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Abstract

Before Gramsci was given permission to write what we now know as his *Quaderni del carcere* (Prison Notebooks), he filled four other notebooks with translations (mainly from German, but also from Russian and some exercises from English); he also then included some translations from Marx in Notebook 7 in particular. In the translation notebooks we see him as an “apprentice translator”, certainly, but also note his overall approach to problems that are the constant preoccupation of translation scholars, his translations of the collection of folk tales collected by the Brothers Grimm being a case in point. Among other texts translated are a volume on historical linguistics and the 1927 number of “Die literarische Welt” on the new school of American social fiction, exemplifying the growing strata of United States intellectuals. The nineteenth-century Russian classics also aroused his interest for their link with and input into social ferment that was then beginning to grow in that country. Thus the link with some of the themes and subjects of what all regard as his major work and interests emerges clearly in these hitherto rather neglected notebooks.

Keywords

Translatability; linguistics; Gramsci’s translation work; folk tales; contemporary American literature; Marx

*Quaderni di traduzioni / Translation Notebooks (1929-1932)**

Birgit Wagner

Ever since Valentino Gerratana's most commendable publication of the *Prison Notebooks* (*Quaderni del Carcere*, 1975), and of course ever since the publication of Gramsci's *Prison Letters* (*Lettere dal carcere*, first partly published in 1947, in the post-war context, then in the first critical edition of Sergio Caprioglio and Elsa Fubini in 1975) readers could be aware of the importance of translation for Gramsci's intellectual well-being during the prison time and, perhaps more importantly, of the centrality of "translatability" ("traducibilità") for his political and philosophical thought. Yet, Gerratana's edition gave only a small place, more like a teaser, to the translations – probably for reasons of economy (in order not to overload this first critical edition), and perhaps because the question of translation did not appear so important at that time as it now seems to us. Even more welcome, therefore, are the two large volumes dedicated to the *Quaderni di traduzioni* within the context of the *Edizione Nazionale* of Gramsci's writings.

Actually, these volumes were the first (2007) published in the ongoing and still uncompleted series of this important editorial effort – a fact that might indicate the importance of translation in its literal and metaphorical meaning in our days.

Giuseppe Cospito, the author of the introduction (*Introduzione*, Vol. 1, pp. 11-40)¹ – a text that any Gramsci scholar should read – quotes Gerratana's introduction, where the latter states that in his opinion the translations were only an intellectual exercise for the prisoner, not connected to his theoretical work in the *Prison Notebooks*. However, the

* *Quaderni di traduzioni*, 2 vols, 915 pp., Giuseppe Cospito e Gianni Francioni (eds), *Edizione Nazionale degli scritti di Antonio Gramsci*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2007

¹ His text draws frequently on Lucia Borghese's seminal essay "Tia Alene in bicicletta. Gramsci traduttore dal tedesco e teorico della traduzione", in: *Belfagor* XXXVI, 1981, p. 635-65, unfortunately never entirely quoted, at least not in the "Introduzione". [This article, "Aunt Alene on her bicycle" may now be read in an English translation: see *Gramsci. Language and Translation*, ed. Peter Ives and Rocco Lacorte, Lanham, Lexington, 2010, pp. 135-70.]

current editors can prove him wrong. As Cospito rightly emphasizes, the translations not only embrace more than 700 pages in print of the prison manuscripts (3000 in total, see “Introduzione”, p. 13), but each and every one is linked to Gramsci’s manifold intellectual projects and capable of completing and even enriching their comprehension.

The first case Cospito examines is the translation of the magazine *Die literarische Welt*, issue 1927, dedicated to the then contemporary American literature. As however stated by Giorgio Baratta², this particular interest is closely related to Gramsci’s interest in modernism and to the paragraphs on “Americanism and Fordism” of the *Prison Notebooks*, most notably the monographic notebook 22 which he entitled “Americanismo e fordismo”. Grimm’s *Fairy Tales*, a major interest for the apprentice translator Gramsci, corresponds to his interest in fables – see the short Sardinian stories he sent to his sons in Russia in the moving last letters of his prison correspondence – as well as to his interest in popular culture. As is well known, Gramsci also translated from Russian, drawing on an anthology presenting the most famous Russian writers of the nineteenth century, considered exemplary models of high-level national-popular literature, which could introduce untrained readers to “good” literature. These are, therefore, in some ways linked to the same issue as Grimm’s *Fairy Tales*, namely empowering narratives.

