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DIALECT IDENTITIES IN GADDA'S TRANSLATION: THE CASE OF *QUER PASTICCIACCIO BRUTTO DE VIA MERULANA*

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Untranslatability of dialects

Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana[1] could be considered a meaningful case of untranslatability. This is immediately evident from the title as "pasticciaccio" is translated "an awful mess." The semantic hyperbole and typical ironic nuance connected to the pejorative Italian suffix, which in Roman dialect hints at a very intrigued situation, are lost. Let us analyze the real value of the word *pasticciaccio* in Gadda. It has an ontological connotation and is a synonym for the inextricable and unfathomable knowledge of the personal inner essence. Its significance entails an existential and philosophical implication that gives a peculiar physiognomy to the whole novel and justifies the lack of a final resolution. Therefore, the novel is unfinished but not incomplete. According to Gadda, the word *pasticciaccio* points to something related to chaos, but not in a negative sense. It is the origin of life and recalls the pre-Socratic concept of *physis*, as the reality that has not yet found a[3] way to express itself systematically (Porro). The American translator William Weaver was well aware of this principle and as a result he tackled the text by creating a "translation in progress."

The difficulty in translating *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* does not only involve the Roman dialect, but also dialects from other Italian geographical areas such as Molise, Naples and Veneto. The use of various dialects interwoven with the Italian language reflects Gadda's angst and reveals unsolvable and unsolved conflicts that Weaver took into account in his translation. The mixture of Italian with dialects is intentionally designed by Gadda to create a grotesque tension between reality vs. appearance, truth vs. lie.

Dialects are the mirror of popular spontaneity against rhetoric and unveil traces of human history (Gadda, *I viaggi* 123, 161-74). Dialects are based on real sounds, all languages originate from dialects and are linked to people's lives. It follows that dialects are the only useful means to act against hypocrisy, and since they stem from real life, they are first spoken before they are committed to writing (*Arte del Belli* 174). Therefore, the ontological level entails an ethical one as well.

In assessing the novel's level of untranslatability, we can define it on a literal rather than semantic level, it is neither absolute nor partial. In the terms proposed by

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[1] The novel was first published serially in the journal *Letteratura* in 1946. Later in 1957 it came out as a single, book-length volume and, in 1965, the English version was issued by the publisher George Braziller.

[2] The title of the movie version directed by Pietro Germi was *Un maledetto imbroglio* (1959), which in English was known as *The Facts of Murder* (USA 1965). Regarding the relationship between the novel and film see Lipparini and Gutkowski.

[3] Weaver (1923-2004), who was born in the United States, lived for a long period in Italy. For complete biography and bibliography see the following website: < http://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/index.php>.

[4] Among the personalities Gadda consulted for dialects, we find the Roman poet Mario dell'Arco, Onofrio Galdieri (son of the poet Rocco Galdieri) for Neapolitan, and Alberto Maria Cirese (son of the poet Eugenio Cirese) for the dialect spoken in Molise (Gadda, *Il Pasticciaccio* 118-19).

George Steiner untranslatability does not exist, at least as it is conceived of by Chomsky when he asserts that "[t]ranslation is realizable precisely because deep-seated universals, genetic, historical, social, from which all grammars derive can be located and recognized as operative in every human idiom however singular or bizarre its superficial forms" (Steiner 77). Weaver respects the aforesaid universal principles and consequently creates a semantic equivalence to reach the core of the novel beyond the forms of dialect. He translates following the three stages of "penetration, of embodiment, and of restitution" unconsciously (Steiner 319). Decodification and re-formulation (intended as Jakobson's rewording) are insufficient if the text has not previously been interiorized on a profound level. Weaver makes use of many devices to achieve this goal, such as paraphrasing, which is often used for explicative purposes: "al Collegio Romano, cioè a Santo Stefano del Cacco" (Gadda, *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de Via Merulana* 6, hereafter *QP*) is widened "at the Collegio Romano Station, or rather, to give the street address, Santo Stefano del Cacco" (Gadda, *That Awful Mess* 7, hereafter *TA*). Analogously "quacche gliuommero" (*QP* 5) is translated "some mess, some *gliuommero*" (*TA* 5); the Neapolitan word, which literally means *ball of wool* and is also used in a figurative sense as *intrigue*, *deceit*, *problem* (*Dizionario dialettale napoletano*), is explained adding a synonym and is intentionally not translated in order to transfer a foreign phonetic and ethno-cultural reality into the English text.

