

## SIMPATICO

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*How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language?*

*Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,  
Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*

In 1978, soon after my translations of Italian poetry began appearing in magazines, I met another American translator of Italian, an older, widely published, and very gifted writer who gave me advice about the art of literary translation. He recommended that I translate an Italian author of my own generation, something which he himself had been doing for many years and with much success. He explained that when author and translator live in the same historical moment, they are more likely to share a common sensibility, and this is highly desirable in translation because it increases the fidelity of the translated text to the original. The translator works better when he and the author are *simpatico*, said my friend, and by this he meant not just "agreeable," or "congenial" -- meanings which this

Italian word is often used to signify -- but also "possessing an underlying sympathy." In other words, the translator should not merely get along with the author, not merely find him likeable; there should also be an identity between them.

The ideal situation occurs, my friend believed, when the translator discovers his author at the start of both their careers. In this instance, the translator can closely follow the author's progress, accumulating exhaustive knowledge of the foreign texts, strengthening and developing the affinity which he already feels with his author's ideas and tastes, becoming, in effect, of the same mind. When *simpatico* is present, the translation process can be seen as a veritable recapitulation of the creative process by which the original came into existence; and when the translator is assumed to participate vicariously in the author's thoughts and feelings, the translated text is read as the transparent expression of authorial psychology or meaning. The voice which the reader hears in any translation made on the basis of *simpatico* is always recognized as the author's, never as a translator's, nor even as some hybrid of the two.

My friend's ideas about translation rest on ideas about poetry which still prevail today in Anglo-American culture, although they received their most decisive formulation some two hundred years ago, with the emergence of Romanticism in England. From Wordsworth to T.S. Eliot to Robert Lowell and beyond, the dominant aesthetic in English-language poetry has been *transparency*, the view, as Antony Easthope puts it in his incisive critique, that "poetry expresses experience; experience gives access to personality, and so poetry leads us to personality"(p.4). My friend's notion of *simpatico* was in fact a development of these assumptions to characterize the practice of translation and define the role of the translator.

Attracted by a theory that offered a sophisticated yet lyrical understanding of what I wanted to do, I followed my friend's advice and came upon an Italian writer who is roughly my own age, the Milanese poet Milo De Angelis. Born in 1951, De Angelis made his precocious debut in 1975, when he was invited to contribute some of his poems to *L'almanacco dello Specchio*, a prestigious annual magazine centered in Milan and published by one of Italy's largest commercial presses, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore. The title of the anthology, literally "*The Almanac of the Mirror*," proclaims it to be a representative literary survey, but the title also connects it with Mondadori's long-standing series of poetry volumes, *Lo Specchio*, whose editorial policies the anthology seems to share: both print recent works by canonized twentieth-century writers, foreign and Italian,

along with a few newcomers. The issue of *L'almanacco* to which De Angelis contributed also included poems by Eugenio Montale and Pier Paolo Pasolini, as well as Italian translations from the poetry of various foreign writers -- Russian (Marina Tsvetayeva), German (Paul Celan), and American (Robert Bly). De Angelis's first book of poems, called *Somiglianze* (*Resemblances*), appeared in 1976 from the small commercial press Guanda, noted in the '70s for its list of innovative contemporary writing. These two titles - the assertive mirror and the tentative resemblances - raised a range of questions about representation, canon formation, and publishing, which continue to haunt my encounter with De Angelis's poetry.

### **Transparency and Opacity**

I happened to see his anthology selection, then got hold of this book, and immediately was struck by the fact that on every level -- linguistic, formal, thematic -- his poems issue a decisive challenge to the notion of *simpatico*. Their abrupt line-breaks and syntactical peculiarities, their obscure mixture of abstraction, metaphor, and dialogue give them an opacity which undermines any sense of a coherent speaking voice. They do not invite the reader's vicarious participation, and in fact resist any reading that would treat them as the controlled expression of an authorial personality or intention. Whose -- or what -- voice would speak in a translation of De Angelis's poetry? Often, I should add, it is more of a question of *which* voice, since the snippets of dialogue that punctuate his texts are impossible to pin down to a distinct identity. De Angelis's poetry questions whether the translator can be (or should be thought of as being) in sympathy with the foreign author. It rather shows that voice in translation is irreducibly strange, never quite recognizable as the poet's or the translator's, never quite able to shake off its foreignness to the reader.

