

GIOVANNI VERGA IN ENGLISH

IAIN HALLIDAY

UNIVERSITY OF CATANIA

Abstract – This paper provides a list of Verga’s English translators and their works together with discussion principally of D.H. Lawrence’s 1925 translation of the novel *Mastro-don Gesualdo* (1889) and some consideration of the author’s own 1995 translation of *Una peccatrice* (1873). Emphasis throughout is placed on the particular nature of literary translation, an activity often and inevitably influenced by factors that go beyond purely linguistic concerns.

Keywords: translation praxis; translation theory; translation’s ubiquity; Verism; literary profession.

1. Verga and his English translators

In literary historical terms, Giovanni Verga (1840–1922) is the leading exponent of *verismo*, Italy’s contribution to realism, and much of his work is (and has been for almost a century) available to readers of English. A brief description of the first ever translation in book form of one of Verga’s works and the way in which it was published will help provide us with a picture of his place in the history of literature. Mary A. Craig’s 1890 rendition of *I Malavoglia* in its English title abandoned the negatively loaded surname (literally it means “unwilling”) of the tragic and doomstruck family from the fishing village of Aci Trezza who are the novel’s protagonists, and made use of the name of the family’s home (*La casa del Nespolo*) for the more accessible, *The House by the Medlar Tree*. Harpers published the translation in New York and in London with an introduction by the leading American realist William Dean Howells, who had this to say about his realist colleague:

When we talk of the great modern movement towards reality we speak without the documents if we leave this book out of the count, for I can think of no other novel in which the facts have been more faithfully reproduced, or with a profounder regard for the poetry that resides in facts and resides nowhere else. Signor Verdi [*sic.*] began long ago, in his *Vita dei Campi* (“Life of the Fields”) to give proof of his fitness to live in our time; and after some excursions into the region of French naturalism, he here returns to the original sources of his inspiration, and offers us a masterpiece of the finest realism. (pp. iii–iv)

Pity about Signor Verdi, but such slips are a constant danger in dealing with other languages. Along the production process it is odds on that several people working on the text, unlike the translator, will be unfamiliar with the original language. In the English edition of the same year Verdi had already been corrected to Verga, though both editions carry another misspelling on the very first page where Ognina, then a small fishing village near Catania, now an attractive little harbour in the midst of a sea of concrete and speeding cars, becomes Ognino.

Verga remains little read in the Anglophone world, however, and his greatest claim to fame, his authorship of the story *Cavalleria rusticana*, on which Pietro Mascagni's one-act opera is based, is often unacknowledged and for many opera enthusiasts is a fact that remains unknown. The reason for this originates in the outcome of Verga's protracted dispute with Sonzogno, the Milanese publisher and producer, over royalties in the spectacularly successful opera. Sonzogno not only failed to respect the contract Verga had signed with Mascagni, based on a then new copyright law under which as original author Verga was entitled to at least one quarter of royalties, but he also failed to comply with subsequent court rulings, taking the case twice to appeal. At the beginning of 1893 Sonzogno convinced Verga, who was at that time in some financial difficulty, to take a lump-sum payment of 140,000 lire as a settlement in the dispute. His writing career never really progressed after this event and he died in Catania on 24 January 1922, just four months after his most famous English translator had expressed a definite interest in translating the second of his two great novels – *Mastro-don Gesualdo* (1889).

Verga has been translated by at least 14 translators over the years and while I hope the bibliographical list I have compiled is complete, it is possible that some further English translations may have been neglected because, to borrow a word from a letter in which D.H. Lawrence (his most famous translator) mentions, Mary Craig's 1893 translation of *Mastro-don Gesualdo*, translations do "disappear".

For reasons of lack of available space and time it would be impossible in this context to provide even a cursory survey of the work of all of these translators and I will concentrate on Lawrence's translation of *Mastro-don Gesualdo* (for reasons of notoriety and literary interest) while also making some considerations regarding my own contribution (for reasons of familiarity).