Liveliness and color are lost in many circumstances, not only within the single words or formulaic expressions, but particularly within dialogues:

> Ci andate voi, Ingravallo, a via Merulana? Vedete nu poco. Na fesseria, m'hanno detto. E stamattina, con chell'ata storia della marchesa di viale Liegi… e poi 'o pasticcio ccà vicino, alle Botteghe Oscure: e poi chilo buchè 'e violette: 'e ddoje cugnate e 'e ttre nepote: e poi avimmo de pelà la coda dell'affare nuosto: e poi, e poi. (*QP* 15)

> Will you go over to Via Merulana, Ingravallo? Take a look. It's nothing much, they tell me. And this morning, with that other business of the Marchesa in Viale Liegi… and then the mess here in the neighborhood, in Via Botteghe Oscure; and then that other nice little bunch of posies, the two sisters-in-law and the three nephews; and on top of it all, we have to straighten out our own business, and then, and then… (*TA* 21)

Aside from the difficulty in translating dialects, Weaver has to face other challenges, such as the translation of Gadda's idiolect that combines multiple language layers by merging elements from dialects, jargons, technical, erudite, refined, and sometimes baroque lexicon:

> Il male infitto cavicchio si disincastrò e cadde al suolo, come ogni volta, indi rotolò per un pezzetto; lui lo raccolse, rificcò la radichetta mencia dentro al buco: e con la manica dell'avambraccio, quasi fosse una spazzola, diede una lisciatina al cappello nero, così, lungo il nastro. (*QP* 15)

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[5] "To translate is to descend beneath the exterior disparities of two languages in order to bring into vital play their analogous and, at the final depths, common principles of being" (77).
[6] See Gadda *Come lavoro* 18. Moreover, Stracuzzi and Dombroski for studies on the baroque elements in Gadda's works.

The badly fitted peg came loose and fell to the floor, as it did every time, then rolled for a bit. He picked it up, stuck its withered root into the hole, and with the sleeve of his forearm, as if it were a brush, briefly smoothed his black hat, along the band. (*TA* 21)

Weaver always respects Gadda's refinement thoroughly and with particular meticulousness. Gadda reveals a maniacal and obsessive rigor in the choice of any single lexical item. Everywhere in his prose it is possible to trace those distorted expressions that characterize his idiolect: "Vivendo sott'acqua d'appetito e di sensazioni fagiche in genere, il grigiore o certa opalescenza superna del giorno era luce, per loro: quel po' di luce di cui avevano necessità" (*QP* 16). Apart from the literary Dantean adjective *superna*, we come across *fagiche* that is a typical creation of the author: *fagico* derives from the Greek φαγεῖν which means *to eat/devour* (Rocci) and is used in Italian as a prefix or suffix in compounds. Gadda coins a new autonomous word appropriate to the circumstance. Similarly, Weaver creates an English word as a calque of the Italian one, considering that the *phag-, phago-, -phage* prefixes/suffixes are also employed in English: "Living underwater on appetites and phagic sensations in general, the grayness, the lofty opalescence of the day was light, for them: that little bit of light which was all they needed" (*TA* 22).

