Translating Oneself on the World Stage. Global Literature and Minority Languages in Italy, Scotland and Ireland

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Abstract
Writing in a minority language means going towards difficult translatability and the preservation of culture-specific elements, which is the opposite of what is required for global literature. The common practice of self-translation, however, points to an ambiguity in minority language writing. After redefining the concept of 'minority language', which has acquired a new meaning in the context of globalisation, it is essential to define whether the languages involved in self-translation are of the same type or not. A comparison of minority language literature in Italy, Scotland and Ireland shows how crucial the role of translation and self-translation is. These countries are only an example, since in recent decades minority language writers all over the world have felt the need to publish their works with parallel texts – be it translation or self-translation. Despite the variety of motivations, the primary reason seems to be the desire to widen the audience beyond the limits of the minority language. Translation offers the seductive possibility of crossing the borders of one's beloved cultures, whose virtue – the shared values of an 'organic' community – implies temporary limitation and isolation. This is all the more true for the writers whose other tongue is English. Local products have a well-established niche in national and international trade, where they meet the taste of audiences in search of exotic specialities. However, the global prestige of English can weaken the creative impulse towards the minority language, since English offers much more visibility, fame and money. Despite the ambiguous status of self-translation, which is often considered as a symptom of subordination, it remains the only way of opening oneself up to the world. In sum, the position of minority language literature on the international stage looks to be twofold: on the one hand, it is a form of resistance to global literature; on the other hand, immediate translation and self-translation imply a desire to be part of the global scenario.

Keywords: poetry, translation, minorities, globalisation

English, the global language, is producing a global literature, the latest stage of a phenomenon which has only recently begun to

attract critical attention[1]. International best-sellers are published simultaneously in several major languages. Translators work on unfinished or barely finished texts, a practice which is changing both the sense of original writing and the role of translation. This is a complex field, which requires a separate analysis. I have recalled it to provide a background to my discussion and to point out how, among other things, global literature demands easy translatability and the reduction of culture-specific references. In such an international context, writing in a minority language means going in the opposite direction, that is, towards difficult translatability and the preservation of culture-specific elements. The common practice of self-translation, however, points to an ambiguity in minority language writing.

Globalisation has modified the concept of 'minority language', which needs to be qualified before starting our discussion. Since minorities exist in relation to a majority, what kind of majority are we thinking of? There are national and international majorities, but only one global language: English. As Michael Cronin argued in *Translation and Globalization*,

> If the informational revolution has involved the globalization of English, then the very terms of our discussion here are altered. The issue of translation and minority languages is not a peripheral concern for beleaguered fans of exotic peoples gabbling in incomprehensible tongues but the single most important issue in translation studies today. (2006: 144)

In other words, in some crucial fields English has minoritised all other languages, which today are experiencing the same pressure minority languages have always been subject to. The limited number of translations from Hindi and Chinese into English and French shows that on the global book market Hindi and Chinese are treated as minority languages. Like many minority language writers, Chinese and other Asian translators often have to work from their mother tongues into English in order to promote their cultures abroad[2]. Therefore, 'minority language' does not only

[1] The most comprehensive essay is probably Casanova (2008).

[2] On the problems raised by these versions into a translator's second language, see Hung (2005).

mean 'spoken by a small population'[3]. This extended concept of 'minority language' should be kept in mind, even though the examples analysed in this essay refer to some minority languages in the habitual sense.

Empirically, minority languages can be classified according to their status. The main difference is between officially recognised and unrecognised languages. A general scheme could be as follows:

A) officially recognised
a) As national languages (Maori, Irish, Canadian French)
b) As regional languages (Catalan, Welsh)
b.1) Equal status with the national language(s), i.e., used in education, bureaucracy, media, etc. (Catalan)
b.2) Not equal to the national language(s), i.e. used only occasionally or not used in education, bureaucracy, media, etc. (Italian dialects in Autonomous Regions, e.g. Friulian, Sicilian, Sardinian, etc.)
c) As language of an ethnic minority (Basque, Walser, etc.)

