

Impasses in the translation of poetry

GERALDO HOLANDA CAVALCANTI

I WAS ASKED to write a testimony, not an essay. Reflections of someone who has devoted himself to the difficult task of translating poetry. This can be two things: a short memory of how I became a translator, or a few reports of concrete experience in the craft of translation. I will take the latter path and dwell on just one or two stories related to some of the books I have written.

Ungaretti

It has been said time and again that a poem bears no words, but rather meanings. Needless to add that the meaning of the word can only be perceived in the semantic set in which it is contained; but this meaning is not transparent either. If the word is innately polysemic, so is the sentence in fiction or poetry – particularly in the latter. When writing the poem the author is not thinking of the reader. He does not do it to communicate. He is struggling with himself; he wants to find the best way to express what is in his mind, be it the result of an epiphany or the mere transcription of a semantic flash that surprises him as the most suitable graphic or sound representation of the effect he wishes to reproduce.

Let us take an example, only one, that may even have represented a merger of these two impulses, the well known poem *Mattina*, by Ungaretti, possibly the shortest in the history of universal poetry which, however, never ceases to impact even the reader who has come across it a thousand times: *M'illumino / de immenso*. Whoever reads or hears it - and by reading it one will be also hearing it - because it is made of music, too - cannot help but feel moved by its intensity, its brevity, its expressiveness. And in this particular case it is the poem's semantic and prosodic concentration that causes shock, awe, admiration. It is not impossible to find other factors. The Italian critic Roman Luperini, for example, refers also to the phonic-rhymic parallelism of the two short verses, including the double rhyme formed by the sounds of "i" and "o" at the beginning and end of each of them. It may seem irrelevant, but that most certainly is not the case.

A few years ago, in a tribute to Ungaretti by the Italian government, the Italian *Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali* took the initiative to ask poets representing about 150 countries to contribute their translations of the poem to be published in a commemorative edition. I was one of such poets. I am not

sure whether the publication has ever come out. I have not heard about it. It took me some time to respond. What was the cause of the extraordinary success of such a short poem? In its apparent simplicity, almost only two words, the translation posed remarkable difficulties. Where was the mystery of its expressive power? By examining it from various aspects I concluded that it was in the tonic proparoxitone syllable at the beginning of the verse, as it was responsible for the explosion that hit us in both the chest and the imagination. But that was not enough. There was a sound climate from which we were unable to stray. I was not yet familiar with Luperini's observation, but my intuition told me that it was essential to remain in the register of the initial and final sounds, to maintain the nasal vowels, "im", "em", and especially to refrain from introducing new consonants in order to preserve its sound clarity. And my translation was: *Ilumino-me / de imenso*", which maintains the stress on the antepenultimate syllable, just shifting it from the second to the third syllable of the verse. It is not, obviously, an original translation. It must have been that of most of the poets who attempted it. The realization that the impact produced by the poem rested in the stress on the antepenultimate syllable was not original either. Haroldo de Campos, who had already commented on the issue, proposed in an international seminar on the poet the translation "*Deslumbro-me / de imenso*", so as to maintain, according to him, the stress in the same position as in the original, i.e., on the second syllable. What I want to show is not the originality of my translation, but its genesis, how the mind of the translator can and should work in view of a concrete difficulty: to choose the translation that preserves what is most essential in any poem. Obviously such a solution is not possible in a translation into French, a language in which there are no words with the stress on the antepenultimate syllable. And that was the reason why Jean Lescure refused to translate the poem in the bilingual edition of the author's complete poems for Gallimard. He was replaced in the task by Philippe Jaccottet, with the disastrous result described below.