2. D.H. Lawrence and Verga

The remarkable (and sad) thing about Lawrence's interest in Verga is that the two never met, despite the fact that the English writer had been living on and off in Taormina, only 40 kilometres north of Catania, for just over two years at the time of Verga's death on 27 January 1922. Lawrence wrote in a letter to his

American agent Robert Mountsier on 7 February, “I have done about one-third of Verga [sic] novel *Mastro-don Gesualdo* – translated it I mean. I have written to the publishers in Milan about copyrights. Poor old Verga went and died exactly as I was going to see him in Catania. But he was 82 years old” (*Letters*, volume IV, p. 186). Treves, Verga’s publisher, replied that they no longer held any copyright in his works and that Lawrence should contact Verga’s heirs. More of the question of copyright later, but for the moment it is enough to observe that the intended visit hardly rings true – the interest in translating *Mastro-don Gesualdo* had been famously expressed in a letter of 25 October 1921 to the Scottish author Catherine Carswell: “I have only been reading Giovanni Verga lately. He exercises quite a fascination on me ... Do you know if he is translated into English?... It would be fun to do him – his *language* is so fascinating” (*Introductions*, p. li). In part that fascination will have derived from Verga’s subject matter and characters: his verist language was certainly influenced by the conscious choice to write about struggling people, the *vinti*, the vanquished, as his cycle of five novels was to be known. Verga himself, of course, sadly proved vanquished in his ambitions, only managing to reach the halfway mark with the third and incomplete *La duchessa di Leyra*.

But the interest will also have come from the fact that *Mastro-don Gesualdo* is a story about the difficulties of mobility between social classes, a topic which as the writer son of a miner father and a school-teacher mother, Lawrence would have been particularly receptive to. Then there was the simple linguistic fact that Lawrence was learning Italian – surely a trip to Catania to see Verga would have been of great benefit in this sense.

But this never happened because Lawrence was very much preoccupied in this period with escaping from Sicily and the question of how to do it: whether to travel directly to the United States or to, “go east, ultimately intending to go west”, via Ceylon (*Letters*, volume IV, p. 220). Had Lawrence been interested in Verga the man, in Verga the fellow writer, he could easily have found a way to meet him between November and December of 1921. In truth Lawrence was primarily interested in Verga’s texts and in Verga’s language; the translation work on the novel and the stories were very much part of the process of Lawrence’s learning Italian and were also a way of carrying something of Sicily with him after his departure in 1922 and during his travels over the last eight years of his life: Ceylon, Australia, New Mexico before his return to Europe, to Italy and France.¹

Lawrence’s need to escape Sicily was profound, but so too was his attachment to the island, and a 1986 article by Julian Moynahan, “Lawrence and

¹ A letter written from the *Osterley* on 28 February 1922 provides an illustration of just how pleased Lawrence and his wife were to be taking pieces of Sicily with them on their journey: “Too bad you were not there, in Naples, to see us come on board; with trunks bag-and-baggage: baskets of oranges and apples (given us) and a long board, which is a piece of a Sicilian cart, very colourfully painted with two scenes from the life of Marco Visconte – Else knows how lovely are these Sicilian carts: and the *facchini* kept calling: *Ecco la Sicilia – Ecco la Sicilia in viaggio per l’India*.”

Sicily: The Place of Places”, documents this fact admirably. Lawrence had extremely mixed feelings regarding Sicily, as indeed he had regarding most things. Ambivalence was one of his trademarks and was often a source of the vigour and appeal in his writing. Here he is in a letter from Taormina to his friend, Jan Juta, on 3 December 1921:

I am getting so sick of these piffling pleasant people here, and their silly jibber-jabber. Feel I shall die if I have to hear much more. Very few *forestieri* because of strikes etc. Taormina Corso just one long arcade of junk shops now. Things dearer than ever, more faked, food tiresome as it always was. If only Etna would send down 60,000,000,000 tons of boiling lava over the place and cauterise it away. I’ll bet Naxos was a foul hole, before Etna kindly crozzled it to a cinder. – But she – Etna – has been looking very lovely, deep, deep snow, and heavy smoke billowing this way, sun sultry through the smoke. Italy has a kind of waste, barren, *écoeuré* feeling, it seems to me. I want to be off. If only I could get a ship to New Orleans or to Los Angeles. (*Letters*, volume IV, p. 139)

The “piffling pleasant people” are most probably members of Taormina’s considerable expatriate community who receive frequent criticism in Lawrence’s letters from the villa Fontana Vecchia. The ship in the end would be the *R.M.S. Osterley*, which sailed from Naples on 22 February 1922 to take Lawrence and Frieda to Ceylon.

