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## Not So Sweet: Translating and Re-Translating Bianciardi's *La Vita Agra*

### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to provide a theoretical consideration of the strategies employed in my translation of Luciano Bianciardi's 1962 novel *La Vita Agra* into English. A brief review of the multiple connotations of context and its relation to translation precedes an attempt to define Bianciardi's literary style and discuss some specific areas of difficulty encountered in rendering the novel's style in English, focusing on grammatical and syntactical equivalence, and the role of Italian dialect. Throughout, Eric Mosbacher's 1965 English translation has been used as a point of comparison. The paper concludes with a more extended discussion of the wider intertextual system in which *La Vita Agra* can be located, and the possible implications this has for a translation of the novel.

**KEYWORDS:** Luciano Bianciardi, translation, context, style, adaptation

### 1. Translating Bianciardi/Bianciardi Translating

The cultural image of the translator as subordinate to the author, as "glorying in borrowed plumage" (France 2005: 258) has a long history. This attitude tends to, in Lawrence Venuti's phrase, "completely efface the translator's crucial intervention in the text," and constitutes a "self-annihilation" (Venuti 1986: 179-180). The translator protagonist of Luciano Bianciardi's 1965 novel *La Vita Agra* alludes to a similar predicament when he describes his career; all of the many texts he has translated have "taken something out of me" (Bianciardi 1965: 136).

Translating Bianciardi into English presents no small challenge to the translator, in part because of the subject matter of the novel. It is intimately concerned with the power structures involved in translating, not only in terms of the relations between authors and their translators, but also between translators and their

editors and employers. The latter act as ‘gatekeepers’ in *La Vita Agra*, symbols of a cultural élite which Bianciardi satirizes in the novel. A key aspect of Bianciardi’s presentation of the narrator (and to an extent, his presentation of himself as a public intellectual in Italy in the 1960s) is that he is an outsider, in overt, and later tacit, opposition to the forces of cultural hegemony which would exclude him and those like him. The translator-protagonist’s subordinate, rebellious status in the novel contains an implicit criticism of the way in which a globalized culture constructs translation, particularly translation into English. As a prestigious language of globalization, how is a translator to approach the recontextualization of Bianciardi’s novel into English and what role should a translator play in it? What role should the English language play in the translation, given that parts of the source text are already in English? Is the translator, to adopt Schleiermacher’s famous distinction, to move the novel towards the target culture rather than away from it, and would that act of translation constitute a ‘betrayal’ of Bianciardi and his protagonist? Another central problem in translating *La Vita Agra* develops from this sense of alienation from the centres of power and the ways in which it involves the translator. One of the crucial elements Bianciardi uses to establish the protagonist’s otherness is linguistic; specifically, in the latter’s use of his (and Bianciardi’s) native Tuscan dialect. How should a translator approach these problems?

## 2. Context and Translation

Just as postwar economic prosperity took 15 years to wend its way from France and Germany to Italy, so Bianciardi’s disgust with the mechanized, bureaucratized, cellophane-packaged world accompanying that prosperity is 15 years behind times (Dienstag, 1965).

*The New York Times*’ negative review of Eric Mosbacher’s 1965 English translation of *La Vita Agra* demonstrates a certain Anglocentric parochialism. It compares the novel unfavourably with Philip Roth and calls some of Bianciardi’s writing about sex a “parody” of D.H. Lawrence’s fiction. Such an approach tends to ignore the specifically Italian, mid-twentieth century cultural and economic context of *La Vita Agra*, situating it instead in a well-trod literary landscape of “desexed career women, antiseptic supermarkets peopled by mean-spirited zombies [and] office politics” which would have been familiar to an American audience. However, as the review itself acknowledges, the social changes which transformed Italian society in

the nineteen-fifties and sixties (which will be described in detail in the following sections of this paper) took place years after similar changes in other countries, and Bianciardi's novel may be read in part as a response to those changes.

A successful translation of the novel needs to take its context into account. However, the notion of context contains a variety of meanings. Juliane House has described context as a "highly complex notion, conceptualized in a variety of ways in different disciplines" (House 2006: 342). She characterizes a written text as static, with "in-built temporal and spatial constraints" which does not unfold dynamically in dialogue with another speaker but should rather be seen as a static "stretch of contextually embedded language" (House 2006: 343). The way in which *ex post facto* re-contextualization of a text from one language into another is carried out depends on the type of text which is being translated and the purpose of the translation. House proposes two different models of re-contextualization of a given text: 'overt' and 'covert' translation strategies. An *overt translation* is one which freely admits that it is a translation, while a *covert translation* presents itself as a 'second original' of the source text, without making any acknowledgement to its status as a translated text.

