Peter Robinson

A Portrait of His Work

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A note on referencing

References to frequently cited works by Peter Robinson use the abbreviations given below together with the relevant page numbers. All other works cited are referenced in full in the footnotes. Where poems don't appear in the *Collected Poems* or the reference is to an earlier version of a poem which is substantially different to the version in *CP*, the reference is given to its original publication.

TC *The Constitutionals: A Fiction* (Reading: Two Rivers Press, 2019)
RE *Ravishing Europa* (Tonbridge: Worple Press, 2019)
CP *Collected Poems 1975–2015* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2017)
STR *September in the Rain: A Novel* (Newbury: Holland House Books, 2016)
BM *Buried Music* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2015)
TDW *The Draft Will* (Tokyo: Isobar Press, 2015)
FDB *Foreigners, Drunks and Babies* (Reading: Two Rivers Press, 2013)
TRS *The Returning Sky* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2012)
STS *Spirits of the Stair: Selected Aphorisms* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2009)
TLG *The Look of Goodbye* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2008)
TAP *Talk about Poetry: Conversations on the Art* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2007)
GC *Ghost Characters* (Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2006)
UD *Untitled Deeds* (Cambridge: Salt, 2004)
SP *Selected Poems 1976–2001* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2003)
ATT *About Time Too* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2001)
LF *Lost and Found* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997)
EF *Entertaining Fates* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1992)
TOL *This Other Life* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1988)
OA *Overdrawn Account* (London: Many Press, 1980)

Chapter Six:
An Italian Peter Robinson

Anna Saroldi

As well as being an award-winning poet and a widely published critic, Peter Robinson now has an established reputation as a translator, from French, German and Japanese, but pre-eminently Italian poetry. He has put a vast amount of effort into translating from the beginning of his career, through the 1970s to the 1990s, but it was only later that his work in this area began to gain prominence and recognition, with two major translations published soon after the turn of the millennium: *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Vittorio Sereni*,[1] co-authored with Marcus Perryman, and *The Greener Meadow*,[2] a selected poems of Luciano Erba, which won the John Florio Prize, the prestigious award for translations from Italian into English. After the reception of these volumes, Robinson was recognized as a professional translator and commissioned to produce a volume of poems by Antonia Pozzi.[3]

The first seeds of the poet's relationship with Italy, however, are not linked to any poetic plan, but are instead connected to personal relationships. Despite the fact that Robinson is mostly known as a translator from Italian, this is not the first foreign language he learned and translated. He grew up in the North of England, where, as he remembers, no one among his acquaintances spoke any foreign languages. His father knew a little German because of his wartime military experience, but that was all. Robinson's passion for Italy initially stems from his father's biography: he has said that it was in fact 'my dad's reminiscences of his time in Italy travelling right up to Brunik in the Alto Adige before the Armistice that fired my interest in the place and its culture'.[4] His father, who became a clergyman, went to Italy as a

[1] Vittorio Sereni, *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Vittorio Sereni: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Marcus Perryman and Peter Robinson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[2] Luciano Erba, *The Greener Meadow*, poems selected, introduced and translated by Peter Robinson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[3] Antonia Pozzi, *Poems*, trans. Peter Robinson (Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2011).

[4] *TAP,* 114.

member of the Intelligence Corps during the Second World War, and loved it. Italy was to him the land of war and wonder, and a number of firsts: the first time so far away from home, the first experience of opera, the first adventure for a boy who had always been protected by his parents. The father's memories thus gave Robinson a first positive impression of Italy. However, in school Robinson did not study Italian, but took Latin and French at O level, and a little German. When he started university at York, he studied 'English and Related Literature', which required him to take a foreign literature class. Robinson studied the French Symbolists, taught by writer Nicole Ward-Jouve, who was also his tutor.[5] The course introduced Robinson to the practice of reading poetry in European languages, an activity he has continued ever since. The first author he translated was Blaise Cendrars, attempting to render into English his *Au cœur du monde (fragment retrouvé)* in 1974, fascinated by its use of long and short lines.

The second factor that pushed Robinson towards Italy was his interest in the relationship between poetry and art. As a student of visual art and Ezra Pound, Italy had to be visited. This led to the events of summer 1975 when, while on holiday in Italy, Robinson and his then girlfriend found themselves hitchhiking in the rain, at night, on a deserted autostrada somewhere between Milan and Como. There, the rape of Robinson's girlfriend occurred, which he witnessed at gunpoint. This traumatic event inevitably changed his life and has continued to influence his writings. But so too did Italy itself in many other ways. The following years were those spent in Cambridge, where Robinson studied for his doctorate, during which he also dedicated himself to translation. Ward-Jouve had recommended him to read Apollinaire, and from there he discovered Reverdy for himself, who was at the time popular in the Cambridge poetry circles influenced by the New York school.[6] Robinson's first published translation was featured in a special issue of *Poetry and Audience* in 1977, consisting of three pieces by Reverdy, 'Mao-Tcha', 'The Name of The Wings' and

[5] For more on the role of Nicole Ward-Jouve in Robinson's education, see *TAP,* 52–54.

[6] Also because of Frank O'Hara's poem 'A Step Away from Them', ending with the lines 'My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy', see Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems,* ed. D. Allen (New York, NY: Knopf, 1995), 257–58.

'On Ten Fingers' (the last two later included in *The Great Friend)*.[7] Between 1977 and 1979, he published a number of other translations from Reverdy in various small magazines. Robinson kept working on him and accumulated quite a substantial amount of material, with the aim of publishing a selection of translated poems. This is an important characteristic of Robinson's work as a translator: the absolute majority of his projects are begun because of a personal interest and enthusiasm in the author, not under commission. Many, such as the Reverdy project, were never finalized, partly through the difficulty of finding a suitable publisher.

Robinson similarly undertook the translation of a book of short poems by the French poet Alain Delahaye, who had attended the Cambridge Poetry Festival in 1977. He translated the collection *L'être perdu*, an abstract kind of lyric poetry, influenced by Jacottet and Bonnefoy.[8] This was Robinson's first experience as a translator collaborating with a living poet, and it did not turn out successfully. Robinson 'began to feel, rightly or wrongly, that he [Delahaye] was taking over the translations', with the effect of eliminating the 'Anglo-Saxon vigour' that Robinson was trying to impart to them, and for this reason the collaboration did not reach publication.[9]

At Cambridge, Robinson also first became acquainted with Italian poetry, and with Sereni in particular. As Robinson recalls, he 'encountered Sereni's name for the first time in 1979 and started to try and render some of his poems the following year'.[10] In him, Robinson found a more concrete poetic style than that of the French poets he knew, which dealt with recognisably actual experience, and a poet positively engaging with his translators. It marked a considerable shift in Robinson's poetic interests and reading, as he moved from a French *poésie pure,* with its idealism and minimalism, to a much more socially engaged poetry and a preference for specific and concrete language.[11] Robinson decided that the style he had found in Italian poetry was much more suited to him and could help him in his own writing. In the years between 1979 and

[7] Pierre Reverdy, 'Mao-Tcha', 'The Name of The Wings', 'On Ten Fingers', trans. Peter Robinson, *Poetry and Audience,* 1977.
[8] Alain Delahaye, *L'être perdu* (Paris: Maeght, 1977).
[9] *TAP,* 16.
[10] *TAP,* 114.
[11] Peter Robinson, 'Vittorio Sereni nella vita di un poeta inglese', in *Vittorio Sereni. Un altro compleanno* (Milano: Ledizioni, 2014), 343-53, 346.

