The Sweetest Dream that Labor Will Know:

"The Fact" Facing Italian
Frost Translators and Scholars

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The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.

Robert Frost, "Mowing"

The circumstances and motivations of a poet’s recognition in a foreign country can reveal important aspects and peculiarities of both parties involved in the literary exchange. In the case of Robert Frost and Italy, the development of Frost’s reputation through the meanders of Italian translations and critical studies tells us something both about the nature and validity of Frost’s poetry and about the attitude with which Italian scholars have approached North American culture in the past years.

One of the conspicuous facts about Frost’s reception in Italy is that Frost’s poetry has been little translated compared to that of, say, Emily Dickinson or T. S. Eliot. Moreover, Frost translations into Italian have been practically monopolized by a single translator. So far, Frost has been included in five anthologies of American, or of English and American, poets—translated by five different authors (Gabriele Baldini, Giulio Gnoli, Carlo Izzo, Paolo Nobile, Tommaso Pisanti)—while only two Italian editions of his poetry have been issued. Actually, three volumes have come out, but two appear to be the same book re-edited, with the same—only slightly revised—translations by the Italian poet Giovanni Giudici. Giudici also included poems by Frost in a personal anthology of transla-
tions of foreign poetry. His books have been published by Einaudi and Mondadori, two of the most important Italian publishers. Thus, he can be said to hold the leadership of Frost’s translations—not only because of the quantity of the poems he has translated and of the number of times his books have been re-edited, but also because his is the most recent Italian edition of Frost’s poems (with the coediting of Massimo Bacigalupo, 1988), and his is the widest selection of translated texts.

This leads us to the second fact about Italian translations of Frost. Apart from their quantity, how representative of Robert Frost’s poetry are they? Franco de Poli, in what he himself declares to be the first Italian edition of Frost’s poems (1961), writes that he has been forced to leave out the narrative poems, though he recognizes them as an “important part” of Frost’s production (47). Giulio Gnoli is the only translator to include one, “The Witch of Coös”, in his anthology selection of 1958, after which Giudici has included more since his first, 1965 volume Conoscenza della notte. The masques have never been translated into Italian, nor the other dramatic pieces (A Way Out, The Guerdeen, In an Art Factory). Except for “The Figure a Poem Makes”, whose translation by Bacigalupo has been included in the last volume by Giudici, nothing has been published of Frost’s prose writings, speeches or interviews. Considering Frost’s lifelong inclination for drama and the quality of his legacy in poetics, the lack of these texts in Italian represents a serious obstacle to the full appreciation of his achievements as a poet and as a theorist.

There is a clear link between the fortune of Italian translations of Frost’s poetry and the development of his reputation among Italian intellectuals and scholars of American literature. Since the Italian common reader did not have direct access to Frost’s poems, it was impossible, in Italy, to differentiate between the response of the wider reading public and that of the specialists. In addition, when Italian scholars of American literature began writing on Frost, in the late 50s-early 60s, their taste was influenced by the harsh criticism of R. P. Blackmur (1936), Malcolm Cowley (1944), and Yvor Winters (1957). Though they courageously exerted all their efforts to spread a balanced and impartial image of Frost and of his poetry, they were not immune from some ideological and aesthetic prejudices.

In 1963, Alfredo Rizzardi was still trying to free Frost from the negative evaluation of certain American critics whose ideas were informed by
New Criticism and by the Naturalism of the Thirties. He pointed out that when the American critics’ yardstick for defining the dominant cosmopolitan poetry was the Pound-Eliot axis, Frost’s poetry appeared perforce eccentric; and that when their yardstick for defining a poet’s moral stature was social engagement and a progressive attitude, Frost could only appear as a conservative and a “spiritual drifter”. In sum, in the first decades of Frost’s reception in Italy, not much could be made of the figure of a bucolic, regional, and easy-going poet (even though universal values were attached to his regionalism), and especially since this was coupled with a conservative nationalism. The most recurrent refrain in the early studies of Frost’s poetry was that behind the official and plain Frost a “more authentic” Frost had to be discovered (de Poli 31), whose philosophic assumptions were much deeper and less optimistic. This warning, though, did not keep Italian readers from feeling more attracted by poets whom they found existentially more problematic and absorbing, like Eliot or Pound.

