

## Chapter 6

---

### ***Simpatico***

---

How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language?

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (tr. Dana Polan)

In 1978, soon after my translations of Italian poetry began appearing in magazines, I met another American translator of Italian, an older, widely published, and very gifted writer who commented on some of my work and gave me advice about literary translation. Among his many shrewd remarks was the recommendation that I translate an Italian author of my own generation, something which he himself had been doing for many years and with much success. He explained that when author and translator live in the same historical moment, they are more likely to share a common sensibility, and this is highly desirable in translation because it increases the fidelity of the translated text to the original. The translator works better when he and the author are *simpatico*, said my friend, and by this he meant not just “agreeable,” or “congenial,” meanings which this Italian word is often used to signify, but also “possessing an underlying sympathy.” The translator should not merely get along with the author, not merely find him likeable; there should also be an identity between them.

The ideal situation occurs, my friend believed, when the translator discovers his author at the start of both their careers. In this instance, the translator can closely follow the author’s progress, accumulating exhaustive knowledge of the foreign texts, strengthening and developing the affinity which he already feels with his author’s ideas and tastes, becoming, in effect, of the same mind. When *simpatico* is present, the translation process can be seen as a veritable recapitulation of the creative process by which the original came into existence; and when the translator

is assumed to participate vicariously in the author's thoughts and feelings, the translated text is read as the transparent expression of authorial psychology or meaning. The voice that the reader hears in any translation made on the basis of *simpatico* is always recognized as the author's, never as a translator's, nor even as some hybrid of the two.

My friend's ideas about translation still prevail today in British and American cultures, although they have dominated English-language translation at least since the seventeenth century. The earl of Roscommon's *Essay on Translated Verse* (1684) recommended that the translator

chuse an *Author* as you chuse a *Friend*:  
 United by this *Sympathetick Bond*,  
 You grow *Familiar Intimate*, and *Fond*;  
 Your *Thoughts*, your *Words*, your *Stiles*, your *Souls* agree,  
 No longer his *Interpreter*, but *He*.

(Steiner 1975: 77)

Alexander Tytler's *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (1798) asserted that if the translator's aim is fluency, "he must adopt the very soul of his author" (Tytler 1978: 212). John Stuart Blackie's article on the Victorian translation controversy, "Homer and his translators" (1861), argued that "the successful translator of a poet must not only be a poet himself, but he must be a poet of the same class, and of a kindred inspiration," "led by a sure instinct to recognise the author who is kindred to himself in taste and spirit, and whom he therefore has a special vocation to translate" (Blackie 1861: 269, 271). Burton Raffel's review of the Zukofskys' modernist Catullus argued that the optimal conditions for translating the Latin texts include "(a) a poet, (b) an ability to identify with, to almost be Catullus over a protracted period, and (c) great good luck" (Raffel 1969: 444). And Will Stone, who has translated the poetry of Gérard de Nerval and Georg Trakl, reiterated the point while revealing the anti-intellectualism to which it leads: "Like the act of poetry itself," he asserted, "translation is essentially an intuitive private act of empathy, and despite the energies of theorists seems to nudge any analytical conclusion towards complacency" (Stone 2004: 62).

From this chorus of theorists, critics, and translators it seems clear that the idea of *simpatico* translation is consistent with ideas about poetry that prevail today in British and American cultures, although they too were formulated centuries ago, perhaps most decisively with the emergence of romanticism in England. From William Wordsworth to T. S. Eliot to Robert Lowell and beyond, the dominant aesthetic in English-language poetry has been transparency, the view, as Antony Easthope neatly puts it in his incisive critique, that "poetry expresses experience; experience gives access to personality, and so poetry leads us to personality" (Easthope 1983: 4–5). My friend's notion of *simpatico* was in fact a development of these assumptions to characterize the practice of translation (it was transparent)

and to define the role of the translator (identification with the foreign author's personality).

I was profoundly attracted by my friend's remarks. No doubt this attraction was partly due to his cultural authority, his command of publishers and his growing list of awards, the sheer success he had achieved with his translations. But he also offered a sophisticated and rather lyrical understanding of what I wanted to do, a position of identification for me as translator, someone I could be when translating – that is, my successful friend, but also, in the process, the author of a foreign text. I followed this advice, and as chance would have it I came upon an Italian writer who is roughly my own age, the Milanese poet Milo De Angelis.

Born in 1951, De Angelis made his precocious debut in 1975, when he was invited to contribute some of his poems to *L'almanacco dello Specchio*, a prestigious annual magazine published by one of Italy's largest commercial presses, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore. The title of the anthology, literally "The Almanac of the Mirror," asserts its claim to be a representative literary survey, but the title also connects it with Mondadori's longstanding series of poetry volumes, called *Lo Specchio*, whose editorial policies the anthology seems to share: both print recent work by canonized contemporary writers, foreign and Italian, along with a few newcomers. The issue of *L'almanacco* to which De Angelis contributed also included poems by Eugenio Montale and Pier Paolo Pasolini, as well as Italian translations from the poetry of various foreign writers, Russian (Marina Tsvetayeva), German (Paul Celan), and American (Robert Bly). De Angelis's first book of poems, called *Somiglianze* ("Resemblances"), appeared in 1976 from the small commercial press Guanda, noted in the 1970s for its list of innovative contemporary writing. These two titles, the assertive mirror and the tentative resemblances, raised a range of questions about the possibility of *simpatico* translation, questions about representation, canon formation, and literary publishing, which came to haunt my encounter with De Angelis's poetry over the next twenty years.

### I The canon of modern Italian poetry in English

As I followed De Angelis's success in Italy, I quickly saw that he couldn't match it in the US and the UK, not in the 1970s or today. The canon of twentieth-century Italian poetry in English translation hasn't yet admitted his kind of writing, doesn't find it *simpatico*, and in fact constrained my attempts to publish my translations. At the center of this canon is Eugenio Montale (1896–1981), flanked by many other Italian poets who exhibit a stylistic affinity with his poetry or who received his admiration in essays and reviews and, in some cases, his recommendation to publishers. At the margins are the successive waves of experimentalism that swept through Italian poetry in the post-World War II period and gave rise to poets like De Angelis. Montale's canonical status in British and American poetry translation, I learned, cast a shadow of neglect over the legions of Italian poets who followed him.

English translation of Montale's poetry began early, with a 1928 appearance in Eliot's *Criterion*, and it has continued to this day in myriad magazines and anthologies. It was only in the late 1950s, however, that book-length translations started to proliferate, so that Montale now rivals Dante in the number of versions by different hands to be found on publishers' lists. Montale produced eight slim volumes of poetry, all of which have been Englished in their entirety or in part, some of them more than once.<sup>1</sup> Individual sequences of poems have frequently been lifted out of these volumes and published as chapbooks. There have been eight representative selecteds, an extensively annotated single-volume collection of his first three books, an anthology presenting multiple versions of individual poems, a book of autobiographical prose, a slim miscellany of critical prose, and a large selection of essays (some 350 pages). At present, fifteen English-language translations of Montale's writing are in print. They are published by an impressively broad range of trade, academic, and small presses in the US, UK, and Canada: Bloodaxe, Boyars, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Graywolf, Mosaic, New Directions, Norton, Oberlin, Other, Penguin, and Turtle Point. And the numerous translators include talented poets, scholars, and editors, some of whom are internationally known: William Arrowsmith, Jonathan Galassi, Dana Gioia, Jeremy Reed, G. Singh, Charles Wright, and David Young. Italian poets linked to Montale by resemblance or influence, whether formal or thematic, have also appeared in a number of book-length translations since the late 1950s: they include Guido Gozzano (1883–1916), Umberto Saba (1883–1957), Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888–1970), Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–68), Lucio Piccolo (1903–69), Sandro Penna (1906–76), Leonardo Sinisgalli (1908–81), Vittorio Sereni (1913–83), Mario Luzi (1914–2005), and Maria Luisa Spaziani (1924–). Here too the presses are varied and the translators accomplished. The presses include Anvil, Carcanet, Chicago, Cornell, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Green Integer, Guernica, Hamish Hamilton, Minerva, New Directions, Ohio State, Princeton, Red Hill, Sheep Meadow; among the translators are Jack Bevan, Patrick Creagh, W. S. Di Piero, Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann, Andrew Frisardi, Allen Mandelbaum, J. G. Nichols, Michael Palma, Peter Robinson and Marcus Perryman, Stephen Sartarelli, and Paul Vangelisti. Seventeen books by poets who can be described, without too much violence, as Montale avatars in English are currently in print, a couple with essays by him.<sup>2</sup>