The same statement is valid for the translation of Goethe’s text – Goethe being for Gramsci an exemplary “national”, but not “nationalist” writer (see *Introduzione* p. 21, citing Notebook 3, paragraph 2 of the *Prison Notebooks*** – the lack of whom in Italian literature, rightly or wrongly, he often deplors in the *Notebooks*. The selection of Goethe’s poems is certainly the most ardent enterprise among his translations – the one into which he put the most effort. They are accompanied by a selection of Goethe’s conversations with Eckermann, this latter related, amongst other concerns, to Gramsci’s constant debate with

² Giorgio Baratta, *Le rose e i quaderni. Il pensiero dialogico di Antonio Gramsci [The Roses and the Notebooks. The Dialogic Thought of Antonio Gramsci]*, Roma, Carocci 2003, note p. 142.

** Gerratana p. 284; in English *Selections from Cultural Writings*, D. Forgacs and G. Nowell-Smith (eds), p. 260 [tr. Note].

the philosopher Croce, one of his constant outstanding models and intellectual adversaries (*Introduzione*, p. 22).

Gramsci was a learned linguist (remember his Turin study time with the linguist Matteo Giulio Bartoli), and so it is not surprising that he undertook the translation of a manual by Franz Nikolaus Finck, *Die Sprachstämme des Erdkreises*, representing his interest in – as we would nowadays say – culturally informed linguistics that is obvious in many sections of the *Notebooks*. And who would wonder that he undertook translations from Marx, drawn from *Lohnarbeit und Kapital. Zur Judenfrage und andere Schriften aus der Frühzeit* [*Wage Labour and Capital. The Jewish Question and other Early Writings*], even with the limits that his condition as a prisoner of a fascist state imposed? Their relation to the political section of the *Notebooks* is obvious and clarify the divergent readings Gramsci gave to these texts regarding the *vulgata* proposed by the Third International. Here we are extremely close to Gramsci's political vision (*Introduzione*, p. 25).

In the last section, Cospito gives an overview of Gramsci's translation strategies, accomplishments and deficiencies (the last quite understandable, as the Sardinian philosopher was a politician and political thinker, not a trained translator). However, he was a theoretician of translation, as Cospito rightly states. The strategies employed to translate Grimm's *Fairy Tales*, already studied by Lucia Borghese, are remarkable in aiming to achieve a lay version, adjusted to his intended readers, that is, his sister's children, in order to provide them with an "empowering" vision of the world – the intended public they never reached, due to the veto of the prison's authorities.

The editors divided their responsibilities: Cospito, aside from the *Introduzione*, also furnishes most useful explanatory notes, while Gianni Francioni has seen to the critical edition of the text and the important textual note (*Nota al testo*, at the end of the second volume, p. 835-98). All these tasks have been carried out with outstanding philological expertise. Notes to the translations appear when they are necessary, i.e. in cases of clear misunderstanding of the text, or when Gramsci takes the liberty to change slightly the literal sense in the interest of his own political and philosophical convictions.

Actually, translation is one of the most accurate modes to read a text. In the task he undertakes to translate a selection of Marx's texts, the prisoner not only exercises his mind – in the period when he was not yet allowed to write texts of his own – but finds himself in constant dialogue with these founding writings. Aside from his possible misunderstandings, he also finds creative solutions for the rendering of Marxist terminology – creative solutions that slightly or not so slightly diverge from the then Marxist *vulgata* – and so prepare, perhaps even contribute, to making his own political thought emerge. That is not of course what a professional translator is supposed to do, but Gramsci did not translate in order to prepare a critical edition, he wanted to enter into a dialogue with Marx's thoughts, thereby intending to clarify his own political philosophy. Most interesting are therefore the ample notes to *Lohnarbeit und Kapital*, for instance the origin of Gramsci's notion of "praxis"³ so important to his own political theory (see p. 743 and the note on p. 814), one of the many examples of his creative appropriations.