The nature of *La Vita Agra*, its status as a literary novel which is closely bound up with a specific time and place, compels a strategy of overt translation, which in turn obliges the translator to take the novel's contexts into account. My own translation of the novel was constructed within two main contextual frameworks. The first framework has to do with the novel's historical context; that is, the novel's chronological and geographical setting, the social organization which the protagonist, as an outsider in a strange city, must navigate, and the economic impulses which drive his actions in the novel. The second conceptual framework has to do with literary style, the way in which Bianciardi writes the text. These two frameworks are not easily separable, and both inform the strategies I have used in my translation.

Toury contends that "translation is basically designed to fulfil... the needs of the culture which would eventually host it" (Toury 1995: 166). In the case of *La Vita Agra*, I would identify as one of the needs of the target culture a desire for "Italianness"<sup>1</sup>, a need to encounter the source culture on the target culture's terms.

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<sup>1</sup> I intend the term as a description of a kind of need existing in the target culture for contact with the source culture, mediated by the stereotypes the former has of the latter. The target culture may not want direct contact with this source culture, but satisfy its need through a mediation; in this case, a translation.

House elaborates on this idea by noting that the translator allows target culture readers to “eavesdrop”, in that “the translator’s task [is] to give target culture members access to the original text and its cultural impact on source culture members” (House 2006: 348), but from the outside, looking in. Readers choose some translated texts to “experience” the source culture in their own language and on their own terms.

### 3. Bianciardi’s style(s)

The translator-protagonist of *La Vita Agra* remarks of the translation process, “*se sei accorto, hai assimilato lo stile e il lessico, e quasi non c’è più bisogno di ricorrere al vocabolario.*”<sup>2</sup> An acknowledgement of the need to replicate an author’s style has been a constant of translation theory since the classical period. A text’s style can and should also be measured by the extent to which it conforms to text conventions, or how it makes use of various conventions for special effect. Literary style is polysemous and semantically dense; even if it uses genre conventions which on a surface reading may appear banal, it is deeply connotative (Carter – Nash 1990: 38-39).

The opening paragraph of *La Vita Agra* is indicative of Bianciardi’s dominant style in the novel, and worth quoting in full:

Tutto sommato io darei ragione all’Adelung, perché se partiamo da un alto-tedesco Breite il passaggio a Braida è facile, e anche il resto: il dittongo che si contrae in una *e* apertissima, e poi la rotacizzazione della dentale intervocalica, che oggi grazie al cielo non è più un mistero per nessuno. La si ritrova, per esempio, nei dialetti del Middle West americano, e infatti quel soldato di aviazione che conobbi a Manduria mi diceva “haspero” mostrandomi il ditone della mano destra ingessato, e io non capivo; ma poi non c’è nemmeno bisogno di scomodarsi a traversare l’Oceano, perché non diceva forse “Maronna mia” quell’altro soldato, certo Merola che era nato appunto a Nocera Inferiore?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Bianciardi, *La Vita Agra*, 137 [“if you keep your wits about you... you had assimilated his style and vocabulary and hardly needed to use the dictionary.”].

<sup>3</sup> Bianciardi, *La Vita Agra*, 9 [“On the whole, I am inclined to agree with Adelung, because if we take as our point of departure a High German *Breite*, the transition to *Braida* is plain sailing, as, indeed, is all the rest – the contraction of the diphthong into an open “e” as well as the rhotacism of the intervocalic dental, which now, heaven be praised, is no mystery to anyone. It occurs, for example, in the speech of the American Middle West – there was the airman I knew at Manduria, whom I failed to understand when he showed me his middle

The first element to strike the reader's attention is the way Bianciardi's lexis is founded on a contrast between specialized vocabulary and quotidian, conversational interjections which come near to being clichés. The opening disjunct "*tutto sommato*" establishes a conversational tone; as does the use of the conditional "*darei ragione*," communicating a modest hesitancy to impose and polemicize the narrator's opinion; this hesitant tone is prolonged by Bianciardi's use of the interrogative phrase "*non diceva forse...?*". The narrative is propelled by simple words and noun phrases, for instance "*poi*," "*infatti*" giving cohesion to the narrator's thoughts. The light, conversational tone is balanced by the use of specialized vocabulary in the field of linguistics; the narrator is conversant with High German names and demonstrates an understanding of phonetics by citing the "*rotacizzazione della dente intervocalica*." The narrator's tone is also ironic, as can be seen from his use of the hackneyed interjection "*grazie al cielo*" when lauding a more general understanding of rhotacization among the populace. Also, the use of linguistic terminology is not a genuine attempt to fix the etymology of the word "*Braida*," but to characterize the narrator as an intellectual, and to establish the theme of linguistic play in the novel. It also has the effect of mystifying the city; the reader does not know what this *Breite/Braida* place might be. A reader who knows the city of Milan might identify it with the Brera neighbourhood, but the location remains vague, especially when placed in contrast with the specificity of "*Nocera Inferiore*," a town not mentioned again in the novel.