Compared to the increasing interest that distinguished Montale's reception in British and American cultures, other tendencies in Italian poetry have received limited attention. Among them, experimentalism is remarkably underrepresented, given its importance in Italy. In a conservative estimate, approximately fifty poets writing over five decades can be classed in this category, making it a central movement in Italian poetry since the World War II. The first wave, sometimes called "I novissimi" ("The Newest") after the title of an important 1961 anthology, includes its editor Alfredo Giuliani (1924–), Corrado Costa (1929–91), Edoardo Sanguineti (1930–), Giulia Niccolai (1934–), Nanni Balestrini (1935–), Antonio Porta (1935–89), Franco Beltrametti (1937–95), and Adriano Spatola (1941–89). The second wave, which began publishing during the 1970s, includes Nanni

Cagnone (1939–), Gregorio Scalise (1939–), Luigi Ballerini (1940–), Angelo Lumelli (1944–), Giuseppe Conte (1945–), Cesare Viviani (1947–), Michelangelo Coviello (1950–), and Milo De Angelis. There are also various other poets whose careers do not coincide with these chronologies, but whose writing is marked by a strong experimental impulse – Andrea Zanzotto (1921–), for instance, and Amelia Rosselli (1930–96). The fact that these names are more than likely to be meaningless to most Anglophone readers of poetry is symptomatic of the poets' current marginality (and perhaps that of any other Italian poet but Dante and Montale) in British and American writing.

English translations of the experimental poetry took much longer to appear (over a decade after the Italian publication) than English versions of Montale's poems (within three years of his first volume). In the 1970s, Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann did a selected Zanzotto with Princeton, and Paul Vangelisti published his chapbook version of Spatola's *Majakovskiiiiij* with John McBride's Los Angeles-based Red Hill Press. Vangelisti and McBride built a small library of Italian experimentalism, with nine books from Beltrametti, Costa, Niccolai, Porta, and Spatola, as well as an anthology that aims to map the movement, *Italian Poetry, 1960–1980: From Neo to Post Avant-garde* (1982). Porta has been the most translated: six books of poetry altogether, including individual volumes from City Lights and Green Integer and a selected from the Canadian press Guernica. The poet Ballerini's Out of London Press issued bilingual volumes of Cagnone, Tomaso Kemeny, and Giovanna Sandri, as well as an anthology that collected essays, lectures, and poems from a conference held in New York during the late 1970s, Thomas Harrison's *The Favorite Malice* (1983). Poets associated with the experimentalism, as well as various other contemporary tendencies, are represented in several other anthologies from these years – but they are entirely absent from William Jay Smith and Dana Gioia's *Poems from Italy* (1985), which aims to be a representative survey of Italian poetry from its medieval beginnings. Jamie McKendrick's anthology carries a similarly comprehensive title, *The Faber Book of 20th Century Italian Poems* (2004), but experimental poets are reduced to a small and misleading sample, a handful of poems by Zanzotto, Sanguineti, and Rosselli, compared to the substantial selection from Montale and his avatars. In 1995 a translation of Giuliani's anthology, *I novissimi*, was finally brought out by Sun & Moon, more than thirty years after its Italian publication; in 2004 the first book-length translation of Rosselli's poetry, *War Variations*, was published by Green Integer, almost ten years after her death.

By the 1990s, roughly twenty English-language books relating in whole or part to the experimentalist movement had been published, mostly by rather obscure small presses with limited distribution. In the following decade, a few new books in this vein appeared as older ones went out of print, but their marginal situation has remained unchanged. It is no exaggeration to say that you will have trouble if you want to locate them, even through an online bookseller; many university libraries have not acquired them. But you will certainly be able to find most of Montale's books. Behind Montale's monumentalization in British and American

writing lies a very different poetic landscape in Italy, one where he is canonized, to be sure, but which also includes the canonical tendency I am calling, somewhat reductively, “experimentalism.”

No doubt, the different reception of these Italian poetries is due to many factors, cultural, economic, ideological. The fact that Montale was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1975 accounts for some of his cultural capital here and abroad. But it can’t explain the sustained attention given to his poetry by the English-language writers who have chosen to translate it, or the relative neglect bestowed on some fifty years of experimentalism. To understand this, I want to suggest, we must turn to the dominant poetics in British and American cultures, specifically its romantic assumptions: that the poet is a unified subjectivity freely expressing his personal experience, and that the poem should therefore be centered on the poetic I, evoking a unique voice, communicating the poet’s self in transparent language, sustaining a feeling of *simpatico* in the translator. Montale’s canonical status in British and American writing rests on his translators’ assimilation of his poetry to mainstream poetics, whereas the postwar experimentalism has been marginalized largely because it resists any such assimilation. The Montale canonized in English is actually a domesticated version shaped by a poet-oriented aesthetic and realized in the transparent discourse of fluent translation.

A case in point is Dana Gioia’s version of Montale’s *Mottetti*, a consecutively numbered sequence of twenty poems that forms the centerpiece of the 1939 volume *Le occasioni*. Montale’s contemporaries found these poems obscure, using the term “hermeticism” (*ermetismo*) to disparage their typically modernist poetics of indirection, their recourse to ellipsis, fragmentation, heterogeneity. In an essay from 1950, “Due sciacalli al guinzaglio” (“Two Jackals on a Leash”), Montale answered his critics by claiming that the “motets” were not obscure, that although individual poems were written at various times, they constituted “an entirely unmysterious little autobiographical novel,” in which he deployed some traditional cultural materials – Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*, the *dolcestilnovisti* – to represent his intermittent relationship with Irma Brandeis, an American Dante scholar he encountered in Florence (Montale 1982: 305). British and American mainstream poetics privileges the poet, so Gioia accepts Montale’s defensive, slyly ironic essay at face value and asserts that the poems “form, a unified sequence whose full meaning and power becomes apparent only when they are read together” (Montale 1990: 11). Any obscurity is only apparent, an effect of the equally apparent discontinuity of the narrative:

The sequence recreates isolated moments of insight, stripped of their nonessential elements. Everything else in the story is told by *implication*, and the reader must participate in the reconstruction of the human drama by projecting his or her own private associations to fill in the *missing* elements of the narrative.

(Ibid.: 16; my italics)

It is remarkable how Gioia repeatedly locates the formal elements that earned Montale the tag “hermetic” – only to explain away their existence, to “fill in” the cracks of the broken text. In Gioia’s assimilation of Montale to mainstream poetics, the most important thing is to maintain the continuity of the poet’s representation of his experience, insuring the coherence of the poetic subject and its control over the act of self-expression. Hence Gioia’s translation strategy is designed to make versions that “would move naturally as English-language poems,” “always preferring the emotional clarity and narrative integrity of the whole poem in English to the lexicographical fidelity of the individual word,” departing from Montale’s lineation so as to “integrate the transposed elements tightly into a new whole” (*ibid.*: 21). The departures, however, are not seen as inaccuracies or domesticating revisions, but as more intimate fidelities, showing that Gioia is really *simpatico* with Montale, “faithful not only to the sense but also to the spirit of the Italian” (*ibid.*: 22). Here it becomes clear that the translator’s feeling of *simpatico* is no more than a projection, that the object of the translator’s identification is ultimately himself, the “private associations” he inscribes in the foreign text in the hope of producing a similarly narcissistic experience in the English-language reader.

The effect of mainstream poetics on Gioia’s translations can be seen in his version of the sixth Italian text in the group:

La speranza di pure rivederti  
m’abbandonava;  
  
e mi chiesi se questo che mi chiude  
ogni senso di te, schermo d’immagini,  
ha i segni della morte o dal passato  
è in esso, ma distorto e fatto labile,  
un *tuo* barbaglio:  
  
(a Modena, tra i portici,  
un servo gallonato trascinava  
due sciacalli al guinzaglio).

