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Two Gatsbys: Translation Theory as an Aid to Understanding

Translation theory, like literary theory, has been in a state of continuous flux since its beginnings in Roman times.¹ This flux of course is not by any means unidirectional and has certainly speeded up in recent decades with the expansion of both literary and translation studies. One day's psychoanalytical approach will soon be superseded by tomorrow's metaphysics reincarnate and at some stage yesterday's empiricism will inevitably return triumphant to prove that everything up to that moment had been a regrettable, perhaps useful, but nevertheless regrettable mistake. And as academic study of literature and academic study of translation proceed, the only definitive result they seem to offer is the straightforward fact that no two writers, no two translators and no two academics will ever deliver the same text when working on the same material. There will always be difference in interpretation, difference in expression.

As structuralism made clear, however, simple facts often hide complex realities. I am sure many of us will know the consideration Robert Frost made on literary translation in a 1964 interview:

Poetry is what is lost in translation.²

Simple, aphoristic, extremely effective and often pulled out of the literary pundit's bag of tricks for the purpose of criticising the inferior art of translation. I am equally sure, however, that fewer of us know Frost's next sentence from the same context - equally aphoristic, equally quotable, but much less well known because it constitutes a decidedly uncomfortable consideration for literary scholars:

It [poetry] is also what is lost in interpretation.³

The concept of loss is not only a common one in general thinking about translation - and understandably so, for even the most linguistically gifted reader will soon experience loss as a work is inevitably translated into tongues beyond his or her ken - but it has also been dealt with thoroughly in the literature of translation theory.⁴ The concept of loss in literary interpretation, however, has - again understandably - received less attention, but Umberto Eco for one has certainly touched on the problem in his essay, "Overinterpreting Texts".⁵ Eco's consideration of the "endless progress" of similarities in analogical interpretation has interesting implications for the study of literature in general and translation in particular. The danger in such an approach is that it begins and ends without an acknowledged specific purpose: the method, an analogical exegesis, is in itself the purpose of the exercise and as such is prone to self-absorption into a sort of literary miasma of reference and cross-reference. Translation theory, on the other hand, can ultimately never lose sight of the purpose of translation - the efficient and effective conveyance of a text from one language to another. This awe-inspiring function, too often taken for granted, demands continuous consideration of the eventual recipient of a translated text: the reader. In many forms of literary interpretation, however, the reader, the notional general reader, is substituted by one specific reader to the exclusion of all others: the critic who is analyzing the text.

Despite the continual need to respect empirical exigencies, translation theory need not be enslaved to practical concerns. In *After Babel* George Steiner explains that the hermeneutic approach to translation theory - concerned with the nature of language and the nature of understanding - gives the topic "a frankly philosophic aspect".⁶ I believe that a middle course held between the hermeneutic and the empiric currents in translation theory can be of considerable use as a method in understanding and explaining how literary texts work.

A consideration here of two Italian translations of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* will, I hope, provide some specific insight into the value of translation theory as an aid to understanding and conse-

quently explaining how literature works. The two translations I have studied are Fernanda Pivano's of 1950 and Tommaso Pisanti's of 1989, both currently in print in Italy. In the process I hope to make some contribution towards understanding fortunes and misfortunes in the life and times of F. Scott Fitzgerald: I hope to show that Fitzgerald as a writer was very much aware of the potential of multiple points of view and the converse, but inevitable limits of fixed ideas — Nick Carraway's self-declared tolerance and his "admission that it has a limit."⁷

Chapter One of George Steiner's *After Babel* carries the title, "Understanding as Translation" and introduces the concept of intralingual interpretation of all kinds as a form of translation. If anyone doubts this concept - but remember that in doubting my words, you are interpreting them, even if summarily - then perhaps a quotation from the linguist David Crystal can help explain it:

Language is the means whereby people communicate. It is also, ironically, the main means whereby people fail to communicate.⁸