As I began to translate De Angelis's poems<sup>1</sup>, I became aware that the notion of *simpatico* actually mystifies what happens in the translation process. Most crucially, it conceals the fact that in order to produce the sense of transparency in a translated text, in order to give the reader the sense that the text is a window onto the author, the translator must manipulate what often seems to be a very resistant material -- *i.e.*, the language into which he is translating, in most cases his mother tongue. Transparency occurs only when the translation reads fluently, when there are no awkward phrasings, unidiomatic constructions or confused meanings, when clear syntactical connections and consistent pronouns create intelligibility for the reader. When the translation is a poem in free

verse, varied rhythms that avoid jogtrot meters are needed to give the language a conversational quality, to make it sound natural. Line-breaks should not distort the syntax so much as to frustrate the reader's search for comprehension; they should rather support the syntactical continuity which gets him to read for meaning over the lines, pursuing the development of a coherent speaking voice, tracing its psychological contours. These formal techniques reveal that transparency is an illusionistic effect: it depends on the translator's work with language, but it hides this work, even the very presence of language, by suggesting that the author can be seen in the translation, that in it he speaks in his own voice. If the illusion of transparency is strong enough, it may well produce a truth-effect, wherein the authorial voice becomes authoritative, heard as speaking what is true, right, obvious. Translating De Angelis's poems demystified this illusionism for me because they so obviously resist fluency, cultivating instead an aesthetic of discontinuity.

### **The Elusive Authorial Voice**

Consider o poem from *Somiglianze* called "L'idea centrale" ("The Central Idea"), a programmatic text which gave its title to De Angelis's anthology selection:

#### **L'idea centrale**

È venuta in mente (ma per caso, per l'odore  
di alcool e le bende)  
questo darsi da fare premuroso  
nonostante.

E ancora, davanti a tutti, si sceglieva  
tra le azioni e il loro senso.

Ma per caso.

Esseri dispotici regalavano il centro  
distrattamente, con una radiografia,  
e in sogno padroni minacciosi  
sibilanti:

"se ti togliamo ciò che non è tuo  
non ti rimane niente."

## The Central Idea

came to mind (but by chance, because of the scent  
of alcohol and the bandages)

this careful busying of oneself

notwithstanding.

And still, in front of everybody, there was choosing  
between the actions and their meaning.

But by chance.

Despotic beings made a gift of the center

absentmindedly, with an X-ray,

and in a dream threatening bosses

hissing:

"if we take from you what isn't yours

you'll have nothing left."

The Italian poem offers glimpses of a hospital setting, ominous with its suggestion of injury and death, but the actual incident is never precisely defined, and the quasi-philosophical reflections on its meaning remain abstruse, only to be further obscured by the sudden shift to dreaming and the disturbing quotation. Not only is the reader unsure what is happening, he also doesn't quite know who is experiencing it. Until the peremptory statement from the "*padroni*" ("bosses"), the tone is natural yet impersonal, ruminative but not actually introspective, lacking any suggestion that the voice belongs to a particular person, let alone someone who had himself experienced the mysterious physical danger. The text does not offer a coherent position from which to understand it, or a psychologically consistent voice with which to identify. On the contrary, the fragmented syntax and abrupt line-breaks constantly disrupt the signifying process, forcing the reader to revise his interpretations. The opening lines are remarkable for their syntactical shifts and contortions, which compel some synthesis of the details just to make sense of them, but then weaken any closure with the qualification introduced by "*nonostante*" ("notwithstanding"). Enjambment is contradictory, schizoid, metamorphic. If "*il centro*" is given "*distrattamente*," in what sense can it be described as central? Would "*padroni*" who are "*minacciosi*" ("threatening") be "*sibilanti*," an Italian word often used to describe the sound of wind in the reeds, or snakes? The result of the discontinuous form of the poem is that it fails to create the illusionistic effect of authorial presence, demonstrating, with degrees of discomfort that vary from reader to reader, how much transparency depends on language, on formal elements like

linear syntax and univocal meaning.

Most interestingly, De Angelis's abandonment of the formal techniques used to achieve transparency occurs in a poem whose representation of human consciousness clearly rejects romantic individualism. This is the concept of subjectivity which underlies such key affirmations of transparency as Wordsworth's theory of authorial expression in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800): "All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."<sup>2</sup> The same concept is also evident in Eliot's romantic modernism, his ultimate capitulation to the romantic cult of the author: "[poetry] is not the expression of personality," wrote Eliot at the end of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), "but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (pp.10-11). De Angelis's poem, in contrast, represents consciousness not as the unified origin of meaning, knowledge, and action, freely expressing itself in language, but rather as split and determined by its changing conditions -- waking and dreaming, thought and sensory impulses, meaning and action, medical diagnoses and chance. Thus, whatever the central idea may be, it does not come to mind through the subject's own volition; it arises only accidentally, through various determining factors over which the subject has limited or no control, like a smell, or the possibility of death.