(Montale 1984a: 144)

I had almost lost  
hope of ever seeing you again;  
  
and I asked myself if this thing  
cutting me off  
from every trace of you, this screen  
of images,  
was the approach of death, or truly  
some dazzling  
vision of you

out of the past,  
bleached, distorted,  
fading:  
(under the arches at Modena  
I saw an old man in a uniform  
dragging two jackals on a leash).  
(Montale 1990: 35)

Gioia's version appreciably enlarges the poet's presence in the poem with several alterations and additions. Montale's opening lines – "La speranza di pure rivederti / m'abbandonava" (in a rendering that follows the Italian word order and lineation, "The hope of ever seeing you again / was abandoning me") – get reversed, with the emphasis shifted to Gioia's "I": "I had almost lost." Similarly, the penultimate line contains another first-person reference, "I saw," which doesn't appear at all in the Italian text. Gioia's other additions – "truly," "vision," "bleached," "old man" – show an effort to make the language more emotive or dramatic, to sketch the psychological contours of the poetic subject, but they come off as somewhat stagy, even sentimental ("old man"). In keeping with this emotionalizing of Montale's lexicon, Gioia uses the phrase "approach of death" to translate "i segni della morte" ("signs of death"), diminishing the element of self-reflexivity in the Italian, its awareness of its own status as "images" and "signs," and replacing it with a pallid sensationalism. The English word "signs" is currently loaded with various meanings, including a reference to controversial foreign imports in British and American literary theory that depersonalize the text and deconstruct authorship – viz. semiotics and poststructuralism. The avoidance of the word here produces two notable effects: it moves the translation away from contemporary European thinking that would question the theoretical assumptions of mainstream poetics, and it reinforces the focus on the poet's emotional state, on the (re)presentation of Montale's poem as (Montale's or Gioia's?) self-expression. Gioia's translation strategy quite clearly seeks to efface Montale's modernist poetic discourse, to remove the formal elements that made the Italian text so strikingly different to its first Italian audience, and that, if a translator tried to reproduce them in English, would result in a translation just as striking to an anglophone reader because of their deviation from the dominant poet-centered aesthetic.

The Italian postwar experimentalism proves recalcitrant to this assimilationist ideology in both form and theme. In its early phase, it was called the "neoavanguarda" for its return to modernist movements like Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism in order to develop a highly discontinuous poetic discourse that reflected on its cultural and social situation. In the preface to *I novissimi*, Giuliani outlined the experimental project as a leftwing cultural politics: language is fractured in a "schizomorphic vision" ("visione schizomorfa") which simultaneously registers and resists the mental dislocations and illusory representations of consumer capitalism (Giuliani 1961: xviii). Sanguineti's

poetry, to take one example, is a frenetic stream of episodes in the poet's life, allusions to contemporary figures and events, excerpts and applications of his readings in philosophy, literature, psychology, and social theory, punctuated with found language and references to popular culture. The experimentalism in this initial phase circulated widely in magazines and anthologies, a book series with a large trade press (Feltrinelli), and several public meetings that received substantial media attention. And the experiments took varied forms, not only writing that was much more plurivocal and heterogeneous than anything produced by Montale, but also visual poetry and collage, computer-generated texts and performance (see Picchione 2004).

Experimentalism encompasses diverse poetries, and my periodizations and cultural genealogies inevitably give too neat an account (which, moreover, is interested on this occasion, pitched to demonstrate a deviation from Montale). The common experimental thread is the use of formal discontinuity to address philosophical problems raised by language, representation, and subjectivity, resembling in this such contemporary French developments as the *nouveau roman* and the emergence of poststructuralist thinking, especially in politicized versions, with the *Tel Quel* group. Indeed, the immense importance of politics to the neo-avant-garde has led Christopher Wagstaff to suggest that "when, in 1968, Italy seemed to offer significant opportunities for direct political action," the movement "saw its *raison d'être* disappear," as evidenced by the demise of a central magazine, the increasing affiliations with established cultural and academic institutions, and, most tellingly, a theoretical and practical redirection (Wagstaff 1984: 37).

The second experimentalist phase avoided explicit political engagement to develop more speculative projects with distinct philosophical roots (existential phenomenology, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism), exploring the conditions of human consciousness and action in powerfully indeterminate texts. The renewed emphasis on textuality was sometimes given a political inflection in theoretical statements, particularly by members of the first experimentalist phase. In an anthology that surveys Italian poetry during the 1970s, Porta argued that "the reaffirmation of the linguistic force of the I resolves the problem of the interactions between poetry and society, between poetry and reality, because the poetic I is never merely 'personal' but, just like the author, is a linguistic-collective event" (Porta 1979: 27). In general, however, the post-1968 experimentalism didn't resort to the leftwing theorizations of the neo-avant-garde, but rather pursued the "enamored word," as the title of one important anthology indicates, turning it into a site of uncontrollable polysemy, exposing and destabilizing the multiple determinations of subjectivity – linguistic, cultural, social (Pontiggia and DiMauro 1978). In doing this, some poets returned to the formal and thematic innovations of hermeticism, its oblique means of signification, its penchant for climactic moments. This is clear in Milo De Angelis's case: drawing not merely on hermeticism, but on such other European poets as René Char and Paul Celan, he pushes modernist fragmentation to an extreme that threatens intelligibility even while proliferating meaning.

Perhaps a poem by De Angelis, “Lettera da Vignole” (“Letter from Vignole”), can indicate how he at once resembles and differs from the early Montale. It too issues from a friendship between the poet and a woman engaged in literary activity, although not a Dantista. This is Marta Bertamini, who collaborated with De Angelis on the experimentalist magazine he founded, *niebo* (1977–84), and on a translation from the Latin (Claudian, *The Rape of Proserpine*). Vignole is the Italian town near the Austrian border where she was born.

Udimmo la pioggia e quelli  
che ritornavano: ogni cosa  
nella calma di parlare  
e poi la montagna, un attimo, e tutti  
i morti che neanche il tuo esilio  
potrà distinguere.

“Torna subito o non tornare più.”

Era questa – tra i salmi  
della legge – la voce  
che hai ripetuto all’inizio,  
la potente sillaba, prima  
di te stessa.

“Solo così ti verrò incontro, ignara  
nell’inverno che ho perduto e che trovo.”

(De Angelis 1985: 12)

We heard the rain and those  
who were returning: each thing  
in the calm of speaking  
and then the mountain, an instant, and all  
the dead whom not even your exile  
can distinguish.

“Come back at once or don’t ever come back.”

This – amid the psalms  
of the law – was the voice  
that you repeated at the beginning,  
the potent syllable, before  
you yourself.

“Only then shall I come to meet you, unaware  
in the winter which I lost and find.”

(De Angelis 1995: 91)

Knowing the allusion in the title doesn't much help to fix the meaning of this poem. The pronouns support multiple subjectivities. A word like "inverno" ("winter") sets up a fertile intertextual/intersubjective chain: it suggests a key motif in several poets, notably Celan and Franco Fortini (1917–94), an Italian writer of politically engaged cultural criticism and verse who early expressed his admiration of De Angelis. Although De Angelis frequently takes specific episodes in his own life as points of departure, his experimental poetics renders them both impersonal and interpersonal, thickening the representation with an intricate network of images and allusions that construct relations to other poetic discourses, other poetic subjects, challenging any facile reduction of the text to autobiography (whether the poet's or the reader's).

Montale is undoubtedly much easier for British and American mainstream poetics to kidnap than experimentalism. In fact, it could be said that some English-language translators are responding to the traces of another poet-oriented aesthetic in Montale, "crepuscularismo," a *fin de siècle* movement ("crepuscolare" means "twilight") that cultivated a private voice in conversational language, producing introspective, slightly ironic musings on prosaic experiences (Sanguineti 1963). This would go some way towards explaining not only Gioia's effacement of Montale's modernism, but the recent American fascination with later Italian poets who seem to be returning to crepuscularism – Valerio Magrelli (1957–), for instance, whom Gioia has also championed and translated (Cherchi and Parisi 1989).

Of course, not all of Montale's English-language translators put to work an assimilationist ideology. William Arrowsmith's versions were designed precisely to respect the modernist edge of poems like *Mottetti*. In the "Translator's Preface" to *The Occasions*, Arrowsmith described his practice as "resisting" any domestication of the Italian texts:

I have conscientiously resisted the translator's temptation to fill in or otherwise modify Montale's constant ellipses, to accommodate my reader by providing smoother transitions. And I have done my best to honor Montale's reticence, his ironic qualifications, and evaded cadences. A chief aim has been to preserve the openness of the poet's Italian, even though this has meant resisting the genius of English for concreteness.