1989, there is a change of track in Robinson's poetry, as he becomes more 'eloquent', as Montale would put it.[12] He started expanding his vocabulary and using more structured syntax, distancing himself from those who believed in a more abstractly discontinuous style.

Around the same time, he put some tentative creative effort into coming to terms with the immediate experience of sexual violence, which resulted in the series of eight rape poems.[13] In 1987 a young Italian lector at Cambridge, Emanuela Tandello, contacted Robinson about a possible visit by Italian poets. Thus it was that both Robinson and Tandello collaborated on the 1988 Poetry International Festival in London, where they organized a joint reading with Franco Fortini and Amelia Rosselli, the latter's poems being collaboratively translated by them.[14] It had been more than a few years since Robinson had started translating Italian poetry: before the holiday in Italy in 1975, he had bought a copy of Ungaretti's *L'Allegria*, innocently thinking that he could manage to translate it, the poems being so short. His fellow Cambridge student Marcus Perryman helped him with Ungaretti, and this project developed a few years later into a fine-printed limited edition by Richard-Gabriel Rummonds's Verona-based Plain Wrapper Press.[15] Rummonds had published the very first limited edition of Sereni's *Stella Variabile*,[16] and, discovering that Robinson and Perryman were interested in translating him, organized a meeting between them. This encounter with Sereni marks Robinson's Italian turn.

Around 1981, Robinson had written a line in 'The Harm', 'clearly pleasing each other', consciously imitating Sereni's poem 'Un incubo' ('certo si piacciono, certo'),[17] read in the Oscar *Poesie scelte* edition brought to him from Italy by a friend. Tandello translated the line as

[12] *Ibid.*, 344.

[13] Of the eight poems, 'The Trial', was published just once in *This Other Life* and then abandoned as Robinson was not satisfied with it, and considered it 'too narrative'. The scene it recalls is now a part of his novel *September in the Rain*.

[14] The event is recalled in 'Italian Poets in London', *Bulletin of the Society for Italian Studies*, 21 (1988), 50–56. Robinson's summary of the festival is followed by two translations, respectively from Rosselli and Fortini, both by Robinson and Tandello.

[15] Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Six Poems,* trans. Peter Robinson and Marcus Perryman (Verona: Plain Wrapper, 1981).

[16] Vittorio Sereni, *Stella Variabile* (Verona: Amici del libro, 1979).

[17] Vittorio Sereni, *Poesie*, ed. Dante Isella (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 134.

'il loro godimento così ovvio', but the poet asked her to replace it with a word-for-word allusion to Sereni's poem. Robinson and Perryman met Sereni twice before his death, and the poem 'Towards Darkness' was inspired by their second and last meeting in Segrate and Milan. To Robinson, Sereni was a 'Godsend',[18] to the extent that he stated that 'non è esagerato dire che ho cominciato ad imparare la lingua [italiana], proprio per poter leggere poesie italiane e quelle di Sereni in particolare' ('it's not an exaggeration to say that I began to learn Italian really to read Italian poetry and Sereni in particular').[19] Robinson strongly felt the impulse not only to learn the language, but also to learn from him, and in the poem 'Towards Darkness' movingly asks: 'With your gratitude and reticence, / through obscure exits, guide me', echoing Sereni's own 'La malattia dell'olmo' ('Guidami tu, stella variabile, fin che puoi …'), which he had already begun to translate. In a way, Robinson felt abandoned by Sereni's sudden death, which occurred in 1983: 'I have barely begun, and the work / so soon leads into silence' ('Towards Darkness').[20] Robinson and Perryman had invited Sereni and Fortini to the Cambridge Poetry Festival. Sadly, only Fortini and another Italian poet, Maurizio Cucchi, were able to attend.[21] Homages to Sereni began to become explicit in Robinson's poetry. In 'News Abroad' he uses the phrase 'from square to square',[22] consciously imitating Sereni's 'da una piazza all'altra' ('Saba'), and in fact he employs Sereni's phrase in his poem's Italian translation, just as he had asked to be done with 'The Harm'.

Robinson has also translated non-European poets. When teaching in Japan, he tried to learn Japanese and produced an edition of translated poems in collaboration with one of his students, Fumiko Horikawa: the collection *When I was at My Most Beautiful and Other Poems 1953–82*, by Noriko Ibaragi.[23] During those Japanese years,

[18] *TAP*, 25.

[19] Robinson, 'Vittorio Sereni nella vita di un poeta inglese', 343.

[20] *CP*, 97.

[21] Fortini had also joined the 1983 edition of Cambridge Poetry Festival, as recalled by Robinson in 'Franco Fortini in Cambridge', *The Fiction Magazine*, 2:2 (1983), 64-66. The article is followed by five translations of Fortini's poems by Robinson and Perryman.

[22] *CP*, 96.

[23] Noriko Ibaragi, *When I was at My Most Beautiful and Other Poems 1953–82,* trans. Peter Robinson and Fumiko Horikawa (Cambridge: Skate Press, 1992).

though, Robinson never abandoned Italian literature and was slowly working on an anthology of twentieth-century Italian poetry. The project was already well developed in the early nineties, but various personal obstacles stood in its way (most prominently Robinson's brain tumour and his divorce), as well as professional difficulties, such as those with the publisher who had initially supported an anthology of translated poetry. Robinson had to confront the proverbial British indifference towards translated literature (and poetry most of all) and the reluctance of publishers (at the time more rooted than today) to believe that such a project could sell in the British market. The initial plan was rather comprehensive, with two volumes stretching from Carducci to Veracini, and including the most renowned poets of the twentieth century alongside younger generations (represented, for instance, by Cucchi, Frabotta, Valduga, and Magrelli). All the poems were to be translated by Robinson himself, with Perryman's assistance; Robinson had already sketched renderings of at least a few poems by every author on the list (including some particularly challenging ones, such as Zanzotto), and had translated others more extensively (Montale, for instance).[24] The anthology was never completed, but the surviving typescripts clarify the extent to which Robinson has engaged with contemporary Italian poetry.