### **Transparency as Illusionistic Effect**

Because this is a foreign text that refuses the romantic aesthetic of transparency which has long dominated Anglo-American poetry, it makes any pursuit of *simpatico* difficult if not impossible for the English-language translator. "L'idea centrale" is not a congenial poem to bring into a culture that prizes individuality and self-determination to such an extent that intentionality and self-expression decisively shape its reflections on language and poetry. The continued dominance of these individualistic assumptions in contemporary Anglo-American culture inevitably makes De Angelis a minor writer in English, marginal in relation to the major English-language aesthetic, the transparent expression of authorial experience. Indeed, the dominance of individualistic assumptions makes translation itself a minor genre of writing in English, marginal in relation to writing which not only implements the major aesthetic of transparency, but bears the authorial imprimatur: because transparent discourse is perceived as mirroring the author, it values the foreign text as

original, authentic, true, and devalues the translated text as derivative, simulacral, false, forcing on translation the project of effacing its second-order status with a fluent strategy. It is here that a Platonic metaphysics emerges from beneath romantic individualism to construe translation as the copy of a copy, dictating a translation strategy in which the effect of transparency masks the mediations between and within copy and original, eclipsing the translator's labor with an illusion of authorial presence, reproducing the cultural marginality and economic exploitation which translation suffers today<sup>3</sup>. What then could I hope to achieve by translating De Angelis into English? What theory would inform my translation strategy and govern my choices?

Certainly, I could defer to the prevailing cult of the author and make my translation of "L'idea centrale" as fluent as possible, perhaps with the vain hope of edging the poem closer to transparency. Some progress in this direction can be achieved if in line 12 of the translation the verb "were" is inserted before "hissing," minimizing the fragmented syntax and giving more definition to the meaning, or if the verb "came" in the first line were given a subject, even one as vaguely defined as "it." Of course, adding "were" and "it" would not go very far toward making the text transparent, but they would at least mitigate the grammatical uneasiness usually provoked by the omission of a subject or verb in an English sentence.

### **"Resistancy" in Translation**

My English version, however, refuses fluency. Taking its cue from De Angelis's own aesthetic, my strategy can be called resistancy: it seeks to reproduce the discontinuity of De Angelis's poem. And the translation is no doubt more discontinuous with the omission of a subject and a verb. Resistancy was also at work in my effort to heighten the abruptness of the line-breaks, their effect of forcing the reader to change expectations. In line 1 "scent," so vaguely defined that it can entertain the possibility of pleasantness, replaced two earlier choices, "smell" and "odor," both of which carry strong negative connotations and so gave too much of a foretaste of the ominous "alcohol," reducing the latter's power to evoke surprise and fear. The line-break allows "scent" to release its various possible meanings, making its juxtaposition with "alcohol" a bit more jolting. Similarly, an earlier version of line 9 began with "carelessly," but this was ultimately replaced by the more resonant "absentmindedly," which seems not only inexplicable in the context of

"gift," but rather alarming: since the gift carries the important cognitive associations of "center," it offers the reader the promise of intelligibility, of some light shed on the title -- which, however, the idea of absentmindedness quickly betrays.

By adopting a strategy of resistancy to translate De Angelis's poem, I have been unfaithful to -- and have in fact challenged -- the dominant aesthetic in the target-language culture, *i.e.*, Anglo-American culture, becoming a nomad in my own language, a runaway from the mother tongue. At the same time, however, implementing this strategy must not be viewed as making the translation more faithful to the source-language text. Although resistancy can be said to rest on the same basic assumptions about language and subjectivity which inform De Angelis's poetry, my English version still deviates from the Italian text in decisive ways that force a radical rethinking of fidelity in translation. The kind of fidelity which comes into play here has been called "abusive" by Philip Lewis:

The translator's aim is to rearticulate analogically the abuse that occurs in the original text, thus to take on the force, the resistance, the densification, that this abuse occasions in its own habitat, yet, at the same time, also to displace, remobilize, and extend this abuse in another milieu where, once again, it will have a dual function -- on the one hand, that of forcing the linguistic and conceptual system of which it is a dependent, and on the other hand, of directing a critical thrust back toward the text that it translates and in relation to which it becomes a kind of unsettling aftermath (it is as if the translation sought to occupy the original's already unsettled home, and thereby, far from "domesticating" it, to turn it into a place still more foreign to itself). (p.43)

