Fernanda Sottsass Pivano

MODERN TRANSLATIONS INTO ITALIAN

ONE OF THE VERY FIRST things I noticed long ago as a young translator, was that no translator is ever completely satisfied with other translators' translations; therefore, I started quite early wondering what it was to be wrong in this strange *métier*, this strange profession. Was it because someone wanted a sentence to be translated word-for-word, while someone else wanted to change it a little or much or very much following his inclination or mood or taste? Or, was it because someone wanted an ancient language to be re-created in a fake ancient language, while someone else wanted to create the flavor of other times through modern words? Or was it because someone wanted a foreign-language rhythm to be destroyed and turned into another language rhythm, while someone else wanted to try as hard as possible to invent a non-existent rhythm to face this weird hospitality problem?

I found out that, more often than not, each translator had his own very strong opinions about what he was doing and most of all about what other translators should or should not have been doing. This confused me a lot.

When I talk of translators, I am referring to the literary ones; but among these I am not referring to the highly skilled technicians who dictate translations of three different books to three different typists at the same time, after changing the typewriter keys to humor the different editorial practice of such-and-such a publisher. The translators I am talking about are the silent, patient, hardworking researchers who write and re-write a sentence over and over again to reach whatever dream they have about that sentence and, if this kind of research can be called a creation, then I myself surely have my own very strong opinion, which is that a translation can only be a creation. But my own very strong opinion is also that a translation should by no means destroy the original texture and flavor, let alone the original rhythm and style; because by this the author's reality – and I don't mean his way of writing but the writing itself – would be destroyed as well.

Whoever might mistake such a technique for a word-for-word translation would be severely baffled at his very first attempt at achieving it. It is clear enough how different is the consciousness of any author from anyone else's consciousness; but it seemed unthinkable to me the way the various translators' approaches could differ for the same words being translated into a different language. This sounds like an old Mr. Lapalisse's statement, but it was for me the very beginning of a technique that kept my work going for decades, with no feedbacks of bad conscience since I knew that I was doing my best to try to have my authors understood in a very different language from a very different consciousness and I was doing my best to keep them safe in their own inventions and fantasies.

It is probably through this approach to translation that some of us in Italy started "discovering" authors as the simplest way to "invent" another way of life, during the faraway decades of Mussolini's unmild literary dictatorship. I assume that many of us have read

Donald Heiney's book *America in Modern Italian Literature*, the most accurate and sharp portrait of those Italian literary decades I have come across so far; and someone probably recalls with respect, as I do, the work done by two Italian writers, Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini, who "created" American literature for Italian readers and by so doing created a new generation of writers and a new consciousness towards literature.

I suppose everybody knows what the cultural basis of those Italian decades has been. Our Undersecretary of Fine Arts declared in 1926: "Artists must prepare themselves for the new imperialist function which must be carried out by our art. Above all we must categorically impose the principles of *Italianità*. Whoever copies a foreigner is guilty of *lèse-Nation* like a spy who admits an enemy by a secret doorway." This rule was very strongly enforced, together with a typical censorship against any creativity aimed at making the very narrow channels of political and moralistic propaganda overflow.

Writing in Italy during those decades without incurring censorship meant either fulfilling the cultural autarchy by singing in a peculiar, rhetorical language the values of classical imperial images and stifling by the sounds of ever-ringing brass bands the daily brainwashing of everybody's consciousness; or, escaping into poetry and its so-called obvious lack of directness or straightforwardness or clearness, since at that time our poetry was mostly labeled as metaphysical and hermetic. A creative writer had to be very careful about whatever he was writing, if he did not want to end up in confinement in some secluded village of our deep South (which was really deep at that time) or maybe in a jail quite more unfriendly than any jail designed for non-political crimes; and the 1931 law that required the *tessera* of the Fascist Party for professors did not derive much help from the Academies.

OK, you all know what I am trying to get across, and I don't even want to make you believe that everybody in Italy was unhappy. The very first time I saw Pavese after the so-called "Liberation," with the last Fascist *Cecchini* still shooting in the streets, he threw me off balance by saying: "No one but a fool would think that all Italians were anti-Fascists. Only a very few of them were." He was probably right, I don't know; but Fascist or un-Fascist or anti-Fascist as they might have been, the system was so strict that I think we might safely say that a general alienation from real human values was suffocating our public and private consciousness to death.

