

“Dark juxtaposition” – D. H. Lawrence, Verga and Cultural Difference

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In this short paper, I propose to consider D. H. Lawrence as a travel writer and translator of the work of Giovanni Verga, the Sicilian novelist best known for the novels *I Malavoglia* and *Mastro Don Gesualdo* and author of numerous short stories and sketches of peasant and country life in Sicily, collected principally in *Vita Dei Campi*, *Novelle Rusticane* and *Vagabondaggio*. I would like to suggest that it is unfair to Lawrence and an inadequate appraisal of his engagement with Verga and his work to base our judgment on his limited knowledge of the Italian language and the haste with which he carried out his translations of *Mastro Don Gesualdo* and the short stories in *Vita dei Campi* and *Novelle Rusticane*.

Lawrence's responses to Verga are, in an important manner, bound up with his engagement with cultural difference and his sense of place and with his search for the so called Other of European civilization. We should also take into account Lawrence's status as a working novelist and an advanced and highly perceptive critic and theorist of the novel when seeking to define the criteria by which to judge his translations.

Furthermore, his approach to translation could help us, in our examination of his achievement, to extend and enrich the vocabulary of the criteria we apply in the evaluation of literary translation, particularly when we consider the need for a more empirical approach to the assessment of literary prose translation, which has been traditionally left somewhat in the shade due to the greater attention paid to poetry.

So one of my aims is to seek to broaden the scope of analysis which we apply to Lawrence's involvement with Italy and Verga in order to show how his decision to undertake these difficult and extensive translations is consistent with the spirit of this involvement and is linked, as it were, symbiotically, to his critical and theoretical interest in the novel *per se* and to his personal agenda both as traveller and travel writer.

Lawrence's involvement with Verga's work, in the form of translation and critical commentary, takes us to the heart of Lawrentian critical discourse and debate and creates an added opportunity to appraise Verga as seen by a highly individual and perceptive critic.

The key text in travel writing that comes from Lawrence's Italian experiences is *Sea and Sardinia*, written in 1921 during his stay with Frieda in Taormina and describing their eight day visit in January of that year to Sardinia, which, Lawrence says:

[...] lies outside; outside the circuit of civilization. Like the Basque lands. Sure enough it is Italian now, with its railways and its motor omnibuses. But there is an uncaptured Sardinia still. It lies within the net of this European civilization, but it isn't landed yet.¹

Lawrence's specific agenda for visiting Sardinia remains ambiguous in the text, but can be seen as couched within the framework of his declared engagement in a personal search for alternatives to first British and later European civilization, which would take him eventually to Ceylon, Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti, America, Mexico. Helen Carr notes that Lawrence's travels were 'energized by a passionate quasi-primitivist quest; he longed for a truer, simpler, more intense way of being and was endlessly disappointed.'²

The latter years of his life, subsequent to his definitive break with and departure from England in 1919, would be spent travelling and living abroad and this is the period in which he produces his travel writing and his translations. As far as Italy is concerned, he had begun as a travel writer, or rather, as a writer for whom travel was indispensable, with the bringing together, from earlier travel sketches, of *Twilight in Italy* in 1915 but the text that is most emblematic of his engagement with place and cultural difference remains *Sea and Sardinia*. Thematically, this intricate and demanding book gives evidence of Lawrence's fear of the female and of his speculation on the possibility of asserting forms of masculine independence from the female, as can be seen in his attitude to Frieda, nicknamed 'Queen Bee' and the threatening personification of Etna as a 'wicked witch,' or in his interest in the 'Girovago' encountered while they are in Sorgono. There is also his fear of the post war *en masse* rise of the workers, with, as he envisioned it, a concomitant reduction of life in society to a servile elimination of individuality and originality. Yet one of the most striking characteristics of *Sea and Sardinia*, which marks its

¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia* (Harmondsworth. Penguin, 1997), 9.

² Helen Carr, *Modernism and Travel 1880-1940 in The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, Peter Hulme and Tim Young (eds.) (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 83.

uniqueness, is Lawrence's ability to comment and change and reappraise both his positive and his many negative reactions to places and people, which is symptomatic of his total honesty aided by a mercurial intelligence which manifests itself in his refusal to accept a limiting, constricting single voice. It is as if he were engaged in the creation of a form of internal polyphony in his appraisal of surroundings and experiences and his resistance to and intense irritation at being perceived by the Other, Sicilian or Sardinian, in stereotypical form. Travel, for Lawrence, is a lived experience which symbiotically, in relation to the landscape, people, buildings and trees, contributes to the formation of the living self. Jack Stewart sees the trip to Sardinia as 'a voyage of total perception, its dynamics a process of interpenetration with the world'³ and suggests that Lawrence is seeking out primitive landscapes in connection with nostalgia for blood consciousness:

