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THE CAUSALITY OF CASUALNESS IN THE TRANSLATIONS OF WORLD POETRY: JORIE GRAHAM VS MARY OLIVER IN ITALY

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The essay explores the impact of poetry translation on the circulation of the works of American poets in Italy. The research is conducted by means of a double approach: in the first place, the aesthetic and cultural value of the poetry of two American women poets (Jorie Graham and Mary Oliver) is assessed, whose work has received a radically different reception. Secondly, the reasons for this disparity of treatment are sought in the interrelation between the practices and activity of poetry translation and of publication, as they are customarily led in Italy. These are inferred from sample interviews with professionals in both fields. The results of the investigation highlight a combination of the casual and the causal, the causing factor being the occasional encounter of a poet with a translator, who then chooses his/her author, texts, and translating strategies according to his/her personal aesthetic, and sometimes ideological, judgment.

Il saggio offre un'analisi dell'influenza delle traduzioni sulla circolazione della poesia americana contemporanea in Italia. La ricerca si articola in due momenti: in primo luogo viene fornita una valutazione estetica e culturale dell'opera di due poetesse americane, Jorie Graham e Mary Oliver, la cui ricezione in Italia è particolarmente significativa perché sta conoscendo fortune opposte; in secondo luogo viene condotta un'indagine dei motivi di questa disparità di trattamento nell'interazione tra le pratiche di traduzione e le dinamiche di pubblicazione in atto in Italia. Queste sono state dedotte da alcune interviste campione con professionisti dei due campi. I risultati hanno evidenziato una combinazione di fattori casuali e causali, nella quale l'incontro personale e a volte fortuito tra un poeta e un traduttore mette in moto strategie di selezione e di traduzione motivate da ragioni estetiche e a volte ideologiche.

In his most reader-friendly publication on World Literature, the handbook *How to Read World Literature* published by Wiley-Blackwell in 2009, David Damrosch reminds us that “most literature circulates in the world in translation,” that readers of world literature must often read in translation, and that it is important that they do so “in critical awareness of the translator’s choices and biases.”¹ Reflecting upon the relationship between translation and World Literature is unavoidable. But exactly in how many ways, and in which ways, does the translation of a *poetic* text affect not only its appreciation by readers, but also (the two things being not always univocally linked) its circulation, which means, ultimately, its chance of becoming (quickly or slowly) a work of World Literature?² And how does all of this happen in my country, Italy?

When the particular field of observation is poetry, things become more complicated, especially in a country like mine, where there is no market for poetry comparable to that of the United States – and I should perhaps say that there is almost *no* market for poetry at all. Nonetheless, I have thought it worthwhile to inquire into the processes and the dynamics by which contemporary United States poetry is being translated and circulates in Italy. The focus of my interest has been the interaction between the inherent qualities of a text – both original and in translation – and the external circumstances of its circulation – basically the choices made by translators and publishers. So I proceeded

¹ DAVID DAMROSCH, *How to Read World Literature*, Malden (MA)-Oxford (UK), Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, pp. 65 and 4.

² See DAVID DAMROSCH, *What is World Literature?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 4.

on a binary track, coupling an analysis of the aesthetic value of two American poets' work with an investigation into the motivations and ways in which some of the Italian translators and publishers of US poetry operate. The latter was carried out by means of interviews conducted with some of the most representative (for various reasons) among these in both spheres of action.

I A PICTURESQUE LANDSCAPE

The starting fact that triggered my curiosity was the variegated landscape of Italian translations of contemporary American poets. We have been profusely ministered Charles Simic and Mark Strand, but have gotten almost no A.R. Ammons and Robert Pinsky.³ We have been proposed the exquisite case of a Princeton academician poet who is also a refined scholar of poetry, aesthetics, and the arts, Susan Stewart – although by a small publisher like Ares (Milan) –,⁴ but we haven't yet been introduced to Donald Hall. We are able to get a glimpse of the diverse scene of contemporary American poetry through the window of a couple of anthologies, but all of them present highly individual or partial selections. The 2006 *Nuovi poeti americani* translated by Elisa Biagini, and issued by one of our major publishers, Einaudi, offers a limited assortment of twelve authors that was “unavoidably partial and partisan, made by a poet who chooses other poets,” basically excluding all the New Formalists (much celebrated at home and holding positions of power in the academia and the editorial and prize systems), and opting for a poetry that could remain close to Williams's ideal of “no ideas but in things,” the motto he coined in his poetics manifesto *A Sort of a Song*.⁵ The most unconventional project has been that of Luigi Ballerini and Paul Vangelisti, who have begun a mapping of US poetry by geographical areas, and have completed, up to now, three rather massive volumes (sampling the poetry of Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York), again for one of our major publishers, Mondadori.⁶ A joint venture was attempted before these by a medium-size publisher, minimum fax, with *West of Your Cities: Nuova Antologia della poesia americana*, which the house website advertises, somewhat boastingly, as the first one in forty years (after Fernanda Pivano's 1964 *Poesia degli ultimi americani*),⁷ and one edited by the greatest American living poet, Mark Strand, exclusively for minimum fax, and optimally translated by Damiano Abeni. The collection of eleven authors is claimed

3 A group of poems by Ammons appeared, together with an introductory article, in *Poesia*, the most widely spread Italian magazine of verse (PAOLA LORETO, *A. R. Ammons. L'angelo storpio*, in «Poesia», CCLXXVII (2012), pp. 2-14); and Pinsky's *An Explanation of America* was, in fact, translated by a minor publisher (ROBERT PINSKY, *Un'America*, a cura di Simone Lenzi e Simone Marchesi, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2009).

