



THE DEL SOL REVIEW

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A Translator's Dilemma

by Russel Scott Valentino

Eligio Zanini was a bad husband and a bad father. He abandoned his family when two children were small and a third was on the way. He never contacted them again, though he lived just down the road. When his son died in a car accident at the age of seventeen and the parents were supposed to go down to Split to retrieve the body, he didn't show up, though the boy's mother, Bianca, held out hope until the last minute. She was devastated by her husband's departure and carried the wound as if fresh inside her.

She still has it in her old age, says her daughter, despite the fact that he beat her when they were young. The children felt his willful absence from the beginning of their lives, she says. It marked them as children, as adolescents, and, for the ones who made it that far, as adults. Then he married a second time and did it again, with another wife and two other children, leaving them with the same abrupt, categorical sweep of the hand, just down the road. "I'm sorry to tell you these things," she says. "They might spoil the beautiful poetry for you." The sea is behind her — she insisted on giving me the view, the Gulf of Trieste from the top of San Giusto. It is that "other sea" that Claudio Magris describes, the lake known as Adriatica, site of my poet's work. And life.

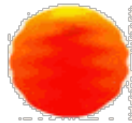
Biancastella, now sixty-one, is his first daughter, his eldest child. She has no memory of him as a father and saw him just three times in her life. She tells me about each meeting, all awkward, none lasting more than a few minutes. She owns the rights to his works with her siblings, who've given her power of attorney, but she hasn't read them all. Some of the poetry, yes, but not the memoir of his imprisonment. She can't bring herself to read that, she says, not yet. She tells me how she got her unusual name. He'd been arrested and was being shipped off to Goli otok, Tito's gulag for political prisoners, when his wife had managed to contact him with the news that she was pregnant. What should she name the baby, she asked? If it was a boy, he said, Giordano Bruno, the heretic, and if it was a girl, Stella Bianca, white star, "because," he said, "they no longer believe in the red one here." Her mother had softened the message slightly, while respecting her husband's wishes, and flipped the two words for her daughter's name, creating Biancastella in the process, Starwhite.

Clifford Landers, in a book on translation practice, claims that translators have an obligation to prevent their authors from looking foolish in English. He recommends that they correct errors of fact: for

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The goal of Del Sol Review is to publish the best work available. Political motives do not compromise, and we do not publish inferior work simply because a "name" tag comes attached.

- Michael Neff
Editor-in-Chief



Del Sol Review
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Suite 443
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CONTACT
editor@webdelsol.com

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instance, if an author has written that El Paso is in California or Paso Robles in Texas, or if she's mistaken the age of one of her characters in a long novel that covers a lot of time, or made a grammatical error, or written something in the supposed voice of an English-speaking character that sounds especially un-English. Fix them, he says. Don't let your author look like she's not in control of her own work, don't let her look ridiculous. He doesn't say how translators should handle more serious faults, faults of character, for instance, moral transgressions, bigotry, perversion.

When I was asked by Christopher Merrill a couple of years ago to translate a poem by Radovan Karadzic, the Serbian war criminal, who had just been captured and sent to The Hague for trial, I hesitated. He wanted it fast, first of all, journalism time, overnight. You never know what that will do to a poem, but that wasn't the main thing. The poem wasn't bad, but the man clearly was, or would be, eventually, in the years after he wrote it. Eventually he would be responsible for the deaths of thousands, for concentration camps and rape camps and an entire campaign of ethnic cleansing the likes of which Europe at least had not seen since the Nazis. What would I be responsible for in translating his work? I couldn't help recalling the story of the Italian edition of *Mein Kampf*, for the translation of which the publisher Valentino Bompiani, in one of the supreme ironies of that hateful book's dissemination in the world, had hired a Jew.

Karadzic had sent the poem, tucked inside one of his books, to the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, hoping to get himself invited, it seems. It was typed on a piece of onion skin paper, with a signature, the name of a Serbian magazine, *Knizevna rec*, and a date written in pencil at the bottom of the second page — May, 1974. I found it striking, in part, for its resonance with what the man would do later and realized that, for that kind of observation to make sense to Chris or to his listeners on PRI's *The World* or anywhere else, for that matter, I would need to translate it. It was just one poem, I told myself. And so I gave him a voice.