Idiolect vs. dialect

Gadda's stylistic re-elaboration rises spontaneously and Weaver is deeply committed to this sort of linguistic eccentricity. Let us compare the following passages. In "diatriba fra i casigliani opinanti, roboanti in proporzione dell'evento: fra i volenti e nolenti, gli squattrinati e i quattrinosi, i micragnosi e i mingenti in gloria e in letizia" (*QP* 20) the present participle *opinanti* is used in a humorous way. The English version is: "diatribe among the opinionated tenants, vociferous in proportion to the event: among pros and cons, the penniless and the wealthy, the stingy careful ones and the carefree, urinators in hope and glory" (*TA* 28). The change of tense, from present to past participle (*opinanti > opinionated*), confers adjectival value, as the latter is "always ready to express one's own opinions and dismissive of other people's" (*New Penguin English Dictionary*) and corresponds to the Italian meaning of *supponente*, *cocciuto* (Hazon). In this way it is highly appropriate to the ironic context to express anything but the false fraternal atmosphere of the Italian condominiums. At the same time, the Latin origin of many lexemes enriches the English prose, and Weaver gives evidence not only of outstanding competence in Italian, but also of an extreme ability to manage Gadda's idiolect by re-creating an English text marked with a distinctive style. Weaver acts discreetly without altering the core of the original work.

When Weaver is unable to translate dialectal forms, he substitutes them with Latin, Greek, or French loanwords, in an attempt to reproduce the same polyphonic feature conceived of by Gadda. Most of the Latin expressions recurring in the Gaddian text remain unvaried and are italicized, although they are not in use in English, such as *in utroqu*e (*QP* 9; *TA* 12), or *manu armata* (*TA* 24, *QP* 17). Weaver tends to introduce the Latin form on his own initiative, particularly when translating folk idioms and/or regional proverbs, in this way betraying his deeply rooted classical education (Guarnieri 85), as it

occurs for instance in "Carta canta villan dorme" (*QP* 179) translated as "*verba volant, scripta manent*" (*TA* 265).

Gadda relies on lexemes that do not only belong to Italian dialects but are also influenced by regional idioms. He sometimes invents words as required by the narrative circumstances (Contini; Terzoli; Zublena), probably due to his professional bias – let us remember that he was a mechanical engineer. Consequently, linguistic experimentalism cannot be separated from the technical pragmatism typical of an engineer in search of new formulas that in our case belong to the lexical sphere. However, his "technicality" does not exclusively stem from a pure love for accuracy but also from other needs. Gadda develops a mainly fragmented metaphoric language that, unable to express the inner essence of reality, uncovers the essential dimension of human nature: grief (Zublena 48-50).

Weaver is strongly committed to carrying out his task and the positive outcome of the translation reveals his skill in mastering the narrative text. A clarifying example: "intignazzato e grigio" (*QP* 15) is translated into English as "worm-eaten and gray" (*TA* 22). The Italian vernacular *intignare*, literally *essere roso, danneggiato dalle tignole* (*Lessico Universale Italiano*), maintains the same semantic level in the English translation.

Weaver is well aware of the fact that *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de Via Merulana* does not belong to a particular genre, namely the "dialect novel" ("Translator's Foreword" xviii), and that, according to Gadda, dialects are not accessories, but tools used to reproduce the ethnic and psychological diversity of the characters. Weaver adapts his own language to this peculiarity by reproducing the human stereotypes as originally conceived of by Gadda.

A dialect is not an end in itself, but it plays a specific supporting role. Gadda's novel cannot be included in the regional literature written by authors such as Pascarella or Trilussa, for the reason that it has a different and defined purpose. According to Gadda's conception, dialects represent the essential dimension of the novel, they aim to completely exteriorize the global content and support the individual characters' introspection. Gadda deems that dialects are "spoken" instruments related to life, and by spoken he means a synonym of experiences orientating human knowledge towards truth (Pinotti 267). Gadda does not aspire intentionally to belong to a regional category of literature, like Verga, although Italian Verism has wielded its influence on him in some way. Gadda, similarly to Aristotle, conceives of dialects as mimetic languages that are close to reality and human nature: "È ovvio ch'io abbia chiesto e chieda al romanzo, al dramma, e perfino alla cronaca, alla 'memoria', quel tanto di fascinoso mistero o di appassionata pittura dei costumi e delle anime che soli potevano aiutarmi a perseverare nella lettura" (*Un'opinione sul Neorealismo* 251). In light of this, dialects represent communicative means that are immensely vital to achieving the knowledge of truth, even in a partial and indefinite way. Gadda openly admitted to preferring Roman dialect because of its spontaneity and irony: this is the reason why he especially appreciated Belli's *Sonetti* (Pinotti 267-68; 274-75). Dialects are applied to express caricatures and

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[7] "It is obvious that I demanded and demand from novels, dramas, and even chronicles and «memories» only a little of fascinating mystery or passionate painting of the habits and souls that together could help me persevere in the reading" (my translation).

grotesque features verging on tragic, parodistic (not exclusively for comic nuances), and they function as instruments for social criticism (Pinotti 275). Weaver translates the second edition of *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de Via Merulana*, in which the Roman dialect had even been "enhanced and purified" phonetically of its Italian and regional contaminations so as to be strengthened in its telling power (Pinotti 273-74).