Incidentally, it is worth mentioning what Ungaretti himself used to say about the purpose of poetry (of the poem) of providing not a "signification" but a "meaning", which is beyond the knowledge produced by reason. I find in him the best explanation of himself, of what he understands to be the role of the poet: "*la poesia è poesia solo se uno udendola da essa subito si senta colpito dentro, senza immaginare ancora de potersela spiegare, o non ancora indotto a doversi confessare di non potere mai essere in grado di valutarne le manifestazioni, miracoli*". I believe that these words allow me to doubt any translation that attempts to "explain" what the poet meant by his poem, be it Philippe Jaccottet's, for example, (*Je m'éblouis / d' infini*), or Diego Bastianutti's (*I grow radiant / in the immensity of it all*). In this case, actually, the translation by the Italian Bastianutti is clumsy in the second verse, but not so much in the first. With the word *radiant* (meaning a good, intense, overflowing feeling), this translation is closer

to what the intention of the author of the poem might have been than those of the other translators who used words related to wonder (that which causes allure, seduction, charm, wonder). The story of the poem confirms my judgment.



Photo Associated Press - 21/04/1968

Giuseppe Ungaretti
(1888 -1970).

In fact, the poem is a fragment of the four-verse originally written by Ungaretti on a postcard sent to Giovanni Papini during the war - *M'illumino / de immenso / con un breve / moto di sguardi*, and published with the title "*Cielo e Mare*". The circumstance in which it was written is a matter of controversy. In one of the sources I found that the poet, moving out of the trench towards Trieste, suddenly found himself on a beach with the rising sun lighting up the expanse of the sky and sea. The author told Ledo Ivo, in 1966, that had written it in the trench. Couldn't the two things be true, i.e., that the epiphany occurred when he reached the beach and the poem was written by the author later on, when reminiscing about it in a trench? But that is insisting on making sense of what does not need to make sense. What matters is that there was a moment of the sudden vision of the rising sun, and adding a sea reflecting sunshine under an endless sky lends likelihood to what the poem conveys: a bright and totally absorbing explosion. And it justifies the title subsequently removed precisely to prevent the reason for the poem from being too obvious. The poet shines, feels

enlightened, but not fascinated. It is not about being overpowered with light (coming out of the shadow), but about an epiphany.

Photo Associated Press -09/10/1997



Eugenio Montale (1896-1981).

Montale

As the reader knows, *L'Anguilla* is the last poem of the fifth part (*Silvae*) of *La Bufera e altro*, the book which the poet wrote in his full maturity. It is one of the author's best constructed poems; the highlight of Italian lyric poetry in the twentieth century, in the words of William Arrowsmith, one of his most respected translators, my predecessor in the *Premio Internazionale Eugenio Montale*, from Rome. And by saying that, a caveat is in order, because like another American translator, John Frederick Nims, Arrowsmith added two verses to the original thirty. A less serious flaw, perhaps, than that of the also American Robert Lowell, who removed verses from the poem.

L'Anguilla describes the journey of an eel from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, where it arrives to reproduce. The poem is written in a single sentence, as if to be read without interruption, voraciously, following the eel in its journey, and ends with a rhetorical question from the poet to his beloved Clizia, as to whether the obstinacy of the eel could be compared to her determination to achieve her own objectives. Everything in the poem is important,

every word is essential to it. Now, if we take the translations rendered by those poets, and many others more, into English, French or Spanish, in none of them we will find a real understanding of what they were translating. One will add the toponymic precision of the “North Sea” to the *mari freddi* from where the eel departs; another will replace the cold seas with a description of the place as the home of deadpan Icelandic gods; a third will translate the tributaries of the rivers followed by the eel, *di ramo in ramo e poi de capello in capello*, as from twig to smaller twig; a French translation will transform the poetic image into a dictionary entry *suivant l'embranchement qui se diversifie en fines ramures*; another American translator will reduce the beautiful description of the eel as *torcia, frusta, / freccia d'amore* (torch, whip, arrow of love) to whipstock, a Roman candle [sic] (fireworks). None seemed to have consulted a map of Italy to follow the path of the eel *dai balzi d'Appenino alla romagna*, translating the verse as *ravines spilling downhill towards the Romagna*, as if the Apennines did not cross the Romagna. I cannot forget to mention a renowned American poet who translated *iride breve* as buried by rainbow, the same who translated *estuari* as wetlands and marshes. We could provide more and more examples of clumsy translations, but none as off target as the French one already mentioned in which the last verse of the poem *puoi tu / non crederla sorella?* becomes *nieras-tu leur parenté?!*

Why say all that? Perhaps to reaffirm my opinion that one should not translate poetry using interposed language, at the risk of making huge mistakes. Of course, there are situations in which interposition may be necessary or unavoidable, such as in the case of exotic languages, where suspension of disbelief is always required.