If translation theory as a description of the process of interlingual translation can be considered an aid in the intralingual process of understanding a literary text, then it is also true that translation theory and translation constitute paradigms for understanding. Indeed, can there be a more thorough, conscious process of understanding than the transformation, the transposition, the translation of a literary work from one language and culture to another? In English of course the verb's principal meaning is "to bear, convey, or remove from one person, place or condition to another; to transfer, transport."⁹ I am sure, however, that few translators would disagree with me if I were to say that this ambition is never completely fulfilled: there are always moments of loss. But this loss is by no means confined to interlingual translation, it is also a phenomenon of writing, of intralingual interpretation. I am sure that this concept, the ineffability, the untranslatability of some human experience, is exactly what Fitzgerald describes when his narrator, his translator in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway, writes at the end of Chapter Six, with regard to a monologue from Gatsby describing the birth of his love

for Daisy, a monologue that cannot be a verbatim rendering of Gatsby's words but has, of course, already passed through Nick Carraway's translational filter:

Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something - an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever.¹⁰

In tutto quello che diceva, perfino nel suo impressionante scntimentalismo, qualcosa mi ritornava nel ricordo — un vago ritmo, un frammento di parole perdute, che avevo udito altrove, molto tempo prima. Per un momento una frase tentò di prendere forma sulla mia bocca e le mie labbra si schiusero quali quelle di un muto, come se avessero da lottare ben più che con un esile filo di aria incantata. Ma non emisero nessuno suono, e tutto quanto stavo per ricordare diventò per sempre incomunicabile.¹¹

In tutto quello che mi disse, perfino nel suo sentimentalismo impressionante, ritrovai qualcosa: un ritmo sfuggente, un frammento di parole perdute, che avevo udito da qualche parte molto tempo prima. Per un momento una frase cercò di prender forma nella mia bocca, e le labbra si schiusero come quelle di un muto, come se non fossero trattenute soltanto da un filo di aria stupita. Ma non diedero suono, e ciò che avevo quasi ritrovato divenne inesprimibile per sempre.¹²

Within this description of a moment of intralingual interpretive loss - almost a negative epiphany - there is a slight moment of interlingual translational loss in the first translation of "elusive rhythm"; I would suggest that *vago ritmo* stifles some of the resonance in Fitzgerald's writing, a resonance that is preserved in the *ritmo sfuggente* of the second translation. The second translation, however, may also carry an example of a phenomenon that is not as rare as is generally supposed and, I feel, need not be as controversial as it sometimes is — a moment of gain in translation from source to target language:

My lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air.

Le labbra si schiusero come quelle di un muto, come se non fossero trattenute soltanto da un filo di aria stupita.

The translator here has compressed Fitzgerald's meaning, bringing the relationship between Carraway's startled breath and his inability to express himself much closer — the possible (and portentous) vacuity of the life that Gatsby comes out of and the death that Gatsby is moving towards is conveyed more clearly in the Italian — as though Nick Carraway's lips were held back, or blocked, by something more than that beautiful "wisp of startled air."

I am very much aware that the minutiae of this type of analysis can be tedious, and so I will try to keep them to a minimum. It is a fact, however, that translators and translation theorists cannot afford to ignore such particulars and neither can writers and editors. The importance of this close attention to detail is outlined in Matthew Bruccoli's essay "Getting It Right", published online on the University of South Carolina's Francis Scott Fitzgerald Centennial Home Page.¹³

The idea of Nick Carraway being not just Gatsby's narrator but his translator — following quite logically from the concept of understanding as translation — is an intriguing and, I think, a useful one. There certainly are moments when Gatsby is in need of an intralingual translator:

Her voice is full of money.¹⁴

La sua voce è piena di monetine.¹⁵

Ha una voce piena di monete.¹⁶

This most famous of statements, like most quotable utterances, can mean so many things out of its context. In the context of Fitzgerald's masterful novel, however, it is as important for what Nick Carraway makes of it as it is for its own enigma:

That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money — that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbal's song of it ... High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl ...¹⁷

Era così. Non l'avevo mai capito prima. Era piena di monete — era questo il fascino inesauribile che s'alzava e ricadeva in quella voce, in quel suo tintinnio, in quel suono di cembali... In alto, in un bianco palazzo, la figlia del re, la fanciulla tutta d'oro...¹⁸

Era proprio così. Non l'avevo mai capito prima. Piena di monete: era questo il fascino inesauribile che in essa si alzava e cadeva, il tintinnio, il canto di cembali...

