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Norms, Difference, and the Translator: or, How to Reproduce Double Difference

I. Norms and the translator

IF TRANSLATORS MUST ALWAYS RE-PRODUCE a “difference” by reducing a distance, there are some cases in which the distance and the difference are so great that they cannot help asking themselves some questions before grappling with the text. When there is a spatial and temporal abyss separating the source text from the translator’s language and culture, preliminary attention must be dedicated to the question of how Lefevere’s «tpt elements» will be conveyed by the target text. If the source text is either geographically or historically remote¹, «the freedom of the theme is [...] inevitably circumscribed by the concentric circles of language, time, place, and tradition» (Lefevere 1975: p. 19). In this case, even choosing not to choose can be a significant choice (if we translate *Beowulf* in contemporary Italian free verse, we make a significant choice). Therefore, it is advisable for the translator to have a knowledge of all the cultural and ideological issues involved before taking any decisions.

In certain situations, it can be argued that the distance to be reduced or re-produced is double, because there is a difference embodied in the source text. Whenever the source is written in two or more languages, or in two or more versions of the same language, whether hierarchically arranged or not, the translator must fix or ignore two holes: the gap distancing him/her from the source and the chasm opening in the source itself. Since they pose

¹Lefevere was only interested in the translation of historically remote texts, but his formula can be applied to spatial as well as temporal distance, and it can be argued that these two distances are materially the same in the translator’s relativistic world-view.

extreme and very material problems, such “doubly foreign” texts constitute ideal research objects for the translation scholar: translators’ behaviour can be gauged against a tangible yardstick of binary oppositions and not only according to ethic or aesthetic values; the tastes and values dictating translating styles are immediately apparent against the background of the tastes and values informing the source text.

The translator usually normalizes the source, if only by virtue of the fact that he/she has to make it comprehensible to target readers. He/she is like a guard deciding what passes the border and what does not: quite comprehensibly, his/her tendency will be, if instinct is left to itself, to let those elements of the source pass that are most digestible for the target audience. Gideon Toury and others have studied the impact of «norms» on translators’ behaviour, i.e., the weight of common expectations on how a translated text should appear on the way translated texts are turned out by translators, editors, and publishers. «Norms» stand midway between «conventions» and «laws», possessing neither the volatility of the former nor the sanctionative power of the latter: they have more strength and consistency than mere conventions, and they imply punishment (and reward) like laws, but they do not dictate punishment (and reward) on any automatic, mathematical basis. A translator can occasionally thrive by breaking norms or, quite often, suffer by obeying them: but each translator is wittingly or unwittingly influenced by the power of norms, and ignorance only makes that power greater, because unseen pitfalls are harder to avoid (Toury 1995, 1998; Morini 2004). Not surprisingly, single stylistic analyses and general studies conducted on parallel and comparable corpora have shown that the most common norms traceable through a comparison of source and target texts are simplification, explicitation, disambiguation, and more generally normalization according to the standards of the target language and culture (Laviosa 2002).

Normalization, whether single or double, is of course inevitable, at least to a degree, and must therefore be accepted. Little has been made so far, beyond a few statements by Brodsky and a handful of scholarly essays (Brodsky 1986 [1983]; Merkle 2002; Morini forthcoming), of the idea that the translator acts like a censor on the texts he/she works on. Brodsky has written: «What translation has in common with censorship is that both operate on the basis of the “what’s possible” principle, and it must be noted that linguistic barriers can be as high as those erected by the state» (Brodsky 1986 [1983]: p. 47). Though the poet’s emphasis was solely on linguistic barriers, while one should perhaps speak of linguistic and cultural barriers, it is true that the very nature of the transaction forces the translator to select among the materials he/she has on hand. There is no escaping this procedural similarity between translation and censorship, and

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the similarity is heightened if the translator slavishly follows the translation norms of his culture: on the other hand, one can be a conscious and conscientious translator by becoming aware of those norms – by choosing instead of submitting.

Thus, the translator is caught between norms and the source text, between the wish (if there is such a wish on his/her part) to give his/her readers an account of the source and conforming to his/her readers' expectations. It is a modernized, and more general, version of Schleiermacher's dilemma over the labour of translating – whether it has to be borne by the translator or the reader; whether, in Venuti's terms, the target text has to be produced according to «foreignizing» or «domesticating» techniques (Schleiermacher 1813; Venuti 1995). Even the translator who wants to give the fullest possible account of the source will be forced, if that source is very far from the target culture, to make some concessions to norms.

