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Resisting Homogenization: Giorgio Bassani translates James M. Cain

In 1946, Bompiani editions published Giorgio Bassani's first unabridged Italian translation of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*¹ by James M. Cain. Born in 1916 from a prosperous family of Jewish origin, Bassani lived in Ferrara till 1943, when he was arrested and briefly jailed for his antifascist activities. After his release, he lived under a false name in Rome where he started writing his collections of poems. During those hard years of life underground, Bassani accepted any temporary job to get by, from clerical work to acting, and it is likely that translating Cain was one of them. The most consistent record of Bassani's activity as a translator, in fact, dates back to those early years of his writing career, despite his later commitment, as the renowned editor of the international literary journal *Botteghe Oscure*, to promoting and sustaining foreign literature.

If we start from Lawrence Venuti's notion of *simpativo* (Venuti, 1995: 237-264) as the justification for the right to translate at all, it is worthwhile investigating the degree of Bassani's affinity with Cain. According to Venuti's account, a distinguished American translator of Italian literature encouraged him, at the beginning of his career, to find an author with whom he shared a common sensibility. Such an "underlying sympathy" was supposedly very desirable in translation in that it would increase the fidelity to the original. A

1. Further referred to as *Postman*.

close connection between writer and translator would facilitate that process of impersonation that any translation entails. In fact, as will be clarified later, Venuti finds this notion decidedly objectionable and considers it the reason why the translator's invisibility has prevailed in British and American cultures for so long.

In a comparison between Cain's hard-boiled fiction and the style Bassani would develop in his mature narrative of the late 1950s and 1960s, it does not seem like the two writers have much in common. Fixed on his Jewish-Ferrarese themes and apparently incapable of reaching beyond the limitations of his anti-fascism and moralism, Bassani's realist prose has been alternatively defined as either "decadent" or "*crepuscolare*", and his ideology summed up as a substantial refusal of history (Voza, 1970: 65-92). If both writers privilege and achieve their best results in the first person narrative, it is also true that Cain's subjectivism aims at reproducing the syntax, diction and grammar of his characters through an extensive use of colloquialisms and slang, while Bassani never moves away from what has been called his *italiano medio* ("average Italian"), which favors common usage against any regional inflection or avant-garde infraction.

Another element that characterizes Bassani's respect for conventional narrative is the recurrent use of *verba dicendi* to introduce any direct speech or even free indirect speech. Cain's prose, on the other hand, is well known for its deletion of such signals, to the extent that the distracted reader is often lost and obliged to go back to the beginning of his long dialogues to understand who is saying what. In his 1946 preface to *The Butterfly*, while strenuously refusing any debt to Hemingway, Cain wrote:

We each cut down to a minimum the *he-saids* and *she-replied-laughinglys*, though I carry this somewhat further than he does, for I use the minimum number it is possible to use and be clear, as a rule permitting myself only a *he-said* to begin a patch of dialogue, with no others in between. For, when I started my *Postman Always Rings Twice*, *he says* and *she says* seemed to be Chambers's limit in this direction, which looked a bit monotonous. And then I thought: Well, why all this *saying*? With quotes around it, would they be gargling it? And so, if I may make a plea to my fellow fiction writers, I should like to say: It is about time this convention, this dreary flub-dub that lies within the talent of any magazine secretary, was dropped overboard and forgotten. If Jake is to warn Harold, "an ominous glint appearing in his eye," it would be a great deal smoother and more entertaining to the reader, though I grant you nothing

like so easy, to slip a little, not too much of course, but just the right subtle amount, of ominous glint in the speech. (Cain, 1989: 354)

Bassani's redundant use of *verba dicendi* is also an artifice to give voice to his provincial and prejudiced Ferrara without taking sides, and the reader perceives a certain ambiguity in the writer constantly marking his distance from his characters and never stating where he stands. As Pier Paolo Pasolini noticed, Bassani's prose never descends to the linguistic level of his "thinking characters"; rather, the voices of the "thinking characters" (which Pasolini identifies as "vaguely Emilian") rise to the refined style of Bassani. In this way, the vulgarity and misery of his characters' thoughts often achieve a nobility that is not properly theirs (Pasolini, 2005 [1974]: 527). On the contrary, Cain never attempts to distance himself from his creatures, but "shudders at the least hint of the highfalutin, the pompous, or the literary" (Cain, 1989: 353). Cain's greatest ambition—in his own words—is to have "people talk as they do talk" (*ibid.*), and his characters can count on their author to give them a diction that accurately reflects their low station in life.

