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ABSTRACT

This article looks at issues affecting Robert Garioch's translation into Scots of a sonnet from Giuseppe Gioachino Belli's Romaneschi collection. It begins with the discussion of a problem involved in writing in dialects with no settled written standard. This 'standardizing' poetry is then looked at in terms of translation and theories of the "impossibility" of translation. It is argued that the problems facing the translator/poet are much the same as those the dialect writer encounters in writing the original. A brief comparison is made at the level of lexical equivalence between the two texts in order to illustrate some of these issues. It is concluded that claiming there is divergence in meaning between the two texts is dependent on the assumption that there is a determinancy of meaning in both of the languages concerned, an assumption that is ultimately subjective. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/KFT)

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Bryan Fletcher (TAAL)

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TRANSLATING THE FOLK

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Abstract

This paper looks at issues affecting Robert Garioch's translation into Scots of a sonnet from Belli's romaneschi collection. It begins with a discussion of the problems involved in writing in dialects with no settled written standard. This 'standardising' poetry is then looked at in terms of translation and theories of the 'impossibility' of translation. It is argued that the problems facing the translator/poet are much the same as those which the dialect writer comes up against in writing the original. A brief comparison is made at the level of lexical equivalence between the two texts in order to illustrate some of these issues.

Er Caffettiere Fisolofo

L'ommini de sto Monno sò ll'istesso
che vvaghi de caffè nner maschinino:
c'uno prima, uno doppo, e un antro appresso,
tutti cuanti però vvanno a un destino.

Spesso muteno sito, e ccaccia spesso
er vago grosso er vago piccinino,
e ss'incarzeno tutti in zu l'ingresso
der ferro che li sfragne in porverino.

E ll'ommini acussi vviveno ar Monno
misticati pe mmano de la sorte
che sse li gira tutti in tonno in tonno;

e mmovennose oggnuno, o ppiano, o fforte,
scnza capillo mai calcno a ffono
pe ccascà ne la gola de la Morte.

(Giuscpc Gioachino Belli: from *Sonetti* 1833/1978)

The Philosopher Café Proprietor

Men in this warld, whan aa's said and duin
are juist like coffec beans in a machine:
first yin, anither, and ac mair, they rin
til the same destiny, that's easy seen.

They keep aye checngin places, a big yin
shothers its wey afore a smaller bean:
they croud the entrance, fechtan their way in
syne the mill grinds them down and throu the screen.

Sae in this warld ilka man maun boun
Intill fate's neivc, thair to bc passcd and passed
frac haun till haun and birlit roun and roun;
and aa thae folk, aye muvan slaw or fast,
maun gang, unkennan, til the boddum doun,
and faa intill daith's thrapple at the last.

(Robert Garioch 1975)

1. Transcribing/translating the plebs

il poeta dialettale tende a realizzare artificialmente questa intensificazione pseudo poetica della lingua nei parlanti in rapporto non puramente strumentale, e trasferisce dentro gli schemi letterari interi pezzi di quella realtà di lessico, di gergo, come per una documentazione.

(Pasolini, 1952)

Garioch's translations of Belli's sonnets are an example of Schleiermacher's notion of bringing the author to the reader. Indeed, if we consider Belli's work in the light of Pasolini's comments, then it may be possible to speak of bringing the people of Rome of the early nineteenth century to the reader of modern Scots poetry. Belli in his introduction to his sonnets comments:

Nel mio lavoro io non prescinto la scrittura de' popolani. Questa lor manca;... La scrittura è mia, e con essa tento d'imitare la loro parola. Perciò del valore de' segni cognitivi io mi valgo ad esprimere incogniti suoni.

(Belli, 1978: 9-10)

How seriously can we take such a claim to represent a people? The poet offers himself as translator between the illiterate masses and cultured readers: "tramite una complessa ed intricata operazione di supplenza culturale e tecnica, di vigile e sorvegliato mimetismo, di continua traduzione dal popolano al colto e, quindi, di ri-traduzione dai linguaggi della cultura e della poesia..." (Merolla: 1995: 190). Not only does Belli suggest that he will imitate the word of the people, but also, in one collection of sonnets, he intends to create a written standard for the Roman dialect: "*cavare una regola dal caso e una grammatica dall'uso, ecco il mio scopo.*" (Belli: 1978, 6).

We needn't necessarily accept that the mimetic ideal is anything other than illusory, however. The manifesto set out in Belli's introduction may be a mask of sorts for an agenda more to do with literary experimentation than folkloric documentation.