In the case of “doubly foreign” texts, the first question the translator asks him/herself is if that double foreignness is crucial to an understanding of the source, and if so, how it can be rendered in the context of the target language. Quite often, a text written in two or more languages reflects a sociolinguistic situation (Fishman 1971-1972: p. 15) which has a bearing on how the text itself is ideologically interpreted – where that adverb, “ideologically”, is used in its broadest sense. In that case, it will be very hard for the translator to find a comparable context to make the source resonate into the target. On the other hand, if the translator does not even try to find such a context, or an alternative technique to convey that sense of internal foreign-ness, his/her translation will begin with an act of censorship which no linguistic subtlety can fully redress.

II. The translator and literature in Scots

What has been generally and theoretically introduced above will now be repeated with a more substantial referent and after a rather abrupt shift to the first person. In a recent paper on translation theory and the translator, I argued for the rise of a class of middle figures between translation theory and practice. These figures would be scholars with an experience of practice, or translators with a knowledge of theory, uniting the two main branches of a discipline whose practitioners all too easily tend, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard's play, to flick coins that always fall on one side. Such figures would not bring the constraints of theory to bear on practice or vice versa, but would investigate at first hand the ways in which the insights of theory can help translators, and, conversely, practice can add to theory. In the latter direction, translation theory partly

converges with translator's autobiography: and it is at this junction that I present the Italian translation of an Anglo-Scottish text as a case study.

The bi-text (Harris 1988) in question is *Canto del tramonto*, my own Italian translation of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*. It has been published by Giannozzi Editore in 2006, while Gibbon's original first saw the light in 1932. There is, therefore, a certain temporal distance between the source and the target texts, though no such changes have taken place in European literature between 1932 and 2006 as to make *Sunset Song* incomprehensible to contemporary Italian readers (being in many ways a modernist novel, *Sunset Song* is as strange an object on the British market of the thirties as *Canto del tramonto* is on the Italian bookshelves of the third millennium). A major problem, however, is posed by *Sunset Song* being a "doubly foreign" text, written in English and in Scots, though the Scots used by Gibbon is often anglicized in spelling and usage. Before lowering his fingers on the keyboard, the translator has to ask himself some questions about the significance of the double foreign-ness of Gibbon's book. Is this quality central to our reading of the book? Should it remain central in Italian? And if so, how can it be reproduced or accounted for?

Lewis Grassie Gibbon's real name was Leslie Mitchell (1901-1935). In his very brief career as a full-time writer, Gibbon/Mitchell managed to publish the impressive number of sixteen novels, only four of which were set in Scotland and signed with the pseudonym. Mitchell's English novels have been almost forgotten, while Gibbon's literary career has been more successful. His masterpiece is the trilogy *A Scots Quair* (1932-1934), whose overall title alludes to James I of Scotland's medieval *Kingis Quair* (Book of the King). *Sunset Song*, *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite* follow the vicissitudes of the heroine, Chris Guthrie, whose life is used as a reflector for the changes Scotland undergoes between 1911 and the early thirties. *A Scots Quair* is "a book in Scots" as well as "a Scottish book", because Gibbon uses his personal mixture of English and Scots to plunge his readers into the world he grew up in (his birthplace was Segget, Aberdeenshire, which provides the setting for *Cloud Howe*). Gibbon was by no means the first novelist to employ Scots, but there was a substantial difference between his style and the style of such predecessors as George Douglas Brown:

She rose in a nervous flutter when she saw him; yet needlessly shrill in her defence, because she was angry at detection.

'Ah, well!' she cried, in weary petulance, 'it's an unco thing if a body's not to have a moment's rest after such a morning's darg! I just sat down wi' the book for a little, till John should come till his breakfast!' (Douglas Brown 1985 [1901]: p. 51)

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However anglicized (in order to be universally comprehensible), Douglas Brown's Scots is reserved for the characters, whereas the narrator of *The House with the Green Shutters* almost always uses English. There is a linguistic and cultural gap between the uneducated characters and the narrator, as shown by the inverted commas he employs to present certain culture-bound words («body», «orra») the meaning of which he then expounds much as an anthropologist would. In *Sunset Song*, by contrast, the characters' language is the narrator's, and this overlap is used to reflect the ideological conflation of narrator and (main) characters on the stylistic level:

But for days now the wind had been in the south, it shook and played in the moors and went dandering up the sleeping Grampians, the rushes pecked and quivered about the loch when its hand was upon them, but it brought more heat than cold, and all the parks were fair parched, sucked dry, the red clay soil of Blawearie gaping open for the rain that seemed never-coming. Up here the hills were brave with the beauty and the heat of it, but the hayfield was all a crackling dryness and in the potato park beyond the biggings the shaws drooped red and rusty already. Folk said there hadn't been such a drought since eighty-three and Long Rob of the Mill said you couldn't blame this one on Gladstone, anyway, and everybody laughed except father. God knows why. (Gibbon 1977 [1932]: p. 32)

