

Translating Hogg into Italian **Marina Rullo**

My paper does not pretend to be a scholarly study on literary translation, but just a series of very personal considerations on some aspects and problems of rendering the complexity of Hogg's prose in a romance language such as Italian.

For many years the only work by Hogg available to the Italian reader has been the translation of the *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* published by Feltrinelli in 1961¹ and reprinted in 1982, about whose author, Adele Forziati, I have not been able to find any information.

The Italian version of the *Confessions* is preceded by the well-known introduction by André Gide but, apart from the scanty information that can be gathered from the same, there is no further information about Hogg's life and works or about the specific nature of Scottish literature. Nor are there any explanatory notes to the text, save a very laconic one about the term "Cameronian". The Italian reader is thus left to "sail without star or compass" as Hogg would have said, through a text which can prove obscure and sometimes irksome to the average Catholic reader not familiar with Scottish culture. This may account for the fact that the book has not sold well and for its being so long out of print.

The first puzzling thing about the Italian version is the title, translated as *Confessioni di un peccatore* (i.e. confessions of a sinner), leaving out the key word "justified". This is even more inexplicable considering that the original title appears correctly translated on page 227. The only reason that I can think of is that the choice of the Italian title was due to some obscure decision of the publisher. I have experienced this problem myself in the translation of *Strange Letter of a Lunatic*, when I had to insist on retaining the literal translation of the English title, *Strana lettera di un folle*, while the publisher wanted to add an initial definite article "la" (the) for fear that in Italian the title might sound too odd.

The Italian translation of the *Confessions* is characterised on the whole by the use of a very learned and antiquated prose style, somehow reminiscent of the literature of the last century. This is also testified by the old-fashioned habit of translating the proper names of the characters, who become accordingly Giorgio Colwan and Roberto Wringhim (though it is interesting to note that other names, such as John Barnet and Adam Gordon, are left unchanged), and by the frequent use of obsolete or rare spellings, such as "menomo", "Evangelo", "giovine" and "crocidando", to quote but a few, instead of the now common forms "minimo", "Vangelo", "giovane", and "gracchiando".

I can see no real reason for this, as one of the main points in the theory of translation is that a good translator should not attempt to reproduce the language of the period of the original text. The language of the original is eternal and immutable, while the language of translation must necessarily change according to the age and culture. Otherwise, we should be translating Shakespeare in the Italian of the sixteenth century.

Moreover, the classical style of the Italian translation leads to a substantial change of register and at the same time to a levelling of the variations of language, which play such an important part in Hogg's novel. The major consequence is that there are no perceptible differences between the passages in Scots and those in English, so that the original tension between the two languages is completely lost.

Another important point is that each term should have just one foreign equivalent, unless it becomes necessary to translate the same word with two synonyms in order to avoid misunderstandings. It must be said that Italian translators usually find it difficult to abide by this rule as our language, unlike English, does not easily tolerate repetition and redundancy. This circumstance may account for the wide variety of synonyms that in her effort to make the Italian translation more fluent and agreeable Adele Forziati uses to render the same recurring term. One instance is the simple word "close" (in the sense of entry or passage), which appears translated alternately as "vicolo cieco", "vicolo", "stradicciola", "viuzza" and finally "chiassetto", an unusual term which Baldelli's dictionary of the Italian language ascribes exclusively to the Florentine dialect. Similarly, the expression "young spark" is translated, according to the situation, either as "galantuomo" (honest man), "innamorato" (lover), or "amabile personaggio" (amiable person). Again, the young man who in the guise of Thomas Drummond eggs on Wringhim to kill his brother and whom Hogg describes as wearing "the Highland garb", in the Italian version appears once "dressed as a mountaineer"² and some pages later "in the Highlands costume"³.

Sometimes the insistence on the use of synonyms has a comical effect as in the description of the clothes found in the suicide's grave, where "Border bonnet" is translated as "berretto delle Marche" (p.226),⁴ (a bonnet of the Marches). Now, considering that the Marche is the name of an Italian province renowned for its footwear and clothing industries, the reader may be led to think that a poor Scottish shepherd could not do without a touch of Italian fashion!

