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JOYCE IN/AND ITALY

edited by

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Joyce, James. 2013.
Ulisse
Trans. Gianni Celati. Torino: Einaudi

During spring this year the Italian publishing market welcomed the long awaited publication of a new translation of *Ulysses* by the self confessed writer-translator Gianni Celati. The previous major translations were Enrico de Angelis' authorized one published by Mondadori in 1960, already a classic in its own right, and Enrico Terrinoni and Carlo Bigazzi's "democratic" one published by Newton Compton in 2012.

The initial expectations for this *Ulisse nella traduzione di Gianni Celati* were high. In Italy, Gianni Celati, born in Sondrio (Lombardy) in 1937, is a highly regarded writer, art director, literary critic and translator, who has also taught at Cornell University and at the DAM in Bologna. His many translations include works by Herman Melville, Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain and Joseph Conrad, authors that represent a very different class of writing, easy to understand in their intentions but lacking the intricate layers of meanings and references typical of Joyce's work.

It is possible to have a powerful experience of a work of art even in a modest translation, let alone a brilliant one. That is, after all, how most of the literate world has encountered the *Iliad* or *Hamlet*, and, though it is certainly preferable to read these works in their original languages, it is misguided to insist that there is no real access to them otherwise. To translate a narrative of such a complex nature as Joyce's requires extra stamina and a lot of knowledge. In Italy in the 1950s if a publisher wanted to publish a foreign author he was compelled to engage some of the leading writers of the time, like Cesare Pavese, Alberto Moravia or Elio Vittorini, who were familiar with other languages rather than Italian, but today what sense has a "traduzione d'autore", when there are armies of highly skilled professional translators, whose humble and precious work is often forgotten?

This question arises especially in the case of Joyce's works. Celati obviously plays with the author's original text, falling victim thereby to his own vanity. He almost seems to be competing with the original writing instead of trying to make himself invisible, as every translator should do. He tries to leave his mark everywhere in the text, putting himself in between the author and his readers. For example when Joyce quotes famous authors like W.B. Yeats, Ignazio Loyola or Thomas Aquinas, the translators should make

use of a canonic version, but Celati changes it, just as he changes recurring nouns, phrases, advertising copy, refrains of songs and much more. In *Ulysses* Joyce's meanings are often to be found in repetitions, like echoes. An important fact that Celati seems to have missed.

An example could be a quotation from W.B. Yeats' poem "Who goes with Fergus", which first appears in the "Telemachus" episode. Buck Mulligan, addressing Stephen Dedalus says: "Don't mope over it all day, (..). I'm inconsequent. Give up the moody brooding". And then come the lines, "*And no more turn aside and brood / Upon love's bitter mystery / For Fergus rules the brazen cars*" (1, 235-45). Celati, while translating it (erroneously) with: "Non mugugnarsi sopra per tutto il giorno, disse. Io parlo a vanvera. Dacci un taglio con queste ruminazioni musonesche". (..). "*E mai più appartato a rodersi/ sull'amaro mistero dell'amore/ Fergus guida i bronzi cocchi*" (1, 13 27) misses the whole sense of the quotation. In his version, the one who is supposed to stop brooding is Fergus, instead of the young pair in Yeats' original poem. He then keeps adopting different versions every time lines of that poem are quoted. For example in "Proteus": "*and no more turn aside and brood/ His gaze brooded on his broadtoed boots, a buck's castoff, nebeneinander*". (U 3, 445-7) is redered by Celati with "*E mai più appartato a ruminarel Con lo sguardo indugiò ruminando sulle proprie scarpe a punta larga, avanzi di un caprone, nebeneinander*" (3, 67).

We are well aware that *Ulysses* is no mean challenge to a translator's imagination. Opening the gate to a number of different paths, following one might easily result in missing others: witness the many revised editions of *Ulysses Annotated* by Gifford and Seidman since its first printing in 1988. As a translator Gianni Celati's was certainly aware of the abundance of textual guidance in existence and decided to risk his luck by relying on his writer's instincts. The results of his gamble are uneven to the point that the first 300 pages of *Ulisse nella traduzione di Gianni Celati* could have a disheartening effect on the reader, both if he is already familiar with it or if he has never read it before. Particularly during the first episodes, the text at times seems almost incomprehensible.