Unless this is clear it is really very hard to understand the work of these writers, Pavese and Vittorini, who devised the trick of translating books where suggestions of freedom were bursting off like ripe fruits on a rich tree, as a way of expressing themselves; and by freedom I don't mean any already ambiguous political freedom but literary freedom, the freedom of a prose or poetry written in a new language in order to express new feelings about new things, where traditions might be respected but might also be discussed or ignored. It was mostly the American naturalists who were translated in Italy during the thirties: Caldwell, Steinbeck, Saroyan, and Sinclair Lewis were the most popular, but even Melville's *Moby Dick* was translated by Pavese, who also wrote the first Italian temptative essay on Walt Whitman, by whom he had been turned-on to the American mingling of life and writing, as opposed to the Italian idea of immaculate pages

of a *Turris Eburnea* where prose and poetry were fleckless – or to modernize it all, stainless, unpolluted – by such a supposedly dirty thing as everyday reality and life. Hemingway, who was severely forbidden by our censorship, had to be read in English or French translations; the lack of communication and knowledge led to mistakes, and mistakes have been made, for instance, in preferring James Cain to Faulkner. But anyway these authors were read in an atmosphere of conspiracy that gave the books an unpredictable, what's-next flavor; more or less, maybe, the flavor that the classics had when they were discovered in Italy in the early Renaissance. One of the most outstanding examples of this sort of attitude was the enormous success of the *Spoon River Anthology* – yes, I really mean Edgar Lee Masters' *Anthology*, which in Italy, during the Nazi occupation, was a kind of underground safe-conduct or pass, such as to give its fans or even just its readers the features of something between a conspirator and a new-style-of-fife adept.

How much has all this to do with translations? Vittorini and Pavese and a little later I myself were called *Americanisti*, which did not only mean that we were translating American authors but that we were suggesting that particular approach to literature that American literature seemed to us to embody at that moment to the Italian consciousness. In the frame of such literary choice, many problems had to be faced, and I am not referring to the practical problems like obtaining from our Minister of Popular Culture permission to publish the books we wanted to publish. I am actually referring to the technical problems of translating new ideas expressed in a new language (as the American language was or seemed to be when compared to its English great-great-grandfather) into our very old Italian language built up through very old centuries to express very old ideas.

This is what I mean by "translation as creation." When I started in Pavese's wake, or footsteps if you prefer, doing my own work (of whatever significance it might have been), I learnt most of the technical approaches to a page to be translated from him. I learnt the very first rudimental practice of underlining all the unfamiliar words and all the slang words, to read aloud a sentence trying to reach whatever rhythm the original sentence seemed to have my ear, to try hard to forget our Italian so-called formal elegance, by which what was actually meant was a French-like sonority or roundness of sound – a rotundity, if this makes any sense. And right away our "cross and delight" problems sprang out from those pages: the problem of occasionally understanding American slang and always of inventing an Italian slang, and the problem of shifting pages which were rhythmically flowing away on mostly monosyllabic or bisyllabic American words to pages slowed down and made heavy by our long plurisyllabic words.

The problem of understanding American slang sounds now quite meaningless to our young translators, who have at their disposal numberless dictionaries and vocabularies and varieties of specific slang glossaries; they can also meet numberless English-speaking tourists in Italy or they can eventually take a plane and fly to America or to England for help. We all know how fast times are a-changing and I see someone around who might remember that all such chances were not given to the *Americanisti* of the decades I am talking about; and that, rather than disheartening us, the tantalizing difficulties were fas-

cinating us, as if the obscurity of a word were stimulating to the discovery of an all-clear but quite new language. The discovery of the American language through reading a book was very much connected with the discovery of a book through the discovery of its language; and this gave the translations from American done in those decades a particular kind of enthusiasm, of commitment: the Italian *Americanisti* of the thirties and forties have been as *engagés* as the political writers in the fifties.

