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FROM STANDARDIZATION TO DIALECT COMPILATION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF ITALIAN
DIALECT POETRY IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

PHILIP BALMA

In an article published in 1997 in *World Literature Today*, Luigi Bonaffini referred to the “untranslatableness of dialect – that is, its semantic opacity,” which he considered to be proportional to the “idiomatic use of words, slang, and jargon limited to local color” (285). Even though his significant list of publications points to the high degree of success he has achieved in rendering that which has the potential to be *untranslatable*, the article in question suggests that there do exist some texts that are resistant to this process, if not utterly *immune* to it. Putting aside the complex obstacles presented by texts that employ a number of different vernaculars and a variety of registers (such as Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* and Gadda’s *Pasticciaccio*), this study will focus on the limitations of a trilingual format for the translation of dialect poetry, and propose an alternate quadrilingual solution designed to reflect the unique linguistic features of Italy’s many dialects. A single poem (“Can,” by the late Venetian poet Ernesto Calzavara) will be used as a case in point. A published translation of said poem will be presented as a practical application of a strategy that has more often been theorized than put into practice, not only by Bonaffini, but also by Manuela Perteghella, both of whom have posited innovative approaches to rendering dialects in translation.

Literature authored in Italy’s many dialects¹ presents editors, translators and readers with a conundrum. While these linguistically challenging texts have progressively managed to gain more widespread acceptance during the twentieth century, the fact that their ideal readers inevitably tend to inhabit a geographically limited area makes it difficult (and sometimes impossible) for them to appeal to a broad audience both within and outside the Italian borders. The lack of a sizeable readership that is capable of truly comprehending the often subtle and idiomatically specific references contained in these works runs the risk of making them less than viable from both a critical and a commercial perspective. Ask any reasonably educated person raised in Turin to read and interpret a poem written in the dialect of Bari and, in all likelihood, they will be unable to successfully complete the task at hand.² This kind of experiment could be repeated hundreds of times over by exposing Italian citizens to the speech patterns of their more physically distant compatriots, and the results would often be disappointing at best. This is not to say that many Italians are not capable of understanding multiple parlances, either partially or in their entirety. For example, a significant percentage of Italophone individuals are capable of understanding many of the residents of the region of Lazio. This is especially true when it comes to the dialect spoken in Rome, which has been popularized in literature, music, television, radio, and film. In his essay entitled “L’italiano: dalla letteratura alla nazione” Francesco Sabatini noted that after Italy’s

¹ According to the *Webster’s New World College Dictionary* a dialect constitutes: “a form of language peculiar to a locality or group and differing from the standard language in matters of pronunciation, syntax, etc.; *vernacular* today commonly refers to the informal or colloquial variety of a language as distinguished from the formal or literary variety” (397).

² Not surprisingly, a popular independent film shot in Bari entitled *La capa gira* was released with Italian subtitles to enable its non-*Barese* viewers to understand the dialogue.

unification in 1861 only 5% of its citizens (approximately) were able to speak the Italian language. The creation of a national railroad system, the continued migratory fluxes from the rural areas to the cities, the existence of a unified administration and armed forces, and the institution of mandatory standards of education brought on the need for all Italians to be able to speak Italian (as opposed to an exclusive use of dialects). All of these factors made it possible for journalistic and literary sources to act as quasi-official voices for the new course of the Italian language, yet the Italianization of speech patterns nationwide was certainly not a speedy process. As of the year 1911 no more than 18.5% of the population could be considered Italoophone. With the diffusion of radio broadcasts (in the 1920s) and the advent of sound in film (in 1927) the issue of language became even more relevant and complex. The extension of mandatory schooling to the age of 14 in 1963 contributed to a national process of linguistic Italianization, as did the popularization of television starting in the year 1954, inasmuch as this new mediatic device was able to further circumvent the obstacles posed by illiteracy. In the early 1990s the utmost majority of Italians could be counted among the Italophones, while only 11.5% still made an exclusive use of dialect in a familial environment. In the 20th century the use of Italy's many dialects for poetic purposes has come to signify a search for a more personalized, more intimate expressive vehicle (Sabatini 21-23). Although a number of anthologies and critical texts have been devoted to this subject, it should come as no surprise that there currently are only a handful of periodicals in Italy that focus exclusively on poetry in dialect, and that these publications are virtually unknown.