Today, Robinson has completed a manuscript of translations from Fortini (some of which are already published in *The Great Friend* and in *Modern Poetry in Translation*),[25] an author whom he had started working on thanks to Perryman and later kept translating on his own. In addition to a project on Giorgio Bassani's *Complete Poems* in collaboration with Roberta Antignoni, he is now writing an essay on the so-called *linea lombarda*, and at the same time working on a selection of poems from the three collections by Pietro De Marchi (b. 1958), a contemporary Swiss-based Italian poet who follows in the same line as Giorgio Orelli.[26] De Marchi lives in Zurich and his

[24] Robinson's translation of Montale's *Mottetti* appeared in *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 8 (1995), 179–86.

[25] Poems by Franco Fortini trans. Peter Robinson and Marcus Perryman, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 9 (1996), 188–200.

[26] A previous English-language edition of poems from De Marchi's first two collections has been edited and translated by Marco Sonzogni: see Pietro De Marchi, *Here and not Elsewhere. Selected Poems 1990–2010* (Toronto: Guernica, 2012).

poetry often deals with the presence and reality of daily bilingualism, balancing itself between Italian and German, a situation of co-presence and the dialogue of languages and cultures that Robinson knows and understands well.

The Great Friend and Other Translated Poems

Despite the fact that the Italian anthology was never published, a smaller selection of his translations from different languages, *The Great Friend and Other Translated Poems,* was published by Worple Press (2002), featuring not only, but mostly, Italian poems, and illustrating Robinson's activity in the field. This publication divides his translating production into two parts, marking the end of his early career. It features various examples of the many different poets Robinson had privately worked on and was published just four years before the large Sereni collection, which had a much greater ambition and scope, wanting to introduce to the English-language audience a little-known foreign author by providing an almost complete translation of his poems. The Sereni translation is a fully public work, meant to be the compass and point of reference for any new reader in English who wants to learn something about Sereni and his oeuvre. *The Great Friend* is a more private work, a personal selection of beloved authors, assembled on purely personal criteria. *The Great Friend* also marks Robinson's willingness to be a part of a specific Italian poetic tradition. The format is quite unusual for British poetry publishing: not only, as Jacob Blakesley has shown, do British poets translate much less than, for instance, French and Italian ones,[27] but, if they do publish translations, they rarely choose the personal anthology format, opting instead for single-author volumes. Italian poets, on the other hand, are the most likely to be translators, and this for a specific, well-established format, that of the 'quaderno di traduzioni'.

The label comes from Eugenio Montale's homonymous collection, published in 1948, which '[diede] il nome a un genere letterario prettamente novecentesco e italiano' ([gave] the name to a literary genre typically twentieth century and Italian').[28] This collection stands

[27] Jacob S. D. Blakesley, *A Sociological Approach to Poetry Translation. Modern European Poet-Translators* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 19.
[28] Eugenio Montale, 'I Quaderni di traduzioni', *I quaderni di poesia*, 5

out for being published while the poet-translator was alive: before him, Ungaretti had done the same (but with a different title, *Traduzioni*, 1936),[29] but otherwise collections of translations by Italian poets had only been published posthumously (such as Carducci's *Versioni da antichi e moderni*, and Pascoli's *Traduzioni e riduzioni*).[30]

The choice of the word 'quaderno' intimates that the reader is accessing the private notebook of the author, the scrapbook where drafts are hidden. It does not give the impression of a completed work, but rather suggests that the author can still go back to it and make changes – that translation is still in progress.

The title was later used at various times by the publisher Einaudi, and it acquired a prestigious status: the other most prominent 'quaderni di traduzioni' in Italian literature are those of Sergio Solmi, Giorgio Caproni, Beppe Fenoglio and Edoardo Sanguineti. Other influential poets have published their 'quaderno' under a specific title, such as Sereni's *Il musicante di Saint Merry* (the title of a poem by Guillaume Apollinaire, the translation of which is featured in the volume).[31]

According to Blakesley, the characteristics of a 'quaderno di traduzioni' are that all the translations must be authored by a single poet, who also decides how to structure the book; that the collection does not feature original poems and it includes mostly (if not only) poetry; that the texts are translated from various languages and are put together not in order to achieve a reliable representation of a certain national literature or movement but rather because of the translator's interest and taste.[32] Robinson's volume perfectly fits this description. This shows that

(2017), 13–25, 13.

[29] Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Traduzioni* (Roma : Edizioni di Novissima, 1936).

[30] Giosuè Carducci, *Versioni da antichi e moderni* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1940); Giovanni Pascoli, *Traduzioni e riduzioni* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1913).

[31] Sergio Solmi, *Quaderno di traduzioni* (Torino: Einaudi, 1969); Giorgio Caproni, *Quaderno di traduzioni* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975); Beppe Fenoglio, *Quaderno di traduzioni* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000); Edoardo Sanguineti, *Quaderno di traduzioni* (Torino: Einaudi, 2006); Vittorio Sereni, *Il musicante di Saint Merry e altri versi tradotti* (Torino: Einaudi, 1981). Other examples are Luciano Erba's *Dei cristalli naturali: e altri versi tradotti (1950-1990)* (Milano: Guerini, 1991); Franco Fortini, *Il ladro di ciliege e altre versioni di poesia* (Torino: Einaudi, 1982); Giovanni Giudici, *Addio, proibito piangere e altri versi tradotti (1955-1980)* (Torino: Einadi, 1982); Mario Luzi, *La cordigliera delle Ande e altri versi tradotti* (Torino: Einaudi, 1983).

[32] Blakesley, 'I Quaderni di traduzioni', 17.

his interest in Italian poetry is not limited to an ambition to translate it into English and make it available to a new audience, but that he is also driven by the desire to belong to that same tradition. His status as prolific translator, and the way he approaches poetry and translation as closely related practices, show an understanding of the role of the European poet that is closer to that of the Italian sphere. Robinson thus transformed his long-standing activity as a translator into a concrete volume, inspired by the Italian poets he loves and has translated, for whom the pairing of composing and translating poetry is almost a given.

The Greener Meadow

When *The Great Friend* was published, however, Robinson was not yet a renowned translator. An unusual collection with a precise model, it constitutes a strong declaration of poetics and intentions by someone still early in his career. After the Sereni volumes, the work that definitively established Robinson as a translator is the Erba collection, which he also considers his most positive translation experience, because of his relationship both with the author and the publisher. Robinson had started translating Erba by himself while working on the project for the Italian anthology in the early nineties, before meeting the Erbas and before the idea of *The Great Friend*. The surviving notebook of the time shows that he had already tackled more than twenty texts. These first attempts are very literal translations, maintaining the syntax and word order of the original: mostly intended to give a sense of the meaning of the poem, they lack the poetry and rhythm that subsequent versions will acquire. By 2001 he had completed, with the help of Perryman, a small section of twelve translations, with the intention of sending them to a journal. That did not happen, and four of them were later collected in *The Great Friend*: 'Without a Reply', 'Festival of Nations', 'When I Think of my Mother', and 'La Vida Es…'. All of this was done without knowing the poet himself. Later on, a connection was established thanks to Mairi MacInnes, who knew Erba and his wife personally, and put them in touch. Robinson got to work with Erba himself, building a solid relationship with the author. Around 2002-2003, there was an initial proposal to publish a small book with Arc press. This was never completed, but some translations were featured

in *Modern Poetry in Translation* in 2004,[33] and eventually these various initiatives led to the publication with Princeton University Press.[34]