Such a commitment is what I consider a creation in a translation. But from the moment of discovery, the creation was mostly tied down to our endless attempts, our never-ending efforts to find non-existent Italian language fit to create a vicarious fiction or poetry such as we were not allowed to write of our own, while the all-Italian classical tradition was imposed on our consciousness. American slang was in itself a specific problem, of course, and one that was never actually solved. There was no such thing as slang in Italy, except for a few technical slang words, like the thieves' or the beggars' or the football slang; and the cartoon magazines approved by the Establishment and its censorship were offering a middle-class slang, mostly derisive of any attempt to escape from the portrait of a tough, bullying, patriotic, reckless, no-time-for-nonsense youth on which the future of our so-called empire was resting. Needless to say, we carefully avoided such slang; and when I was talked and talked and talked into using it in Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* translation, I didn't have to wait very long to see how foolish I had been when I finally used even just a couple of words of it: that particular Italian slang died out after a very short time, completely erased from language and consciousness probably because of its lack of reality, of its being born from a propagandistic program put into being on a cartoonist's drawing-table rather than from spontaneous talks and inventions of people in the street.

The only way out of the problem of slang seemed to be our dialects, and this was for a moment the solution chosen by Pavese, who was born in a section of North Italy called Piedmont and who was very much involved with this. His using of his dialect was a whole lot more than a sentimental choice for him: besides believing very much in his birth as a country boy, he was quite aware that putting a stress on the agricultural, little-town life was already showing a symbolic choice between the overimposed imperialist pattern and the forbidden human dimension of an un-heroic reality. But his experiments of using Piedmontese words while translating Faulkner did not seem to be very profitable to him; and he gave them up and kept using his dialect in his own prose as soon as his prose was allowed to be published.

As for my own experiment on translations of slang, what I tried to do as hard as I could was to turn it into peculiar ways of our spoken language, which was quite different from our literary language and supposedly improper for a good book. Starting as it did as a solution of the slang problem, this experiment widened to the whole stylistic texture of the books I translated, but of course I couldn't hold on to such a solution whenever I was working on old traditional authors – which actually I accepted to translate only under a very typical pressure of those decades: publishers were most unwilling to publish American authors for fear of having the books seized by political anti-foreign censorship, even

though their reputation as literary publishers was actually helped a great deal through such publications. Bompiani started in 1929 and published Cain, Caldwell, Steinbeck, and Vittorini's *Americana Anthology* (1942); Frassinelli started in 1932 by publishing Melville and Anderson, Einaudi started in 1933 and introduced Gertrude Stein, Masters, and Hemingway in Italy, and Mondadori in 1933 started a competitive literary series of "foreign" authors which included Sinclair Lewis, Dos Passos, Faulkner and Saroyan. Publishers were usually blackmailing the *Americanisti*, by expecting them, whenever they wanted very hard to have an American author published, to translate it more or less free, (Pavese translated *Moby Dick* for 1000 lire, about one-dollar-fifty, and I really mean one-dollar-fifty, and for the same fee I translated Masters' *Anthology*) and by expecting them to reciprocate the favor by translating a "traditional" (beyond censorship) book for a normal fee.

That's how I happened to translate a book by Jane Austen and one by Charles Dickens; and from this moment my problem was to get out of using colloquial contemporary Italian. Therefore I found myself re-reading half forgotten Italian books of my scholarly education, trying to capture their rhythm and their texture. It was at that moment that I found out how strictly connected with contemporary life a really good book is for all its universality and how hard it is to re-create an ancient rhythm and texture without making a fake reconstruction, not very unlike the wax statues of Marie Tussaud.

I worked very hard before giving the problem up. I still have big, huge index books where I used to collect any word which had been used in the same book more than once with the same or a different meaning, each word with the number of the page where it was used. The idea was to be sure to make exactly the same number of repetitions as the author, which – together with the attempt of producing a more or less similar rhythm based on accents, on the general cadenza – was my suggestion to turn the old style of a language into an old style of another language *without* using ancient, lifeless words.

I am not sure that my attempts reached their aim: I gave up translating old authors as soon as I could. But while translating the new ones, I went on using the technique of recording all repetitions and of never forgetting the original rhythm. This was a hard enough job in itself, but it was a real drudgery when it came to the editors' revisions, with their opinions about how to make our translations "pretty" or "likable" or even just "correct". Their first idea of prettiness was usually that any repetition at all had to be avoided, whenever they noticed one; and the easiest ones to be noticed, of course, were the "he (or she) said" in our beloved modern-American dialogues. It was typical, much later, to read a young man's criticism where he blamed Pavese for not respecting those repetitions.

