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Panel Title: Writing Italian in English

Presentation Title: Translations of Umberto Saba and Sara Copio Sullam

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First off, I would like to preface my talk by delineating the principles that guide my attempts at translating poetry. Robert Frost was famously quoted as quipping that "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." Thus, the poetic translator's job is to battle this tendency, and thereby to preserve as much of the feel of the original work as possible. In keeping with this mandate, the mere translation of words will not suffice. The translator must attempt to preserve a trinity of attributes: the poem's form; the poem's music and rhythms, and the poem's sense as expressed through language. While the translator should not seek to improve upon the original, he/she is also obligated to do everything possible to insure that a graceful lyric does not emerge in the target language as flat and stilted. As regards form, the translator must replicate it; for example a sonnet that doesn't rhyme or preserve sonnet rhythms in the target language doesn't evoke the sense of a sonnet. Since English is much less rhyme-rich than Italian, I am sometimes forced to use slant rhymes (e.g., "Delos, ice, skies"), but I try to compensate with as many full rhymes as possible to preserve the sonnet feel. As regards music, a poem is sound before it ever makes sense in any language; the interplay of similar or contrasting vowel and consonant sounds creates a subtle pre-conscious music that may be lost when the cognates or inflections in the target language differ from those in the original. The translator must endeavor to restore or substitute a music that works in the target language. For example, Umberto Saba's poem "Trieste" begins with the following line, "Ho attraversato tutta la citta." Notice how the dominance of the "t" sound – three double t's and two single t's – mimics the sound of shoes on cobblestones, reinforcing the sense that he has walked a long time. Since "t's" aren't as readily available in my English rendition, I have substituted c's and s's to reproduce a scuffing sound in my opening line, "I crisscrossed the whole city." Another sound attribute that can be lost is verbal puns which may not cross over into the target language. Throughout his poems about Trieste, Saba consistently reinforces his melancholy by the fact that "Trieste" is only one letter off from sad ("triste"). In English, there is no resonance, so that element is lost. Finally, the literal substitution of the closest word in the target language sometimes blunts the music or rhythm, so the translator must search the reserves of synonyms and or parallel concepts in the target language to identify other close alternatives that better express the poetic sense of the original.

One more concept before I begin to share my translations. Translation is more than finding verbal equivalents. It is also about finding literary equivalents, where possible,

within the target language. Deana Shemek correctly noted that Sara Copio Sullam's poetic expression owes a clear debt to the sonnets of Petrarch which should be readily apparent to Italian readers of poetry. To recreate that sense for English readers, I have tried to echo Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder whose English sonnets also owed a deep debt to Petrarch, and with whom readers of English poetry are likely to be familiar. However, it also seems to me that the devoutness and the rhythms of Sara Copio Sullam's poetry clearly echo the Psalms of David, which she would have read in Hebrew. Thus, for my English audience, I seek to recreate tonalities from the Psalms translated in the King James version of the English Bible, which is exactly contemporary with the writing career of Sara Copio Sullam. The devout fervor permeating Sullam's poetry seems very comparable to the fervor expressed in English by her contemporaries, John Donne (especially in his "Holy Sonnets") and George Herbert. Both Donne and Herbert read some Hebrew and contributed to the translation of the Psalms for the King James version. While I claim no influence in either direction, since Herbert and Donne were presumably unaware of Sara Copio Sullam, and she of them, a strong resonance exists amongst the three, so some phrasings intentionally suggest Donne and Herbert for the English reader. Since poetry can best be understood within a context, I have tried to reproduce an English context that fairly represents her poems.

Several key elements seemed either to be jarring or missing in Deana Shemek's version of Sara Copio Sullam's "Manifesto of the Jew". The English phrase "bare-breasted" for "Col petto ignudo" suggested that Sara was some sort of Amazon or exhibitionist and stood in stark contrast to the overall tone of the poem. For me, "chest bared" is both more faithful to the Italian and more suggestive that the image is metaphorical rather than literal, expressing her state of vulnerability rather than any desire to flaunt social norms. Also, Sullam's poems are infused with a pious tone and strong resonance with Hebrew verse, both of which are not adequately established in Shemek's version. So here is my version:

#### Manifesto of the Jew

Lord, with you at my side, I make ready  
My defense since I am abused and harassed  
By a warrior who dares to deem faithless  
A soul, by Your mercy, with faith made steady.

Unarmed, I enter an unused ring.  
I'll make no war against my challenger,  
But through His mercy and by God assured,  
With chest bared, I will repel his beating.

If, out of dust, You've given weapons flight  
For great Abraham against opposing kings  
So that he made of them a famous rout,

Renew that example in me, though, no doubt  
I am unequal, and let this ink I'm spilling  
Suffice to show how worthy is Thy might.

