

# SELF-TRANSLATION AS TRANSCULTURAL RE-INSCRIPTION OF IDENTITY IN DÔRE MICHELUT AND GIANNA PATRIARCA

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Over the past few decades a flowering of scholarly endeavours has begun investigating the intimate connection between translation and migration, in both cultural and linguistic terms. Cultural theorists like Homi Bhabha and Salman Rushdie have, for instance, explored how migrants «are translated men» (Rushdie 16) in countless ways and have prompted the need to analyse the transformations and tensions that arise within the contradictory and ambivalent ‘Third Space’ of enunciation, where «even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew» (Bhabha 37). In the field of Translation Studies various scholars have also begun examining the translational act within that peculiar space<sup>1</sup>. This has led to a reformulation of old translation models based on original/translation dichotomies and the concepts of fidelity and equivalence. As Anne Malena points out in her “Presentation” to the XVI issue of *TTR*, the complex translation process spurred by migration «disrupts and transforms the very concept of original», making it thereby impossible to view translation as «a relatively unproblematic transfer of meaning» (11). Translation occurs, instead, «between fragments» (12) and fosters multifarious connections that make it a fluid in-between space of difference, rather than one of equivalence.

More recently, bi- and plurilingual writing practices like self-translation have captured some critical attention for the insights they disclose on the dynamics and problems inherent in articulating different and multiple cultural identities. As a creative instance that allows an author to consciously produce double texts, self-translation is, in fact, a useful deconstructive lens which reflects – and through which to reflect upon – what it means to be ‘translated’ subjects both at the geographical-cultural and textual-linguistic levels. By mir-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ovidio Carbonell, Nikos Papastergiadis and Sherry Simon.

roring the bilingual writer's deep-rooted urge to give voice to the duality deriving from the migrating experience, self-translation is, at once, a strategy of resistance against physical displacement, forgetfulness and hegemonic cultural and linguistic assimilation, as well as a strategy of re-appropriation of one's pluricultural identity. At the same time, by providing a «materialization, or transcript» of the bilingual mind onto the textual space of the written page, it sheds light on that «place of limbo» where, as Nicola Danby states about Nancy Huston's self-translating practice, both languages «bounce off each other in a bilingual voice» (86).

The reliance on self-translation and plurilingual experimentation in the works of Italian-Canadian poets Dôre Michelut and Gianna Patriarca offers a particularly interesting case study in this respect, since both writers employ a heteroglossic mixing of languages and cultural heritages to bridge their various selves, both past and present. Being part of their broader identity politics, the instances of self-translation in their works exemplify their desire to understand, retrieve, re-appropriate, accept, state and redefine their identities and pluriculturality within a dialectic transcultural paradigm. Here they can renegotiate and translate their 'self' into being and construct their identity as constantly shifting and fluctuating. As I have argued elsewhere<sup>2</sup>, rather than representing an attempt to assert the potentialities and legitimacy of dialect (as occurs in the works of Italian dialectal poets) or to convey an exotic charm, for these writers self-translation is a vital act of transcreation and transformation. It becomes, in other words, a space of mediation and renegotiation where transcultural exchange may occur, thereby allowing them to fuse and re-inscribe their multiple identities, selves, languages and cultures.

Moving from these premises, my aim here is to investigate how such a transcultural conversation is enacted in the bilingual texts written by Michelut and Patriarca. In particular, by analysing some of the formal, linguistic and cultural differences between the parallel versions, I wish to show how both texts are mutually aware of each other and are differing, but complementary, expressions of the poetic persona's voices. As Michelut, in fact, explains, the act of passing her poetry «through the sieve» of self-translation, having it go «from English to Furlan and back, from Furlan to Italian or Italian to English and back», allows her to engage in a polyphonic dialogue with herself where «each language still speaks me differently, because it must, but each speaks me more fully» (“Coming to terms... ”: 170)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See Saidero.

<sup>3</sup> Furlan, or Friulian, is the language spoken in the region of Friuli, in north-eastern Italy, where Michelut was born.