Anyway, the easiest, most rudimental attempt to keep up with the original rhythm seemed possible to me by respecting the original punctuation, of course, I grew a deep dislike for the French craze of those years, of turning whatever paragraph of whatever language into the breathing of the French literary, traditional paragraph; and I was aghast when I saw this same technique applied in an Italian pirate (and later to be rescued) translation of *A Farewell to Arms*: Hemingway's beautiful, inimitable sequence of very short sentences, three-four words each, was drowned into long, eighteenth-nineteenth

century paragraphs, complete with colon and semicolon. What had this to do with the prose that had turned some of us on to a new style of writing long before we came to know about its author's new style of life? I was more and more confused.

Later, with the mythical discovering time gone into the postwar flooding rivers of Coca-Cola and economic imperialism – I mean, after America had become a physical reality with not so much to be dreamt about and after our champions of clandestinity were accepted by the Establishment – I kept translating for a. while simply because this had become my profession; but my approach to translating didn't change as far as my attempts of turning the American authors' rhythm and style into Italian were concerned; and the weird disguisement of Hemingway prose in that Italian translation disturbed me a lot. I was wondering, while doing the authorized translation of *A Farewell to Arms*, whether my reaction was just a sentimental one, or whether I was undergoing the professional distortion of refusing another translator's way of translating, or whether I simply believed quite strongly in my own technical devices. The Last Judgment Day came for me while translating Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*, when I found on my table a paragraph about twenty pages long without a period, where the thoughts and images and actions were linked by numberless gerundives and present participles: a form which I could not possibly use in Italian in that sequence without sounding like an untalented primary-school pupil doing her homework. It would have been easy, so easy, to break the paragraph, as was usually done in European translations, and to make several Italian-sounding sentences out of that long wave of breathing; but I chose to work seven months trying not to break it, and I will never know whether my dedication rewarded me with a practical achievement or not.

My anxiety, my eagerness to be true to my authors' styles, led me to write to them and ask for explanations and advice; their kindness and patience provided me with the most precious experiences of my life as a writer and as a human being. As soon as my passport was granted to me, I went to Paris to meet Alice Toklas, and she gave me precious information on her fabled Gertrude Stein, on whom I had written a long essay while translating one of her books. When Richard Wright came to Paris after being invited by Jean-Paul Sartre, I went to tell him about a never-to-be-published book called *Uncle Tom Is Dead* which I had written half-fanatically during the war.

Then Ernest Hemingway came to Italy and by giving me his generous friendship he made up for whatever dedication to his books I had committed myself to. He hated to talk about what he had written and couldn't stand explaining the meaning of some of his colloquial expressions which I was foolish enough to call slang. He flatly stated that he never used slang in his books, that any word in his books might have been used by Shakespeare and might anyway be found in a dictionary. Next morning, under the shining sun of Cortina d'Ampezzo, while pulling a little sledge up the hill where Tiziano was born or maybe had just lived, he insisted that he never used slang; and it wasn't until much later that I learnt about such prose rules of his Kansas City *Star* as: "Use short sentences. Use short paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative," or: "Never use slang, which has no place after its use becomes common. Slang to be

enjoyable must be fresh," or: "Avoid the use of adjectives, especially such extravagant ones as *splendid*, *gorgeous*, *grand*, *magnificent*, *etc*."

Whatever influence such prose rules had on his formation as a writer, they surely relieved me of my worries about keeping or not keeping his short-sentences rhythm in my translations of his books or looking for intensity rather than for sensation in the choice of the Italian adjectives to mate the original ones. Listening to him while he was telling a story which he would have written next morning, after getting up at sunrise before the visitors' trickle (soon to become a flood) would start, and standing up in front of his typewriter to type down deliberately the story which he had warmed up by telling it at the dining-table – listening to him telling that story at the dining-table was more useful to understanding his writing than reading thousands of words of criticism on his technique of writing. And I remember a happy day in his open car, Mary hidden under a blanket, Hemingway drinking from a few bottles of gin which he had taken with him, when I suddenly understood the real sound of his fabled dialogue, just by listening to his answers to Mary, his breathtaking gambling with the use of that "to do" which is, really for ever, impossible to translate into Italian.