In truth Lawrence had already come across Verga, or at least Verga’s most famous work, before moving to Sicily; some five years previously, while living in Cornwall during the First World War, he wrote to his Russian friend “Kot” Koteliansky, who had lent him some Italian books: “We have read the *Cavalleria Rusticana*: a veritable blood-pudding of *passion*! It is not at all good, only, in some odd way, comical, as the portentous tragic Italian is always comical.” (*Letters*, volume II, p. 53) We cannot know in precisely which form Lawrence read Verga’s story at that time – in Italian, in English, as the original story or as the theatrical adaptation or even as the operatic libretto, but we can note that Verga himself is not named in the letter with its damning verdict on the work. But by the time he has translated *Mastro-don Gesualdo*, his view on the “portentous tragic Italian” has changed considerably, as this quotation from the first version of his introduction to Verga’s work shows:

In most books of the period – even in *Madame Bovary*, to say nothing of Balzac’s earlier *Lys dans la Vallée* – one has to take off about twenty per-cent of the tragedy. One does it in Dickens, one does it in Hawthorne, one does it all the time with the great writers. Then why not with Verga? Just knock off about twenty per-cent of the tragedy in *I Malavoglia* and see what a great book remains. Most books that live, live in spite of the author’s laying it on thick. Think of *Wuthering Heights*. It is quite as impossible to an Italian as ever *I Malavoglia* is to us. But it is a great book. (*Introductions*, p. 373)

Lawrence and Frieda travelled to Ceylon to stay with their American artist friends Achsah and Earl Brewster who in 1934, four years after Lawrence's death, published *D. H. Lawrence: Reminiscences and Correspondence*. In one brief passage they provide us with a vision of Lawrence, translator of Verga, at work in Kandy:

Lawrence sat curled up with a school-boy's copy-book in his hand, writing away. He was translating Giovanni Verga's short stories from the Sicilian. Across the pages of the copy-book his hand moved rhythmically, steadily, unhesitatingly, leaving a trail of exquisite, small writing as legible as print. No blots, no scratchings marred its beauty. (p. 250)

While the copy-books containing Lawrence's handwritten translations of Verga's stories are not available to us, the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, does hold the four copy-books containing the translation of *Mastro-don Gesualdo*, indeed remarkable for how neat they are, entirely free of "blots" and "scratchings". The typescript of the translation is similarly clean, but the galley proofs, also held at the Ransom Center, tell another story that belies the Brewsters' vision.

On reading the long sheets of galley proofs, apart from the physical oddity of this now bygone step in book production, one is struck by the sheer quantity of corrections. Lawrence was evidently sometimes unhappy with his English, with his translation, but on occasions his corrections are statted, probably because he was aware of the inordinate cost in terms of time and money that such substantial corrections would entail. On galley 16, for example, the Italian, *La figliuola finse di accorgersi soltanto allora della sua amica* (*Mastro*, Mondadori, p. 47) appears as, "Her daughter pretended to ~~realise only at that moment that her friend was there.~~" The words struck through were to have been replaced with the handwritten correction, "have only just noticed the presence of her friend", but they in their turn have been struck through and all the blots and scratchings are statted, or rather, to be precise, in this instance they are "OK" ed. The line between "realise" and "notice" as English synonyms of *accorgersi* is a very fine one, but the time and energy necessary for reflecting on (and correcting) that subtle difference are considerable: such is the stuff of translation, an accumulation of at least mental blots and scratchings.

The story of how Lawrence translated *Mastro-don Gesualdo* is an object lesson in how not to approach literary translation, in how to apply a praxis that makes no provision for the time and reflection necessary for doing the job well. But even a minimum of reflection told Lawrence that many changes simply had to be made on the galleys. On sheet 12 the Italian *L'arciprete prese tabacco, si spurgò, tossì* (*Mastro*, Mondadori, p. 35) was translated and composed as, "The arch-priest took snuff, spat himself clear, coughed." Lawrence very wisely engages in some cleaning up of his own by striking out ~~spat himself clear~~, replacing it with the more mundane, but much more natural, "blew his nose".

Lawrence's relative lack of familiarity with Italian plays a role in this type of problem in his translations of Verga – the best synonym for *accorgersi* in the one instance, the niceties of Italian reflexive verbs in the other. But he failed to catch all such problems and never would have been able to even if he had had more than a few weeks staying as a guest at Seltzer's home on Long Island. The work of the translator, while certainly requiring writerly qualities of imagination and linguistic verve, also requires great reserves of patience and dogged concentration – resources Lawrence simply could never have had because of the man and the writer he was.