For both Michelut and Patriarca, two first-generation Italian immigrants who moved to Canada in the late 50s as children, the desire to negotiate their plural identities and experiences is closely linked to the need to understand how language inhabits their body. Since language – as Kamboureli writes – is «that which constructs the articulations of ourselves», their effort to trace a genealogy of self involves uncovering «a genealogy of language» (12) and recovering the hidden signifiers of their minoritized and repressed mother tongues (Friulian and Italian for Michelut; Italian and the *ciociaro* dialect for Patriarca). Through bilingual writing practices they, thus, seek to express and mediate the trauma of linguistic and cultural displacement, make sense of their diverse subjectivities and achieve a unification of identities within their fractured and hybrid self<sup>4</sup>. Self-translation initiates, in other words, a process of healing and recovery, which enables both poets to overcome the semantic vacuum caused by dislocation and to construct meaning and experience in all their languages. In her autobiographical essay «Coming to Terms with the Mother Tongue», Michelut, in fact, explains how, by allowing her «languages... to ‘see’ each other within [her]», self-translation allows her to «stop feeling haunted and cheated» by form and begin «generating a dialectical experience that was relative to both languages» while «at the same time, [she] was beyond them both» (166).

### **Dôre Michelut: *Loyalty to the Hunt and Ouroboros: The Book that Ate Me***

The struggle with language and the word is constantly at the fore of Michelut’s writing, whether she experiments heteroglossic self-translation or resorts to renga to establish writing as an act of social engagement<sup>5</sup>. The parallel self-translated poems published in her first two collections witness not only her

<sup>4</sup> In their sociolinguistic studies, Pavlenko and Lantolf have put forward the metaphor of self-translation as a renegotiation of the self, arguing that it enables immigrant subjects to make meaning of their troubled relationship with their languages. In particular, self-translating acts allow the bi- or multi-lingual individual to overcome the initial phase of displacement/continuous loss caused by dislocation and begin a process of recovery/(re)construction of identity.

<sup>5</sup> See her last collection *Linked Alive*. During a conference held in Udine in 2007, Michelut expressed her scepticism toward the truth value of the written word suggesting that the place of writing is not socially trustworthy; instead writing can co-opt the voice and become a trap for the writer, unless it is intended as a social engagement where the reader-writer equation can be experienced contemporaneously. For a transcript of the discussion with Michelut see: De Luca and Saidero.

need to retrieve her voice in English, Italian and Friulian, but also to write in the interface between languages and create new spaces where language can renew itself. Various formal and stylistic features show how Michelut is consciously aware that languages differ in their ways to communicate and that her use of form changes according to how she experiences reality in it. In *Loyalty to the Hunt*, for instance, the three poems that make up the section “Double Bind” emblematically signal her first efforts at re-creating and transcending herself across linguistic boundaries. The opening poem, “Tra l’incudine e il martello” / “Double Bind” (32-33), reveals her dual allegiance to both her Canadian and Italian background: her split experience of life in Toronto and Florence is echoed in the use of language, which reflects her double education in both cities<sup>6</sup>. While the English text is more neutral and relaxed in tone, with a linear, SVO syntax, the Italian text makes use of more formal devices, such as ellipsis of the verb to create nominal constructs (e.g., «Materia grigia. Pezzi di carne truciolata e grigliata» / «Matter is grey. Pieces of meat get ground and grilled»), or of other grammatical elements to achieve a greater poetic effect (e.g., «Di giorno riemergono, campane che osservano il dimenticare» / «By day, they return like bells to observe the forgetting»). The Italian seems, thus, to convey the voice of an educated adult learner whose knowledge and experience of the language is mostly academic and based on literary, artistic and political texts. The impression seems to be confirmed not only by somewhat unexpected lexical choices, such as ‘carne truciolata’ instead of ‘macinata’, but also by the sudden drop in register when trying to translate the colloquial exchange with a street vendor on Bloor Street: «Drain the blood. I want ketchup» becomes, in fact, «Scola il sangue, voglio salsa rubra». Despite Michelut’s attempt to find a cultural equivalent by resorting to the Italian ‘salsa rubra’, a common brand of ketchup made in Italy by Cirio, the overall tone and lexical choices of the Italian text betray how the poetic persona’s experience of Italian is restricted to the formal, written dimension and lacks the informal, spoken one. It is, however, a more passionate and poetic language, which seems to convey a greater emotional involvement on the part of the poet. The English text seems, on the other hand, to make greater use of the deforming tendency of rationalization as described by Antoine Berman in his “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign” (288-289). The two titles, for instance, bear witness to the movement from the concrete to the abstract, revealing how the specific image of being caught between two presumably unpleasant poles evoked by “Tra l’incudine e il martello” is rationally contracted in the more abstract English image of the