There are many more examples that I could quote, along with a considerable number of omissions and inaccuracies, which are sometimes surprisingly similar to the ones found by Dr Bloedé in Dominique Aury's French translation of the *Confessions*.⁵ Such is the case with the name Lucky Shaw and the expression "set up her lang lantern chafts", that the Italian translator, just like her French counterpart, misunderstands and renders the first as "Shaw la fortunata" (Shaw the lucky one) and the second as "ha levato due lunghe braccia" (has raised her long arms p.179). A similar misunderstanding occurs also in the Auchtermuchty story with the sentence "an auld carl, Robin Ruffiven" (p. 198), where, as in the French version the Italian translator manages to read "Earl" for "carl".

Fortunately, matters stand otherwise with two recent translations of the short stories *The Mysterious Bride* and *George Dobson's Expedition to Hell*. The first was published by Mondadori in 1994, under the title *La sposa misteriosa*, as part of a two-volume collection of Gothic tales.⁶ The translation is the work of Chiara Zanolli and contains very few mistakes which, I think, are caused by commercial pressures and lack of time for revision, rather than carelessness and

misinterpretation. To quote an example, the “tremendous speed” of fifty miles an hour at which the Laird of Birkendelly and Jane Ogilvie are seen riding through the village is, in the Italian version, slackened to ten miles an hour (not a very suitable speed for an elopement, one would think). Another fault appears in the translation of the song “The Laird of Windy-wa’s”, where Chiara Zanolli misunderstands the Scots term of endearment “Joe”, taking it as the abbreviation of the name Joseph, which makes the whole song sound a little more ambiguous than Hogg intended it to be. It is also interesting to note that even if she translates the English text in plain modern style, on one occasion she follows the example of Adele Forziati and renders the word “Scotland” with the obsolete spelling “Iscozia”, instead of the modern one “Scozia”. This is a jarring note in an otherwise agreeable translation.

The Italian version of *George Dobson’s Expedition to Hell* was published in 1988 under the title *Spedizione all’inferno*⁷ but, unfortunately, is not easily accessible to the general public as it is intended mainly for university students. The author of the translation is Valentina Poggi, Professor of the University of Bologna, who is also the author of several interesting essays on Hogg’s stylistic and thematic peculiarities. As would be expected from a scholar of her standing, her translation is by far the most accurate of all I have mentioned and the one that best manages to recapture and convey in our language the spirit of Hogg.

A crucial point that must now be considered and which I have hardly touched on is the way in which the Italian translator can deal with the different levels of language in Hogg’s narrative and particularly with the opposition between Scots and English. As Dr Bloedé has already pointed out, this is the most difficult aspect of translating Hogg and I may add that this is even more so for the Italian translator.

Readers of this journal will, I hope, excuse me if I now take time to introduce a few notions about my language which I think are necessary to understand the problems of translation better.

The present form of the Italian language derives mainly from the Florentine dialect of the thirteenth century, as codified in the works of the renowned poets Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Thanks to the prestige of the Tuscan literary tradition between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries learned people began to use the Florentine dialect as a common pan-Italian language. However, the lack of a unitary state and of a widespread educational system caused the new national language to be considered for centuries a learned idiom, its use confined solely to written literature and formal occasions. This also caused the structure of the language to remain stable through the years, without the spontaneous transformations usually undergone by a spoken language.

On the other hand, the same historical and social background, along with the great geographical discontinuity of our land, encouraged the proliferation of an enormous number of dialects, which had their own social dignity and were spoken by the upper as well as the lower classes. Vittorio Emanuele, the first king of Italy, used to speak in dialect with his ministers, and dialect was also the language of preaching.

With the political and social changes brought about by the unification of Italy in 1870, dialect slowly came to be considered as something provincial, impolite,

and obsolete, a relic of the past. People continued to use it in everyday life to express their feelings and emotions but resorted to Italian as a means of social achievement.⁸ This situation is very similar to the one experienced by Scots speakers in Hogg's time.

Matters standing thus, it would seem natural for the Italian translator to render the different levels of language in the text by using the vernacular. Unfortunately, this is not a practicable solution as every Italian dialect is strictly associated with a peculiar local reality and has several implicit cultural references which, placed outside their own natural context, would make the translation sound hardly credible or even incomprehensible to the reader.