The "abuses" of De Angelis's writing, what Lewis would call "points or passages that are in some sense forced, that stand out as clusters of textual energy," are precisely its points of discontinuity and indeterminacy. These abuses continue to exert their force in Italian culture, on the Italian-language reader, long after the publication of *Somiglianze*. In 1983, for instance, the poet Maurizio Cucchi began his dictionary entry on De Angelis by stating that "idea and freedom of image often coexist in his verses, revealing a subtending, insinuating uneasiness, an always arduous and troubling skewing [*attraversamento*] of experience" (p.116). My strategy of resistancy aims to reproduce this effect in English by resorting to analogous techniques of fragmentation and proliferation of meaning. As a consequence, the translation establishes an abusive fidelity to the Italian text: on the one hand, the translation resists the transparent



aesthetic of Anglo-American culture which would try to domesticate De Angelis's difficult writing by demanding a fluent strategy; on the other hand, the translation simultaneously creates a resistance in relation to De Angelis's text, qualifying its meaning with additions and subtractions which constitute a "critical thrust" toward it.

For example, certain features of the syntax in my translation make it stranger than De Angelis's Italian. His first line gives a verb with no subject -- "È venuta" -- which is grammatically acceptable and intelligible in Italian because this particular tense indicates the gender of the subject, here feminine, almost immediately leading the Italian-language reader to the last feminine noun, which happens to be in the title, "L'idea." English sentences without subjects are grammatically incorrect and often unintelligible. By following the Italian closely and omitting the subject, therefore, I was actually moving away from the foreign text, or at least making it more difficult, more peculiar: "È venuta" seems fluent to the Italian-language reader, the upper-case "e" showing that it begins a sentence, whereas the grammatical violation in "came to mind" (with the lower case) makes it seem unidiomatic or resistant to an English-language reader -- even if this is only an initial effect, which eventually drives him to look toward the title for meaning. My translation takes a syntactical subtlety in the Italian version, the absence of any explicit subject, and distorts it, giving exaggerated emphasis to what is only gently hinted in the Italian: that the central idea always remains outside of the poem because it is never explicitly stated, perhaps because it cannot be, because it questions any form of representation, whether in language, or X-rays.

### **Translation as Interpretation**

In this instance, my translation exceeds the foreign text because of irreducible differences between the source and target languages, syntactical differences which complicate the effort to produce resistancy. But the excess in the translation can also be seen in the fact that I rendered certain lines primarily on the basis of an interpretation of the poem. Because interpretation and poem are distinct entities, determined by different factors, serving different functions, leading different discursive lives, my interpretative translation should be seen as a transformation of the poem, grounded, it is true, on information about De Angelis's readings in literature, literary criticism, and philosophy, but aimed at circulating this body of writing in the English-language culture

where it continues to be alien and marginal. For what De Angelis's poem shows Anglo-American readers, with all the discomfort of the unintelligible, is that European culture has decisively moved beyond romanticism, in both its nineteenth-and twentieth-century manifestations.

In his letters to me, as well as in his essays, translations and interviews, De Angelis has made clear that his poetry assimilates various literary materials (European and Eastern, classical and twentieth-century), but also that it has a distinct philosophical genealogy: he has read widely in phenomenology and psychoanalysis, yet revises them according to the new conceptions of language and subjectivity which underlie the varieties of poststructuralist thinking in contemporary French and Italian culture. An early interest in Maurice Blanchot's critical speculations about the creative process and the nature of textuality led De Angelis to the study of Heidegger and Ludwig Binswanger, and finally to a belief in the overriding importance of Nietzsche and Lacan for any contemporary project in poetry. This aspect of De Angelis's writing was partly noted by the poet and critic Franco Fortini in a review of that first anthology selection. De Angelis, Fortini found, is "fascinated with the Heideggerian vortices of origin, absence, recurrence, and the danger of death" (pp.1308-9)<sup>4</sup>. My interpretation of "L'idea centrale" argues that it reflects Heidegger's concept of "being-towards-death," but that De Angelis submits this concept to a Nietzschean revision.