4 SUSAN STEWART, *Columbarium e altre poesie (1981-2003)*, cur. e trad. da Maria Cristina Biggio, Milan, Ares, 2006.

5 ELISA BIAGINI, *Introduzione*, in *Nuovi poeti americani*, cur. e trad. da Elisa Biagini, Torino, Einaudi, 2006, pp. v-vi.

6 *Nuova poesia americana. Los Angeles*, cur. e trad. da Luigi Ballerini e Paul Vangelisti, Milano, Mondadori, 2005. *Nuova poesia americana. San Francisco*, cur. e trad. da Luigi Ballerini e Paul Vangelisti, Milano, Mondadori, 2006. *Nuova poesia americana. New York*, cur. e trad. da Luigi Ballerini et al., Milano, Mondadori, 2009.

7 FERNANDA PIVANO (a cura di), *Poesia degli ultimi americani*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1964.

to be at the same time representative of the major shifts in the society, politics and life of the US, and to include eight Pulitzer Prize winners.⁸

In front of this apparent unevenness and arbitrariness of treatment, one begins to grope for reasons and motivations. The most obvious guesses that come to mind revolve around the quality of the poetry (in the most hopeful mood); the quality of the translation (in almost the same); the translators' personal taste and convictions (in an intrigued mood); the translators' – or the publishers' – casual acquaintance with a poet (in a more realistic mood); the publishers' consideration of the potential market for their products (in the most disenchanted mood). So I decided to make a case study of the significantly different fortune that two contemporary American poets are presently enjoying in Italy. I proceeded to compare the poetry of Jorie Graham and Mary Oliver – not so much in their specific qualities, of course, which are hardly comparable, but in their reciprocal, overall aesthetic quality, philosophical weight and relevance to our times – and then to try to explain why the first has already seen two volumes of translations of her poems come out in Italy, while the second only some fans' translations of a couple of poems on the Internet. Once considerations about the intrinsic value of the poetry were examined in depth, I turned to the facts that paved the way to the translation and circulation of Graham's poetry in my country, which I have mainly acquired through an interview with Graham's translator. Finally, I extended my survey to other cases by collecting the experience of more translators and publishers in order to base my conclusions on firmer ground. Trying to outline a panorama of the interrelations between the translating practices and the popularity of American poets in Italy would be a task that overcomes the limits of the present study – and a very delicate and tentative one, given the closeness of the phenomenon to the eye that is watching it. Nevertheless, the gathering of some sample accounts allowed me to infer a pattern of habits and dynamics at play.

2 GRAHAM VERSUS OLIVER

Jorie Graham and Mary Oliver are both women poets renowned in their country. They have both won the most ambitious national prizes, are published by major houses, and hold or have held academic positions (Oliver is 15 years older than Graham). Graham's Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard is undeniably more prestigious than Oliver's Catharine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington College, and might be due to the intellectually ambitious and experimental

8 MARK STRAND (a cura di), *West of Your Cities. Nuova antologia della poesia americana*, trad. da Damiano Abeni, Roma, minimum fax, 2003. The anthology gathers poets born between 1934 and 1950, and aims at emancipating Italian readers from their dependence on the Beat generation and the other two schools of poetry (the Black Mountain and the New York schools), which had exhausted their acquaintance with American literature in the previous four decades (see Fernanda Pivano's influence). In fact, at least another anthology had come out in 1982, Riccardo Duranti's "Anthology of the American poets of the Seventies," whose fate I will illustrate later on. For a more detailed account of the anthologies issued until 2006, see ANTONELLA FRANCIINI, *An Italian Canon for American Poetry?*, in «Semicerchio», XXXVIII (2006), pp. 50-56. Francini was also making a cursory inventory of the poets who have been published most in Italy recently, and a quick survey of the reviews and magazines that are more active in the field of poetry translation.

character of her writing. Oliver's writing meets the public on a more immediate level of communication – or at least more superficially so. As her site declares, Graham

was born in New York City in 1950, the daughter of a journalist and a sculptor. She was raised in Rome, Italy and educated in French schools. She studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris before attending New York University as an undergraduate, where she studied filmmaking. She received an MFA in poetry from the University of Iowa.⁹

As the website of Oliver's publisher informs (she has no site of her own making, or managing), she was "born in a small town in Ohio,"

studied at Ohio State University and Vassar College, but took no degree. She lived for several years at the home of Edna St. Vincent Millay in upper New York state, companion to the poet's sister Norma Millay. It was there, in the late '50s, that she met photographer Molly Malone Cook. For more than forty years, Cook and Oliver made their home together, largely in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where they lived until Cook's death in 2005.¹⁰

The two biographies could be interpreted as radically different ways of conceiving a poet's *Bildung*, one surely aiming at satisfying all the canonical requirements for becoming an international citizen poet – nowadays better defined as a "global" author –, the other at cultivating the intimacy with a natural environment that is required for rooting one's poetry in place and developing a clearly defined relation to an ecosystem.

In other words, on the one hand we have a poetic career based on a transnational – once defined as cosmopolitan – and interdisciplinary education, received in the most glamorous centers of Western civilization, and in the traditionally consecrated (and academic) institutions for poets' breeding. On the other hand, we have a poetic career based on an independent self-training in the solitary search for a new vision of the individual's relation to the world and the regeneration of one's powers of perception and use of language. Paradoxically, at every line Graham's poetry affirms its focus on the renewal of perception and on the revision of a world conception, and this by means of a blazing experimentation with style and language. Her project is explicit, her reasoning abstract, her references cultural. Her difficulty and newness artificial: "To praise to recall to memorialize to summon to mind | the thing itself – forgive me – the given thing – that you might have persuaded yourself is invisible, | unknowable, creature of context – it is there, it is there, it needs to be there."¹¹ Oliver's project will be known at the end of her production, she reasons (also) by means of her body, her references are natural. Her difficulty and newness are organic. Her poetry seems to endorse (almost) at every line its belonging to the tradition of Romantic nature writing. But if the model of Graham's difficulty is Stevens, then that of Oliver's is Dickinson: the orthodoxy of her language is apparent,

⁹ <http://www.joriegraham.com/biography> [accessed on June 23, 2014].

