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THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF UMBERTO ECO'S *IL CIMITERO DI PRAGA*

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Abstract – The translation of Umberto Eco's latest novel raised various practical considerations. First, historical context: all of the main characters, except the protagonist, actually exist; most of the events around which the story is told actually happened; this means that the story must not only sound right, but it has to be right. Second, the action in the novel moves between Piedmont, Sicily and Paris, and involves negotiating between three languages: the cultural context suggests that certain words should be left in Italian, while others were better translated into French. Third, the story is told mainly through diaries written in the last years of the 19th century: the vocabulary in the target language therefore had to be appropriate for that period. Fourth, to place the English reader in the same position as the Italian reader, particularly in understanding Latin expressions, a little help could occasionally be given. Fifth, it was important to render the diversity of the three different voices of the Narrator, Simone Simonini and Abbé Della Piccola, as well as changes in pace and style. The task of the translator, in the end, is to try to produce the same effect for an English reader as the author has tried to produce for an Italian reader. It involves working on sound and rhythm – it involves trying to find the voice of the author.

Keywords: Umberto Eco, Prague Cemetery, translation.

1. Introduction

I would like to begin by telling you the story of *Il Cimitero di Praga* as seen through the eyes of the translator.

The main character is Simone Simonini, born in Turin in 1830. His mother dies when he is still a child; his father is away fighting for a united Italy and is killed in Rome in 1848. He is brought up by his grandfather, an old reactionary who houses Jesuit refugees and hates the Jews. The French Revolution, he says, was planned by the Knights Templars, the Bavarian Illuminati and the Jacobins, but behind them were the Jews.

Simonini studies law. After his grandfather's death he is employed by a crooked *notaio* who teaches him the art of forgery. His skills bring him to the attention of the Piedmont secret service who decide he might be useful. He is sent to Palermo in 1860, to follow Garibaldi's advance through Sicily. The Kingdom of Piedmont is worried that Garibaldi's fame might eclipse that of

their king, Vittorio Emanuele, or worse still, that he might proclaim a republic.

He meets Alexander Dumas, Nino Bixio and Ippolito Nievo. Simonini is ordered to destroy some heavily guarded documents in Nievo's possession. To do so, he blows up the ship on which Nievo is sailing, with the loss of all lives. Simonini has gone too far. He is banished to Paris.

He arrives there in 1861. We are now a third of the way through the novel. The remainder of the story is set here, where he sets up business forging documents in rooms over a junk shop near Place Maubert. He also works for the French secret service as a forger and fixer. Over the next thirty-five years he lays traps for revolutionaries fighting against Napoleon III, provides intelligence during the days of the Paris Commune and forges the *bordereau*, the famous secret note that would trigger the Dreyfus Affair.

All of this earns him enough to pay the bills and to indulge his passion for fine food, but he wants to retire on a decent pension. He hatches a plan to forge what will one day become the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a document that claimed the Jews were plotting world dominion. Simonini's idea is first inspired by an account of a masonic gathering in Alexander Dumas's *Joseph Balsamo*, and he gradually embroiders it using other sources, each inspired by the other – Eugene Sue's *Les Mystéres du Peuple,* Maurice Joly's *Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu* and a novel called *Biarritz* by a Prussian secret agent called Hermann Goedsche who uses Sir John Retcliffe as a *nom de plume*.

This story is told through diary entries written over a period of three weeks in 1897. But why? Because Simonini wakes up one morning suffering from loss of memory. He has suffered some kind of trauma and has to find out what has happened. Years earlier he had met a young doctor training at the Salpetrière Hospital, a certain Doctor Froïde, who had told him about *talking cures*. "Nothing in the world", says Simonini, "would persuade me to retell my story to a good Christian, let alone to a Jew", (p. 44)[1] and so he decides to write down all he can remember in the hope that the hidden trauma might re-surface.

He works long hours to complete his account, but each time he falls asleep he wakes to find that someone has been at his diary, a mysterious Abbé Dalla Piccola, who seems to know far too much about Simonini's life. Dalla Piccola has his own story to tell, involving Freemasonry and the Catholic Church, and introduces another historical character, Léo Taxil, one of the greatest hoaxers of the 19th century.