The numerous varieties of language that characterize the verbal interactions of Italians on a daily basis (as well as the profound differences that exist between individual Italian dialects) are enough to cause any work of literature that reflects this multifaceted linguistic geography to be ignored or egregiously misunderstood by Italoophone readers. According to Anna Laura and Giulio Lepschy, in fact, "it is more realistic to talk about varieties of Italian (regional or sectional) than about an alleged standard, which [. . .] does not exist in actual usage" (62). This reality makes it all the more difficult for many works of modern poetry to be effectively translated and shared with an English-speaking audience.

As one of the leading Italoophone scholars of translation studies, Luigi Bonaffini's production has set the bar for Italianists in this line of inquiry for many years. While this statement can be applied to the history of Italian literature in translation in general, when it comes to rendering Italian literature in dialect for an Anglophone readership Bonaffini's efforts are almost unparalleled in their scope and their longevity. Although one could certainly argue that Welle and Feldman's translations of Zanzotto's Venetian poetry (*Peasant's Wake for Fellini's Casanova and Other Poems*) are just as groundbreaking as Bonaffini's work, the latter deserves recognition not only for matching their eloquent use of a trilingual format (dialect, Italian, English), but also for editing the first anthologies of Italian dialect poetry in English translation to make use of said format.³

The two book-length publications of Italian dialect poetry in translation released in 1997 (Welle and Feldman; Bonaffini) certainly owe a debt to Miller Williams's 1981 edition of Giuseppe Belli's sonnets, translated from the *romanesco*, but also to Hermann

³ See Bonaffini (1997). Serrao, Bonaffini and Vitiello (1999), and also Bonaffini and Serrao (2001).

Haller's 1986 bilingual (dialect, English) anthology entitled *The Hidden Italy*, which was the first of its kind. Not surprisingly, in 2002 Rimanelli credited Haller with "opening the door" to the study of Italian dialect literature in the Anglophone world (201). In his introduction to Belli's sonnets in translation Williams acknowledged the fact that his rendition of these poems consisted of "an intricate complex of compromises," due not only to their linguistic peculiarity but also to his efforts to use "slant rhyme to represent the true rhyme of the original" (xxi). Although Williams was also forced to compromise the rhythm of Belli's poems, what seems to be completely lacking from his volume entitled *The Sonnets of Giuseppe Belli* is a willingness to strive for an English rendition that avoids forcing the original poems into a standardized Anglophone shell.⁴ In other words, the end result of Williams' efforts in this case was a text that is equally accessible to all of its readers, unlike Belli's sonnets in *romanesco* which would have conveyed a more personal meaning to the inhabitants of Rome. Williams recognized the fact that Belli's poems were "bound up in the lives and language of the Romans he wrote about," yet he did not legitimately attempt to insert some evidence of their phonological and syntactical uniqueness when he transplanted them into modern American English. One could argue that Williams endeavored to match many of the lexical features of the original poems, but he did not consider the impact Belli's *romanesco* would have had on an Italian reader that was not familiar with Roman speech patterns from the 19th century. As Tullio De Mauro observed in his *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita (Linguistic History of Unified Italy)*, approximately 60% of the language used in Belli's sonnets is perfectly identical to Italian words, while 4% of the terms he employed can be described as "radically not Italian" (125). In other words, the average Italian reader would have been able to understand slightly less than two thirds of the lyrics in question.

In the introduction that precedes Belli's sonnets in their English rendition, the translator disagreed with the assumption that "because Romanesco is looked upon as a dialect by those who don't speak it, Belli's poems can't be truly translated unless they are rendered in some sort of patois," arguing instead that "if we render the poems into any kind of dialect, slang, or jive talk, we hear them only as the middle- and upper-class Roman would have heard them and hears them now." If we consider De Mauro's linguistic analysis of these sonnets and his considerable research on the history of the Italian language, Williams' contention that "to those who live in Trastevere, the language spoken in Trastevere is the way people talk" appears to be somewhat reductive if not anachronistic, and it calls into question the criteria that led him to avoid adopting any regional or vernacular forms of English in the translation process (xxii). A more sensible analysis of the issues that arise in the translation of dialect poetry can be found in the writings of John DuVal. In an article titled "Translating the Dialect: Miller Williams' Romanesco," published in 1990 in the journal *Translation Review*, he concluded that

since *dialect* by its very nature is, even in the minds of its speakers, distinct from some greater language and unique in its distinction, and since the individual writers in that "dialect" will use those distinctions in unique ways, the problem of translating dialect has no single solution. (31)

⁴ Williams states the following in his introduction: "What I've tried to do is to write the poems that Belli would have written if American English had been his language" (xxii).