Nonetheless, the perseverance of a steadfast reader will be rewarded if he can manage to overcome the "Wandering Rocks" of Scylla and Charibdis, as from the 10th episode on, Celati's version of Joyce's masterpiece begins to work as it should, giving justice to the magic writing of "Nausicaa", "Eumaeus" and "Ithaca". Such as in his opening of "Circe": "*Mabbot street, ingresso nel quartiere dei bordelli, innanzi al quale sapre una rimessa di*

tramway, con selciato sconnesso, su scheletri di binari, con fuochi fatui rossi e verdi e segnali di pericolo". (15, 590) or in this passage of "Nausicaa": "Con mano cautelosa Mr Bloom rimise a posto la camicia bagnata. Diàmine, quel diavoletto zoppicante. La roba sta diventando fredda e vischiosa. Mica piacevole. Però si deve pur sfogare in qualche modo". (13, 507). Celati's translation sometimes flows best in those episodes where Joyce mocks literary styles of the past: "Nausicaa", "Cyclops" and "Eumaeus", or also where Joyce uses a peculiar language such as the scientific/catechetical one of "Ithaca". And even if at the end, in "Penelope", one has the feeling that Molly has just emerged from a course in basic grammar, the reader can close the book admiring the greatness of it.

According to Fritz Senn, "instead of expressing indignation or gloating over translators' mistakes, I find it more profitable to investigate into what in a text makes translators go a different way from the one we think correct. There is usually a reason, a complexity in the original, that puzzles or misleads translations. We can learn something about the originals from translators' errors or departures".

With this in mind we will try to follow some of Gianni Celati's "departures" where some of his stylistic or interpretative choices raise doubts.

Besides the already mentioned "missed" references to Yeats, there are also many to Homer or Shakespeare, as in the case of the famous opening of the novel:

"Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed" (1, 1-2) that Gianni Celati translates with: "Imponente e grassoccio, Buck Mulligan stava sbucando dal caposcala con in mano una tazza piena di schiuma (...)". (1, 5)

Grassoccio? Sbucando? Caposcala? Una tazza piena? All hints to a false start. Grassoccio: (besides being cacophonous) takes the reader far from the Shakespearian allusion to the plump jester Falstaff. Sbucando: Joyce does not use the gerundio *coming*, but the past *came*. Caposcala: an Italian reader would think of a condominio, but here Buck Mulligan has ascended the steps to an imaginary altar represented by the Martello Tower terrace, where he is performing a parody of the Catholic mass. What he has in his hands is not a "tazza piena", but a "bowl", a "ciotola" with all that is necessary for a shave, and "bowl" recurs in the episode as a chalice and as a symbol of illness and death when associated with Stephen's dying mother. Not to speak of the "fearful jesuit" that appears few lines below that is rendered with "disgustoso d'un gesuita".

Similar problems are to be found with the translation of the “snotgreen” Irish sea, Bloom’s fat and animistic “kettle” (which becomes a “cuccuma”), “the cracked lookingglass of a servant”, and of the toponymies and titles of Irish folk-songs. The ubiquitous names of places such as the Cabman’s Shelter, the Dublin Bakery Company, or Philip Beaufoy’s Playgoer’s Club, are translated differently every time they appear in the text. This is also the case of refrains from late Victorian popular songs like “Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?”, “Those Lovely Seaside Girls” and “Love’s Old Sweet Song”.

Consider Leopold Bloom’s obsession with the advertising for Plumtree’s Potted Meat, “*What is home without/ Plumtree’s Potted Meat?! Incomplete./ With it an abode of bliss*” (5, 145-9).

