TRANSLATING *OLD NEGATIVES*
BY ALASDAIR GRAY
Rendering a poetics of "absences and reverses"

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Abstract – The most noticeable feature of Alasdair Gray's first collection of poems is the predominance of loss, absence, and void in all its manifestations. The absence is mostly of love and the beloved ones, either dead or gone, but also of meaning, of God, of light and warmth. So, my translation of *Old Negatives* focused primarily on the analysis of this poetics of what he himself calls "absences and reverses", accounting for the linguistic phenomena of negation. This article concentrates on the translation strategies, as well as the actual solutions, adopted in order to preserve the "un-factor" which permeates Gray's entire poetic production. The translation strategies employed range from the linguistic and etymological study of Italian negative prefixes or periphrases to the creation of neologisms. The purpose is to achieve what Zdanys (1982) called "affective equivalents", namely a type of objective correlative which can capture as many of the cognitive implications of the original as possible.

Keywords: Alasdair Gray; Old Negatives; translated poetry; Scottish poets; Scottish literature.

1. Introduction

The most noticeable feature of Alasdair Gray's first collection of poems is the predominance of loss, absence, and void in all its manifestations. The absence is mostly of love and the beloved ones, either dead or gone, but also of meaning, of God, of light and warmth. Consequently, a good translation of *Old Negatives* should focus primarily on the analysis of this poetics of absences and reverses, accounting for the linguistic phenomena of negation. Before I can proceed with the analysis of these linguistic aspects, I should first account for who Alasdair Gray[1] is and, secondly, outline the structure of the book, both in terms of recurrent themes and of poetic forms.

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[1] http://www.alasdairgray.info/index1.htm

2. The Author

For those who are not familiar with Alasdair Gray, he is one of the most well-known contemporary Scottish artists, and is usually numbered among the Postmodern writers, especially for his 1981 novel *Lanark – A Life in Four Books.* The work I intend to examine, *Old Negatives,* is his first collection of poems. According to his biographer Rodge Glass, the poems are "lean, spare and didn't follow conventional poetic rules: to the untrained eye many of them just looked like prose chopped up into bits." (Glass 2009, p. 193). Furthermore, the abundance of autobiographical material openly used and abused (Glass 2009, p. 13) by the author is immediately evident.

Gray can be regarded as an occasional poet[2] (Glass 2009), since his poetic production is secondary to his more prominent activities as a novelist and as a painter. For this reason, he has been widely criticised for his poetic work, as many literary critics believed his poetry to be of an inferior quality in comparison to his prose. In particular, Iain Crichton Smith (in Glass 2009, p. 194) argued that Gray's poetry failed at being metaphoric, since "what metaphor, after all, is there for the void?". This is a crucial point: I would venture to say that the lack of metaphor is precisely the metaphor for the lack of meaning, of love, of purpose he felt throughout his life, which can be clearly deduced from Rodge Glass's *Alasdair Gray: a secretary's biography* (2009, pp. 12, 56 and 98). At the same time, the existential void is metaphor and exaggeration, both for his own personal losses, and for the atmosphere of loss and despair brought about by the Second World War. The writer partly compensates for the lack of metaphors – which also derives from the Postmodern concern for the insufficiency and unreliability of words – with a juxtaposition of words and images.

3. *Old Negatives*

Since Gray is at the same time a writer and a painter, and he is fond of blending literary and visual arts, let us consider, for a moment, the cover of *Old Negatives* (Image 1). It consists of a series of fifteen alternate black and grey squares, forming a frame inside which, this time on a white background, the subtitle "4 verse sequences by Alasdair Gray" is visible.

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[2] In 2005 Gray published a collection of poems precisely called *Sixteen Occasional Poems.*

Image 1.
Cover of Alasdair Gray's *Old Negatives*.