In terms of sentence length and syntax, of particular note is Bianciardi's use of hypotaxis, or chains of subordinate clauses linked in long, elaborate sentences which masquerade as informal, loquacious and open, creating a stream of consciousness style. These long sentences facilitate the passage from one topic to another within the same sentence, in an apparent defiance of conventional rules of logical progression. An example can be seen in the following sentence. The various discourse markers used to give a sense of cohesion to the text appear in bold type, while the various topics touched upon are underlined:

La si ritrova, **per esempio**, nei dialetti del Middle West americano, e **infatti** quel soldato di aviazione che conobbi a Manduria mi diceva "haspero" mostrandomi il ditone della mano destra ingessato, e io non capivo; **ma poi** non c'è nemmeno bisogno

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finger covered with plaster and said *hospiral*. But there is no need to cross the Atlantic, because there was that other member of the armed forces, one Merola of headquarters company, who was born at Nocera Inferiore, and always said *maronna mia* instead of *madonna mia*"].

di scomodarsi a traversare l'Oceano, **perché** non diceva forse "Maronna mia" quell'altro soldato, certo Merola che era nato **appunto** a Nocera Inferiore?

The reader can follow the progression of the narrator's discourse from linguistics to war to hospitals to dialect pronunciation and back to war again, all linked together with a series of conjunctions to help structure the sentence. Working against this sense of fluidity is the way in which characters, such as the two soldiers, and locations, such as Nocera Inferiore in southern Italy, are introduced and dropped without warning. This creates a jarring, disorienting effect on the reader, who may struggle to recognize a narrative progression in the text. This strategy is fairly typical of Bianciardi's style throughout the novel. It combines with the heterogeneity of Bianciardi's use of writing styles and lexis. It may also be seen as an expression of the disorder that the narrator experiences later on in the novel as he sees, like De Quincey during his opium dreams, endless processions of disjointed, ill-assorted figures in front of him as he tries to sleep (Bianciardi 2013: 140).

The apparent bonhomie of the conversational style is belied by the references to war and illness towards the end of the paragraph, just as the apparently simple conversational style is belied by the judicious deployment of technical language. A translator, then, should focus their efforts on attempting to preserve not one, but a number of different writing styles, blended together to approximate Bianciardi's informal but erudite, light but dark, style.

#### 4. Issues of morphosyntactic equivalence

Baker has noted that "it is difficult to find a notional category that is regularly and uniformly expressed in all languages." For that reason, "differences in the grammatical structures of the source and target languages often result in some change in the information content of the message during the process of translation" (Baker 2018: 97). It is precisely such informational variation tied to morphosyntax that creates issues for translators.

Morphosyntactic divergence can sometimes impair a smooth translation process. For example, Chapter V of *La Vita Agra* opens with the phrase "*Glielo avrò chiesto cento volte*" (Bianciardi 2013: 78). This can be translated literally as "to him/her/it/them it (I) will have asked a hundred times". There is a lack of specificity as to the number and gender of the object of the phrase, but it can be inferred from context that the narrator is referring to his partner, Anna. A further problem is encountered in translating the structure "*avrò chiesto*". The literal

translation “will have asked” is clearly inadequate for the context. Only a good knowledge of the equivalent structures in the two languages can render “I must have asked.” This is a relatively simple and obvious case of imperfect alignment between grammatical structures and can be resolved fairly easily by a competent translator. However, problems can arise when working with imperfect equivalents across extended stretches of the text.

Syntactic marking is another important morphosyntactic factor. This refers to the process through which the natural syntax of a given sentence is altered to emphasize a particular element. Baker states that “the less expected a [syntactical] choice, the more marked it is and the more meaning it carries” (Baker 2018: 145). Chapter V of *La Vita Agra* contains the following sentence:

Se le premo deve scendere, **me lo deve dire lei** resta, non te ne scappare, senza di te non posso vivere.

“*Me lo deve dire lei* resta” deviates from unmarked Italian by including the third-person pronouns “*lo*” and “*lei*”, which are normally not required in this context, before and after the two verbs. The protagonist wishes to communicate that the responsibility for resolving his quarrel with Anna rests exclusively on her shoulders, not his. The translation should take account of the extra shade of meaning supplied by the marked syntax and use a structure in English, or manipulate the syntax in English, to achieve as similar an effect as possible. For example, my translation of the passage reads as follows, with an appropriate equivalent to the marked Italian syntax in bold:

If she cared, she had to come down, **it was on her** to tell me *stay, don't run away, I can't go on living without you.*

An appropriate translation of the various marked sentences in the novel will have to take these syntactic variants into account, recognize elements the author is emphasizing, and find an equivalent sequence in English. This may not always be achievable with syntax alone (Craigie *et al.* 2016: 61).