(Montale 1987: xxi)

Arrowsmith's intention, however, was to validate, not reevaluate, Montale's canonical status in British and American poetry translation, and so there was no need for him to mention the postwar Italian experimentalism, let alone suggest that it was worth translating into English. Indeed, he believed that

No Italian poet of the twentieth century has taken greater experimental risks than Montale in this book, above all in the effort to renew the Dantesque

vein in terms of a sensibility that belongs so passionately to its own time and strives tenaciously to find an individual voice – a voice never to be repeated.  
(*Ibid.*: xx)

The modernist translation discourse Arrowsmith recommended may have been resistant to certain British and American literary values (“smoother transitions,” “concreteness”), but his rationale for this discourse agreed with mainstream poetics, the romantic valorization of the poet’s “voice.” Obviously, Arrowsmith’s translations can do little to question the shadow of neglect that Montale continues to cast on Italian experimentalists like Milo De Angelis.

## 2 Translating with resistancy

The irony of my situation was not lost on me. In pursuing my friend’s notion of *simpatico*, I discovered an Italian writer who forced me to suspect this notion and ultimately abandon it. When I came across De Angelis’s 1975 anthology selection and then got hold of his first book, what struck me most was the fact that on every level – linguistic, formal, thematic – his poems issue a decisive challenge to a poet-centered aesthetic. Their abrupt line-breaks and syntactical peculiarities, their obscure mixture of abstraction, metaphor, and dialogue give them an opacity that undermines any sense of a coherent speaking voice. They do not invite the reader’s vicarious participation and in fact frustrate any reading that would treat them as the controlled expression of an authorial personality or intention. Whose – or what – voice would speak in a translation of De Angelis’s poetry? Often, I should add, it is more of a question of *which* voice, since the snippets of dialogue that punctuate his texts are impossible to pin down to a distinct identity. De Angelis’s poetry questions whether the translator can be (or should be thought of as being) in sympathy with the foreign author. It rather shows that voice in translation is irreducibly strange, never quite recognizable as the poet’s or the translator’s, never quite able to shake off its foreignness to the reader.

As I began to translate De Angelis’s poems, I became aware that the notion of *simpatico* actually mystifies what happens in the translation process. Most crucially, it conceals the fact that, in order to produce the effect of transparency in a translated text, in order to give the reader the sense that the text is a window onto the author, translators must manipulate what often seems to be a very resistant material, that is, the language into which they are translating, in most cases the language they learned first, their mother tongue, but now also their own. Transparency occurs only when the translation reads fluently, when there are no awkward phrasings, unidiomatic constructions or confused meanings, when clear syntactical connections and consistent pronouns create intelligibility for the reader. When the translation is a poem in free verse, varied rhythms that avoid jogtrot meters are needed to give the language a conversational quality, to make it sound natural. Line-breaks should not distort the syntax so much as to hinder the reader’s search for comprehension; they should rather support the syntactical continuity

that gets him or her to read for meaning over the lines, pursuing the development of a coherent speaking voice, tracing its psychological contours. These formal techniques reveal that transparency is an illusionistic effect: it depends on the translator's work with language, but it hides this work, even the very presence of language, by suggesting that the author can be seen in the translation, that in it the author speaks in his or her own voice. If the illusion of transparency is strong enough, it may well produce a truth-effect, wherein the authorial voice becomes authoritative, heard as speaking what is true, right, obvious. Translating De Angelis's poems demystified this illusionism for me because they so obviously resist fluency, cultivating instead an aesthetic of discontinuity.

Consider a poem entitled "L'idea centrale," a programmatic text which gave its title to De Angelis's anthology selection and appeared in *Somiglianze*:

È venuta in mente (ma per caso, per l'odore  
di alcool e le bende)  
questo darsi da fare premuroso  
nonostante.  
E ancora, davanti a tutti, si sceglieva  
tra le azioni e il loro senso.  
Ma per caso.  
Esseri despotic regalavano il centro  
distrattamente, con una radiografia,  
e in sogno padroni minacciosi  
sibilanti:  
"se ti togliamo ciò che non è tuo  
non ti rimane niente."

(De Angelis 1976: 97)

#### The Central Idea

came to mind (but by chance, because of the scent  
of alcohol and the bandages)  
this careful busying of oneself  
notwithstanding.  
And still, in front of everybody, there was choosing  
between the actions and their meaning.  
But by chance.  
Despotic beings made a gift of the center  
absentmindedly, with an x-ray,  
and in a dream threatening bosses  
hissing:  
"if we take from you what isn't yours  
you'll have nothing left."

(De Angelis 1995: 41)

The Italian poem offers glimpses of a hospital setting, ominous with its suggestion of injury and death, but the actual incident is never precisely defined, and the quasi-philosophical reflections on its meaning remain abstruse, only to be further obscured by the sudden shift to dreaming and the disturbing quotation. Not only can the reader not be sure what is happening, he also doesn't quite know who is experiencing it. Until the peremptory statement from the "padroni" ("bosses"), the tone is natural yet impersonal, ruminative but not actually introspective, lacking any suggestion that the voice belongs to a particular person, let alone someone who had himself experienced the mysterious physical danger. The text does not offer a coherent position from which to understand it or a psychologically consistent voice with which to identify. On the contrary, the fragmented syntax and abrupt line-breaks constantly disrupt the signifying process, forcing the reader to revise his interpretations. The opening lines are remarkable for their syntactical shifts and contortions, which compel some synthesis of the details just to make sense of them, but then weaken any closure with the qualification introduced by "nonostante" ("notwithstanding"). Enjambment is contradictory, schizoid, metamorphic. If "il centro" is given "distrattamente," in what sense can it be described as central? The "padroni" who are "minacciosi" ("threatening") turn "sibilanti," an Italian word often used to describe the sound of wind in the reeds, or snakes. The result of the discontinuous form of the poem is that it fails to create the illusionistic effect of authorial presence, demonstrating, with degrees of discomfort that vary from reader to reader, how much transparency depends on language, on formal elements like linear syntax and univocal meaning.

Most interestingly, De Angelis's abandonment of the formal techniques used to achieve transparency occurs in a poem whose representation of human consciousness clearly rejects romantic individualism. This is the concept of subjectivity that underlies such key affirmations of transparency as Wordsworth's theory of authorial expression in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800): "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 1974: 123). The same concept is also evident in Eliot's romantic modernism, his ultimate capitulation to the romantic cult of the author: "[poetry] is not the expression of personality," wrote Eliot at the end of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), "but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (Eliot 1950: 10–11). De Angelis's poem, in contrast, represents consciousness, not as the unified origin of meaning, knowledge, and action, freely expressing itself in language, but rather as split and determined by its changing conditions – waking and dreaming, thought and sensory impulses, meaning and action, medical diagnoses and chance. Thus, whatever the central idea may be, it doesn't come to mind through the subject's own volition; it arises only accidentally, through various determining factors over which the subject has limited or no control, like a smell, or the possibility of death.

Because this is a foreign text that refuses the romantic aesthetic of transparency which has long dominated British and American poetry, it makes any pursuit of

*simpatico* difficult if not impossible for the English-language translator. “L’idea centrale” is not a congenial poem to bring into a culture that prizes individuality and self-determination to such an extent that intentionality and self-expression decisively shape its reflections on language and poetry. The continued dominance of these individualistic assumptions in contemporary British and American cultures inevitably makes De Angelis a minor writer in English, marginal in relation to the major English-language aesthetic, the transparent expression of authorial experience. Indeed, the dominance of individualistic assumptions makes translation itself a minor genre of writing in English, marginal in relation to writing that not only implements the major aesthetic of transparency, but bears the authorial imprimatur. Because transparent discourse is perceived as mirroring the author, it values the foreign text as original, authentic, true and devalues the translated text as derivative, simulacral, false, forcing on translation the project of effacing its second-order status with a fluent strategy. It is here that a Platonic metaphysics emerges from beneath romantic individualism to construe translation as the copy of a copy, dictating a translation strategy in which the effect of transparency masks the mediations between and within copy and original, eclipsing the translator’s labor with an illusion of authorial presence, reproducing the cultural marginality and economic exploitation which translation suffers today.<sup>3</sup> I was definitely attracted by the difference of De Angelis’s poetry, even if it upset the Anglophone translation practices that my friend had described so lyrically. Yet this difference was forcing me to set new goals for my work. What could I hope to achieve by translating De Angelis into English? What theory would inform my translation strategy and govern my choices?