In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger argues that human existence is perpetually "falling," always already determined by concern-filled relations with people and things, its identity dispersed into the "they" -- until the possibility of death appears. The anticipation of death, the possibility of being nothing, constitutes a "limit-situation," in which the subject is forced to recognize the inauthenticity of its determinate nature and gains "a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the 'they,' and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious" (p.311). De Angelis's "L'idea centrale" exploits the potential for drama in this climactic moment of truth by sketching a hospital scene. His poem depicts being-towards-death as a state of physical and psychological extremity where the apparent unity of lived experience is split by competing representations, and consciousness loses its self-possession and self-consistency. "Actions" are decentered from intentionality: "their meaning" is never uniquely appropriate to the subject, but an appropriation of the subject by the "they," figured here as the "bosses" who are so "threatening" to identity because they speak "in a dream," having even colonized the unconscious. The "central idea" is that subjectivity is ultimately "nothing," mere action on which meaning is

imposed, an ensemble of biological processes whose meaninglessness "despotic beings" inadvertently reveal when they attempt to master it and impose meaning through a scientific representation like X-rays. The formal peculiarities of this text -- the shifts from realistic detail to abstract reflection to quoted statement, the scanty amount of information, the fragmented syntax -- mimic the identity-shattering experience of being-towards-death by destabilizing the signifying process and frustrating the reader's search for intelligibility.

What does become clear, however, is that De Angelis's disturbingly enigmatic poem carries no suggestion that being-towards-death is the prelude to authentic existence. De Angelis resists Heidegger's idea of authenticity as being that which is unified and free, which is "something of its own" and can "choose" itself and win itself" (p.68). In form and theme, "L'idea centrale" rather suggests Nietzsche's corrosive notes in *The Will to Power*, where human agency is described as "no subject but an action, a positing, creative, no 'causes and effects' " (p.331)<sup>5</sup>. For Nietzsche, subjectivity can never be authentic, because it can never possess an essential identity: it is always a site of multiple determinations, whether produced by the grammaticality of language, the need for a subject in a sentence, or constructed by some more elaborate conceptual system or social institution, like a psychology, morality, religion, family, or job -- the "bosses." De Angelis's poem calls attention to the contradictory conditions of subjectivity, which often remain unacknowledged in the "careful busying" of everyday life and need a limit-situation in order to re-emerge in consciousness.

This interpretation allowed me to solve certain translation problems even as it created others. In line 3, for example, the Italian word "*premuroso*" can be translated variously as "thoughtful," or "attentive," or "solicitous." I chose to avoid these more ordinary meanings in favor of "careful," an ordinary word which has nonetheless supported a philosophical significance and can bring the text closer to what I take to be its themes: Heidegger's English translators use "care" to render *Sorge*, the German word with which he characterizes the nature of everyday life (*Being and Time*, p.237). Similarly, in line 5, the Italian verb "*si sceglieva*" is ordinarily an impersonal form which does not require that a subject be specified. English sentences must have subjects, and so "*si sceglieva*" is often translated into English as "one chose," or the passive voice is used. Yet since my reading establishes a connection with Nietzsche's concept of human agency as subjectless action, as will or force, neither a subject nor the passive would do: I resorted to the slightly strange circumlocution, "there was choosing," and avoided any explicit subject, even in as

impersonal a form as "one," while retaining a sense of forceful action. In both of these examples, the translation lost some of the ordinariness which makes the language of the foreign text especially moving and rich in possibilities -- just as the use of "bosses" to translate "*padroni*" excluded the latter's patriarchal associations, weakening the psychoanalytic resonance of the Italian.

### **Translation as Interrogation of the Original**

My interpretation undoubtedly reflects some of De Angelis's reading and thinking, but the translation solutions which it rationalizes do not make my English version any more faithful to its meaning. No, the interpretation has fixed a meaning, enabling the translation both to go beyond and fall short of De Angelis's poem. Interestingly, the interpretation also points to a logical tension in the theme, namely the contradiction of Heideggerian authenticity by Nietzschean action. My interpretive translation in effect opens up this contradiction in the poem, foregrounds it, and perhaps reveals an aspect of De Angelis's thinking of which he himself was not conscious or which, at any rate, remains unresolved in "The Central Idea." My interpretive translation exceeds the source-language text, supplementing it with research that indicates its contradictory origins and thereby puts into question its status as the original, the perfect and self-consistent expression of authorial meaning of which the translation is always the copy, ultimately imperfect in its failure to capture that self-consistency. The fact is that the original can be seen as imperfect, fissured by conflicting ideas, by the philosophical materials it puts to work, and the translation has made this conflict clearer.