The difficulty Robert Frost’s poetry meets with in being popularized not only in Italy but elsewhere, though, must also be explained by a characteristic that is inherent to the poetry itself, which is its low translatability. Giovanni Giudici seems to hold a contrary opinion. In the preface to his volume of 1965—republished in his last one—he writes that the degree of a poet’s translatability depends on “how much of what is essential is objectively transferable from the original to the translated text” (26), and concludes that Frost’s poetry is highly translatable because “the essentials of his discourse, of his structure, largely depend on extreme rigor of lexical definition”, something that, “unlike rhyme”, can be “almost directly translated”. He also sees in Frost a “prosodic indifference”, which counterbalances his lexical choosiness. According to Giudici, only Frost’s diction can cause the translator some occasional problems, as in the case of plants which do not exist in Italy (7).

The comment on Frost’s “prosodic indifference” can only be taken as a serious misjudgment on Giudici’s part. Perhaps this should come as no surprise from a translator who has candidly avowed that he hardly knew Frost before being commissioned to translate his poems, and that he has never formally learned English (Addio, proibito piangere vi)—two details which can hardly be a recommendation of his work.

Furthermore, part of “the essentials” of Robert Frost’s poetry are the intonations he tried so hard, during his entire career, to “entangle” within
the syntax and metrics of his dramatic monologues and dialogues. These, though, cannot be directly transferred into another language, because they are nonverbal features, and each language has a paralinguistic system of its own. As Frost himself once said, tones of voice are exactly that part of poetry that will be lost in translation. So that Paolo Nobile’s attitude in translating Frost (1968) is admirable, because he seems to have worked on the basis of a similar kind of awareness, though he derived it from another source, that is, Benedetto Croce. The great Italian literary theorist, in fact, had already suggested that translators follow the way of what he called “beautiful infidelity,” because “the impossibility of translation,” to him, was “the very reality of poetry in its creation and recreation” (Nobile 9-10).

There is, indeed, a kind of infidelity in translating that one would be ready to embrace, because it provides the translator with the liberty which is necessary to find in his language a form equivalent to the original. But even though this infidelity allows for a greater truthfulness, it entails some risks. Nobile, for example—whose method is to recreate Frost’s sound and rhythm effects—has beautifully translated “Winter-death” (though he has inserted in it an inversion which makes a statement falsely sound like a question), but has been less successful in translating “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”. His “Sosta presso i boschi” does reproduce the rhythmical structure of the original, but sounds obsolete in its vocabulary selection. It must be admitted that, when more freedom is granted in formal matters, they may become subjective matters of perception and taste. Evaluation on the basis of some kind of objective standard becomes difficult. One is left to hope that the original text is correctly perceived in its wholeness, both sound and meaning.

So how should one judge the nearly monopolized, too few, unrepresentative translations of a poet’s output, an essential part of which has a very low degree of transferability into another language? Given the premises, the most likely answer would be “Not well!” But that would also be incorrect. Even if the work that has been done is insufficient in quantity and quality, there are instances of successful translations of isolated poems which allow one to hope that it is possible to carry out the task satisfactorily.

Italian translators find it difficult to remain faithful to the sound of Frost’s poetry mainly because of two great differences in the languages
and the poetical traditions of Italy and the United States. First of all, the Italian language is susceptible to more linguistic or tone registers than English. To give a concrete example of what this may mean in terms of poetry translation, where one has “licks” in “The Pasture”, one can find “lecca”, “lambisce” or “alliscia” in the Italian versions, which go, respectively, from colloquial to literary to archaic.

All this bears on the present discourse, which maintains that the most serious flaw of Italian translations of Frost is the way they sound falsely literary. The great bulk of these translations is characterized by an arbitrarily high diction while they should privilege a colloquial one. Though many Italian scholars and translators have been aware that one of the fundamental qualities of Frost’s poetry is its “colloquial though elevated style” (de Poli 23), few of them have been able to render it in Italian. Up to now, Frost’s happy and unique combinations of intonation, accents, and meter stresses have rarely been transposed into Italian.

The reason for this lies in the misunderstanding of how Frost was able to reach what Giudici himself is able to describe as a “speech-effect which is forced into formal postures” (Conoscenza della notte, 1988 28). He is, ironically, the one who, in his 1965 translation of “The Pasture”, uses “alliscia” (the archaic term), and who, in his descent down the scale of rhetorical effects towards a colloquial register, manages only to get to “lambisce” (the literary term, 1988). This means that he understands the formal effect in Frost’s poetry as a matter of word choice, perhaps confusing it with that lexical precision he was so good at detecting in it. Paradoxically, a more satisfying translation of “The Pasture” can be found in the earlier edition by de Poli, where we could expect an archaic term and we have instead “lecca”, that is, the most common term one would use.6 Giudici’s kind of misunderstanding can be fatal in translating poems like “Stopping by Woods”, where the sense of a literary stance is given by the very strict metric structure and rhyme scheme, while the vocabulary remains very simple. The Italian translations of this poem, though, contain a certain number of obsolete words and awkward syntactical inversions.