Bassani also uses a lot of foreignisms, especially from English, French and Hebrew; words and expressions from the Ferrarese dialect; colloquialisms, pieces of jargon, and so on. This distinctive feature of his prose, which is known as *mistilingua* ("mixed language"), is extremely relevant to his translating Cain in post-war Italy and deserves a few clarifications. First of all, Bassani's use of linguistic contamination is a clear sign of his interest in language in general, in its phonetic, semantic and graphic aspects. The first time the narrator of *Il Giardino dei Finzi-Contini* hears Micòl's voice, for example, he is fascinated by her speech:

Era la prima volta che mi rivolgeva la parola, la prima, anzi, che la sentivo parlare. E immediatamente notai quanto la sua pronuncia assomigliasse a quella di Alberto. Parlavano entrambi nello stesso modo: spiccando le sillabe di certi vocaboli di cui essi soli sembravano conoscere il vero senso, il vero peso, e invece scivolando bizzarramente su quelle di altri, che uno avrebbe detto di importanza molto maggiore. Mettevano una sorta di puntiglio nell'esprimersi così. Questa particolare, inimitabile, tutta privata deformazione dell'italiano era la loro vera lingua. Le davano persino un nome: il finzi-continico. (Bassani, 1991: 379)

(It was the first time she ever spoke to me, the first, in fact, that I ever heard her speak. And I immediately noticed how similar her pronunciation was to Alberto's. They both spoke the same way: stressing certain syllables whose true meaning, whose true weight, only they seemed to know, and sliding bizarrely over others that one would have thought much more important. They were fastidious about expressing themselves that way. This curious, inimitable, wholly private deformation of Italian was their own *true* language. They even gave it a name: Finzi-Continian.)²

Bassani's attention to language varieties and his using them in his prose is significant because, despite its apparent experimentalism, it confirms once more his conservative attitude to literary language. All of his inserts from "other" languages, in fact, are never fully incorporated into his prose, but always marked by either inverted commas or italics, to highlight that they are not fully integrated into his writing. It is as if the adoption of these foreign, regional, or class-defined words were only possible while preserving the substantial elegance of his syntax and the overall refinement of his lexicon. On the other hand, Cain's use of the American vernacular of the lower classes, predominantly monosyllabic and rich in malapropisms, and of the lingo of non-native speakers of American, is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Bassani's *mistilingua*. Cain, like Hemingway, ignores a great deal of what his ear brings him, "particularly as to pronunciation, which I never indicate, unless the character is a foreigner and I have to give his dialect, or a simplified version of it, else have him pale and colorless" (Cain, 1989: 354). Bassani's linguistic contamination does not aim at syncretism but reinforces a normalizing attitude toward the Italian language, while Cain's appropriation of dialect-inflected American speech subverts the standard language by disregarding its laws. He adopts the language of the uneducated drifter, which includes a great many colloquial expressions, misspelt words and some mild obscenities. My point is that Cain's prose, differently from Bassani's, is closer to modernist experimentalism and avant-garde plurilinguism than has been admitted, and (that) his fascination with subaltern and minorities speech should also be given the political emphasis it deserves³.

2. All translations from Italian into English are mine, kindly revised by Thomas Simpson.

3. The reception of Cain's work has changed a lot over the years and across countries. However, he has never been canonized and, despite the fact that European contemporary critics treated him as the equal of Faulkner and Hemingway, most American critics of his time dismissed him as pulp.

In his chapter on the notion of *simpatico*, Venuti begins by defining this notion as a very special relation between author and translator that goes beyond their being just “agreeable” or “congenial” one to the other. “The translator,” he continues while reporting his experienced American colleague’s words, “should not merely get along with the author, not merely find him likeable; there should also be an *identity* between them” (Venuti, 1995: 237, italics mine). This ideal situation only happens when the translator discovers the author at an early stage of both their careers so that they can grow up together, develop an affinity of ideas and tastes and possibly become “the same mind.” Venuti considers the way in which this concept of an ideal translation has affirmed itself since at least the 17th century, making transparency and fluency the dominant aesthetic principles of translation into English.

Once the goal of the translator is defined as a complete *identification* with the foreign author’s thoughts and feelings though, it is a short step to reassert also the implicitly vicarious status of the translator with respect to the author, and of the translated text to the original, if for no other reason than the fact that the original usually comes first. However, since a translation can never become one with its original, it can only be measured in terms of its distance from the source and ultimate failure to coincide. That an ideal so replete with contradictory implications should nevertheless be so deeply rooted in the practice of translation, especially into English, is demonstrated by the fact that also post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak argues for a notion whose implications are not dissimilar from Venuti’s *simpatico*. Spivak’s idea of translation as the most intimate act of reading is well known. What is more, according to the Anglo-Bengali philosopher, the translator must “earn the right” to become the intimate reader of the foreign work if she wants to—as she should—“surrender to the text” and “respond to its special call” (Spivak, 1992: 181).

