

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Rosa Cappiello, *Oh Lucky Country*, Introduction by Nicole Moore. Translator's Introduction by Gaetano Rando. (Sydney University Press, 2009).

That the translation by Gaetano Rando of the late Rosa Cappiello's *Paese fortunato* (1981) should be reprinted, 25 years after its 1984 first edition, in the 'Australian Classics Library' of Sydney University Press, says something about the significant place the English version has achieved in the body of migrant literature. It has attracted far more attention in Australia than in Italy where of course it was first published. The controversy it aroused is part of the story and briefly summarised in the capable preface written by Nicole Moore.

The narrator's criticisms of Australia have caused unease among Australian critics, although, as Sneja Gunew observed, reviewers made the mistake of making 'the author, the narrator, the woman, the migrant converge in a spurious unity'.¹ For her, the novel 'inflates migrant oppression to such absurdist proportions that in its very excessiveness it becomes a force of renewal and imaginative energy' (517). Despite many stimulating observations, I note that ambiguities created by translation have led Gunew to make unsustainable claims of intertextuality of *Oh Lucky Country* with Dante's *Inferno*.²

In their introductions, Nicole Moore and the translator, Gaetano Rando, like Gunew, take to task critics who confused narrator and author. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that Moore by seeing the work as 'an outsider's view of white Australia that is unforgiving as well as envious' and Rando, for whom the work is 'autobiographical,' illustrate the continuing temptation to look at a reality perceived behind the fiction (viii, xii). It is no surprise then that outrage, or a sense of vindication, are typical critical reactions.

As Jonathan White commented,

There is little point in disputing this subjective account with some 'objective' facts about Australia's receptiveness to outsiders, ... little point, because the point of Cappiello's case is precisely that hers is the *subjective* migrant's-eye view of life in the new country.³

¹ Sneja Gunew, 'Rosa Cappiello's *Oh Lucky Country* Multicultural Reading Strategies,' *Meanjin* 44. 4 (1985): 517-528, 519.

² Gunew claims that at *Inferno* XXXIV, 88-93, Dante, having clambered down Lucifer's body fixed in the centre of the earth, with the 'coyness of high culture' invites 'gross people' to consider that he (Dante) has passed 'the ass-hole' of the world'. The claim illustrates the pitfalls inherent in depending on translation. Dante is certainly not coy when the occasion demands: he has no qualms about depicting the signal by a devil who turns 'his arse into a trumpet' (*Inferno* XXI, 141). In Canto XXXIV, however, Dante is not referring to the 'ass-hole' of the world (an English, not an Italian concept), but to the centre of gravity of the universe. A scientific phenomenon perplexes Dante the pilgrim: he has passed through the centre of the Earth in a constant direction, and now (thanks to the force of gravity) another sort of direction, the sense of *up* and *down*, has reversed itself. The sense of the Italian 'grosso', in the expression 'gross people' to which the translation refers is *ignorant*, not *uncouth*.

³ "'A Fine Funeral of Our Identities'?: The Italian Diaspora of the Modern Epoch.' Jonathan White, *Italy: The Enduring Culture* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000) 290-323, 292.

Book Reviews: *Oh Lucky Country* by Rosa Cappiello. Antonio Pagliaro.

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Whereas some Australians might prefer to see their country portrayed as Utopia by immigrants, even in a fictional work, it is totally expected in the context of Italian literature that an emigrant should be victim. Such a view goes right back to the beginning of the twentieth century, to writers like Luigi Capuana and Edmondo De Amicis. The expectation is not diminished with regard to a work like this, essentially grounded in the Italian intellectual climate of the 1970s. Emigration from Italy was widely seen by opponents of the Christian Democrat government, as a proof of ill-will towards the disenfranchised and of a preference for easy solutions to problems of poverty. Films such as Montaldo's *Sacco e Vanzetti* (1971) and Zampa's *Bello onesto emigrato Australia sposerebbe compaesana illibata* (The Italian Girl) (1971) were graphic illustrations of the problems emigrants faced. A novel from Italy which saw emigration in a light other than negative would have been contrary to the trend. The emigration issue, as ever a political one, was moving from the level of theoretical deplorations to actual action, with the possibility being mooted of allowing Italians abroad to vote in national elections.