Translating Gadda often involves cultural aspects restricted to regionality, such as in the following passage: "Brutti caprai de la Sgurgola!" (*QP* 48), which becomes "Lousy goatherds from Sgurgola!" (*TA* 70). Weaver conveniently inserts an explicative note to make the English reader understand the sarcasm of the expression: "Sgurgola is a small village not far from Rome, often used by Romans to indicate a backward locality, a place from which peasants come." Weaver refuses to translate Italian dialects by employing dialects native to North-American regions. Consequently, in order to adapt cultural or social aspects to his idiolect, he foreignizes his translation by introducing the reader to a foreign reality that maintains its original identity.

The semantic transfer may become more complex and sometimes impossible: "la gran paura le aveva portato scarogna" (QP 20) is conveniently translated "her great fear had brought bad luck to her" (*TA* 28). However, it does not reproduce the superstitious mentality historically rooted in our popular culture. Similarly, when "il cracking della jettatura sive jella" (*QP* 136) is translated "the cracking of the malocchio sive evil eye" (*TA* 202), Weaver employs an Italian word, not used in English, and makes use of a device that relates the lexemes to one another according to the following chiastic pattern: English/Italian and Latin/English.

In some passages the semantic transfer is reduced to a minimum, leaving the epithetic vernacular subtly unaltered: "Erano Gaudenzio, noto alla malavita come er Biondone, e Pompeo, detto invece lo Sgranfia" (*QP* 15) becomes "They were Gaudenzio, known to the underworld as 'Blondie', and Pompeo, alias 'Grabber'" (*TA* 21). *Blondie* instead of *Blond,* although it is not literal, conveys the Roman *Biondone* (*TA* 240), transferring the physical and psychological connotations of the character, a bully whose personality is evident in his nickname.

Weaver is forced to carry out a double translation, firstly from Roman dialect into Italian and secondly into English. As Stellardi asserts, we can notice that the very first translation occurs within the text, because Gadda himself senses that he has to solve all the existential doubts and voids of his own conscience (Stellardi 359-60). On the one hand the plot remains unvaried, as well as the narrative essence and consequently the intrinsic literary value; on the other hand, a shift of expression takes place, and style, dialect, and idiolect are modified by Weaver. He never undermines the cultural aspects and whenever possible he employs the equivalent term in English. For example "un Sempronio" (*QP* 78) becomes "some Tom, Dick or Harry" (*TA* 115).

The wide range of Italian suffixes (pejorative, augmentative, diminutive) forces Weaver to find alternatives, and in order to compensate for the limited solutions available in English he savvily invents new words. Therefore, although the highly-colorful dialects are lost, the vivid caricatures remain: *fregnoni* (QP 64) is transformed into *smart-ass* (*TA* 95); *bellimbusto assonnato* (*QP* 241) into *drowsy wastrel* (*TA* 354); *smargiasso impestato* (*QP* 135) into *syphilitic Swaggerer* (*TA* 199), where *swaggerer*, taken from the verb *to swagger* ("to behave in an arrogant or pompous manner; *esp*. to walk with an air

of overbearing self-confidence or self-satisfaction," *New Penguin English Dictionary*), highlights a wealthy vocabulary that is no less noteworthy than Gadda's.

Another device Weaver resorts to is reproducing in English the onomatopoeia of some verbs used in Roman dialect. Although the sound is not exactly identical, the assonance corresponds on the whole and the semantic effect is guaranteed, as in the following example: "cercò ancora la portiera, ch'era là: e stava a baccajà con quarcuno" (*QP* 27), where Weaver employs the eloquent verb *to squabble* ("to quarrel noisily *esp.* over trifles," *New Penguin English Dictionary*) and consequently translates "He looked for the concierge again; she was there, squabbling with somebody" (*TA* 39).