B) without official status
a) With a written tradition (literature)
a.1) Used orally in private and public situations, but not in public institutions (e.g. Venetian, Neapolitan, etc.)
a.2) Used orally (almost) only in private situations (declining Italian dialects, e.g. Milanese, Genoese, etc.)
b) With no written tradition.

Political recognition is not enough to preserve the vitality of a language. Nonetheless, it is helpful, and it has saved more than one tongue from extinction. The difference makes itself felt even in common speech. The idioms in group *A* are normally defined as 'languages', those in group *B* as 'dialects' (excluding the unwritten tongues of small, isolated populations, which are usually called 'languages' even by non-experts).

[3] As Cronin points out, in many foreign countries speakers of Chinese and Hindi can find themselves in the position of minority language speakers. Every language is, potentially, a minority language. Its status can change as historical conditions change. Cronin (2006: 144-5) mentions the case of Canadian French, whose development anticipated the changing status of French in Europe and the rest of the world.

The reasons for these differences are obvious. Officially recognised languages receive public support, which means not only funds, but also a network of publishers, newspapers, radios, TVs, internet sites, cultural and bureaucratic institutions which reinforce the speakers' confidence in the value of their tongue – the essential requirement for survival. Scholars have argued that minority languages cannot survive for long if their written usage is confined to literature (Cronin 2006: 143-4). Though this cannot be extended to the past, because Italian dialects have thrived in written form only as poetic languages for centuries, it is true that minority languages run the risk of disappearing if they remain confined to orality and aesthetic forms of writing in a time of mass literacy and planetary circulation of knowledge. However, pragmatic translation can be dangerous. As Michael Cronin has pointed out with reference to Irish, pragmatic usage involves unidirectional translation from the dominant major language into the minority language, which progressively becomes a mirror-image of the other. In the long run, there is nothing left to translate because the minority language turns into a calque of the major language. In other words, minority languages need to be written for pragmatic purposes if they want to escape extinction; at the same time, pragmatic translation can destroy the identity of the language it should theoretically reinforce[4].

Despite these dangers, public support remains an essential asset. Languages without official recognition, at best, are tolerated. Their use is often discouraged (explicitly or implicitly, publicly or individually) and sometimes forbidden by law. As the scheme mentioned above shows, not every Italian dialect enjoys the same status, a fact which exerts a significant influence on its survival.

Another important question we must ask ourselves is, what kind of languages are involved in self-translation? Are they two languages of the same type, that is, two international languages, two national languages, two dialects? Or, is the relation between them asymmetric, since they are a national language and a dialect (as in Italian dialect literature), an international and a minority language

[4] Cronin 2006: 146-7. The crucial point, according to Cronin, is that minority language speakers and translators are able to decide what translation strategy must be followed (p. 167).

(as in many former colonies), an international and a national language (as in Emile Cioran), or two international languages (as in Beckett and Nabokov)?

Besides, the problems a self-translator faces when his or her two languages are closely related, like Scots and English, are not the same as those raised by two languages with different origins, like Irish and English. This second type of relation was the most common in the British Empire. But, as George Steiner pointed out long ago, translating from a closely related language can be more complicated than from a remote language. Proximity of origin and constant interchange make a translator's work easier and more difficult at the same time[5]. The example cited by Steiner is the case of French and English, but his observations apply even better to the question of Scots and English, or dialects and Italian[6].

I must emphasise that here the word 'dialect' is used in the Italian sense, which differs from the common English usage. Italian dialects are languages that evolved from Latin simultaneously and independently. Over the years one of them, the Tuscan-Florentine dialect, became the national language, thereby turning the other idioms into 'dialects'. The clearest analogy in the British Isles is the question of English and Scots. Before becoming a national, spoken language, for centuries Italian was a literary language frozen in the works of some early authors considered as atemporal models. It was a dead language for most writers, who had different mother tongues. However strange it may sound, literature in Italian is an immense repertoire of auto-translation, though literary histories and critics usually ignore the fact.

In Italy, literature was multilingual from the start. I am not referring to the widespread knowledge of Latin, but to the fact that many dialects were already used for writing in the Middle Ages.