In *The House with the Green Shutters* there is an implicit admission that English is the language of high culture, whereas only half-educated or illiterate characters can speak Scots in a novel. In *Sunset Song*, no such hierarchy is implied: and by employing Scots (or, a mixture of English and Scots) for such an ambitious work, whose literary alliances are clearly to be sought among the modernist masters of the English-speaking world, Gibbon strives to fashion a language for Scotland which can be on a par with the other prestigious languages of Europe. Some years earlier, the Scottish poet Christopher Murray Grieve had fashioned a local (nationalistic) identity for himself, and had started publishing poems in Scots under the name of Hugh MacDiarmid. His most ambitious work, the long poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), was, amongst other things, a manifesto which Mitchell/Gibbon might have endorsed, though his personality was by no means as exuberant as Grieve/MacDiarmid's:

T.S. Eliot – it's a Scottish name –
Afore he wrote 'The Waste Land' s'ud ha'e come
to Scotland here. He wad ha'e written
A better poem syne – like this, by gum! (MacDiarmid 1994: p. 37)

If it is true that all stylistic choices have ideological implications, in the case of MacDiarmid and Gibbon there is an ideological purpose, i.e., the wish to promote Scots as a literary language, informing a stylistic choice. The

informed translator will know that *Sunset Song* is a novel of the “Scottish Renaissance”, and may feel under the obligation to communicate this knowledge to the reader. He/she can do so, of course, in an introduction, in a general note to the text, or in any number of endnotes he/she will be allowed to use. But if he/she wishes to communicate that knowledge in and through the target text, he/she will have to struggle with linguistic barriers and translation norms.

The problem is one of cultural transmission, local or national identity, and editorial policy. On the British book market, Scottish literature survives only in a very small niche, forced into the background by “old” English literature and “new” English-speaking literatures. Should one look for Hugh MacDiarmid’s *Selected Poems* in a London Waterstones, one would probably find a single copy among a host of collections by such poets as Andrew Motion and Derek Walcott – the former being a good but certainly not outstanding English poet. The same would happen if the sought-for Scottish poet was a living one, though such writers usually thrive that can be appropriated as “British” or “English” (Walter Scott, contemporary poet Carol Ann Duffy). Linguistic difference is felt very keenly, in that the presence of Scots appears to be the watershed between what is foregrounded and what is not (Liz Lochhead’s books are not as widespread as Carol Ann Duffy’s, Muriel Spark is much more popular than George Friel).

When grafted onto the narrow, asphyctic Italian market, this situation is mirrored into one in which Scottish literature is virtually non-existent. Though Italian readers are generally aware that Walter Scott is a Scottish writer, they will not think of Scottish literature as a separate tradition from English (and not British: Italians know very little about Britishness) literature, but merely as English literature written in Scotland. This is partly due to the difficulty of translating linguistic difference, but mostly to the fact that no publisher (the only very partial exception being the medium-sized Tranchida Editore) has so far attempted to create an awareness of a specific Scottish tradition, while the only critical book of a certain importance ever written on the subject is Valentina Poggi’s *Voci da un paese lontano* (Poggi Ghigi 1992). Therefore, while a specifically Irish tradition can be found on our cultural menu (Ireland is, after all, a separate island, and has been fashionable for a couple of decades), Scottish plates are treated as regional variants, and often not even presented as such.

It is evident that even apart from the ideological purposes of the writers of the “Scottish Renaissance”, no neutral choice is possible for the translator of *Sunset Song* or *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. A few years before struggling with Gibbon’s novel, I was asked to prepare a selection of MacDiarmid’s poems for a parallel-text poetry magazine, the Milan-based *Poesia*. Faced with the task of producing Italian versions of MacDiarmid’s

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early poems in Scots and of excerpts from the *Drunk Man*, I decided to translate them into standard Italian, relying as I did for further information on my introduction and on the source printed alongside the target text (Morini 2000). Whatever the cultural consequences of this choice, on re-reading these translations a couple of years later I found that they fell very flat of the stylistic strength they had in the original. Stripped of their internal difference (even in those cases in which the difference was implicit, i.e., no English words were used), they lost much of their flavour and significance – where significance is intended, as Leech and Short intend it, as the sum of sense plus stylistic value (Leech and Short 1983 [1981]: p. 23-24). The question was, how could this flattening effect be obviated in the translation of a much longer text, where the impression of any prefacing explanations or endnotes would be cancelled by the one left by the text itself?