Weaver's translation strategies

Weaver's personal contributions interact by means of a law of compensation: in order to cope with the untranslatability of individual dialect words and idiomatic expressions, he takes part in the text interposing lexical elements that confer to the narrative dynamism the same subtle irony and intimate colloquiality established with the reader by Gadda: "dressed as well as his slender government salary allowed him to dress, with one or two little stains of olive oil on his lapel, almost imperceptible however, like a souvenir of the hills of his Molise" (*TA* 3) corresponds to the Italian "vestito come il magro onorario statale gli permetteva di vestirsi, e con una o due macchioline d'olio sul bavero, quasi un ricordo della collina molisana" (*QP* 3). Let us remark how it is sufficient to insert the term *souvenir* to intensify the irony of the whole passage. After all, it is inevitable that a translator interferes unconsciously with the text (Toury 275). A translation is a process of re-creation that forces the translator to re-mold others' fabric with his/her own hands, and yet respect the author's personality after interiorizing the text in its wholeness. Weaver is able to penetrate Gadda's mind and assimilate his philosophical system entirely, effectively overcoming all inter- and meta-textual problems. Weaver has claimed possession of Gadda's text, thus applying George Steiner's definition: "To experience difference, to feel the characteristic resistance and 'materiality' of that which differs, is to re-experience identity. One's own space is mapped by what lies outside; it derives coherence, tactile configuration, from the pressure of the external. 'Otherness', particularly when it has the wealth and penetration of language, compels 'presentness' to stand clear" (381). Weaver, aware of this distinction, creates a text that has its own identity, but at the same time is also parallel to the original.

Weaver, faithful to Gadda's ironic substratum, invents new English words on the calque of the Italian ones. Therefore we find *ingravallian* and *donciccian* (*TA* 19) for the Italian *ingravalleschi* and *doncicciani* (*QP* 14). In addition, *carabinieresque* (*TA* 190) and *carabinieral* (*TA* 259) for *carabinieresco* (*QP* 128) and the verb *unkierkegaarded* (*TA* 202) for *dekirkegaardizzava* (*QP* 137), all typical Gaddian coinages. Weaver turns into an inventor and carries out the re-writing of this work in a Lefeverian sense.

Another task that is remarkably performed by Weaver is the transfer of the comic register, which is yet one more element inherent to dialects according to Gadda. His translation maintains its effectiveness through the exploitation of the basic principle of contradiction: "All heavy and smoky, the genteel clime of Santo Stefano del Cacco, in a syncretic odor, a little like a barracks or the second balcony of the Cinema Jovinelli: between armpits and feet, and other effluvia and aromas more or less of March, which it

was sheer delight to sniff" (*TA* 165-66) represents the Italian passage "Tutto greve e fumoso, il gentile clima del Cacco, in un odorino sincretico un po' come da caserma o de loggione der teatro Jovinelli: tra d'ascelle e de piedi, e d'altri effluvi ed olezzi più o meno marzolini, ch'era una delizia annasalli" (*QP* 112). The use of *effluvia* and *aromas* in this context supports the language of irony, the refined terms inserted in contrast act conversely and accentuate the comic elements of the specific situation. Although Weaver admitted that *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de Via Merulana* had been the most complex novel he had ever translated (Guarnieri 80), he was undoubtedly able to overcome all these obstacles successfully.

Weaver defines himself a sincere translator in respecting Gadda's genuine language ("Translator's Foreword" xx-xxi). He confessed that he had never used any predetermined method but only his instinct and natural intuitions, based on simplicity and literalness: "Notes to myself: avoid ironing out the rhythm, making the sentence structure more normal or conventional; do not try to clarify the meaning when Gadda has deliberately made it murky (translation is not exegesis); try to maintain Gadda's balance between ordinary words (*sudore*, *lavoro*, etc.) and more exotic words (*zaffiro*, *detersi*). Find a suitably poetic and cadenced solution to the final, short sentence of the paragraph" ("The Process of Translation" 119). The strategy Weaver adopted was supported by reasoning, every choice was a negotiation of sorts that entailed losses but also gains which enriched the translated text (Eco, *Dire* 95-138).

