

COLERIDGE'S TRANSLATIONS OF GABRIELLO CHIABRERA

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Kathleen Coburn has shown that before leaving England for Malta in April 1804 Coleridge 'had almost certainly read very little Italian literature in the original, though he had made a beginning in the language.'¹ During his stay in Malta he improved his knowledge of the Italian language and this was probably also due to the fact that, contrary to what Coburn maintains (*Coleridge-Notes* 1962: 397), the island was 'almost completely isolated from [*anything but*] Italian culture'! Ever since 1249, the year the Arab dominators were expelled from the island, and in particular after 1530, when Malta was taken over by the Order of the Knights of St. John, the cultural life on the island was almost totally dependent on what was forthcoming from the nearby peninsula. This was also the case at the time of Coleridge's stay in Malta.

In November 1804 he was quite capable of understanding spoken Italian; at the beginning of 1805 he was definitely having a few conversations with Vittorio Barzoni, one of the first Italian exiles to set foot in Malta, in the Italian tongue and in 1806 he could distinguish between the Tuscan and Roman variants of Italian (*Coleridge-Notes* 1962:398). A few years later, he even devoted some of his time to translating Italian authors, amongst whom was Gabriello Chiabrera, a lyric poet he found incomparable (*Coleridge-Notes* 1962: 401). The Chiabrera translations can provide an approximate but reliable checkpoint on Coleridge's knowledge of Italian in the years 1808 – 1810.

The first time Coleridge mentions Chiabrera is in the following notebook entry (n. 2365), dated 21 December 1804:

2365 22.13 Jupiter & the Poet -cut your
throat & come to me? in Chabrerta- Jupiter
divided the world -The Poet came in after the
division- he had been gazing on the Heaven-&-²

'Chabrerta' for 'Chiabrera' could be a slip of the pen, as suggested by Coburn (*Coleridge-Notes* 1962:[2364]), but the more or less-contemporaneous error 'Bassoni' for 'Barzoni' (*Coleridge-Notes* 1962:398) leads me to suggest that in late 1804 – early 1805 Coleridge's mastery of written Italian was still quite approximate.

The first three Chiabrera odes which Coleridge partly transcribed were *Per l'Altezza Serenissima di Ferdinando II, Gran Duca di Toscana*, *Loda il gran Duca di Toscana: Ferdinando II* and *Per Cristoforo Colombo*.³ These extracts were reproduced from the 1782 Venetian edition of Chiabrera's *Opere*, which Coleridge possessed.⁴ His being very faithful to the Italian original (*Coleridge-Notes* 1973:[3318]) is an indication of laudable philological accuracy, but his reproducing even the misprints of the 1782 edition, such as *Ne* for *Ne'* at line 5 of the following extract⁵, proves that his approximate knowledge of Italian prevented him from fully understanding the meaning of these texts:

Columbus

Certo, da cor, ch'alto destin non scelse,
Son l'impresе magnanime neglette;
Ma le bell'alme alle bell'opere elette
Sanno gioir nelle fatiche eccelse;
Ne biasmo popolar, frale catena, 5
Spirto d'onore/il suo cammin raffrena.

Così lunga stagion per modi indegni
Europa disprezzò l'inclita speme:
Schernendo il vulgo (e *seco* i Regi insieme)
Nudo nocchier promettitor di Regni; 10
Ma per le sconosciute onde marine
L'invitta prora ei pur sospinse al fine.

Qual uom, che torni alla gentil consorte,
Tal ei da sua magion spiegò l'antenne;
L'Ocean corse, e i turbini sostenne, 15
Vinse le crude immagini di morte,
Poscia dell'ampio mar spenta la guerra,
Scorse la dianzi favolosa Terra.

Allor dal cavo Pin scende veloce
E di grand'Orma il nuovo Mondo imprime; 20
Nè men ratto per l'Aria erge sublime
Segno del Ciel, insuperabil Croce;
E porge umile esempio, onde adorarla
Debba sua Gente;

(*Coleridge-Text* 1973: [3318 – 3318])

Coleridge actually published this same extract ten years later in his *Essay on the Principles of Method*, contained in Volume III of the 1818 issue of *The Friend*.⁶ Whilst the omission of the apostrophe at 1.20 ('grand Orma') and the reduction of double *mm* to *m* at 1.16 ('imagini') might indicate a certain amount of distraction on the author or the printer's part, the introduction or removal of capital letters (1.1 'Destin'; 1.15 'ocean'; 1.20 'mondo'), the integration or adaptation of the definite article (1.1 'dal cor'; 1.13 'al gentil') and the change of tense from present to perfect (1.23 'porse') could point towards a better knowledge of the Italian language and a greater degree of familiarity with the style of Italian poetry on Coleridge's part in 1818.⁷