I have recently read a novel by the Belgian writer Eric de Kuyper about the summer holidays in Ostend of a French Netherlandish-speaking family, where a short dialogue, which in the original text was in the dialect of Ostend, has been translated into the Venetian dialect.⁹ The effect is rather baffling: the reader is well aware that he is reading about a Belgian-Flemish family and that the story takes place in Flanders, so what have these Venetians got to do with it? The use of a dialect outside its own geographical and cultural domain carries too many implications.

I have found this problem in the translation of three short stories by Hogg: *Strange Letter of a Lunatic*, *The Brownie of the Black Haggs*, and *The Unearthly Witness*—which have recently been published by Salerno Editrice in a small volume under the title *Strana Lettera di un folle*.¹⁰ Though there is little or no Scots in *Strange Letter* and *The Unearthly Witness*, the problem is more acute in *The Brownie of the Black Haggs*, where the conflict between two languages is well represented by the Laird of Wheelhope, who usually speaks English but suddenly turns to Scots to express his feelings at the shocking news of Jessle's death. Another important passage is the dialogue between Wattic Blythe, the laird's shepherd, and his wife Bessie: a brilliant example of how Hogg can use Scots with consummate theatrical skill to provide relief from tension and at the same time to prepare the audience for the sensational entry of Merodach and Lady Wheelhope. Incidentally, I have always thought that if Hogg were alive today he would be a successful script writer or playwright and it is very strange that nobody has ever thought of dramatising his stories for the cinema.

In order to avoid the use of a specific dialect for the reasons that I have just mentioned, I thought at first of creating a sort of koiné, a composed language made up only of those dialectal terms which have become part of standard Italian and are thus comprehensible to everyone. I soon realised, however, that the fact that those words have been accepted into common everyday speech has meant that they have lost all their transgressive connotation and cannot mark any change of register in the text. Moreover, the coexistence of so many words from as many different dialects along with the use of the syntactic structures typical of the vernacular had given birth to a hybrid language that sounded clumsy and hardly credible. I must confess that I felt as disappointed as Dr Frankenstein in front of his creature.

The only reasonable way to deal with the problem has been to render Scots with the common form of Italian that we use in everyday speech, which is the same solution adopted by Professor Poggi and, less successfully, by Chiara Zanolli. I

have accordingly avoided the use of the subjunctive, a verbal form which is usually neglected in the spoken language, and have given preference to familiar words and plain syntactic structures. The result is, nevertheless, rather reductive. As I have already said, the structure of the Italian language has remained stable for years and there is no great difference in quality between the standard Italian that we use in everyday speech and the “higher” literary language. As a consequence, the change of register between English and Scots is not so evident as in the original text and much of the vivacity and tension of Hogg’s language is lost, even in Professor Poggi’s accurate translation.

However, I really cannot see any other solution to the problem unless one should transfer the whole story to one of the regions of Italy and use the language of that place. For that matter, this is the solution adopted by the Scottish writer Robert Garioch to translate the sonnets in dialect of the Roman poet Belli. Garioch has transferred characters, situations and themes of the original sonnets from eighteenth-century Rome to contemporary Edinburgh, translating them into Scots with surprisingly good results. Though this method of translation is maybe too peculiar to be used as a general model, yet I think that it would be interesting to try it with Hogg.

Another problem arises in those cases where Hogg is trying to reproduce foreign or strange idioms, as in the case of the funny Irish accent of the Laird of Scoresby Hall in *The Mysterious Bride* or the Highland accent of the Inverouran landlord in *Strange Letter of a Lunatic*. Such passages are a real challenge for the translator, as it is impossible to transfer a foreign accent to Italian, except perhaps in those cases when a language has some phonetic peculiarities which make it immediately recognisable. I am thinking of the French “r” or the way in which Chinese people substitute the letter “r” by the letter “l” when speaking our language. In any other case, I am afraid that little else remains to be done but to render the passage with common everyday speech.

Matters become more difficult when the accent plays an important part in the plot, as does the broad Highland accent of Basil Lee’s antagonist Lieutenant Colin Frazer in *The Adventures of Basil Lee*¹¹, which I am working on at the moment. My first thought was to avoid the problem and render the lieutenant’s accent in standard Italian, but I soon realised that this would have damaged all the comical situation and made the saucy remarks of Basil Lee meaningless. Reading the lieutenant’s speech aloud, I then realised that he made very much the same phonetic distortions that Germans usually do when speaking Italian (curiously enough, the Scots language usually sounds like German to an Italian ear). And since the lieutenant is characterised in the story as a man of the north, in contrast with Basil Lee who is a Lowlander, I decided to give his speech a touch of strong northern accent. The effect is fairly comic and at least justifies the mocking attitude of Basil Lee towards his superior in rank, but I do not know if I will keep to this solution. A translation is very much the work of a skilled artisan, and one keeps inserting words and taking them out again right up to the end of the work, like the person doing a jigsaw puzzle.

