

Visiting a Strangely Familiar Country: Writing in Another Language

We live in an era that supposedly favors social and cultural exchanges much more than any other past era. We live in the era of globalization and we believe that the approach to issues that are so familiar to our lives—thanks also to the technology of communication—makes the world in which we live truly global, transnational, and able to embrace all of the world's cultural declensions. Leaving aside the considerations of globalization and of its effects, of its possible past forms or of its consequences, let's consider some cultural aspects and, in particular, that phenomenon according to which writers decide to write in both their own native language and in another, different language. The very choice of language is crucial from so many viewpoints, some of which may even be ideological (such as the decision to write in dialect or in the language of a minority group), but this choice entails, in any case, cultural phenomena that are worthy of attention.

One of the languages that non-anglophone writers mostly employ today, when they decide to write in a different language, is English. This may be a result of biographical reasons, but it may also be linked to the fact that English is becoming more and more a sort of lingua franca to which one returns when in a foreign and strange territory. To be sure, this is not a novel phenomenon, as there have been several writers at least since the nineteenth century who have adopted English, rejecting their native language in favor of English in their literary writings. Perhaps the most famous case that comes to mind is that of Joseph Conrad, to which one should add all those writers who grew up in colonized territories speaking both the native languages of those places as well as English. The example of several Indian writers, to limit the possible number of examples, is a case in point and, since here the attention focuses on those who write poetry in a different language, the example of Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote in Bengali and English, is a luminous one. He, Joseph Brodsky, and Samuel Beckett are the only recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature who wrote their literary works in more than one language.

Whether authors write in a specific genre, or in different genres, the decision to write in a different language marks their writing profoundly. Perhaps this mark is even more striking when poets write their own works both in their language as well as in another chosen language. The vast options that poetry as a genre

offers make the decision to write in an acquired language a very peculiar one, given the nature of poetry itself, even when that poetry defines itself as experimental or avant-garde. In fact, in those cases the choice of language is just as decisive as it can be for the programmatic reasons of that poetry writing. However, the selection of a language other than the native language of the poet remains a delicate approach to poetry writing. Furthermore, as mentioned above, writing in a given dialect has implications that differ from writing in another national language, especially when that language is the hegemonic one of the colonizer or that which happens to dominate most literary expressions of world literature. In other words, it does make a dramatic difference that members of Gruppo 93, just to return to a striking example from the last quarter of the twentieth century, decided to write their poetry in Neapolitan dialect, whereas other poets decided to write their poetry in English. Both operations are legitimate and important. Furthermore, both operations need to be considered in their singularity, as the decision behind the Gruppo 93's adoption of Neapolitan dialect is different from the one supporting the employment of that dialect by other poets such as Salvatore Di Giacomo; or the use of other dialects by Italian poets, from Andrea Zanzotto to Franco Loi, from Biagio Marin to Albino Pierro.

The language in which a poet writes offers a different set of complications, assuming that we can limit that language to English, French, and Spanish. In the Italian context, Italian poets most often consciously adopt the English language to write their poetry, while also writing their poetry in Italian. There are at least a couple of questions that the critic would immediately ask. Is the poetry written in either language and, if so, why is that the case? According to which criteria is one language chosen over the other? When the poetry is written in a poet's native language, is the poet offering a translation of their poems from Italian into English? Writing in a different language does not eliminate either possibility and the consequential ambiguity in the poetic operation that the critic must interpret. That ambiguity may often be solved thanks to specific information on the poets, their biographies, life and professional experiences, ideologies, writing objectives.