As Glass states in his biography, "the survival of the delicate in tough circumstances is the main theme" (2009, p. 76). The very meaning of the title is exemplified by this drawing: death is the reverse of life, its "negative", only in the photographic sense of the word. Hence, death is not seen as life's negative counterpart; it is, instead, its matrix, the photographic negative from which life can develop. The theme and the focus are autobiographical, exactly like private photographs are. The collection of poems can thus be regarded as an "intense, explicit, sharply focused series of autobiographical sketches" (2009, p. 193) and the book as a "sketchbook in print" (2009, p. 76). However, it is the author himself who provides the most accurate explanation for the title, saying that *Old* was chosen because many verses were decades old, and *Negatives* because they describe love mainly by its absences and reverses. In an interview the author granted me in 2008, he admitted that:

> The main inspiration of my verses has been loss. I went to Art School shortly after my mother died, and now I think that when writing the poems in the first sequence I was more disturbed by her death than I noticed at the time. I am cold-hearted in many ways, and often take a long time to appreciate events that have made me feel deeply. Or perhaps I'm like a thick-skinned dinosaur with a brain so far from its tail that it only noticed that the tail had been trampled on when the trampler was far away. (Personal interview)[3]

3.1. In a cold room

A closer look at the structure of the book exemplifies Gray's statement: the first section entitled *In a cold room* contains poems written between 1952 and 1957, mainly when he was attending Art School. They deal with the death of his mother, Amy Fleming, to the memory of whom the book is dedicated. An interesting drawing opens the section: a man with a sad, distant expression has a snake coming out of his head. The snake is carrying an egg in its mouth: here reoccurs the theme of the survival of the delicate in tough circumstances.

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[3] On October 12th, 2008, I had the pleasure of being granted an interview with Alasdair Gray at his home at 2 Marchmont Terrace, Glasgow. The interview is still unpublished.

The same image is conveyed by the third poem of the section, called *Loneliness* Gray 1989, p. 15):

> From the soul's proper loneliness love and affection seem
> part substance and part dream
> held in the mouth in the same way the snake carries its eggs […]

The absence of his mother is turned into lack of affection, of warmth, which echo in the last part of the poem *Cries of an unceilinged blood* where he accuses his "lost mother" of letting him "go with so little heat/ into this implacable machine" (1989, p. 25). Even romantic love is de-mythicised and condemned "for the nothing that it leaves inside" and regarded as "a mistake between us two/ because you make as little heat in me/ as I can make in you" (1989, p. 16).

Absence, meaninglessness and emptiness are not only the hallmark of feelings; on the contrary, they constitute the very essence of human beings and even of God. In fact, this first section is almost entirely dedicated to the establishment of what I would call "the cosmogony of the void", where the writer describes the encounter of two human beings in scientific terms: first comes *The Experiment* or "the union of two voids in a cold room" (1989, p. 17), followed by *The Unit*, or the collision of two selves, each defined as "[…] an envelope enclosed by a void/and enclosing a void" (1989, p. 18). If humans are conceived as agglomerates of void, their creator is a screaming cavity, mistaken by the Jews for God (1989, p. 20). "In the beginning was the cavity" – thus opens the previously cited poem *Cries of an unceilinged blood*. The section ends with the image of a God who "cannot fit/ the outer void, the inner pit" (1989, p. 28). We are thus faced with an overturning of the traditional view of God: he (or "she", as the author often refers to the deity) is a "cavity", a "void", rather than pure Being, whose role is compared to that of the artist: both are constantly questioned and challenged, and their authority is always under examination. Life is perceived as "a cancer of the clay" and humanity as a creative mistake (1989, p. 21).

3.2. Between Whiles

The second section, *Between Whiles*, consists of poems written between 1947 and 1957. It opens with a poem called "*Unfit*", which depicts the inhabitants of Glasgow as "unfit" to look at "dawns and gloamings", where the choice of the Scottish term for twilights is not a matter of chance. The city itself becomes an unreal one, "built in time of mutiny" (Gray 1989, p. 35), and later transfigured into its fictional counterpart "Unthank" in Gray's novel *Lanark* (1981). A recurrent image throughout Gray's works is the image of the city as a displaced world, a Western wasteland (Witschi 1989, p. 19). "Unthank" is emblematic: its inhabitants suffer from horrific diseases because they

completely lack the warmth of life, both physically – lack of sun – and psychologically – lack of positive and negative emotions (1989, p. 71).

The poem *Announcement* explores and compresses these themes. The narrative voice is that of Thaw, *Lanark'*s protagonist. He claims to "look back without loss to an uncushioned womb" (Gray 1989, p. 41), introducing the theme of the uncomfortable birth, which features another time in this section: namely in the poem *Vacancy*, where a woman gives birth "to a death/ and the casket has collapsed inward on its vacancy" (1989, p. 36). The last part of *Between Whiles* is devoted to the reflection on the theme of love, which will be expanded in the next section. One poem in particular, *Lost absence*, seems to identify the source of love with "the feel of a loved somebody gone" and to anticipate the theme of unsatisfied love, which will be central to the third section of the book. In fact, the third stanza of the poem admits that "this weak true heart did not satisfy who it loved. This flesh is blunt. It cannot feel but by loss" (1989, p. 43).