A variety of vocal options are available to me as part of the expressive, rhetorical side of translation. Coming up with a strategy for how best to craft an effective and compelling work, an authorial image and voice is, I think, the most challenging part of translating, far more so than the technical side of learning the language, for instance. This is translation as writing.

It may not be the simpatico affair that Lawrence Venuti describes and criticizes, in which you assimilate yourself to another's character, matching affinities such that you might mimic, even perhaps channel her or his words and thoughts. But even far short of that: (1) you take this on and are responsible for it, and (2) in taking it on, you sidle up next to him, try on his garments, so to speak, once in a while, even if only in the privacy of your own office, glancing back at yourself as if from the mirror of the words you've put on the screen, you and not you. If not boon companions, at least close acquaintances between whom an agreement, more marriage than contract: I promise to listen to you, not provided that, or on condition that. And not pretend to listen, as I'm reading the paper, or watching TV, or thinking my own thoughts. I know that you want me to hear what you're not saying, too, what you don't even know you're not saying, because it's so much a part of your life and thoughts it would never even enter your head that I wouldn't get it already, even before you started to say it. I will do my best. I will listen, you can trust me to listen, not for some purpose of my own, not in order to twist your words to my own ends, but for

themselves, for their own sake.

This is why I would never translate more of Radovan Karadzic's work. I don't want to listen to him like that. I don't want to make that promise to try. But I did, or I thought I did, with Ligio Zanini.

Here was a poetry and life experience I was willing to try on. When I first read the words on the page, I found them both seductively familiar and frustratingly incomprehensible. They were an *invitation au voyage*, while the life of the man gave them buoyancy and depth. I was not ignorant. I had learned much about him. An anti-fascist and supporter of Yugoslavia's annexation of Istria after WWII, he'd chosen to remain behind when most of his friends had left, taking over as a school principal at twenty-three because all the older teachers were gone. He'd been arrested after Tito's break with Stalin in 1948, along with thousands of others, and sent to Goli otok. Stalinists, anti-communists, Party members, dissidents, political prisoners of all kinds were sent to the island to serve out their terms at hard labor. There were executions; there was torture. Zanini spent nearly five years there.

Once released, he was a persona non grata for another ten years, doing odd jobs in his native region, and soon after that he'd retired to Rovinj, where he fished and wrote for the rest of his life: seven books of dialectal poetry, an autobiographical novel about his time in prison, a book of essays on fish.

These things I knew, and Zanini was for me a part of a vision of Istria first of all, the spirit of a place, a dissident, a staunch anti-nationalist who had chosen to step back from the grand sweep of history and express himself in an idiom that few would understand. He had just died when I discovered his work, which settled into my image of the place and him in the place for a good long stay.

When his daughter, some fifteen years later, expressed her fear that she might spoil the beautiful poetry for me by narrating her version of his life, I reassured her. Of course I could separate the man from his work. And anyway we weren't talking about a monster like Karadzic. I could easily name half a dozen writers whose politics, beliefs, or personal lives I found somehow wanting but whose works I admired nevertheless.

But it slowly sank in. That promise I had made to listen, maybe I could fulfill, but those garments of his I'd been trying on now and again, that voice I'd been working hard to give him? I wasn't sure about that at all. It suddenly felt like almost a betrayal, as if the person you'd been dating for the past six weeks, and who was always super sweet to you, treated the diner waitress like garbage. Only, that is just a sign of a kind of moral ugliness that might lurk in a mass under the surface of her character, the visible part. Maybe it's not a mass. Maybe it's just a dirty little corner that you could say the right few words to suddenly shed light on and sweep away for good.

This was more serious. "Lig," I felt like saying — in the conversational idiom we've developed to address each other — "Lig, I've been listening! But you haven't been telling me everything!"

You might think about an annulment at this point, claim that he introduced himself under false pretenses (even if his writer's biography is actually rather honest by comparison with many of his peers), but it's far too late for that: your union has been sanctioned by the NEA. You've met the family. They're all expecting something,

perhaps not greatness, perhaps just the mundane details of everyday life, *convivenza*, living together. At the very least: offspring. Should I be sorry if, in some ways at least, they favor me more than him?

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