So the novel has three voices: the Narrator, Simone Simonini and Abbé Dalla Piccola.

[1] Page references are to the English translation, *The Prague Cemetery*, published by Harvill Secker, London in 2011; references in Italian are to the original published by Bompiani in 2010.

2. Historical context

As Eco explains in the postscript to the novel, "the only fictitious character in this story is the protagonist" (p. 433). From the translator's point of view, this means that the story must not only 'sound' right but has to be translated using words that are compatible with the historical context. Much of what Eco describes is well-documented: it was therefore essential during the translation process to go back to the sources.

For example, Eco gives detailed descriptions of events in Rome in 1848 and 1849; he uses eye-witness accounts of Garibaldi's advance through Sicily in 1860; we follow the Prussian invasion of Paris in 1869, the Paris Commune of 1870, the rise of anti-Semitism and the Dreyfus Affair in 1895. Military, political and social detail had to be historically correct – and that means accurate in English.

But the same accuracy is applied to those passages describing the treatment of hysteria, the benefits of cocaine, developments in bomb-making, Paris's most famous restaurants as well as its most disreputable brothels and brasseries, its strange religious cults and its myriad brands of freemasonry.

Eco is just as demanding when he indulges in his passion for lists, whether it is the long list of furnishings in Simonini's rooms over the junk shop in the opening pages of the novel, or the religious institutions suppressed by the Piedmont state (p. 80), or the half page of honorary titles given to a certain General Pike, the Grand Master of Universal Freemasonry, a man, it is said, who had a hand in Lincoln's assassination (p. 313).

There is no point in describing all the sources used, but I doubt whether such extensive research would have been possible before the arrival of the internet, and even long hours in libraries would be a poor substitute for the wealth of information more or less instantly available today. In short, in the days of the internet the translator has the tools to do a more reliable job than ever before.

3. Negotiating between three languages

With most translation jobs it is a simple question of moving everything from one language to another. But here the translation involved negotiating between three languages: some of the text had to remain in Italian, some was in French and had to remain so, and some seemed better translated from Italian into French rather than English. All of this helped to give a sense of place, a sense of foreignness.

3.1. Italian

Food plays a conspicuous role in the novel.[2] Names of Italian dishes obviously remained in Italian: most English readers are familiar with Italian menus, and to translate them would sound odd, or plain stupid.

What about titles? What was I to do with names like *avvocato* Simonini, *notaio* Rebaudengo or *cavalier* Bianco. The English don't use this kind of title – they don't translate well. And the meaning was clear from the context, so I left them as they were, rendering each title with initial capitals as it would be in English.

3.2. French

Two-thirds of the book takes place in France and the Italian text already used many French words. Descriptions were liberally scattered with such words as *arrondissement*, *mouchards*, *coiffeuse*, *flics* or *tombeur de femmes.*

The cultural proximity of England and France made it natural to translate many Italian words into French rather than English. In some cases there is really no choice – "per eccellenza" has to be *par excellence;* "colpo di grazia" and "colpo di teatro" naturally become *coup de grace* and *coup de théâtre*, and the same for "colpo di stato".

Not so obvious was *birreria*. My English dictionary gave me "ale-house", "public-house", "brewery", and I confess it took me a little while to realize that the obvious translation was *brasserie*. Likewise, the word *federato*, the soldier fighting to defend the Paris Commune, is generally referred to in the history books with the French word *fédéré*. But the dictionary gave me *federate* or *confederate* – fine for the American Civil War, but not here, so I used the French *fédéré*.

I rendered titles in French, and so "notaio Fournier" became *Maître Fournier* and, most importantly, "abate Dalla Piccola" became *Abbé Dalla Piccola*.

Most restaurant menus were already in French, but here again I translated into French when necessary, so that "bouillabaise alla nizzarda" became *bouillabaise à la nicoise*, "fegato d'oca" became *foie d'oie* and "trippa alla moda di Caen" became *tripes à la mode de Caen*.

