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VERNACULAR EXPERIMENT

FRANCO BUFFONI

Robert Fergusson¹ was born on 5 September 1750 in Cap-and-Feather Close in the district of Edinburgh; he was the second son of William Fergusson, a modest clerk, and of Elizabeth Forbes, both born in the county of Aberdeen. Between 1758 and 1762 Robert studied at Edinburgh Secondary School but even then his bad health forbade him from attending regularly. He went on to the Grammar School in Dundee thanks to a scholarship which was renewed in 1764 for four more years at St. Andrews University. At St. Andrews the young Robert completed his first poetic experiments: for the most part satirical verses – many of which in the Scottish language – aimed at teachers and classmates. Of these we have still “The Elegy on the Death of Mr. David Gregory,” a mathematics teacher. Belonging to this period are also compositions of a scholastic nature, as the Scottish version of “Ode XI” of Horatio.

The standard of life at St. Andrews was rather poor but culturally stimulating. Robert was considered a “light-hearted prankster” for the vivacity of his spirit and, above all, for the “witty verse-satires” already mentioned. His favorite readings were Latin, English and Scottish poetry. All the biographers underline “his electrifying a college congregation by his conduct.”² We are reminded of “his masquerading, Sganarelle-like, as a doctor, and prescribing for patients”³ and “that Robert Fergusson and some others, who had appeared the most active” during a “scuffle,” “were expelled.”⁴ These characteristics would not be so worthy of mention if they did not appear so much in contrast with the career to which, in his early adolescence, the poet had been destined. It had, in fact, been “decided to train him for the Ministry.”⁵

The Secondary School he attended in Edinburgh was actually a *seminary*. With the passing of time, however, “his inborn Bohemianism”⁶ surfaced forcefully, together with an actual rebellion towards any form of imposition: “So it seems that the notion of a clerical career,” concludes Sir George Douglas, “came tacitly to be dropped.”⁷ Fergusson, as many Scotsmen of the eighteenth century – and in reference to the poets, we can mention Robert Burns and Campbell – was Jacobite and nationalist at the same time. Thus, while on the one hand he tended to “celebrate” and idealize the Scottish heroes (like Wallace), with the intention of stimulating his fellow countrymen to rebellion

¹ This biographical introduction was summarized and translated from: Buffoni, Franco. *Ramsay e Fergusson: Precursori di Burns*. Milano: Guerini, 1992.

² See: George, Sir Douglas. *Scottish Poetry: Drummond of Hawthornden to Fergusson*. Glasgow: J. Maclehose and Sons, 1911. 165.

³ George 166.

⁴ See: Peterkin, Alexander. *The Works of Robert Fergusson*. London: Printed for S.A. & H. Oddy, 1807. 19-20.

⁵ George 167.

⁶ George 168.

⁷ George 167.

against the Act of Union, on the other hand he did not hesitate to lament the fall of the Stuarts.⁸

At the expiration of the scholarship, Fergusson left St. Andrews (May 1768) and returned to Edinburgh, where he had to seek employment to support his mother and sister. His qualification was “Copyist of legal documents” for the Commissary Office (a government legal office). This poorly paid and unsatisfying activity was the only employment he held on a regular basis. However, he did not lose the habit acquired at St. Andrews and continued writing poems, especially pastorals, elegies and *burlesques*.

In 1771 eight compositions in “neo-classical English” appeared in the *Weekly Magazine*. Among these can also be found the pastorals “Morning, Noon and Night” that make up the best of his production at the time. In January, 1772, Fergusson published the first poem in Scottish, “The Daft Days,” which was followed in the same year by eight more compositions in vernacular. The poet, however, did not abandon immediately his production in English; in fact, seventeen poems, which were imitative in nature and composed in English, appeared in the same year in the *Weekly Magazine*. The fame which he encountered did not assure him financial security, thus he was forced to continue working in order to live. He often found himself suddenly interrupting his work, in the throes of inspiration, and jotting down a few verses, at times a whole poem.

Fergusson’s vernacular poems were thematically centered on descriptions of the city of Edinburgh and its inhabitants. This study focuses on how one might translate the first of these compositions, the aforementioned “Daft Days,” which concerns the six “crazy” days between Christmas and New Year’s Day. I am proposing three “Italian” versions: the first is a literal rendition (which immediately follows the original text); the second is translated in the dialect of Milan and the third – which appears as a footnote of sorts to the second – is a translation of the Milanese in standard Italian. Since Fergusson had opted for the dialect spoken in his city, I have decided to imitate him in this respect. In fact, my version in the dialect of Milan is nothing if not an imitation.

In an early draft of the fourth stanza (where the author explicitly identifies the city of Edinburgh with the affectionate epithet “Auld Reikie,” “vecchia fumosa”), I had obviously translated this reference as “Milan;” but something about this choice jarred me, because the *urban* reality invoked by Fergusson – as the first stanzas prove – was still profoundly rural. Subsequently I hence replaced “Milan” with the more generic “paës.”