Hermann Haller's aforementioned 1986 anthology entitled *The Hidden Italy* paved the way for the more recent collections of poetry in dialect edited by Bonaffini. *The Hidden Italy* also constitutes a much more ambitious undertaking than Williams' translations of Belli's work. The anthology in question shows evidence of the translator's lengthy investigation of Italy's linguistic history, and it includes a selection of texts written by twenty-four poets from ten of Italy's twenty regions.⁵ Each section is introduced by a brief description of the linguistic features of one of these regions, accompanied by a bibliography of texts devoted to the study of their dialects and, when available, a list of dictionaries examined by the editor. Each author whose work appears in translation is also briefly discussed in a biographical and analytical introduction, followed by an acknowledgement of the editions consulted by Haller and a bibliography of selected critical texts. Williams and Haller were the first scholars to bring a considerable selection of dialect poetry to the attention of American-based readers in a bilingual (dialect, English) format, yet their work does not consider how linguistic barriers influence the impact of texts produced in dialect when compared to literature authored in Italian.⁶ In spite of Lepschy's reasonable assertion that a standard Italian language "does not exist in actual usage," the fact remains that said "alleged" standard has been used in the media for decades, taught in Italian public schools, and codified in hundreds of textbooks. There truly may not be a legitimate, standard language for Italians to rely on, but this unusual linguistic reality certainly does not allow us to pretend (for example) that Zanzotto's poems written in the Venetian and Solighese dialects do not have a different effect on Italophone readers depending on their place of birth, their individual levels of education, and their relative exposure to regional idioms.

Haller's contributions to the study and diffusion of Italian literature in dialect in the English-speaking world continued for many years after the release of *The Hidden Italy*. His dedication to this important process culminated in the publication of another volume in 1999, an invaluable reference work entitled *The Other Italy: The Literary Canon in Dialect*. Unprecedented in its scope and precision, this volume presented Anglophone Italianists with a vast array of writers and works that were previously unknown, endeavoring to classify them both in linguistic and historical terms. Moving beyond some of the limitations he had set for himself in his earlier anthology, with *The Other Italy* Haller offers considerations on works of prose and theater (as well as poetry) written in the dialects of 18 different regions,⁷ accompanied by a selection of relevant bibliographical citations. *The Other Italy* is truly the first reference work of its kind. In his review published in *Annali d'Italianistica* in 2000 John Welle described this text as "a guide" and "a map" that "will remain an indispensable tool for understanding the historical dimensions of the diverse literary traditions in dialect" (550).

The year 1997 marks a fundamental turning point in the theory and practice of translating Italian dialects. Bonaffini's first anthology (*Dialect Poetry of Southern Italy*) and Welle and Feldman's co-edited collection of Zanzotto's poetry in English (*Peasant's*

⁵ Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli, Emilia-Romagna, Latium, Campania, Basilicata, Sicily.

⁶ In his introduction to *Peasants Wake for Fellini's Casanova and Other Poems*, John Welle described Haller's English renditions of dialect poetry as "literal prose translations" (xi).

⁷ Namely: Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Marche, Umbria, Lazio, Abruzzo and Molise, Campania, Puglia, Lucania, Calabria, Sicily, Sardinia.

Wake for Fellini's Casanova and Other Poems) were published, and they reinforced a new standard for how Italian literature in dialect was to be translated and presented to an Anglophone readership. The decision to include a version in standard Italian in a published trilingual work reflects the editors' awareness of the importance of bearing evidence of the gradual process of translation. The inclusion of this intermediate step in their texts bears evidence of Bonaffini, Welle, and Feldman's desire to clarify said process for their readers, and it serves as an acknowledgment of the fact that an apparatus of this kind is just as important as any set of ancillary materials (introductions, footnotes, postscripts) that typically make up a critical edition of a literary work. Furthermore, it highlights the differences between dialect and standard language in a way that enables Italophone readers from any background to gain an improved understanding of the relationship between the idioms in question.