## 5. Translating dialect in *La Vita Agra*

The narrator of *La Vita Agra* is, like Bianciardi himself, an immigrant to Milan and northern Italy from Grosseto in Tuscany. Grosseto represented a radically different reality for Bianciardi compared to the social problems he found in the

rapidly industrializing Lombard capital. Grosseto is not mentioned by name in the novel (neither, for that matter, is Milan) but it remains present in the frequent allusions to the protagonist's wife and son, who need to be provided for and represent a source of guilt for the narrator. Bianciardi often uses his protagonist's Tuscan identity to mark him as an outsider in Milan. Pertinently for the translator, this identity is partially expressed through dialect.

The use of dialect in Italian texts can provide the audience with several sociocultural connotations, helping to situate characters in a particular socio-economic context and promoting the formation of stereotypes about that character's personality (Craigie *et al.* 2016: 94). During the 1950s and 1960s, Milan and Turin saw a huge rise in inward immigration from the south of Italy, with an accompanying influx of unfamiliar dialects (Crainz 2003: 12-17). The protagonist of *La Vita Agra* uses some words and expressions of Tuscan origin during the novel, which affect other characters' opinions of him, particularly in terms of his occupation as a translator. For example, in Chapter VIII of the novel he has a meeting with an editor, who comments on the perceived "impurity" of the protagonist's Italian:

Locuzioni dialettali. Lei ha questo difetto, le locuzioni dialettali, come tutti i toscani, del resto. Per esempio lei traduce: *Bottega di falegname*. *Bottega* è un toscanesimo, no?<sup>4</sup>

The protagonist's Tuscan identity is important in the novel because it serves as a means of reinforcing the reader's perception of him as an outsider, an interloper in a city which does not accept him and which he does not accept. By marking the protagonist as linguistically different, Bianciardi opens him up to criticism on the part of Milan's cultural elite, symbolized in this instance by the widow appraising his work, and who acts as a gatekeeper both to cultural respectability (which the narrator is not interested in) and financial opportunity (which he most definitely is interested in). Bianciardi invests the dialogue with heavy irony in two ways. Firstly, Tuscany is the home region of Dante Alighieri, long associated with linguistic prestige and legitimacy in Italy; the Lombard should, in theory, be taking lesson from the Tuscan, and not the other way around. Secondly, the narrator defends himself, "*trovando non so come il coraggio*," explaining that

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<sup>4</sup> Bianciardi, *Vita Agra*, 129 ["And then there's the question of dialect. You, like all Tuscans in fact, have the fault of lapsing into dialect. You use the phrase *carpenter's shop*, for instance. Isn't that a Tuscanism?"].



the nineteenth-century Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi also uses the word “*bottega*” in his work. She dismisses the protagonist’s point about the Romantic poet with a tautological “*Leopardi era Leopardi*,” but the cultural issues brought up by this interaction remain for the reader and need to be translated for the non-Italian reader.

Lawrence Venuti theorizes an approach to translation which includes Antoine Berman’s ethics of translation which “respects cultural otherness by manifesting the foreignness of the source text in the translation” (Venuti 2013: 2). To this ethical notion can be added the imperative to render the sociocultural issues inherent in the novel’s treatment of the protagonist’s outsider status and perceived cultural inferiority, marked through his voluntary and involuntary use of dialect, clear to the reader. The novel will not be fully accessible unless the character’s use of dialect is rendered clearly, or compensated for, in such a way as to limit translation loss as far as possible. Venuti finds a possible solution to this imperative through the techniques of defamiliarization and experimentalism. I have employed the former in my translation of the narrator’s “*toscanismi*,” because his non-standard way of speaking is an important signifier in the novel, marking the narrator’s foreignness on a linguistic level.

However, dialect is very difficult to replicate effectively in translation, specifically in the question of which target language dialects might correspond to source language ones (Cragie et al. 2016: 94). English has fewer dialects than Italian, and the variations between dialects are more minor in English. Injudicious translation into *another* dialect would run the risk of diminishing the specifically Italian context of Bianciardi’s work, which is heavily invested in the economic, social, literary and historical context of Italy and Milan/Tuscany at a very specific point in time. Mosbacher opts to translate the word “*bottega*” with a standard English “*carpenter’s shop*,” which can be seen as a valid strategic decision when translating dialect. However, I believe that the issues around dialect in this specific case, and the particular geographical dislocation the protagonist is suffering from in the novel, mean that not adequately representing the foreignness of the narrator’s position in relation to his interlocutor constitutes unacceptable translation loss. Venuti defines translators as performing “the crucial role of cultural go-between” (Venuti 2013: 110) and this demands, in this case, that the translator make an attempt to render the linguistic (and by extension geographical, cultural and social) differences between the protagonist and the city’s inhabitants. So, how can the passage be translated in such a way that it preserves the Italian

context without creating a stilted, unnatural English text using a corresponding dialect? The answer, I believe, lies in acknowledging the Italy-specific language and considering the context of the conversation the two characters are having in this scene – that is, English-Italian translation itself.

