

GERALD PARKS
Università di Trieste

Dialect Poems from Northern Italy in English: a Brief Sample

It is an open secret that much of the best Italian poetry is written in dialect. This poetry is not generally very well known, even in Italy, with a few notable exceptions. The poets who write in a local dialect tend to have a local reputation, and even though they may be well known and much honoured in their home town, their fame rarely goes beyond the town walls. The first reason for this is linguistic: very few people outside the local area can read their works. Another reason is the use of local cultural references in their works – the often free use made of local place names, persons, and historical events.

To avoid misunderstandings, it must be pointed out at once that the term “dialect poetry”, when used with regard to Italy, has an entirely different meaning from what is usually understood by the term in English. When an English or American reader sees the term “dialect poetry”, he or she thinks usually of the verses of Kipling or, in the United States, the dialect poems by James Russell Lowell, etc. This kind of “dialect” is an invention of the author, who attempts to give a rough imitation of the substandard English speech of uneducated people. The verse is light and humorous, and is not generally considered to be “serious poetry.”

Several points should be underlined here: (1) such a “dialect” is derived from, and is a socially inferior form of, standard English; (2) this “dialect” has no geographical connotations, but is considered typical of a certain social class; (3) this “dialect” is not spoken by the author who records it; (4) this “dialect” is considered incapable of serious literary expression.

None of these points applies to the Italian dialects. First of all, they are not derived from standard Italian, but are independent “idioms” that have evolved from medieval Latin in just the same way as Italian (which is nothing but the dialect of Tuscany, which came to be adopted nationwide, first as a literary language, then as the language of schooling and the mass media). They have their own vocabulary and syntax though, being romance tongues, they share many features in common with Italian and other romance languages. Secondly, the dialects of Italy are geographically localized, so that practically every province has its own dialect. For example, the dialect of Trieste is considerably different from the dialect of Grado, even though only 30 miles separate the two towns. People coming from other parts of Italy may find the local dialect totally incomprehensible, or at best partially understandable, unless they happen to

know it for some reason. On the contrary, these dialects are not socially marked, but are used by all the social classes. Thirdly, the author of poetry in dialect in Italy is almost certainly a speaker of that dialect (Virgilio Giotti is an exception). And finally, there is considerable fine literature written in these dialects. The names of Carlo Goldoni, who wrote many comedies in the dialect of Venice, and Edoardo de Filippo, who wrote plays in the dialect of Naples, are world-famous. But there is much more. Poets such as Carlo Porta, Giacomo Belli, Salvatore di Giacomo and Biagio Marin are an integral part of Italian literature.

To some extent, the relation of the Italian dialects to standard Italian somewhat resembles that of Scots to English: it is an independent idiom, partially understood by English speakers, and with a fine literary history all its own. But the parallel should not be pushed too far.

Typically, the literary forms most used by writers in dialect are poetry and drama. There are few examples of novels in dialect, although dialect may be used in a novel (mainly in dialogue) whose main vehicle of expression is Italian. But the most flourishing literary medium is poetry. There are several reasons for this.

Poetry, notoriously, does not sell, and poetry written in dialect can be expected to sell even less, because the number of people who can read it is small. Therefore the profit motive is in any case absent, and dialect poets (like most other poets) can be expected to be, in a sense, 'amateurs', i.e. people who have other jobs and cultivate poetry as a hobby. These poets, free from any commercial pressure, and very often financing their own publications, may choose the medium of expression they find most congenial. And if they choose to write in their local dialect, it is because it is the language in which they can express themselves most naturally – the language of their childhood, of family affections, of everyday life. Literary Italian, which they learned at school, may seem cold and remote to them; it is not their mother tongue. But in the dialect they are free to talk about the joys and sorrows of their lives and the lives of those around them; and they can do so honestly, naturally, without rhetoric. Poetry in Italian has a tendency to become rhetorical (as in Manzoni, Carducci or D'Annunzio), but there is almost no trace of rhetoric in the poetry written in dialect. It also tends to be, generally, wonderfully concrete and down-to-earth, with few metaphysical flights (an exception is Biagio Marin). It is much closer to the pulse of normal human experience than almost all the poetry written in standard Italian.

Formally, these poems range from compositions in traditional verse forms such as the sonnet to free verse. Rhyme is used by some authors, and not by others. Alliteration and assonance are frequent. Technically, the poems in dialect are rarely daring or in the 'avant-garde', but they are not naive, either.