¹⁰ <http://maryoliver.beacon.org/aboutmary/> [accessed on June 23, 2014].

¹¹ *Posterity*, in *Never* (2002), in JORIE GRAHAM, *L'angelo custode della piccola utopia. Poesie scelte 1983-2005*, cur. e trad. da Antonella Francini, Roma, Sossella, 2009, p. 272.

the heresy essential. Graham is perhaps trying to contribute to the reorientation of contemporary Western thought after postmodernism, but Oliver is trying to test a language that will express a new position of the subject in the world – the concrete, material world we live in: “You only have to let the soft animal of your body | love what it loves. [...] The world offers itself to your imagination [...] over and over announcing your place | in the family of things”.¹²

So what is happening in the Italian reception of two contemporary American poets, whose work can be equally said to be of a high aesthetic standard (although of a different degree of sophistication), whose popularity can be said to be equally wide (although with a different range in the academic and in the common readership), and whose difficulty/simplicity are antithetically, and complementarily, articulated in terms of an apparent and actual complexity?¹³ A basic difference in the lives of the two authors, which might have helped Graham publish in Italy, is the fact that she has a history of belonging to Italy and to the Italian language, which Oliver hasn’t. In her *Paris Review* interview of 2003, she recalls that while she lived in Italy, English was her third language, after Italian and French, and that Rome for her has signified history, especially the opportunity to take on what she calls the *feeling* (and not the *idea*) of history.¹⁴ Her knowledge of the Italian language has surely helped the kind of work that her Italian translator, Antonella Francini, has done on her poetry. In her introduction to the first volume of poems by Graham published in Italy, *L’angelo custode della piccola utopia*, Francini writes that the selection of “representative texts” was made in collaboration with the author.¹⁵ In her Translator’s Note, she explains how this author-translator collaboration went rather further, sealing the closing of the book with the poet’s endorsement of its rhythmical shape in the new language:

The final revision of the translations was a rhythmical revision, which could count on the author’s knowledge of Italian. Graham generously accepted to listen to me reading the whole book out loud, focusing her attention on the modulations in which her texts had been reassembled in a different language.

Francini goes on informing the reader that revisions were made in that same session, where the Italian verse seemed not to correspond to the “original metrical design,” and that decisions were taken together, and substitutions accepted by Graham which Francini put forth as solutions to unsatisfying passages in her version (word-order rearrangements, and the occasional increase of the number of lines). She correctly comments

¹² MARY OLIVER, *Wild Geese*, in *Dream Work*, New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986, p. 14.

¹³ In a way, Oliver’s popular reception is remindful of Robert Frost’s. Her poetry is often appreciated for its focus “on the quiet of occurrences of nature,” and for her familiarity with the natural world, which seems to have an uncomplicated, nineteenth-century feeling” (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/mary-oliver> [accessed on June 23, 2014]). In fact, her poetry ultimately unveils a lucid, unyielding view of the total equality of the existent forms of being that can produce a terrible feeling – a “terrifying” feeling, Lionel Trilling would have called it.

¹⁴ JORIE GRAHAM, *The Art of Poetry No. 85*. Interviewed by Thomas Gardner, in «The Paris Review», CLXV (2003), <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/263/the-art-of-poetry-no-85-jorie-graham> [accessed on June 24, 2014].

¹⁵ ANTONELLA FRANCINI, *Sulla poesia di Jorie Graham*, in Jorie Graham, *L’angelo custode della piccola utopia*, Roma, Sossella, 2009, p. 7.

that all this allowed a rare and inestimable check of the translation, and concludes that the poetic text was thus rendered more effective in Italian with the author's permission.¹⁶

The collaboration seems to have turned into a co-authorship in certain passages of the second Italian book by Graham, *Il posto*, recently issued by one of our major publishers, Mondadori.¹⁷ The house website advertisement makes the most of this advantage by offering the "Italian version of Antonella Francini, who worked side by side with the author,"¹⁸ while Francini herself seems to have embraced more consciously a conception of translation as a form of writing.¹⁹ In an interview I conducted with her she has recounted that

With *Il posto*, we have dared much more. The translation is full of author's "mistakes," that is, we have re-written entire lines, shifted movements, etc. Each time we wanted to make the Italian lighter or more accurate, we abandoned the original and re-wrote the text. The aim was to obtain not so much a translation as a poem in Italian (within the limits of the faculties of the translator, who is not a poet). Only with the author's authorization can this be done. The book is *special* for this peculiarity.²⁰

On this issue opinions may vary, indeed. Elisa Biagini shares Francini's conviction that a dialogue with the author is an essential tool of the translator's craft, which allows him/her to render an image, a thought, or a term correctly, and to avoid those errors that the translator finds constantly lurking behind the corner. Biagini meets all the poets she translates, and regards this opportunity as "a benediction."²¹ Franco Nasi, the Italian translator of Billy Collins, has found his author willing to help him and give him advice on the issue he most cared about, that is, the preservation of a medium register in the tone and vocabulary of his Italian editions.²² At the opposite extreme from Biagini and Francini – who goes as far as attaching appendixes to her works where she reports her exchanges with the poets – stands Damiano Abeni, a long-experienced translator of several American poets in Italy (among whom include Mark Strand, Anthony Hecht, James Merrill, John Ashbery, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Charles Bukowski), who maintains that a dialogue with the author generally turns out to be a disadvantage because it

16 ANTONELLA FRANCINI, *Nota alla traduzione*, in Jorie Graham, *L'angelo custode della piccola utopia*, Roma, Sossella, 2009, p. 14.