The survival of the manuscript of the first sketched translations (pre-existing *The Great Friend*) and of three printed drafts for *The Greener Meadow* allows us to compare different versions of the poems and to observe their development closely, as well as the changes between the volumes themselves. The structure is relatively simple to understand, as the selected poems are organized chronologically, according to their original collections. The idea for the title came with the first of these printed drafts, substituting the previous neutral *Selected Poems* and *The Lesser Evil* (the title of Erba's fifth collection).[35] The process of rewriting is particularly long and intense: various drafts exist of every poem, and the final shape of the translation of *The Greener Meadow* is always very distant from the original sketch and often from the version published in *The Great Friend*. One poem that went through a particularly intense process of rewriting is 'A First-Degree Equation', a rendering commented on by Matthew Reynolds in *The Poetry of Translation*. There, Reynolds highlights Robinson's tendency strictly to adhere to the original text, which thus becomes 'a palimpsest of the foreign words and sensibility'. In his argument, 'Robinson's uncompromising phrases' challenge the readers' interpretation 'because English has been kept so close to Italian', and 'this verbal fidelity comes at the cost of pattern of sounds'. As Reynolds points out, Robinson's rendering of the initial lines of the poem does not replicate the original pattern of alliteration and internal rhyme, and the result he describes as 'flat' by comparison. However, this does not make Robinson's texts any less poetic, as his 'translations achieve the strangeness and complexity of poetry by interpreting as little as possible'.[36]

This poem is not featured in *The Great Friend,* and therefore its genesis will be discussed by comparing the original draft from the nineties' notebook to those of *The Greener Meadow*, and to the final

[33] Poems by Luciano Erba trans. Peter Robinson, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 3:1 (2004), 61–68.

[34] Guernica Editions had already edited a small book of selected poems by Erba: Luciano Erba, *The Hippopotamus*, trans. Ann Snodgrass (Toronto: Guernica, 2003).

[35] Luciano Erba, *Il male minore* (Milano: Mondadori, 1960).

[36] Matthew Reynolds, *The Poetry of Translation: From Chaucer & Petrarch to Homer & Logue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 68–72.

printed text. The uncertainties and difficulties with this text are evident from the very beginning, and the handwritten draft already featured two subsequent and different translations of it (for the vast majority of the poems just one handwritten translation is present in the notebook). The title ('Un'equazione di primo grado') proved to be problematic for Robinson: variants for it include 'A Grade One Equation', 'A First Rate Equation' (handwritten copy), 'An Equation of the First Power' (first print draft), and finally the definitive 'A First-Degree Equation', introduced in the second print draft. This draft also presents the foreignizing 'to leaf over pages of *temps perdu*' for 'sfogliare pagine del tempo perduto', privileging a Proustian interpretation of the line. But it is at the third print draft that Robinson attains a significant number of improvements, for instance by correcting the rendition of line 10: 'fiori affranti / dolcemente dai merci decollati' had been rendered with 'broken-hearted flowers / gently decapitated by the merchandise', a mistake caused by the ambiguity of the term *merci*. At this stage, Robinson corrects it into 'gently cut off by freight trains'. In addition, he reintroduces the pronoun 'you' a few lines before, thus creating a technical rhyme with '*perdu*'. In this case, by choosing a precise interpretation of the syntagm 'pagine del tempo perduto', Robinson has been able to create a new pattern of sound, unknown to the original, to characterize his translation. The various drafts of this poem also show Robinson's constant attention to the text and how he kept coming back to his translations (even those already published, in journals or in *The Great Friend*), reworking them until the very last moment, in a continuous effort to improve the results and with the aid of his growing knowledge of the Italian language. Some lexical choices are exemplary in this sense: to translate 'ci equipaggiavamo', Robinson went through 'to fit', 'to equip', and finally 'to kit out', a change in the third print draft, and chosen for the final translation. Similarly, he keeps rewriting other lines, such as 'cara provvista di ombra!', initially translated as 'dear foreseen shadow' (manuscript), then 'expensive purchased shade', and finally 'dear provisioned shade', a revision in the third print draft that gets closer to the original handwritten version and will be kept in *The Greener Meadow*. Other hesitancies involve, for instance, the word order of the first line, where Robinson tries both the option with the vocative 'Mercedes' at the beginning and at the end: finally, he will adhere to its position in the Italian text. In some other passages, he distances himself from the original and its vocabulary: in order to translate 'decollati',

he initially resorts to 'decapitated', but will later (again, in the third print-out draft) change his mind and incline towards a more Anglo-Saxon diction: he suggests in the draft version 'taken off', and will opt in the final book for 'cut off'. The richness in changes of this third draft shows how Robinson, despite starting extremely closely to the original text, and staying so for a few rewritings, continuously re-assesses his choices and finds new ways to balance the Italian-ness of the text with more English options, in an attempt to create a text that can work independently in the target language, but without truncating its link to the original. Studying Robinson and Perryman's translations of Sereni, Michela Bandera has argued that, in their rendition, 'la vaghezza dello stile sereniano resta generalmente intatta' ('the mistiness of the Sereni style generally remains intact').[37] In *The Greener Meadow,* similar and opposite things happen at the same time: similar because Erba's style is preserved in English, the opposite because Erba's style is much more precise and detailed than Sereni's. By always keeping close to the Italian texts, Robinson is capable of rendering into English two very different kinds of poetry while preserving their specificity.

L'attaccapanni e altre poesie

Robinson's willingness to adhere to the Italian poetic tradition did not stop at the composition of a 'quaderno di traduzione' nor with translating two of the most important Italian poets of the second half of the twentieth century. He decided to take one step further by writing in the very language of the poets he loved and to become a part of the Italian poetry world by publishing his poems in that language. The story of Robinson's Italian self-translated collection, *L'attaccapanni e altre poesie*, is inextricably bound to the series of rape poems, to the Sereni translations and to the love story with his now wife Ornella Trevisan. While discussing how the collection was born, I will quote passages from the poems it features: *L'attaccapanni* is a distinctly autobiographical collection, which summarizes a whole chapter of Robinson's relationship with Italy.

[37] I am grateful to Michela Bandera, who has studied the Sereni translations and kindly shared her work with me: *Vittorio Sereni in inglese. Le traduzioni di Peter Robinson e Marcus Perryman,* MA thesis, Università degli Studi di Milano (aa 2014–15), 58.