What is interesting, however, is that, even if Venuti finally rejects *simpatico* as the sole criterion for a legitimate translation, while Spivak seemingly supports her idea of intimacy to its extreme consequences, they both end up abandoning the seductive temptation of sameness and ultimately admitting otherness as the necessary relation between original and translation. Yet, if for Spivak “translation is a necessary impossibility,” (Spivak, 2005: 105) an aporia that contains within itself its own negation, for Venuti it is the translation’s very resistance to assimilation and homogenization that makes it such

a powerful means of political action and literary creation. If the utopia of sameness is inevitably unachievable and even the most radical experiments of exact word for word repetition of the original have to confront their own limits, then it is precisely the translation's independence from the foreign work that must be valued.

Moving from Venuti's final dismissal of the principle that self-recognition and mirroring of the translator in the author constitute the ideal basis for a successful translation, I will push the argument further and venture to suggest the opposite, i.e. that "antipathy" between translator and author may result not in a hindrance but in a point of strength. The first definition of the word "antipathy" in the OED says "contrariety of feeling, disposition, or nature; natural contrariety or incompatibility. The opposite of sympathy." My point is that a lack of kinship or familiarity between author and translator, an impossibility for them to share a similar vision of the world, and, ultimately, opposite leanings in terms of literary tastes should not necessarily end up in bankruptcy but, rather, favor results that resist homogenization, provoke norm disruption, while producing new, unsuspected meanings. Given that Bassani is such a diverse writer from Cain in terms of literary style, linguistic choices and thematic interests, it is worthwhile elaborating on how their "contrariety of feeling," or possible "incompatibility," affected the first unabridged Italian version of *Postman*. Drawing from these theoretical premises, I will also verify the possibility that Bassani's practice corresponds to Venuti's definition of "translating with resistancy" and to his reading of Philip Lewis's concept of "abusive fidelity" (Venuti, 1995: 252)⁴, and demonstrate how it challenged the tradition of transparent discourse in post-fascist Italy.

During the twenty years of its rule, in fact, language planning and its connected censorial measures had been at the cusp of fascist politics. A strong vernacular nationalism identified the regime from the beginning. The 1923 *Riforma Gentile*, for example, already established the Italian language as the only language of instruction in the schools of the kingdom. This approach to a territory that was extremely diversified in terms of history, culture and language varied in degree, from the patriotic promotion of standard Italian as

4. Venuti finds Lewis's concept of "abusive translation" extremely helpful in his own practice as a translator, because of its forcing a radical rethinking of the notion of fidelity.

a unifying national language, to the outright vetoing of all regional dialects, linguistic minorities, foreignisms, and any form of hybridization.

Scholars of the language policy during the fascist era have stressed the consistent tendency to homogenize the Italian language and privilege a grammatical approach throughout the period, but they have also identified different phases in such a policy, from the folkloric acceptance of diversity in the beginning, to the autarky of the later linguistic imperialism⁵. Despite its being so strongly nationalistic, not to say racist and xenophobic, however, the fascist regime allowed a considerable number of translations to be published, especially during the 1930s. This apparent contradiction was the result of the tremendous popular success that foreign narrative, especially the so-called “entertainment fiction”, such as adventure, romance and crime, enjoyed in a country which was just starting to modernize its reading habits. The publishing industry did not want to miss the opportunity, and the dictatorship, in its anxious search for consensus, had no interest, at least before the passing of the racial laws in 1938, to block translations altogether. A study of translated narrative in Fascist Italy, therefore, has to run the bumpy road that goes from more or less silent tolerance to active hostility, and must remember that, as Christopher Rundle emphasizes, the “invasion of translations” (Rundle and Sturge, 2010: 15-50), which took place in Italy during the thirties, assumed extra-linguistic meanings and reflected a larger ideological, political and aesthetic debate.

The fame of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* immediately spread across the Atlantic after its publication in the U.S. in 1934. Most Italian intellectuals and translators of the time, such as Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini, highly prized Cain’s prose, and Bassani himself soon obtained a copy of the original novel for his personal library. That the fascist censorship particularly opposed Cain’s crime fiction, and that Bassani’s translation resisted their enforced language normalization is demonstrated by the fact that *Il postino suona sempre due volte*⁶ could only be released once the regime was finally over.

Translating Cain at a time when he was still developing his abilities as a novelist must have been extremely challenging for such a scrupulous writer as

5. See G. Klein, 1986, *La politica linguistica del fascismo*, Bologna, Il Mulino.

6. Further referred to as *Postino*.

Bassani, whose literary language seldom deviates from a respectful observance of traditional syntax, whose vocabulary is not always up-to-date, and whose narrative technique could be easily assimilated, if not confused, with that of the previous century.