Translating my Fergussonian imitation into Italian I realized that from the moment I employed the usage “paës” I could no longer refrain from actualizing the text, distancing myself more and more from a translation of an imitation piece, arriving instead at the imitation of an imitation.

I must confess that I am now inclined to “translate” this last version into English in order to ask a Scottish friend to render it in his own dialect. (Naturally, this would enable me to pay homage to Montale’s quip, which provokes us to translate the same work into a dozen different languages without knowing its original form, in order to see what we are left with at the end of this process). One final note: from one imitation to the next, I was unable to resist making use of a progressively more savage synthesis as I experienced an anthropological identification with the actualized spirit of the speakers.

⁸ See: Wittig, Kurt. *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1958. 177.

The Daft Days

1.

Now mirk December's dowie face
Glowrs owre the rigs wi' sour grimace,
While, thro' his *minimum* o'space
The bleer-e'ed sun,
Wi' blinkin light and stealin' pace,
His race doth run.

2.

Frae naked groves nae birdie sings;
To shepherd's pipe nae hillock rings;
The breeze nae od'rous flavour brings,
Frae Borean cave;
And dwynin Nature droops her wings,
Wi' visage grave.

I giorni pazzi

Ora il volto triste di dicembre oscuro spia da sopra i tetti con smorfia amara, mentre - percorrendo il tragitto più breve - il sole dall'occhio cisposo, con vivida luce e passo furtivo, corre la sua corsa.

Dai boschi nudi nessun uccello canta; del piffero del pastore nessuna collinetta risuona; la brezza non porta fragranze profumate dall'antro boreale... E la natura abbassa le ali, con viso grave.

I ultim dì de l'ann

1.

Adess t'el vedet propi,
Inscì trist, ch'el guarda giò,
El par adree a sguajtamm
Sto oeucc de nebia sbarlusenta!
E l'è el sò...
Ma el para nanca ver!

2.

E dent i bosch
I usij i canten pu,
Se sent pu nient,
Nanca i odor del vent.
El mond el par adree a morì,
Senz on lament.

Gli ultimi giorni dell'anno

1. Adesso lo vedi proprio, così triste, che guarda giù,
Quell'occhio di nebbia luccicante, pare che spii...
Ed è il sole, ma non sembra vero.

2. Tacciono i canti del bosco, più non si sentono
Gli odori del vento. Sta per morire
Il mondo senza un lamento?

3.

Mankind but scanty pleasure glean
Frae snawy hill or barren plain,
Whan Winter, 'midst his nippin' train,
 Wi' frozen spear,
Sends drift owre a' his bleak domain,
 And guides the weir.

4.

Auld Reikie! thou'rt the canty hole;
A bield for mony a cauldribe soul,
Wha snugly at thine ingle loll,
Baith warm and couth;
While round they gar the bicker roll,
To weet their mouth.

5.

Whan merry Yule-day comes, I trow,
You'll scantlins find a hungry mou;
Sma' are our cares, our stamacks fou
O' gusty gear,
And kickshaws, strangers to our view
Sin' fairn-year.

3. Gli uomini non possono cogliere che ben scarsi piaceri dalla collina nevosa o dalla brulla pianura quando l'inverno, nel pieno del suo gelato cammino, si scatena con le sue lance ghiacciate su tutto il suo brullo dominio, e conduce la guerra.

4. Edinburgo! Tu sei il buco allegro! Il riparo per tutte le anime infreddolite, che al tuo camino caldo e accogliente comodamente si adagiano, e intorno fanno roteare i boccali per bagnarsi la gola.

5. Quando viene il felice giorno di Natale, sono sicuro che difficilmente si trovi in giro uno che ha fame. Poche sono le nostre preoccupazioni, i nostri stomaci sono pieni di roba buona e le teste dei pettegolezzi e delle novità dell'anno che sta finendo.

3.

I omenn gh'han propi pocch da fà,
La tèra l'è dura,
La nev l'è da per tutt.
Gh'e on frecc che se pò no andà in gir.
Cont i so gibigiann de giazz
L'invern el par adree a fà la guera.

4.

Alura, alura sì che ti te se bèl
Te se grand, te se còld, paes.
L'è dumà chi che se sta ben,
Che se lassen tucc i dispiasè...
E se bev
E se sta insemma al còld.

5.

E il dì de Natal
Mi son segur
Te troeuvet in gir nanca vun
Che líha mangiaa mal.
E se sta tucc insemma
A cuntàss su i ball de l'ann passaa.

3. Terra dura e neve dappertutto. Troppo freddo
Per andare in giro. Cosa resta agli uomini da fare
Con le lance di ghiaccio dell'inverno in guerra?