In a recently-published but less-recently-written article on the translation of Scottish poetry, I reviewed the three most common ways of rendering internal difference in translation. Whenever two or more variants of the same language inhabit the same textual space, the translator can: 1) write his target text in the standard version of the target language; 2) employ two or more variants of the target language; 3) translate one of the variants by a non-standard (incorrect, popular) variant of the target language. The first solution, as seen above, is hardly a solution at all, though it can have some value in certain specific publishing situations. The second and the third solutions are more effective, but they also pose their problems: if a sociological or geographical dialect is used, the source text is transferred onto a sociolinguistic plane that can be very distant from the source situation; if a low, incorrect version of the target language is employed, a hierarchy is created that can or cannot be warranted by the internal division of the source text (Morini 2005: p. 7-11).

Italian translators of Scottish literature, when they have bothered to translate Scots at all, have adopted the “dialectal” strategy only rarely (usually when the target text was to appear with a small publisher), while the third strategy (using a non-standard version of Italian) has been a favourite with all those who had to produce translations for the mainstream market. Witness the following extracts from two books by Irvine Welsh, one of the very few Scottish writers who are known in Italy and recognized as Scottish:

The sweat was lashing oafay Sick Boy. Ah wis jist sitting thair, focusing oan the telly, tryin no tae notice the cunt. He wis bringing me doon. Ah tried tae keep ma attention on the Jean-Claude Van Damme video. (Welsh 2003 [1993]: p. 3)

Sick Boy era coperto di sudore; tremava tutto. Io me ne stavo lì schiaffato davanti alla tele, cercando di non dargli retta, a quel coglione. Mi buttava giù. Provai a concentrarmi sulla cassetta di Jean-Claude Van Damme. (Welsh and Zeuli 1996: p. 9)

– Lovely casserole, Marge, I remarked in between frantic mouthfuls. It really was good.

– Glad ya like it, she replied, her face screwing up in an indulgent smile behind her glasses. Marge was a good looking woman, no doubt about it. (Welsh 2004 [1994]: p. 1)

«Che sformato coi fiocchi, Marge» ho detto, mentre ci davo dentro di mascelle. Era proprio buono.

«Contenta che ti piace» ha risposto lei. la faccia dietro le lenti spaccata in due da un sorriso goduto. Niente da dire, Marge era una bella donna. (Welsh and Bocchiola 1999: p. 9)

In the first case (the opening of *Trainspotting*), the vigorous immediacy of Scots is defused in a mixture of formal («coperto di sudore», «Provai a concentrarmi») and informal Italian (bordering on jargon: «schiaffato davanti alla tele»). In the second case (the opening of the short story *The Shooter*), the linguistic difference between Marge and the narrator is lost, also because the translator introduces a slangy term («goduto»), supposedly representing Scots, in a passage originally in English.

For the Italian translator of *Sunset Song*, a regional dialect would reduce in size and importance the sociolinguistic distance between Scotland and England, and a low or incorrect version of Italian would make uncultivated peasants out of all the characters portrayed in the book (some of them are and some of them are not, and even the most uncultivated peasants are part of a fully developed, if largely oral, culture). At the time I was beginning to ask myself how to translate Gibbon's trilogy, and while automatically discarding the "zero" option I had selected for MacDiarmid, I was dissatisfied with both of these methods.

In the same article, I also suggested a fourth possibility: the creation of a "synthetic Italian" which could serve as a target language for Scots (alongside standard Italian for English). This "synthetic" – i.e., non-existent – Italian, in my translating plans, would be made up of incorrect or slightly modified words and phrases and regional words and expressions picked up more or less at random from various Italian regions and "normalized" according to the phonetic rules of the national language (Morini 2005: p. 11-12). This invented language – an idea for which I am indebted to Hugh MacDiarmid, who fashioned a "synthetic Scots" out of several literary, historical and geographical versions of the language – would ideally come to represent Scots in the whole trilogy and, if the trilogy was successful, in an

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imagined future string of Scottish novels translated into Italian. Whatever the likelihood of this enterprise, there is now detachment enough between translator and translation to judge the stylistic results of these plans, as well as the correspondence between theoretical conception and practical realization.

III. Translating Lewis Grassie Gibbon

III.1 The bi-text

So by the winter of nineteen eleven there were no more than nine bit places left the Kinraddie estate, the Mains the biggest of them, it had been the Castle home farm in the long past times. An Irish creature, Erbert Ellison was the name, ran the place for the trustees, he said, but if you might believe all the stories you heard he ran a hantle more silver into his own pouch than he ran into theirs. Well might you expect it, for once he'd been no more than a Dublin waiter, they said. That had been in the time before Lord Kinraddie, the daft one, had gone clean skite. He had been in Dublin, Lord Kinraddie, on some drunken ploy, and Ellison had brought his whisky for him and some said he had halved his bed with him. But folk would say anything.