The Anglocentric nature of Mosbacher’s translation strategy becomes evident through an examination of an extract from his version of this passage:

“And then there’s the question of dialect. You, like all Tuscans in fact, have the fault of lapsing into dialect. You use the phrase *carpenter’s shop*, for instance. Isn’t that a Tuscanism?”

I plucked up the courage to say:

“I really don’t think so. Leopardi speaks of a carpenter sitting up late in his closed shop, and Leopardi was not a Tuscan.”

“All right, all right,” the widow replied. “Leopardi was Leopardi. He could permit himself an occasional lapse into dialect.” She smiled at me again. “Look, I changed it into more correct Italian and made it carpenter’s workshop” (Bianciardi 1965: 123).

The “more correct Italian” of “*laboratorio*” is rendered as “workshop” in Mosbacher’s translation. Here, the translation can be said to be effective because it replaces a more general word with a more specific word. The trend is in keeping with how Bianciardi characterizes the pedantic editor who criticizes the protagonist, in that she also offers a more specific substitute in the English translation. However, I would argue that Mosbacher’s strategy is too Anglocentric (see Venuti 2013: 121-123) and fails to effectively communicate the specifically Italian context of the scene. The widow may be wrong about the geographical provenance of the word *bottega*; however, there is no geographical connotation to the English words “shop” and “workshop”, just a semantic one. In part, the widow does not offer the narrator a translation job just then because of where he comes from and how he speaks; there is an element of geographical dislocation in his sense of alienation living in the big city.

For these reasons, my translation deviates from Mosbacher’s in that I have prioritized the foreignness of Bianciardi’s original text. My version of the same passage is as follows:

“Dialect words. You have the defect of using dialect words – like all Tuscans, come to think of it. For example, you’ve written: the carpenter’s *bottega*. *Bottega* is Tuscan slang, isn’t it?”

“Well, not really, I don’t think so,” I replied, finding the courage from I don’t know where. “Leopardi mentions the woodsman working all night in his *bottega* in one of his poems and Leopardi wasn’t from Tuscany.”

"Well," said the widow, "Leopardi was Leopardi. He could afford to indulge in a few dialect words." She smiled again: "Look here, I've changed it to a more Italian *laboratorio*, et cetera."

Firstly, I have retained the original words *bottega* and *laboratorio*, judging that the complex interplay of opinions surrounding these two words on the part of the two characters, situated in a geographical context, is too difficult to translate into English without incurring unacceptable translation loss. *Laboratorio* has a recognisable cognate in English (laboratory) which conserves some of the same sense of a specialized working area and is recognizable to an English reader, even if the etymological cognate of *bottega*, apothecary, is too distant from the Italian meaning to be of much use when presenting the word to an English reader.<sup>5</sup> However, the presence of *laboratorio*/laboratory compensates for this and allows the reader to infer a similar type of working space, emphasized by the word "carpenter". This complex interaction between the Italian and English equivalents allows the reader to access the Italian dimension of the source text, something which is not possible in Mosbacher's translation, while at the same time being afforded the possibility to navigate the strangeness of the Italian words through judicious allusion to an English-language cognate.

I have attempted to preserve the delicate interplay of familiarization and defamiliarization of the text (Bertolazzi 2015: 81) by translating Bianciardi's reference to Giacomo Leopardi, a figure who retains his cultural prestige in Italy to this day, but who is less well-known in the Anglophone world. I wanted to preserve the same sense of cultural cachet that the narrator wants to exploit when alluding to Leopardi's work to defend his choice of the word *bottega*, so I have added an interpolation "in one of his poems" to the passage so that a casual reader will be informed of Leopardi's occupation and should be able to surmise that Leopardi was also an important cultural figure (given that the narrator is able to quote from his work from memory, and the widow is disposed to forgive his eccentric use of *bottega* because "*Leopardi era Leopardi*"). Mosbacher's translation makes no allusion to who Leopardi was, and so denies the reader immediate access to the cultural context surrounding the novel; in this instance, by defamiliarizing the text, Mosbacher paradoxically makes it less Italian, because he does not grant the English-speaking reader the same cultural access that an Italian reader would generally have.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/bottega/>

## 6. Marketing *La Vita Agra* in the United States

To what extent does Bianciardi's work as a translator of texts from English into Italian influence the text of *La Vita Agra*? How far should what Hutcheon calls "the dialogic relations among texts" (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2012: xiv) condition an English translation of the novel? The theme of translation is writ large through the novel as a symbol of the protagonist's economic insecurity. *La Vita Agra* can be also read as a composition, in part, of translated texts, which begin to dominate the discourse of the novel towards the end of Chapter VIII. Any prospective translator of the original novel should also take account of the fact that it is deeply concerned with the dynamics and mechanics of the translation process, to the extent that parts of the novel itself are made up of translations of other works from English into Italian and making up part of the fabric of the novel itself. Any analysis of the novel during preparations for translation should take account of this network of allusions and attempt to render it in the target language, in such a way that its implications are comprehensible for a reader in the target culture.