The earliest nucleus of what would one day form *L'attaccapanni* can be identified in the first Italian version of the eight rape poems which Robinson asked Tandello to translate. Further developments occurred after Sereni's death in 1983, when Perryman and Robinson went to Parma to revise their translations with the poet's daughter Maria Teresa. While there the following year, Robinson had the chance to see again an Italian woman, Ornella Trevisan, whom he had met in Cambridge when teaching English. '*Galeotto fu Sereni*', as many Italians would say, alluding to the *Inferno V* episode, as Robinson and Ornella fell further in love over working on Sereni versions.[38] In the poem 'Unfaithful Translations', the town of Parma, Ornella's home and the Mondadori offices at Segrate are linked by the common spectacle of fish swimming in a lake and the figures of Ornella and Sereni merge in the ending: 'your words / came offering in trust' might be referring to either of them, as they are both calling the poet, 'inviting me towards / myself'.[39]

Robinson wrote a poem to Ornella, 'an almost stranger / I must say goodbye to', and Perryman volunteered to translate it into Italian so that she could understand it. Thus, in 1984 'An Impossibility' was translated. As well as translating this poem, Perryman wrote an Italian prose piece, never published, titled 'Autobiografia', as a form of introduction to Robinson's translated poems, whose number was starting to grow. The following year, something similar happened: Robinson wrote a poem, 'Aria di Parma', evoking a couple of Ornella's friends who were getting married, and dedicated, through its acrostic form, to Ornella herself.

Around 1988, when *This Other Life* was published, some hand-written revisions of Tandello's translations became the nucleus of a first book project entitled *Quest'altra vita* (literal translation of *This Other Life*), that also contained Perryman's 'Autobiografia' as well as some attempted translations by Robinson revised by Perryman, and a few translations by Perryman (from the rape series and of 'At Salò' and 'Leaving Parma'). These first translations had to deal with a necessary degree of reticence and ambiguity, as at that time Robinson was still married to his first wife. Poems such as 'Unfaithful Translations' and 'Towards Levanto', as Robinson stated, 'bring together the work of translating Sereni and

[38] Robinson himself uses this adjective in 'Vittorio Sereni nella vita di un poeta inglese', 351.

[39] *CP*, 122

the process of falling in love'.[40] At the same time, these two poems have the greater aim of redeeming Italy in his mind, as they 'are attempting to bring together a renewed sense of possibility that I discovered by returning to Italy, by co-translating Sereni, and by meeting Ornella Trevisan'.[41] This positive feeling is, however, accompanied by a growing awareness of the unhappiness in his first marriage.

When Robinson moved to Japan, this marriage was slowly coming to an end and he was attempting to keep in touch with Ornella. 'Not Yet Out of the Wood' incarnates the struggle accompanying that complicated time of crucial decisions, economic – as he was 'financially embarrassed' – and personal. In this case, the self-translation into Italian brings new implications to understandings of the text. On the one hand, being 'out of the woods' is not an idiomatic expression in Italian, and thus the translated title, 'Non ancora fuori dalla selva', is unfamiliar to the Italian reader.[42] However, the words *wood* and *forest* present in the English version are both translated into Italian as *selva*, and *lost* is rendered not as *perso* but as *smarrito.* This configuration is distinctly familiar to every Italian reader because of the first line of the *Divine Comedy*. As Dante did, Robinson gets out of the wood – he moves to Japan – and this would influence his poetry more and more, as is testified in, for example, 'An Undetermined Heart' and 'Lost Objects', poems that illustrate how the change in Robinson's life was finally happening.

From the mid-1990s Robinson regularly spent the summer in Italy with Ornella and, subsequently, their two young daughters. This brought the Italian translations of his poems a step forward. In 1990 he gave a bilingual poetry reading in Volterra, at an event organized by the local poet Roberto Veracini and the artist Mark Brasington, and in 1992 one in Massa Marittima, at a summer school held there by the British Institute of Florence. For these readings, he and Ornella translated some more poems, including 'Unfaithful Translations', which was read at both events. In 1992 Robinson's collection *Entertaining Fates* was published, containing several poems set in Italy (first published in *More About the Weather*)[43] whose translations were read there too. Moreover,

[40] *TAP,* 89.

[41] *TAP*, 114.

[42] It can, however, be used as a metaphor, as Luzi's line, epigraph of Robinson's 'Clearing the Wood', proves ('ma fui certo che il bosco / non è senza via d'uscita'), *CP*, 171–72.

[43] Robinson, *More About the Weather* (London: Robert Jones, 1989).

it is in the mid-nineties that 'Aria di Parma' was finally translated into Italian, so that the couple to whose wedding day it alluded could read it. It was there that the whole process accelerated: the first project of a collection of poems translated into Italian dates to just a few years later.

This collection was entitled *Nutrire i morti. Poesie scelte 1980–1995* and exists as an incomplete typescript of translations and a sketch of a contents page. It was the second attempt to create a book after *Quest'altra vita*, but these both remained private projects, as Robinson did not have a potential publisher in mind. By then, the poet was in a more stable situation, still living in Japan, but settled now with Ornella and their first child. Again, the summers spent in Italy led to significant developments. Robinson was more actively considering the possibility of a book of Italian poems, and in Parma he met Paolo Lagazzi, a friend and supporter of Attilio Bertolucci in contact with the publishing house Moretti&Vitali's poetry series. The agreement to go forward with a collection probably dates back to summer 2002, since the email correspondence between Robinson and Moretti&Vitali can be tracked to the autumn of that year. Marco Fazzini, an Italian academic and translator of British poets, also helped in the revision process. Despite some difficulties and disagreements, in the typical fashion of an author-editor-publisher triangle, the book was produced relatively quickly in spring 2004. The book launch took place on 16 March, at which Robinson gave a reading of his poems at the British Council in Milan in the presence of Luciano Erba, whom Robinson was then translating.

Italy in *L'attaccapanni e altre poesie*

While recounting how *L'attaccapanni e altre poesie* took shape, it has been natural to link the poems of the first sections of the collection to Robinson's biography. In this sense, these poems have a story to tell, Robinson's Italian *Bildungsroman*, starting with the establishing-shot of the first section, which ends on the 'blank drawing board' of 'How He Changes', where everything is yet to be written. Despite not being linked to Italy, the first section is required to set the frame for the rest. The second, third and fourth sections represent the core of the narration, dealing with the rape, Sereni and Ornella. The last part presents instead a distinct change and contains the culmination of the Italian love story: 'Variazioni di Via Sauro', a sequence of twenty-five

short poems, is a heartfelt summary of all that had happened between Robinson and Ornella. The same section also starts to reflect on what is to come, including poems such as 'At la Villetta' (the municipal cemetery in Parma) and 'Parco Nord' (also in the town).