In his response to such landscapes, Lawrence projects and receives back, altered or clarified, something of his deepest self. He reads the landscape as if it were the physical form of his idea.⁴

In a well known passage in Chapter VI, Lawrence acknowledges the 'conscious genius' of the place, Italy:

[...] For us to go to Italy and to penetrate into Italy is like a most fascinating act of self-discovery – back, back down the old ways of time [...]⁵

He likens himself to a restored Osiris:

Italy has given me back I know not what of myself, but a very, very great deal. She has found for me so much that was lost.⁶

When we turn to Lawrence's involvement with Verga, it is sense of place which immediately comes to the forefront in his comments on the Sicilian writer. Probably Lawrence's best known statement in this regard comes from his opening essay in *Studies in Classic American Literature* in which he declares that every continent has its own great spirit of place and that

³ Jack, F. Stewart, "Metaphor and Metonymy, Color and Space, in Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia*" in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 41, No.2 (Summer, 1995), 211.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁵ Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia*, 117.

⁶ *Ibid.*

every people is polarized in a particular locality which is home, that the spirit of place is 'a great reality.'⁷

In his translator's note to Verga's *Short Sicilian Novels* he comments:

Many of these sketches are said to be drawn from actual life, from the village where Verga lived and from which his family originally came. The landscape will be more or less familiar to any one who has gone in the train down the east coast of Sicily to Siracuse, past Etna and the Plains of Catania and the Biviere, the lake of Lentini, on to the hills again. And anyone who has once known this land can never be quite free from the nostalgia for it, nor can he fail to fall under the spell of Verga's wonderful creation of it, at some point or other.⁸

In his critical comments on *Mastro Don Gesualdo* he makes an emotional declaration which brings together his sense of what Sicily had given him and his sense of its uniqueness as a place, evoked by Verga:

[...] If you have any physical feeling for life [...] if you have any appreciation for the southern way of life, then what a deep fascination there is in *Mastro Don Gesualdo!* Perhaps the deepest nostalgia I have ever felt has been for Sicily, reading Verga. Not for England or anywhere else- for Sicily the beautiful, that goes deepest into the blood. It is so clear, so beautiful, so like the physical beauty of the Greek.⁹

For Lawrence, *Mastro Don Gesualdo* is 'a great undying book, one of the great novels of Europe:'

If you cannot read it because it is *a terre* and has neither nervous uplift nor nervous hysteria, you condemn yourself. As a picture of Sicily in the middle of the last century, it is marvellous [...] There are no picture-postcard effects. The thing is a heavy, earth-adhering organic whole.¹⁰

In 1957, Giovanni Cecchetti published an extended English version of a paper originally presented in Italian two years previously at a Chicago

⁷ D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London. Penguin, 1971), 12.

⁸ Giovanni Verga, *Short Sicilian Novels (Novelle Rusticane)* translated from the Italian by D. H. Lawrence (New York. Daedalus, 1984).

⁹ Anthony Beal, (ed.) *D. H. Lawrence. Selected Literary Criticism* (London. Heinemann, 1956), 278.

¹⁰ Giovanni Verga, *Mastro Don Gesualdo* translated by D. H. Lawrence, (London. Jonathan Cape, 1925), xiv.

meeting of the Modern Language Association which, while praising Lawrence for bringing Verga to an English reading public, severely criticized the end product, commenting that the work of translation was done at 'unbelievable speed'¹¹ without proper revision and checking and that Lawrence's knowledge of Italian was inadequate to the task. Cecchetti limits his comments – he cites numerous examples of errors and failures in comprehension in Lawrence's translations – to the translations of *Novelle Rusticane* and *Vita dei Campi*, which are collections of short stories and does not examine the novel *Mastro Don Gesualdo* since, he says 'the short stories provide enough material for observations on Lawrence's work as a translator.'¹²

G. H. McWilliam, in his 1999 introduction to his own translation of *Cavalleria Rusticana* comments that 'Lawrence's version's of Verga can hardly be regarded as adequate' and notes a couple of examples, similar in nature to those listed by Cecchetti, of incomprehension of phrases and items of vocabulary.