My next flesh-and-blood discovery was William Faulkner's sarcasm. His prose had mostly meant a very interesting stylistic tantalizing trial to me, when I happened to translate it; and when I first met him I was mostly impressed by his silence and his chivalrous ways, like catching hold of my arm when crossing a street, the way men used to do with ladies during the Golden Age (at least in Europe). But when I saw him later and his silence was not so defensive and his ways were not so stately anymore, I found in some of his answers, in many of his remarks, a sarcastic way of eluding some unpleasant reality, some reluctant statement. This sarcastic key came out over and over again, while making fun of a lady – who very much wanted to have a Nobel Prize at her dining-table and, who, Faulkner said, had spent three days choosing a menu, hiring servants, mailing invitations, setting the table, going to the hairdresser and finally shining the silverware without knowing that actually he had already chosen not to attend her dinner; or while walking slowly in the dusk (or, as he would say, in the dust), pretending to look for a phantom window shop where that morning, passing by car, he had seen a very beautiful necktie, which he very much wanted to buy, and stubbornly going up and down the same street as if he wouldn't see that all the shops were closed anyway. I could go on and, somehow, the Biblical oratory and the Joyce stream of consciousness acquired a new light for me, and I started looking through his pages, to find out when his images were true and when they were disguising his discontent.

I don't know, maybe I am all wrong. I had spent years looking for a connection between fiction and reality, between a book and its reality, between an author and his reality, all of which had very little to do with French or American or Italian or whatsoever literary "naturalism" and which only concerned my eagerness to find, if not a blueprint, at least a tentative way out of our Italian attitude towards literature as an abstract tournament where the "Queen of Beauty" could be reached only by giving up any

connection with so-called "vulgarity" and so on; yes, like the old British Victorian days, except that not being vulgar at that time for Italian Establishment meant being a Fascist.

What a confusion. Now – I mean, after the war, in the fifties – those times had been swallowed up by a large tide of tragedy and disaster, of forgiveness and grief, with all the hatred drowned in blood and too much blood to have mercy on. Our principle of *Italianità* was there, like a tiger made of paper, as Mr. Mao Tse-tung would say, and some of us were too tired to find out for whose fault it all had happened and too wise anyway to think that finding it out would help anyone. There we were, with the American authors of our dreams of liberty – which we had translated for no tangible advantage, surely not for money, even more surely not to get any academic honor out of it, sometimes getting jail or confinement sentences and always public disgrace for it – all of them suddenly being very popular, with publishers contending for their copyrights and exploiting whatever celebrity had come out of the *Americanisti* myth.

That myth had lost most of its meaning for some of us; and after having checked my interpretations by personally meeting my authors, or their wives or daughters when my authors had died, there seemed little more for me to do, since I was not particularly interested in an abstract, purely formal critical research.

It was more or less at that time that Allen Ginsberg's "*Howl*" blew my mind out when I read it in that *Evergreen Review* special issue on the San Francisco scene. OK, maybe I have been all wrong again, but in his attitude during those McCarthy days, I rediscovered some of the emotions which I had shared at his age with some Italian writers while looking for that unclear something that might turn a brainwashed consciousness into a living one; and by "his attitude" I mean of course what *I* thought his attitude was at that moment, what his attitude seemed *to me*. I insist on the relativity of my personal interpretation because, much later, he severely complained about my stereotyping him, and I remember him in Florence, in a very crowded movie theatre where we went to see a Pier Paolo Pasolini something, when an American boy asked him: "Are you Mr. Allen Ginsberg?" and he answered flatly, "One of them." Whatever he really meant at that time, what I thought I saw through his lines, was a proposal of a full-time frankness or truthfulness or whatever you want to call it, a suggestion of total directness and of searching into one's own consciousness as a first step to try to find the core of anyone else's consciousness and start a new, unmanipulated communication between human beings, a suspicion about bureaucracy as one of many alienation sources, a revival of a human dimension as based on spiritual values versus the materialistic values born from the gradual mechanization of souls.