So the daftie took Ellison back with him to Kinraddie and made him his servant, and sometimes, when he was real drunk and the fairlies came snifering out of the whisky bottles at him, he would throw a bottle at Ellison and shout Get out, you bloody dish-clout! so loud it was heard across at the Manse and fair affronted the minister's wife. And old Greig, him that had been the last minister there, he would glower across at Kinraddie House like John Knox at Holyrood, and say that God's hour would come. And sure as death it did, off to the asylum they hurled the daftie, he went with a nurse's mutch on his head and he put his head out of the back of the waggon and said Cockadoodledoo! to some school bairns the waggon passed on the road and they all ran home and were fell frightened.

But Ellison had made himself well acquainted with farming and selling stock and most with buying horses, so the trustees they made him manager of the Mains, and he moved into the Mains farmhouse and looked him round for a wife. Some would have nothing to do with him, a poor creature of an Irishman who couldn't speak right and didn't belong to the Kirk, but Ella White she was not so particular and was fell long in the tooth herself. So when Ellison came to her at the harvest ball in Auchinblae and cried Can I see you home to-night, me dear? she said Och, Ay. And on the road home they lay among the stooks and maybe Ellison did this and that to make sure of getting her, he was fair desperate for any woman by then.

They were married next New Year's Day, and Ellison had begun to think himself a gey man in Kinraddie, and maybe one of the gentry. But the bothy billies, the ploughmen and the orra men of the Mains, they'd never a care for gentry except to mock at them and on the eve of Ellison's wedding they took him as he was going into his house and took off his breeks and tarred his doup and the soles of his feet and stuck feathers on them and then they threw him into the water-trough, as was the custom. And he called them Bloody Scotch savages, and was in an awful rage and at the term-time he had them sacked, the

whole jingbang of them, so sore affronted he had been (Gibbon 1977 [1932]: p. 18).

E così nell'inverno del Millenovecentoundici² non c'erano rimaste più di nove casette nella proprietà di Kinraddie, Mains era la più grande, in tempi lontani era la fattoria del Castello. Un soggetto irlandese, Erbert Ellison si chiamava, la dirigeva per gli amministratori, diceva lui, ma a stare a sentire quel che si diceva dirigeva un fracco di denaro nelle sue tasche e molto meno nelle loro. E c'era ben da aspettarselo, perché all'inizio a Dublino faceva il cameriere, a quel che si diceva. Questo prima che Lord Kinraddie, quello matto, uscisse di testa del tutto. Era a Dublino, Lord Kinraddie, per farsi una bella bevuta, ed Ellison gli aveva portato il whisky e c'era chi diceva che aveva dormito nel suo stesso letto. Ma ne raccontano di pazzane. E così il matto si portò a casa Ellison e se lo prese come domestico, e a volte, quando era ubriaco fradicio e sentiva gli spiriti che gnaulavano nel whisky, lanciava una bottiglia a Ellison e gli urlava Va' via, straccione! tanto forte che lo sentivano di là in Canonica e la moglie del parroco si scandalizzava da morire. E il vecchio Greig, l'ultimo parroco, dava un'occhiataccia a Casa Kinraddie come John Knox a Holyrood, e diceva che l'ora di Dio prima o poi arrivava. E arrivò, puntuale come la morte, il pazzo lo scaraventarono in manicomio, andò via con una scuffietta da infermiera sulla testa e per strada mise la testa fuori dal carro e fece Chicchiricchiii! a dei bocia che uscivano da scuola e quelli tornarono a casa di corsa con una fifa blu.

Ma Ellison si era fatto la sua bella cultura sul coltivare la terra e vendere le bestie e soprattutto sul comprare case, e così gli amministratori gli diedero in gestione Mains, e lui si installò nella fattoria di Mains e si guardò intorno in cerca di moglie. Ce n'erano alcune che non ne volevano proprio sapere, un poveraccio irlandese che non sapeva parlare come si doveva e non faceva parte della Chiesa, ma Ella White, lei non era tanto schizzinosa e anche lei aveva i denti belli lunghi. E così, quando Ellison al ballo della mietitura di Auchinblae andò a chiederle Posso compagnararti a casa questa sera, mia cara? lei disse Vabbè. E sulla strada di casa si stesero tra i govoni e forse Ellison fece questo e quello per assicurarsela, ormai era disperato, gli andava bene una donna qualsiasi.