17 JORIE GRAHAM, *Il posto*, trad. da Antonella Francini, Milano, Mondadori, 2014.

18 <http://www.librimondadori.it/libri/il-posto-jorie-graham> [accessed June 24, 2014].

19 I am referring here to the conception shared by the majority of poet-translators and finely theorized by Henri Meschonnic (HENRI MESCHONNIC, *Poétique de la traduction*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973). I discuss poetry translation theory, with a special focus on poets' opinions, in a forthcoming essay (PAOLA LORETO, *The Value of Poetry. Writing, Translating, and Reading Verse (Or, An Experiment in Teaching)*, in *Il valore della letteratura. Scritture in onore di Luigi Sampietro*, Milano, Mimesis, in corso di stampa).

20 Interview with Antonella Francini conducted by Paola Loreto, June 24, 2014, unpublished. Francini defines her collaborative translation as "an Italian version veined with author's variants, which privileges a construction of a poetic text that may be effective in the arrival language" (ANTONELLA FRANCINI, *Nota della traduttrice*, in Jorie Graham, *Il posto*, Milano, Mondadori, 2014, p. 231).

21 Skype interview with Elisa Biagini conducted by Paola Loreto, June 24, 2014.

22 Interview with Franco Nasi, in BARTOLO CASIRAGHI, "The Apple that Astonished America": Billy Collins e la difficoltà dell'essere semplice, tesi di laurea triennale, Università degli studi di Milano, a.a. 2011-2012.

is more often the case than not that “foreign poets don’t know Italian well, so they force you into a situation where you must either tell them that they’re wrong, or worsen your own version.”²³

3 “CONNECTIONS”

Unexpectedly, when I asked Francini about the influence of American poets’ familiarity with Italy in her choice of an author to translate, she answered that it is usually none. She highly values the possibility of talking to them, and checking her work with them, and, particularly in Graham’s case, “her knowledge of the Italian language has made the difference, since it happens rarely that a translator can work with a poet whose first language has been Italian.”²⁴ However, she declared that her customary principle in choosing a poet is her personal taste, and critical evaluation. The “discovery” can be casual – as in the case of her “meeting” with Mina Loy (who is less relevant to this survey, though, because not living) through the pages of the biography a publisher friend handed her in his office in NYC – but the work that follows is one of critical evaluation and scholarly study, which may end up with a translation. In the case of Graham, she had been reviewing her work regularly since the middle of the 1990s in «Semicerchio», the valuable review of Comparative Poetry founded in Florence in 1985. In 2006 she began publishing selections of her poems in «Semicerchio». In 2007, another group of translations appeared in «Poesia», after which Nicola Crocetti, the owner and chief editor of the magazine, invited Graham to the lively poetry festival he curated for some years in Parma.²⁵ In the meantime, a small publisher in Naples proposed a volume edition, which never came about. The project was taken up by Guido Mazzoni, who directs the poetry series of another small publisher in Rome, Luca Sossella, which is how *L’angelo custode della piccola utopia* was born, in 2008. The book won the Premio Nonino of 2013, after which a bigger publisher, Mondadori, decided to come out with a second book of Graham’s translations.²⁶ The publication was presented for the first time in the country at a book-signing that took place in the Libreria Spazio of via dell’Ospizio in Pistoia during Graham’s trip to Italy to receive the 2014 Premio Internazionale Ceppo Bigongiari as – national and local newspapers were blurbing out – a US poet of world renown, winner of the Pulitzer prize, Nobel candidate, and holder of the Harvard poetry professorship formerly occupied by Seamus Heaney, the first woman to enjoy such distinction.²⁷

The encounter with a good – or congenial – Italian translator is often casual, but usually proves causal as well. Edoardo Zuccato, who is the chief editor of another valuable review of translation studies «Testo a fronte», thinks that having a friendly rela-

²³ Skype interview with Damiano Abeni conducted by Paola Loreto, June 22, 2014.

²⁴ Interview with Antonella Francini, cit.

²⁵ The *ParmaPoesia Festival* was canceled by the town administration in 2013, after eight successful editions (<http://quasiaoccidente.wordpress.com/2013/05/18/ricadute/> [accessed on July 4, 2014]).

²⁶ GRAHAM, *Il posto*, cit.

²⁷ <http://met.provincia.fi.it/news.aspx?n=163899>, http://firenze.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/01/18/news/jorie_graham_vince_il_ceppo_la_poetessa_in_toscana_a_marzo-76305453/ [accessed on June 25, 2014].

tionship with an able translator is a great fortune.²⁸ Massimo Bacigalupo, a university professor who has long been active in the field of poetry translation, thinks the same: “Given the absence of a poetry market, the success of contemporary poets depends on casual circumstances, one of the most frequent being a friend, or a fan translator – who, by the way, often tends to claim a copyright to the poet he translates, until this becomes too much of a celebrity, and escapes him, or her.”²⁹ Nasi agrees: “Choices, in the poor market of poetry, seem to be determined by occasional events – sometimes the simple fact that a poet finds a good-willing translator. Surely Strand found a very resolute “sponsor” in Abeni, and before him in Enzo Siciliano. Perhaps Pinsky hasn’t found his Italian ‘voice’ yet.”³⁰

In the same way, the availability of a poet in Italy while his/her translations are being marketed seems finally to count, at least in some measure. According to Nasi, this measure can vary: if Robert Pinsky’s translation of Dante, and his avowed love for our country hasn’t helped make his poetry better known in Italy, “surely, Billy Collins’s willingness to come to Italy when invited and his enthusiasm about being translated into a language he doesn’t know but loves and has been trying to learn for years has made his entry in Italy less complicated.”³¹ Nicola Crocetti, perhaps the most prominent among the publishers entirely devoted to poetry in Italy, affirms that:

Frequent visits to the country, and a personal relation to a translator are fundamental factors in divulging a poet in Italy. Translators are sometimes gratified more by their friendship with the poets than by their remuneration. The poets themselves sometimes take advantage of this and bind themselves to translators who will be able to impose them on the market. Graham, for instance, has strong ties to Italy, where she and her father have lived. She knows the language, and she is ready to accept every invitation to a poetry event in Italy. (She is not alone in this, though.) This contributes to her popularity and makes the publication of her books easier.³²

Biagini also thinks that while translators’ choices are generally a matter of personal taste, they often originate in a personal encounter. American writers travel through our country and still stop in the cities traditionally included in the Grand Tour, such as Florence, where she and Antonella Francini are based. Proximity facilitates contacts, and contacts facilitate the arising of interest in a poet that may lead to translation. I would add that the routes of fellowships and residencies help, too. I met Philip Levine when we were both residents at the Bogliasco Foundation, outside Genoa, in 2000. It is there that not only a friendship developed, but also the project of translating a group of his poems which I published in «Poesia», accompanied by an introductory article and an

²⁸ *Interview with Edoardo Zuccato conducted by Paola Loreto, June 23, 2014, unpublished.*

²⁹ “As in the case of Heaney, Walcott, and, in his way, Simic.” *Interview with Massimo Bacigalupo conducted by Paola Loreto, June 22, 2014, unpublished.*

³⁰ *Interview with Franco Nasi conducted by Paola Loreto, June 18, 2014, unpublished.*

³¹ *Interview with Franco Nasi, cit.*

³² *Interview with Nicola Crocetti conducted by Paola Loreto, June 18, 2014, unpublished.*

interview.³³ The same happens in other busy American/Italian crossways in Italy, such as the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio, and the American Academy in Rome.³⁴

All this may well explain why Mary Oliver hasn't yet found "her translator." Her attachment to her home on Cape Cod is obstinate, her reservedness legendary. I learned this myself when I tried to contact her for an interview during one of my research stays in the US. Her answer to my letter was a lesson that someone who writes poetry will never forget. She said she seldom granted interviews, because they took "time away from the real work."

4 MATERIAL FACTORS: TALENT SCOUTING AND BOOSTING

The main pattern illustrated by Antonella Francini's narrative of her experience of translating Graham – and not only Graham – was confirmed by all the other interviewees. I am referring to a flagrant, economic dynamic at work in the Italian translating industry of American (or foreign?) poetry. The talent scouting is done by the small and medium-size publishers – who rely on individual translators, who sometimes establish stable relationships with them – while the major, or bigger publishers reap the harvests of the formers' high-risk investments. The funny irony is that those who would have more to invest – and less to risk – dare much less than those who have less to invest, and much more to risk. Or maybe this is the simplest explanation why.

According to Crocetti, major publishers are forced by the responsibility involved in the size of their organizations (the number of their employees, the costs of their structures) to privilege, in their choices, material(istic) considerations such as the selling potential of the books they issue, their potential success with the readership, and even the course of their advance purchase by bookstores. It is well known that the bigger publishers delegate to the smaller the task of talent scouting, and then take their discoveries away from them using their proportionally bigger contracting power. One example Crocetti quotes is Wislawa Szymborska, who was taken away from Vanni Scheiwiller, the small, fine publisher who discovered her, by the group Adelphi-Rizzoli. Crocetti's own experience was that having agreed with Charles Simic to publish a book of his poems, and signed a contract with his agent, he saw the agent withdraw the contract after a few days of delay in the delivery of the translation. A book came out soon afterwards by Adelphi, who had suddenly become interested in Simic because the poet was then thought in the US to be a probable Nobel candidate.

33 PAOLA LORETO, *Philip Levine. Il sentimento dell'ironia*, in «Poesia», CL (2001), pp. 60-72. A longer version of my interview with Levine, accompanied by some translations, was published in the American Studies review «Àcoma» (PAOLA LORETO, *La carriera di un poeta americano. Intervista a Philip Levine*, in «Àcoma», XX (2001), pp. 56-68).

34 The only contrary opinion on this is that of Ottavio Fatica, who quotes Robert Lowell as an example of a poet who "often visited Italy and was friends with the best Italian equals of his time (Montale, Ungaretti, Betocchi, Caproni, Luzi), but who hasn't seen his reputation grow for these reasons, despite the fact that he would figure as a far superior writer among the Anglophone ones circulating now." (*Interview with Ottavio Fatica conducted by Paola Loreto*, June 25, 2014, unpublished). It is hard to affirm, though, that Lowell's reputation hasn't risen over that of other American poets of his age in Italy, where three volumes of his poems have already come out.

The importance of the assignment of a Nobel Prize in the choice of a poet to translate is one of the most tangible ways in which *the* Prize effects the globalization of an author. The weight of the Nobel Prize is undeniable. According to Abeni, our major publishers – among whom he quotes not only Mondadori, Einaudi and Adelphi, but also Garzanti and Guanda – publish only Nobel Prize winners. For Francini, the Nobel Prize is one of the main means by which a poet becomes famous and highly sellable, the others being his/her having become fashionable in the culture, as has happened, in Italy, with the Beats, or Charles Bukowski, to quote only two conspicuous examples. Tomas Tranströmer was published by Crocetti (13 years) before the Nobel, and by Rizzoli after the Nobel. Derek Walcott was brought to Italy by a university Professor, Luigi Sampietro, well before the assignment of the Nobel Prize, and was published by Adelphi – somewhat hurriedly – some weeks after. He has also made many trips and spent much time in Italy, where his fame has steadily been growing together with the bulk of his translations.