In the *New York Times* review cited at the beginning of this essay, Bianciardi was compared unfavourably to the director Federico Fellini.

Not only does this novel challenge, in title and theme, "La Dolce Vita," but, unfortunately, the publisher has chosen to emphasize this fact by describing the book as one which, "in the wake of the extraordinary furor over Fellini's 'La Dolce Vita,' became... the rallying point for a whole segment of Italian city dwellers for whom 'the sweet life' was either unattainable or unacceptable." We are further informed that "a successful movie" reminiscent of "Shoeshine" and foreshadowing "8½" was made of it.

It is hard to imagine Luciano Bianciardi's satiric dirge to city life as a rallying point for anyone, even anti-Fellinis. The two men simply aren't in the same league. It's like comparing a Ferrari to a Ford (Dienstag, 1965).

I have quoted this passage extensively because I believe it ties together a series of considerations of *La Vita Agra* and its relationship not only to the general theme of translation but also to other works both of literature but also in other media. I propose now to use it as a starting point for an investigation into the ways in which the novel situates itself in a continuum of other works, and the issues that this might present for a prospective translator.

*La Vita Agra* was marketed in the United States as a kind of companion piece, or riposte to, Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. This is indeed true – the concordance

between the title of the film and the one which Bianciardi chose for his novel is unmistakable. “*Dolce*” and “*agra*” are antonyms in Italian, and there would be unmistakable semantic echoes of the film for the average Italian reading the novel. It is also true that the novel’s title is an ironic echo of the film’s; Fellini’s work introduces the audience to the decadent glamour of Rome, while Bianciardi develops a counterpoint of the squalid, grey chaos of Milan in his novel.

The review’s ironic quotation of the promotional paratext, which was published on the inside cover in the 1965 edition of Mosbacher’s translation (Bianciardi 1965), notes specifically that *La Vita Agra* appeared “in the wake of the extraordinary furor” that Fellini’s film attracted, and further claims that a significant segment of Italian society – presumably the victims of the boom, the precarious, the exploited – have chosen to identify with the book rather than with Fellini’s film. This claim is rubbished in the review (“it is hard to imagine... [the novel] ... as a rallying point for anyone”) but still gives a valuable insight into the ways in which Viking Press, the publishing house responsible for the English-language version of the novel, hoped to ensure its commercial success by placing it into a relationship with a well-known contemporary Italian cultural export. The necessity of doing so is comprehensible in terms of the financial viability of publishing a translation of a novel into English; Lawrence Venuti has remarked upon “the appallingly low volume of anglophone translations since the Second World War, now just over 2% of annual book output according to industry statistics.” One can imagine how establishing a connection with Fellini’s film might have seemed like an effective way of attracting the interest of the American book-buying public who, like their counterparts elsewhere in the Anglophone world, “have formed aggressively monolingual readerships” (Venuti 2013: 158-159).

The strategy seems to have been unsuccessful, judging from the *Times*’ review and its unflattering comparison between the director and the novelist. The chief difficulty in replicating the association of Bianciardi’s novel with Fellini’s film in an English-language context is the fact that the film title *La Dolce Vita* has survived the translation into the target language unchanged. Indeed, the film is known in the Anglophone world by its original Italian-language title. The same privilege was only half-afforded to *La Vita Agra* by Viking in their 1965 edition of the novel. The original title remains, just like Fellini’s film preserves its original title. However, it is followed by Mosbacher’s English translation of the title; *La Vita Agra / It’s a Hard Life / a novel*. This preserves the novel’s specifically Italian

context for the English-language reader, while affording them an insight into what the Italian words mean, specifically the adjective “*agra*”, which would not be as familiar to an English-language reader as the more widely known “*dolce*”. However, the translator has incurred a major loss of meaning by rendering the title as “It’s a Hard Life”, because it loses the antonymic association of “bitter” (“*agra*”) and “sweet” (“*dolce*”) and thus moves the translated text definitively away from its association with *La Dolce Vita*.