<sup>6</sup> Michelut studied at the University of Florence and at the University of Toronto.

double bind. The abstracting and reversing intent of rationalization is also visible in the English text's careful reordering of sentence structures, which never lack the verb (e.g., «Materia grigia. Pezzi di carne truciolata e grigliata» / «Matter is grey. Pieces of meat get ground and grilled») and of punctuation (e.g., «Faccio all'amore e la notte si spiega dall'utero di mia nonna, mi lega, aggroviglia nomi e tempo, è la mia voce...» / «I make love and the night unfurls from my grandmother's womb. It binds me. It tangles names and time, is my voice...»).

The inadequacy of the linguistic categories of one language to express experience lived in another is overtly addressed in the second poem of the sequence, "La terza voce diventa madre" / "The Third Voice Gives Birth" (34-35), where the poet laments the difficulty of voicing 'the exact bitterness of the per-simmon' in both English and Italian. Being foremost a sensory experience connected to her early childhood, it can be properly articulated only by giving herself to her remote Friulian language and culture, which erupts on the page in both versions: «O Susanna tal biel cjastiel di Udin with tanti pesciolini e i fiori di lillà don't cry for the deer and dead buffalo». This sudden use of code switching hints at differing cultural perspectives, which intermingle to disrupt a hierarchical framing of experience and bridge the gaps between Michelut's linguistic identities. The juxtaposition of lines from three well-known folk texts functions, in fact, to recover a polyphonic dimension that incorporates intercultural and inter-linguistic elements, as well as those pre-oedipal, maternal aspects of language which include non-verbal, rhythmic, and sensory dimensions.

The movement from English to Friulian, her mother tongue, is sanctioned in the third poem, "Ne storie / A Story" (36-37), where Michelut allows the two languages to equally claim her and become «subjects with individual personalities which acted on me» ("Coming to terms...": 167). The retrieval of Friulian, an oral, peasant language, enables the emergence of a more informal poetic voice, which reverberates with the ancestral traditions of Friuli, but is also open to transcultural exchange. While being full of culture-bound and idiomatic expressions (e.g., *laip*, *lazarone*, *befane*, *fasarin i conts a cjase*, *dome quatri gjats*, *cjalin pì di brut*), the Friulian poem incorporates, for instance, the English word 'jeans' to signal how modern global times are changing the rural habits of a twilight world. At the same time, the translation of the Friulian nursery rhyme 'Buligon buligon...' and the use of the word 'befana' in the English version provide «a bridge in which English can happen in the light of Furlan and, when possible, vice versa» ("Coming to terms...": 170). By enriching the two texts linguistically, the poet-translator thus expands their possibility to be endowed with ever-new meanings and to be infinitely re-read, re-written and renewed in the process.

The bilingual poems in *Ouroboros* also bear witness to the poet's endeavours to erase the hierarchies and blur the boundaries among her languages, thereby allowing various discourses to interpenetrate and multiply. The emphasis on the dialogical quality of the poems is signalled both by their titles, which are often dedications to people the author knows, and by Michelut's efforts to mould and manipulate the texts, so as to generate «independent entities», each «coherent, whole, complete» and «progressively more untranslatable as it progressed in its own direction» (“Coming to terms... ”: 166). In many cases the poet rearranges concepts and structures freely to fit the tone and flow of the twin text. In “La Vecchia Signora / Old Lady Politics” (40-41), for instance, the Italian:

«Mi permette questo ballo?» Ho chiesto alla vecchia, la quale, sdentata e sorridente, mi agguantò per la vita e mi ha fatto ballare la polka a capogiro, gira che ti gira, al tempo del frullio del mangianastri e della macchina da cucire

is reordered into shorter, more abrupt sentences to comply with English narrative patterns:

«Won't you dance?» I asked the old woman. Toothless and grinning she hitched up her black, voluminous skirts, grabbed me in the middle and spun me around. My tape recorder and sewing machine were whirring, providing the music.