We see that the vision of translatory perfection provided by the Brewsters is completely unrealistic: the blots and the scratchings are always there in one way or another, but of course do not appear in any “definitive”, published text. It is the fate of every translation, however, to be open to subsequent revision, correction, comment. In the case of Lawrence's translations this problem is compounded by the fact that the translations themselves are now in the public domain and although over the years many of Lawrence's oversights have been corrected, many remain and may never be corrected because of the costs involved in such an operation. For example, in the paragraph regarding the snuff-taking priest quoted from the galley-proofs above, the current Dedalus edition of the novel (2000) still reproduces a slight misinterpretation on Lawrence's part. Below is the original followed by the same paragraph from the Dedalus edition:

L'arciprete prese tabacco, si spurgò, tossì, infine si alzò, e si mosse per andarsene, gonfiando le gote – le gote lucenti, la sottana lucente, il grosso anello lucente, tanto che le male lingue dicevano fosse falso, mentre il marchese gli gridava dietro:

– Don Calogero! don Calogero! dico per dire, che diavolo! Alla mia età... (p. 35)

The arch-priest took snuff, blew his nose, coughed, and at last rose and made as if to leave, his cheeks puffing: – his cheeks shining, his gown shining, and his ring shining, although spiteful tongues said it wasn't real; while the marchese cried behind him:

'Don Calogero! Don Calogero! I mean to say, what the devil! – At my age – !' (pp. 39–40)

The translation of *tanto che* with “although” is an imprecision. Here *tanto che* carries the meaning of “to the point that” or “so much that”.

Giovanni Cecchetti in his famous article of 1957 highlighted a number of such problems, but he also focused on the fact that Lawrence often chose to translate Verga's Italian idioms literally. Just a few lines after the example mentioned above from galley sheet 16, we have an example of this. The Italian, *Il baronello ch'era sulle spine propose di rientrare in sala* (Mastro, Mondadori, p. 47) is translated as, “The young baron, who was on thorns, proposed that they

should go back into the salon.” Lawrence chose to translate the Italian idiom of to be *sulle spine*, which means to be on thorns in the sense of a state of painful trepidation, of anxiety, literally. He evidently liked the idiom and its image very much because in a letter from Fontana Vecchia to Mary Canaan of 12 February 1922 he wrote, “I am filling in my time translating a Sicilian novel, *Mastro-don Gesualdo*, by Giovanni Verga: he died last month. It is so good. – But I am on thorns, can’t settle.” (*Letters*, volume II, p. 191) It seems to me that the image works very well here in this brief extract from Lawrence’s letter – Lawrence was a man and a writer constantly “on thorns”, never settled – and it works, too, in my opinion, in the translation of the novel. It is not, however, a very common image in English, generally our thorns are more often in our sides and consequently are semantically different. To borrow Lawrence Venuti’s terms, “foreignizing” and “domesticating”, introduced and explained in 1995 in *The Translator’s Invisibility*, D.H. Lawrence, probably due to his being a creative writer, was certainly not afraid of foreignizing his own English. What Cecchetti presented as a tremendous failing in Lawrence’s translations has been viewed by others, most notably Armin Arnold, as a positive feature.

In “A Chorus of Cruelty”, an article on Giovanni Verga that contains some discussion of *Cavalleria rusticana and other stories*, translated by G.H. McWilliam (1999), the writer and translator Tim Parks quotes McWilliam quoting Lawrence:

Usefully, McWilliam’s introduction quotes Lawrence as observing that a translation of Verga would ‘need somebody who could absolutely handle English in the dialect’. ‘Probably I shall never do it,’ Lawrence says, ‘Though if I don’t, I doubt if anyone else will – adequately at least.’ Remarking on the acuteness of observation, McWilliam then lists four or five howlers Lawrence made as evidence that his ‘immodesty’ was misplaced and his version not ‘adequate’. But there are few translators, McWilliam included, who do not make occasional mistakes [...].

