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### Author

DuVal, John

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POPE JOHN PAUL I'S CRITIQUE OF TRILUSSA'S FAITH  
A TRANSLATOR'S DEFENSE

JOHN DUVAL

On August 26, 1978, Cardinal Albino Luciani was elected Pope at Rome and chose as his papal, public name John Paul I. Almost immediately Edizioni Messaggero published a volume of the new Pope's essays as they had appeared earlier in the *Messaggero di Sant'Antonio* magazine. The title was *Illustrissimi*, for the illustrious saints and scholars, fictional characters and writers (such as Mark Twain, Francesco Petrarca, and Gioachino Belli) whom Cardinal Luciani had addressed and imaginatively conversed with in each of these essays.

On the night of September 28, 1978, most unexpectedly, Pope John Paul I died. Before the year was out, William Weaver in the United States completed his English translation of *Illustrissimi* and published it with Little Brown. In February of 1982, Bill Quinn, my friend and fellow medievalist at the University of Arkansas, learning that I was beginning to translate the poetry of Trilussa, a Roman dialect poet of the first half of the twentieth century, introduced me to *Illustrissimi* by giving me a copy of the book in English.

I was delighted and felt vicariously honored that Trilussa, my poet, was one of only three Italian poets whom the Pope, that is, Albino Luciani, addressed in his book. The other two were Petrarca and Gioachino Belli, a poet who, like Trilussa, wrote not in standard Italian, but in Romanesco, the modern dialect of Rome. But Luciani's essay, "To Trilussa: In the Heart of the Mystery," bothered me, too. In it, Luciani uses Trilussa's thirteen-line poem "La Guida" as a springboard to discuss what Christian faith is and what it is not. It is not, Luciani says, Trilussa's faith, not the Faith personified in the poem by Trilussa's little blind old woman who finds the speaker lost in the woods. Nor is Christian faith, Luciani continues, "a pathetic walk along the path in the woods" (29).<sup>1</sup> Calling "La guida" "that melancholy and autobiographical poem" (29),<sup>2</sup> Luciani seems to belittle not only the faith described in the poem, but also the poem, and even the autobiographer himself. Nevertheless, the future Pope John Paul I honors the poem with the attention he devotes to it; and after his death, through William Weaver's translation of his essay, he brought the poem to my attention and made me want to translate it. Here is my translation:

### The Guide

The old blind woman I met as I wandered through  
the night when I was lost in a dark wood  
said to me, "If you don't know the road,  
I'll go along with you, because I do.

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1 "la patetica passeggiata sulla strada del bosco" (47).

2 "la poesia melancolicamente autobiographica" (46).

“If you have the strength, stay close. I’ll be at hand.  
Listen for me on the road as it takes you  
down to the depths: there a cypress stands;  
up to the heights: there a cross awaits you.”

“All right,” I said, “but I don’t see what good  
you can do guiding if you can’t see the woods.”  
The old blind woman, who didn’t waste time talking,  
was Faith. She took my hand and sighed: “Start walking.”  
(DuVal, 133)

And here is the original Romanesco:

La Guida

Quela Vecchietta ceca, che incontrai  
la notte che me spersi in mezzo ar bosco,  
me disse: – Se la strada nu’ la sai,  
te ciaccompagno io, ché la conosco.

Se ciai la forza de venimme appresso,  
de tanto in tanto te darò una voce  
fino là in fonno, dove c’è un cipresso,  
fino là in cima, dove c’è la Croce ...—

Io risposi: – Sarà... ma trovo strano  
che me possa guidà chi nun ce vede....—  
La Ceca, allora, me pijò la mano  
e sospirò—Cammina!—  
Era la Fede.

(Trilussa, 933)

Faith, for both Trilussa in the poem and Luciani in the essay, involves *keeping faith*, but Luciani lectures his “caro Trilussa” that faith means *having faith* first, and certainly not having *blind faith*, as in Trilussa. Faith is, in William Weaver’s translation of the essay, a “conviction” that “must be formed and planted in the mind” (29)<sup>3</sup> first, before the tough journey begins. The journey itself is the “second stage” (29).<sup>4</sup>

Luciani has his own lesson to convey about faith, but in conveying it, he ignores the fact that poems, unlike didactic essays, often start *in medias res*. The genre does not oblige the speaker in Trilussa’s lyric poem to explain whether he has fulfilled Luciani’s

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3 “la convinzione deve formarsi e piantarsi nella mente” (47).

4 “secondo momento” (46).

requirement of “a filial *yes . . . to God*” (30),<sup>5</sup> before Faith sets him on the journey, or whether, like the “far more impassioned” (30)<sup>6</sup> Augustine, he has gone through, “a state of indecision, inner turmoil, until, assisted by a powerful thrust from God, he summons his courage and makes up his mind” (30).<sup>7</sup> The poem simply sets the speaker down in the middle of the journey of his life, and leaves it to us, if we want to act as biographical critics, to look at the life of the author for a context.