These are complicating questions for the issue of translation for a number of reasons. For Belli language represents a "magic key" (Joseph 1996) into the traditions, even into the psyche of the Romans. Belli in considering his poetry this way belongs to an illustrious line of thought. As Steiner points out, in this tradition there is a notion that "language (is) the defining pivot of man and the determinant of his place in reality...But so far as each human tongue differs from every other, the resulting shape of the world is subtly or drastically altered." (1975: 81-82) In the poems, the Belli original and Garioch's translation, the language used is at the core of distant cultures that share no more than a superficial historical resemblance. Is translation possible between the two?

The politico-linguistic debate around Scots has its own manifesto and similar claims that there are things that can be worded only in the Guid Scots tongue:

E'en herts that ha'e nae Scots'll dirl richt thro'
As nocht else could – for here's a language rings
Wi' datchie sesames, and names for nameless things.

(MacDairmid: 'Gairmscoile')

In Belli the work represents the "genius" of the people of Rome, which can only be expressed in the Roman tongue. Relativism in a very similar guise has been and is being used as the rallying cry to put Scots back into writing and to re-animate the language across Scottish culture in general. Just as Joyce, with his linguistic inventions, 'captured' the soul of the Irish nation, so Scottish writers justify atavistic dictionary dredging in the attempt to resuscitate a moribund literary tradition. But can a

language so closely bound to the 'genius' of a nation be used to translate other literatures, other cultures?

There is indeed a paradox in translating Belli and perhaps also in translating into Scots. It is, however, the paradox of translation in general. In Schleiermacher's terms Garioch's task is an impossible one in that he attempts to make a nineteenth century Roman poet sound like a modern speaker of Scots. The task is made to seem even more unlikely by the fact that both writers are simultaneously engaged in the standardisation of the language or dialect in which they are writing. Belli has the normative role of committing a particular sociolect of Roman speech to writing and transforming it into art. Garioch is taking part in the recreation of a new Scots tongue while also "deciding to interpret someone in one way rather than another [which] is intimately tied to normative judgements." (Putnam, 1988: 14)

Translation as part of the emerging tradition that is attempting to put Scots back onto the literary agenda has a number of functions. For MacDairmid, 'free adaptations' of Alexander Blok woven into the text of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* are a statement of modernist credentials. For Garioch, on the other hand, translating Belli is perhaps an attempt to escape the fact that "the language that enables us to communicate with one another also encloses us in an invisible web of sounds and meanings, so that each nation is imprisoned by its language." (Paz, in Schulte, 1992: 154) Or, in more positive terms, translation widens the net of Scots: "*The bringing forth of language is an inner necessity of mankind. ...[Each speech form] is a foray into the total potentiality of the world.*" (Steiner, 1975: 83, quoting Humbolt)

2. Vulgar Insularity

For Garioch translation provides reproof against the accusation of insularity sometimes levelled at writers of modern Scots. Both Belli and Garioch are urban writers, they give poetic form to a style of language dubbed in recent times by Halliday as anti-language. An anti-language is the extreme form of a social dialect and as such the antithesis of a standard language: "A social dialect is the embodiment of a mildly but distinctly different world view." (1978: 179) The translation of the world-view of the *plebeo* Romano, or Napolitano, or Milanese into literary form was not until recently accepted as 'literature' in Italy and as such was possibly only accepted as an anti-language of anthropological interest. As Merolla points out "La riscoperta dei grandi valori poetici dei *Sonetti romaneschi* è stata piuttosto tardiva e di fatto può farsi risalire solo agli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta." (1995: 188) For Garioch then, Belli might represent a kind of father figure in the *International* of urban dialect writing.

Are such affinities not an illusion, a spin off from the rhetoric of international socialism? Can a reader of Scots empathise with the Roman café proprietor of 1833? The assumption in Garioch's work is that Belli's 'meaning' is not only interpretable for a Scot but also that that interpretation can be translated into modern Scots. Implicit in such an assumption is the presupposition that "linguistic utterances point to something beyond themselves, which can also be pointed to (in) wholly different utterances in 'another language.'" (Joseph: 1999) How can we justify such assumptions? There is no question of Garioch deconstructing the Belli sonnets back to an 'essential' meaning and then working outwards into Scots. If it were possible to posit such an 'essential' meaning we would be forced to question whether Belli's *mentalese* should be characterised as a semantic primitive based on standard Italian, and then question how many layers of translation precede the process of writing in Romanescho.