3.3. Inge Sørensen

It is in the third section that the theme of unsatisfied love reaches its peak, evolving into that of the checkmate of marriage. The section is significantly called *Inge Sørensen*, the name of Gray's first wife. The poem *Married* portrays their relationship as "the solitude of being me and you" (Gray 1989, p. 46) and depicts the couple as a king and a queen walking side by side but utterly separate from each other. The impossibility to communicate ultimately becomes the impossibility to engage in a healthy and satisfactory sexual life. Hence, sexual intercourse is referred to as a "Mishap" (1989, p. 47); home is perceived as "a place minced into tiny words" (1989, p. 49) and love as an evil goddess that rejects the "unlovely" (1989, p. 52).

3.4. To Lyric Light

The last section contains poems written between 1977 and 1983: this is the most heterogeneous section, its themes ranging from philosophy (*The Thinker),* further reflections on life and death (*Wanting*, *Awaiting*); unfulfilled sexuality (*Renewal*, *Ripeness*); the connection between love and God – or, better, the absence of both – (*Cares*, *Lyrical*), and the absence of the beloved ones (*Unlocks*, *A Burning*).

4. The Translation

Absence, loss, void, cavity, vacancy, vacuity, loneliness, cold: this is the semantic area around which *Old Negatives* revolves. Apart from the formal demands of a poetic text (rhythm, rhymes, assonances, syntax, meter), which the translator always has to face, there is something else that s/he should struggle to reproduce at any cost: an equivalent effect. Newmark (2003, p. 49) regards it as "the desirable result, rather than the aim of any translation". At this point, a question might arise: what exactly does equivalent effect mean? How can it be achieved? I believe Jonas Zdanys (1982, p. 38) gives a satisfactory answer:

> Translation, it seems to me, ought to involve a search for and, when necessary, a substitution not of linguistic equivalents but of "affective equivalents", images which, like Eliot's "objective correlatives", capture emotion and as many of the cognitive *implications* of the original as possible. If this search entails changing the "literal" meaning — as defined by some compiled listing of linguistic "equivalents" — then that change ought to be made. This, of course, is not something to be undertaken gratuitously or haphazardly; change is never made for the sake of change [...].

Thus, it becomes clear that the attempt to recreate an equivalent effect in a translated text entails the search for "affective equivalents". Nevertheless, it is also true that, when tackling translation:

> More often than not, the translation process involves initial decisions that determine later decisions. No choice is made without certain costs. [...] Such decisions are neither right nor wrong, but both, always limiting and opening up, closing off certain avenues and possibilities, but simultaneously creating new relations and possible alternatives. (Gentzler 2001, p. 97).

4.1. The "un-factor": a practical example of translation

In other words, affective equivalents have to be found to translate the meaningful, essential aspects of the text. In this case, what is unique to this particular collection of poems is the morphologic rendering of Gray's poetic of absences and reverses, namely the "un-factor". More or less intentionally, the author highlights this aspect by employing an astonishingly high number of adjectives and verbs beginning with the negative prefix "un-", including a wide range of neologisms:

- "untwist" in the poem *Predicting*
- "unceilinged" in *Cries of unceilinged blood*
- "unpick" in *Two*
- "unfit" in the poem of that title

- "unheated" in *Cowardly*
- "uncushioned" and "unschooled" in *Announcement*
- "unoccupied" in *Woundscape*
- "unlovely" and "undo" in *Unlovely*
- "undaunted" in *Notstriving*
- "untrue" in *Ripeness*
- "unlock" in *Unlocks*
- "unstained" in *End*

This choice cannot be a matter of chance: the author conveys a strong feeling of negativity through these adjectives, which are not mere counterparts of positive adjectives, but rather their negation, their antithesis. I have tried to reproduce the same effect in my Italian translation, as discussed in the following paragraphs.