In these poems, as in the following ones of sections six and seven, Italy is at times evoked as a distant place (in 'Italian in Sendai', 'Winter Zoo Encounter' and 'Pasta-Making') and at times a setting ('Closure' and 'Italian Poplars' located in Parma, or 'Stranded' in Monterosso). This is Robinson's attempt to write about Italy itself and no longer as the setting for violence or love. Robinson does not fall into the trap of the touristic approach, just as he had not fallen into it when writing in and about Japan, as illustrated by John Roe in his essay on the poet's work.[44] His approach has proved to be rewarding, and it can be directly linked to the work featured in Robinson's latest collection, *Ravishing Europa,* which contains poems set on trains to Milan, in Monterosso again, in the Apennines, and looking at Italy's violated landscape. Robinson is Italian in the sense that he is trying to look at Italy just as it is, 'not prepossessing' ('Parco Nord'), with no fairy-tale of the South in mind to invite the interest of his audience. This is also true because Robinson does not write for an audience, but for individual readers, and asks them to be ready to confront the different: be it Italy, England or Japan. Robinson, as Miki Iwata stated, has a 'delicate sensitivity to the otherness behind the ordinary',[45] a sensitivity that always allows him to see things at a distance: he himself admits 'I *have* felt foreign everywhere – '('World Citizens').[46]

L'attaccapanni e altre poesie is a particularly significant collection in that it has no English equivalent. Robinson could have simply taken a previous English collection and translated it into Italian, but he decided instead to craft something new. The collection has been made with the Italian reader in mind, offering an explanation of why Robinson is writing in Italian, and at the same time a sample of what he can say about Italy. However, despite being targeted at the Italian market, there

[44] John Roe, 'The Refracted-Self: Japanese Experiences', in *The Salt Companion to Peter Robinson*, 175–92, 191.

[45] Miki Iwata, 'His Other Islands: Peter Robinson, Languages, Tradition', in *The Salt Companion to Peter Robinson*, 193–204, 196.

[46] *RE,* 28–29. The line is a self-allusion to the poem 'A Constitutional', *CP*, 261. Robinson does not feel fully British either: as he wrote in 'Your Other Country', 'I'm a tourist here myself', *CP,* 222.

is little effort to conceal the inherent difference of the collection: in particular, its title sounds remote from the usual abstractness of Italian poetry collection titles – to which, for instance, *Nutrire i morti* would have been significantly closer. Robinson is not striving to fit in: he chooses as a title *L'attaccapanni,* the poem ('Coat Hanger') that would appear to have the weakest link to Italy and to the collection's purpose. However, it is the most delicate reflection on loneliness in the collection and tactfully addresses the bodily pain felt when missing a distant lover. Despite not overtly lamenting this, Robinson is disclosing that the beloved is so present in his mind as to be glimpsed through the leaves of a tree, in an Ovidian metamorphosis. In this case, however, Daphne is not running away but revealing herself to the poet, as if to confirm the stability of her love, whose roots are unaltered by distance. The thought of the lover is so material and magnetic that it draws the attention of the poet back to itself, needing a physical incarnation despite absence: the lover momentarily becomes a tree and a brief bridge is created across the lovers' separation. In 'Coat Hanger', the cortex of the tree reminds him of the freckles of the beloved, with a similarity that was made famous in Italian poetry by Gabriele D'Annunzio's line 'Quasi fatta virente, par da scorza tu esca' in 'La pioggia del pineto'.[47] But this brief encounter is not enough, and the pain remains: the absence of the Italian lover – and of Europe – is felt in the poem as a phantom limb. With this title, Robinson is thus saying to the reader: I have missed your country as a part of myself.

The Italian language in *L'attaccapanni e altre poesie*

Behind the autobiographical layer of the collection, Robinson addresses the language topic directly. *L'attaccapanni e altre poesie* testifies to his gaining intimacy with Italian, and indirectly retraces the steps for his long process of learning the language. In 'Towards Darkness', Italian is described as 'Bruised on my tongue, their rumorous / language, like an almost closed book': it does not yet belong to the poet, as it is 'their[s]', and he also sees it from a foreigner's perspective, defining

[47] Gabriele D'Annunzio, 'La pioggia nel pineto', in *Alcyone*, ed. P. Gibellini (Milan: Mondadori, 1988), 83.

it as 'rumorous'.[48] The adjective is a perfect example of Robinson's hidden belonging: while native English readers would mostly interpret it as 'full of rumour', the adjective is instead an Italianism, intended to mean 'noisy' (*rumoroso*).[49] In the same poem, he is also aware of his inability to master the Italian language and is almost afraid to hurt it, as if the language was 'bruised' by him, like he had been 'bruised' by others (and both are translated with *ammaccare*). This perception of a damaged language resurfaces in 'Variazioni di Via Sauro', where the communication between the lovers happens in 'the miscarried language we say', an imperfect tool that requires them to 'translate distances'. As William Empson wrote in 'Aubade', a poem also concerned with lovers speaking different languages: 'the language problem but you have to try'.[50] Once in Japan, as recounted in 'Italian in Sendai', Robinson and Ornella are both 'defenceless against nostalgias', 'knowing only too well / that a bottle of wine's not Italy / nor foreigner speaking your language, home': despite being an English teacher and thus able to stay constantly in touch with his mother tongue, Robinson has to face up to the fact that this cannot hide the cultural difference in Japan.[51]

This is particularly hard to deal with as Robinson is fully aware of the importance of language for happiness and a feeling of identity: in 'Winter Zoo Encounter' the Italian woman who has lost contact with her language and her people is an unnerving premonition of what he could become if he remained in Japan. Robinson is aware and afraid of the option, and conveys this with a reference to Italian culture, in the line 'another Florentine in exile'.

More than to Dante, this line refers to his friend and fellow poet Guido Cavalcanti, author of 'Perch'i' no spero di tornar giammai', in which he admits to having lost hope of returning home. Robinson finally moved back to the UK in 2007. Shortly after, in 2009, some of his poems ('For the Birds', 'To that Effect', 'Mi último adiós', 'Unwitting Epitaph', 'What Have You', 'Old Loves') were translated into Italian by Marco Sonzogni, and published in the *Journal of Italian Translation* IV.[52] The poems had previously been printed in the collection *The*

[48] *CP*, 97.

[49] Both meanings are present in the OED, but the latter is archaic.

[50] William Empson, 'Aubade', *The Complete Poems*, ed. J. Haffenden (London: Penguin, 2001), 69.

[51] *CP*, 201.

[52] Peter Robinson, 'The Look of Goodbye: The Poetry of Peter Robinson',

Look of Goodbye, which was also the first English collection to feature the poems in the last section of *L'attaccapanni.* Five years later, he published in *Quadernario* the Italian translation of another six poems from that same collection, rendered into Italian again with the help of his wife Ornella:[53] 'White Lines', 'The False Perspectives', 'Not Lost', 'Credit Rating', 'Silence Revisited', along with the prose poem 'Talking to Language' which had first appeared in *Untitled Deeds.* In this work, whose Italian title is 'Conversazione con lingua inglese' (specifying which language only becomes necessary in the bilingual context of the translation), the English language itself puts words in Robinson's mouth (and pen, we could add), as in 'Difficult Mornings' it had told him 'use me, yes, but use me well'.[54] The English version tells us how 'English itself' – a 'weary lover' – addresses Robinson, but in the Italian translation this has become an unspecified 'la lingua'.