What strikes the Italian reader of Bassani's *Postino* is the constant switching of past tenses from *passato remoto* to *passato prossimo* and *imperfetto*. As is known, the Italian verbal system differs from the English one in many ways, especially in that the opposition between "simple past" and "present perfect" is based on the aspect, that is on how an event or action is to be viewed with respect to time, rather than on its actual location in time. Unfortunately, there is no one-to-one correspondence between English and Italian past tenses, even though this difference does not usually constitute a big problem in translation. Common Italian usage has the *imperfetto* for description, and either *passato remoto* or *passato prossimo* for narration of past events, with no perfective aspect implied by the use of the auxiliary in the compound tense. Today, the use of more literary sounding and often irregularly inflected *passato remoto* is much limited, especially in spoken Italian, but in the mid-1940s it would certainly have been the most obvious choice for narration of the past in a literary context. The fact that Bassani shows such a verbal uncertainty in his translation appears strange, considering his almost maniacal surveillance over his prose, unless we admit that he was at a loss with the colloquial lingo of Frank Chambers and uneasily trying to adjust standard Italian to the vagaries of Cain's undisciplined narrator. At the same time, though, I believe it was precisely the encounter with the disquieting novelty of Cain's language that offered him a chance to experiment and play with the structures of his own.

Here are a few examples of his tense switching:

Los Angeles wasn't but twenty miles away, but he shined himself up like he was going to Paris, and right after lunch, he went. Soon as he was gone, I locked the front door. I picked up a plate that a guy had left, and went on back in the kitchen with it. She was there. (Cain, 1934: 14)

Los Angeles non distava più di venti miglia. Ma lui s'è tutto agghindato, come se dovesse recarsi per lo meno a Parigi; e subito dopo pranzo è partito. Non appena si fu allontanato, chiusi a chiave la porta d'ingresso. Presi quindi un piatto e una posata che erano serviti ad un cliente, e li portai in cucina. C'era Cora, là. (Cain, 1973 [1946]: 177)

Note here the rather disorienting and often inconsistent sequence of tenses: *imperfetto* – *passato prossimo* – *trapassato remoto* – *passato remoto* – *imperfetto*; in particular, the switching from *passato prossimo* (*s'è tutto agghindato, è partito*) to *passato remoto* (*presi, portai*). And later on:

She cracked up, then, and cried, and after she got quiet she went downstairs. I was down there, right after her. (Cain, 1934: 171)

A un tratto il riso le si ruppe in singhiozzi: ha pianto alungo; in fine quando si fu calmata, scese da basso. Non la perdevo di vista. (Cain, 1973 [1946]: 177)

Here again he alternates a series of different past tenses without it being justified in any way by the plain chronological sequence of simple pasts in Cain's text.

As a matter of fact, Bassani scholars have identified a “perennial temporal instability” (Boselli, 1962: 12) as a defining mark of his prose. The constant consciousness of the passing of time, and of memory that reconstructs or invents the past, is at the basis of Bassani's literary language and of his substantial ambiguity toward narrated events. His is a time deprived of chronology, in which frequent switches from one tense to the other almost annul temporal links by flattening the narrative to the single tense of memory. This strategy, which is more evident in his first Ferrarese short stories, such as *Il muro di cinta* and *Lida Mantovani*, but is persistent in all of his mature writing, shows how discontinuity and apparent lack of temporal unity are essential elements of Bassani's language. As Mario Boselli notices:

Si passa, per esempio, dall'imperfetto al passato remoto; questo passaggio equivale cronologicamente a quello del passato a presente storico. L'imperfetto immobilizza le cose rappresentate e ne fissa definitivamente la condizione; il passato remoto [...] riporta ad un sottinteso presente storico i fatti. Il presente storico è proprio di un linguaggio che assimila nelle sue strutture l'idea di tempo. (*ibid.*)

(Tenses switch, for example, from *imperfetto* to *passato remoto*; this change corresponds chronologically to the one from simple past to historical present. *Imperfetto* freezes the represented things and fixates their condition forever; *passato remoto* [...] brings facts back to an implicit historical present. Historical present belongs to a kind of language that assimilates the idea of time in its structures.)

Also Pasolini stresses something similar when he notices the uncommon occurrence of the past conditional in the Ferrarese writer's use of free indirect speech. According to Pasolini, the world that Bassani represents is always seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; the events he narrates cannot be modified, cannot progress. "They are not simply *passed*, but *destined to pass*" (Pasolini, 1960 [1948-1958]: 344-345), since it is the value of the present itself that is weak for him.