Certainly, I could defer to the prevailing cult of the author and make my translation of “L’idea centrale” as fluent as possible, perhaps with the vain hope of edging the poem closer to transparency. Some progress in this direction can be achieved if in line 12 of the translation the verb “were” is inserted before “hissing,” minimizing the fragmented syntax and giving more definition to the meaning, or if the verb “came” in the first line were given a subject, even one as vaguely defined as “it.” Of course, adding “were” and “it” would not go very far towards making the text transparent, but they would at least mitigate the grammatical uneasiness usually provoked by the omission of a subject or verb in an English sentence.

My English version, however, refuses fluency. Taking its cue from De Angelis’s own aesthetic, my strategy can be called resistancy: it seeks to reproduce the discontinuity of De Angelis’s poem. And the translation is no doubt more discontinuous with the omission of a subject and a verb. Resistancy was also at work in my effort to heighten the abruptness of the line-breaks, their effect of forcing the reader to change expectations. In line 1 “scent,” so vaguely defined that it can entertain the possibility of pleasantness, replaced two earlier choices, “smell” and “odor,” both of which carry strong negative connotations and so gave too much of a foretaste of the ominous “alcohol,” reducing the latter’s power to evoke surprise and fear. The line-break allows “scent” to release its various possible meanings, making its juxtaposition with “alcohol” a bit more jolting. Similarly, an earlier version of

line 9 began with “carelessly,” but this was ultimately replaced by the more resonant “absentmindedly,” which seems not only inexplicable in the context of “gift,” but rather alarming: since the gift carries the important cognitive associations of “center,” it offers the reader the promise of intelligibility, of some light shed on the title – which, however, the idea of absentmindedness quickly betrays.

By adopting a strategy of resistancy to translate De Angelis’s poem, I have been unfaithful to, and have in fact challenged, the dominant aesthetic in the receiving situation, that is, British and American cultures, becoming a nomad in my own language, a runaway from the mother tongue. At the same time, however, implementing this strategy must not be viewed as making the translation more literal or more faithful to the foreign-language text. Although resistancy can be said to rest on the same basic assumptions about language and subjectivity that inform De Angelis’s poetry, my English version still deviates from the Italian text in decisive ways that force a radical rethinking of fidelity in translation. The kind of fidelity that comes into play here has been called “abusive” by Philip Lewis: the translator whose “aim is to recreate analogically the abuse that occurs in the original text” winds up both “forcing the linguistic and conceptual system of which [the translation] is a dependent” and “directing a critical thrust back toward the text that it translates” (Lewis 1985: 43). The “abuses” of De Angelis’s writing are precisely its points of discontinuity and indeterminacy. They continue to exert their force in Italian culture, on the Italian-language reader, long after the first publication of his poems. In 1983, for instance, the poet Maurizio Cucchi began his dictionary entry on De Angelis by stating that “pensiero e libertà dell’immagine spesso coesistono nei suoi versi, rivelando una sottesa, insinuante inquietudine, un attraversamento sempre arduo e perturbante dell’esperienza”/ “idea and freedom of image often coexist in his verses, revealing a subtending, insinuating uneasiness, an always arduous and troubling skewing of experience” (Cucchi 1983: 116). My strategy of resistancy aims to reproduce this effect in English by resorting to analogous techniques of fragmentation and proliferation of meaning. As a consequence, the translation establishes an abusive fidelity to the Italian text: on the one hand, the translation resists the transparent aesthetic of British and American cultures which would try to domesticate De Angelis’s difficult writing by demanding a fluent strategy; on the other hand, the translation simultaneously creates a resistance in relation to De Angelis’s text, qualifying its meaning with additions and subtractions which constitute a “critical thrust” towards it.

For example, certain features of the syntax in my translation make it stranger than De Angelis’s Italian. His first line gives a verb with no subject – “È venuta” – which is grammatically acceptable and intelligible in Italian because this particular tense indicates the gender of the subject, here feminine, almost immediately leading the Italian-language reader to the last feminine noun, which happens to be in the title, “L’idea.” English sentences without subjects are grammatically incorrect and often unintelligible. By following the Italian closely and omitting the subject, therefore, I was actually moving away from the foreign text, or at least

making it more difficult, more peculiar: “È venuta” seems fluent to the Italian-language reader, the upper-case “e” showing that it begins a sentence, whereas the grammatical violation in “came to mind” (with the lower case) makes it seem unidiomatic or resistant to an English-language reader – even if this is only an initial effect, which eventually forces a glance back towards the title for meaning. My translation takes a syntactical subtlety in the Italian version, the absence of any explicit subject, and distorts it, giving exaggerated emphasis to what is only gently hinted in the Italian: that the central idea always remains outside of the poem because it is never explicitly stated, perhaps because it cannot be, because it questions any form of representation, whether in language, or X-rays.

In this instance, my translation exceeds the foreign text because of irreducible differences between the foreign and translating languages, syntactical differences which complicate the effort to produce resistancy. But the excess in the translation can also be seen in the fact that I rendered certain lines primarily on the basis of an interpretation of the poem. Because interpretation and poem are distinct entities, determined by different factors, serving different functions, leading different discursive lives, my interpretive translation should be seen as a transformation of the poem, grounded, it is true, on information about De Angelis’s readings in literature, literary criticism, and philosophy, but aimed at circulating this body of writing in Anglophone cultures where it continues to be alien and marginal. For what De Angelis’s poem shows British and American readers, with all the discomfort of the unintelligible, is that European culture has decisively moved beyond romanticism, in both its nineteenth- and twentieth-century manifestations.

In his letters to me, as well as in his essays, translations and interviews, De Angelis has made clear that his poetry assimilates various literary materials (European and Eastern, classical and twentieth-century), but also that it has a distinct philosophical genealogy: he has read widely in phenomenology and psychoanalysis, yet revises them according to the new conceptions of language and subjectivity that underlie the varieties of poststructuralist thinking in contemporary French and Italian cultures. An early interest in Maurice Blanchot’s critical speculations about the creative process and the nature of textuality led De Angelis to the study of Heidegger and Ludwig Binswanger, and finally to a belief in the importance of Nietzsche and Lacan for any contemporary project in poetry. This aspect of De Angelis’s writing was partly noted by Franco Fortini in a review of that first anthology selection: De Angelis, Fortini found, is “fascinated with the Heideggerian vortices of origin, absence, recurrence, and the danger of death” (Fortini 1975: 1309). My interpretation of “L’idea centrale” argues that it reflects Heidegger’s concept of “being-towards-death,” but that De Angelis submits this concept to a Nietzschean revision.

In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger argues that human existence is perpetually “falling,” always already determined by concerned relations with people and things, its identity dispersed into the “they” – until the possibility of death appears (Heidegger 1962: 219–24). The anticipation of death, the possibility of being nothing, constitutes a “limit-situation,” in which the subject is forced to recognize

the inauthenticity of its determinate nature and gains “a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the ‘they,’ and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious” (*ibid.*: 311). De Angelis’s “L’idea centrale” exploits the potential for drama in this climactic moment of truth by sketching a hospital scene. His poem depicts being-towards-death as a state of physical and psychological extremity where the apparent unity of lived experience is split by competing representations, and consciousness loses its self-possession and self-consistency. “Actions” are decentered from intentionality: “their meaning” is never uniquely appropriate to the subject, but an appropriation of the subject by the “they,” figured here as the “bosses” who are so “threatening” to identity because they speak “in a dream,” having even colonized the unconscious. The “central idea” is that subjectivity is ultimately “nothing,” mere action on which meaning is imposed, an ensemble of biological processes whose meaninglessness “despotic beings” inadvertently reveal when they attempt to master it and impose meaning through a scientific representation like X-rays. The formal peculiarities of this text – the shifts from realistic detail to abstract reflection to quoted statement, the scanty amount of information, the fragmented syntax – mimic the identity-shattering experience of being-towards-death by destabilizing the signifying process, abandoning any linearity of meaning, and unbalancing the reader’s search for intelligibility.