Quasimodo

Reading notes and variants is of particular relevance for the proper understanding of the poem to be translated. This is not possible in most cases, when critical editions of the author's work are not available. In the case of the Italian poets discussed herein, I had access to all of them, either from the *I Meridiani* collection or from the publisher Einaudi.

Quasimodo changed his poems substantially from one edition to another, often removing whole verses, as was the case with the poem *Ed è subito sera*, which introduced his first book *Acque e terre*, from 1920. The poem is short and worth being reproduced in full: *Ognuno sta solo sui cuor della terra / trafitto da un raggio di sole: / ed è subito sera*. For me it has almost the same impact as the already mentioned poem by Ungaretti. However, it is not a poem originally conceived as such. It is simply the result of an excerpt taken by the author from a poem published in a previous edition of *Acque e terre*, named *Solitudini*, of which it was the final stanza. The poem was changed twice: the first when it was separated as an autonomous poem, maintaining the comma at the end of the second verse, and the second when the comma was replaced by colon, a solution

that undoubtedly lends greater strength to the poem. Later on its first verse served as the title for the 1942 collection.



Photo Associated Press - 21/10/1969

Salvatore Quasimodo (1901-1968).

Sometimes, however, the cuts made by Quasimodo resulted in embarrassing situations for the translator. This is what happened to me when I was translating the poem *Anche mi fugge la mia compagnia*, the penultimate poem in the aforementioned collection. I nearly gave up on the task because I could not find a syntactic meaning in the last three verses: *Forse è mutata pure mia tristezza / come fossi non mio, / da me stesso scordato*. Using the notes or the critique edition encouraged me not to give up. The poem maintained the title *Osteria* until the 12th edition of *Acque e terre*. After that it was published with changes, and in the final version it ended with the first verse of the second stanza and the two last verses of the third stanza. Now, it was in the deleted verses that I found what I needed to lend meaning to the last two remaining verses: *il sonno m'è strano / dei rovi e dei canneti / come fossi non mio*.

Saba

Nobody in Italy argues that Montale and Ungaretti were the two biggest names of twentieth century Italian poetry. Opinions are divided when it comes to the next in line, some including Quasimodo in third place and Saba in fourth or vice-versa.

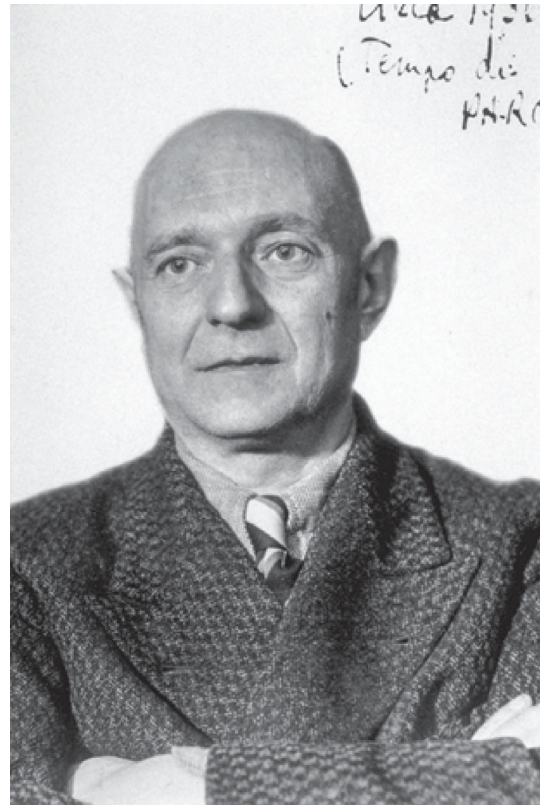


Photo France Press

Umberto Saba
(1883-1957).