Of course such a defeatist political stance was unacceptable to an engaged intellectual like Pasolini, who relegates Bassani's literary activity back to a time of his own personal past:

Non amo il passato proprio perché è passato, e mi difendo da esso non pensandoci mai. L'indifferenza è una delle difese più sicure che la nostra coscienza erige contro gli eterni nemici che la minacciano. Il momento in cui Bassani si è rivelato come un senso, un momento, un modo di essere della letteratura italiana appartiene al mio passato personale. E' rimosso, quindi. (Pasolini, 2005 [1974]: 523)

(I don't care for the past precisely because it is gone, and I defend myself from it by never thinking about it. Indifference is one of the surest defenses that our conscience erects against the eternal enemies that threaten it. The moment that Bassani revealed himself as a feeling, a moment, a way of being of Italian literature belongs to my personal past. Therefore it's banished.)

My point is that translating Cain's jargon at an early stage of his writing career was a fruitful ground for experimenting with a narrative technique that he would later develop and gain perfection in his major work. And the fact that confused chronology is more apparent and uncouth in his first trials, while more subtle and sophisticated in his later, great novels, demonstrates that by progressively perfecting a stylistic aspect of his language he also reinforced the foundation of his ideology of history. In a sense, Cain's nonstandard English and its syntactical disconnection offered a unique opportunity to put to the test a notion of time that would become a distinguishing feature of Bassani's own narrative. Contrarily, Cain's sense of history may be seen as closer to Pasolini's. To him only the present matters and there is no point in lingering over past events. It is what happens next and what happens finally that is important—as David Madden and William Marling observe (Marling, 1995: 185),—so much so that he never wastes his time in describing the how,

one of the major traits of his narrative being precisely its compressed style and fast pace⁷.

The encounter with American literature had an explosive impact on Italian writers and translators of the 1930s and 1940s and, in Cesare Pavese's words, "[...] aperse il primo spiraglio di libertà, il primo sospetto che non tutto nella cultura del mondo finisse coi fasci," (Pavese, 1990: 173), (opened the first gleam of freedom, the first suspicion that not everything in world culture ended with fascism). According to Pavese who, together with Vittorini, would be among the protagonists of Italian literary neorealism, the lesson did not consist of the flashy search for scandalous topics, but of the expressive richness of the American people. American writers had realized that the "strict and already century-old aspiration to *constrain daily life inside the word with no residue*" had to be overcome. (*ibid.*: 174, italics mine)⁸ "Di qui il loro sforzo continuo per adeguare il linguaggio alla nuova realtà del mondo, per creare in sostanza un *nuovo* linguaggio, materiale e simbolico, che si giustificasse unicamente in se stesso e non in alcuna tradizionale compiacenza." (*ibid.*) (From this arose their continuous effort to adapt language to the world's new reality, to create, in substance, a *new* language, material and symbolic, justified in and of itself alone and not in some smug tradition.)

All Italian translators of American literature in fascist and post-war Italy had to face the same challenge and their results were often as odd-sounding as this passage by Bassani, in which the hypothetical sentence, with both if-clause and main clause in the *passato remoto*, does not seem to follow any *consecutio temporum*:

7. It was David Madden who first stressed the cinematic pace of Cain's best works and the richness of his deceptively simple dialogues, while talking of his "pure" novel. See D. Madden (ed.), 1968, *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, together with his following monographic studies on James M. Cain. Also William Marling emphasized the metonymic representation of speed that Cain achieved.

8. These words by Pavese, dating back to 1947, strike me as prophetic, in that they seem to anticipate poststructuralist discourse on the inherent polysemy of language, particularly with reference to Jacques Derrida's enlightening notion of a "remainder,"—*un reste*. According to Derrida's formulation, the process of signifying always leaves something *out* and something *over*: a plus that is also a minus of signification. On the concept of the "remainder" see also J.-J. Lecercle, 1990, *The Violence of Language*, London & NY, Routledge.

I tried to lift him. I had a hell of a time. He was slippery with soap, and I had to stand in the water before I could raise him at all. All the time I could hear her down there, talking to the operator. They didn't give her a doctor. They gave her the police. (Cain, 1934: 29)

Cercai di sollevarlo; e non ci riuscii che dopo molti sforzi. Mi sgusciava di mano, tutto insaponato com'era. Se volli tirarlo fuori completamente mi toccò entrare io stesso nella vasca. Frattanto udì Cora parlare col centralino. Chiedeva del dottore, e s'ostinavano a darle la polizia. (Cain, 1973 [1946]: 36)

The result is that the reader is left as uncertain of what Frank actually did to lift Nick's unconscious body out of the bathtub, as was Frank on how to do it. Here Bassani also seems to be at odds with Cain's nonstandard and mildly obscene expression "I had a hell of a time," which he renders weakly with the more explicit and quite plain *non ci riuscii che dopo molti sforzi*. Yet, I believe it was precisely translating from American English that, because of the deviation from the norm that it encouraged, challenged the practice of domestication, while legitimizing the most audacious attempts to renovate contemporary Italian language and literature.