Just as his translations of others remain close to the Italian text, his self-translations are first of all very close to the English, attempting to preserve its structure and recreate a rhythm that could work in Italian. Robinson is successful in giving his Italian poems a new orchestrated sound, arranging for the poem a suitable new acoustic economy. For instance, in 'Per Lavinia', the initial line features the alliteration 'da scempio e stupro', which creates a sound pattern that does not exist in the English (although echoing 'stared and strayed' and 'the shame she's not' of the English version) and forms a net with 'storta e snerva' at line eight and 'fissato e vagato e pianto' at line four. In 'Vite dopo', the Italian gains the assimilation of 'rinsavente o rossori', while in 'Alla villetta' the repetition in the line 'dal muro dei morti e stupirci o afferrarci' is added, while 'Chiusura' gains the stressed 'r' of the line 'Fisso attraverso finestre imbrattate'. Similarly, in the fourteenth part of 'Variazioni di Via Sauro' the repetition 'in being found again and try / again and try and try' is changed in order to be preserved into 'nell'essere / trovati ancora e tentare / ancora e ancor tentare', the successful ending of a strophe built on a crescendo of joy and emotion. One of the main differences of the translated style is the word order, as in the Italian versions Robinson quite often resorts to inversions that were not present in the English, and that

edited and translated by Marco Sonzogni, *Journal of Italian Translation IV* (II, 2009), 221–27. Available online at <http://userhome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bonaffini/jit/>.

[53] *Sei poesie* in *Quadernario: Almanacco di poesia*, I (2013).

[54] *CP*, 187.

can be fundamentally divided into two different groups. In some cases, Robinson is maintaining English word order into Italian, anticipating the adjective ('inside thin skin' > 'dentro sensibile pelle', 'Vacant Possession'), the possessive ('this respite's last light' > 'di questa tregua l'ultima luce', 'Stranded'), or the adverb ('the whole house helplessly resounds' > 'la casa intera disperatamente risuona', 'A Disturbed Night'; 'I still have desires' > 'che ancora ho desideri', 'Via Sauro Variations'). Elsewhere, he is echoing the tendencies of the so-called 'italiano poetico' and Florentine Hermeticism, postponing the subject (as in 'seagulls would rise' > 'si alzavano gabbiani', which is also moved to the end of the line, 'News Abroad'; 'beyond Milan the train curves' > 'oltre Milano curva il treno', 'Towards Darkness'; 'the cold exacts its price' > 'esige il suo prezzo il freddo', 'Via Sauro Variations'), the verb ('even if I've learnt it by heart' > 'anche se a memoria l'ho imparata', 'Italian in Sendai'; 'it was no dream' > 'sogno non era', 'Via Sauro Variations'; 'if she used her mother tongue' > 'se lei la lingua madre usava', 'Incontro invernale allo zoo') or the possessive ('our pasts' > 'i passati nostri', 'Via Sauro Variations').

Some of these cases are quite telling: in 'Curriculum Vitae', the syntagm 'a lack of love' is perfectly standard English, while the translation 'd'amore la mancanza' acquires with the inversion a higher lyrical value, summarizing the Italian poetic tradition in just one sentence. However, this is not always the case. When analysing the syntax of lines such as 'my father's and grandfathers' / wars played out' > 'di mio padre e dei miei nonni / le guerre allo stremo' ('Towards Darkness'), or 'some distant love's / skin can still be glimpsed' > 'di qualche amore lontano / la pelle si può intravedere' ('Coat Hanger'), it is clear that some constructions are preserved in order to prevent the differing syntax from altering the order of delivery in the English, and its syntactic ordering of attention. The poet is torn between the various options of translation: for instance, the draft of 'Italiana a Sendai' shows that Robinson, translating 'even if I've learnt it off by heart', hesitated between 'anche se l'ho imparata a memoria' and 'anche se a memoria l'ho imparata', the inverted form that will stay in the final version. This could be a trace influence of the Italian poets he has translated: Robinson recalls how he and Perryman had endless trouble in rendering Sereni's multiple inversions, which is particularly relevant as it illustrates how Robinson's long apprenticeship as a translator of Italian poetry shaped his Italian, and partially determined the style of his self-translations. The style of *L'attaccapanni* is a mirror of the anthology of Italian poets he never got

to publish: all those translated poems are present in his style.

When considering the translation of a full poem, it is also possible to see how local choices come together in creating a new piece. In 'Traduzioni Infedeli', for instance, it is clear how the syntax of the translated version tries to render as closely as possible the structure of the English, with a few notable exceptions. At line four, 'almost too close to me' becomes 'a me quasi troppo vicino': the personal pronoun is moved at the beginning of the sentence according to Robinson's Italian predisposition for inversions and his fondness for their lyrical impact. In general, he tries to stay close to the English and only introduces small changes, such as the elimination of the verb in line twelve, for instance, or the alteration of the sentence structure in lines thirteen and fourteen, which successfully creates a plausible Italian expression where adhering too strictly to its English counterpart would have meant a loss in efficacy. With regard to the rendering of the sound of the poem, Robinson is lucky, as he has sometimes used English words whose sound is not so different in Italian: the alliterations of the line 'and I tried to touch those depths still without harm' is more or less easily carried in 'e tentai di toccare quelle profondità ancora senza ferita'. Moreover, like the fish he describes, the poet is also creating 'intersecting figures' within the collection: lines ten to twelve are quoted in 'Via Sauro Variations', combined with line six.

In this case, translations are unfaithful not only because Robinson was being unfaithful at the time, but primarily because of the mistakes foreign speakers unwittingly make. The unfaithful translations of the title are first of all those Sereni made addressing Robinson. By literally translating common Italian expressions such as "buon lavoro!" and "amichevolmente", he said something that was both wrong in English and different from what he meant. The poem thus tackles the problem of intentions and how words transform them (one of the main issues in the entire collection), ending on a positive note: those 'well- meant misunderstandings' did reach the poet in the end, implying that a translation does not have to be perfect (if such a thing exists) to be effective.