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[5] "The innocence of great distance, the conventionally negotiated immediacy of exoticism are unavailable." Prolonged contact makes "the text to be translated denser, more opaque (literally *verdichtet*). Therefore the relations of the translator to what is 'near' is inherently ambiguous and dialectical." In sum, "What merits wonder is the fact that there can be serious alternity of meaning and expressive form inside the same language-family and cultural lattice" (Steiner 1976: 361-2, 393).

[6] Steiner (1976: 363) notes also that, "The more charged the proximity, the stronger the impulse to defensive self-definition, to the conservation of integral form".

After the 16th century, and with great individual differences, their written usage was confined to theatre and poetry. This tradition still continues today. In fact, a singularity of contemporary Italian literature is the relevant presence of poetry in dialect (the so-called *poesia neodialettale*). Among other things, a distinguishing feature of Italian dialect poetry since the mid-20th century is the self-translation that regularly accompanies the dialect poems.

In Italy as elsewhere, self-translation is more common in poetry than in prose. Short poems are easily translated soon after their composition, whereas a novel can be translated only a long time after the author started writing it. This lapse of time changes the relation between the source text and the translation, which are rarely as interlocked as a bi-textual poem. The translations are variously printed, as parallel texts, at the foot of the page or as side-by-side texts; whatever the case, dialect poetry books appear even in their first editions as bilingual texts.

The impact of dialect poetry on poetry in Italian has not received much critical attention yet. Scholars will have to analyse not only the influence of the original texts but also the self-translations into Italian, which introduced linguistic and poetic models radically different from those that have dominated Italian-language poetry in recent decades.

Some Italian critics have written that their problem with dialect literature is that it is not completely distinct from the Italian tradition. Italian dialect literature has neither a separate formal tradition nor publishing, media and institutional support. Dialect authors normally exploit the same publishing channels as Italian-language authors to address their audiences. Therefore, they look like foreigners inside the Italian home, writing a different language while using the same instruments and institutions. But this is the crucial point of our story: the concepts of 'home' and 'stranger' underlying such a view are obsolete.

Foreigners at home: this is how many minority languages are considered when they are not recognised officially. It is a view that stems from the ideology of nineteenth-century nationalism, which claimed that national culture must be monolingual and homogeneous. This situation never existed in Italy, a country of many idioms and innumerable local differences. The nationalist ideology demands that, preferably, a nation must possess one language and one culture.

Cultures which look unfamiliar or languages that are not known to all the population have no right to citizenship. The recent wave of immigration from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe has only raised the same issue on a more complex level. Unsurprisingly, the attitude of many Italians towards the new cultures has been the same as towards dialect, that is, a mixture of classist disdain and sentimental idealisation. As a result, the immigrant communities begin to act like dialect groups inside the Italian dynamic, which is even more interesting.

Dialect poets are not only motivated by their affection for a minority culture. In historical contexts like Italy, dialect writing often implies disaffection for the national and/or international culture in which a part of one's life is spent. Writing in dialect means taking up a marginal position when the forestage is crowded by distasteful actors. The presence of an Italian self-translation indicates that writers do not want to break completely with their national community. They want to interact with it dialectically, from a standpoint which is not severed, but peripheral. Hopefully, such an oblique perspective might make their fellow citizens stop and think for a moment.

Self-translation signals the existence of multiple cultural identities or, rather, it shows that cultural identity is not necessarily monolithic. One can belong to more than one community, of different levels and sizes. One can feel part of a community with a restricted geographic location and a specific language, and, at the same time, feel part of a larger community which contains it. Their relation can be dialectic and need not end up in the destruction of the smaller group. To identify oneself with more than one community is a way of avoiding the trap of nationalism. It is a cultural polytheism which can accept a global language, provided that it does not want to absorb and delete the other cultures, drowning out the minority speakers with its sheer volume.

At this point, it is useful to compare the situation of Italy with that of Ireland and Scotland. In Scotland, self-translation began to appear in the 1940s and became common in the 1980s. It is the standard practice in contemporary Scottish poetry, whereas contemporary Scottish poems are rarely translated by other writers[7]. Corinna

[7] Recent initiatives include a series of monolingual Gaelic prose texts and translations between Irish and Scottish, but most publications are still based on self-translation (Krause 2008: 126).