Si sposarono il Capodanno seguente, ed Ellison ormai si sentiva un grand'uomo a Kinraddie, forse si credeva un signore. Ma i soggetti del capanno, i braccianti e i giornalieri di Mains, a loro non gli interessava niente dei signori se non per prenderli in giro, e la vigilia del matrimonio di Ellison mentre entrava in casa lo presero e gli levarono i pantoni e gli incatramarono le chiappe e le piante dei piedi e ci cacciarono su delle piume e poi lo buttarono nell'abbeveratoio, com'era usanza. E lui gli diede dei Maledetti selvaggi scozzesi, era infuriato duro e alla fine della stagione li fece licenziare, tutta la masnada, tanto se l'era presa a male. (Gibbon and Morini 2005: p. 22-23)

III.2 Stylistic analysis

²On re-reading *Canto del tramonto* after publication, I was thrown into utter despondence when I discovered that I had written «Millenovecentodiciannove» (1919) instead of «Millenovecentoundici» (1911), thus shifting the initial temporal plane from before to after the Great War. Great theories do not prevent small disastrous mistakes.

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Re-reading one's translations, especially the ones written according to certain more or less well-defined theoretical principles, means realizing two things: 1) that practice always displaces theory, for whatever the theory there is no way of making the final result independent of the translator's personality, taste, etc.; 2) that even when a theoretical principle is carefully applied, it can never inform a whole translation. The staunchest theoretician/translator has his/her moments of absent-mindedness and feebleness, and perhaps no theoretically consistent translation would be fully readable.

Canto del tramonto faces me with both truths. In the first place, the material results of the strategies I chose to apply appear somewhat different from what I had imagined them to be. In the second place, I can now identify textual stretches where those strategies were abandoned in favour of easier readings or even out of sheer exhaustion or laziness.

As the above twofold passage shows, there are two main stylistic features to be taken into account by the translator: one is the mixture of English and Scots; the other is Gibbon's appropriation of the rhythm of (Scottish) speech for his highly literary prose – a function of his appropriation of a popular Scottish voice as a narrator³. This imitative effect is obtained by the use of referential repetition («Lord Kinraddie [...] He had been in Dublin, Lord Kinraddie»), pleonasm («him that had been the last minister»), and, more generally, a syntax where order is sacrificed for the necessity of saying first and qualifying later («once he'd been no more than a Dublin waiter, they said»).

The second feature is, fortunately, easy enough to recreate. It is usually possible to follow the syntax of the original without defacing the dignity and naturalness of Italian. Here is a syntactically tangled passage alongside an alternative “normalized” version:

Un soggetto irlandese, Erbert Ellison si chiamava, la dirigeva per gli amministratori, diceva lui, ma a stare a sentire quel che si diceva dirigeva un fracco di denaro nelle sue tasche e molto meno nelle loro. E c'era ben da aspettarselo, perché all'inizio a Dublino faceva il cameriere, a quel che si diceva.

[La dirigeva per gli amministratori un soggetto irlandese che si chiamava Erbert Ellison. Così almeno diceva lui, perché si diceva che dirigesse un fracco di denaro nelle sue tasche e molto meno nelle loro. C'era ben da aspettarselo, perché si diceva che all'inizio a Dublino facesse il cameriere.]

There are, however, certain passages which in translation have been simplified or stripped of their repetitions and pleonasm. A case in point is

³ Elsewhere, and most evidently in the intense moments of *Cloud Howe*, Gibbon's popular voice waxes lyrical. On such occasions, one has to rely on one's abilities as a poetic translator.

«old Greig, him that had been the last minister there», which is reduced to «il vecchio Greig, l'ultimo parroco [old Greig, the last minister]». Another smaller reduction is «gli amministratori gli diedero in gestione Mains [the trustees gave him the management of the Mains]», where a pleonastic pronoun is cancelled («the trustees they made him manager of the Mains»).

As regards the reproduction of Scots terms, I had planned (as discussed above) the creation of a “synthetic Italian” made up of words from various regional or social dialects and of incorrect or corrupted versions of standard Italian words. A post-factum analysis, however, informs me that the words I used to translate Scots fall under five basic categories:

1) **dialect words**: these are words like «bocia» (for «bairn», child) and «scuffietta» (for «mutch», bonnet, cap). I meant these words to be taken from a variety of dialects, but they turn out to be taken almost entirely from my own region (Emilia Romagna) and the neighbouring ones («bocia» comes from the area between Lombardy and Veneto). Another example, not present here but endemic in the novel, is the verb “arcordarsi”, an Italianized version of a word in romagnolo meaning “to remember”, and standing for the Scots verb “to mind” in my version.