4.1.1. Verbs

As far as verbs are concerned, *di-/dis-* and *s-* are among the most common negative prefixes in the Italian language. So, for example, "untwist" has been translated as *districare*, "unpick" as *dipanare*, "undo" as *disfa*, and "unlock" as *sblocca*. As often happens when reviewing translations after some time, I have realised that mine is not entirely satisfactory; if we consider the first two verbs, "untwist" and "unpick", it is correct to say that they negate the correspondent un-prefixed verb ("twist", "pick"), but the negation is only morphological, it does not imply a negative connotation of the verb. In fact, I believe that Gray, instead of choosing a verb with a positive connotation, chooses to negate a verb with a negative connotation, thus making it positive. Only in the first case have I been able to reproduce such an effect. In fact, "to untwist" means to loosen, separate, unwind something twisted. In the poem *Predicting*, it refers to a girl untwisting "her soft hair from her lover's beard" (Gray 1989, p. 14). The Italian *districare* is the negation of *intricare*, it has the same semantic content of its English counterpart and is used pretty much in the same contexts (*districare i capelli, districare un filo*).

My translation of "unpick" proved definitely more problematic. First of all, the verb normally applies to the semantic area of sewing, it means to take out stitches. If we read the first lines of the poem *Two*: "who unpick their anatomy/ in ecstasy or agony,/ can find a self within no part/ of backbone, belly, brain or heart" (1989, p. 28), we understand that the writer is trying to give his own answer to the philosophical question of where the "self" lies, whether it can be identified with or found in a part of our body (the brain, the heart or something else) or whether it is, rather, made up of all those parts put

together. Gray leans towards this second hypothesis, affirming that "selfhood is the unity" (poem *Two*). The verb "unpick" is essential to the understanding of the image the writer is trying to convey: that of a man who tries to separate the components of his body by unravelling the connections that bind them together, becoming a dismembered puppet, in which the self is nowhere to be found. The Italian *dipanare* lacks the physical strength of the original, as it is widely used in a metaphorical context (*dipanare la matassa* meaning "to unravel the mystery of a plot"). After revising the text carefully, I wonder why I did not opt for a simple, straightforward "scucire".

4.1.2. Adjectives

As for adjectives, a variety of strategies have been adopted:

1) some adjectives have been formed using the negative prefix *in-/im-*, so that "unfit" has been translated as *inadatti*; "unoccupied" as inoperoso; "undaunted" as *imperterrito*, and "unstained" as *incontaminata*. "Unfit" has been translated with the plural *inadatti*, as obviously the adjective refers to the inhabitants of Glasgow. It is not the city that has become hostile, it is the people who are being punished for some unknown reason, and thus deprived of one of the primary sources of life: light. The poem ends by telling us "I think there is a mystery in dawns and gloamings/ a crime has made us unfit to look upon".

    Unfortunately, the great loss in this poem is the Scottish word "gloaming". What gets lost in translation is the Scottishness of the poem, the fact that this twilight which is impossible to look upon is not an indeterminate twilight, but precisely a Scottish twilight, namely, a gloaming. For this reason, I have decided to keep the pluralised adjective in the title as well, as a reminder, a label imposed on Glaswegians, who later will be similarly described as "unlovely", translated as *inamabili*, the reason for which I will give in the following paragraph.

2) some adjectives could not be negated with a prefix. Consequently, I decided to adopt a periphrasis containing the negative particles *non* or *senza*; thus "uncushioned" has been translated as *senza imbottiture*, "unschooled" as *non addestrato*, "untrue" as *non* è vero;

3) in two cases I opted for a neologism. In the poem *Cowardly* the author distinguishes between cowards, who "die clinging to their sullen heap/ unheated by the light of their desire" and the loving man, who "has made his facts catchfire". The opposition here is not between heat and cold, but between heat and the impossibility of being heated by "the light of desire", something which should include a reference to heating. In order to underline this, I translated "unheated" as *deriscaldati*, where the Italian

term, resembling the English one, insists on the privation of heat rather than on coldness.

Following the same criterion, the poem's title *Unlovely* has been turned into *Inamabili*. The poem starts by saying "'Love is an evil God' the unlovely say",making it clear that the unlovely are not only unpleasant people, but also those who cannot be loved, who are ignored by the goddess of love. Therefore, it is essential to maintain the reference to "love". Translating the adjective with *sgraziati* or *sgradevoli*, would not be enough, because the reference to "love" would be lost. Thus, I decided to use *inamabili*, not be found in the dictionary, but which is perfectly understandable by an Italian reader. In this way, I am not altering the poet's style, but I am compensating for untranslatable neologisms by creating others where the Italian language allows me to.