This information is partially relevant in understanding the reasons why Monica Guerra started writing poetry in English, after she had already been writing poetry in Italian. After publishing an intriguing essay (*Il respiro dei luoghi*, 2014), which is a dialogue with the sociologist Daniele Callini, Guerra published two collections of

VISITING A STRANGELY FAMILIAR COUNTRY

poems in Italian (*Sotto di Sé*, 2015; *Sotto Vuoto*, 2016), before releasing the collection *Sulla Soglia* (On the Threshold, 2017), which contains poems in Italian with English translation. To be sure, besides the assumption that Monica Guerra is a native speaker of Italian writing poetry in English as well and that the order of the languages in the title itself speaks to Italian's status as original, there is another puzzling suggestion that invites us to consider that Monica Guerra's poetry may have been written in English and translated into Italian. Indeed, the English version of the poems appears on the left page, whereas the Italian version appears on the right page. Although the potential causality of the order of the two languages cannot be discarded, the effect is that of conveying a certain order of composition to the reader, as the left page traditionally hosts the original version of the poems, relegating translations to the right page.

In the first half of the Nineties, Monica Guerra lived in the United States, where she earned her bachelor's degree at the American Intercontinental University of Los Angeles. This may very well have been the time when she strengthened her knowledge of English, which her subsequent professional engagements must have made more fluent until she decided to challenge herself with the English translation of her poems in Italian. Monica Guerra's first apprenticeship in poetry writing came to her in her mother tongue; then, she added the complementary version in a language that had become familiar to her for experiential and professional reasons. In the meantime, one may say that Guerra's poetry remained loyal to the characteristics shown in the collection *Sotto Vuoto* (Under Vacuum): brevity of expression, attention to word choice and even neologisms, whose goal is to enrich the formal rendition of thought; poetry as a journey and, at the same time, as a constant annotation of travels, as though poetry were the diary of existence itself.

Monica Guerra wrote the poems in *Sotto Vuoto* right after working with the sociologist Daniele Callini on their conversation titled *Il respiro dei luoghi* (The Breath of Places), a long essay in eight chapters, in which the most telling of these reflections are those on "Il *Genius loci*," "La forza narrativa dei luoghi" (The Narrative Power of Places) and "L'Archetipo dell'infinito viaggiare" (The Archetype of Infinite Traveling). This is a book that would require more careful analysis than is possible to offer in this context. However, the highly poetic force of this conversation and of the considerations that the two dialogists elaborate must be noted.

One may say that Monica Guerra writes the poetry of *Sotto Vuoto* keeping in mind not so much the lesson of those writers and

especially poets from Russia whom she lists in “Piccolo viaggio nell’inverno russo” (Little Journey in the Russian Winter; *Sotto Vuoto* 29), but rather Giuseppe Ungaretti and Eugenio Montale. The first poem of the collection, titled “Filigrane” (Filigrees), formally recalls the best experiments of Ungaretti’s *L’Allegria* (Joy): “Le mie reliquie quotidiane / nelle tue minuzie d’amore” (13; see also “Le mie mani” [My Hands], *Sotto Vuoto* 67). Perhaps even more intriguing is the use of the adverb “dove” as a noun, following a stylistic strategy Montale used in the famous poem “Lasciando un ‘Dove’” (Leaving a ‘Dove’)¹ in which he played with the semantics of the term as adverb in Italian and the name of an airplane in English. By the same token, Monica Guerra refers to “io e te spaiati tra dove diversi,” in “Mattino solitario” (Solitary Morning; 19), in which the adjective accompanying that adverb become noun presents a hypogrammatic rendition of that adverb (DoVE DiVERsi) as well as oral semantic ambiguity (tra dove diversi = tra dove di versi) (see also “Dietro i vetri” [Behind the Windows], 33). One poem in this collection that is striking as a manifesto of Monica Guerra’s poetry is “Deragliamenti” (Derailments; 36), in which the love she proclaims for traveling by train in the opening of the brief *poème en prose* soon gives way to a loose reference to Arthur Rimbaud’s derangement of the senses (“scardinare i sensi,” to bust through the senses). However, in preparation for considering the poems that Guerra writes in Italian and English, it is worth mentioning the oxymoronic line in “Da Mosca a Pietroburgo” (From Moscow to Petersburg; 37): “è casa lo spaesamento” (displacement is home). As foreign places become familiar, by the same token a foreign language becomes familiar. Just as the places through which the poetic voice travels, while moving from one strange city to another, actually become familiar, so the foreign language is no longer a mark of displacement, but of home.