Welle and Feldman's Anglophone edition of Zanzotto's poetry written in Venetian and Solighese are decidedly more artful than the "literal prose renditions" of dialect poetry previously published by Haller. The critical apparatus included in their volume offers a concise analysis of Zanzotto's career and his noteworthy contributions to the Italian poetic patrimony, while also drawing a clear picture of the personal and literary significance of his writings in dialect. Perhaps the most indispensable portion of said apparatus are those elements that bear witness to Zanzotto's support and his personal interest in this project. Aside from containing a translation of the poet's insightful "Observations on the Meaning and the Situation of the Dialects in Italy in the Late Twentieth Century" (87-90) this text also includes excerpts from a letter that Zanzotto had written to John Welle in 1987:

The [...] issue raised by the poet in the initial stages of this project concerns the translations themselves. The principal characteristic of Italian dialect poetry, or what is called "the new dialect poetry," remains its linguistic alterity, that is, its status as "other" vis-à-vis the national literary standard. It is widely believed, not without reason, that dialect poetry in translation, unless rendered into another dialect or subaltern linguistic form, loses its essential character. Here are Zanzotto's own remarks regarding this problem: "In the translations, therefore, if the passage from Italian to English (or into another language) is already uncertain, the passage from dialect to a foreign language becomes almost impossible. The dialect *cannot* be rendered with Standard English. It would be necessary to find some *patois* or slang that nevertheless was rather widely known in the Anglophone area." Letter to John P. Welle, April 25, 1987 (xv-xvi)

In spite of his admission that a preference for a "subaltern linguistic form" in translating dialect is "not without reason," Welle's introduction cites the successes of other translators such as Williams, Haller, DuVal, and Cipolla as a contributing factor in the decision to "not follow the path suggested by Zanzotto." His disagreement with the notion that "dialect poems can *only* be rendered in some kind of English *patois* or *slang*" is, of course, not without merit (xvi). However, it also leaves open the door (the same one symbolically opened by Haller in 1986) for translators to some day explore the kind of playful experimentation suggested by Zanzotto. Interestingly enough, in his "Observations" Zanzotto himself made reference to the shaky, uncertain nature of the linguistic territory he had operated in during his initial reawakening to the artistic potential of dialect. Having been hired by the late Federico Fellini to write the dialogue for a film that the director had "shot recklessly in English," the poet had been faced with

the challenging task of composing a text that resembled what he described as a “pseudo-Venetian dialect from the eighteenth century” (vii). In other words, Zanzotto was called upon to use his background, talent, expertise, and creativity to hypothesize the way some of his ancestors might have spoken a century before the unification of Italy and its lingual repercussions:

Fellini’s visual discourse awoke in me a variety of resonances within a certain linguistic aura to be called of the Veneto (Venetian only in part) both by excess and by lack. I came upon a way of speaking lost in the diachrony and in the synchrony of the Veneto, up to the paradox and the unreality of a paleo-Venetic quotation, a way of speaking partly invented, partly imitated from excessively high models, in which apprehension for the rights of glottology and philology could not hold at bay the desire to tear up the margins, to go far away, to “run off the road.” (vii)

Allowing Italian dialect literature to inhabit some sort of Anglophone vernacular shell could be seen as a perilous activity, and the risk of running “off the road,” as Zanzotto puts it, is substantial. Nevertheless, the fact that this avenue has been both acknowledged and summarily avoided by the utmost majority of translators suggests that it could constitute fertile ground for new advances in the field of translation studies. The first obstacle that one would have to overcome in taking such a step is an assertion made by Welle in his “Translator’s Note;” or rather, that

contemporary American English does not afford [these kinds of] possibilities. Whether one settles for Standard English, as we have done, or attempts to move more haphazardly toward some version of the demotic, the risk of distorting the sense of the dialect is great. (xvi)

Although it would be impossible to make a legitimate comparison between the wealth of regional varieties of language existing in Italy and the extant dialects within the United States, it is also true that the North-American continent does possess its own linguistic diversity.⁸ While the differences between the speech patterns of a native of Alabama and those of a New Yorker are certainly not equivalent to the phonological, syntactical and lexical abyss that separates *leccese* from *bergamasco*, American dialects do offer multiple solutions to those who wish to put forth a translation of Italian dialect poetry that bears some vernacular features, some noticeable distance from the standard language that 300 million citizens are exposed to in schools, in the media, and in many aspects of their daily lives. Moreover, while Welle is correct in saying that “the risk of distorting the sense of the dialect is great” if one seeks to transpose it into an American-based vernacular, he also recognizes that the risk is not diminished by standardizing the language inhabited by a poetic text (xvi).