4. Allora sì che il mio paese è grande e caldo
E bello. Solo lì si sta tutti in compagnia
A bere per scordare i guai.

5. E il giorno di Natale non c'è proprio nessuno
Che non mangi bene. Poi ci si mette insieme a raccontare
Le storie dell'anno che muore.

6.
Ye browster wives! now busk ye braw,
And fling your sorrows far awa;
Then, come and gie's the tither blaw
Oí reaming ale,
Mair precious than the Well o' Spa,
Our hearts to heal.

7.
Then, tho' at odds wi' a' the warl',
Amang oursels we'll never quarrel;
Tho' Discord gie a canker'd snarl,
To spoil our glee,
As lang's there's pith into the barrel,
We'll drink and gree.

8.
Fiddlers! your pins in temper fix,
And roset weel your fiddlesticks;
But banish vile Italian tricks
Frae out your quorum;
Nor fortes wi' pianos mix; -
Gie's Tullochgorum.

6. E voi ostesse, vestitevi bene e scacciate i vostri dispiaceri. Poi venite a portarci un altro boccale di birra traboccante, più preziosa dell'acqua di Spa per guarire i cuori.

7. Poi, anche se siamo in lotta con tutti, tra noi non litigheremo mai. Sebbene la discordia dia ringhiate rabbiose per sciupare la nostra allegria, finché c'è forza nella botte, berremo e andremo d'accordo.

8. Violinisti! Accordate i vostri strumenti e strofinate con la resina gli archetti! Ma bandite dal vostro programma le orribili fantasie italiane, né confondete il piano col forte. Suonateci la danza di Tulloch!

6.
Demm, su tosann, fee no i smorfios!
Adess l'è il moment de sta 'legher!
Vegnì chi a fass vedè
E portee scia de l'alter vinit!
L'è domà lu ch'el riess
A tegnì su el coeur!

7.
Anca quij che voeuren semper resia
Incoeu ghe riessen no,
Fin che gh'è el spirit int el fiaschett
Tucc i van díacord
E pensen no
A tacà lit.

8.
E adess, sott a sonà!
Ma per piasè...
Domà i legrij ladina.
Lassee int on canton
La musica de sciori
Che fa vegnì el magon.

6. E da voi, care, non vogliamo smorfie
Adesso che è il momento della festa!
Forza col vino e fatevi guardare!

7. Oggi, col fiasco pieno,
Neanche quelli che son sempre sotto
Riescono a litigare.

8. E via con lo stereo ma, attenzione,
Niente palle di musica diffusa,
Solo karaoke e su il volume!

9.

For nought can cheer the heart sae weel,
As can a canty Highland reel;
It even vivifies the heel
To skip and dance:
Lifeless is he wha canna feel
Its influence.

10.

Let mirth abound; let social cheer
Invest the dawnin' o' the year;
Let blithesome Innocence appear,
To crown our joy:
Nor Envy, wi' sarcastic sneer,
Our bliss destroy.

11.

And thou, great god of Aquavitae!
Wha sways the empire o' this city; -
Whan fou, we're sometimes capernoity; -
Be thou prepar'd
To hedge us frae that black banditti,
The City Guard.

9. Perché nulla può meglio rallegrare i cuori di una gioiosa danza delle Highlands... Fa bene persino alla salute saltare e ballare. E' senza vita chi non se ne sente attratto.

10. Che l'allegria abbondi; che la lieta convivenza investa l'aurora dell'anno! Che un sano buon umore coroni la nostra gioia! Che l'invidia non distrugga col suo ghigno beffardo la nostra felicità!

11. E tu, gran dio dell'acquavite, che imperi su questa città, sii pronto a proteggerci da quei farabutti della City Guard perché, quando siamo ubriachi, diventiamo suscettibili.

9.

Chichinski se dev sonà
Domà quel che voeuem nun,
Una canzon da fà balà
Anca i gamb del tavol,
Un'aria che te la sentet subet
S'ciopà denter de ti.

10.

Vess alegher e vess amis,
Gh'è nient de pussee bell
L'ultim de l'ann.
Vess comm i fioeu...
Insemma, inozent...
E pensà no a l'ann che vegn.

11.

Ma ti, stagh atenta,
Anima del cichètt,
Varda giò e regòrdess
Che quand che semm ciocch
Podem no vess toccà
Da quij negher di crabigner!

9. Perché qui si suona soltanto quel che vogliamo noi,
Musica da far ballare i tavoli, canzoni
Che scoppiano subito dentro.

10. Essere amici e essere in festa, essere
Amici in festa agli ultimi dell'anno,
Come bambini che non si pensa a dopo.

11. Ma tu, guarda giù, gran dio della vite,
Guarda e ricordati che poi da ciucchi
Guai se ci toccano i carabinieri!

IULM - MILANO