Krause sent Scottish authors a questionnaire on self-translation. Poets explained, among other things, that translation is helpful even for native speakers, who often have problems not with the language, but with poetry. Others pointed out that their bilingualism, however asymmetric, was reflected in the Scottish-English bi-texts. Only some of the youngest authors expressed concern for translation and especially self-translation. Christopher Whyte has abandoned it completely because he believes that self-translation undermines the credibility of the Gaelic text (Krause 2008: 128). Most readers of Scottish poetry are English rather than Gaelic speakers – who, in any case, are very few. But the danger is that readers, including critics, will base their judgments only on self-translation, which is considered authoritative and reliable. The influence of English is so pervasive that some readers believe that contemporary Scottish poetry has lost its genuine themes and character, and it is, in fact, English poetry in Gaelic form (pp. 131-2).

In Ireland, editions of contemporary Irish poetry with parallel English versions became common in the 1980s, thanks to the support of publishers and the Arts Council. The protagonists of this enterprise were Máirtín Ó Direáin, Michael Hartnett, Nuala Ní Dhomnhaill and the poets of The Bright Wave[8]. Anthologies of this kind and individual collections show that self-translation is not a common practice with Irish-language poets. Their texts are usually translated by other Irish poets who write in English or Irish, from Thomas Kinsella to Seamus Heaney, from Ciaran Carson to Derek Mahon[9]. Their translation strategies are various, ranging from the literalism used for ancient Irish poems to the freer adaptation to the TL used in the English versions of many contemporary texts[10].

Translation remains a hotly debated issue in Ireland. Attitudes range from Biddy Jenkinson's refusal to be translated into English

[8] See Cronin (1996: 169-70).

[9] There are some significant self-translations, like those of Michael Hartnett, but this translation mode has remained marginal in Ireland.

[10] Kinsella and Ó Tuama in their celebrated anthology *An Duanaire*, and Heaney and Hartnett have tried to preserve a trace of the structural difference of the Irish language in their English versions of old Irish poems. On the contrary, the poets-translators who worked on contemporary Irish poetry used their own style in their English versions. There are translations into Irish too, such as Gabriel Rosenstock's versions from Yeats and Heaney (pp. 181-2, 186).

in Ireland (which does not exclude translation elsewhere) to the impressive list of writers – the élite of contemporary Irish poetry – who have translated recent Irish poems[11]. The overall impression is that the Irish are a not only a nation of poets, but also of translators.

Italy, Scotland and Ireland are not the only examples. In fact, we must ask ourselves why in recent decades minority language writers all over the world have felt the need to publish their works with parallel texts – be it translation or self-translation. Despite the variety of motivations, the primary reason that emerged in Corinna Krause's questionnaire and elsewhere is the desire to widen the audience beyond the limits of the minority language[12]. Here we see why translation is tempting. For all minority language writers, translation offers the seductive possibility of crossing the borders of their beloved cultures, whose virtue – the shared values of an organic community – implies temporary limitation and isolation in comparison to the international languages. This is all the more true for the minority language writers whose other tongue is English. The different potential audience for the two tongues is enormous, and translation allows minority language writers to place their goods on the market of world literature. Local products have a well-established niche in national and international trade, where they meet the taste of audiences in search of exotic specialities. However, as Barra Ó Séaghdha pointed out, there is a danger for the bilingual writer. The global prestige of English can weaken the creative impulse towards the minority language, since English offers much more visibility, fame and money[13].

The difference from Ireland and Scotland can help us define the Italian situation better. There are not many native speakers of Irish and Scottish, whereas Italian dialects are still used by millions

[11] The list includes Paul Muldoon, Thomas McCarthy, John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian, Michael Hartnett, Peter Fallon, Eiléan Ní Chuillenáin and others (see Cronin 1996: 176-7).

[12] Krause (2008: 126). Following some recent essays, Krause argues that scholars should focus on the socio-political context in which self-translation takes place. This is hardly the novelty she thinks. This perspective is frequent in many studies on Italian dialect literature.