2) **modified Italian words**: two examples here are «govoni» and «pantoni» («stooks» and «breeks»), which are modified versions of “covoni” and “pantaloni” (“sheaves” and “breeches”). Though they take their cue from standard Italian, they have a regional flavour, and might well be part of one of Italy’s countless dialects.

3) **low, vulgar words**: an example is «chiappe» (buttocks), used to translate the Scots word «dowp» (“bottom”).

4) **standard Italian words**: sometimes, a Scots word is translated by a common Italian word, either because I did not find any other satisfactory solution or because the word was too crucial to admit misunderstandings. A middle case is “to affront” (to scandalize), which I rendered with “scandalizzarsi” because I found no understandable alternative.

5) **old-fashioned, formal words**: someone impressed upon me the surprising idea that some “synthetic Italian” words, which I had meant to sound popular and informal, were, on the contrary, quite formal, old-fashioned or far-fetched: this is the case with «panzane» (which does not translate anything in particular here, but elsewhere stands for «stite», nonsense), «gnaulavano» for «snifftering», or «[avere una] fifa blu» for «[being] fell frightened» (very frightened).

On the whole, I find that the target text is normalized to a certain degree, and certainly simpler than the source. In part, I had been conscious while translating that theory and practice occasionally drifted apart, merely

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because it would have been impossible for me to keep them always on the same level. Partly, though, normalization and simplification seem once again to be the unconscious toll to be paid if a text is to be transferred from one language and culture to another. As I already noted in an article on «invisibility» and «humility» in translation, personal experience confirms the insights of translation theory and corpus linguistics (Morini 2002-2003). Even apart from normalization and simplification, however, translation defies our plans and expectations because it is done through language, and language will always confront us with imponderable elements: in this case, my invented dialect proved to be something different from what I had imagined it to be, and consequently my wish to avoid geographical localization may have been foiled. Quite often, the target text strayed from the course I had traced for it beforehand: and though as a control freak I find this textual freedom slightly disturbing, as a translator and critic I also find it compelling and liberating.

III.3 Reception

My wish to make *Canto del tramonto* the cornerstone of an Italian tradition of Scottish literature, or of making Scottish literature known in Italy through an adequate presentation of its modern masterpiece, must inevitably clash or collide with the book's critical and commercial fortunes; and though only nine months have passed since its appearance, a first balance can be drawn in a publishing market in which books tend to disappear if they do not sell well and make a name for themselves in their first year as marketed goods.

First of all, sales. The book, as far as I know, did not fare too badly, but it did not sell out, either. The publisher tells me that the book has not “paid its way” yet. It is true that Giano Editore is not the biggest publishing house in Italy, and that it relies on “long” rather than “best sellers”. Still, I understand from the publisher's words and tone that the results have so far been disappointing, and though publishers will always tend to complain, experience makes me pretty sure that if the book were doing extremely well I should know it.

On the critical side, *Canto del tramonto* has so far had three reviews on national newspapers: Alessandra Iadicicco's «*La ballata dello scozzese volante*» (The ballad of the flying Scotsman), *Il Giornale*, 27 November 2005; Masolino D'Amico's «*Com'era aspra e bigotta la campagna del “classico” Gibbon*» (How harsh and bigoted the country of Gibbon's “classic”⁴), *La*

⁴Here my English translation differs slightly from the Italian, where it is Gibbon himself who is called «classical» in inverted commas. The gist, I think, remains the same.

Stampa (Tuttolibri), 10 December 2005; and Viola Papetti's «*Gibbon: storia con fantasmi nel rinascimento anni trenta*» (Gibbon: a tale with ghosts in the Renaissance of the thirties), *Il Manifesto (Alias)*, 25 March 2006. While the first review is the longest and the most enthusiastic, the other two are shorter and more prudent. On the other hand, these two reviewers are well-known figures in the literary world. Masolino D'Amico's word, in particular, is held to have great weight: but his review is the shortest of the three (a single short column), conceived as it is for a Christmas issue of *La Stampa*'s literary supplement in which a great number of books were described as suitable presents.

If the book's reception is to be judged by these reviews, it has been on the whole favourable but not as good as its committed translator had hoped, and as would be necessary to make its style the staple for a future line of Scottish novels in Italian. The reviewers generally praise the quality of the book, but some of them do not appreciate or accept its centrality to a Scottish (as distinct from English) tradition: Iadicicco indeed stresses its local character and universal ambition, and adds that it is a «monument, an opus magnum, a masterpiece [*un monumento, un opus magnum, un capolavoro*]»; D'Amico writes that the work is «of majestic proportions and superbly controlled [*di proporzioni maestose e dal controllo superbo*]», and that Gibbon can be compared to Faulkner and Joyce for his attempt at rendering the rhythm of spoken Scots («*l'ambizione di far vivere sulla pagina qualcosa che rendesse il sapore della lingua scozzese com'era e com'era stata parlata, e sotto questo aspetto Gibbon è accostabile ai contemporanei Faulkner e Joyce*»); while Papetti defines *Sunset Song* an «honest and generous novel [*onesto e generoso romanzo*]».