We can make a distinction between two types of voice in translation. One is the voice of the author, which may be difficult to pin down. This is particularly so in the case of Verga, who, particularly in *Mastro Don Gesualdo*, is actively engaged in the technical obfuscation of narrative, authorial voice in favour of an impersonal method of presentation which privileges choral and polyphonic narration and voicing and the use of free indirect speech in his fictional representation of the busy life of his home town of Vizzini. *Mastro Don Gesualdo* is, in many of its episodes, a marvellous inebriating kaleidoscopic tour de force of crowd and group scenes which acquire and provoke in the reader a sense of both the spontaneity and density of theatre.

The novel is noteworthy for the richness of its language, particularly in its powerful and consistent metaphorical representation of animality in human behaviour and expression, as Verga seeks to convey what Lawrence calls 'the incredible spiteful meanness' of life in the villages and small towns of Sicily. The use of free indirect speech, as an alternative to direct authorial narration can only have been sympathetic to the author of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, critical comment on which has

¹¹ Giovanni Cecchetti, "Verga and D. H. Lawrence's Translations" in *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Autumn 1957), 335.

¹² *Ibid.*

come to propose the idea that Lawrence's novels are structured dialogically and that he was purposefully engaged in narrative experimentation that involved the surrendering of his own voice in favour of that of another mind or minds, those of his characters.¹³

The other type of voice is that of the translator or rather a 'discursive presence' which can make itself heard in the choices made by the translator in a variety of ways. We need to establish to what extent that presence is competent, adequate or accomplished and to what extent it is disruptive or even wilfully meddling. In Lawrence's case, while it is fair to say that many of his linguistic choices are in error, either because of an inadequate understanding of the original or because of haste or lack of revision, it is also fair to say that his critical awareness of the nature of the text he was translating made him sensitive to some of the principal issues involved in trying to translate Verga into English.

Cecchetti, for example, acknowledges Lawrence's sensitivity to the question of language in the novel citing a letter to Edward Garnett in which Lawrence states:

He (Verga) is *extraordinarily good* – peasant – quite modern – Homeric – and it would need somebody who could absolutely handle English in the dialect, to translate him. He would be most awfully difficult to translate. That is what tempts me: though it is rather a waste of time and probably I shall never do it. Though if I don't, I doubt anyone else will – adequately at least.¹⁴

McWilliam, while commenting on Lawrence's lack of modesty, acknowledges the critical astuteness of the first part of this declaration, which draws attention to three of Verga's outstanding qualities as a writer of narrative:

his familiarity with popular, colloquial speech; the modernity of his prose style which placed him at the forefront of literary innovation in the latter part of the nineteenth century ... and the epic structure of his two major novels.¹⁵

¹³ M. Elizabeth Sargent, Garry Watson, "D. H. Lawrence and the Dialogical Principle: 'The Strange Reality of Otherness,'" *College English*, Vol. 63, No. 4, (Mar. 2001), 412-13.

¹⁴ Aldous Huxley, (ed.) *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence* (London. Heinemann, 1932), 529.

¹⁵ Giovanni Verga, *Cavalleria Rusticana and Other Stories* translated and with an Introduction by G. H. McWilliam (London. Penguin, 1999), xiii.

Cecchetti notes that this comment shows 'that he felt the regional linguistic stratum lying just beneath the surface of Verga's prose' but remarks that Lawrence fails to indicate how the 'dialect' should be used, adding that 'very probably he meant to employ it directly' and alludes to what he calls Lawrence's inconsistent and rather inappropriate use of London cockney in parts of the dialogue in *Cavalleria Rusticana*.¹⁶ Cecchetti's reference to cockney is mistaken. The language used by Lawrence in the dialogues between Turiddu, Alfio, Lola and Santa in his translation of the story *Cavalleria Rusticana* owes much more to his native North Midlands than to Cockney and is consistent with the translator's need to render colloquial non-formal speech in dialogue. There is certainly no speaking equivalent of the Joseph of *Wuthering Heights*, nor for that matter, of a character like Horsepool in Lawrence's own story *The Sick Collier*. It should be noted that the language of Verga's characters, depending of course on who is doing the talking, can be simple syntactically, grammatically incorrect and highly colloquial, but he never uses dialect directly except for isolated words and expressions, which are usually italicized to indicate their markedness in the text. It is also worth noting that Lawrence generally manages to render the meaning and the spirit of expressions in dialect well and makes a consistent and diligent attempt to be faithful to tone and rhythm in colloquial speech which is such an important element in Verga's writing.

In assessing Lawrence's translations, of *Mastro Don Gesualdo* in particular, because Lawrence's discursive presence can be observed more consistently than in the short stories, attention could, I believe, be very profitably drawn to specific and important questions in the field of translation studies, such as equivalence at word level and in terms of idiom and fixed expressions and the translation of metaphor.