What does become clear, however, is that De Angelis’s disturbingly engimatic poem carries no suggestion that being-towards-death is the prelude to authentic existence, De Angelis resists Heidegger’s idea of authenticity as being which is unified and free, which is “something of its own” and can “choose’ itself and win itself” (Heidegger 1962: 68). In form and theme, “L’idea centrale” rather suggests Nietzsche’s corrosive notes in *The Will to Power*, where human agency is described as “no subject but an action, a positing, creative, no ‘causes and effects’” (Nietzsche 1967: 331).<sup>4</sup> For Nietzsche, subjectivity can never be authentic, because it can never possess an essential identity: it is always a site of multiple determinations, whether produced by the grammaticality of language, the need for a subject in a sentence, or constructed by some more elaborate conceptual system or social institution, like a psychology, morality, religion, family, or job – the “bosses.” De Angelis’s poem calls attention to the contradictory conditions of subjectivity, which often remain unacknowledged in the “careful busying” of everyday life and need a limit-situation in order to reemerge in consciousness.

This interpretation allowed me to solve certain translation problems even as it created others. In line 3, for example, the Italian word “premuroso” can be translated variously as “thoughtful,” or “attentive,” or “solicitous.” I chose to avoid these more ordinary meanings in favor of “careful,” an equally ordinary word that has nonetheless supported a philosophical significance in English and can bring the text closer to what I take to be its themes: Heidegger’s English translators use “care” to render “Sorge,” the German word with which he characterizes the nature of everyday life (Heidegger 1962: 237). Similarly, in line 5, the Italian verb “si sceglieva” is ordinarily an impersonal form which does not require that a subject be specified. English sentences must have subjects, and so “si sceglieva” is often

translated into English as “one chose,” or the passive voice is used. Yet since my reading establishes a connection with Nietzsche’s concept of human agency as subjectless action, as will or force, neither a subject nor the passive would do: I resorted to the slightly strange circumlocution, “there was choosing,” and avoided any explicit subject, even in as impersonal a form as “one,” while retaining a sense of forceful action. In both of these examples, the translation lost some of the ordinariness that makes the language of the foreign text especially moving and rich in possibilities – just as the use of “bosses” to translate “padroni” excluded the latter’s patriarchal associations, weakening the psychoanalytic resonance of the Italian.

My interpretation undoubtedly reflects some of De Angelis’s reading and thinking, but the translation solutions which it rationalizes do not make my English version any more faithful to its meaning. No, the interpretation has fixed a meaning, enabling the translation both to go beyond and fall short of De Angelis’s poem. Interestingly, the interpretation also points to a logical tension in the theme, namely the contradiction of Heideggerian authenticity by Nietzschean action. My interpretive translation in effect opens up this contradiction in the poem, foregrounds it, and perhaps reveals an aspect of De Angelis’s thinking of which he himself was not conscious or which, at any rate, remains unresolved in “L’idea centrale.” My interpretive translation exceeds the foreign-language text, supplementing it with research that indicates its contradictory origins and thereby puts into question its status as the original, the perfect and self-consistent expression of authorial meaning of which the translation is always the copy, ultimately imperfect in its failure to capture that self-consistency. The fact is that the original can be seen as imperfect, fissured by conflicting ideas, by the philosophical materials it puts to work, and the translation has made this conflict clearer.

This interrogative pressure in the translation surfaces in another point of resistance, an ambiguity entirely absent from De Angelis’s poem. Line 10, “and in a dream threatening bosses,” adheres to the word order of the Italian text as closely as linguistic differences permit. But because “threatening” is syntactically ambiguous, applying to either “dream” (as a participle) or “bosses” (as an adjective), the line releases a supplementary meaning which proves especially resonant in the interpretive context that guided my other choices: the “bosses” can also be seen as “threatened” by the nightmarish “dream” of determinate subjectivity, or more generally the agents that direct social institutions are equally determined by the hierarchical relations in which they dominate other agents. The “dream” becomes one of subversion by the dominated, and it is the dreamer who is “threatening” and “hissing” at the “bosses.” Here the abusiveness of the translation enacts an unsettling critique of the Italian text by exposing its privileging of the “bosses,” its implicit representation of power and social dominance as transcending the determinations of human action.

A strategy of resistancy thus results in an abusive fidelity which constructs a simultaneous relationship of reproduction and supplementarity between the translation and the foreign text. The precise nature of this relationship cannot be

calculated before the translation process is begun because different relationships must be worked out for the specific cultural materials of different foreign texts and for the specific cultural situations in which those texts are translated. This makes translation labor-intensive, but also serendipitous, with the translator poring over dictionaries, developing many alternative renderings, unexpectedly finding words and phrases that at once imitate and exceed the foreign text. "In the work of translation," Lewis notes,

the integration that is achieved escapes, in a vital way, from reflection and emerges in an experimental order, an order of discovery, where success is a function not only of the immense paraphrastic and paronomastic capacities of language, but also of trial and error, of chance. The translation will be essayistic, in the strong sense of the word.

(Lewis 1985: 45)

Abusive fidelity can be achieved by various strategies of resistancy worked by various formal techniques, but more often than not the techniques surface accidentally as possibilities are tested, their effects evaluated only after the fact, when rationalization occurs.

The abuses in De Angelis's "Il corridoio del treno" ("The Train Corridor"), also from *Somiglianze*, offer another illustration:

"Ancora questo plagio  
di somigliarsi, vuoi questo?" nel treno gelido  
che attraversa le risaie e separa tutto  
"vuoi questo, pensi che questo  
sia amore?" È buoi ormai  
e il corridoio deserto si allunga  
mentre i gomiti, appoggiati al finestrino  
"tu sei ancora lì,  
ma è il tempo di cambiare attese" e passa  
una stazione, nella nebbia, le sue case opache.  
"Ma quale plagio? Se io credo  
a qualcosa, poi sarà vero anche per te  
più vero del tuo mondo, lo confuto sempre"  
un fremere  
sotto il paltò, il corpo segue una forza  
che vince, appoggia a sé la parola  
"qualcosa, ascolta,  
qualcosa può cominciare."

(De Angelis 1976: 36)

"Again this plagiary  
of resemblance – do you want this?" in the cold train

that crosses the rice fields and separates everything  
 “you want this – you think this  
 is love?” It is dark now  
 and the deserted corridor lengthens  
 while the elbows, leaning on the compartment window  
 “you’re still there,  
 but it’s time to change expectations” and a station  
 passes, in the fog, its opaque houses.  
 “But what plagiary? If I believe  
 in something, then it will be true for you too,  
 truer than your world, I confute it always”  
 a trembling  
 beneath the overcoat, the body follows a force  
 that conquers, leans the word against itself  
 “something, listen,  
 something can begin.”

(De Angelis 1995: 55)

The fragmentation of subjectivity in the Italian text is its strongest and most striking point of resistance. The voice (or voices?) is apparently engaged in a strange lover’s quarrel, both bitter and very abstract, where desire is structured by conflicting modes of representation, but ultimately breaks them down. Although never defined as a distinct identity, with a definite age or gender, the quarrelsome voice at the opening sets up an opposition between two concepts of “love”: the first, judged false or inauthentic (“plagio”), is governed by “somigliarsi” (literally “resembling each other”), by an identity or sameness between the lovers; the second, implicitly favored by the voice, is an alternative governed by difference, or deviation, the invention of new “expectations” (“attese”). Yet the Italian text is already undermining this second alternative with “attese,” which can also mean “delays,” an ambiguity that submits the hopefulness of “expectations” to jaundiced skepticism. In fact, the quotation that begins “tu sei ancora li” (“you’re still there”) can easily signify the introduction of a different voice, suggesting that maybe the one who hurled the accusation of “plagio” should be changing its expectations, that maybe the accuser should be abandoning any search for authentic existence, any effort to avoid the dishonesty of imitation, because desire always has contradictory determinations, frustrations, “delays.”