Other external factors may influence the fortune of a US poet in Italy. As Zuccato reminds us, we have a special deference for American writers, and our main publishers are particularly subject to the trends of the Anglophone market. According to Bacigalupo, some of them are in a continual dialogue with their foreign peers, with whom they exchange titles. Crocetti underlines the weight that the media echo of prizes and awards received in hegemonic countries like the US has in orienting the taste in provincial countries like Italy. The most lamented fact is that today's publishers don't seem to be able to, or don't care, about shaping an editorial policy, or a recognizable cultural project, in planning their foreign authors' series. According to Nasi, motivations drift casually from convenience to conformity to fashionable trends. Bacigalupo would make an exception for the more coherent planning of Adelphi. Zuccato notes that somebody like the historical 'small' publisher Vanni Scheiwiller, who was capable of working with taste, and who would personally respond to the reading and the comprehension of a text, no longer exists.

5 IMMATERIAL FACTORS: AESTHETIC QUALITY AND PERSONAL TASTE

What the interviewees didn't agree upon was the impact of the quality of translations on our readership's reception of new authors. The more skeptical – Bacigalupo, Crocetti, Abeni – assumed that translation *per se* is ineffective in divulging a poet, Bacigalupo quoting the case of Seamus Heaney as the only Anglophone poet to have reached a certain popularity in Italy despite the uneven quality of his poems' translations. Abeni, though, admitted that translation may allow a poet to be read and influence another poet, and that a bad translation can do even more, by preventing the appreciation even of a great poet. I myself remember Derek Walcott saying that he couldn't understand the greatness of Boris Pasternak's poetry until Brodsky translated the Russian poet for

him.³⁵ According to Crocetti, it is the quality of the original poetry that can make a difference, although he quoted the exception of Salvatore Quasimodo's 1940 translation of the Greek lyricists, which has sold hundreds of thousand copies and is still in print, because of the innovative quality of the Italian poet's translations. Biagini thinks that the quality of the translation matters in the way that she conceives of it – as aiming essentially to transfer the story narrated by a poem, its internal structure – because the possibility of rendering the formal and rhythmical shape of the original is a delusion. Fatica and Nasi agree in granting the quality of a translation a substantial role in the spreading of a poetic work, or at least, again, in granting a considerable role to a bad translation in hindering it. Nasi thinks that our Leopardi would have had an easier access to the Anglophone readership if he had found a great poet translator earlier, someone who could have inserted him in the Western canon side by side with Wordsworth, or Goethe. Fatica admits that, although very few, the excellent translations of masterpieces such as Chapman's or Pope's Homer, Hölderlin's Sophocles, and Celan's Mandelstam have left their trace in history and their example in art.

On the ways in which the translators' personal taste directs their choices, a look at the lingering effects of some past habits in the tradition of the Italian translations of American poets suggests itself. In the 1950s and 1960s, Fernanda Pivano championed a literary criticism that would come out of academia and divulge American poetry more effectively, largely through translation. She used to make known those poets whom she had met and with whom she established a relationship. She managed, however, to strongly influence the Italian reception of coeval American poetry, determining the predominance of the Beat Generation at the expense of other schools and writers such as Charles Olson (and the Black Mountain School), Frank O'Hara (and the New York School), and Robert Bly (and the Deep Image movement), who – as Camilla Binasco aptly points out – were revitalizing and renewing the scene of American poetry even more widely and profoundly.³⁶ She inherited her mentor Cesare Pavese's ideal of American literature as the spontaneous and authentic expression of the values of liberty and sincerity, and assumed Malcolm Cowley's model for a socio-biographical criticism. Through her sponsoring, the Beats became popular in Italy for the same reason for which they had become so in the United States in the first place: for their rebellious aesthetics and morals, a critical paradigm which survived into the subsequent wave of Italian reception. In accordance with James Longenbach's principle of the "breakthrough" narrative, Italian scholars would privilege in their appreciation those poets whose reasserted egotism was exhibited in forms that were both public and private. Hence the idolization of innovation, and the assumption, as a yardstick for the measure of poetic quality, of experimentation and disrupting novelty. For Italian critics, and translators, of American poetry, good poetry has long signified avant-garde poetry engaged in some ideological or political struggle.

³⁵ PAOLA LORETO, *The Crowning of a Poet's Quest. Derek Walcott's Tiepolo's Hound*, in Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, 2009, p. 169.

³⁶ CAMILLA BINASCO, *La poesia americana del secondo dopoguerra: un contributo alla ricezione italiana*, tesi di laurea magistrale, Università degli studi di Milano, a.a. 2013-2014, p. 178. I am indebted to the accurate work of this bright pupil for the following sketch of the major trends in the Italian reception of post WW2 American poetry (see esp. §§ 2.2 and 2.3).