Lassù, nel palazzo bianco, la figlia del re, la fanciulla dorata...¹⁹

Perhaps the most remarkable thing here in our two Italian translations is their similarity rather than any of the minor differences between them. But the most remarkable single feature of the passage is certainly the way our intralingual translator, Nick Carraway, perhaps suffers a moment of loss in his interpretive powers, converting what might be a deeply cynical, venal comment on Gatsby's part into yet another deeply romantic gesture.

Yet despite his unreliability, Nick Carraway deserves, and in most cases receives, the reader's indulgence, for he is the only character sufficiently interested in Gatsby to tell his story. Indeed, he is the only character sufficiently interested in Gatsby to effect his ultimate translation, his burial, his *traslazione*:

At first I was surprised and confused; then, as he lay in his house and didn't move or breathe or speak, hour upon hour, it grew upon me that I was responsible, because no one else was interested - interested, I mean, with that intense personal interest to which everyone has some vague right at the end.²⁰

Dapprima fui sorpreso e confuso, poi, mentre Gatsby giaceva in casa sua senza muoversi né respirare né parlare, mi persuasi che ero io responsabile, perché nessun altro se ne interessava; voglio dire, provavo quell'intenso interesse personale che chiunque ha un certo vago diritto di suscitare.²¹

Dapprima fui sorpreso e turbato poi, mentre Gatsby giaceva nella sua grande casa senza muoversi né respirare né parlare, un'ora dopo l'altra, sempre più s'ingrandì in me l'idea che responsabile dovevo ora essere io, giacché nessun altro se ne interessava, voglio dire, con quell'intensità di partecipazione personale a cui ognuno dovrebbe avere, almeno alla fine, vagamente diritto.²²

It is obvious, seeing the three passages here in typescript, that the second translation is a good two lines longer than the first. The phrasal verb "to grow upon" and nuances in the semantic differences between "responsible" and *responsabile* account for many of the translator's problems here. From a reading, however, it is equally clear that the second translation is more successful, is more complete

than the first. In mitigation, it must be said that we do not know the exact nature of the text the translator was working from, neither do we know under what circumstances he or she was working. Under certain circumstances two extra lines can be two lines too many ... even in this the glorious era of computerized typography; publishing has never been easier and, for many of the world's new electronic publishers, it has never been more difficult.

The thing to understand here, and I think this is a lesson Fitzgerald gives in the way that good writers give lessons, that is to say without the slightest hint of didacticism, the thing to understand is that we are all — translators, writers, critics, human beings of all kinds engaged in the pursuit of all kinds of happiness — so fallible. All it takes is a moment's inattention to some important detail or a moment's weakness in accepting a pressing circumstantial need for an easy compromise and we have an explosion or a slow-burning disaster, or even just a useless void, an omission, on our hands.

Gatsby himself of course seems oblivious to the enormity of his own mistake: so far is he removed from the lives being lived around him that without an intermediary, without a translator, he would be beyond understanding. And in Chapter Eight our translator gives us an example of the enormity of the task when Gatsby forlornly considers the possibility that Daisy actually loved Tom Buchanan, even if "just for a minute, when they were first married":

Suddenly he came out with a curious remark.

"In any case," he said, "it was just personal."

What could you make of that, except to suspect some intensity in his conception of the affair that couldn't be measured?²³

A un tratto, aggiunse stranamente:

"In ogni caso, era qualcosa di personale".

Che cosa si poteva concludere se non che c'era, nell'idea che si era fatta dell'intera faccenda, un'intensità che non si poteva più neanche misurare?²⁴

D'un tratto uscì con una frase strana.

"Comunque" disse "è stato un fatto personale."

Che cosa restava da fare, se non sospettare nel concetto che si era formato della faccenda un'intensità che andava al di là di ogni misura?²⁵

Here, of course, is the Great Gatsby — a man splendidly and ridiculously beyond measure. And here, too, is the thing that makes his story so compelling, so successful, for here is an overt expression of the invitation that is always there in the best fiction, the invitation to join the narrator in interpreting, in understanding and expressing the story: "What could you make of that?" *Che cosa si poteva concludere? Che cosa restava da fare?*

A similar question is asked by the only other character, apart from Mr Gatz, who eventually attends Gatsby's funeral. The man with owl-eyed glasses whom Nick Carraway meets in Gatsby's library during his first visit to one of Gatsby's parties:

"See!" he cried triumphantly. "It's a bona fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella's a regular Belasco. It's a triumph, What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop, too — didn't cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?"