Luigi Bonaffini is without a doubt the scholar who has been most successful in bringing Italy’s rich tradition of dialect poetry to the attention of English speakers. His efforts have made it possible for anyone with a library card to gain an insightful understanding of the themes explored in these works and the authorial intent behind them. An ability to read Italian (or one of the dialects of Italy) is no longer a *conditio sine*

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the dialect areas in the United States and their respective boundaries, see Labov, Ash and Boberg.

qua non – a selection of the writings of Pascarella, Trilussa,⁹ Calzavara and countless other poets who operate in a subaltern linguistic context are available (and finally accessible) to any and all Anglophone individuals who are inclined to read them.

What distinguishes Bonaffini's anthologies (and Welle and Feldman's volume) from their previous counterparts is actually the high degree of success they have achieved in rendering the original poems in a language that is literary as opposed to literal. Inasmuch as Haller himself had freely acknowledged that *The Hidden Italy* consisted of "literal prose translations" produced at the expense of "some stylistic and rhythmic elegance," it is tempting to look at Bonaffini's work as a natural continuation of Haller's efforts (22). Indeed, the metaphorical door that Haller opened with *The Hidden Italy* must be seen in terms of how the practice of literary translation has evolved (since 1986) alongside the necessary theoretical advances that define and guide this evolutionary course. Bonaffini's article entitled "Traditori in provincia. Appunti sulla traduzione del dialetto"¹⁰ which preceded the release of *Dialect Poetry of Southern Italy* by two years, clearly illustrates the challenges posed by dialects and goes well beyond the context of translating texts into English. It also suggests that a standard language (English or otherwise) will not suffice as a point of arrival in the translation process:

dialect is by nature a distinct and marginal language with respect to a standard language, and all the speakers of dialect consider it such—that is, they are conscious of speaking a language which in some way is in opposition to another, more widespread and important, even if they are in a totally dialect-speaking setting where the opposition is only virtual. This means that translation from dialect must in some way reflect its uniqueness and diversity, even if the various solutions may take very different forms. (283)

These concerns echo Zanzotto's aforementioned preferences, but they are also reminiscent of a series of comments made by Mark Twain concerning his severe disapproval of a French translation of one of his short stories:

Mark Twain himself criticizes the French translation of his famous tale "The Jumping Frog" for having used standard French, seemingly without any understanding of the importance and the implications of the use of vernacular [. . .]. In other words, translating into standard language, the translator cannot capture the eccentricity of vernacular speech. (Bonaffini, "Translating Dialect Literature" 280)

Bonaffini's perceptive considerations on "the multiplicity of local linguistic forms" in *Huckleberry Finn* would seem to directly contradict Welle's contention that American English does not offer us the possibility to render dialect poetry in a way that reflects at least some of its vernacular features. Nevertheless, when he authored a review of *Peasant's Wake* for the journal *Annali d'Italianistica*, Bonaffini stated a different opinion, opting to praise Welle and Feldman for their decision to adopt standard English as opposed to highlighting the existence of other strategies they could have employed.

⁹ A significant selection of the poetry of Trilussa (a pseudonym for Carlo Alberto Salustri) has been published in English by John Du Val. His efforts won him the 2006 Raiziss/de Palchi Prize for translation.

¹⁰ This article was subsequently translated and amplified by Bonaffini and published in *World Literature Today* in 1997. For the sake of convenience, whenever a passage is reflected in both versions it will be cited from the English version, which is entitled "Translating Dialect Literature."