Many studies have been dedicated to Pavese's translations, to his recurrent use of calques from the American language and to his so-called interference errors⁹. Bassani is not immune from these traits, even though they are less showy and more random than those of his colleague and longtime friend. Apart from a few obvious loanwords, and some Anglicisms, one of the most common features in Bassani's *Postino* is the mismatched use of prepositions. Here are some examples:

CAIN (1934)	CAIN (1973 [1946])
"The next thing was how to play it" (125)	"Tutto consisteva di ¹⁰ calare" (131)
"We amount to something" (145)	"Riusciremo a qualcosa" (152)
"you went to Mexico with" (169)	"ti sei portato al Messico" (174)
"to be in bed with" (174)	"stare in letto assieme" (180)

9. On Cesare Pavese's activity as a translator and on his relation to American culture see: P. Lorenzi-Davitti, 1975, *Pavese e la cultura americana*, Firenze, G. D'Anna; M. Stella, 1977, *Cesare Pavese traduttore*, Roma, Bulzoni and V. Ferme, 2002, *Tradurre è tradire: La traduzione come sovversione culturale sotto il fascismo*, Ravenna, A. Longo Editore.

10. Bold case is used to highlight phrases commented on.

These examples show how Bassani often slips, whether deliberately or inadvertently, into a non-idiomatic choice when translating prepositions. The following example is maybe even more illuminating:

Well, first I get on a boat and go down to Nicaragua. All the really fine pumas come from Nicaragua. [...] Then I hire me some Indian boys [...] Goat meat is cheaper there [...] (Cain, 1934: 152)

Prima di tutto prendo il piroscampo che mi porta fino **al Nicaragua**, dato che i puma più belli vengono di là. [...] Arrivata **al Nicaragua**, ingaggio qualche indiano [...] **Al Nicaragua** la carne di capra costa assai meno [...] (Cain, 1973 [1946]: 158)

As one can see, Bassani uses the preposition *al* followed by *Nicaragua* three times in a few lines, even though the preposition “in” would be the standard choice with state names. However, if the first occurrence *mi portafino al Nicaragua* is still acceptable, the second and third times, the insistent use of *al Nicaragua* simply does not sound right. There is no apparent reason for repeating it, especially so since no disambiguation is needed, and correct and fluent Italian tends to avoid repetitions as much as possible. Moreover, Cain himself used the adverbs of time (“then”) and place (“there”) instead. Unless we admit, as I will suggest, that Bassani is intentionally ab-using his own mother tongue in order to question the very norms that regulate it.

As is well-known, according to Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1456b-1457a), prepositions, together with articles and conjunctions, do not belong to the semantic order of language in that they have no meaning in themselves and do not designate anything. Contrary to nouns and verbs, which are intelligible by themselves since they have a direct relation to either an object or a unity of meaning, prepositions function *between* signifying members and resist what Derrida, in his essay on metaphor, calls the *nominalizable* (Derrida, 1982 [1971]: 233).¹¹ Whereas nouns, verbs and, to a certain extent, even adjectives and adverbs, work by resemblance or analogy to the ideas and objects they define, just like metaphors do, prepositions, which are extremely capricious,

11. In his reading of the *Poetics*, Derrida also stresses how Aristotle’s theory of language is based on the concept of “properness,” according to which a noun has but a single sense, and argues that polysemy is to the Greek philosopher either finite or outside language. Derrida’s critique, on the contrary, challenges the primacy of the intelligible, the privileging of the semantic over the syntactic, and the search for univocal meanings inside the polyvalency of language.

do not depend on any determinate notion. Given that their use is simply a matter of convention, languages vary a lot in the way they employ such particles and some of them do not even occur in certain languages. Their arbitrariness makes them extremely tricky for both translators and foreign language speakers so that, despite their playing an indispensable role in the organization of discourse, they still remain, at least from Aristotle's point of view, totally without meaning.