Obviously, the translation "exercises" were not a mere stopgap for the prisoner. In a way, they appear to be such in the sense that in the early period in prison Gramsci was not able to undertake other intellectual projects. However, as the present edition clearly shows, they prepare and pave the way for the *Prison Notebooks*, in a dimension that has been frequently underestimated.

But there is more. The editors pay little attention to the metaphorical meaning of translation (*traducibilità*, translatability), a term of utmost importance in Gramsci's political thought – perhaps because it is not the task of a critical edition to exceed its prior purpose. Yet, in my opinion, this edition opens up possibilities to pursue investigation on the link between literal and metaphorical translation.

Of course, this has been prepared in the past, years before the publication of the *Quaderni di traduzioni*. Important studies to mention are Derek Boothman's book *Traducibilità e processi traduttivi* (*Translatability*

³ Gramsci's translation of Marx here reads "l'oggetto, il reale, il sensibile è concepito solo sotto la forma dell'oggetto o della intuizione; ma non come attività sensibile umana, praxis, non soggettivamente": translating literally in English "the thing [*Gegenstand*], the real, sensuousness is conceived under the form of the object [*Objekt*] or of intuition; but not as human sensuous activity, praxis, not subjectively".

and translative processes)⁴ and Giorgio Baratta's interpretation of the term "translatability".⁵ The term in question can be conceived as a communicational (and hence political) device as well as in an ethical sense: as the capability to listen to others, not only to put forward one's own political and intellectual principles, as the capacity for democratic – and human! – dialogue, in order to meet the addressee's cultural horizon. I am quite aware of the fact that Gramsci would not have used this terminology – but it matches how we can nowadays think of it.

Because we have to "translate" Gramsci's insights to our present: and this project needs, among other capabilities, philological expertise (which Gramsci would have approved of). It seems that this view has made it nowadays to new topicality. Suffice it to take a look at the *International Gramsci Journal*, vol.1, issue 4. There, Gianni Fresu comments on the contributions of Cosimo Zene and Peter D. Thomas, both dedicated to uses and misunderstandings of Gramsci's reflections on subaltern groups, under the label "traducibilità e modernità" and the "possibili traduzioni del patrimonio teorico gramsciano, in concrete formazioni economico-sociali profondamente diverse da quelle indagate dall'intellettuale sardo" ("the possible translations of Gramsci's theoretical heritage into concrete socio-economic formations profoundly different from those investigated by our Sardinian intellectual himself").⁶

Of course, the translatability of concepts presupposes correct reading of texts – as Peter D. Thomas shows convincingly in his essay – and close attention to literal translation. The present edition give us a rich instrument to investigate this question.

⁴ Derek Boothman, *Traducibilità e processi traduttivi. Un caso: Gramsci linguista*, Perugia, Guerra Edizioni 2004. Boothman opens up the discussion on "translatability" with the last chapter of his book ("La traducibilità di Gramsci – verso un bilancio provvisorio"). It is to be hoped that the promised update of this book in English will appear before not too long.

⁵ Giorgio Baratta, *Antonio Gramsci in contrappunto. Dialoghi con il presente* [*Antonio Gramsci in Counterpoint. Dialogues with the Present*], Rome, Carocci 2007, see especially pp. 22 et seq. Cfr. also my essay "Cultural Translation: A Value or a Tool? Let's start with Gramsci", in: Federico Italiano / Michael Rössner (ed.) *Translatio/n. Narration, Media and the Staging of Differences*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2012, p. 51-68 (a text written already with the help of the current edition of the *Quaderni di traduzioni*).

⁶ Gianni Fresu, "Traducibilità e modernità del nesso concettuale egemonico/subalterno nelle relazioni di Peter Thomas and Cosimo Zene", *International Gramsci Journal*, 1 (4), 2015, p. 94-100, here p. 94. The texts Fresu comments are the following: Cosimo Zene, "I subalterni nel mondo: tipologie e nesso con le differenti forme dell'esperienza religiosa", p. 66-82 and Peter D. Thomas, "Cosa rimane dei subalterni alla luce dello 'Stato integrale'?", p. 83-93, both in the same issue.