4) Finally, the adjective "unceilinged" proved extremely problematic to translate. The poem *Cries of an unceilinged blood* is composed of seven parts originally entirely written in capital letters and later transformed into italics.This poem is intended to stand out, to be different from all the others. It begins, with a reminiscence of the Bible, as follows:

> In the beginning was the cavity:
> eye socket in no skull, wound in no flesh,
> the faceless mouth, the coatless pocket. (Gray 1989, p. 20)

Already in these opening lines we find a reversed image of God, imbued with negative attributes. Then, in the second part, it is life's turn to be reversed:

> Then life appeared, a cancer of the clay:
> some molecules shuffled into sense
> which wriggled out in the light of day [...] (Gray 1989, p. 21)

The third part of the poem accounts for the coming to being of man, inferring that:

> Mind is a sky-machine [...]
> the engines of heart and lung sustain
> its wings above the basement of a void.
> Boxed in its skull, brain is the aneroid by which we gauge
> a level through the pressure of our pain
> and struggle hard for some
> degree of stable equilibrium. (Gray 1989, p. 22)

The poem continues with a tirade against corruption and ends with the resumption of the theme of coldness and loneliness caused by the loss of Gray's mother. Nevertheless, it is the image conveyed by the third part cited above that provides a key to understanding the title. Gray writes that the brain

is "boxed in its skull", hinting that it is bound by the constraints of the body, its function reduced to that of an aneroid struggling to find some equilibrium. At the same time, heart and lungs are described as "engines", the energy of which is used to sustain the mind. The mind is different from the brain, it is a "sky machine", however bound as well to the body because it is "kept stable by the breeze of breath" (Gray 1989, p. 22).

In this context, "unceilinged blood" is perceived on the one hand as blood which transcends the "ceiling" of the body (the head, the brain) and circulates freely. On the other hand, the image has a negative side. Blood needs to be "ceilinged", contained, in order to keep the body alive, otherwise it disperses in the void and leaves the body empty. Therefore, these "Cries of unceilinged blood" seem to be both the complaints and the lamentations (the Biblical reference here is intentional and has been maintained in the Italian translation) of blood. It is, in fact, bound not to transcend its limits and doomed to confront the void at the core of every human being, thus beating and keeping a desolate flow (Gray 1989, p. 40).

When I was trying to find an affective equivalent for this adjective, I came up with a variety of solutions, ranging from the neologism *dissoffittato* to the periphrasis *a cielo aperto*, but none seemed to do justice to the original. Doing some research, I realised that behind Gray's expression there was a critique, a lamentation of the conditions of the city of Glasgow during the 1920s and 30s, where Glasgow was seen as a post-industrial city in crisis. We must not forget, in fact, that Gray – especially with his novel *Lanark* – continues the tradition of George Blake, Edwin Muir and Edward Gaitens, who in the first half of the 20th century tried to break the spell of literary silence that hung above the city of Glasgow and give voice to a "literature of crisis", as suggested by Anne Wright (1984).
Consequently, I concluded that this "unceilinged" blood also stands for the people living in unceilinged houses in the slums of Glasgow, and for this reason I translated the word as *scoperchiato*.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, I will stress once more that the aim of this essay has been to give a practical demonstration of how Alasdair Gray's poetic of absences and reverses can be rendered in translation. I have focused primarily on the "un-factor", which is the most prominent translation issue of *Old Negatives*, and have illustrated at least some of the context necessary to understand my choices.

It is certainly true that "a translation is never finished, it is open and could go on to infinity […] because the choices made in translation are never as secure as those made by the author" (Fissore 2001, p. 7), but it is also true

that the crucial role of the translator as a mediator and decoder cannot be ignored. By using the word "decode" instead of "interpret", I align myself with Lefevere (1990) and his notion of texts as complex signifying systems, which have to be continually decoded and re-encoded. This process takes place at the phonological, the morphological, the syntactic and the semantic level at the same time; none of these levels can be neglected if the final aim is to reproduce an equivalent effect (Newmark 2003) or, in this case, an equivalent poetics.

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