The decision to publish a collection of poems in Italian and in English tells us how comfortable Monica Guerra feels in her other language. Although the English version of the poems in *Sulla Soglia* (On the Threshold) was prepared in collaboration with Patrick Williamson, it is our poet herself who worked on the rendition in that language. Some of the formal characteristics of the previous collection *Sotto Vuoto* return in this one and it is interesting to see how here they are presented with an eye and an ear to the English translation. In other words, certain stylistic devices such as assonances or even anaphoras cannot necessarily be presented again in English, which at times, given the context of loss and mourning that pervades the collection, becomes crucial in order to maintain the

VISITING A STRANGELY FAMILIAR COUNTRY

empathetic tone of the poem in Italian. Therefore, in “5 Luglio 2016” (5th July 2016; *Sulla Soglia* 34–35) the four lines in Italian all insist on the presence of the alternation of the vowels /u/ and /o/ in half the words of the poems, whereas the other half privileges the alternation of the vowels /i/ and /a/. The phonosymbolic function of these alternations is apparent when one reads the poem:

in questo bosco troppo cupo
per sbiadire l’ultima fatica,
il tuo saluto, la mia elegia,
il nero muro è la malattia.

The English version cannot maintain such a balance and it only attempts its own phonetic play in the repetition of the consonant /f/ in the second line:

in this hole too gloomy
to fade the final effort,
your goodbye, my elegy,
the black wall is the disease.

Another good example of such need to rearrange differently the phonetic and semantic plays of the Italian text is “16 Maggio 2016” (16th May 2016; 58–59) where the repeated name of “Cappello” invites an internal rhyme with “pennello,” which in turn invites a semantic twist between the images of “il suo pennello” and “in punta di binario” in the next to the last line. In the English version, the internal rhyme cannot be kept and in the last two lines the image of the tracks is transferred to the “end of the platform” and the syntax of the Italian version is resolved in English in a sequence that invites a reading of the Italian as proleptic: “l’amore in punta di binario / è la sola conclusione” (“and the only conclusion / is love at the end of the platform”). One last example in this respect is in the poem “in verità qui non esiste” (in fact here doesn’t exist; 90–91), in which the repetition of the verb “esiste” returns four times in the first three lines of the Italian version; however, the occurrences of the verb in the English version are reduced by half the occurrences in the English version thanks to the different and concise solutions that English syntax offers:

in verità qui non esiste
non esiste certo né assolutamente
esiste la vita parziale finché esiste

in fact here doesn't exist
 nor does absolutely or certainly
 a partial life exists until it is

Although at times the Italian version invites the English one to follow it in generating a new term, as is the case in “17 Maggio 2016” (17th May 2016; 56–57: “scorrere o il solco di un nonamore” [overflowing or the furrow of a non-love]), at other times the English version has to opt for a more regular rendition of the twisted semantics privileged by the Italian version. That is the case in the first line of “28 Marzo 2016” (28th March 2016; 60–61): “non c'è un lontano,” which in English becomes “there is no such distance” (another similar solution is in “19 Marzo 2016” 64–65).

In the new group of poems here presented under the title “expectations” and with the date “(Texas, July 2017),” one wonders whether the use of only the English language and, once again, as it happens in the book of poems just considered, the English version preceding the Italian version are signals of a shift in preference or emphasis between the two languages. Truth be told, Monica Guerra wrote the poems here gathered directly in English, considering the Italian counterpart a version rather than a translation *stricto sensu*. In these poems, Monica Guerra explores a landscape that becomes one with the turns of the imagination. If the indication of time (one may notice that it marks exactly one year after the most recent date in the previous collection of poems) and, more importantly, space (a specific state in the United States of America) are supposed to be meaningful in the interpretation of the poems, then the landscape that prevails in those texts cannot be associated with the characteristics of that state's landscape. The recurring reference to the wait (poems 1, 5, 8, 10) may be a good justification for the title itself, with an ambiguity and a tension between the meaning of the Italian “attesa” (wait) and the English “expectations” (which one may translate into Italian as “aspettative”). The first poem of the sequence is a good example:

cruel and reddish air
 always craving the rain
 while slow lying stones
 stir the water's faults
 a precarious silence floats
 this is the fraud
 the green desert the expectations
 always near but then

