

Carver's Domestic Adaptations:

An Interview with Riccardo Duranti, Carver's Italian Translator

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Muldoon: Film critic Stephen Wood says that Carver's work is a "set of variations on the theme of marriage, infidelity and the disquieting tricks in relationships." Something in this phrase reminds me of current day Italy—Tradition's brutal encounter with materialism. What makes Carver so adaptable for a translation into Italian as a language and culture?

Duranti: It is more a question of a shift taking place in the class system. The middle class is going downhill. And there is of course a clash there and as a consequence there is all kinds of un-ease, dis-ease generated from this process that can be expressed through infidelity, and alcoholism, that can be expressed, among other things, through a lack of a sense of protection, a sense of abandonment. That's what Carver addresses and that's what makes his stories pretty universal, especially in Italy where he is recognized as a valuable witness to this process.

As far as Italy is concerned, that is one feature that has made the appeal of Carver so great. I sent you that survey (Number of quotations of Carver: Italy, 81,600, Germany 30,500, Greece, 403: Duranti on Google May 6, 2008) which shows that his work has had quite a huge appeal here. As for the reasons it would be worth investigating further. Certainly there was a well-organized launch but it wouldn't have worked if the works didn't fit some need in the readership.

Muldoon: Well it was definitely well-organized considering that you retranslated the entire work of Carver. There is the idea of re-translation in its entirety.

Duranti: Yes, presenting the complete Carver, unifying his voice. In that frame, it is very important that the publishers chose to translate not only the stories but the poems as well, which is a necessary thing to do when trying to understand the legacy of Carver as a whole.

I can tell you my personal experience with the translation. I met Carver in 1985 and we became friends but I didn't translate him until the year he died. So the translation became a sort of what we call in Italian an "elaborazione del lutto," a way of getting over the mourning and sense of loss by trying to recuperate a voice that I had loved and I had lost. Translating him for me was that kind of recuperation of a lost voice. Maybe that's what made Tess Gallagher choose me as the translator of the whole work.

Muldoon: Translators might be considered inheritors of a language, passing on words, images, innovations, etc. What do you think about the responsibility of inheriting Carver, relating that to the responsibility of mourning?

Duranti: There were moments where I doubted my ability to do it. As I said there was this kind of push of trying to reproduce his voice. I think it was a privilege to have heard his conversations and to recognize the rhythms and quirks of his dialogue in them. There was also a big responsibility. That kind of language, that kind of register is very often avoided in Italian

literature. It is thought of as not high enough. There is still this idea that the register should be constantly “high” in fiction, but I thought there was also the task of the translator to show Carver’s kind of register, his kind of language. It is a very precious tool used to make literature work, to make fiction come alive, real. I think that is what is behind my interpretation of the language.

Muldoon: In the poem “Venice” we see Carver thinking about death, the arguably third phase of his writing where he is distracted and self-aware. This poem shows the beauty of translating into Italian with the use of words like “biasimare,” “trapelata,” “sorci,” but it also shows the potential problem with register in Italian. How does the translator escape the heavy tradition of this language in order to transmit Carver’s everydayness? Could this be an example of where the register gives way to the beauty of Italian even though it has some distance from the original text?

Duranti: There is always this dialectics between registers, especially in his poetry where he is less loose than in the fiction. Once in a while he does try to crank up the register in the poems a little bit. It is not that you make a conscious choice when you translate. You try to do your best, and sometimes your background “trapela” comes to the surface. There is also an unspoken pressure on the translator to keep a high register. Carver helped me to stabilize that register. Of course there might be some leftovers. Some occurrences might have gone over the base line, but I think it depends on your ear, the kind of what you call everydayness is often heard in the other words, in the syntax. You have to be careful about the interference of dialect. Immediately when you think of everyday speech in Italian the connection is right away to local dialect.

Whereas you have to find an Italian equivalent, which doesn't really exist in Italian literature because Italian writers tend to be very conservative. The role of the translator is also to import ways of writing and ways of playing with language that maybe some Italian writers don't fully dare to use because they are afraid of alienating the publishers. The publishers tend to conform to the average literary language, especially when there is a lack of translation of interesting material, such as Carver's for example. They also have the difficult task of making this lower register acceptable, but it's very difficult to do without falling into traps like local language. For example the first translation I saw of Carver, which was the 1994 edition of *Cathedral* in Italian by Mondadori, the translator characterized the Italian that came out in a recognizably northern fashion. I think that was a fault in the translation, whereas my effort was to stay away from instinct: I would normally resort to central Italian dialect if I have to lower my register, even though I am aware that I have to be careful not to go too far in that direction.