Wit in Translation

"La cascatella delle telefonate gerarchesche, come ogni cascatella che si rispetti, era ed è irreversibile in un determinato campo di forze, qual è il campo gravidico, o il campo ossequienziale-scaricabarilistico" (*QP* 69-70) is shrewdly translated as "[t]he little cascade of official telephone calls, like every cascade with any self-respect, was and is unreversible, within a determined field of forces, the field of gravity, or the field of obsequiousness and pass-the-buckdom" (*TA* 103). Beyond his ingenuity in conveying the meaning of "scaricabarilistico," which is an original Gaddian creation, let us highlight Weaver's remarkable competence and mastery of the Italian language. The translation of "scaricabarilistico" occurs in two phases: the first entails the literal translation of *scaricabarile* on the basis of the expression *to pass the buck*, or "to shift a responsibility to someone else"; the second includes the addition of the suffix *-dom* to signify *state*, *rank*, *office*, *realm*, *jurisdiction* (*New Penguin English Dictionary*). In this way Weaver confers an ironic connotation to the passage by bestowing dignity to the object (*buck*) and consequently to the action, and at the same time is able to iron out the translation of the Italian suffix *-istico*.

Weaver shows his outstanding skill also with respect to the translation of puns. Here is a significative example: "In occasione dello smarrimento d'un anello con un topazio o topazzio (quarcuna, sempre pe rispetto, pronunziava topaccio), che la Menegazzi o per più pulito dire Menecacci aveva dimenticato al cesso, unicamente perché era un'oca vanesia" (*QP* 39-40) becomes "[o]n one occasion, the misplacement of

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[8] In this regard Eco does not refer exclusively to Weaver but more in general to the translating process of any literary work. The volume also offers worthwhile testimony of the strategies followed by Weaver in translating Eco's works.

a ring with a topaz or towpats (somebody, out of spite, pronounced it top-ass), which la Menegazzi, or more properly, Menecacci had forgotten in the toilet, solely because she was vain as a goose" (*TA* 57). The complexity of the passage does not only spring from the wordplay *topazio/topazzio/topaccio*, but also from the double entendre relevant to the surname *Menegazzi*, connected to the male member (in this regard, Weaver adds an explicative footnote). The obstacle is overcome cleverly even when it returns with *topo-topazio* (*QP* 180), which is translated *topaz-ass-rat* (*TA* 266). It is evident that Weaver knows exactly what is hidden behind these words and their lexical variations; therefore, he adapts his translation with extreme naturalness. He is aware that beyond the pleasure of a verbal game a rooted philosophical and psychoanalytic structure is at play: Gadda is convinced that words are means necessary to express psychic needs (Amigoni 18-19). Furthermore, psychoanalysis forces Gadda to "dismantle" his own novel and develop it through the dynamics of the spirit, in which a direct cause-and-effect relationship does not exist any longer, but rather a "policausalismo" of sorts. Time no longer matters and from the very beginning of the novel the story, which is built on this belief, reveals a logical pattern outlined according to its own rules. In our specific case, the symbolic relationship between *topazio/topaccio* (in a dream of the character named Pestalozzi) brings to mind a personal dream of Gadda's, which in turn recalls many passages from Freud's *Psicopatologia della vita quotidiana* (Amigoni 109, 112-14).

Weaver's sensitivity emerges in these situations, particularly in the ability to perceive both *intentio operis* and *intentio auctoris* (Eco, *I limiti* 110-25). Thanks to his empirical method that forces him to establish a direct relationship with Gadda, he can propose a translation that is prospectively bound to meet the *intentio lectoris* in a language different from the original, yet intact in its deep perception.

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[9] According to Amigoni, *polycausalism* defines appropriately Gadda's practice to invent an extremely peculiar vocabulary, which is the result of an almost obsessive search. See Amigoni also for the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature in *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana*.

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