VISITING A STRANGELY FAMILIAR COUNTRY

they never happen

l'aria rossa e impietosa
sempre in attesa di pioggia
mentre lente pietre distese
frugano i nei dell'acqua
galleggia d'intorno
un silenzio precario
è questo l'inganno
il verde deserto le attese
sempre vicino qualcosa,
qualcosa che poi non succede

The solution in the English “expectations” for the Italian “attesa” gives those first lines a swift pace, immediately balanced in the switch of the main clause accompanying the stones. In this poem as well as in others, the elimination of the initial article in the English version almost gives a sense of apostrophe to that air, whereas in the Italian version a missing copula sustains the first two lines. Sometimes, the options privileged in the English version are not necessarily rendered with a literal translation in Italian (poem 1: “the water’s faults,” “nei dell’acqua”), although they may reveal moments of exploration of the acquired language through a complication of the metaphoric reference. To be sure, it may very well indicate the opposite. That is, the need to think about a given image, especially when it is a metaphoric one, invites an expansion of the semantic horizon available in either language. Much also depends on which language is the first in which the poem is composed and in this case English, that is, the acquired language, is the linguistic laboratory in which the poet has decided to forge the poem). Monica Guerra tames one language and the other in syntactic structure that often privilege parataxis, as though she were offering layers of impressions and sensations describing a still landscape. In this landscape, a scorching sun in the desert reveals the pain of the expectation for some event that may happen, while the living moments remain suspended in the sultry air (poem 6: “Chateau Duval the road boils / and this sun scrapes me as well,” “Chateau Duval la strada ribolle / e questo sole scortica anche me”). A similar situation occurs at the end of the following poem 7, when the addition of an adverb in the English version augments the subtle difference between the two versions (“all heroes have just died,” “sono morti tutti gli eroi”): the Italian version suggests a death that could have indeed been heroic for the heroes, whereas the adverb “just” in the English version implies that those

LIVORNI

heroes are merely dead ones, it registers the fact that those heroes have disappeared, although only recently. However, in other poems there is a balance between the solution in one language and that in the other, as it happens in poem 8:

a spider spins the wait
it's a careless web
the desert in black

the beat swamped away

un ragno fila l'attesa
è una tela distratta
questo nero deserto

il tempo impaludato

The intriguing solution for the last line perhaps compensates for the possible perplexity before the syntactic structure of the central lines. Such unexpected solutions in Monica Guerra's poetry seem to develop a movement between the two languages in which the rivalry may prove to be a fertile one in future plurilingual poetic attempts.

The attempt at writing poetry in a foreign language is a daring one, in which the cultural background and the poetic tenets of the writer meet first the constraints of the language and then the history of poetry writing in that language. Monica Guerra remains faithful to her poetics, one that seems to have much in common with the early twentieth-century literary tradition of Italian hermetic poetry. In that respect, the English-speaking reader may be encouraged to retrieve the corresponding trends in the poetry written in that language according to a style and a mode that privileges chiseled lines aiming at enlightening moments of insight.

Ernesto Livorni

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN—MADISON

ENDNOTES

¹ See Eugenio Montale, *La Bufera e Altro* (1956), in *Tutte le Poesie*, Mondadori Editore (I Meridiani), 1984, p. 233.

VISITING A STRANGELY FAMILIAR COUNTRY

WORKS CITED

- Montale, Eugenio. *La Bufera e Altro*. 1956. *Tutte le Poesie*, Mondadori Editore (I Meridiani), 1984.
- Guerra, Monica. "expectations (Texas, July 2017)." Unpublished (2017).
- . *Sulla Soglia*. Samuele editore, 2017.
- . *Sotto Vuoto*. Il Vicolo Editore, 2016.