The addition of «black, voluminous skirts», however, inscribes the text with a stereotyped cultural reference to Italian dress codes, absent in the Italian version: this may signal the poet's desire to parody and subvert the external, stereotypical conjectures a culture makes about another and to incorporate other sensibilities in the gaps between texts and languages. The use of two past tenses, the *passato prossimo* («ho chiesto» / «mi ha fatto ballare») and the *passato remoto* («mi agguantò») in the Italian text signals, on the other hand, a different layering of past experiences, which is not achieved through the use of the past simple in English. The poet's perception of the past in Italian fluctuates, in fact, between a more recent past when she recalls the actions performed and a more remote past connected to bodily experiences («mi agguantò la vita»).

Lexical and syntactic simplification and reordering are also present in Friulian/English poems like “M.B.” (17), which tells of how a young Friulian girl was seduced by her supervisor. Since the facts are set in bygone, rural Friuli, the Friulian account reproduces the flavour of the peasants' oral speech pattern. It abounds with colloquial expressions and foul language, which are, at times, eliminated in the English text («ch'ai vignis un colp», «chel bastart di un bastart», «folc ch'ai trai») or softened (e.g., «bastart che no tu ses atri» be-

comes simply «you bastard»; «mi è vignude une fote di ches» is rendered with the blander idiom «may lightning strike»; the colloquial simile «al ere grant come un ors» is reduced to «who was twice my size»), so as to maintain a more neutral and distanced tone. Even when the English text does resort to indigenous foul terms ('jackass' for 'macaco' and 'sonofabitch' for 'purzit'), it still manages to preserve a slightly higher register and fails to convey the same type of emotional involvement in the story that transpires from the Friulian version. The latter, in fact, employs storytelling devices typical of orality which make the reader participative of the text, as if we were engaging in a dialogue with the narrating voice. Sentences like

Une di a no mi ven dôngje e a mi dîs ch'al fatôr ai satve davôr. A si saveve ch'al veve ruvinât pi di une fantate... Bé, in famee a ere fân, vevin bisùgne, no podevin migo tignile a cjase, folc ch'ai trai

implicitly seek the reader's consent and empathy. In the English version, instead, the narrating voice is fully in charge of the narration and delivers the tale confidently and authoritatively:

One day she came home distraught and told me that a supervisor who had a reputation for ruining young girls was making advances. Well, by hang, she had to work. In those days we were hungry and needed every pair of hands busy to survive.

Both voices, the rational and the emotional, intermingle, however, in the self-translating process, creating an interactive polylogue where all words are «full of» the poet since they can «speak and listen to each other» (“Coming to terms... ”: 170).

A final meshing and merging of all three of her languages and identities is achieved at the end of *Ouroboros*, with the trilingual version of “The Crowd Ceases” (126). Here the space of translation emerges as a site of tension where the process of trans-textualization through the three languages and cultures originates a playful game of hide and seek among the poet's various voices. An impersonal Friulian voice, which avoids the use of the first person pronouns so that the verbs sound like imperatives directed at the reader rather than at the poetic persona («met il cjaf ta lis mans, sint ca i cjavei ju ai curts, provi a pensa...»), dialogically expands into a self-asserting ‘I’ in the English and Italian poems. The use of ‘you’ and ‘we’ in all three versions then emphasizes the willingness to connect and fuse with the other, to ‘open into your hands’ and embrace difference. The space between languages becomes a dialogical site of transcreation where multiple, fractured selves can fluctuate dynamically.