He snatched the book from me and replaced it hastily on its shelf, muttering that if one brick was removed the whole library was liable to collapse.²⁶

"Guardate" esclamo trionfante. E' roba autentica. Prima non ci credevo. Quest'individuo è un vero Belasco. Un trionfo. Che precisione! Che realismo! E sa anche quando fermarsi: non ha tagliato le pagine. Ma che volete di Che cosa vi aspettate?"

Mi strappò di mana il libro e lo ripose in fretta sulla scansia mormorando che se si spostava un mattone c'era il pericolo che cedesse l'intera biblioteca.²⁷

"Ecco!" esclamò trionfante. È un autentico pezzo bibliografico. Non ci credevo. Quest'uomo è proprio un Belasco. È un trionfo. Che esattezza! Che realismo! Sa anche quando fermarsi: non ha tagliato le pagine. Ma che altro si vuole? Che altro v'aspettate?"

Mi strappò il libro di mano e lo ripose in fretta al suo posto, borbottando che se si spostava un solo mattone l'intera biblioteca poteva crollare.²⁸

"But what do you want? What do you expect?" *Ma che volete di Che cosa ci aspettate? Ma che altro si vuole? Che altro v'aspettate?* Again an invitation to interpret, this time directed not just at the reader but also at all of Gatsby's "guests". It is an uncomfortable question that readers — and critics — could usefully ask themselves more often, and that is why Tony Tanner made use of it to close his deeply perceptive and useful introduction to the current Penguin edition of the

work. Another point that Tanner makes in that introduction, which is not strictly relevant to this paper, but is certainly relevant to study of Fitzgerald in particular and American literature in general, is his concept of the American dream as less an "index of aspiration" and more "a function of deprivation".²⁹ (I find it interesting to consider the current European boom in instant lottery tickets in this light — I am sure that if Fitzgerald were travelling in Europe today then his keen eye for contemporary fads and crazes would mean that the sight of people from all walks of life and several different countries scratching away at their lottery tickets would find its way into his notebook.)

It is Owl-eyes who ultimately comes out with the most direct, most eloquent statement regarding the deprivation, the paucity of Gatsby's life and death, a comment more honest perhaps than any of Nick Carraway's romantic reflections and certainly more sincere than, say, Meyer Wolfshiem's reluctant, clumsy elegy:

"The poor son-of-a-bitch," he said.³⁰

"Povero bastardo" disse.³¹

"Poveraccio!" disse.³²

Which one do you want? Do you prefer the rougher, less affectionate *bastardo*, or is the sympathetic tone of *poveraccio* more in keeping with the way you see Gatsby? My point is that in a sense this is a choice that you must make anyway as a reader in any language — if reading in English you must decide what Owl-eyes means by "poor son-of-a-bitch" and unless you are engaged in some very stringent close reading, that choice should be completely unconscious. The translator, however, allowing for the inevitable momentary distractions that should be caught on rereading and at proofs stage, is always aware of what he or she is doing in terms of interpreting language.

I see now that this has been a paper about binaries, about two Gatsbys, about two translations, about two languages, about two meanings in the title, *The Great Gatsby*. It is difficult to resist a famous quotation from "The Crack-up":

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.

I think Fitzgerald probably understood that few first-rate intelligences would ever be able to resist joining his schizophrenic club. But the absurdity of such opposites, of such binaries naturally leads me to the computer and cyberspace where yes and no and positive and negative expand exponentially at speeds difficult to conceive of into a myriad of possibilities, and, of course, into a myriad of negations, of dead ends. And in its turn this binary delirium makes me hope that this has been a paper about more than binaries — I hope it has been a paper about understanding in the way that *Gatsby* is a book that is not only about the West: it is also a book about understanding life and about how we understand. Binaries become more, or less than the sum or the subtraction of their parts and this is what happens with texts and readers — every reader creates his or her own translation of every text — and in my view this approach forges a link between translation theory and reader response criticism. Sometimes poetry *is* lost in translation and in interpretation, but I honestly feel I can paraphrase and revolutionize Robert Frost and say that sometimes poetry is what is *gained* in translation; poetry is what is gained in interpretation. I would hazard that the mere fact of the existence of an efficient, effective translation of a text, or of an efficient, effective interpretation of a text is in itself a considerable gain.