The review in question would appear to constitute a retraction of a handful of statements that appeared in print only a few years before. However, in all likelihood they are simply proof of an ongoing debate that Bonaffini is engaged in both with himself and his fellow Italianists:

In the translators' note we read that Zanzotto himself suggested a non-standard rendering of the dialect [. . .]. Heeding Zanzotto's advice, however, would have been a terrible blunder, and the translators wisely decided not to do so, opting instead for a standard colloquial diction. (430)

While it would be grossly incorrect to draw any direct parallels between the linguistic reality in Italy and the varieties of English spoken in the United States, the English-speaking world does present us with a diverse set of histories that are “profoundly affected by the question of vernaculars” (Bonaffini, “Translating Dialect Literature” 281). For this reason, the challenges posed by dialect poetry must allow for a myriad of creative solutions to be adopted in the translation process, and a reticence to explore different solutions is just as problematic as the dated, flawed presumption that these important works of literature are somehow inferior to their counterparts authored in a standard, widely spoken language – for no other reason than the potential said reticence has to constitute another obstacle to their increased diffusion and popularization. In fact, in a seminal article on neodialect poetry entitled “Italian Dialects from Common Speech to Literary Languages”¹¹ Bonaffini reminded his readers that

Dialect poetry, for reasons stemming from its traditional condition of presumed inferiority and limited diffusion, but also due to the objective difficulties inherent to the process of translation, and because of scant knowledge of dialects outside of Italy, has been mostly ignored by translators until very recently. As a result, it remains largely untranslated, particularly the most recent works. Nevertheless, there are some notable exceptions, and translations from the dialect are increasing. (303)

An insightful article on the theoretical implications of translating dialect – and the options that translators can explore – was published by Manuela Perteghella in 2002, and it concerns “the treatment of dialect and slang” in theater translation (45). Perteghella's study posits “[f]ive strategies for theatrical transposition of dialect and slang,” some of which could be applied to poetic texts in translation as well:

1. Dialect Compilation

To translate a dialect or a slang into a mixture of target dialects or idioms.

[...]

2. Pseudo-dialect Translation

To make up a fictitious, indistinct dialect, usually using nonstandard language and idiomatic features of various target language dialects. [...]

3. Parallel Dialect Translation

¹¹ Any Anglophone scholar who is interested in how Italian dialects factor into the linguistic history of Italy should make a point to read this article. The same could be said for students, critics, and translators who want to gain a better grasp of Italian neodialect poetry, the origins and features of this phenomenon, and how it relates to the Italian literary canon as a whole.

To translate a dialect or slang into that of another specific target language, usually one that has similar connotations and occupies an analogous position in the target linguistic system. [...]

4. Dialect Localization

To localize a dialect or slang into another specific target-language frame. [...] This is very much a domesticating, acculturating strategy, which borders on adaptation and version. [...]

5. Standardization

To substitute dialect, slang, and jargon with standard language. The language is sometimes dotted with occasional colloquialisms. (50-51)

A translator of poetry or prose written in dialect who wishes to make use of one or more of the strategies outlined by Perteghella should first of all consider that rendering a theatrical text in a foreign dialect is a means to an end that differs greatly from a desire to produce a scholarly edition for publication. The concept of “dialect localization,” for instance, implies the need to modify the use of proper names within a text, and to change “[s]etting, topical, and cultural references [. . .] to target ones” (50). This kind of strategy could realistically only be applied to a theatrical work that was being adapted for a highly specific target audience. For example, a translator might wish to transpose a play by De Filippo written in Neapolitan to match the cultural, geographic, and linguistic expectations of a particular audience based in Liverpool, and in doing so the choice to transplant one dialect into another would be insufficient: any reference to locations or proper names that are characteristically Neapolitan would need to be filtered out as well to achieve the desired localization. These types of compromises might make for a successful performance on stage, but their success would be tied to a rather limited area beyond which they would significantly diminish the audience’s affinity for the cultural product in question and its ability to relate to the characters.