Parks here has illustrated the hubris of two translators – a certain amount of this quality is required before taking on any literary translation – and proceeds to reveal several problems with McWilliam’s translation, including his tendency to introduce idioms that while being natural, contemporary language are sometimes anachronistic or inappropriate. These examples include one almost unbelievable, and extremely funny howler that *is* a howler precisely because it *is*, unlike Lawrence’s translation at that particular point in the text, a *literal* translation. Translation is indeed a complex business and as Parks writes pithily in his article, “These stories are never pretty.” But there are those who see benefit or profit in looking for and eventually exposing the ugly stories, exposing translators’ mistakes, an approach that often goes hand in hand with what the Translation Studies scholar Andrew Chesterman in 2004 defined as “the pejorative route” (as opposed to the “descriptive” or “prescriptive” routes).

Cecchetti, for example, back in the 1950s with his criticism of Lawrence's translations was on the pejorative route and while many of his points were valid and interesting, it is also true that his criticism became something of a vehicle for his own translations of Verga. This is yet another story that is not very pretty, also because Cecchetti's translations in their turn, inevitably, have received criticism, most famously from Armin Arnold who at a distance of just over a decade from Cecchetti's article wrote unequivocally, even categorically, "The present paper proves that Lawrence's translations of Verga into English are, in fact, much better than Cecchetti's: they are the best ones we have." (p. 389) Such is the rise and fall of translators' fortunes and this movement is inevitable because over time and over readings no translation – indeed no text, no author – can be beyond criticism or reinterpretation.

But to return momentarily to Lawrence, writer and translator on thorns, another significant and obvious element in the extract from his letter to Mary Canaan is "filling in my time". The fact is that for Lawrence his translation activity with Verga's texts was not "work" and the eventual publication of his translations seems more related to his publishers' desire to attract and keep him as an author rather than any conviction regarding the value of the texts themselves.

In one of the folders of miscellaneous correspondence regarding Lawrence held at the Harry Ransom Center are two unpublished letters from Adele Seltzer, wife of Thomas Seltzer, Lawrence's American publisher; both make mention of the translation of *Mastro-don Gesualdo*, which she had just (apparently) read. The first letter is to her husband, written from Chicago on Friday January 5 1923, presumably just before her train left for New York:

I read steadily, but even so got through only a half of *Mastro-don Gesualdo*. It's a superb thing, lusty + kicking with life, but after the middle of the book one gets a little weary of the perpetual Sicilian kicking.

I hated to be riding back without you. I'd even have preferred 'Lawrence is great, isn't he?' 'Lawrence is a remarkable character, isn't he?' 'Lawrence is a wonderful man, isn't he?' all the way. However, I did get some reading done + made one worth while acquaintance.

The other letter, brief and quoted here in its entirety, is to Lawrence himself, written two days later from New York on Sunday January 7:

Dear Mr Lawrence:

I have now read *Mastro-don Gesualdo*.

It is superb, so rich, so lusty, kicking with life. It is one of those few massive works of the whole of literature that tower monumental, apart, a world in themselves. Bitter, too, as you say, but in rare parts so beautiful. Nowhere that I know of has maiden awakening been done as exquisitely as with Isabella in the country, after her father and household have fled there before the plague.

As for your translation. I take it with the thrilled wonder and delight with which I take everything you do. (Singing of the old Christmas carol included). It seems to me perfection. The world is certainly fortunate that you of all people have done this work: and Verga unfortunate that he did not live to know you.

Yours sincerely,

Adele Szold Seltzer

Lawrence is great indeed, but perhaps Verga's true fortune was in never knowing the precise circumstances under which his novel was translated and published in English and in never knowing that the matter of his (and his heirs') rights in the work was effectively swept under the carpet by Lawrence, his agent and his publishers. Another unpublished letter held in the Ransom Center was written on January 18 1923 and is from Robert Mountsier, American agent, to Curtis Brown, English agent:

As for Blackwell and "Mastro-don Gesualdo," it seems to Lawrence and me that this novel and the book of short stories, "Black Bread," should be published by the same publisher. We think it useless to try to trace the heirs. On this side in the matter of publication we consider the following; since Verga is dead: the Treves volume from which Lawrence translated "Mastro-don Gesualdo" bore no copyright; there was no copyright agreement in existence between the United States and Italy at the time the volumes were published; if anybody with a legitimate claim to royalties comes along, he or they can share in the royalties of the American edition. However, the English copyright law may put a different face on the matter for you.