It is no surprise then that the publisher (Feltrinelli), should have welcomed a book with the topicality of *Paese fortunato*. In Italy, principal critical consideration of the work came from Alfredo Luzi, Professor of Sociology of Literature at Macerata, himself an occasional academic visitor to Australia, who characterized Cappiello's style as that of the *pastiche* (543). He saw the constituents of this as elements in memoir form, characterizations largely based on the body, its physiology and sex organs, the re-emergence of dialect, the use of lists of nouns as a way of enumerating events to which she cannot give any systematic order. For Luzi, the author's act of writing serves as a mechanism of liberation which will enable her to recover her own identity: and save her from the annihilation created by social marginalization.⁴ However, after Luzi, for reasons which one can only guess, there has been no attention from other critics in Italy.⁵

Rando's translation is commendable in many aspects and clearly the success of the volume in its English language version must be attributable to this. The translator's introduction claims that '...an attempt was made to follow the language of the original as closely as possible, perhaps sometimes at the expense of what may be considered "good English".' This comment somewhat muddies the waters. The comment suggests that Rando aspired to equivalence at individual word level, rather than seeking sense at sentence or a broader level. Despite some excellent moments in the work, it should have had closer editorial attention in 1984 and certainly needed to be revised before being re-issued.

There are many inaccuracies and examples of clumsiness in the English. The first page starts with a misspelling 'gig' for 'jig'. The second paragraph starts with the obscure mistranslation 'over-exasperated thoughts.' The character Tina is re-named Flavia in the translation (19). 'I would like to admonish her that she is in the same boat' (30) should be 'I would like to warn her.'

The incomprehensible sentence 'I am tired of having pigeon eggs on the back of my spine' (25) might be more clearly translated as 'I am tired of having shit on my

⁴ Alfredo Luzi, 'Espressionismo linguistico ed emarginazione sociale: la scrittura di Rosa Cappiello,' *La letteratura dell'emigrazione: Gli scrittori di lingua italiana nel mondo*, ed. Jean-Jacques Marchand (Milan: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1991) 539- 545.

⁵ There is also an unpublished thesis: Gabriella Bianco, *Rosa R. Cappiello e la letteratura italo-australiana* (Urbino University, 1983). (supplied by Professor Luzi).

backside.’ To elucidate the image, I note that the name ‘Pigeon Eggs’ is given in Italian also to a variety of olives.

Why is the supervisor made to say to Rosa, ‘... the thread breaks’ (25), instead of ‘the thread is breaking’? Likewise why ‘the business stagnates’ (37), with a superfluous definite article, instead of ‘business is stagnating’, or ‘business is bad’?

‘I am suffering’ (19) looks like a present tense of ‘to suffer’. Whatever solution the translator chooses, the sense required is ‘I incarnate suffering’, or ‘Suffering is me’.

Mixed metaphors give moments of incongruity. For example on a group of young women in translation look like ‘a herd of unleashed fillies’ (7). Rosa’s friend Helen might be mistaken for a robot, granted that ‘screw-loose wildly promiscuous channel’ of hers. (31). Other striking examples include ‘a procession of stinking dregs filing past’ (182).

It is also a pity to see certain omissions, for example a picturesque personal description incorporating ‘la saliva frizzante e schiumosa alla coca cola’ (bubbly foamy spittle like coca cola) which should have appeared on page 21.

There is an invariable English translation ‘cunt’ for a variety of expressions which in Italian, unlike English, are not used as personal insults. They may even be rough compliments which, while vulgar, are certainly not as uncouth as the English. The result is to intensify Rosa’s unruly provocations into the tone of gloomy diatribe.

Whereas the fortunes of the Italian *Paese fortunato* have been limited, the translated Capiello has in effect been welcomed in the pantheon of literature as if, as Brigid Maher has noted, she were an Australian writer.⁶ The reasons for this are potentially disturbing. Could it be that defects in the English of the translation have been taken as representing some specific imagined quality in the Italian? At all events, what Luzi has called her pastiche of styles does not refer to linguistic incapacity. There seems to be an idea current in Australian criticism that Capiello wrote in a dialect. However, her borrowings from dialect and from the English of Italo-Australians are never more than enrichment by lexical adornment or local colour. The work is written using standard Italian grammar and a syntax appropriate to the content. To name but one instance, Capiello is quite capable of using the appropriate tenses and moods to express hypothesis. Hers is certainly not the language ‘of a working class migrant woman as she has been termed’ (viii). It seems then that, by strange irony, the English translation of Capiello’s novel, as a result of shortcomings which at times suggest broken English, has confirmed a pervasive stereotype of the Italian migrant in the English-speaking world and has been greeted as such with enthusiasm. The migrant author who expresses herself in stilted language has been conveyed into her executioner’s grasp. The translation in its present state has led to *Oh Lucky Country*’s elevation to the rank of ‘Australian Classic.’ How would Rosa the narrator, declaimer of Europe’s civilizing mission to Australia, react to this paradox?

Antonio Pagliaro

⁶ Brigid Maher, ‘The Sky Here Compensates for Solitude,’ *Literature and Aesthetics* 17.2 (2007): 174-191, 188.