The poets who wrote them seem simply to have been largely indifferent to the fashions and trends of mainstream Italian poetry, and to have gone their own way, certain of their own worth.

In this brief article only a few samples of the rich variety of dialect poetry in the 20th century can be given. Four poems written in four different dialects have been chosen, and are reproduced together with the original texts. Other poems have been translated and are being prepared for book publication. The book, entitled *Dialect Poems from Northern Italy*, is the joint effort of the scholar Giorgio Faggin and the translator Gerald Parks.

A word should be said about the translation. It will be clear, from what was said above about the Italian dialects, that it would make no sense to try to translate these poems into some sort of English 'dialect.' The implications of trying to do so would be disastrous, aside from the fact that the present translator is not capable of reproducing credibly any English or American 'dialect.' And then, it would have been necessary to invent many different dialects, since almost every author in this book has his or her own. In reality, the only possible solution is to treat these dialects the same way we do the dialects of ancient Greece. No one has ever proposed translating Sophocles into a different 'dialect' from that used for translating Homer or Sappho.

An attempt has been made to reproduce some of the formal features of the original texts, and in some cases it has been possible to be faithful to the overall form and, say, to write a sonnet where the original was one. In any case, the translated text retains the number of lines of the original and, if possible, is written in a similar metre and with a similar line length. Free verse, of course, presents no such problems. In general, the translator has tried to produce texts that preserve the meaning of the original poems and yet can also be read as poems in their own right; they are intended to be neither 'ponies' nor free adaptations, but steer a middle course between these two extremes.

It may be asked what is the future of dialect poetry in Italy. That is linked, of course, to the future of the dialects themselves. The preservation of so many different dialects has depended, in the past, on a general social conservatism and lack of mobility. People would be born, grow up, live and die in the same community. There are places in Italy where this still happens, but obviously in the era of globalization, television, internet, and the McDonaldization of the world, things are changing even in the most remote corners of the country. Young people tend to be more mobile than their elders, and, being better educated, they also tend to use Italian more than the local dialect. There are, to be sure, movements tending to protect the dialects and even to promote their use, but with what success is uncertain.

And now we invite the reader to explore this almost uncharted territory of poetic experience, confident that he or she will come away from these poems enriched and vivified.

Virgilio Giotti

Vècia Mòglie

La xe in leto, nel scuro, svea un poco;
 e la senti el respiro del mari
 che queto dormi, vècio anca lui 'desso.
 E la pensa: xe bel sentirse arente
 'sto respiro de lui, sentir nel scuro
 ch'el xe là, no èsser soli ne la vita.
 La pensa: el scuro fa paura; forsi
 parchè morir xe andar 'n un grando scuro.
 'Sto qua la pensa: e la scolta quel quieto
 respiro ancora, e no' la ga paura
 nò del scuro, nò de la vita, gnanca
 no del morir, quel che a tuti ghe 'riva.

(V. Giotti, *Versi*, Trieste 1953)

Old Wife

She's now in bed, in the dark, not quite awake;
 and she hears the breathing of her husband
 who's calmly sleeping, old like her, too, now.
 And she thinks: it's nice to feel near me
 this breathing of his, to feel in the darkness
 that he's there, not to be alone in life.
 She thinks: the dark is scary; maybe because
 dying is going into a great darkness.
 This is what she thinks; and listens to that quiet
 breathing once more, and she is not afraid
 of the darkness, or of life, or even
 of dying, that comes some day to everyone.

Biagio Marin

La solitàe la xe comò la piova

La solitàe la xe comò la piova
che la soneva sora 'l mar lisiera
cò, mànolo, me 'ndevo su la spiassa
su l'ora che a levante fèva sera.

La solitàe vigniva co' 'l caligo
da le marine ignote de ponente;
la ronpeva ogni tanto garghe sigo
de garghe oselo ne l'onbra cressente.

Dolse 'l rumor de l'aqua su l'onbrela,
caressa al cuor el respirâ de l'ola;
passeva silensiosa garghe vela,
che ne la piova pareva più sola.

E me più solo fato conca svoda
e sonante de duti quii laminti,
de quele parolete de la piova
e dei fis-ci, lontan, dei bastiminti.

(B. Marin, *Il non tempo del mare*, Milano 1964)

Loneliness Is Like the Rain

Loneliness is like the rain
that sounded lightly on the sea
when, as a boy, I wandered on the beach
in the hour that dusk was falling in the east.

Loneliness came together with the fog
of unknown western shores;
at times it was broken by a lonely cry
of some rare seagull in the growing dark.