The review’s metaphorical description of Fellini as a Ferrari car makes use of an Italian cultural referent widely familiar in the United States, all to Bianciardi’s detriment when he is unflatteringly compared to a Ford.<sup>6</sup> The comparison between the two men and their work is implicit in the marketing around the novel in the US. Therefore, not only is the novel a reply to an existing, successful film; it has also become successful, and can be compared to a further film (*Shoeshine*), and also anticipates a third (*8½*), which will be made by Fellini himself. In this way, the novel is enmeshed in a web of references to other works, all of which help to guide the prospective purchaser of *La Vita Agra* towards an informed understanding of that work through cultural context. The reasoning behind Viking’s sales strategy is clear; the implicit initial association with Fellini can easily be overlooked by an Anglophone reader, the context lost, and the meaning of the work diminished. Venuti has written of the way in which the translation process “so radically decontextualizes the source text that a translation can be hard for a reader to appreciate on its own” (Venuti 2013: 160-161). It is part of the translator’s task to preserve this wider context, too.

Mosbacher’s original title in English, “It’s a Hard Life,” neglects to establish an implied connection with Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* and thus diminishes the novel’s intertextual reach. By entitling my translation of the novel “The Bitter Life,” I have been able to re-establish the allusion to the film, as well as more accurately reflecting the tone of the original. The use of the adjective “bitter” is more specific than Mosbacher’s “hard”; what is more, the omission of the dummy-pronoun and indefinite article “it’s” gives a harder, less comical edge to the title.

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that the reviewer compares Bianciardi to the utilitarian, unexciting Ford, rather than an Italian car, which would have made more sense in terms of the Italian basis of the comparison. It might be accepted that she chose Ford for the euphony of its alliteration with Ferrari (even if the brand name Fiat also begins with an F) but also demonstrates the hostile cultural terrain in which a novelist translated into English had to, and perhaps still has to, operate.

## 7. Translating English into English

The biographical information on Bianciardi at the end of the Viking edition of *La Vita Agra* notes that “Bianciardi is himself the translator into Italian of more than a hundred books, among them works by Faulkner, Steinbeck, Henry Miller, Saul Bellow, and J.P. Donleavy” (Bianciardi 1965). The authors Bianciardi translated during his career left their mark on his style as an author (Corrias 2011: 149-153). His own work as a translator, as we have seen, deeply informs both the plot and the social criticism of *La Vita Agra*. I would like to take some space to consider the importance of translation in making up the fabric of the work, and to think about the challenges which translation in the novel poses for the translator.

Due to the protagonist's translation work, *La Vita Agra* features English text, or translations into Italian from other English-language texts, from Chapter V onward. The preceding chapters feature sentences written in other languages; for example, Chapter I features sentences written in Latin, French, German and Piedmontese dialect. In each case I have mostly followed Mosbacher in retaining the original foreign-language text, once supplemented with a translation in the footnotes, to maintain the same distancing effect that the original text would have on the Italian-language reader. As the novel progresses, the volume of foreign-language text or its translation into Italian increases, culminating in a paragraph of English text at the end of Chapter VIII, symbolizing the way in which the protagonist's work as a translator has parasitized his life.

I have already mentioned the protagonist's meeting with the widow-editor in Chapter VIII when deciding how to translate dialect words. The passage presents a further challenge, in that the two characters are discussing the best way to translate a text from English into Italian. This may not present much of a challenge for, say, a German translation of the novel. The translator could translate the Italian text and preserve the English in the original. How, though, should the English-language translator tackle such a text?

The following exchange from the novel is representative of the problem:

Mi raccomandò di tenermi fedele al testo, di consultare spesso il dizionario, di badare ai frequenti tranelli linguistici, perché in inglese *eventually* per esempio significa finalmente... (Bianciardi 2013: 126).

How can the translator render “eventually” into English, given that it is an English word, without losing the sense of foreignness which the word would have for a reader in the source culture? Mosbacher translates as follows:

She told me to stick close to the original, to use the dictionary continually, and to watch out for the linguistic traps that are so frequent, such as the English word *eventually*, for instance, which means *at last* and not *possibly*, as one might suppose from the Italian form of the word... (Bianciardi 1965: 121).

He has retained Bianciardi's use of the word "eventually" and interpolated a short explanation of the difference in meaning between English *eventually* and Italian *eventualmente*, thus reinforcing the notion that English is a foreign language to the two characters and reminding the reader that the scene is set in an Italian context. Such an approach, while helping to locate the exchange in the right context, might be thought of as heavy-handed; the reference to "the Italian form of the word" simultaneously reminds us that the language we are reading is foreign and not-foreign, creating a tension in the illusion that we are reading Italian. I have tried to preserve the foreignness of the exchange by reversing the languages, and inserting an Italian word in place of the English one:

She enjoined me to remain faithful to the original text, to consult my dictionary often, to be careful of common linguistic traps, because *eventualmente* didn't mean 'potentially' in English...