The one translator who seems to have understood that Frost’s form is a matter of metric choice and rhythm is Attilio Bertolucci, one of the best-known living Italian poets. Unfortunately, though, all the Frost he has translated up to now is “Dust of Snow” and “The Cow in Apple-Time”. These two short poems manage nevertheless to reveal the tone of Frost’s
original texts through their sound. They manage to convey what some outmoded theorists of translation would have called their “spirit”.

A desire to reproduce the rhythm of Frost’s poems, though, does not guarantee a good translation. Another typical defect of Italian translators of Frost shows how their main weakness lies in an insufficient treatment of the poems’ tonal stance. It is the pervasive use of the rhetorical device of inversion. In Italian, one can have either a syntactical inversion, putting an object first, like the one in “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall”, or a simpler inversion between a noun and an adjective. In this latter case, the inversion is less dramatic because there is no rule concerning the position of the adjective in Italian, but it does nonetheless have a remarkable rhetorical effect, and gives the whole phrase a literary turn. The way inversion is used by many Italian translators of Frost gives a superficial sense of formality compromising any chance of suggesting a colloquial tone. Many of these inversions are totally unnecessary (and make one suspect that the translator was taking them over from the English because he misunderstood Frost’s tone—a case, here, of misplaced and blind fidelity); some result in blatant errors in translation, because they lead the reader’s comprehension astray by suggesting an interrogative intonation where there is none.  

These features of the Italian language and their effects on the tone register of a written text stem from the fact that Italian is a highly rhetorical language as compared to English, which is a much more concise one. Actually, in proper linguistic terms, Italian should be defined as a “synthetic” language, and English as an “analytic” one. There is a grammatical category, for example, of the adjective—the diminutivo—which does not exist in English, which cannot be translated into English, and which is another constant threat to the aesthetic result of Italian translations of Frost. A relevant example is the “little horse” in “Stopping by Woods”. Italians can make a horse little either by making the adjective “piccolo” (which is “little”) precede the noun, as in English, or by using a diminutivo, a noun transformed by a suffix which indicates a size reduction. So that in the Italian version of “Stopping by Woods” “cavallino” often becomes “cavallino” (Giudici, Nobile, Pisanti, De Logu). It consequently sounds very obsolete and a bit too precious and affected, very much like Giovanni Pascoli, whom these translators may very well have had in mind, because he belongs to the most pristine Italian poetic tradition—and with
whom, by the way, Frost curiously shares the fate of being misinterpreted in his apparent simplicity and easiness.

The other basic difference I mentioned earlier, regarding the development of two separate poetic traditions in the United States and in Italy, also helps to explain why the Italian translator of a poetry so full of dialogues as Frost’s meets so many difficulties in rendering its colloquial register. The average American reader and critic are both more ready to appreciate colloquial poetry than their Italian counterparts; the American poet has been immersed in it during his education. One should think, here, of Frost, Masters, Williams, Pound, Eliot—and, still earlier, Whitman and Dickinson. From the point of view of poetic language, too, English has developed a metrical form, the iambic pentameter, which is very close to the intonations of ordinary, everyday speech. Furthermore, Frost is considered one of the best craftsmen of blank verse after Milton and Browning, so that he is easily placed in a tradition which is not paralleled in Italian poetry, where forms have been more varied and mixed and where very tightly structured forms have been dominant. Bertolucci, in this sense, has probably had an advantage, because he has been writing a kind of colloquial verse which is very close to blank verse for most of his poetic career.

The different emphases in the two countries’ poetic traditions also explain why the body of Italian translations of Frost has only gradually been including the “dialogic” poetry written by Frost. The term is used, here, to refer to all the poems which have dialogues in them and to the verse drama, since Frost’s masques should be considered dramatic and poetical texts at the same time. The translation of Frost’s dialogic poetry presents the great problem of how to transfer into Italian its special interplay of oral intonations with the written meter. One attempt to translate “The Witch of Coöss” made by Gnoli as early as 1958 yielded an adequate result in its choice of free verse and in the rendering of speech intonations, notwithstanding a couple of glaring mistakes in translation. There followed the substantial selection made by Giudici, which is less successful because it does not fully manage to adapt an authentically colloquial stance.