Muldoon: Speaking of infidelity, a problem you talked about in an interview on translation where you said, and I am translating "In translating, the problem of trust is so complex that it even transcends the question of whether there is more or less of an affinity between languages." ["Il Problema della fedelita e talmente complesso che trascende anche la questione delle minore o maggiore affinita tra le lingue."] How does Carver's minimalism expose the level of difference between the Italian and English languages? Is it the minimalism that is particularly hard to keep? There is a lot of punch in Carver, a lot of boxing. How did you get that in Italian?

Duranti: It is a problem that I am going to face again pretty soon. I think minimalism is a sort of wrong track to take. He certainly thought there was some mislabeling there. I think the

invention of minimalism was part of a campaign that Gordon Lish was doing to promote his own way of writing. He is the only *real* minimalist and he tried to use Carver as a kind of spearhead to launch his own vision of writing. He did this by heavily editing Carver's work. He was very intelligent and he understood that Carver's work could handle all the editing that he did. My next project is to translate the stories that came out heavily edited by Gordon Lish in *What we talk about when we talk about love*, to translate the original versions *before* the editing and that's where I am going to find the differences there are between the two languages and the two ways of telling a story. From my experience, because I have already translated some of the original stories, I think I am more comfortable with the longer versions. That dry, cut to the bone language is more difficult to reproduce in Italian. I think I'm going to enjoy the longer versions more. There has been some criticism about my translations, saying that they do not respect that dry quality of Carver's dialogue but I feel that beyond a certain point Italian cannot be dried up so much. There is a level that has to be lengthened a little bit, diluted a little bit; otherwise it will be like sandpaper. You cannot sandpaper the Italian reading public so much.

Muldoon: To say that Carver writes about Sexual Politics seems to be very limiting, others have called it Anti-Politics. What would you say?

Duranti: He had no agenda. When he wrote he was not thinking about sexual politics. He was just writing about his experience. And his experience is full of contradictions like all his life. He was brought up with very traditional, rigid roles between women and men. I think in a sense he was caught in the contradiction between the way he was brought up and the way he wanted to do things. For example even in his first marriage, besides all the problems with getting married

very early and having to juggle his will to improve himself through education and having to keep the family together, when he was not fully equipped to do that economically, there was always this contradiction between doing things in the traditional way and wanting to do them in the new, cooler, hippie way that he was discovering. I think they [Ray and Maryann] actually managed to gain some sort of balance in this, before the stress got them. For example, they really took turns in getting an education because they couldn't both study at the same time, as it was already difficult as it was. He even followed his wife in a scholarship abroad, in Israel of all places, because she had this opportunity. It was a disaster because you cannot go from working class Washington State to Israel without having some cultural shock. His experiences were certainly contradictory, as he couldn't keep up with this pull in several directions, at once, in the long run. As far as I know in the second part of his life, the last, and the most productive one, he certainly had solved a lot of his problems, also thanks to meeting Tess Gallagher. Their relationship was much more balanced, much less traditional. The traditional roles didn't put as much pressure on him as his earlier experience. Sexual politics is divided into two phases in his life and in the later phase, this awareness comes out better. The earlier stories are just witnesses to the contradictions he was living in, and the fact was that very often he was aware of wanting to do things differently, but was being pushed back to doing them in a traditional way.

Muldoon: Infidelity between women and men is a major theme in Italian life as well, being almost an everyday discussion, an accepted norm. What is characteristically different about the Italian and American version of having an affair?

Duranti: That kind of frankness about it is fairly new in Italian culture. It explains some of the uneasiness in the male characters in his stories. It is a sign of the conflict he lived through in his own life. In Italian culture this is coming to the surface more and more but not so much like in Carver's world, along with the awareness that women do work even if they are relegated to a traditional role at home and really do more than men who often take shelter in their jobs with traditional Italian "furbizia." They keep up their role as the breadwinners but the actual management of the family falls is on the shoulders of the women. With all the differences involved, I think the Italian audience can catch the analogies in the conflict even though it is not the same.

Muldoon: Thinking about the 80's and being in America, with the divorce rate at the time when Carver was writing and even, in a way, Carver predicting divorce in the 70s with his stories, in Italy there was and is less divorce but at the same time the birth rate is very low. Maybe it is quite timely that Carver is getting put out again in this complete form. The reaction is different, but could the traditional state of marriage in Italy be under question nonetheless?

Duranti: I think as far as social trends are concerned there is always a gap of at least ten/fifteen years between Italy and the States so it was timely because some of the problems he was talking about may not have been as prominent here in 1984, but have certainly become more current since the beginning of the 90s up to today.

