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Italian Yawps

Untranslatable he claimed to be but translated he was, indeed. In the different Italian versions of the second stanza of section 52 of “Song of Myself,” there is in fact no untranslatable *yawp*: the expression is *translated* by using more common screams, cries, shrieks, shouts. The only recurrence of the original term can be found in Mario Corona’s footnote number 76 on page 410 of his translation of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and this confirms how Corona’s translation is certainly the most accurate one ever produced in Italy, from a philological and scholarly point of view.

In the historical overview that follows, I present the different versions followed by short comments. The Italian words correspondent to “I sound” and “yawp” are underlined.

1) Lugi Gamberale, trans. 1923 (Deathbed edition)

E fo risonare il mio barbarico strillo su per i tetti del mondo. (Whitman, 1923: 94)

Gamberale goes for literalness with the verb *risonare* (to make something sound) for “to sound.” Even the original “over” is kept, with the Italian *su per*. The choice of *strillo* for “yawp” is not optimal, though, because *strillo* (shriek) indicates a shrill vocalization more than an energetic, visceral one. Gamberale adds the conjunction *e* at the beginning of the second line for rhythmical reasons. His work is characterized by an attempt to soften and add a solemn flavour to

Whitman's accumulative rhythm, at a time in which the American poet's work was more appreciated for its contents than for its formal innovations.

2) Enzo Giachino, trans. 1950 (Deathbed edition)

E lancio il mio grido barbarico sopra i tetti del mondo (Whitman, 1950: 112)

Giachino's more modern version, produced in a season of great innovation of Italian poetry, is characterized by a colloquial and intimate tone, as is evident in these lines: the Italian *grido* (cry, scream) for "yawp" is better than Gamberale's *strillo*, and the euphonic *lancio* (to throw) is less literal and solemn than *risonare*, but perfectly effective in conveying the sense of spatial appropriation. The choice of leaving the conjunction *e* introduced by Gamberale is rather disappointing: it is not needed here, and it clashes with Giachino's overall style. This is not the only instance in which Giachino shows a particular reverence toward the work of his predecessor.

3) Ariodante Marianni, trans. 1988 (Deathbed edition)

Emetto il mio grido barbarico sopra i tetti del mondo (Whitman, 1988: 277)

Overall, Marianni's translation is an excellent achievement that combines poetic beauty with a faithful rendering of the original's experimentalism, multilingualism and modernity. And yet, it does not shine in this instance. The line is practically identical to Giachino's one, except for the use of the impersonal, biology-manual sounding *emettere* (to emit).

4) Mario Corona, trans. 1996 (1855 edition)

E sopra i tetti del mondo gracchio il mio urlo barbarico (Whitman, 1996: 410)

In his footnote, Corona explains the hazardous choice of the rather ugly verb *gracchiare* (to caw, to croak) for the original "to sound": because there is nothing similar, both phonetically and semantically, to "yawp" in Italian, Corona relies (just as J.L. Borges, with his *graznido*) upon this onomatopoeic verb in an attempt to suggest a shrieking sound similar to that of the hawk, but also to the *ya-honk* of the wild gander of section 14 (which, differently from the "yawp," and disappointingly enough, has been kept untouched and italicized

in all the Italian versions). The term, which corresponds directly to “yawp,” is a rather loud *urlo* (shout), which is certainly better than any of the previous alternatives. Corona’s choice is also aiming to evoke Allen Ginsberg’s Whitmanian *Howl*, whose famous Italian translation is *Urlo*. The translator, who is currently preparing an unabridged translation of the Deathbed edition of the *Leaves*, has decided to modify the choice he made in 1996 and to leave “yawp” intact. Of course his is still a draft which will have to make it through that interminable and convoluted process of decision-(re)making typical of literary translation.

5) Igina Tattoni, trans. 2007 (1856 edition)

Emetto il mio barbarico urlo sopra i tetti del mondo (Whitman, 2007: 137)

Tattoni’s translation seems often to be modeled on Marianni’s and Corona’s versions. With the only difference that hers is often clumsy and unpoetic: let us think of the line that precedes the one considered here, translated by Tattoni as *Neanche io sono domato, neanche un pò – anche io sono intraducibile*, which literally corresponds to the heavy sounding “Neither I am domesticated, not even a little bit—I am untranslatable too.”

6) Alessandro Ceni, trans. 2012 (1855 edition)

Io risono il mio barbarico graculio sopra i tetti del mondo (Whitman, 2012: 179)

In Ceni’s recent translation of the first edition, the line here considered is characterized by an archaic tone, which sounds completely detached not only from contemporary Italian, but also from Whitman’s English. The choice of *graculio* (a self-invented word, probably from the same verb used by Corona, *gracchiare*) is far from reproducing the effect of “yawp,” and astonishingly inappropriate.

I would argue that Whitman’s “yawp” should be left untranslated, but that it could be made more readable by choosing an equivalent sounding made-up word in Italian such as *ioop*, so that readers who do not know English could still get a sense of the sound and experience the estrangement effect that comes from finding such an unexpected, bizarre word. (A translator’s footnote could provide them with information about the history and recurrence of the original,

English *yawp*.) My translation would therefore be: “Io lancio il mio barbarico *iioop* sopra i tetti del mondo,” where I would try to convey the expansive sense of the verb “to sound” with *lancio* and to stun the readers with the barbaric *iioop* which I hope they would read aloud.

To conclude, the line seems to have sounded over the roofs of Italy, notwithstanding the curious translations it has received. Among many possible examples, let us remember Giosuè Carducci, who had read and orally translated *Leaves of Grass* with his English teacher at least three times.¹ In 1873 he had called his collection of poems *Odi Barbare* (*Barbaric Odes*) because thus, barbaric, is how he was convinced that his attempt to reconstruct quantitative metrics would have sounded to Greeks and Latins. The poet laureate was not fully aware of how this recuperation of the classic metrics would have actually corresponded to one of the first pushes toward the liberation and modernization of Italian verse. And the poets Gabriele D’Annunzio and Dino Campana made extensive use of the adjective barbaric, perhaps literally following the advice of the iconoclast critic Giovanni Papini, who, in a 1908 article about Whitman, had written: “We must become barbarians again—maybe even a bit boorish—if we want to rediscover poetry. If Whitman did not teach us at least this, then all the translations and all the talking that has been made about him were completely useless”(711).²

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¹ See Carducci’s letter (June 26, 1881) to Enrico Nencioni as quoted in Rea Mc Cain, “Walt Whitman in Italy.” *Italica* 20.1 (March 1943): 7. See also Giuseppe Lesca, “Carducci lettore di Walt Whitman,” *L’Archiginnasio* 32. 1-3 (1937).

² Translation mine.

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Summary

The article is a brief historical overview of the different Italian translations of Whitman's line "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." Each translation is followed by short comments. An alternative solution is proposed by the author.

Key words: comparative literature, translation studies, Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," Italian literature

Włoskie „yawp”

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest historycznym przeglądem różnych włoskich tłumaczeń wersu „I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world”. Każdy przywołany przekład został krótko skomentowany. Autorka szkicu przedstawia także własną propozycję przekładu.

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, studia przekładoznawcze, Walt Whitman, „Pieśń o mnie”, literatura włoska