The insistent questioning proceeds to the Nietzschean argument that love is yet another form of the will to power, where two lovers are locked in a struggle for dominance and each can disprove (“confuto”) the other’s representation of their relationship, imposing a “world” that “will be true” for both. At this point, the voices lose what vague definition they may have acquired as the text unfolded, and the two conflicting positions of intelligibility are finally abandoned by the last voice, which implicitly calls for silence, full of expectation for another, still unspoken “word” that will construct a new subject-position for “the body,” a new

representation for the biological “force” that threatens the linguistic basis of every relationship. The indeterminacy of the phrase “appoggia a sé la parola” (“leans the word against itself”) points to the contradictory interaction between language and desire. If “itself” is read as the “force” (or “body”? – another indeterminacy, perhaps less consequential here because of the connection between “force” and “body”), the “word” receives support from, or “leans [...] against,” the “force” as the meaning of a linguistic sign depends on the linkage between signifier and signified. Thus desire is seen as driving language use, but also as depending on such use for its articulation. Yet if “itself” is read as “the word,” in the sense of language in general, the “force” also “leans the word against” another word, circulating a chain of signifiers which defer the signified, throwing it into internal division. Here it is possible to glimpse Lacan’s fundamental idea that desire is simultaneously communicated and repressed by language (Lacan 1977).

The resistancy of the translation reproduces the formal discontinuity of De Angelis’s poem by adhering to its line-breaks and syntactical peculiarities. A fluent strategy could easily iron out the syntax, for example, by correcting or completing the sentence fragments – in line 7 with the substitution of the verb “lean” for the participle “leaning”; in line 10 with the insertion of a verb phrase like “go by” after the fragmentary “opaque houses.” The translation, however, reproduces De Angelis’s challenge to transparent discourse by using broken constructions which have the effect of throwing the reading process off-balance, aggravating the already difficult problem posed by the shifting positions of intelligibility, the dislocation of voice.

It is in the quotations that the translation is most abusive of the foreign text. To mimic the drama of this situation, I sought to make the opening forcefully colloquial, inserting the abrupt dashes and fracturing the questions in line 4 by omitting the auxiliary “do.” Yet since my reading construes this text as a poststructuralist meditation on the relationship between language and desire, I sought to increase the philosophical abstraction of the English: “resemblance” replaced the more ordinary, and more concrete, phrase “resembling each other,” which is actually closer to the Italian “*somigliarsi*.” The mixture of colloquial and philosophical discourses in the translation reproduces but somewhat exaggerates the similarly discordant materials of the Italian text, its combination of concrete and abstract diction.

The resistant strategy is also evident in a tendency towards archaism in the translation, specifically the dated quality of “plagiary” and “confute” in place of the more contemporary usages, “plagiarism” and “refute.” These archaic words make the quotations more unusual and distancing to the English-language reader, drawing attention to themselves as words and thus abusing the canon of transparency. The word “plagiary” is particularly useful in producing this effect: it introduces a point of polysemy which opens up a metacritical register vis-à-vis the foreign text. The Italian “*plagio*” signifies the action or instance of literary theft, the practice of stealing a text or the stolen text, and would ordinarily be translated into English by “plagiarism”; the Italian for the agent,

"plagiarist," is "plagiario." My choice of "plagiary" condenses these words and meanings: it can signify either "plagiarism" or "plagiarist," the action or the agent, the text or the subject (*OED*). Combined with "resemblance" in the translation, "plagiary" becomes a pun which in itself brands any relationship based on identity as a crime against personal autonomy and individuality, a Heideggerian inauthenticity, a person-theft, conjuring up its Latin root *plagiarius* – kidnapper. But since "resemblance" also defines a mode of representation exemplified by transparent discourse, the pun on "plagiary" interrogates the subjective illusionism in transparency, its fiction of personal presence, its person-lie. The English lines, "plagiary / of resemblance," at once valorize and demystify the concept of authenticity, locating within the strident voice at the opening a different, alien voice. The strain of archaism in the translation, finally, temporalizes De Angelis's poem, suggesting that cultural forms governed by "resemblance" are situated in the past, static, unwilling to admit difference and change, but also that De Angelis's concept of the subject as determinate process departs from the individualistic evocations of older, romantic and modern poetry. The archaism in the English version goes beyond the foreign text by adding a metacommentary on its form and theme.

### **3 In the margin of Anglophone poetries**

Resistancy is thus a translation strategy by which De Angelis's poems become strange to the Italian poet, as well as to the British and American reader and translator. It is certain that De Angelis will not recognize his own voice in the translations, not only because his ideas and texts would seem to make such a way of reading unthinkable for him, but also because he is unable to negotiate the translating language. Although he works with many languages, including Greek, Latin, French, German, and different dialects of Italian, he finds English difficult to master and can read my translations only with informants, usually native Italians who have studied English. When he does this collaborative reading, moreover, he sometimes discovers what I have been arguing, that my English loses features of the Italian texts and adds others which he had never anticipated.

The resistant strategy of my translations gives them a different, and perhaps more intense, strangeness in Anglophone cultures. They have enjoyed varying success with readers since the late 1970s. Most of them appeared in literary magazines, appealing to editors whose aesthetics normally diverge, both mainstream and experimentalist – although my translations have also been rejected by as many magazines.<sup>5</sup> The complete manuscript, a selection from De Angelis's poetry and critical prose, received many rejections from American and British publishers, including two university presses with noted translation series – Wesleyan and P (for "prestigious": the editor at this press would not permit me to identify it). The anonymous readers' reports for these presses, written in 1987, show quite clearly that my resistant strategy was strange because it abused the transparent discourse that dominates British and American poetry translation.

A reader for Wesleyan acknowledged the “difficulty” of De Angelis’s Italian texts, but felt that

Mr. Venuti’s translation makes matters more difficult by being faithful to this difficulty; he has chosen *not* to choose among the many ambiguous levels of meaning of [De Angelis’s] dense verse. For example, a *calcio d’angolo* remains a “corner kick,” no more and no less, and, as we see clearly from its placement in the poetic line, no compromise is made for the sake of the sound in English.<sup>6</sup>

The sort of fidelity Wesleyan’s reader preferred was evidently to the canon of transparency, which here includes univocal meaning and smooth prosody. But my translations aimed to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the Italian texts, their characteristic discontinuity, the neologisms, syntactical shifts, staccato rhythms. The reader’s example was taken from De Angelis’s poem “Antela,” whose experimentalist gestures begin in the title: a neologism combining “antenari” (“forebears”) and “ragnatela” (“spider web”). My version is entitled “Foreweb.” The abruptness of this poem, the dizzying succession of cryptic images, would demand considerable rewriting to produce fluent English verse. It would be easier, as Wesleyan evidently decided, to reject the entire manuscript.

C’è un crimine  
 non so se commesso o visto  
 in un tempo senza stile, come un’aria  
 di blu e di buio, che mosse  
 la destra. O qualcuno  
 che, morso dalla cane, urla.  
 Allora anche la mosca di pezza dà  
 voli indiscussi e anche  
 un ginocchio ferito nel calcio d’angolo  
 ricuce il maschio con la femmina.

(De Angelis 1985: 46)

There is a crime  
 I don’t know whether committed or witnessed  
 in a styleless time, like a breeze  
 blue and darkling, which moved  
 the right hand. Or someone  
 who, bitten by caries, screams.  
 Then even the dust mote makes  
 unquestionable flights and even  
 a knee hurt in the corner kick  
 stitches male back to female.

(De Angelis 1995: 105)

P's anonymous reader likewise expected an assimilation of De Angelis's experimentalism to transparent discourse. The reader's comments on specific translations revealed an insistence on immediate intelligibility, criticizing archaism and polysemy in favor of current English usage. My use of the word "plagiary" in "The Train Corridor," for example, was called "really obsolete and obscure." This reader, like the one for Wesleyan, also recommended revising the Italian text, even when it contained a recognizable rhetorical device: "the discontinuity (anacoluthon) between lines 2 and 3 seems excessive, however justified by the original; a little glue seems needed."

My translations signify the foreignness of De Angelis's poetry by resisting the dominant British and American literary values that would domesticate the Italian texts, make them reassuringly familiar, easy to read. And this is the reception that the translations continued to get. A selection was included in a 1991 anthology, *New Italian Poets*, a project that was initially developed by the Poetry Society of America and the Centro Internazionale Poesia della Metamorfosi in Italy and later edited by Dana Gioia and Michael Palma (1991). The anthology received a few, generally favorable reviews in American, British, and Italian periodicals. In *Poetry Review*, however, poet and translator Jamie McKendrick reflected on the cultural differences between British and Italian poetry and singled out (my translations of) De Angelis as an example of these differences at their most alienating:

One feature that clearly distinguishes many of these poets from their British contemporaries is a freewheeling associative imagery which doesn't feel obligated to explain itself – sudden transitions, lacunae – or to situate itself in a familiar time and place. This is at its most irksome in Milo De Angelis, whom Palma, introducing him, suggests the reader should approach "with openness and sensitivity." If this is accomplished, the reader will be "moved by feelings and insights that, however ineffable, are genuine and profound." I did my best, but was left unmoved.