Muldoon: Word choice is a top priority in translation as there are a lot of words in the world. Obviously the short story collection title *Cathedral* is translated as "*Cattedrale*," but what about

Carver's word choice in itself. An everyday working person would go to a simple "Church," what is the connection in this collection?

Duranti: There are two problems. In that particular story "Cathedral" there is the special problem of choosing something that is not everyday. The whole situation is pretty original and absurd. There is a very typical, low/middle class American man trying to explain something as difficult as what a Cathedral is to a blind man so he couldn't have just said church because a church would be something they would be familiar with. They are thinking of the traditional European Gothic cathedral, a cathedral in France, Germany, and Italy in a sense. The Cathedral represents another world so he had to use a different word not just church. There is an element of pretension there. He was trying to tackle something out of the ordinary. I also think there is a kind of prejudice about Carver, that he should always deal with everyday typical American life, which doesn't do justice to him because he was very well read, very interested in things like Russian stories, French writers, even Italian writers, (he was a lover of Italo Svevo and Calvino) so he felt that kind of fascination with European culture. I always thought that one of the biggest pities of his early death was that it happened just when he was on the verge of changing his outlook. The kind of working class American he depicted was beginning to grow a little too narrow for his talent. The last story he wrote, "Errand," shows that very well as it is set outside of America, and it is set in the past. It describes the death of Anton Chekhov, who was of course his favorite writer. There are some sophisticated choices of words there when trying to portray a very different world from the one he was used to writing about. Then you can find this in the poems; the poems about literary experience, reading the French and Russian writers. "Cathedral" is one of the first examples of this ambition of going into a wider arena.

Muldoon: Was naming the whole group of stories *Cathedral* part of it as well?

Duranti: *Cathedral* does represent his attempt to upgrade himself. It's very different from all his other titles which are very colloquial and long, and this one is short, to the point: from *Would You Please Be Quiet, Please?* to *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, he goes to *Cathedral*. It was that part of an attempt to reassert himself as a more complex writer than the labels that were stuck on him as being a minimalist. He felt like he was being constrained in a corner and he wanted to show that he could get out of that corner.

Muldoon: If you take that final sentence and you attach it to things like alcoholism or different traps that people get into, you see that you need time to get out of corners sometimes.

Duranti: He was doing it in many different ways. I think the poems are a key to understanding the more complex side of Carver because they go beyond the labels that journalists would resort to just to put him in a niche where they could deal with him. I think he was more complex than that.

Muldoon: There is a poem which really shocked me where he talks about his daughter, and how his daughter would be an alcoholic. It is outside any scheme. You can just see his personal fears.

Duranti: The problems he had with both his daughter and his son were deep and painful. He said in an essay that they were the biggest influence on his work in a sense. In an essay called “Fires,” he talks about the fact that in his writing he was able to address something that was very tormenting to him. Even in the final period of his life, he divided his life into the Good Ray’s days and the Bad Ray’s days, or what he called in one of his last poems the “Gravy” years. Even in the Gravy years, the past and the problem that came from his relationship with his children was something that really haunted him, working against his tranquility and balance. It is very well expressed in his poems; this contradiction between love, responsibility and his awareness of his failure as a parent was a big problem of his until the end.

Muldoon: Do you think that communicability, the ability to talk about things in the family, especially on the part of the father, is an issue in Italy? My father is Irish and Catholic, and there are some similarities between this image of a father, Italy and Carver. In Italy there is so much domestic violence, unfortunately not just abuse, but actual homicides and a lot of daily domestic killings.

Duranti: Compared to the tensions in his works there is relatively little violence in Carver, the violence is inside I think. For what I can remember there are only two cases where it really erupts, in “Popular Mechanics” [“Little Things”] and “Tell The Women We Are Going,” but of course in the poems there are more instances of this.

Muldoon: Do you think that in a way talking about it, having an open line of communication, is a way of getting over that disease? Maybe there aren't as many channels of communication here in Italy.

Duranti: Especially here, if you notice, there is an official way and then there is the real way. Everybody is very superstitious and there is also the church, which keeps exalting the family values of family, but at the same time all this talk works as a lid put on a reality which is actually much more complex, more contradictory. Under this lid, because of this lid, all kinds of things fester and violence ensues because there is no other way of expressing it in other ways. Carver's luck was to have this gift of story telling and being able to verbalize some of these tensions because these tensions could have had much more violent outlets. The gift of telling with such power is what eventually saved his life, his sanity. The contradiction here is much heavier because of all this talk of utopia, of an ideal sense of family, and all the social contradictions that end up brewing and building up pressure in family life and finally give way to violence or betrayal.