As regards the translating style, all reviewers inevitably notice the strange Italian in which the target text is written (its nature and motivation having been explained in the introduction), but they are at some variance in their critical judgments, their different opinions possibly having to do with their different regional origins⁵. Iadicicco writes that the one obtained in the translation is an «irresistible effect. And it immediately tickles the reader's ear with the hearty familiarity and the vivid proximity [*L'effetto è irresistibile. E solletica immediatamente l'orecchio del lettore la calorosa familiarità, la viva prossimità*]» of the Scottish people. D'Amico says that the translator «fearlessly defied the Camilleri-effect in order to lend liveliness to a prose that takes the music of the original into account and incorporates dialect words taken from many lexicons. The result is a hybrid, but a substantial one, which one surrenders to willingly [*ha intrepidamente*

⁵Though the surname Iadicicco has a southern ring, *Il Giornale* is a markedly northern newspaper.

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rischiato l'effetto-Camilleri movimentando una prosa che tiene presente la musicalità dell'originale con vocaboli dialettali presi da vari lessici. Ne risulta un ibrido ma di sostanza, cui ci si arrende volentieri]». Papetti calls the translation a very good one («ottima»), «except when it introduces rare, dialectal, or archaic words [eccetto quando introduce voci rare, dialettali o arcaiche]»; she speaks for fluency when she complains that the reader is compelled to look things up in specialized dictionaries («Perché costringere il lettore a consultare dizionari specializzati per “zingano”, “chiuzzo”, “chiazzoso”, “scroglio”, “porbione”, “sgaffo” e altri»). In brief, she proclaims herself against synthetic Italian.

On the whole, *Canto del tramonto* has so far made its way tolerably well into the Italian book market, but it has not satisfied the high-flying ambition of its publisher and translator. While a number of people have had a masterpiece of modern literature at their disposal, and some of them may have recognized it as such, there is not much chance of it founding a new tradition or paving the way for its successors. The reasons of this partial success may have to do with the quality of the bi-text, with the peculiarities of the Italian book market, or both. One way or the other, it is very difficult to tell, because the relationship between causes and effects, quality and results, is often a mysterious one in the literary profession: it would be wrong to condemn a project that did not go down well, as it would be presumptuous to sanctify the actions that obtained notice and commendation⁶.

IV. Conclusion

The translator-scholar should perhaps confine him/herself to the observation of the norms and processes governing his/her behaviour. Once he/she crosses the barriers of scientific observation and becomes a cultural agitator, analytic precision gives way to wishful thinking, with all the delusions and disappointments that wishful thinking creates. One of the reasons for being a translator has to do with the wish to have other people

⁶When this article had already been completed, another brief review by Susanna Battisti appeared on the monthly magazine *L'indice del libri del mese* (may 2006, vol. XXIII, n. 5, p. 38). It is a sort of summary of the other three: the reviewer registers initial discouragement at the linguistic difficulties posed by the target text («Le prime pagine del romanzo sono davvero scoraggianti, tanto irto è il linguaggio di termini dialettali italiani, di parole storpiate e di forme sintattiche strampalate»), calls Gibbon a «niche writer» («uno scrittore di nicchia»), but adds that after the first shock the reader is captivated by the music of the great Scottish writer (tellingly, the translator loses his share: «Ma ben presto la musicalità del grande scrittore scozzese cattura l'orecchio, trascinando il lettore nel pieno della vita del villaggio di Kinraddie»).

read what they could not decode in the source language. The translator wants to reduce a distance, but once he/she sets about to do so he/she finds that at least some of the pleasure of reading had to do with the distance itself. Contradictorily, he/she may try to preserve part of that distance, but in doing so his/her translation will clash with the norms which govern the literary market and communicative behaviour at large in his/her society. The strongest of these norms dictates that the target text must be comprehensible, i.e., for a novel, that the events must be clear and the characters recognizable. But there are other important norms that govern stylistic choice: these norms are usually not compulsory, but they have at least a potential rewarding/punishing power. If translators tries to breach or stretch some of these norms, and are successful, they may wish to do so again, and possibly to dare even more; but once one of their efforts proves a failure or a partial success, the nature of norms is such that most translators (rather than damning their efforts) will ascribe their mischance to their power, and will probably never defy it again.

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