Sweet was the sound of water on my umbrella,
the breaking of the waves a heart's caress;
then some rare sailboat would pass silent by,
and in the rain it seemed even more alone.

And I, more lonely, became an empty shell
resounding inside me with all these laments,
with all those little words spoken by the rain
and, far away, the whistles of the ships.

Giacomo Noventa

Par vardàr

Par vardàr dentro i çieli sereni,
Là su sconti da nuvoli neri,
Gò lassà le me vali e i me orti,
Par andar su le çime dei monti.

Son rivà su le çime dei monti,
Gò vardà dentro i çieli sereni,
Vedarò le me vali e i me orti,
Là zó sconti da nuvoli neri?

(G. Noventa, *Versi e poesie*, Milano 1956)

To Take a Look

To look into the tranquil skies,
Hidden up there by the black clouds,
I left my valleys and my gardens,
To climb up to the peaks of the mountains.

I came up to the peaks of the mountains,
I looked into the tranquil skies;
Will I see my valleys and my gardens,
Hidden down there by the black clouds?

Luigi Olivero

Crist paisan

Crist senza cros, ò mòrt, biond partisan
 che 't pende con la còrda al còl, strossà,
 le man daré dla schin-a ai pols gropà,
 j'euj fiss al cel: a un ragg ëd sol lontan.

Ij cornajass, ch'at vòlo antorn, a van
 a possesse an s'ij branch dl'erbo gelà
 e con dë strèp ëd bèch e dë sgrinfà
 scarniflo toe fatèsse 'd Crist paisan.

An sle sfond invernègh ëd la campagna
 – bianca-azura-ondolà paréj d'un mar –
 l'erbo e tò còrp son fèrm ant na mistà.

Ma un fil ëd sangh, dai tò pé rèidi, a sagna
 ant ij sorch frèid come scalin d'autàr
 scaudand la smens dël gran dla Libertà.

(L. Olivero, *Romanzie*, Torino 1983)

Peasant Christ

Christ without a cross, o dead, blond partisan
 hanging with the rope around your neck, all twisted,
 your hands behind your back, tied at the wrists,
 your eyes fixed on the sky: at a distant ray of sun.

The ravens that fly round you now go straight
 to perch on branches of the frozen tree
 and with their beaks and claws they scratch and flay
 and mutilate your looks, you peasant Christ.

In this cold winter country air and ground –
 blue-white and wavy like the seawater –
 still like an icon stand the tree and your body.

But a trickle of blood, from your stiff feet, drips down
 in the cold furrows like steps of an altar
 warming the seed of the grain of liberty.

For Further Reading

- Brevini (a cura di) (1999) *La poesia in dialetto: Storia e testi dalle origini al Novecento*, 3 voll., Milano, Mondadori.
- Chiesa M. e Tesio G. (a cura di) (1984) *Le parole di legno: Poesia in dialetto del '900 italiano*, 2 voll., Milano, Mondadori.
- Della Monica W. (1981) *I dialetti e l'Italia: Inchiesta fra scrittori, poeti, specialisti*, Milano, Pan.
- Dell'Arco M., Pasolini P.P. (1995) *Poesia dialettale del Novecento*, Torino, Einaudi [Prima ed., Guanda, Parma, 1952].
- Elwert W.Th. (1967) *Die mundartliche Kunstdichtung Italiens und ihr Verhältnis zur Literatur in der Hochsprache* (1939) in *Studien zu den romanischen Sprachen und Literaturen*, vol. I, Wiesbaden-Stuttgart, Steiner. (Italian translation: *La poesia dialettale d'arte in Italia e la sua relazione con la letteratura in lingua colta*, Roma, Quaderni della Biblioteca nazionale centrale di Roma, 2000).
- Haller H.W. (1986) *The Hidden Italy: A Bilingual Edition of Italian Dialect Poetry*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press.
- ID. (1988) *Lexicon der romanistischen Linguistik (LRL)*, vol. III: Italienisch, Korsisch, Sardisch. Ed. by G. Holtus, M. Metzeltin, Chr. Schmitt, Tübingen, Niemayer.
- Mazzamuto P. (1984) *La letteratura dialettale in Italia*, Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Palermo.
- Sansone M. (1948) *Introduzione allo studio delle letterature dialettali in Italia*, Bari-Napoli, Adriatica Editrice.
- Spagnoletti G., Vivaldi C. (1991) *Poesia dialettale dal Rinascimento a oggi*, 2 voll., Milano, Garzanti.