[13] Quoted by Cronin (1996: 176-7).

of people, though their number has been declining since the 1950s. In all three contexts, however, minority language poets have in mind a readership wider than the area of their idioms, as the bilingual form of their works shows. In comparison to Italian dialect literature, in Ireland there is little self-translation and much more public support for minority language publications. Though used by more speakers, Italian dialects, bar those in Autonomous Regions, are excluded from national and European funding schemes. This is a point where institutional status makes itself felt. The European schemes for translation introduced in the 1980s have benefited the officially recognised minority languages of some EU regions and small countries. In this respect, the Irish poets made an excellent collective effort. They understood that each writer promoted himself or herself by promoting the others through translation and reaffirming the international image of Ireland as a 'nation of poets'. Since Ireland could not take up the part of a majority literature in the world republic of letters, it has managed to present itself as the quintessential example of minority literature – the major minority literature, as it were[14]. The difference from Italy, where everyone keeps himself to himself, could not be greater.

Ireland also shows that the more an idiom is promoted as a national, official language, the more self-translation is avoided. Self-translation is felt to be a symptom of subordination, a crutch for a tongue that cannot stand by itself. A true language stands in its own right; others, not the author, must take care of translation. That is why some Welsh poets, like the Irish, avoid self-translation, whereas others delay the translation of their works (Krause 2008: 133). Only in Scotland, as we saw, is the general practice the same as in Italy: self-translation made immediately after completing the text in dialect (p. 135).

Here we get to another sense in which these practices are 'tempting translation', that is, putting translation to trial. Writers' attitudes to self-translation are various. Some authors, in Scotland

[14] This was possible because Irish writers like Yeats, Joyce and Beckett – English-language authors – have become classics of the international canon. If none of its authors are considered of international importance, a minority language literature cannot expect to find a place in the world of majorities, even as a minor minority literature. See also the chapter "Le paradigme irlandais" in Casanova (2008).

as in Italy, consider their self-translations as mere cribs of the originals. Other Scottish writers give equal value to both texts, which they consider as two originals (p. 135). In these cases, we have a more interpretive version of the source text. In Italy some dialect poets share a literalist attitude; others, who use dialects closer to Italian, provide no translation, but only a glossary; and others try to produce versions which read well as Italian poems. What characterises the Italian situation, however, is that self-translations are not mere by-products of the originals. In most cases we have two texts inextricably intertwined. It is more correct to consider them as one bi-text rather than two originals[15]. The idea of two originals, in fact, remains marginal in Italian dialect writing. I believe it is not a coincidence that this concept emerged with bilingual writers who had to do with two international languages, such as Beckett and Nabokov.

Scholars who know little of minority literatures normally have a distorted sense of self-translation. Essays on Beckett as self-translator, a long neglected topic, often remark how eccentric and unique Beckett's practice was. In fact, there are literary traditions entirely based on bilingualism and self-translation. Besides, Beckett's aims and problems were only in part the same as those of the minority language writers. Beckett did not translate himself into a major language to become more visible. If English-language critics are right, over the years Beckett became increasingly bilingual to get rid of or expose the inbuilt mechanisms of language – especially his mother language[16]. Initially he pointed at what he called the "unword", a utopian idiom which recalls Benjamin's *reine Sprache* or Celan's language "north of the future". As this turned out to be unviable, the form of Beckett's late works – two originals, or two translations without an original – embodies the idea that historical languages can give us only a fragmentary identity. There is no single origin, but only partial versions of a non-existent original source (of identity and of writing). Our problems, however, are different. They

[15] On this point, detailed examples are provided by Zinelli (1999) and Zuccato (2011).
[16] Some French critics insinuated that their English-speaking colleagues put forward their views of Beckett's double texts as two originals, or two versions without an original, not to admit that, in many cases, they were working on English "copies" of French originals (see Zinelli 1999: 8).

have to do with preserving the existing linguistic diversity rather than pointing out the philosophical limits of human language or evoking an ideal tongue whose fullness of meaning can provide us with a univocal, non-fragmented identity. Behind Beckett there was theology, behind what we are discussing there is biology. The world has changed so radically that Beckett's problems and solutions are not helpful to the present-day concerns of most minority language writers.