Almost all of the extant English translations of Italian dialect poetry have opted for the fifth strategy suggested by Perteghella; or rather, standardization. Rendering the vernacular features of a poem with standard language, even when adopting “language that is sometimes dotted with occasional colloquialisms,” is certainly an acceptable solution to the problematic issues that arise when translating dialect, yet the same scholars who have stated their preference for this kind of standardization have also freely admitted that multiple solutions do exist. Even Perteghella conceded that the five strategies she suggested

are by no means exhaustive in the area and possibilities of dealing with regionalects and sociolects, but they go toward systematizing and understanding the position(s) acquired by the source [. . .] cultural product abroad, while trying to predict the diverse reception effects that each translation strategy might instigate. (51)

Having already argued that a trilingual (dialect, standard Italian, standard English) edition of Italian dialect poetry carries with it a number of benefits, it follows that these advantages would be proportionally increased by making use of a quadrilingual format, characterized by the inclusion of a fourth version of a text rendered in some form of vernacular English. Bonaffini has suggested that an ideal situation for the translation of dialect poetry would seem to only present itself in the case of a bilingual author who becomes his own translator (“Traditori in provincia” 223). If one accepts the suggestion that a quadrilingual format is necessary (if not simply desirable) when publishing dialect

literature in translation, the “ideal situation” hypothesized by Bonaffini becomes almost impossible to achieve. For this reason, a quadrilingual edition of a text would require a collaborative effort between two translators who have at least one language in common, although it would be much more advantageous if they were equally able to interact in both of the standard languages that make up half of the quadrilingual spectrum in question. Perteghella’s observation that “[u]sually translators have a stronger affiliation to one dialect than another, because they belong to that geographical and social reality,” is relevant to these considerations, yet it is further complicated by the suggestion that a “particular choice may not suit the [. . .] literary needs of a text” (46). In a recent (co-authored) article published in *Forum Italicum* in the Spring of 2010 I experimented with a quadrilingual format for the translation of dialect poetry, using the poem “Can” by Ernesto Calzavara as a case study. “Can” is a poetic text authored in the dialect of Treviso, a language spoken fluently by the late Venetian poet and also by my co-author, Dr. Giovanni Spani. Our study makes a case for the need to look beyond the linguistic limitations that have characterized the extant scholarly editions of dialect literature in translation. The decision to render the poem “Can” in the vernacular of the American South was primarily dictated by my own familiarity with said speech patterns, but also by our shared belief in their expressive potential. Since dialectologists identify “The South” as a rather large area including more than a dozen states, there was no solution at our disposal that would realistically represent the entirety of the territory within its dialect boundaries. The rendition of “Can” that resulted from our efforts was undoubtedly influenced by personal interactions with (or familial relations to) inhabitants of specific areas, namely Kentucky, southern Missouri, the southernmost portions of Illinois, and Tennessee. Although some readers might consider the adoption of Southern Vernacular English to be imprudent, it does also allow for a number of dialect-like features to be used in an English version of Calzavara’s poem, and the ramifications of this choice are considerable:

While it would be naive to assume that [this] version [. . .] could have the same effect on a native English speaker as the original [dialect] does on a group of Italians who are unfamiliar with its linguistic features; it does mirror the poem *Can* in at least one respect: it causes a foreign reader who is not fluent in English to struggle more than a native Anglophone, much like Calzavara’s text does on the opposite side of the language barrier. The usage of Southern American vernacular in this case is not intended to suggest that it should be considered equivalent or even similar to [Trevigiano] in linguistic terms; but rather, to explore the possibility of mirroring the vernacular nature of the poem *Can* in an English translation. (Balma and Spani 124)

Some tangible degree of academic precision in this line of inquiry was achieved by consulting the work of linguists specializing in American dialectology, in particular the essays contained in the groundbreaking volume entitled *English in the Southern United States*, in which a number of scholars take on the subject of Southern American speech patterns from various angles (morphology, history, grammar, phonology, etc.), producing a comprehensive and far-reaching resource for established linguists and students of linguistics alike. Although the initial objective of this quadrilingual rendition was to offer concrete evidence that the gradual filtering of a modern Venetian text through three language systems could eventually result in a version that reflected a vernacular spoken in a specific geographical area, the end result of this process was closer to a hybridization

of multiple language varieties. In other words, a project that was initially intended to adhere to Perteghella’s strategy of “parallel dialect translation” resulted instead in a form of “dialect compilation” (50). This was not only due to the inherent difficulties that parallel dialect translation entailed, but also to the fact that Southern Vernacular English has inevitably evolved due to migratory fluxes within the United States. Moreover, although historically Southern White Vernacular English (SWVE) and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) have common origins, they have since diverged in ways that are difficult to discern for non-native speakers. Nevertheless, much like the dialect of Treviso, to this day Southern Vernacular English is spoken by a variety of individuals from many different backgrounds, and a number of linguistic features are still commonly shared by AAVE and SWVE (Nagle and Sanders 64-194).