If we do look, we won’t find a spiritual autobiography for Trilussa to set the poem in the context of any conversion-to-God experience, as we do for Augustine. We know that he never abandoned the faith his mother taught him as a child (Francia 267; Possenti 279-80), but we have no knowledge that he ever expressed regret for his worldly pleasures. Ennio Francia, a priest himself, tells us that Trilussa did his “devotions,” that is, the sacraments of confession and holy communion, twice a year (Francia, 267-68), but we do not know what, if any, commitments of faith preoccupied him on all the other days of the year. Trilussa is not known as a *religious* poet. Unlike the great nineteenth century Romanesco poet, Gioachino Belli, Trilussa did not write anti-clerical poetry, but he did not write pro-clerical poetry either. The Christian religion figures rarely in his poetry. In this he is the opposite of Belli. The conviction of the living presence of God, his angels, Mary, and the saints and prophets is firmly planted in the minds of the poor Romans who populate Belli’s wry, and sometimes blasphemous sonnets—which may explain why Luciani addresses the “anti-clerical” Belli more respectfully than he does Trilussa.

For a biographical context to the poem, Pietro Pancranzi, editor of the Mondadori *Tutte le poesie*, places the date of composition, 1942, at the bottom of the poem. In the world gone wrong of 1942 Italy, Trilussa’s blind Faith does not offer the convictions that Albino Luciani urges for his readers of the 1970s. The cypress that she points to at the depths offers a classical death, perhaps a meaningless lack of unpleasantness as in Dante’s First Circle. The cross at the heights is Christian, yes, but Trilussa’s Faith does not point past the agony to the resurrection. Trilussa’s guide offers, without the support of convictions, only an imperative sentence, “Cammina.”

By 1942 Trilussa had been walking for some time in the dark wood of Fascist Italy. He had written and continued to write poems criticizing Fascist censorship, the earliest of which was censored. “L’editto” (1927) tells what happens when King Lion puts out an edict that he will eat anyone who criticizes him. Most of the animals decide to play it safe by thinking only what the others think. The dog says, “Cluck, cluck” (“Coccodè”), and the hen says, “Bow-wow” (“Bubbù”). But a foolish rooster doesn’t get it and crows, “Cock-a-doodle-doo” (“Chicchirichi”), after which, “he was never heard again” (“nun s’intese piú”). The implication that the chicken was killed without due process was too much for the censors, and Trilussa could publish the poem only by reducing the chicken’s penalty from death to imprisonment: “lo misero in priggione.”<sup>8</sup>

Five years later, Trilussa managed to slip the following poem past the censors into

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5 “un sì filiale...a Dio.”

6 “ben più concitato” (48).

7 “nell’indecisione, nel contorcimento interno, finché aiutato da una spinta potente di Dio, prende il coraggio a due mani e si decide” (48).

8 “L’editto” and Luigi Huetter’s note about the censored lines are on p. 658 of *Tutte le poesie*.

the beginning of his volume *Giove e le bestie*:

I read my paper, back propped against the hay.  
Here comes a hog, so I look up and say,  
“Goodbye, pig!” And then across the grass  
here comes a donkey. I say, “Goodbye, ass!”

No way of telling if they’ve understood.  
Whether they have or not, it does me good  
to call things what they are without the dread  
of ending up in jail for what I’ve said.

(DuVal, 111)

Mentre me leggo er solito giornale  
spaparacchiato all’ombra d’un pajaro,  
vedo un porco e je dico: –Addio, majale!--  
Vedo un ciuccio e je dico –Addio somaro!--

Forse ‘ste bestie nun me capiranno,  
ma provo armeno la soddisfazione  
de potè di’ le cose come stanno  
senza paura de fini in priggione.

(Trilussa, 753)

“Fini in priggione” “end up in jail” is almost as explicit as the “nun s’intese piú” which was censored out of “L’editto,” but not as vocally resonant, dark, and accusing as “paura de morì in priggione” would have been. “Mori,” to *die*, however, would not have been allowed, and that must have hurt. Nevertheless, Trilussa did not leave Italy. Nor did he try to ingratiate himself with the rulers. He kept walking, and he kept writing poems picking at the Fascist regime, its cruelty and its pretensions of grandeur, progress, and manifest destiny.