The American critic Joseph Cary takes Quasimodo off the list and highlights the importance of Saba. Others do not even mention the existence of the Triestine poet. I do not see much sense in this kind of debate. Arguably these are the four biggest names, and the order of importance is secondary.

Saba's case is special. Quasimodo, Montale and Ungaretti represented the best of Italy's literary and poetic tradition. The three had their origins in the so-called Italian *ermetismo*, which prevailed in the first quarter of the century. They developed, says succinctly their enthusiastic translator Joseph Cary, distinctly hard, high-level, aristocratic styles. We could add that they also lived in cities that were centers of great cultural activity: Quasimodo, although Sicilian, lived in Rome, Florence and Milan; Montale, a Genoese, spent most of his life in Florence; and the Alexandrian Ungaretti spent time in Paris, São Paulo and Rome. Saba was born in Trieste, where he lived for most of his life, with a four-year sojourn in Florence, which allowed him some deserved recognition,

due mainly to the patronage of Montale. He had, thus, two disadvantages in relation to the other nationally and internationally recognized poets: a certain provincialism, which could not let go of, especially in a city like Trieste with its very particular and eccentric history in Italy, and the very quality of his poetry. Unlike the other three, who came from a common cultural and highly creative background and evolved from these strong cultural roots, Saba's poetry received little or no influence from Italian Hermetism. Saba was a realist whose poetry, comparatively easier and more transparent, jarred with that of the other poets. He knew and stated it both in his criticism of the poets who, driven by the ambition to succeed practiced a type of poetry that pretended to be "broader and more transcendent" than it actually was, and his self-recognition as *periferico* and *arretrato* in his direct, simple poetry, which a critic, with no intention to belittle it, termed totally evident, univocal. But I shall refrain from engaging in comparisons and critical judgments, and the only reason for including these few reflections on Saba's poetry is to mention that on him, also, I have prepared a bilingual anthology, similar to those of the other poets, in the unfounded hope of making him known in Brazil, where there seems to be no trace that he has ever existed. His poetry is beautiful and unique, and poems like *A mia moglie* and *La capra* deserve to be included in any general anthology of twentieth-century Italian poetry. The mature Montale came close to that, but his "easier" poetry was written more for himself, for journal pages, as he called them. Not Saba. Saba wanted to be read and understood; and, if possible, loved.

ABSTRACT – A poem bears no words, but rather meanings that are expressed in verbal sets. Giuseppe Ungaretti distinguishes between meaning and signification. The meaning is closer to an epiphany; signification is more like an explanation. An analysis of the poem *Mattina* provides elements for a better understanding of this distinction. At the same time, the poem is an example of the untranslatability of certain poetic texts. The author then examines the poem *L'Anguilla*, by Eugenio Montale, as a good example of the problems of interposed translation, and demonstrates that by reading its English or French versions it is impossible to attain a clear notion of what is contained in the original Italian. In the third part, the author provides examples from his experience translating the work of Salvatore Quasimodo, emphasizing the importance of reading variants of a text for a proper understanding of the canonized version. The fourth part attempts to redeem Triestine poet Umberto Saba, little known in Brazil, as one of the four greatest Italian poets of the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS: Giuseppe Ungaretti, Eugenio Montale, Salvatore Quasimodo, Umberto Saba, Translation of poetry, Untranslatability of poetry, Reader of poetry, Variants, Hermetism.

Geraldo Holanda Cavalcanti is a Brazilian diplomat, poet, essayist and translator. He is the author of the poetry books *O mandiocal de verdes mãos* and *Poesia reunida*; the novel *Encontro em Ouro Preto* (Record); and the books of memoirs *Memórias de um tradutor de poesia* and *As desventuras da graça*. He is a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters. He has translated, among others, the following poetry books: *Eugênio Montale* – Poesias, seleção, tradução e notas; *Umberto Saba* – Poemas; *Lalla romano* – Poemas; *Sandro Penna* – Poemas; *Attilio Bertolucci* – Poemas. @ – geraldo.cavalcanti@gmail.com

Received on 29 August 2012 and accepted on 10 Sept. 2012.