But where should I stop? On page 19, Simonini walks through Place Maubert, the haunt of prostitutes who smell of cheap perfume mixed with sweat. And so, he says, "when I saw one of them approaching I would whirl my stick full circle, as if to form an inaccessible area of protection around me" [*una zona protetta e inaccessibile* (p. 28)]. Fair enough, but why, asks

[2] This is one area – Eco recently admitted – where, to judge from the reviews, he has failed in his intention: Simonini's substitution of food for sex was supposed to nauseate readers (interview with David Aaronovitch, Jewish Book Week, London, 26.02.2012).

one reader,[3] didn't I use the more obvious French expression *cordon sanitaire*? Why indeed. Perhaps here I stuck too close to the original. I don't know.

4. Choice of vocabulary

Simonini and Abbé Dalla Piccola are writing their diary in 1897 and so it seemed natural to ensure that all the words I used in the translation would have been available at that time. This is something easily done – the OED is invaluable in this respect.

There is only one word, so far as I am aware, that Simonini couldn't have used. At the beginning of chapter 9, Simonini finds himself in a notorious bar called *Père Lunette*, sitting next to a woman who is drinking her "ennesimo absinthe" (p. 190). The only translation for "ennesimo", I think, is "umpteenth". But "umpteenth" came into the English language as British army slang during the First World War. It seemed such a small point that I decided to allow myself this slight anachronism. It was only recently, however, that I begin to wonder whether "ennesimo" itself was perhaps a later arrival into the Italian language, and that perhaps Simonini couldn't have used it in Italian either.

Another word I had doubts about was "gaffe" (p. 48). It didn't sound right. In fact, checking it out, I found that it didn't enter the English language until the early 20th century. The better word was *faux pas*, which had been in regular usage since the 17th century.

The same reasoning led to the removal of a "hamster wheel". There is a description of a masonic ritual (p. 290) where an initiate was blindfolded and had to go through various trials. At one point he had to climb an "everlasting staircase", which gave him the feeling of climbing higher and higher when in fact he was at exactly the same height all the time. Eco's original version described this everlasting staircase as being like a hamster wheel. But hamsters were not domesticated until the 1930s and the first reference to hamster wheels does not appear until the late 1940s. Simonini could not have used the expression hamster wheel. I had rather destroyed Eco's graphic description, but he agreed it had to go.

Another change was made for a similar reason. In the original version, during the days of the Paris Commune of 1870, Simonini is offered a glass of Grand Marnier (p. 292). But Grand Marnier was first produced in 1880, ten years later. It is true that Simonini was writing down these recollections in 1897, and so he might have made a mistake when recalling what had happened twenty-seven years earlier, but Eco agreed it would be safer to

[3] Personal email.

change Grand Marnier to something else, so it became Green Chartreuse (p. 242).

For idiomatic expressions, an invaluable resource is the Google Ngram Viewer. This trawls a corpus of books between 1500 and 2008 and produces a graph showing the use of a particular word or phrase over that period. For individual words, such as "hamster" or "gaffe" it gives very much the same result as the OED, but is very useful when trying to find out when particular sayings or phrases first came into common use.

When it came to the translation of individual words, I had great difficulty, oddly enough, with the very first and the very last word of the book.

Chapter I begins: "Il passante che in quella grigia mattina del marzo 1897...". The obvious translation of "passante" is *passerby*, but here it doesn't quite fit. This is not a hypothetical person whom we see passing by, but someone we follow over place Maubert, down a narrow alley, into a junk shop and up a flight of stairs, to a room in which we see a figure at a desk, who turns out to be Simonini. So hardly a "passerby". I thought of starting it like this: *On that grey morning in March 1897, a person crossing...* but Eco felt it didn't work, and he was right. So the novel begins *A passerby on that grey morning in March 1897*. And yet I still worry whether it's quite right.

Similarly, the very last words of the novel are: "non sono ancora un rammollito". "Rammollito": *I'm not yet a ... rammollito.*" "Soft in the head", "reached my dotage", "doddering old fool", "old codger"...? In the end I chose: *I'm not yet a decrepit old fool*. But it doesn't have quite the same ring as the original.

5. Placing English readers in the same position as Italian readers

Eco is not always an easy read. There are times when it's useful to have a dictionary close at hand. But there are also times when the plot takes over and his story moves swiftly and easily. This has to be reflected in the translation. The English reader ought to be placed in more or less the same position as the Italian reader. This point is relevant to every translation, and so I don't wish to labour it.