While it would be redundant to reproduce a recently published quadrilingual version of a poem within the limited the space of this article, a small sample (the first stanza) of said text is cited here to exemplify in practice that which has been theorized up to this point:

Can

[*Original poem in the dialect of Treviso*]

Can, no te si mio.
 Te ga n’altro paron
 te si magro e straco
 ma un ocio bon me par.
 Te vardo parché sì, can, te me piassi.
 Te va de qua de là, te nasi
 e po’ te lassi star.
 Te va col to trotéto
 che la strada no pesa, sito sito.
 Dove? No se sa.
 (124)

Cane

[*Standard Italian*]

Cane, non sei mio.
 Tu hai un altro padrone.
 Tu sei magro e stanco
 ma un occhio buono mi pare tu ce l’abbia.
 Ti guardo perché sì, cane, mi piaci.
 Vai di qua e di là, annusi
 poi lasci stare.
 Vai con il tuo trotterellare
 che la strada non ti pesa, zitto zitto.
 Dove? Non si sa.
 (130)

Dawg

[*Southern Vernacular English*]

Dawg, you ain’t mine.
 You got anutha master.
 you’re skinny and tired
 but I reckon you got one good eye.
 I watch ya ‘cawse, yeah, dawg, I like ya.
 You go dis way dat way, you sniff
 and then you let it be.
 You go on wit’ yo’ trottin’
 and the road don’t weigh on ya, all quiet.
 Where? Nobody knows.
 (124)

Dog

[*Standard English*]

Dog, you aren’t mine.
 You have another master.
 you’re thin and tired
 but I believe you have one good eye.
 I watch you because yes, dog, I like you.
 You go this way and that way, you sniff
 and then you let it be.
 You keep on trotting
 and the road doesn’t weigh on you, all quiet.
 Where? Nobody knows.
 (130)

This playful experiment might be moving “haphazardly toward some version of the demotic” (Welle xvi), and it may legitimately constitute a “blunder,” (Bonaffini, Book Review of *Peasant’s Wake* 430) – but it is also an honest attempt to share Calzavara’s poetry with an English-speaking audience in a way that answers the call of one of Italy’s

most renowned poets from the region of Veneto; one who made an important contribution to what Haller termed “the other Italy,” or rather, the literary canon in dialect. While Andrea Zanzotto’s rejection of standardization was not enough to motivate Anglophone scholars to find other solutions, it’s worth remembering that our Venetian poet did have a notable amount of experience in the field of translation, having “translated such French writers as Balzac, Michaux, Bataille, and Leiris” (Welle ix). It certainly comes as no surprise that, in spite of his idealistic vision of the translation process (letter to John P. Welle, 25 April 1987), Zanzotto was more than willing to support and encourage Welle and Feldman’s efforts to standardize the language of his dialect poetry, especially in light of the artful, insightful, and splendidly poetic rendition of his verses which they were able to produce. It is also completely understandable for a scholar of Bonaffini’s caliber to fluctuate between arguing for a strategy of translation that injects the Anglophone version of a poem with vernacular features (“Traditori in provincia” 283) and later advocating for a more standard approach to translating dialect literature (Book Review of *Peasant’s Wake* 430). In order to reflect the ever-changing linguistic realities of our modern world, the field of translation studies must remain as fluid and flexible as the language(s) we speak, read, and write. Given the “tremendous revival of dialect poetry in Italy” during the last thirty years, the need for innovative solutions and approaches to rendering these texts for an international audience is bound to increase (Bonaffini, “Italian Dialects” 294). It is fundamentally important for experienced and novice translators to think critically about these issues and to engage one another in an open-minded, constructive debate. Making use of a quadrilingual format for scholarly editions of translations is merely one answer to the seemingly impossible questions raised by Zanzotto (among others) and tackled by the likes of Williams, Haller, Bonaffini, DuVal, Welle, Feldman, and Perteghella. Perhaps the single best reason to publish dialect poetry in four different versions is that such a strategy makes the best use of all extant examples available to Italophone academics who make translation studies their focus.

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