By letting the syntactic structures of the source language infiltrate the fabric of the target language while leaving the semantic substance of the text unaltered, Bassani's translation assigns a special role to "meaningless words" and, in so doing, practices a kind of fidelity that approximates Lewis's definition of "abusive translation:" "It is rather a new axiomatics of fidelity, one that requires attention to the chain of signifiers, to syntactic processes, to discursive structures, to the incidence of language mechanisms on thought and reality formation, and so forth" (Lewis, 1985: 42-43). By resisting the domination of the "usual" and the "useful" under which languages normally operate, Bassani interrogates the modalities of expression of the foreign text and, far from domesticating them, incorporates them into his own writing. In this way, instead of occupying the original text's already unsettled home, abusive translation—in Lewis's words—turns it into a place still more foreign to itself. The first unabridged Italian translation of Cain's novel never reads as an original, nor worries about how to avoid or conceal its shortcomings. Quite the opposite, it exhibits the awkwardness of its status as translated text. Bassani's *errors* derive not so much from lack of information or knowledge, as mistakes usually do, but from straying outside the path or bounds of his mother tongue and meandering around the language of the other. By tampering with common usage, they open a field of potentiality in translation. They suggest the uncertainty of both signifying and interpreting process, and reflect the *errant* condition of any translator. Differently from Spivak's idea of inhabiting, even if under a short-term lease, the apartment house of the tenant's language, while at the same time developing a friendship with her, Bassani's translation seems to be squatting in and roaming around the disorderly home of a recalcitrant host. Just like an unwelcome guest, he feels uncomfortable throughout his staying and expresses his embarrassment by messing around and refusing to clean up, before resuming his nomadism. With no fixed abode or permanent address, the translator is thus a loner, a

wanderer, constantly drifting from one place to the other, living in-between languages and cultures, participating in them both but never fully belonging to any. Instead of pursuing an impossible transparency, the 1946 Italian version of *Il postino suona sempre due volte* makes its author's uneasiness plainly visible, and has even the courage, as Ortega y Gasset in 1937 wished for translation of the future, to be "ugly" (2000 [1937]: 62).¹² By refusing to dress up with "literary garb" what must have seemed to him the unbearable sloppiness of Cain's prose, Bassani translated *Postman* into a maternal tongue that sounds foreign to itself, and denied beautification as a possible or even desirable goal.

As aforementioned, Bassani's prose is well-known for his *mistilingua*, and his translation of Cain makes no exception to this language habit. Apart from a number of English words that Bassani simply incorporates as they are in his version, there are a few others that are not translated and yet marked, either with italics or inverted commas (Cain, 1973 [1946]):

1. "Ice cream soda" (60)
2. *Coroner* (90, 115)
3. *District Attorney* (91)
4. "Pacific State Accident Assurance Corporation of America" (115)
5. *Match* (125).

My guess is that in post-war Italy, the unmarked words had become, despite twenty years of enforced fascist ban, familiar or assimilated enough for Bassani not to worry about them, while the marked ones probably sounded foreign but were understood anyway from the context they were set in. It is interesting to notice, though, that not only does he leave some American words untranslated, but that he also adds new foreign ones, such as "*cachet*" (84) for "pill," (from French), and "*sagoma-réclame dei sigari Indian*" (48) for "cigar-store Indian" (a strange neologism that is also a blend of Italian and French), possibly to celebrate the end of vetoed foreignisms, together with the newly conquered freedom for Italians to be xenophiles.

12. "I imagine, then, a form of translation that is ugly, as science has always been; that does not intend to wear literary garb; that is not easy to read but is very clear indeed (although this clarity may demand copious footnotes)."

Finally, there are just a few words, together with the lyrics of an American folk song, which the Ferrarese writer must have judged both untranslatable and incomprehensible to his readers, that he left unmodified in his text, while adding a footnote for each of them. They are presented here followed by my translation of Bassani's explanatory notes (1973):

“cornflakes*” (4) “*piccole focacce di farina di grano” (8) (small focaccia bread made of corn flour)

“enchilada*” (4) “*piatto americano” (8) (American dish)

“wop*” (54) “*termine peggiorativo d’usopopolare, per designare un italiano” (59) (derogatory term used by the lower classes to designate an Italian)

“White Rock*” (138) “*acqua minerale” (145) (mineral water)

It is well-known that translator's footnotes are considered a hindrance to the fluent reading of a text, especially so when they do not appear in an academic publication but in popular fiction. Publishing houses do not generally encourage them, since they are graphically unattractive and encumber page layout. Most readers do not like them either and just skip them. Translation theorists who privilege transparency and invisibility see them as a sign of weakness, if not as a plain failure, on the translator's side. Therefore, if Bassani used footnotes in his translation of a best-selling crime story, they were either his last resort or he was taking sides on a controversial issue and making a theoretical statement.