This reflection on what is the right distance to maintain when translating and what fidelity means in this context is also present in Robinson's statements and reflections on translation. On the back cover of *The Great Friend and Other Translated Poems,* we read that 'as the title underlines, these are not imitations or adaptations, but translations that remain faithful to their originals while […] becoming

English poems in their own right'. This is a statement that openly confronts Lowell, whose *Imitations* are, as Robinson acknowledged, 'a watershed – it divides the subsequent flow into rivers of imitators and anti-imitators'.[55] This created a divide among poet-translators: some, like Lowell, believe that it is impossible to preserve the poetry and the literal meaning at the same time (a contemporary example would be Don Paterson). To others, like Robinson, this is not necessarily true: 'la presunta impossibilità di tradurre poesia non è motivo sufficiente perché questo o quel testo non venga tradotto; semmai delimita la situazione linguistica entro cui la traduzione dev'essere fatta' ('the supposed impossibility of translating poetry is not sufficient reason why this or that text cannot be translated; rather it delimits the linguistic situation within which the translation has to be made').[56]

In the preface to his *Imitations*, Lowell states that he has 'been reckless with literal meaning and laboured hard to get the tone'.[57] As Reynolds points out, in Lowell '"the tone" becomes "*a* tone" as the original aim of transference is trumped by the need to compose a poem that Lowell can hear in English'. In *The Poetry of Translation*, Reynolds chooses Robinson's translating style as an example of an anti-Lowell approach: 'Robinson's translation from Erba does less than is implied by the metaphor "translation is interpretation"'.[58] Rather than approaching a poem with a certain idea in mind, Robinson goes to the letter and sticks to it, keeping it as a constant guide. This, however, cannot prevent the creation of a certain degree of distance and difference between original and translation. He does admit that 'the process of translating a poem begins in every case with an infliction of damage', and when self-translating Robinson is experiencing a very peculiar case of self-damage and self-reparation. It is his own poem that he is decomposing, and it is his own poem that he has to see assembled in a different way in the new language – creating a parallel with the mistakes and errors of life, where Robinson also felt himself to be part of the harm and at the same time of the reparation. In self-translation, the necessary process of 'restor[ing] some of its original otherness' is not foreign to the poet, as he is both the original author

[55] Robinson, *Poetry and Translation: The Art of the Impossible* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 32, referring to Robert Lowell, *Imitations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962).
[56] Robinson., 'Vittorio Sereni nella vita di un poeta inglese', 345.
[57] Lowell, iv.
[58] Reynolds, 65, 73.

and translator.[59] The self-translator thus has to see 'how such damage could occur, and how it might be mitigated'.[60] It requires courage: it asks the poet to be ready to see what he had once written incarnated in a radically new shape. But Robinson is perfectly aware of this: 'there can be no union of the original with the translation. So they must be, at best, significantly different'.[61] They are different because, in a way, their own authors are different: as Robinson explains, in self-translation 'you are yourself alive as you translate, though you are translating the results of a past creative moment'.[62] In this situation, some poets choose to treat the self-translation of their work as a continuation of it: this is what, for instance, Joyce did with his Italian self-translation of *Anna Livia Plurabelle,* a text Robinson is familiar with and which provided the epigraph to his poem 'Animal Sendai'.[63] To Joyce, self-translation is a work in progress, where the text experiences new developments (for instance, in Italian, the experimentation with dialects).

Robinson's approach, however, is radically different. When translating himself, he tries to render the situation and thoughts of the past. There is no deliberate attempt to change it according to the poet's new mental state, but rather fidelity – faithfulness – to the past self. Robinson also described what being a faithful translator means when discussing Sereni's work: his translation of Pound's 'Villanelle' is faithful as 'it remains close to the disposition of meaningful shape in Pound's poem, while maintaining its own "lyrical effectiveness"'.

This is what Robinson also tries to do. When a stylistic feature is essential to the poem, like the acrostic form of 'Aria di Parma', he keeps it. Otherwise, he is ready to abandon what is not strictly necessary to create a new set of characteristics in the new language. Thus, faithfulness and loss are not related in Robinson's practice: linking them would

[59] Robinson, *In the Circumstances,* 143.
[60] Robinson, *Poetry and Translation,* 169.
[61] *TAP,* 88.
[62] Robinson, *Poetry and Translation,* 66.
[63] In the short note 'Animal Sendai', written to explain the Joycean epigraph to his poem, Robinson recounts: 'in Italy one summer I found a trilingual copy of *Anna Livia Plurabelle*, which contained *en face* Joyce's text and Beckett's translation with, as footnote-style sub-text, an Italian rendition – and that's when and where I found the future epigraph, which chimed with my regular Sundays with our girls at the zoo, and re-prompted the idea of a poem and memories of an old failed draft', in 'Animal Sendai', *James Joyce Broadsheet*, 98 (2014), 3.

restrict the concept of faithfulness in translation to a limiting evaluation of wrong and correct choices, while the translation should be received within a freer dynamic. The 'wrong' label belongs to a monoglot perspective, to a strict count of one-to-one equivalence, demanding exact correspondence. Instead, faithfulness is to be found in difference. As Robinson stated when commenting on his own self-translation of 'Aria di Parma', the goal is to 'try to get the translation to approximate, as closely as possible, to what the original poem says, while effecting a rhythmical equivalent for it in the entirely different sonic economy of the language into which it is being translated',[64] as he had managed in the examples discussed before. Despite the biographical context, and the Italian saying 'traduttore traditore', Robinson's translations, in this understanding, are not unfaithful at all.

As has been discussed, Robinson's path towards becoming an Italian poet started long ago, culminating in 2004 with the publication of the collection of self-translated poems *L'attaccapanni e altre poesie*. His practice can be read in the context of many significant works located between different national literatures, originating in the urge of some writers to express themselves in a language other than their own (as Conrad, Beckett or Kristóf did).

The Italian tradition is particularly rich in this sense. Historically, foreign writers have used Italian – writing directly in it or self-translating – in the Middle Ages (Raimbaut de Vaqueiras), during the Renaissance (Labé, Montaigne), the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Milton, Mozart, Voltaire) and later (Christina Rossetti, Joyce, and Pound).[65] Seen in this light, Robinson belongs to a long-established tradition of heteroglossia and his Italian collection is not a solitary experiment. He is an Italian poet because he has found his place in this diverse family and has contributed to its long history by publishing *L'attaccapanni e altre poesie*. At the same time, his role as mediator of contemporary Italian poetry in the UK and the US and his decision to carry to the Anglophone poetry market a characteristic Italian genre, that of the 'quaderno di traduzioni', define his Italian-ness in an ampler way. Robinson has not only operated from, with and within the Italian language, he has also been able to represent and transfer Italian culture

[64] Robinson, *Poetry and Translation*, 142, 168.

[65] For more on the topic of Italian heteroglossia, see Furio Brugnolo, *La lingua di cui si vanta Amore. Scrittori stranieri in lingua italiana dal Medioevo al Novecento* (Roma: Carocci, 2009).

abroad in a successful example of cultural dialogue and exchange. In a context in which many British authors approach it with many more or less hidden prejudices,[66] Robinson has instead kept interpretation to the minimum, getting to its substance.

[66] See for instance Kate Willman, 'Contemporary British Travel Writing on Italy and British Broadsheets: Tobias Jones, John Hooper and Tim Parks', *Modern Languages Open*, 8 (2018), 1–15.