It is noteworthy that all the Italian translations of Frost seem to adhere to a “canon”, which includes, among others, “The Pasture”, “Reluctance”, Stopping by Woods”, “Acquainted with the Night”, “Come In”, “A Dust of Snow”, and “After Apple-Picking”. This is why one feels grateful to Gnoli for translating “The Silken Tent” (and for translating it
well), and to Pietro De Logu, who in his essay on Frost of 1961 translated a large section of another memorable achievement by Frost, "The Wood-Pile". As early as 1953, Margherita Guidacci also translated "A Cabin in the Clearing", choosing for it the rather apt form of the prose poem.

Returning now to "the fact" facing Italian translators and scholars of Robert Frost (provided they are able to dream their sweetest dream while laboring to make his poetry known), it is highly desirable that the first group give rise to a new wave of translations (and possibly to a new translating style), and that the second take a less traveled road. A reorientation of the critical studies should prepare the ground for both a demand for more translations of Frost and for a new approach to the translation of his poetry. Up to now, in fact, Italian scholars of Frost have kept within the boundaries of general though updated introductions. The only exceptions to this tendency have been Aldo Celli's study of Frost's particular blend of symbolism (1965), Renzo Crivelli's article on "Realism and Epiphany" in the New England of Robert Frost and Andrew Wyeth (1983), and the close readings of two poems, one by Franco Minganti (of "Mowing", in 1975-6), and one by Gordon Poole (of "Stopping by Woods", in 1987). More recently, Andrea Mariani and the author of this essay have also tried to explore specific aspects of Frost's poetry. In September 1997 we were both at the International Conference Celebrating Robert Frost at Rock Hill, where Mariani talked about Frost in the international context, and I described the extraordinary modernity of Frost's A Masque of Reason. Mariani has also written about the color symbolism in the poetry of Robert Frost, and I have studied his theory of the sound of poetry. Finally, I am the author of the only book-length study of Frost's poetry written in Italian.

In conclusion, it can be said that if in the past some inherent characteristics of Robert Frost's poetry and some historical and cultural circumstances have prevented the full blossoming of Frost's recognition in Italy, the scholarly work which has nevertheless been seriously done has prepared the way for original Italian contributions to the international evaluation of Frost's poetry. The job of translating this poetry into Italian also appears as a very stimulating challenge that can now be tackled with the tools of modern stylistic consciousness.
There has been, in fact, an attempt at translating Frost's masques by Francesco Mulas (see the bibliography at the end of this essay). Apart from some blatant mistakes in the translation, though, the editions in themselves appear homemade and rather dubious, so that they cannot be considered official.

As early as 1961, Franco de Poli lamented in the preface to his volume of Frost translations that "the almost total ignorance of Frost's work, in Italy, makes one think that certain scholars of ours choose mainly to deal with "fashionable" writers" (13).

Claudio Gorlier also laments the harms of Frost's "official sanction" and of the "deceivingly classifying labelling" of his poetry (130).

Here Randall Jarrell has often been quoted.

It is significant, though, that in his review of Conoscenza della notte Gorlier relates that as he was involved in the final stage of the translating process, he came to despair of the possibility of translating Frost's poetry, mainly because of some of its intrinsic qualities and because of the higher variety of modulations of the English tongue as compared to Italian (126, 131).

Tommaso Pisanti also uses "lecca" in his anthology of 1978.

As in Nobile's translation of "Winter-Death", mentioned above: "Può la neve ammucchiarsi alta più piedi/ contro gli aceri, i ceri e le betulle,/ ma non spegnere il coro/ delle garrule rane" (229).

This is not the case of the other translation of "The Silken Tent", by Carlo Izzo (Poeti del Novecento italiani e stranieri. Edited by Elena Croce. Torino: Einaudi, 1960. 535).

A complete translation of this poem has now followed, by Nicola Gardini, in the poetry magazine Poesia (96 (June 1996): 14). The small magazine contributions to the diffusion of Frost's poetry in Italy are not extensively treated here because they have been inconspicuous, as can be gathered from the bibliography accompanying this essay.

Translations


**Critical studies**

Berti, Luigi. _Boccaporto_. Firenze: Parenti, 1940. 117-33. [Contains the earliest translations of Frost’s poems].


Translations of foreign critical studies


