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DRAFT

Translation as a Performing Art

By Antony Shugaar January 27, 2014 9:00 pm

Draft is a series about the art and craft of writing.

Thirty years ago I moved to Milan to work for an Italian art magazine called FMR. It was an odd and ambitious enterprise: FMR started publishing in the United States a year later with the slogan “the most beautiful magazine in the world.” The offices hardly seemed like offices at all: they were located in Palazzo Visconti di Modrone, an exceptionally fine piece of Milanese rococo architecture. The building was Luchino Visconti’s childhood home, and it was a gorgeous and dramatic workplace. When it was time for coffee, we ordered in rounds of espressos, which were brought by a white-coated young man carrying a silver trayful of demitasse thermoses. Every few months, one of the magazine’s production managers would take orders for prosciutto from his hometown, Parma — the whole ham, what they thin-slice in an Italian *gastronomia*. Price: about \$20.

Among the people I met in my time at FMR were Jorge Luis Borges, the legendary Argentine Grand Prix racer Juan Manuel Fangio, the retail tycoon Stanley Marcus, Gay Talese and Katell le Bourhis, Diana Vreeland’s assistant and successor at the Met’s Fashion Institute. Katell told me that as a very young girl she’d met very old people who were the basis of characters in Proust’s “Recherche.”

The publisher was Franco Maria Ricci, who named his flagship magazine after his own monogram. He liked to say “the very best often costs less,” and he decided we needed a professional translator to sit in for a few days each month, so he hired William Weaver, who had just translated Umberto Eco’s “Name of the Rose.”

For a year or so, Bill and I worked together and had occasional lunches together. At the time, there were still relatively down-at-the-heels lunch places in the center of Milan, where a full

meal with wine was about 10 bucks. Our conversations were lively and companionable and this, for me, was when literary translation first swam into view as a path and a profession.

I remember one specific comment on translation technique that was pure Weaver. The great white whale of Italian postwar literature is “Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana,” by Carlo Emilio Gadda. It’s a big, ungainly philosophical treatise of a murder mystery, interlarded with rich seams of dialect of all kinds: Roman, Neapolitan and various minor subdialects of the areas between those two cities. Gadda was an austere Milanese scholar, the opposite in personality and style of these overemphatic, swaggering, loud forms of speech. But Gadda was an acute observer and a gifted mimic. And the “Pasticciaccio” — “That Awful Mess,” in Weaver’s rendering — takes gleeful delight in lampooning, personifying and ultimately embracing these dialects, Italy’s equivalents of Brooklynese, Bronxese and perhaps Boston’s Southie accent.

“What did you do about the dialect?” I asked him, at one of our lunches. He laughed, and replied, “Oh, I just left it out!”

At first glance, it’s a little like translating “Moby-Dick” and leaving out all references to boats. But I understood. Weaver explains it better in his introduction to the English edition: “To translate Gadda’s Roman or Venetian into the language of Mississippi or the Aran Islands would be as absurd as translating the language of Faulkner’s Snopeses into Sicilian or Welsh.” Weaver asks the reader, therefore, “to imagine the speech of Gadda’s characters, translated here into straightforward spoken English, as taking place in dialect, or a mixture of dialects.” In other words, *supply the boats yourself*.

Now it has become standard practice to render heavy Sicilian dialect as Brooklynese — that is the choice that Stephen Sartarelli has made in the Inspector Montalbano books, and it’s an understandable one. It’s no more bizarre than the convention whereby you can identify German officers in American movies set during World War II by their crisp British accents. But it’s absurd.

The dialect problem is the *reductio ad absurdum* of translation. There are workarounds, but basically, when a translator runs into this kind of issue, she simply leaves it out. And the reader is none the wiser.

But the translator is. And though I remember Weaver’s good-humored resignation every time I have to do it, it’s bitter: a little like losing a patient. Translators don’t bury their mistakes, but they do get to sort of white-out their shortcomings.

As a translator I’m constantly running into details that seem to beg for an explanation. Someone stops at an Autogrill on a highway: an Italian instantly envisions the surrealistic ’60s-

style malls spanning the roadway, lined with plate-glass windows from which to watch cars passing beneath at 100 m.p.h. Do I trust the English reader to know?

The Italian author refers to someone falling face-down onto the asphalt: the Italian reader knows that asphalt is what *sidewalks* are made of; streets are made of cobblestone or slabs of granite.

Or I'm translating a scene where two people enter a restaurant. In Italy, the doors of public establishments open *inward*, not out. Our safety inspectors worry about stampedes and people being crushed against doors. Do Italian safety inspectors worry about doors being parked in? Perhaps they do: certainly, the asphalt sidewalks are considered parking areas. One of my favorite Italian signs warned: "Street Cleaning Tomorrow — Absolutely No Parking: *not even on the sidewalks.*"

Or take *casa*: we are taught that it means "house," but in Italy it almost invariably refers to an apartment. You climb three flights of stairs and walk into the *casa*. Which is therefore on the *secondo piano* (you have the ground floor and then, upstairs from that, the first floor) of a *palazzo* (the same word describes a palace and an apartment building).

These intricacies are the tools of the trade. A crucial part of translation, as I first learned from Bill Weaver in those long-ago lunches, is the surveying of the terrain, a careful reading and a knowledgeable transposition. You read very carefully when translating: a very fast and full day's work might be 10 or 15 pages of a book. I compare it to walking down a highway, if ordinary reading is driving at 60 m.p.h. And it seems, sometimes, when you're translating, measuring, and recreating everything you read in another language, as if you can actually leave the highway and walk off into the landscape. Walk around the trees and buildings and see what's on the other side, how they're constructed.

People talk about untranslatable words, but in a way, there's no such thing. It may take three words, or an entire sentence, or even an interpolated paragraph, but any word can be translated. Short of swelling a book into an encyclopedia, however, there is no way of dealing with the larger problem: untranslatable *worlds*.

In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Bill said something very fine: he explained that as a professor at Bard, he was sometimes asked what other departments his classes could be cross-referenced to, and he suggested performing arts. After all, a translation is a performance (whether in another medium or another language) of a written text. And that is what Bill, who died a few weeks ago at age 95 and is greatly missed, did so well: he conjured up worlds and made you see them.

Antony Shugaar is the author of “Coast to Coast” and the coauthor of “Latitude Zero: Tales of the Equator.” He is a translator: among his most recent titles are “The Crocodile” by Maurizio de Giovanni, “Resistance is Futile,” by Walter Siti, and “Other People’s Trades” and “If Not Now, When?” by Primo Levi. He is at work on a book about translation for University of Virginia Press.

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