Once as Mussolini, flanked by important officials, was walking through the streets of Rome lined with cheering admirers who greeted him with the Fascist salute, he spotted one Roman who was not cheering and not saluting. It was Trilussa, a tall man who would have stood out even if those around him had not been nervously making space between themselves and him. The entourage slowed down. Then: a smile and a wave from Mussolini, the entourage moved on, and bystanders, now happy to bask in the reflected light of *il Duce*'s good will, rejoined Trilussa (Faitrop 24; d'Arrigo 81).

A good story from our distance, but what good did not saluting do? No way of telling. Should he have yelled, “Goodbye, pig! Goodbye ass!” when there was already the possibility of ending up in jail for not saluting? In the blindness of the moment, he must have wondered whether keeping faith as a merely passive kind of resistance meant anything at all.

It did to some other Italians. To many, Trilussa’s keeping faith was more than “a

pathetic walk along the path in the woods.” In 1950, at the nomination of Trilussa for the high honor of Senator for Life, Senator Vittorio Emanuele Orlando summed up the good effects of Trilussa’s faith during and in spite of Fascism: “He upheld my faith,” Orlando told the Senate, “during times when, if I looked around me, I could feel myself wavering.... Trilussa... gave us courage and cured us of our skepticism” (Address to the Senate, December 1950, qtd. in Russo 230).

In his essay, Luciani does not mention the parallel between the walk Trilussa’s Faith points to in “La guida” and the walk another guide, on Good Friday of the year 1300, instructed the poet Dante to take through Hell, nor that the parallels between the two meetings and the two journeys imply clearly, and riskily, that 1942 Italy *was* Hell. Nor does he write a letter to Dante Alighieri chiding him for not having faith, not having that “firm conviction” before starting on his journey; nor does he tell Dante his *Inferno* is “a pathetic walk along the path in the woods.”

To introduce his discussion, Luciani, speaking to Trilussa, summarizes “La guida” so closely that his summary could almost be called an abridged translation: “... you tell of being lost, at night, in the middle of the woods, where you meet an old blind woman, who says to you: *If you don’t know the road, I’ll go with you, because I know it!* You are surprised: *I find it strange that someone who cannot see can guide me.* But the little old woman brusquely takes your hand and orders you: *Walk.* This is faith” (29).<sup>9</sup>

Far be it from me to lecture the Pope on Dante, but he has abridged out of this “translation” of “La guida” significant parts that come from Dante: the title and the middle stanza. The title, “La Guida,” referring to the blind old woman, Faith, is the title Virgil proposes for himself in the first canto of the *Inferno* when he suggests that Dante follow him: “Io sarò tua guida” (“I will be your guide,” I:113). And the general direction pointed out by this blind guide in the middle stanza is the same: down and then up. The fact that Trilussa’s guide offers no hope beyond the cross at the height, no “more worthy soul”<sup>10</sup> to guide him, as Virgil promises Dante at the beginning of the *Inferno*, sets the stage for the surprise ending. The guide is not a female Virgil, she is not the voice of our God-given reason, as Boccaccio tells us Virgil is meant to be (188). Reason might get Dante through Hell. Trilussa needs something more to get him through Fascism. Trilussa’s guide “was Faith.”

How Albino Luciani was able to ignore a literary allusion to Dante may have something to do with the fact that “La guida” is a “dialect poem.” Trilussa was born in 1871, the year when Italian National troops marched into Rome and transformed it from the Papal capital of the Roman Catholic Church into the secular capital of Italy, thereby transforming the official language of the city from Latin to Italian (the respectable descendant of Dante’s and Boccaccio’s Tuscan) and bypassing the dialect spoken by Trilussa’s fellow Romans, Romanesco. Throughout the years that followed, speakers of Italian, mostly from Italy north of Rome, flooded into Rome to govern the nation and occupy the bureaucratic offices. It became advantageous for Romans, whether waiters,

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9 “racconti di esserti sperso, di notte, in mezzo al bosco, e lì incontri una vecchietta ceca, che ti dice – *Se la strada nun la sai, te ciaccompagno io, che la conosco!* Sorpresa tua: – *Trovo strana che me possa guidà chi nun ce vede.* Ma la vecchietta taglia corto, ti piglia la mano e ti intima: *Cammina.* –È la fede” (p. 46).

10 “anima...più di me degna,” *Inferno*, I:122.

servants, teachers, or the seekers of office, to be fluent in Italian. Although Romanesco continued to be spoken in Trastevere, Trilussa himself lived much of his adult life not there but on the west side of the Tiber River, where he frequently heard and probably spoke standard Italian.