Apart from the problems involved in translating the different levels of language, some difficulties arise also from words for specifically Scottish customs and features. I have translated them sometimes by using a paraphrase,

as in the case of the expression “chief mourner”, which in the absence of a similar Italian institution I have rendered as “in testa al corteo funebre” (at the head of the burial procession) since this is the place usually occupied by the next of kin.

Where this has not been possible, I have preferred to leave the words as they were and explain their meaning in a footnote. Such is the case with the words “laird”, “Covenanters” “Kelpie” and “Brownie” for which there is no Italian equivalent, though the mischievous character of the Brownie is curiously similar to the one attributed in Southern Italian folklore to a traditional figure known as the “Monacello” (the little monk).

I am no great stickler for footnotes, but I feel that sometimes they are inevitable if one does not want to encumber the text with too many explanations, which would slacken the rhythm of the story and make it dull reading. Dr Bloedé mentions the difficulty of translating compound nouns such as “penny-wedding”, to explain which French and Italian need many words. This is one of those cases where a note could be helpful. As I see it, the fact that the wedding expenses were to be shared among all the guests is not of capital importance in the story, so I would translate the word simply as “wedding” and explain the original meaning in a footnote. I am aware that explanatory notes are always an admission of defeat for a translator, but one has to come to some sort of compromise.

A further source of difficulty are Hogg’s idiosyncratic expressions. While translating Hogg’s *Journey through the Islands and Western Isles in the Summer of 1804*, I stumbled across the expression “to raise the tinker’s whistle” in the following passage:

Every man quitted his hold, save old Hugh at the helm and if my chops had not been so much slackened at the inner end, *I would have raised the tinker’s whistle.* (my italics)¹²

As the situation is that of the turmoil caused on board by a violent storm, Dr Douglas Mack (my ever-patient translator’s tutelary spirit) has suggested that Hogg may have meant something like “I started to whistle to myself to pluck up courage”. I have translated accordingly but if any reader of this article is familiar with the expression I would be glad to accept other suggestions.

Translating Hogg has been an exciting, though difficult and sometimes even frustrating experience. Every translation is after all a very subjective interpretation, but if just one line of my work has succeeded in communicating to the Italian reader a “sparkle” of Hogg’s particular prose, I would consider it a great reward.

NOTES

1. *Confessioni di un peccatore*, translated by Adele Forziati (Milan, 1961). This work is hereafter referred to as *Confessioni*.
2. “Il giovane vestito da montanaro”, in *Confessioni*, p.76.
3. “Il mio amico portava il costume delle Highland”, in *Confessioni* p.155.

4. The term "Border" is elsewhere translated as "il confine inglese" (the English frontier), see *Confessioni*, p.1.
5. Barbara Bloedé, *Translating Hogg*, in Studies in Hogg and his World 2 (1991), pp.25-36.
6. *La sposa misteriosa* translated by Chiara Zanolli, in Racconti Gotici edited by Laura Caretti, 2 vols (Milan, 1994), II, pp.331-47.
7. *Spedizione all'inferno*, translated by Valentina Poggi, in Presenze arcane (Bologna, 1988), pp.79-85.
8. For further information on this subject, see Tullio De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita* (Rome, 1974).
9. Eric de Kuyper, *Al mare*, translated by Silvia Calarnandrei (Milan, 1993), p.72.
10. *Strana lettera di un folle* (Rome, 1995).
11. Published in 1997 by Giovanni Tranchida Editore, Milan, as *Le celebri avventure di Basil Lee* (translated by Marina Rullo).
12. James Hogg, *A Journey through the Highlands and Western Isles, in the Summer of 1804*, in Highland Tours (Hawick, 1981), p.136. Published in 1997 by Giovanni Tranchida Editore, Milan, as *Viaggio nelle Highlands* (translated by Marina Rullo).

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