Fortunately, this last attitude doesn't seem to have persisted as a generalized one among the Italian translators. On the one hand, Crocetti says that he favors poets who reach out of their confessional ego to express social and civic concerns. Moreover, Biagini's first project for the Einaudi anthology was entirely made of feminist African American women poets, successively tamed into that of ethnic women poets – including Native American and Asian – and finally to a politically correct sampling of US contemporary production (with the exclusion of white and academic poets, such as Richard Wilbur and Jorie Graham). And Francini admits that she feels attracted to those poets who are in tune with our times' concerns, and who commit themselves to the responsibility of making sense of our very complex time, which is ruled by overwhelming political and economic global powers, this being one of the reasons why she chose Graham, who has asserted a belief in the moral and spiritual engagement of poetry. On the other hand, most of the translators have professed a devotion to some kind of aesthetic ideal, although often impressionistically defined. Bacigalupo has talked about the capacity of a text to involve the reader from the very first – something resembling the endurance in time of a classic. Abeni seems to favor those poets who have what he calls a certain "potere di parola," meaning the ability to contribute to the art of writing by constantly talking about poetry, as Wilbur does in "The Ride," or Strand in "Poem After the Seven Last Words," or Bishop in "The Bight." He also defends a commitment to the "musicality" of a text, and thinks of its translation in the same way as he imagines a musician playing a score, interpreting musical notation. In fact, he says, translating is not different from living – or, otherwise put, we translate all the time, while we live, because we are constantly reading reality and trying to make sense of it, carrying out a myriad of infinitely small cognitive acts. Nasi declares to be more interested in the stylistic value of a text than in its content, and particularly in the rhythm of a composition, which he considers as a far more complex factor than the mere adherence to metrical standards. He is also inclined to propose poets who run contrary to the mainstream, as Billy Collins paradoxically does with his unveiled simplicity. Zuccato chooses his poets following his personal aesthetic judgment, which he effectively synthesizes in the motto "To say important things in an accomplished aesthetic form." His test is the sense the text must give of saying something in the best way possible in the language, because of the harmonious mixture of sound, rhythm and sense. Riccardo Duranti's activity has been ruled by the impulse to share the appreciation of "some intrinsic aesthetic (but also ethic) value." His judgment is founded on "the sense of some inherent necessity or coherence... and on taste affinity."³⁷

6 THE "REAL WORK" AS BEST PRACTICE

Poetry translation from a globalizing language like American English into a still national language like Italian necessarily runs through a capillary net, which reaches far into another country's literature, bringing nourishment. Tenuous, but accurately patterned, this circuit works both ways, as our delicate thin-walled blood vessels do by interconnecting our arterioles and our venules. I was tempted to say "from a globalizing culture," but

³⁷ Interview with Riccardo Duranti conducted by Paola Loreto, June 24, 2014.

I do think it is, instead, a *literature*, which is not as susceptible to being globalized, because in literature – and even more in poetry – ideas are embodied in a language that shapes them. So that when they transfer into another literature through the channel of another language they are modified in a way that Damrosch rightly calls (referring to an excellent translation) “an expansive transformation of the original, a concrete manifestation of cultural exchange and a new stage in a work’s life as it moves from its first home into the world.”³⁸

The context remains: larger and more powerful economic dynamics determine the ways and size down the space in which poetry translation takes place in Italy. The talent scouting is done by smaller publishers who distribute little, while a wider distribution is guaranteed by bigger publishers who pick up already successful authors to fill the ranks of the poetry section of their catalogues. Translators are freer to choose according to their judgment when they work for a smaller publisher, but they are also often burdened with the additional work of marketing the product of their work – or otherwise see it die soon after it is born, as Francini testifies. The unhappiest episode must have been that of the anthology of American poets of the Seventies edited by Riccardo Duranti in 1982 for the publisher Savelli, who soon afterwards went bankrupt, making the publication unavailable.³⁹ When they work for a bigger publisher, translators are more gratified by the wider circulation of their work – and a trifle more gratified by their fees, too, which rise a little above nothing –, but they are often obliged to comply with the editors’ choices of authors, and sometimes texts, or translating strategies. The copyright for single texts costs less than that of a book, Biagini reminds us, and must be bought in advance of the translation, which sometimes reveals the initial selection as inconvenient.

Given the context, then, it seems to me that the translators’ role finally figures in it as crucial. This is even more the case when they become the editors of poetry translation series, as Nasi has for the Milanese small publisher Medusa, or when they are at the same time translators and publishers, like Crocetti – who says that in choosing the poets he publishes he consults the translators with whom he collaborates and whom he trusts. If we are considering the interconnection of translation and world poetry from the point of view of quality, and not quantity, then translators are usually both the agents of the initial rooting of a new poet in Italy, and the artificers of the version in which he or she will circulate and be absorbed in our literature – famous or unknown, eccentric or mainstream, orthodox or experimental as they may be in theirs. The degree of freedom with which translators are allowed to choose (authors, texts, translating strategies) counts. Their personal tastes count. Their abilities count. Their views of translation count. The measure of causality that has been widely recognized as the second force at play after the economic one by my interviewees is due not only to occasional encounters, but also to all those components that make up a translator’s personality and the way it affects his or her work.

One significant instance was their diverging opinions about how much the translatability of a poet, or a poem, would influence their choices. Bacigalupo said not in the least.

³⁸ DAMROSCH, *How to Read World Literature*, cit., p. 66.

³⁹ RICCARDO DURANTI (a cura di), *Storie di ordinaria poesia. Antologia dei poeti americani degli anni '70*, trad. da Riccardo Duranti, Roma, Savelli, 1982.