To return briefly to the question of dialect and colloquial speech already mentioned, one interesting example of just such an area of analysis in the specific case of *Mastro Don Gesualdo* can be seen in Lawrence's interfering 'discursive presence' in his use of North Midland colloquial country speech in the scene in Chapter Four of Part One of the novel in which Mastro Don Gesualdo returns to his house at Canziria after an eventful day of work and hard dealing. Here he finds Diodata, his servant woman and mother of his two illegitimate sons and sits down and talks

¹⁶ Cecchetti, "Verga and D. H. Lawrence's Translations," 337.

with her and relaxes as she serves him food and wine. In his notes to the Einaudi edition of the novel, Giancarlo Mazzacurati comments how here Mastro Don Gesualdo returns to his 'rural Beatrice' and, surrounded by his accumulated property 'la roba,' allows his senses to relax while his mind relentlessly and restlessly turns over new possibilities including that of marrying Bianca Trao and thereby acceding to a higher sphere of local power and social influence.¹⁷ It is perhaps the only moment of genuine peace and contentment that Don Gesualdo will enjoy before the turn of events and the bitterness that will eventually destroy him from the inside begin their slow process of erosion.

Sensitive to the idyllic rural calm of this moment in the novel, Lawrence inserts forms of address in Don Gesualdo's speech to Diodata, such as 'thee' and 'thou' and 'lass' which simply are not present in the original, but which tend to reinforce the idyllic and pastoral atmosphere of the moment. Two chapters later, as Don Gesualdo sits gazing at Bianca Trao's house considering her potential qualities as a wife, while Diodata, the mother of his children sits by him, Lawrence's translation reads: 'Diodata looked as well, saying nothing, her heart swelling.'¹⁸

The problem is that the line simply doesn't exist in the original, but perhaps an explanation for its presence can be found in Lawrence's comment, in his introduction to his translation of the novel, that:

He should, of course, by every standard that we know, have married Diodata. Bodily, she was the woman he turned to. She bore him sons. Yet he married her to one of his own hired men, to clear the way for his, Gesualdo's marriage with the noble but merely pathetic Bianca Trao. And after he was married to Bianca [...] he still went back to Diodata and paid her husband to accommodate him. And it never occurs to him to have any of this on his conscience.¹⁹

Lawrence here is discussing the fact that he fails to understand what motivates Gesualdo, why he does what he does and why he brings about his own ruin and Lawrence's critical questioning clearly contributes to his 'discursive presence' in the translation.

¹⁷ *Giovanni Verga Mastro Don Gesualdo*, (a cura di Giancarlo Mazzacurati), (Torino. Einaudi, 1992), 108.

¹⁸ Verga, *Mastro Don Gesualdo* translated by D. H. Lawrence, (London. Jonathan Cape, 1925), 114.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xvii.

Analysis of his translation of Verga should therefore be carried out in tandem with analysis of his critical comments on Verga's texts. It should take into account perceptible similarities between the narrative techniques of the two writers, but should be alert to departures of the kind I have just illustrated.

Lawrence's engagement with Verga is therefore, illustrative of concerns which regard Lawrence the man and his personal preoccupation with what one critic has called an 'ethics of alterity.' There is also his critical concern with the novel and the short story. It is, I feel, significant when a figure like Lawrence declares that Verga's stories, *Rosso Malpelo* and *Jeli Il Pastore* are 'among the finest stories ever written.' Together with these considerations, there is also his strong feeling for Italy, for Sicily, for Sardinia. These places fuel life-giving and restorative responses and are an integral part of the permanent examination of self, in relation to the world and the Other, in which Lawrence was engaged. It is the context in which we can appraise his ability to take the sensibility of a practising novelist to translation in a language of which, technically, he was not a master.

In her St. Jerome lecture in the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 2003, the late Susan Sontag, quoting the saint himself to the effect that 'the inevitable result of aiming at a faithful reproduction of the author's words and images is a sacrifice of meaning and grace' offered a complementary account of the process of translation which seems to me appropriate to Lawrence's encounters with Verga. She writes as follows:

Literary translation is, I think, preeminently an ethical task and one which mirrors and duplicates the role of literature itself, which is to extend our sympathies; to educate the heart and mind; to create inwardness; to secure and deepen the awareness (with all its consequences) that other people, different from us, really do exist.²⁰

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²⁰ Susan Sontag, "The World as India: Translation as a Passport within the Community of Literature," (TLS, June 13, 2003), 15.