(McKendrick 1991: 59)

English-language readers will tend to be both "unmoved" and "irked" by De Angelis's poetry, not only because the extreme discontinuity of the texts prevents the evocation of a coherent speaking voice, but also because he draws on philosophical concepts that remain foreign, even antipathetic, to most British and American literary cultures. In a polemical essay published in 1967, Kenneth Rexroth wondered, "Why is American Poetry Culturally Deprived?" because he "never met an American poet who was familiar with Jean Paul Sartre's attempts at philosophy, much less with the gnarled discourse of Scheler or Heidegger" (Rexroth 1985: 59). Rexroth's point, that with few exceptions philosophical thinking is alien to twentieth-century American poetry, applies to most British poetry as well and remains true forty years later. Among the notable exceptions are the diverse group of "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" writers, such as Charles Bernstein, who has eroded the generic distinction between poetry and essay by drawing on

various European traditions and thinkers, including Dada and Surrealism, Brecht and the Frankfurt School, poststructuralism and postanalytical philosophy (1986 and 1992). Since Bernstein's experimental writing – discontinuous, opaque, anti-individualistic – has long occupied a marginal position in American publishing, banished to the relative obscurity of the small press and the little magazine, and only recently has come to be published by university presses as well, still far from trade publishers of poetry, it demonstrates that contemporary American culture is not likely to give a warm reception to a poet like De Angelis, who writes with a knowledge of the main currents in Continental philosophy (Biggs 1990).

It is only fitting, then, that in 1989 my manuscript of his work, *Finite Intuition*, was accepted for publication by Los Angeles-based Sun & Moon, a small press whose list is devoted to experimentalists like Bernstein and whose financial problems prevented my translation from seeing print until 1995. Issued in a printing of 1500 copies, the book went out of print in 2007. A second selection of De Angelis's poetry translated by a different hand appeared in 2003 with an even smaller press, Chelsea Editions, in a printing of 1000 copies. The publisher, Alfredo de Palchi, has reported that sales have been negligible. De Angelis in fact enjoys a considerably more central position in Italian culture: his writing is published by both small and larger presses and is reviewed by noted critics in a wide range of newspapers and magazines, both local and national, little and mass-audience.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the clearest sign of his canonical status in Italy is that his first book, *Somiglianze*, was reissued in a revised edition in 1990.

If my translations of De Angelis's speculative poetry will not be immediately recognizable to the English-language reader, it is also true that I do not recognize my own voice in these translations. On the contrary, my encounter with De Angelis's texts has been profoundly estranging, and for reasons specific to my situation as a translator in contemporary Anglophone cultures: by making *simpatico* an impossible goal, the formal discontinuity of the Italian has forced me to question fluency, the dominant translation strategy in English, exposing its link to the individualism of romantic and modern theories of transparent discourse, dislodging me from the position constructed for the English-language translator by his manifold relations with editors, publishers, reviewers, and, as my friend's advice suggests, other translators. This estrangement can happen because the positioning by which a discursive practice qualifies agents for cultural production does not operate in an entirely coherent manner: a specific practice can never irrevocably fix identity, because identity is relational, the nodal point for a multiplicity of practices whose incompatibility or sheer antagonism creates the possibility for change (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 105–14). A discursive practice like translation seems particularly vulnerable to shifts in positioning, displacements of identity: its function is to work on linguistic and cultural differences which can easily initiate an interrogation of the conditions of the translator's work. Thus, although the hegemony of transparent discourse in contemporary British and American cultures has made fluency the hegemonic strategy in English-language translation, De Angelis's poetry can still enlist the translator in a cultural contradiction: I was

led to implement a resistant strategy in opposition to the discursive rules by which my work would most likely be judged, and yet that strategy, far from proving faithful to the Italian texts, in fact abused them by exploiting their potential for different and incompatible meanings.

The challenge which translating De Angelis's poetry poses to romantic and modern theories of discourse is quite similar to the one posed by Paul Celan's writing. In Celan's speech "The Meridian" (1960), the obscure discontinuity of his and other post-World War II European poetry – what he calls "the difficulties of vocabulary, the faster flow of syntax or a more awakened sense of ellipsis" – is associated with a rethinking of the lyric poem in its romantic and modern guises (Celan 1986: 48). Celan questions the lyric project of personal expression, of evoking an individual voice: the poem "speaks only in its own, its very behalf," he states, but it "has always hoped, for this very reason, to speak also on behalf of the *strange [...] on behalf of the other*, who knows, perhaps of an *altogether other*" (*ibid.*). The poem, then, does not express an authorial self, but rather liberates that self from its familiar boundaries, becoming "the place where the person was able to set himself free as an – estranged – I," but where "along with the I, estranged and free *here, in this manner*, some other thing is also set free" – free from the appropriating power of the speaking "I," of a personal language (*ibid.*: 46–7). The poem does not transcend but acknowledges the contradiction between self-expression and communication with some other, forcing an awareness of the limits as well as the possibilities of its language.

It is this sort of liberation that resistancy tries to produce in the translated text by resorting to techniques that make it strange and estranging in the receiving culture. Resistancy seeks to free the reader of the translation, as well as the translator, from the cultural constraints that ordinarily govern their reading and writing and threaten to overpower and domesticate the foreign text, annihilating its foreignness. Resistancy makes English-language translation a dissident cultural politics today, when fluent strategies and transparent discourse routinely perform that mystification of foreign texts. In the specific instance of Englishing De Angelis's poetry, the political intervention takes the form of a minor utilization of a major language. "Even when major," Deleuze and Guattari observe, "a language is open to an intensive utilization that makes it take flight along creative lines of escape which, no matter how slowly, no matter how cautiously, can now form an absolute deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 26).<sup>8</sup> My translations of De Angelis's poetry obviously can never be completely free of English and the linguistic and cultural constraints which it imposes on poetry and translation; that line of escape would preempt any translation and is no more than a capitulation to the major language, a political defeat. The point is rather that my translations resist the hegemony of transparent discourse in English-language cultures, and they do this from within, by deterritorializing the translating language itself, questioning its major cultural status by using it as the vehicle for ideas and discursive techniques which remain minor in it, minoritizing the major language by opening it to the nonstandard forms that it excludes (cf. Venuti 1998: 9–13). The models for this

translation strategy include the Czech Jew Kafka writing in German, particularly as Deleuze and Guattari read his texts, but also the Romanian Jew Celan, who took German on lines of escape by using it to speak of Nazi racism and Hebrew culture and by exploiting to an extreme its capacity for compound words and syntactical fragmentation (see e.g. Felstiner 1983, 1984). If the resistant strategy effectively produces an estranging translation, then the foreign text also enjoys a momentary liberation from the receiving culture, perhaps before it is reterritorialized with the reader's articulation of a voice – recognizable, transparent – or of some reading amenable to the dominant aesthetic in English. The liberating moment would occur when the reader of the resistant translation experiences, in the translating language, the cultural differences which separate that language and the foreign text.

Translation is a process that involves looking for similarities between languages and cultures – particularly similar messages and formal techniques – but it does this only because it is constantly confronting dissimilarities. It can never and should never aim to remove these dissimilarities entirely. A translated text should be the site where linguistic and cultural differences are somehow signalled, where a reader gets some sense of a cultural other, and resistancy, a translation strategy based on an aesthetic of discontinuity, can best signal those differences, that sense of otherness, by reminding the reader of the gains and losses in the translation process and the unbridgeable gaps between cultures. In contrast, the notion of *simpatico*, by placing a premium on transparency and demanding a narrowly conceived fluent strategy, can be viewed as a cultural narcissism: it seeks an identity, a self-recognition, and finds only the same culture in foreign writing, only the same self in the cultural other. For the translator becomes aware of his intimate sympathy with the foreign writer only when he recognizes his own voice in the foreign text. Unfortunately, the irreducible linguistic and cultural differences mean that this is always a misrecognition as well, yet fluency ensures that this point gets lost in the translating. Now more than ever, when transparency continues to dominate British and American cultures, ensuring that *simpatico* will remain a compelling goal for English-language translators, it seems important to reconsider what we do when we translate.