As we know, the advertising line for this product reappears in the book many times, and it is obviously important to Joyce, helping him to point out Leopold Bloom’s anxieties. In Celati’s translation a different interpretation is used each time, first in “Calypso”: “*Cos’è una casa senza la carne in scatola Plumtree?! Ben povera credenza! Anche se fosse quella del re*” (5, 100); followed by a new reference in “Lestrygonians”: “*Cos’è una casa senza la carne in scatola Plumtree?*” (8 p. 235/6), where he omits to translate the word “*Incomplete*”. Then in “Circe” we have: “The home without potted meat is incomplete” (15, 495) as “Una casa senza carne in scatola non è una casa”. (15, 606); in “Ithaca” the complete jingle is rendered as: “*Cos’è una casa senza la carne in scatola Plumtree?! Incompleta / Con quella siete in paradiso*” (17, 850) where he also translates “some flakes of potted meat, re-cooked, which he removed” (17, 2124-5) with: “qualche minuzzolo di carne conservata, ri-cotta, ch’egli rimosse” (17, 913). After having played with synonyms throughout the book, in “Penelope”, in translating “after the last time we took the port and potted meat it had a fine salty taste yes” (18, 131-2) with: “dopo l’ultimo giro di porto e quel pasticcio di carne buon gusto salato sì” (18, 927) Celati finally manages to catch up with “pasticcio di carne” a more allusive translation for “potted meat” than “carne in scatola”.

But the problem is that he is not only translating “potted meat” with “carne in scatola”, mixing it up with “canned meat” (and thus missing all the sexual hints that the original offers which have been perfectly rendered with “pasta di carne” in the previous two translations by Enrico de Angelis and Enrico Terrinoni), here he is also offering (again) a different translation for the very same advertising copy and also censuring the word “incomplete”, which is charged with many allusions, as the reader is made well aware of in “Ithaca”, where we are eventually informed that between Molly and Poldy

“(..). there remained a period of 10 years, 5 months and 18 days during which carnal intercourse had been incomplete, without ejaculation of semen within the natural female organ”. (17, 2282-4)

Another reflection that needs to be made concerns the apparent mouldy quality of the translator’s prose. While Joyce’s language is rich in freshness, vitality and modernity, Celati adopted a style that by comparison appears antiquated by making wide use of unusual, archaic words and old northern Italian dialect terms such as: baito, sbiellarsi, sbiluciando, fruscoli, mòchela, ambio, popone, mabrucca, gargagna, piola, far flanella, sguillar, en-tragne, balosa, baldente, polleggiare, mecco, sguanguere, pinguello, strambuzzo, guzza, marocca, sfrombo etc etc. This is what he does for instance when translating Joyce’s plain “police” with “polizai”, and “policeman” with “polismano”, or when current English money denominations (penny, shillings and pounds) become “palanche”, “ghelli” and “svanziche”. He also translates “bloody and “gob” with “canchero” and “madosca”.

The constant abuse of this same medley of neo-dialect language transforms a highly polyphonic text such as *Ulysses* into a boring monochord performance.

In Celati’s version of *Ulysses*, the biggest “departures” from the text are caused by his compulsive use of synonyms. As it is well known, the over-use of synonyms is a major problem for whoever wants to translate Joyce. The abuse of synonyms prevents deciphering all the “semantic clusters” or “portmanteau words” that Joyce has scattered through the text. These, on the other hand, are very useful in helping the reader go through a text of almost 1,000 pages. Thus it is also important to decipher these “portmanteau words” from the very beginning in order to easily follow the path that they trace throughout the whole novel.

Let’s take a final example, the famous wordplay around the noun throwaway.

In the 5th episode, “Lotus Eaters”, the better Bantam Lyons stops Bloom in the street asking him to have a look at the *Freeman’s Journal*, because he wants to see what horse is running in the Ascot Golden Cup. Bantam is an unpleasant greasy person, and Leopold thinks:

Better leave him the paper and get shut of him.

- You can keep it, Mr Bloom said.

- Ascot. Gold cup. Wait, Bantam Lyons muttered. Half a mo. Maximum the second.

- I was going to throw it away, Mr Bloom said.
- Bantam Lyons raised his eyes suddenly and leered weakly.
- What's that? His sharp voice said.
- I say you can keep it, Mr Bloom answered. I was going to throw it away that moment. (5, 529-538)

Celati translates:

Meglio lasciargli il giornale e scantonare.

- Lo può tenere, disse Mr Bloom
- Ascot, Coppa d'Oro. Momento borbottava Bantam Lyons. Un secondo. Maximum II.
- Stavo proprio per buttarlo via, disse Mr Bloom.
- Bantam Lyons d'un tratto alzò lo sguardo, con una fiacca occhiata di traverso.
- Che cosa? Disse la sua voce stridula?
- Dico che può tenerlo, rispose Mr Bloom. Stavo proprio per buttarlo via. (5, 115)

What has happened?