"Black Bread" was the title of Verga's story that Lawrence wanted to give the volume of stories eventually published as *Little Novels of Sicily* [*Novelle rusticane*]. The salient point, however, is the "We think it useless to try to trace the heirs." That was part of a story that would have been all-too-familiar to Giovanni Verga.

Italy and the United Kingdom had signed the first Berne Convention in 1886, both countries ratifying it the following year. The significance of this is that under its terms an author automatically holds copyright in his or her work whether or not there is any copyright notice in the published work. (Mountsier's observation about the lack of a copyright notice in the Treves Italian edition is therefore, from a European point of view, a *non sequitur*.) The United States on the other hand relied on its own national copyright laws and in 1911 signed the Buenos Aires Convention. Until 1996 when it signed the Berne Convention, the USA had always insisted upon the need for a copyright notice. The vagaries of international copyright law are perhaps almost as complex as detailed textual matters regarding interlingual literary translation, and to be unravelled would, like the minutiae of translation, require more time and space than is available

here. It is clear, however, that Lawrence's translations of Verga do have something of an air of piracy about them.

3. Translating *Una peccatrice* and *Storia di una capinera*

In 1993 I had no such worries about copyright because Verga's works had entered the public domain. When I began translating *Una peccatrice*, Verga had been in the public domain since 1973 – a period of 50 years since Verga's death had passed, the “duration of protection” established by the Berne Convention. In 1995 the European Union increased the protection period from 50 to 70 years following the author's death, which remains its current length.

Una peccatrice was one of the first works by Verga I had read – a bilingual dictionary by my side – and I had come across it by chance. In 1985, at the age of twenty-five, I was living in a rented, furnished apartment in Catania with a friend. Our *padrona di casa* had not exactly set us up in luxury, but there were a few books on a shelf in the living room, including an Oscar Mondadori paperback – *Giovanni Verga: Una peccatrice, Storia di una capinera, Eva, Tigre Reale*, which is still (27 years later) in my possession. I have no qualms about declaring this petty theft publicly. Firstly because 27 years seems a reasonable period of protection, secondly because she really was an awful landlady (we only lasted one calendar year in the flat) and thirdly because I remain very fond of the book, which for me is intimately linked with the experience of learning to speak, read and write Italian. By some sort of reader's right, I have considered it mine ever since 1985.

I had come across Verga in central Catania's only park of any note – the Villa Bellini, where a bronze bust of him has pride of place at the beginning of the *Viale degli uomini illustri* (and they are all illustrious *men* along that avenue). I became curious about Catania's second-most-famous son. (The first being the Vincenzo who gave his surname to the park.) I remember I even went to see the atmospheric *casa museo*, Verga's house in via Sant'Anna, which is still open to visitors.

I recount all of this not simply because I enjoy reminiscing about how and why I first embarked on the translation, but because I am convinced that there very often are such stories behind the reasons why translators embark on their projects, stories that are expressions of all manner of affective bonds with the texts they subsequently dedicate so much time and effort to, with such relatively slender remuneration. Even when a translator is commissioned by a publisher to do a job, there is usually something linking translator and author, even if it is only as slight as some perceived affinity between the two.

On a visit to the British Library one summer back then I could find no trace of an existing English translation, which was encouraging. After translating a sample chapter and sending it off to two or three potential

publishers who at that time were publishing Italian literature in translation, it was Quartet who offered me a contract in their “Encounters” imprint. I was particularly pleased about this because it meant that I would be required to write an introduction to the text.

In the midst of the beginnings of this project I heard that Franco Zeffirelli was soon to be filming a version of *Storia di una capinera* in Catania and it occurred to me that Quartet might be interested in timely publication of a translation of a work that would constitute a film tie-in. They were, but just a month or so before publication they heard that we hadn’t been the only people to have this idea. Dedalus in London were publishing Christine Donougher’s translation as *Sparrow* and Quartet abandoned their plans for my translation. This was not too much of a disappointment because publication of *A Mortal Sin*² went ahead and in any case I had come to feel deeply uneasy about Zeffirelli’s evident exploitation of the film – by then he was planning to get himself elected as Senator for Catania under Berlusconi’s Forza Italia banner, which did happen, and I was also slightly uneasy about my piggy-back attempt to exploit the film to get my translation published. *A Blackcap’s Story* remains in my drawer together with a photocopy of the anonymous English translation of 1888 – *The Story of a ‘Capinera’*, published serially in the English-language magazine, *Italia*, based in Rome. One day I would like to find the time for the close reading necessary to compare them, together with Christine Donougher’s translation and write about them.