With Beckett, however, we have arrived at the last point I wish to make, the theoretical implications of self-translation. I believe that self-translation is embarrassing because it questions the common opinions about translation. Self-translation is the sole case where no one objects to 'freedom' in translation, as it comes from the author of the source text. This reminds us of Henri Meschonnic, who noted that translation is the only section of literature where the ideal model is not excellence, but mediocrity. The best versions are labelled as 'author's', or 'poetic', or 'free' translations, as though translation proper, without qualifiers, was something else. When it is more than a crib, self-translation liberates us from the belief that translating means transferring semantic content and foreign syntax meticulously into a different language. I am not endorsing adaptation or imitation as ideal forms of translation, but it is striking that few self-translations are made according to the foreignising principles advertised by many scholars as a supreme form of respect for the source text.

Creative forms of self-translation answer Michael Cronin's objection that sometimes self-translation is not a "literature-in-translation" but a "literature-for-translation", that is, only a favour done to translators in other languages[17]. This is only one of the functions of self-translation from minority languages, which seems to me helpful but not decisive. Despite self-translation, foreign translators are always reluctant to work on dialect poetry. This

[17] Cronin also asks (2006: 154): "Does this practice create a different translation dynamic from translation between two major languages?". In this passage Cronin seems to be referring to self-translation though he talks of "auto-translation", which in technical jargon usually indicates writing in a second language on the part of authors who 'translate' themselves from their mother tongues into a bigger language – often colonial tongues like French or English.

is reasonable, considering that in most cases they do not know the original languages. As far as Italian dialects are concerned, translations are mainly made under these circumstances:

a) The dialect texts are part of the works of a canonised writer. For example, Philippe Di Meo is translating into French all of Andrea Zanzotto's poems, which include texts in a variety of the Venetian dialect. But Di Meo told me that usually he does not translate dialect poems, because he does not know what kind of language or register can be used for them in France.

b) The translator uses not only the author's self-translations, but is helped personally by the author, as, for example, in Giovanni Nadiani's case[18]. In fact, this happens frequently with contemporary literature. We know that translators usually consult or work with the authors they are translating.

To sum up, the position of minority language literature on the international stage looks to be twofold: on the one hand, it is a form of resistance to global literature; on the other hand, immediate translation and self-translation imply a desire to be part of the global scenario. In the present historical conditions, going glocal seems to be the only viable solution for many of those who lead bilingual lives in a linguistic minority. However questionable, the glocal compromise of the bi-text is to my taste better than the fake local colour many celebrated best-sellers of global literature offer daily to meet the demand of intellectual tourism and soothe the anxieties of liberal-minded readers worldwide. At a NATO summit in Turkey in 2004, George W. Bush stated that Orhan Pamuk's novels showed that "'people in other continents and civilisations' are 'exactly like you'"[19]. The stubborn presence of a minority language original – no

[18] Nadiani (2010). The translator used both Castilian and Lunfardo, an Argentinian dialect, to render the *Romagnolo* dialect of the originals.

[19] Quoted from Shatz (2010). The complete passage runs: "George Bush hailed Pamuk's work as 'a bridge between cultures', and claimed it showed that 'people in other continents and civilisations' are 'exactly like you'. Praise from Bush couldn't have pleased Pamuk, but the speechwriters had done their homework. Bush's language echoed the terms in which Pamuk's work has been celebrated by his admirers: 'a plea for tolerance', Michael McGaha calls it in his reverential study, *Autobiographies of Orhan Pamuk*, while the Nobel committee praised Pamuk for being 'committed to a cultural concept entirely based on understanding and respect for others'." It must be added, however, that Pamuk, together with many Indian

matter if it remains unread – and a different text mirrored on the opposite page are a reminder that other cultures are emphatically not *exactly* like you.

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novelists who do not use English, recently complained about the international invisibility of authors who do not write in English (Pamuk 2011).