The continuous flux in the way we look at things is, I believe, a reflection of nothing more and nothing less than the continuous flux that is life, conditioned by a multiplicity of factors, some within and some beyond our control. There are as many *Gatsbys*, as many Nick Carraways as there are readers — my *Gatsby* is not your *Gatsby* and our *Gatsby* today is not our *Gatsby* of yesterday or tomorrow or, say, May 1940. As a character *Gatsby* is a resonant example of what can happen when a being refuses to accept that flux and — to borrow Fitzgerald's own famous metaphor — strikes out single-mindedly against or even with the current. *Gatsby* is an example of a character who simply, to paraphrase Daisy's words in Chapter Seven, wants too much: and, to translate those words into Italian — and both translators use the same verb — *Gatsby pretende troppo*.

As a book Fitzgerald's finest creation has very much been borne along on the flux of literary fashion and academic canon so that the *Gatsby* Fitzgerald — close to desperation — longed for in one of his last letters to Max Perkins in May 1940 is surely the *Gatsby* we know today; this fact, combined with the stark fact of the letter's date, some six months before its author's death at the age of 44, certainly illustrates the gain and the loss, the fortune and the misfortune in the life and times of F. Scott Fitzgerald:

Would the 25 cent press keep *Gatsby* in the public eye—or is the book unpopular? Has it had its chance? Would a popular reissue in that series with a preface not by me but by one of its admirers—I can maybe pick one—make it a favorite with class rooms, profs, lovers of English prose—anybody. But to die, so completely and unjustly after having given so much. Even now there is little published in American fiction that doesn't slightly bear my stamp—in a small way I was an original.³³

This essay was originally a paper read at the conference "Fortunes and Misfortunes in the Life and Times of Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940)", held October 10-12 1996 at John Cabot and La Sapienza universities, Rome.

1 Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies* (revised edition), Routledge, London, 1991, p. 39.

2 Louis Untermeyer *Robert Frost: A Backward Look*, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., 1964.

3 Ibid.

4 In the 1960s Eugene Nida considered the problem of loss in his works, *Towards a Science of Translation* (1964) and, together with C. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*.

5 Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 45-46.

6 George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, second edition, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 249.

7 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1926), Penguin Books, London, 1990, p.7.

8 David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 341.

9 *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (second edition), 1989, p. 2098.

10 *The Great Gatsby*, p. 107.

- 11 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Il grande Gatsby* (translated 1989 by Tommaso Pisanti), Edizioni Scolastiche Bruno Mondadori, Torino, 1993, p. 110.
- 12 Fitzgerald F. Scott, *Il grande Gatsby* (translated 1950 by Fernanda Pivano), Mondadori Oscar classici moderni, Milano 1991, p. 113.
- 13 Matthew Brucoli, "Getting It Right: The Publishing Process and the Correction of Factual Errors-with Reference to *The Great Gatsby*", *Francis Scott Fitzgerald Centennial Home Page*, University of South Carolina, 1996, URL: <http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/index.html> (11 June 1997).
- 14 *The Great Gatsby*, p. 115.
- 15 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pisanti), p. 117.
- 16 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pivano), p. 121.
- 17 *The Great Gatsby*, p. 115.
- 18 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pisanti), pp. 117-118.
- 19 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pivano), p. 121.
- 20 *The Great Gatsby*, p. 156.
- 21 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pivano), p. 165.
- 22 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pisanti), p. 158.
- 23 *The Great Gatsby*, p. 145.
- 24 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pisanti), p. 146.
- 25 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pivano), p. 153.
- 26 *The Great Gatsby*, p. 47.
- 27 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pivano), p. 48.
- 28 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pisanti), p. 47.
- 29 *The Great Gatsby*, p. XV.
- 30 *The Great Gatsby*, p. 166.
- 31 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pivano), p. 176.
- 32 *Il grande Gatsby* (Pisanti), p. 168.
- 33 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *A Life in Letters*, edited by Matthew J. Brucoli, Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1995.