After some hours, at the beginning of the 8th episode, "Lestrygonians"—the watchful reader meets with another semantic lead, when: "A sombre Y.M.C.A. (..) placed a throwaway in a hand of Mr. Bloom" that announces the arrival of Elijah (which Celati translates as: "Un tenebroso giovanotto dello Y.M.C.A. (..) ficcò un volantino in mano a Mr Bloom" (8, 206)). Bloom then throws the throwaway in the Liffey.

Only in the 12th episode, "Cyclops", are we informed that the Golden Cup at Ascot has been won by a complete outsider, the horse *Throwaway*.

- Who won, Lenehan? says Terry.
- Throwaway, says he, at twenty to one. A rank outsider. And the rest nowhere. (12, 1217-9)

and Celati's version is:

- Chi ha vinto, Mr Lenehan? Fa Terry.
- Throwaway, lui risponde, a venti contro uno. Un totale outsider. E gli altri ciccia. (12, 447).

In Bernard Kiernan's pub, customers look with hostility the innocent Bloom, who they think has won with a bet on the rank outsider. In the mid-

dle of the night, in the Cabman's Shelter, Leopold will read in the evening paper the results of the race, "Victory of outsider *Throwaway* recalls Derby of '92 (...)" (16, 1242) (translated as: "Ascot, *Throwaway* risveglia i ricordi del Derby '92" (16, 800, 17-18)) and he wonders about the throwaway that he had thrown in the river. The chain of chances will become clear to him only once back home, when he sees on the kitchen table Blazes Boylan's two torn betting tickets. He will then summarize the events of the day:

Where had previous intimations of the results, effected or projected, been received by him?

In Bernard Kiernan's licensed premises 8, 9 and 10 Little Britain street: in O'Connell street lower, outside Graham Lemon's when a dark man had placed in his hand a throwaway (subsequently thrown away), advertising Elijah, restorer of the church of Zion: in Lincoln place outside the premises of F. W. Sweny and Co (Limited) dispensing chemists, when, when Frederick M. (Bantam) Lyons had rapidly and successively requested, perused and restituted the copy of the current issue of the *Freeman's Journal* and *National Press* which he had been about to throw away (subsequently thrown away), he had proceeded towards the oriental edifice of the Turkish and Warm Baths, 11 Leinster street, with the light of inspiration shining in his countenance and bearing in his arms the secret of the race, graven in the language of prediction. (17, 327-341)

Here is Celati's translation of the passage:

Quali indicazioni precedenti su quel risultato, ipotetiche o effettive, erano state da lui ascoltate?

Nel locale di Bernard Kiernan, ai numeri 8, 9 e 10 di Little Britain Street; in quello di David Byrne, al numero 14 di Duke Street; nella bassa O'Connell Street, innanzi al negozio di Graham Lemon quando un tizio scuro gli pose in mano un volantino (successivamente gettato via) annunciante l'arrivo di Elija, il restauratore della Chiesa di Sion; poi in Lincoln Place fuori del negozio di farmacisti F.W. Sweny & Co. Ltd, quando egli, dopo che Frederick M. (Bantam) Lyons gli aveva di gran fretta visto e successivamente richiesto, scorso e restituito una copia dell'edizione corrente del "Freeman's Journal" e "National Press" ch'egli era sul punto di gettar via (lo fece in seguito), s'era diretto verso l'edificio orientale dei Bagni Caldi e turchi, al numero 11 di

Leinster Street, con la luce dell'ispirazione sul volto, recando tra le braccia il segreto della propria razza, inciso nel linguaggio della predizione. (17, 839)

Previous translators have resolved the conundrum brilliantly: de Angelis calling the horse "Buttavia", playing with the misunderstanding "stavo per buttarlo via". Terrinoni called the horse "Volantino", thus adopting a very creative choice not completely faithful to the original: "Il volantino. Puoi tenerlo. Col volantino." but one that enables the reader to understand and follow the development of the semantic cluster throughout the whole novel.

Celati, not translating the name of the horse and using different terms for "throwaway" ("stavo per buttarlo via", "sul punto di gettar via" etc), deprives the reader of a crucial "portmanteau word" charged with meaning. This is scarcely an aid to someone who is approaching *Ulysses* for the first time and more a disappointment to anyone familiar with the original.

Elisabetta d'Erme