One also has to notice that three out of four of his footnotes refer to different eating habits and require a cultural knowledge of the foreign country that most Italian readers probably lacked in the mid-1940s, including Bassani. As far as the term *wop* is concerned, it had already caused not a few problems to other Italian translators from American literature, like Pavese translating Dos Passos in the 1930s, because of the fascist prohibition to say anything insulting or unpatriotic about Italians. The fact that Bassani leaves these words untranslated in his text, while providing a more or less informed definition in the footnotes, indicates that, far from diluting or appropriating the foreignness of the source, he aimed at highlighting it. In refusing homogenization, his translation is more respectful both of the original author and of his extended Italian readers. He constantly reminds them of the fact that they are

in front of a translation, that they are entering another world, an elsewhere always to be on the alert for. Instead of eclipsing his own labor within the illusion of authorial presence, Bassani unveils the irreducible distance between the other and the self and in so doing approximates Venuti's idea of "translating with resistancy" (Venuti, 1995: 248-259).

Such a strategy is even more apparent at the beginning of chapter seven, when Nick and Frank sing "There's a long, long trail a-winding," a popular song written by Stoddard King in 1915. Nick is drunk and unconsciously moving toward his violent death. Frank is pretending to be drunk while preparing to kill him. Cora is playing along as she drives them both to the crime scene. Here are the lyrics that Cain reproduces in his novel:

There's a long, long trail a-winding
 Into the land of my dreams,
 Where the nightingales are singing
 And a white moon beams.
 There's a long, long night of waiting
 Until my dreams all come true,
 Till the day when I'll be going down
 That long, long trail with you. (Cain, 1934: 60)

Faced with the option of either translating the song into Italian or leaving it in the text as it is, Bassani makes what seems to me quite a radical choice: he leaves the original American in the text while offering an ancillary translation in the footnote. In contravening a translating convention of transparent discourse, which at most accepts the other way round, that is the translation in the corpus of the text and the original as a reference in the footnote, Bassani proves that, if not as a writer, at least as a translator, he could transgress linguistic and editorial rules. His solution to the debated question of how to render rhyme, verse and rhythm in a different tongue diverges from the beaten track and suggests the final impossibility of translating verse. By relegating his version to the bottom of the page, thus lowering it to the same paratextual level as his previous paraphrases, he declares that there is more than semantics involved in translation. His denial of both the possibility and the necessity of Italianizing American folk music pursues fidelity to its extreme consequences, that is word-for-word repetition of the original song.

Bassani's unrhymed version of "There's a long, long trail a-winding" reads as follows:

Conosco un sentiero infinito
 Nella landa dei miei sogni,
 Dove canta l'usignolo
 E splende bianca la luna.
 Conosco una notte infinita d'attesa,
 perché tutti i miei sogni s'avverino
 e sorga l'alba che ce ne andremo
 insieme per quel sentiero. (Cain, 1973 [1946]: 65)

Moreover, at the time when Bassani translated Cain, he was mostly writing and translating poetry, some of which was in verse, and he could have easily made a rhymed version of the song, but deliberately chose not to.

Giorgio Bassani's 1946 translation is to be read as a celebration of Italy's liberation from fascism and its enforced policy of language domestication. By rejecting the regime's megalomaniac program of assimilation and homogenization, Bassani acknowledged the absolute alterity of Cain's text, while at the same time defying the alleged purity of the Italian language. In incorporating foreign words, phrases and syntactical structures in his translation, while tampering with standard Italian usage, he denied the racist ideology at the basis of the fascist linguistic nationalism and practiced a more ethical approach to the language of the other. On the other hand, however, it was this very practice that also forced him to admit the ultimate impossibility of his duty and to let "untranslatability" in.

Compared to the latest Italian retranslation of *Postman* (Cain, 1999), which accomplishes "a violent modernization" (Jones, 2011: 57) of the text and clearly shows how market and audience concerns have influenced and directed editorial choices toward transparency and fluency, Bassani's work, the only version of Cain's novel available to Italian readers for more than fifty years, exhibits all the weaknesses and uncertainties of its time. *Il Postino* by Bassani raises the white flag in front of the disarming alterity of Cain's text, thus abdicating what Walter Benjamin described as "the task of the translator." To him, the fragmentation and the dispersive individuality that World War II had tragically revealed is not recoverable. There is no gluing together

the broken pieces, as Benjamin wished for his symbolic vessel in the early 1920s, because fragments simply do not match anymore. No matter how hard he tries to expand and deepen his language in the direction of the alien, to reach and welcome the other into the texture of his own idiom, there is still something he will not understand, comprehend, or be able to translate. In this way Bassani succumbs not just to Cain's extremely challenging prose, but also to the very possibility of understanding the language of man in general. There is a lack of meaning that Bassani perceives in the things of the world, a kind of muteness of history that is fixed forever in his suspended past. He cannot make the actual expression match what has to be expressed nor make the actual sign coincide with what it should signify. So Bassani renounces translatability and resigns himself to the transience and evanescence of all human meaning.

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