This interrogative pressure in the translation surfaces in another point of resistance, an ambiguity entirely absent from De Angelis's poem. Line 10, "and in a dream threatening bosses," adheres to the word order of the Italian text as closely as linguistic differences permit. But because "threatening" is syntactically ambiguous, applying to either "dream" or "bosses," the line releases a supplementary meaning which proves especially resonant in the interpretive context that guided my other choices: the "bosses" can also be seen as "threatened" by the nightmarish "dream" of determinate subjectivity, or more generally the agents that direct social institutions are equally determined by the hierarchical relations in which they dominate other agents. Here the abusiveness of the translation enacts an unsettling critique of the Italian text by exposing its privileging of the "bosses," its implicit representation

of power and social dominance as transcending the determinations of human action.

A strategy of resistancy thus results in an abusive fidelity which constructs a simultaneous relationship of reproduction and supplementarity between the translation and the foreign text. The precise nature of this relationship cannot be calculated before the translation process is begun because different relationships must be worked out for the specific cultural material of different foreign texts and for the specific cultural situations in which those texts are translated. This makes translation labor-intensive, but also serendipitous, with the translator poring over dictionaries, developing many alternative renderings, unexpectedly finding words and phrases that at once imitate and exceed the foreign text. "In the work of translation," Lewis notes, the integration that is achieved escapes, in a vital way, from reflection and emerges in an experimental order, an order of discovery, where success is a function not only of the immense paraphrastic and paronomastic capacities of language, but also of trial and error, of chance. The translation will be essayistic, in the strong sense of the word" (p.45). Abusive fidelity can be achieved by various strategies of resistancy worked by various formal techniques, but more often than not the techniques surface accidentally as possibilities are tested, their effects evaluated only after the fact, when rationalization occurs.

### **Resistant Translations - Whose Voice?**

Resistancy is thus a translation strategy by which De Angelis's poems become strange to the Italian poet, as well as to the Anglo-American reader and translator. It is certain that De Angelis will not recognize his own voice in the translations, not only because his ideas and texts would seem to make such a way of reading unthinkable for him, but also because he is unable to negotiate the target language. Although he works with many languages, including Greek, Latin, French, German, and different dialects of Italian, he finds English difficult to master and can read my translations only with assistance. When he does this collaborative reading, moreover, he sometimes discovers what I have been arguing -- that my English loses features of the Italian texts and adds others which he had never anticipated.

The resistant strategy of my translations gives them a different, and perhaps more intense, strangeness in the target-language culture. The English-language reader will not recognize the voice(s) in

"The Central Idea," not only because the extreme discontinuity of the text prevents the evocation of a coherent speaking voice, but also because it is informed by ideas that remain foreign, even antipathetic, to Anglo-American culture. In a polemical essay published in 1967, Kenneth Rexroth wondered, "Why Is American Poetry Culturally Deprived?" because he "never met an American poet who was familiar with Jean Paul Sartre's attempts at philosophy, much less with the gnarled discourse of Scheler or Heidegger" (p.57). Rexroth's point, that with few exceptions philosophical thinking is alien to twentieth-century American poetry, remains true more than twenty years later. Among the notable exceptions today are the diverse group of so-called "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" writers, such as Charles Bernstein, who has eroded the generic distinction between poetry and essay by drawing on various European traditions and thinkers, including Dada and Surrealism, Brecht and the Frankfurt School, poststructuralism and post-analytical philosophy<sup>6</sup>. Since Bernstein's aesthetic -- discontinuous, opaque, anti-individualistic -- has earned his writing a marginal position in American publishing, banished to the relative obscurity of the small press and the title magazine, it demonstrates that contemporary American culture is not likely to give a warm reception to a poet like De Angelis, who writes with a knowledge of the main currents in Continental philosophy. De Angelis in fact enjoys a considerably more central position in Italian culture: his writing is published by both small and larger presses and is reviewed by noted critics in a wide range of newspapers and magazines, both local and national, little and mass-audience<sup>7</sup>.