The third Chiabrera entry in the *Notebooks* dates back to July-September 1809. Coleridge here transcribes the first stanza of Chiabrera's *Canzone eroica* no. XXVII, entitled *Per Francesco Sforza Duca di Milano* (Coleridge-Text 1973: 3578]). This stanza was published without any significant changes, together with a literal translation, in *The Friend*, no. 4, 7 September, 1809:⁸

I semplici pastori	
Sul Vesolo nevoso	
Fatti curvi e canuti	
D'alto stupor son muti	
Mirando al fonte ombroso	5
Il Po con pochi umori;	
Poscia udendo gli onori	
Dell'urna angusta e stretta,	
Che 'l Adda, che 'l Tesino	
Soverchia in suo camino	10
Che ampio al mar s'affretta,	
Che si spuma, e si suona,	
Che gli si da corona!*	
[...]	

**Literal Translation.* 'The simple Shepherds grown bent and hoary-headed on the snowy Vesolo, are mute with deep astonishment, gazing in the o'ershadowed fountain on the Po with his scanty waters; then hearing of the Honors of his confined and narrow Urn, how he receives as a Sovereign the ADDA and the TESINO in his course, how ample he hastens on to the Sea, how he foams, how mighty his Voice, and that to Him the Crown is assigned'. N.B. I give literal translations of my poetic as well as prose translations, because the propriety of their introduction often depends on the exact sense and order of the words: which it is impossible always to retain in a metrical version.

(Coleridge 1969, v. II:55)⁹

The author's note on literal translations sheds light on his theory of translation: in order to capture the 'exact sense' that a foreign literary work conveys to the native tongue reader, Coleridge is ready to sacrifice the outward 'form', and therefore even to limit the intrinsic artistic value of the literary product. Consequently, in the case of translations, 'meaning' is more important to him than 'artistic appreciation'. Despite Coleridge's intentions, the last part of this literal translation is not at all faithful to the Chiabrera original! At lines 9 – 12, he even goes against his maxim which stresses the importance of retaining the 'order of the words'. This is due to his non perfect knowledge of Italian. First of all, he confuses the Italian relative pronoun *che* ['that'] with the adverb *come* ['how']. This in turn leads him to perceive *soverchia*, the present tense of the third person singular form of the verb *soverchiare* ('to overflow'), as a noun (he translates it as 'Sovereign'). Finally, his inability to distinguish the difference between *si* reflexive (as in 's'affretta') and *sì* ('thus'; in such a way') with an accent (as in 'sìspuma' and 'sìsuona') renders the latter part of his translation a completely different text from the original.¹⁰

Another Chiabrera poem that inspired Coleridge was the 'Epitaffio VII' entitled *Per il Signor Ambrosio Salinero*. In fact, as Coleridge himself points out, '*Tis true, IDOLOCLASTES SATYRANE*, which appeared in issue no. 14 of *The Friend* (23 November 1809), was 'Imitated, though in the movements rather than the thoughts, from the VIIth. of Gli Epitafi of *Chiabrera*: [...]' (Coleridge 1969, v.II:184). Of the Chiabrera original, Coleridge actually gives a more or less faithful poetic translation of lines 8 – 12:

E fu forte a seguir le belle Muse.	8
Non è chiuso sentier che meni all'ombra	
Dell'amate foreste di Parnaso,	
Che a lui fosse nascosto; e non è calle,	
Che sorga a' puri rivi d'Ipocrene,	
Che a lui non fosse aperto. [...] ¹¹	13

which take up lines 20 – 24 of the English text:

The Citadel unconquer'd, and in joy	19
Was strong to follow the delightful Muse.	
For not a hidden path, that to the shades	
Of the belov'd Parnassian forest leads,	
Lurk'd undiscover'd by him; not a rill	
There issues from the fount of Hippocrene	24
But he had trac'd it upward to its' source	
Thro' open glade, dark glen, and secret dell,	
Knew the gay wild-flowers on its' banks, and cull'd	
Its' med'cinable herbs. [...]	

While lines 20 – 23 of Coleridge's version do not in any way depart from the Chiabrera original at lines 8 – 11, the last part of line 23 and line 24 present the reader with three significant changes. Coleridge translates *calle* ['path'], *sorga* ['rises'] and *rivi* ['brook', 'stream'], with respectively, *rill*, *issues* and *fount*. Obviously, one might reason out that Coleridge, being a creative artist himself and having openly declared that his was more of an 'imitation' rather than a proper translation, felt free to produce his own 'original' poem. However, internal evidence leads me to suspect that the changes in these two lines were not the result of a 'free' choice on his part, but of a misunderstanding of the Italian original.