The continuous influence of the dominant language on the marginalized sister-language (or dialect) explains why Trilussa's poetry in Romanesco looks and sounds more like Italian than does the poetry of his early-nineteenth-century forebear, Belli.<sup>11</sup> By 1942, the distinguishing Romanesco characteristics of Trilussa's poetry tend to be slight, as in "La guida," with its prepositional article *ar* instead of *al* in line two, *nu'* instead of *non* in line 3, *ci* preceding *accompagno* and *ai* in lines 4 and 5, *fonno* instead of *fondo* in line 7, and different infinitive forms in lines 5 and 10. The one deliciously Romanesco word is clear in the context. It comes at the climax of the poem in line 11: *pjò* instead of *prese*, for which my translation *took* is shamefully bland. I wish now that I had written *grabbed* or *got hold of*, or some other verb to emphasize how down-to-earth Trilussa's Faith is. The poem is accessible to any reader of Italian, yet these differences at almost every line make it unquestionably Romanesco, a non-standard language whose poetry traditionally stays so close to speech that a non-comic, non-Biblical *literary* allusion would sound jarring were it not for Trilussa's tact in alluding to Dante without quoting the *Commedia* directly and with the simplest possible wording. The allusion is obvious, yet, being a literary device, paradoxically easy to ignore in a dialect poem, easy for as perceptive a critic as Albino Luciani.

"She was faith," Trilussa says, ending the poem, "Era la Fede," not "È la fede" or "This is faith," as Luciani mistranslates. Trilussa was not defining faith, but saying that Faith was what was getting him through a time that seemed hopeless for himself and for his country; and he says it in a poem richly suggestive of history, autobiography, and literature.

I would not have translated "La Guida" if that essay, by a man I admired, had not first drawn my attention to the poem and then unsettled me because of the injustice I felt it did to the poet and the poem. Looking back twenty-five years to when I did translate it, I realize the translation was not only an attempted reflection of the poem but also a reaction to the essay. All translations are attempts to vindicate the originals by giving them voice beyond their original languages, but with this translation the vindication was more conscious and maybe more personal.

I also wanted to get Dante back into the poem. In my eagerness, I did not succeed in weaving him into the fabric of my translation for English speaking readers as subtly as Trilussa did for his Italian readers. To describe a predicament like Dante's at the beginning of the *Inferno*, Trilussa begins his poem with words that are different from Dante's. He writes *bosco* for Dante's *selva*; *strada* for both Dante's *cammin* and *via*; *incontrai* for *ritrovai*; and *spersi* though Dante writes *smarrita*. Both woods are dark, but Dante's action begins at dawn, and he calls the wood *oscura*; Trilussa places the action in

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11 Ettore Paratore alludes to the "processo di progressiva attenuazione, di regolarizzazione e raddolcimento" (progressive attenuation, regularization, and softening) found generally in Romanesco poetry after Belli (9).

the *notte*. The only Dantean word Trilussa writes in his first stanza is *mezzo*.

Worried that readers of “La Guida” in English might not notice the connection between the hell Trilussa was living through and Dante’s Hell, I kept the date, 1942, at the bottom of the poem, and I was less subtle, less tactful than the original. I got the connection across by packing Dante into the second line, writing, “when I was lost in a dark wood,” with the word *dark* translating no word from Trilussa but rather the *oscura* from the second line of Dante’s longer poem.

For the last lines I tried to stay close:

The blind old woman took my hand and with  
a sigh she said, “Get walking.”

She was Faith.

Not liking the enjambment after *with*, I tried,

The blind old woman heaved a breath  
and sighed, “Get walking.”

She was Faith.

I was still dissatisfied with the conclusion. I had already unsubtled the Dante connection. Now no matter how I phrased the penultimate sentence, those last three monosyllables, “She was Faith,” sounded heavy handed, too much like a grand pronouncement—although not quite pompous, as Luciani’s interpretation of the line: “This is faith.” So I moved *Faith* inward and ended with the call to action instead: “Get walking.” Then, as a tribute to Trilussa and a reminder that he kept faith throughout the years of hell in Italy, I changed “Get walking” to “Keep walking.” That was a mistake, and I should change the line back. “Get walking” is closer to *cammina* than “keep walking.” Equally important, I realize, twenty years after my translation was published, that even at the age of seventy Trilussa was still in the middle of his life, still between past and future, as we all are. There is always the possibility to change our lives. All it takes to *get* us walking on a better life is blind Faith.

One final note, which I hesitate to add because I only recently discovered my information on-line: for his very first public pontifical audience, Pope John Paul I recited a single poem, Trilussa’s “La guida,” after which he spoke about the kind of faith he hoped to instill in his listeners all over the world. His remarks ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)) repeat his thoughts from the *Illustrissimi* essay, written seven years earlier, but his voice and the gestures of his folded hands (as they appear in a video posted on youtube by user PaoloPerroni1943), unobtrusive and perfectly timed to emphasize the drama of the thirteen lines of verse, convince me that his disapproval and, to my mind, misinterpretation of the poem and poet were far less than his love for both.

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS



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