Some years ago I did return to look at my translation of *Una peccatrice*, even going so far as to retranslate some excerpts without consulting the work I did back in 1995. The results were interesting.

On rereading *Una peccatrice* I was struck by how juvenile and overblown Verga’s style seemed. Although when I first translated the work I did know about Verga’s “repudiation” of this work – it was published in 1873 before Verga found his voice as a realist; and is one of a series of works that we might define as fictions of high society manners. I don’t recall being so keenly aware of Verga’s stylistic sins while translating back then. This new awareness was surely a result of my growth of a reader (and not just a reader of Italian).

The brief extracts below – the original Italian (a truncated sentence because part of Verga’s early style was that he liked them very long) followed by my two translations – are intended here only as the slightest of illustrations. In chapter 4 of the novella Pietro Brusio, the young protagonist, has fallen hopelessly in love with Narcisa Valderi, the Florentine *peccatrice* who has come to live in Catania (*Laberinto* was the name given back then by the Catanese to a recreational walk through what would become the Villa Bellini):

² I remember letters exchanged with the book’s editor regarding the title. We both felt (perhaps anachronistically) that *A Lady Sinner* was somehow ridiculous as a title and failed to come up with an alternative that maintained the emphasis on the feminine gender. I sent a list of other possible titles and from it she chose *A Mortal Sin*. I agreed.

Brusio passava i giorni al *Laberinto*, la sera seguendo la donna che gli aveva ispirato questa folle passione o cercando d'incontrarla al passeggio [...]. (1975, p. 75)

Brusio spent all his days at the *Laberinto*, and all his evenings following the woman who had inspired this mad passion. Sometimes while out walking [...]. (1995, p. 47)

Brusio spent his days in the *Laberinto*, while of an evening he would continue following the woman who had inspired this mad passion. He contrived to meet her as she took her walk [...] (2005, translation exercise – unpublished)

In 2005 I was not the same translator I was when I first tackled the work. In 1995 I enjoyed the repetition (and the addition) of the adjective “all”; in 2005 I was slightly more literal and enjoyed the colloquial “of an evening”. In 1995 I skipped (consciously or unconsciously) *cercando*; in 2005 I “contrived” to do better. In truth no translator will ever reproduce an identical translation with even a much shorter span of time between the execution of two translations of the same text. The variables involved in the state of the human mind and the environment are simply too many and language is too volatile an instrument to make any translation or any reading a completely reproducible event.

4. Literary translation

Why translate Verga? Why translate anything? Well, because it's there of course, because of the primal human reflex when faced with any type of challenge; but there are also nobler, more considered reasons for embarking on the arduous task. Among these is the fact that interlingual, literary translation is the human drive to understand another person's linguistic production taken to the nth degree: interlingual literary translation is a paradigm for understanding itself, as George Steiner demonstrates in the first chapter of his seminal *After Babel*. The chapter carries the title, “Understanding as Translation”, which encapsulates very effectively Steiner's central thesis, a thesis so fundamental and so demanding in its repercussions that it is often convenient, indeed often necessary, to put it to one side. For to be aware of the fact that “translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication, in the emission and reception of each and every mode of meaning, be it in the widest semiotic sense or in more specifically verbal exchange” (Steiner 1992, p. xii). To be aware of all that, all the time, would be to live in a constant state of neurasthenic, of hypersensitive awareness. But in a way that is precisely the state of awareness that is required of the literary translator when he or she is working with texts (and authors, and editors, and publishers): as near full awareness as possible regarding the workings and effect of the language of the

source text, together with as near full awareness as possible of the workings and effect of the language of the target text. Above all it is time, a commodity not always in ready supply, that allows translators to reach and maintain that awareness.

Bionote: Iain Halliday grew up in Scotland and England and studied at the University of Manchester before moving to Catania, Sicily, where he still lives and works as a researcher/lecturer in English language and translation in the Department of Humanities of the university. Over the years he has also worked as a literary translator from Italian, translating works by Giovanni Verga, Valerio Massimo Manfredi and Claudio Magris among others, and has carried out research in the field of Translation Studies that led to the publication of *Huck Finn in Italian, Pinocchio in English: Theory and Praxis of Literary Translation* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009).

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