The key to my supposition lies in the verb *sorga*. This is the third person singular form in the subjunctive mood of the verb *sorgere*. The corresponding meaning of *sorgere* in English is 'to rise'. However, the Italian verb can be used both literally and figuratively. Thus, one could say: 'Il sole sorge alle cinque' ['The sun rises at five'], implying a literal meaning, and 'Il Reno sorge dalle Alpi' ['The Rhine rises in the Alps'], with an obvious figurative one. Coleridge's translation indicates that in 1809 he was not yet able to distinguish between the two uses of the Italian verb. In fact, Chiabrera meant *sorga* to literally convey the meaning 'rises', while Coleridge renders in English the figurative one: *issues*, in fact, conveys the idea of 'to come forth', 'to emerge'. His interpretation might have possibly been further complicated by another factor: the similarity (visual, but not semantic!) between *sorga* ['rises'] and *sgorga* [issues] (<v. *sgorgare*).

Obviously, if one were to interpret *sorga* in its figurative sense, it would be quite out of context in the Chiabrera epitaph. This is possibly what happened to Coleridge, and especially so if he did not really know what *calle*, which is usually only made use of in a poetic context, meant. Thus, because of his limited knowledge of Italian, he probably found himself reorganizing the two lines in such a way as to shift attention from what was the central image in the Italian version (*calle* ['the path by the Hippocrene fount']) to the 'fount of Hippocrene' itself. In this 'new' poetic context, with a different central image, Coleridge feels fully authorized in making the three alterations (even *rivi* ['brook', 'stream'] is modified into a *fount*) since this vocabulary is more pertinent to the immediate context.

The two Chiabrera translations here reproduced bear witness to the concept that creative genius cannot be in any way constrained within certain boundaries: Coleridge's limited knowledge of Italian might have been the initial reason for his modifying the original Italian versions; the end products however, i.e. the English versions, prove that successful translations are in fact those that, whilst departing from a set point (the text in the original language), give birth to a 'new', autonomous text. Ironically enough, in this case, the fact that Coleridge did not fully master the Italian language did not constitute a drawback. On the contrary, it proved to be a spark powerful enough to set alight his creative genius.

Notes

1. Cf. S.T. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, v.II, *Notes* (1804 – 1808), ed. by Kathleen Coburn, London 1962. p. 399.
2. Cf. S.T. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, v.II, *Text* (1804 – 1808), ed. by Kathleen Coburn, London, 1962, p. 264].
3. Cf. S.T. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, v.III, *Text* (1808 – 1819), ed. by Kathleen Coburn, London, 1973, pp.[3318 – 3318]. The date on the manuscript is not clear at all but, according to K. Coburn, 1808 seems to be the most likely year (Coleridge-Notes 1973: [3318 – 3318]).
4. Cf. S.T. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, v. III, *Notes* (1808 – 1819), ed. by Kathleen Coburn, London, 1973, p. 3315].
5. Contrary to what K. Coburn suggests (Coleridge-Notes 1973:[3318], *il* (1.6) is correct and should not be emended into *in*.
6. Cf. S.T. Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. by Barbara E. Rooke, v. II, London, 1969, pp. 480 – 481. I shall refer to this volume as Coleridge 1969 v. II and to volume I as Coleridge 1969 v. I.
7. Obviously, his appreciation of certain nuances is far from perfect: 'al gentil consorte' is grammatically correct in Italian, but since the subject of the sentence is *uom*, it stands to reason that the neuter noun *consorte* ['spouse'] can only refer to a female spouse. In this context, therefore, the feminine qualifying article *alla* could never be changed into the masculine one, *al*.
8. In the published version, Coleridge corrects 'ampiao' into 'ampio' (1.11), inserts a comma after 'canuti' (1.3) and an exclamation mark after 'corona' (1.13), eliminates the comma after 'cammino' (1.10) and changes the full stop after 'suona' (1.12) into a comma.
9. The same extract is published again in 1812 and in 1818. Coleridge changes the phrase 'prose translations' into 'prose quotations'. Cf., e.g., Coleridge 1969 v.I: 65 – 66.
10. Lines 9 – 12 should read: 'That Adda and Tesino/it [the urn] overflows in its course/that ample hastens to the sea/that foams and roars in such a way'.
11. Cf. *Delle Opere di Gabriello Chiabrera*, Tomo, ii, contenente le canzonette amorose, e morali, scherzi, sonetti, epitaffi, vendemmie, egloghe, e sermoni, in Venezia, 1805, p. 177.