For Garioch what makes translation possible and desirable is the *ideal* notion that, although meaning is not independent of culture as in the Platonic model, the schema or context of situation described in Belli can fit into the world knowledge of modern Scots readers. There is an urban 'reality' that crosses national and linguistic borders. In Hogan's words, this type of stance counters the idea of linguistic relativism: "if there are striking differences between people's idiolects within languages or cultures and striking similarities across languages and cultures – if all this is the case, then there is and can be no special problem of intercultural or historical interpretation." (1996: 27) Such a set of 'shared' notions makes the writing of Belli, even considering distance over time and location,

relevant to Garioch and therefore, he must have assumed, to his readers. As Bonnefoy states "At its most intense, reading is empathy, shared existence." (in Schulte, 1992: 188)

3. The two poems

Up to a point, each translation is a creation and thus constitutes a unique text

(Paz, in Schulte, 1992: 154)

Stylistically Garioch sticks very close to the original. The development of the copular metaphor that is central to *Er Caffettiere Fisolofo* is handled using the same progression of the elements of the coffee-grinder schema. The rhyme scheme, which splits the sonnet into two parts – development and conclusion – is replicated. Garioch does not depart at all from Belli's structural organisation. It is difficult to make a metrical comparison between the two poems as the underlying rhythm in each is based on dissimilar principles: the Romano is syllable timed while the Scots is stress timed. It is noticeable, however, that in both cases the 'natural' rhythm of speech and a simple progression of syntax preclude any obvious emotive or rhetorical metrical effect.

In terms of lexis it is probably paradoxical to speak of how the texts diverge in meaning as a result of any item of vocabulary. Nonetheless, there are areas where the text of the translation strays outside the bounds set by Nabakov in his injunction: "[the translator] has one duty to perform, and this is to reproduce with absolute exactitude the whole text, and nothing but the text." (in Schulte, 1992: 132) Garioch's verb phrase *maun boun (must make (their) way)* implies either outside imposition or wilful surrender into the hands of fate, while Belli's *vviveno ar Monno* carries no such implication and is in fact relatively empty in semantic terms.

Of course, lexical equivalence is an illusion in all parts of the translation. Take the translation of Belli's word: *vvaghi*. In Italian editions of Belli the noun is glossed in Italian as the plural of *chicco*. The Italian word has a much wider application than *bean*, the word which Garioch uses in translation. It can also correspond to *grain* or *seed* and as such is likely to trigger a wider set of associations. This type of lexical 'impoverishment' is central to the idea that the translation of poetry is impossible: the polysemy of poetry cannot be reproduced even in texts written in the same 'language', never mind in a foreign tongue. Translation is impossible not only because of conceptualising differences between cultures, but also because of the essential idiosyncrasy of every unique utterance. No translator, however, sets out to recreate the same utterance, the same words, the same context and the same ideal addressee, just as conversationalists tend not to rely on memorised stretches of speech.

4. Concluding Remarks

Claiming that there is a divergence of meaning between the two texts is dependent on the assumption that there is determinacy of meaning in both of the languages concerned. As Joseph points out "the meanings of words are so *weakly* determined by the language that we can never expect any two speakers to conceive of them in the same way." (1998: 93) We can see this in the translation of the following phrase (line B represents a word-for-word gloss in English):

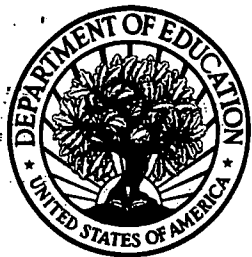
- A) ss'incarzeno tutti in zu ll'ingresso (Belli, 7)
- B) (they) press (themselves) in on the entrance
- C) they crowd the entrance, fechtan their way in (Garioch, 7)

Garioch's reading of this section certainly concurs with the pessimistic theme of Belli's poem, but his *fechtan* is an interpreted addition. Garioch here is visible in his role as interpreter. Of course, this role must precede that of translator. But, at various points in this translation, Garioch seems to surrender the translator's cloak of anonymity. The lexical choices are probably made in an attempt to follow Belli in increasing the expressive power of the visual metaphor for the concluding section. Garioch the creator sticks his head out from his *objective* position as translator as a result of the desire to retain holistic meaning.

In a sense this brings us full circle. Critics have claimed that Belli used the mask of dialect writing to present controversial views. The speakers of his *Sonetti* are the ordinary folk; thus Belli accomplished the trick of distancing himself from the probable repercussions his radical views were likely to incur. Garioch also achieves the trick of internationalising Scots through translating a writer involved in a similar 'struggle' against a dominant language. But in terms of re-creating Belli his translations are a set of illusions. Such illusion is at the heart not only of the translation, but also Belli's boast of mimetic representation. Perhaps the only difference in the writing process of these two poems is that Belli began with an empty page.

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