It sounded a little like our old non-Fascist story, except for the image of the "mechanization," which for us had been "Fascistization" of the souls; but it was the first time that I saw it written down so clearly and with such unaggressive effectiveness, and anyway it showed me a way out of the intellectual sclerotization that was stifling Italy during the sixties. It seemed natural to me that I close my profession as a translator by translating his poetry. And by doing so, I unexpectedly happened to be involved with the Italian public consciousness again, much as twenty years earlier I had happened to be

involved with it while dealing with our myth of the fabled American democracy and literature.

Translating became creative again to me. Once again, I was facing a language which was born from reality rather than from scholarly learning, and I was able to check again how far from banal reality a poetical reconstruction of reality is. When I heard of Jack Kerouac's technique of taping and typing real people's talks, I listened carefully to Neal Cassidy's monologues, to see how much of Kerouac's creativity had worked on Neal's words to reproduce his rhythm, his cadenza. The problem was a fascinating one to me, because, although I didn't translate Kerouac's books, I was constantly looking for the connection between a colloquial language and a literary language, and, anyway, the difference between the real way of speaking without being self-conscious and a written colloquial language. (Please notice that I said *written* rather than *literary*, because a literary colloquial language would be like wax statues to me again, like Minstrel-Show Deep-South dialects).

So there I was again in front of a book of poems, with another unseizable Moby Dick luring me from those long, urging lines, and, when the first shock was over, the technical problems started: how was I to keep that rhythm with our slow, always too slow, too slow for ever, Italian-language rhythm? How was I to contract our long words into short, sometimes snapping monosyllables? How was I to work out those clicking genitive inflections built up as they were in a vertical crescendo with our unruffled extensive sequences which were built up with endless "of" and "of the" and heavy syntactical constructions? How was I to invent an Italian way for those sequences of nounsused-as-adjectives to build up a running-shot image large enough to include everything, really everything, really all the ugly-beautiful ecological reality of whatever was rising up from those lines?

I found a way to turn the running-shot descriptions into Italian by following my old trick of just being faithful to the original. I was typically criticized for it: a young man wrote that my translation was just what we call *interlineare* or *bigino*, one of those word-by-word translations used in Italy by lazy pupils who don't feel like working on their Latin or Greek homework; an old man wrote that I hadn't worked hard enough on it. After all, times had not changed so much as far as criticism was concerned; and I have not been very discouraged, because I still feel some connection between those all--including images and my attempts to make them understood in Italian or at least to give our readers a feeling about them as they have been originally written down.

But there were other problems, sometimes easy problems due to my ignorance of Ginsberg's environment (and Michael McClure helped me a lot, going for hours through Ginsberg's book with me while Ginsberg was in India); sometimes technical problems, like how to avoid our censorship wrath and seizing of the book. (When Ginsberg refused to let his so-called daring lines be translated by half-scientific words which would baffle our censorship, he threw me into deep disaster but gave me a clear evidence of what *real* spoken language meant to him). I got more and more involved, and I will never forgive myself for the weeks I stole from Allen Ginsberg's life while trying to learn from his

voice how to capture the Moby Dick of his poetry. His patience and his scholarship are known to whoever has had a chance to work with him; and for future scholars I taped eight four-track tapes, recording our attempts to translate his “TV Baby Poem” into Italian, with each word discussed and scrutinized and peeled off in an effort to find an Italian word as close as possible to it and to all the possible meanings of it.

Now, is this a creative translation? Maybe it is.

I might go on; but I already have to apologize for talking too much and for talking mostly of my personal experiences, rather than attempting a theoretical critical research on the problem of translating. My poor casual story probably doesn’t mean much to a formal history of translation, of criticism, and of criticism of translation; and I find myself still clinging to human relationships rather than to rational theorization as I did in my girlhood. I don’t even wonder if my translations have been good or bad: what I know is that I always tried to guess, as much as I could, what my authors had tried to mean in the books I was translating; and, by so doing, I was rewarded with personal involvements that took me close to some writers’ techniques and sometimes to their inspirational feelings. Their beautiful pages and their beautiful minds, their written and spoken, literary and non-literary words, sometimes crowd my mind maybe far beyond some technical translation problem. Under the large gliding wings of their images and creativity, of their knowledge of human suffering and joy, of their respect for death and life, I found a reason for my quiet, patient, stimulating, most enjoyable work.

Reference: *The World of Translation*, New York, PEN American Center, 1970, p. 321-333.