Nasi meant something similar when he wrote me that he believes that all texts are finally translatable. He reported, as an example, his experience of working on two poets who are similar in their popularity, in both cases due to the comprehensibility of their poetry, but whose translatability posed completely opposite problems: Roger McGough and Billy Collins. With McGough, of whom he translated several poems for children, the challenge was to find solutions in Italian for his wordplays in English that would render both their semantic and phonetic layers. With Collins, the main difficulty was to find a parallel of his stylistic mediety. It was paradoxically more complicated to find the bold solutions that would serve McGough's lines rather than keeping within the medium register of Collins' tone. Crocetti was adamant in saying that when a poet is impossible to translate, as may happen to be the case, then he/she should not be translated at all. Abeni held the middle position, by affirming that he feels stimulated by the challenge of formally difficult poet as Richard Wilbur, or Anthony Hecht, or James Merrill, or A.R. Ammons. He likes the American poets' tradition of self-training in the trial ground of the writing in forms like the sonnet or the villanelle. And he himself loves to try his hand at some new experimental – and daring – form, like Greg Williamson's *Double Exposures*.⁴⁰ Perhaps because he *has* undertaken the arduous task of translating formally complex poets, Abeni has honestly pointed out how the translatability of a poet does affect the orientation of US poets' translation into Italian. It is for this reason, he believes, that there's so little Wilbur translated, and so much Billy Collins, or Ferlinghetti.⁴¹ He deems these two latter poets of a minor stature, whose contribution to poetry, however, is important in that they bring people close to it once again. Zuccato has also made a very interesting remark on the way the translatability of a poet is not so much in his own mind as in the mind of publishers, who contemplate the fact that "the authors who circulate better are those who more easily become 'global,' that is, those whose writing is more abstract and decontextualized."⁴² When the translatability of a poet affects the choice of a translator, it does so in the subtle way of making a poet more appealing than another, because "certain poets meet the idea of poetry of the arrival country better than others." Also, "some work better in translation than others. Those who create strong images are better translatable than those who work on the linguistic texture and produce a poetry that is more audial than visual."⁴³

I would like to close this brief analysis of the complex interaction between translation and world literature with a theoretical distinction and a heartfelt exhortation. I have a suspicion that some of the answers to my questionnaire varied according to the idea of world literature that the interviewees were entertaining. I suggest that the term "world literature" contains the qualitative implication that Damrosch gives to his project of a new approach to the study of literature, which may account for the positive potential of

⁴⁰ The text can be found on the website of *Kolibris' Iris: Poetry in Transaltion. Transaltion, Migrating Literature and Bilingualism* <http://poetrytranslation.net/2014/03/22/greg-williamson-double-exposures/> [accessed June 27, 2014].

⁴¹ As Binasco demonstrates in her dissertation, though, the reasons for the Italian public's overlooking of Wilbur reside largely in the taste orientation of post-WW2 Italian reception of American poetry.

⁴² *Interview with Zuccato*, cit.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

the more and more diffused overcoming of national barriers in the writing and reading of aesthetically accomplished works of art; while the term “global literature” may continue to indicate a cultural, sociological, and ultimately economical and political phenomenon, which is the indiscriminate power of some works to impose themselves to large, less discerning audiences whose taste and reading habits are oriented by media.

In other words, the power of translation to move readers towards poetry doesn't seem to be different from the power of poetry to attract readers to itself: they are both very restricted. The only way of really affecting the potential of a poem or a poet to be globally read would be to work on its circulation through the media, and especially – in a country like Italy, where it is still predominant – on television. Abeni remembers that the only time in his 40-year-old career as a translator that one of his books reached the fabulous record of 5,000 copies sold was when Giovanna Zucconi, who used to dispense literary advice at the opening of the very popular evening cultural program conducted by Fabio Fazio *Che tempo che fa* on the third channel of our public TV, recommended a volume of Elizabeth Bishop's poems translated by him, Riccardo Duranti and Ottavio Fatica.⁴⁴

This wouldn't mean to lower the quality of the poetry proposed, or of the way it is handed. Bishop is a remarkable poet, and Fazio's program is respectable. The space it has given to poetry over the years, though, is very limited. Another, perhaps more elitist, but very laudable, project found space in *UnoMattina*, the morning historical news program of the first channel of our public TV. Every morning, *La poesia su Rai1* broadcast four Italian poets' readings of other poets of their own choice, often foreign, and always in translation.⁴⁵ Efforts like these seem to be in line with a policy Abeni wishes for: the attempt to widen our poetry public by educating our readership in the idea that “doing things well, with meaning, and with a certain degree of accuracy, being inventive in them, is fun.”⁴⁶ This, though, would require the convergence of more efforts exerted by the educational and the editorial systems.

A certain exiguity of audience, though, seems to be inherent in poetry, and poetry translations. In the face of this fact, I think that a precious distinction Zuccato makes in his essay in the issue of «Testo a fronte» devoted to global literature should be borne in mind. Being himself a dialect poet, and a translator of poetry into dialect, his piece of wisdom comes from experience. About the “central and tricky” question of readers, he says that ““no readers’ is not a correct synonym for ‘few readers’ and no public is not the same as a small public.” Moreover, he suggests that to the now-popular ecology of nature we add an ecology of culture, consisting in the cultivation of the feeling that “stories that have happened in a specific language must be told in that language, otherwise the experience would evaporate,” and at the same time that “translation is the last chance for

44 ELIZABETH BISHOP, *Miracolo a colazione*, trad. da Damiano Abeni et al., Adelphi, 2005.

45 The program was created by writer and RAI vice-president Maria Pia Ammirati, with the collaboration of poet Davide Rondoni, and the realization of Andrea Di Consoli. It lasted six months.

46 *Interview with Abeni*, cit. Hopeful signs are looming on the horizon. In the «Metro» editorial of June 26, the President of the Italian Association of Television Producers writes that “The time has perhaps come to offer Italians a different TV product,” using talent, creativity, and investments to make it grow and become culturally useful (p. 6).

survival for any language,” because “sooner or later all languages disappear, or change beyond recognition.” Translation is there exactly to cater for what has been written, in any language, and is worth remembering and re-reading.⁴⁷ For this reason, my recommendation is that translators continue to do what they are doing, in the same spirit that seems to have animated, until now, at least all my interviewees: trying to answer their own need to communicate, with disinterested passion, their sense of what is beautiful and meaningful in language.

47 EDOARDO ZUCCATO, *Local, National, Global. A Dialect Poetry Survival Kit*, in «Testo a fronte», XLVIII (2013), pp. 211-216, pp. 214-215.

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