If my translations of De Angelis's speculative poetry will not be immediately recognizable to the English-language reader, it is also true that I do not recognize my own voice in these translations. On the contrary, my encounter with De Angelis's texts has been profoundly estranging, and for reasons specific to my situation as a translator in contemporary Anglo-American culture. By making *simpatico* an impossible goal, the formal discontinuity of the Italian has forced me to question fluency, exposing its link to the individualism of romantic and modern theories of transparent discourse, dislodging me from the position constructed for the English-language translator by editors, publishers and reviewers (and, as my friend's advice suggests, other translators)<sup>8</sup>. Although the hegemony of transparent discourse in contemporary Anglo-American culture has made fluency the prevailing strategy in English-language translation, De Angelis's poetry can still enlist the translator in a cultural contradiction. I was led to implement a resistant strategy in opposition to the rules by which my work would most likely be

judged, and yet that strategy, far from proving more faithful to the Italian texts, in fact abused them by exploiting their potential for different and incompatible meanings<sup>9</sup>.

The challenge which translating De Angelis's poetry poses to romantic and modern theories of discourse is quite similar to the one posed by Paul Celan's writing. In Celan's speech "The Meridian" (1960), the obscure discontinuity of his and other post-World War II European poetry -- what he calls "the difficulties of vocabulary, the faster flow of syntax or a more awakened sense of ellipsis" -- is associated with a rethinking of the lyric poem in its romantic and modern guises (p.48). Celan questions the lyric project of personal expression, of evoking an individual voice: the poem "speaks only in its own, its very behalf," he states, but it "has always hoped, for this very reason, to speak also on behalf of the *strange* [...] *on behalf of the other*, who knows, perhaps of an *altogether other*." The poem, then, does not express an authorial self, but rather liberates that self from its familiar boundaries, becoming "the place where the person was able to set himself free as an -- estranged -- I," but where "along with the I, estranged and free *here, in this manner*, some other thing is also set free" -- free from the appropriating power of the speaking "I," of a personal language. The poem does not transcend but acknowledges the contradiction between self-expression and communication with some Other, forcing an awareness of the limits as well as the possibilities of its language.

### **Translation and Cultural Politics**

It is this sort of liberation that resistancy tries to produce in the translated text by resorting to techniques which make it strange and estranging in the target-language culture. Resistancy seeks to free the reader of the translation, as well as the translator, from the cultural constraints which ordinarily govern their reading and writing and threaten to overpower and domesticate the foreign text, annihilating its foreignness. Resistancy makes translation a cultural politics today, when fluent strategies and transparent discourse routinely perform that mystification of foreign texts. In the specific instance of "Englishing" De Angelis's poetry, the political intervention takes the form of a minor utilization of a major language. "Even when major," Deleuze and Guattari observe, "a language is open to an intensive utilization that makes it take flight along creative lines of escape which, no matter how slowly, no matter how cautiously, can now form an absolute deterritorialization"

(p.26)<sup>10</sup>. My translations of De Angelis's poetry obviously can never be completely free of English and the constraints it imposes on poetry and translation; that line of escape would preempt any translation, and is no more than a capitulation to the major language, a political defeat. The point is, rather, that my translations resist the hegemony of transparent discourse in English-language culture, and they do this from within, by de-territorializing the target language itself, questioning its major cultural status by using it as the vehicle for ideas and discursive techniques which remain minor in it -- which it excludes. The models for this translation strategy include the Czech Jew Kafka writing in German, particularly as Deleuze and Guattari read his texts, but also the Rumanian Jew Celan, who carried German on trajectories of escape by using it to speak of Nazi racism and Hebrew culture, and by exploiting its capacity for compound words and syntactical fragmentation<sup>11</sup>. If the resistant strategy effectively produces an estranging translation, then the foreign text also enjoys a momentary liberation from the target-language culture, perhaps before it is reterritorialized with the reader's articulation of a voice -- recognizable, transparent -- or of some reading amenable to the major aesthetic in English. The liberating moment would occur when the reader of the resistant translation experiences, in the target language, the cultural differences which separate that language and the foreign text.

Translation is a process which involves looking for similarities between languages and cultures -- particularly similar messages and formal techniques -- but it does this only because it is constantly confronting dissimilarities. It can never and should never aim to remove these dissimilarities entirely. A translated text should be the site where a different culture emerges -- where a reader gets a glimpse of a cultural other -- and resistancy, a translation strategy based on an aesthetic of discontinuity, can best preserve that otherness by reminding the reader of the gains and losses in the translation process, and the unbridgeable gaps between cultures. In contrast, the notion of *simpatico*, by placing a premium on transparency and demanding a fluent strategy, can be viewed as a cultural narcissism which carries imperialistic tendencies: it seeks an identity, a self-recognition, and finds only the same culture in foreign writing, only the same self in the cultural other. For the translator becomes aware of his intimate sympathy with the foreign writer only when he recognizes his own voice in the foreign text. Unfortunately, the irreducible cultural differences mean that this is always a misrecognition as well, yet fluency ensures that this point gets lost in the translating. Now more than ever, when transparency and the ideal of *simpatico* continue to dominate English-language translation, it seems important to reconsider what we do when we translate.