Generally speaking, however, I try to avoid Latinate words and look for the vocabulary that sounds most natural. But this isn't always possible, and one particular example comes to mind. The title of chapter 15 is *Dalla Piccola Redivivo*. The word "redivivus" exists in English – it appears in the Shorter OED – but my spell-check doesn't like it and it is certainly far less common in English than *redivivo* in Italian. And yet "reborn" or "back to life" seemed just a little too weak. There seemed to be no real alternative to

"redivivus". So that was the word I chose, knowing that the English reader would have to work just a little harder.

Earlier I talked about negotiating between three languages but there is, in fact, a fourth: Latin. Here Italian readers are likely to be at an advantage over English-language readers, and so with Eco's agreement a little help was occasionally given.

It was vital, for example, that readers should understand the phrase *Odi ergo sum* – so vital that it was followed by a translation: "I hate therefore I am" (p. 16).

Likewise *carmina dant panem*. Readers need to know here that it's a misquotation. And so it became: "*carmina dant panem* – poetry *does* give you bread" (p. 29). Italicizing "does" indicates there's a little more to it.

Other phrases, such as "*lippis notum et tonsoribus*" (p. 409) were less easily translatable and it seemed safe to leave them in the air. And after all, the internet is there for any reader who wants to research a little further.

6. Three voices

As previously mentioned, there are three different voices in the novel – those of Simonini, Dalla Piccola (his alter ego) and the Narrator. Each of their accounts is printed in a different typeface, but each voice also has to 'sound' different.

First, there is the Narrator. He sets the scene in Chapter One and helps to move the story along in later chapters.

The main voice is Simonini, the anti-Semitic, psychopathic protagonist. Eco, in describing him, says: "I have tried to make the main character the most cynical and disagreeable in all the history of literature".[4] In other interviews, he frequently uses the word "grotesque". This image was important when it came to choice of words. What was the best translation of a particular adjective, describing a particular situation? It was often the word that highlighted the grotesqueness of the situation, that emphasized Simonini's repugnance as a character.

With Dalla Piccola it was more difficult. His voice is often nebulous and confused – it's not clear at first whether he is a real character or a figment of Simonini's imagination. Here it was a question of working on sound. William Weaver, in an interview, had this to say: "I think ear has a great deal to do with it. And I mean that literally. I often read my translation aloud. Quite often it can be technically correct but not sound right. The rhythm isn't quite right, and maybe it just needs a comma somewhere, or something like that".[5]

[4] Interview with Paul Holdengräber, New York: 8th November 2011.
[5] William Weaver, The art of Translation no.3: interviewed by Willard Spiegelman.

Sounding right, in the end, means sounding something like how the author would have sounded (or how the translator imagines the author would have sounded) if he had been writing in English. Jim Kates, a former president of the American Literary Translators Association, was asked in an interview what makes a good translation, and he gave this answer: "What I want in a translation is one that reads smoothly with a voice that I can be reasonably convinced is the voice of the author. The translator is putting on a mask and the quality of that mask should attempt to replicate the author's face".[6]

Bionote: Richard Dixon's translation of Umberto Eco's *The Prague Cemetery* was published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York and Harvill Secker, London in 2011. He was one of the translators of the first complete English translation of the *Zibaldone* by Giacomo Leopardi (Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York; Penguin Books, London, 2013). He has also translated: Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York; Harvill Secker, London, 2012); Umberto Eco, author's revisions for a new edition of *The Name of the Rose* (Mariner Books, 2014); Roberto Calasso, *Ardor* (Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York; Allen Lane, London, 2014); Roberto Calasso, *The Art of the Publisher* (Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York; Penguin, London, 2015), Umberto Eco, *Numero Zero* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York; Harvill Secker, London, 2015). Forthcoming translations: Marco Santagata, *Dante: The Story of His Life* (Harvard University Press, 2016); Antonio Moresco, *Distant Light* (Archipelago Books, March 2016).

[6] Jim Kates: Interview, NPR Boston, 17.01.2012.

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