By slightly changing the sense of the text to specify what *eventualmente* does not mean in English, I have attempted to respect the pact between reader and writer. I situate the novel more clearly in an Italian context, and preserve the frisson of uncertainty a reader with no Italian would experience on encountering a foreign word, just as an Italian reader with little or no English would encounter on seeing an English word disrupt the flow of the text.

## 8. Intertextuality in *La Vita Agra*

Chapter VIII ends with an extended meditation on the city of Dublin and its surroundings, which represent an escape for the protagonist compared to the grey reality of life in Milan. The protagonist loses himself in the narrative voice of the work he is translating, imagining himself to be a character living in Dublin. The chapter ends with an extended paragraph entirely in English:

... poi il ritorno, dalla parte del camposanto di Scrub, nella grande pianura *open to winds and to strangers*. Then from everywhere crowds had rushed to this newly-found Mecca: black dealers from the South, carrying suitcases filled with oil, speculators from the North, determined to start new enterprises in this promising area, prostitutes, shoeblacks, tramps, ballad-singers, pedlars of combs and shoe-laces, fortune tellers with



*a parrot and an accordion, and little by little all the others: land officers, policemen, insurance brokers, craftsmen, school teachers and priests* (Bianciardi 2013: 141).

Morini has noted that the “paragraph comes at the very end of a chapter in which the narrator’s recounting of the facts of his life has progressively given way to the invading power of translation.” The switch from Italian indicates a sense of the protagonist’s loss of control over his language; ground down by his profession, the story he is telling is vulnerable to being taken over by other narratives and other languages. However, the “impression of utter bewilderment... is just that – an impression” (Morini 2020: 132-133). The English text at the end of the novel is itself a translation from Bianciardi’s novel *Il Lavoro Culturale* (1957)<sup>7</sup>. Just as later on, Lizzani’s film adaptation of *La Vita Agra* would include elements from *L’Integrazione*, so Bianciardi’s novel includes translations of his other work. A translation should reflect this tendency to intertextuality in the novel. Mosbacher retained the (translated) English text in his translation, whereas I have decided to restore Bianciardi’s original Italian text. This helps once more to preserve the sense of foreignness in the text that the Italian reader would also encounter. Morini has explained how Mosbacher believed this passage came from the Irish-American novelist J.P. Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man* (1955) and so left it in the English translation. Restoring the Italian text accentuates the interlinguistic games which Bianciardi is playing with the reader.

Other texts also make appearances in *La Vita Agra*, each bringing its own set of connotations to the text. For example, in Chapter V, the protagonist and Anna work on a translation of the British-Indian novelist Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). The passages which they translate concern the birth of the narrator’s child, Irawaddy. Bianciardi’s narrator translates the novel into Italian, discussing translation choices with Anna: “*Dunque, la chiamammo Irawaddy, che è il nome di uno dei grandi fiumi dell’Asia, perché la cosa più preziosa... No, anzi, aspetta. Sarà meglio dire così: di tutte le cose l’acqua era per noi la più preziosa*” (Bianciardi 2013: 89).

Mosbacher identified the novel alluded to as *Nectar in a Sieve*, and replaced Bianciardi’s translation with the original text, a choice which I have followed. I believe that using the original language helps to preserve the intertextual link with Markandaya’s novel. However, I also believe that preserving this link does more than

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<sup>7</sup> Morini has commented on the way in which the text, depending on whether it is read in Italian or English, has connotations for the reader with Grosseto or Kansas City, which was Bianciardi’s nickname of friendly contempt for his home town (Morini 2020: 132-135).

give an insight into the translation process as experienced by Bianciardi's narrator; it also echoes, and comments on, events and settings in *La Vita Agra* itself.

*Nectar in a Sieve* has not been adapted, strictly speaking; rather fragments of the text have been taken from the novel and integrated into another text. The receiving text therefore receives a certain colouring from the donor text. The receiving text makes a comment on itself by using the donor. In this case, the comment is implicit. *Nectar in a Sieve* is set in India, and concerns the vicissitudes of Rukmani and her farmer husband, Nathan, as their town is rapidly industrialized and the land which they live on becomes ever more difficult to farm. Rukmani grieves as she sees "the slow, calm beauty of our village wilt in the blast from the town" (Markandaya 2023: 74), but then stoically accepts the change and moves to the big city to look for her son. The parallels, ironic and not, with *La Vita Agra* are obvious. Bianciardi's narrator also sees the ill effects of industrial and urban growth; however, he does not accept the situation stoically, and indeed moves to the city to escape his family, rather than seek to be reunited with it. The parallels are implicit, nor does Bianciardi offer any help to the reader in identifying the text. However, this does not negate the fact that *La Vita Agra* exists in a continuum made up of other texts, and that an effective translation will follow Mosbacher in attempting to identify and retain the texts Bianciardi uses to preserve the novel's intertextual dimension.

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