## NOTES

1. De Angelis has since published three other collections of poems: *Millimeters* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983); *Terra del viso (Land of the Face)* (Milan: Mondadori, 1985); and *Distante un padre (A Distant Father)* (Milan: Mondadori, 1989). He has also written a narrative, *La corsa dei mantelli (The Running of the Cloaks)* (Milan: Guanda, 1978), and a collection of critical and theoretical essays, *Poesia e destino (Poetry and Fate)* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1982). For my English versions of his writing, see, for example, *Paris Review*, 85 (1982): 160-163, and 105 (1987): 116-120; *American Poetry Review*, 14: 1 (1985): 48; *Stand*, 27:3 (1986):16-17, and *Sulfur*, 18 (1987): 152-157.
2. Wordsworth's preface is included in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), 1: 118-58. I develop this critique in greater detail in "The Ideology of the Individual in Anglo-American Criticism: The Case of Coleridge and Eliot," *Boundary 2*, 14: 1-2 (1985/86): 161-193.
3. These reflections on the Platonic metaphysics underlying romantic individualism and its degrading of translation rely on Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), and on Gilles Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990), "Plato and Simulacrum," (pp.253-266). I discuss the translator's marginal status in contemporary Anglo-American culture in "The Translator's Invisibility," *Criticism*, 28 (1986): 179-212.
4. For a fuller treatment of the philosophical context in which Italian poetry of the '70s emerged, see Thomas J. Harrison's introduction to the poems, essays and lectures in *The Favorite Malice: Ontology and Reference in Contemporary Italian Poetry*, ed. and trans. Thomas J. Harrison (New York, Norristown and Milan: Out of London Press, 1983) pp. 17-55.
5. See also *on the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1969), p.45: "A quantum of force is equivalent to a quantum of drive, will, effect -- more, it is nothing other than precisely this very driving, willing, effecting, and only owing to the seduction of language (and of the fundamental errors of reason that are petrified in it) which conceives and misconceives all effects as conditioned by something that causes effects, by a 'subject,' can it appear otherwise." Gilles Deleuze has clarified Nietzsche's "philosophy of the will" in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983) pp.6-8.
6. For a selection from the writing of this loosely associated group, see "*Language*" *Poetries: An Anthology*, ed. Douglas Messerli (New York: New Directions, 1987). Charles Bernstein's theoretical and critical pieces are collected in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1986). For discussions of the theoretical differences between the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E

group and the romanticism which dominates contemporary American poetry, see Marjorie Perloff, "The Word as Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties," *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985) pp.215-238, and Lee Bartlett, "What is 'Language Poetry?'" *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 741-752.

7. De Angelis's poetry has been reviewed in little magazines like *Produzione e cultura*, in the widely circulated literary tabloid *Alfabeta*, and in mass-audience magazines like *L'Espresso* and *Panorama*. Newspapers that have printed reviews of his books include *La Gazzetta di Parma*, *La Stampa*, and *Corriere della Sera*. In "Trade Publishing and Poetry," *Research Quarterly*, 1:3 (1985): 62-74, Marcy Biggs documents the marginality of anti-individualistic writers like the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E group.
8. I am here indebted to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London: Verso, 1985), especially pp.105-114.
9. Andrew Benjamin explores the implications of this semantic potential in *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy: A New Theory of Words* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), especially chapter 6.
10. In *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed Christie Mc. Donald, trans. Avital Ronnel and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken, 1985), Jacques Derrida similarly notes that "There are, in one linguistic system, perhaps several languages, or tongues. [...] There is impurity in every language," but he concludes that "translation can do everything except mark this linguistic difference inscribed in the language, this difference of language systems inscribed in a single tongue" (p.100). I am arguing that the strategy of resistancy would go some way toward marking this difference in the translation.
11. John Felstiner's careful annotations have illuminated the cultural heterogeneity of Celan's poetry: see, for example, "Paul Celan in Translation: 'Du Sei Wie Du,'" *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature*, 8 (1983): 91-100, and "Paul Celan's Triple Exile," *Sulfur*, 11 (1984): 47-52.

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