### Gianna Patriarca: *My Etruscan Face*

Like Michelut, Patriarca is also haunted by the harrowing effects of her split Italian-Canadian identity and seeks to free language from the ideologically saturated signifiers of both cultures. Although her entire poetic production focuses on the lives and experiences of Italian immigrants and tries to reconstruct their lost heritage, her only instance of self-translation so far is the poem “sono ciociara / i am ciociara”, from her latest collection. It deserves, nonetheless, critical attention, since it represents the climax of a process of renegotiation of selfhood, which frees the poet from the duality of being caught between languages and cultures and allows her to move toward transculturality. The choice of the *ciociaro* dialect, the regional variety spoken in Latium, rather than standard Italian, signals a movement back to the mother tongue not dissimilar to Michelut’s. Her desire to circle back to an oral language, buried in the meanders of her childhood memories, reveals her need to retrieve the semiotic dimension of language and to write in the rhythms of her body.

In both texts there is an intermingling of English, the acquired dominant language, and *ciociaro*. In “sono ciociara”, the epigraph taken from Philip Roth functions both to establish the cultural and literary power of the English tongue, and to allude to mainstream Canadian culture. In the English version, *ciociaro* surfaces through the use of the affectionate term *paisans*, expanded in this case with the addition of «with all your friends in that little town» (26). Rather than providing semantic clarification of the indigenous term, the addition is used to convey both a somewhat visceral need to retrieve a sense of belonging to the original community of the *paisans* and to signal, on the other hand, the poet’s forced distance from «*that* little town» (emphasis added) which is no longer hers. The self-translating creative space between the two texts, however, enables the poet to experience both cultures and languages separately and simultaneously and thus to rewrite and repossess them infinitely.

Patriarca’s decision to situate her identity in the interface between «ste dialet mezz stuort e sturdit» (25) («this half drunk and broken dialect», 27) and English also rests on the awareness that her languages are a rich source of creativity and inspiration. As she states in the poem that opens the collection: «i speak/ i am the words/ the words are me/... the voice is mine/... i am the words i speak» (13). Living in that place of limbo between languages and cultures and accepting the division that derives from it will ultimately allow her to regenerate herself and her writing and, in the process, to overcome the sense of displacement she feels in relation to both communities – the Canadian and the Latian. The retrieval of both heritages also enables the poet to accept the phenotypical features of her Etruscan face and the fullness of her well-rounded

body, which have visibly marked her as an outsider in the Canadian context and have excluded her from the stereotyped ideals of female beauty in both cultures. In the creative-translational space, Patriarca thus creates a transcultural aesthetics of identity which allows her to interpret, revise and resist categorizations and fixed identities.

## **Conclusion**

In Michelut and Patriarca's quest for identity and legitimacy, the engagement with self-translation is as imperative as the creative act of writing. It is, in many ways, both an ongoing continuation and erasure of the original, a space for dialogue and playfulness where the poet and her readers can make sense of their plurilingual and pluricultural selves. While being foremost a personal endeavour, the transcreative process triggered by self-translation also echoes and affects the collective experience of an entire community. This poses important questions of target readership, which cannot be discarded when analysing the parallel texts. Are the texts addressed to a general Canadian audience, to Italian-Canadians, or to the smaller communities of Latians or Friulians? If, as suspected, the main target readers are Italian-Canadians, then the dialogical, self-translational space created by Michelut and Patriarca certainly allows for the emergence of multiple voices, not only their own, but also those of their fellow countrymen. Indeed, the hybrid space created in this plurilingual dialectic polylogue makes room for a renegotiation of identities within a constantly shifting transcultural and translingual paradigm of self-definition, which can contribute to reconstructing the collective Italian-Canadian space as hybrid and unstable. By stimulating mutual cultural awareness, the self-translated space can also help overcome cultural prejudices embedded in language and favour a genuine exchange of differences. Here the poet and her readers can both bridge the gaps between languages and cultures and experience difference as a capacity to relate and inscribe existing selves within a form that appeases, comprises and expands otherness. Within this dynamic space all fixed representations of cultural identity are thus debased and ultimately re-inscribed as fluid, dialogic, and participative.

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