Here is my version of Sara Copio Sullam's second sonnet, addressed to Ansaldo Ceba upon the publication of his heroic epic, *Queen Esther*.

Sonnet #1

The lovely Jew whose devout dialect  
Evoked grace from the most sublime hearts  
Now in the holy fires of heaven's firmament  
Sweetly delights the greatest intellects

With strains that grant souls release from great torments,  
Ansaldo, and by which you gain the same respect,  
Expressing her most chaste love in your account  
That holds the worlds upon your rhymes intent.

Thus, the immortal God born on Delos  
Lends to your glory his glory's content  
That can be quenched by neither fire nor ice.

She again, who has already made you poet,  
Ruling that craft from the Heavenly skies,  
Will forever give purpose to the poems you write.

Of course, Sara Copio Sullam would eventually be alienated from Ansaldo Ciba as a result of his insistent attempts to convert her to Roman Catholicism. These attempts are generally viewed by the modern reader as a manifestation of Ciba's ethnocentric assumption that conversion would rescue the fair maiden, Sara, from eternal damnation. While I agree with this interpretation of Ciba's motives, translating the poem gave me additional insight into what may have prompted Ciba's attempts at conversion. While I am now certain that the "she" ("Colei") who is referenced in line twelve of the poem is Queen Esther, my first several readings of the poem produced an odd misreading of the text. The first eight lines of the poem clearly invoke Old Testament Queen Esther who is equally relevant for Jews or Christians. Then in typical Renaissance fashion, the sonnet shifts, invoking a totally different cosmology with Apollo, Classical God of poetry. Then line twelve shifts back to Queen Esther with "Colei ancor." Queen Esther is the only third person feminine referenced in the poem. However, line thirteen put me on the wrong track with "Reggendo questa, da l'imperio Cielo." In my initial readings, I

assumed that Sullam was bizarrely invoking the Virgin Mary, the only 'she' capable of ruling from Heaven on high, a misreading probably suggested by my study of the Cult of the Virgin Mary. While I subsequently recognized my misinterpretation, I wonder whether Ciba, who was thoroughly immersed in the Cult of the Virgin, may have been capable of making and persisting in a similar misreading. By such logic, if Sullam is perceived as invoking the Virgin Mary, Ciba would have seen her as ripe for conversion, thus provoking his onslaught.

While I have only recently discovered Sara Copio Sullam's poetry, I have been translating poems by Umberto Saba for nearly thirty years. Today, given the focus of this conference, I will be sharing three poems (two of them newly translated) which reflect Saba's identity as a Jewish-Italian writer.

I originally translated "Old Chimney" eighteen years ago, and it still stands as one of my favorite Saba poems. It comes from one of Saba's later volumes, 1944, which responds to his experiences as a Jew in Italy during the worst excesses of the Shoah. Saba avoided deportation to the death camps because fellow poet, Eugenio Montale, provided refuge in his Florence attic, where Saba's circumscribed view included neighboring rooftops and a Renaissance chimney.

### Old Chimney

Old chimney that juts above the roofs  
which frame my window – an ashen  
sky, partly clouded, overhead –  
you have smoked from the era of the Grand Dukes  
through all the times that followed:  
bright banners and deluded hearts.  
You've also watched a boy return  
on leave from the war. What a fuss  
they made all around him! He held his head  
in his hands, absorbed at length  
in silent meditations. Sometimes he said,  
"Mother," and no more. Someone else said,  
"It's an evil, but it will bear  
an even greater good." Instead...

Old chimney shaped by the hand  
of a man many centuries ago, so much  
has passed over you, years and seasons,  
clouds and sunlight in succession, perhaps  
you have witnessed nothing sadder  
than that. One day a futile  
troupe appeared before you on the roofs,

young men fed up with days of siege  
and crisis, moving – so it seemed –  
like dancers to a phonograph. And eager  
to be under fire; they were partisans.  
It was the end. You could see for yourself  
in the streets below, the brief, red proof.  
Today, rendered almost useless by the new  
discoveries, you send, ever more rarely,  
a greeting of smoke to the sky.  
While I choose to hold my tongue  
among my fellow men, I choose to speak  
to you because you listen, holding your peace.  
You are as old as me, a survivor.

The next poem, “Trieste” comes from *Trieste e una donna* (Trieste and a Lady) which Saba published thirty years earlier, in 1911. I translated it upon my return from Trieste several weeks ago with a sense of Saba’s personal geography fresh in my mind. It is difficult to separate the poetic sense of separation/alienation from Saba’s own sense of the same as a Jew in a very Roman Catholic locale. I recall Margaret Brose’s remarks about self-imposed separation in *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini*. Is that what we’re seeing here? The neighborhood described in the second stanza lies along the Via del Monte where the old Jewish ghetto, Saba’s birthplace, is located. Though stressing alienation, the poem seems to take satisfaction in its place of isolation.

### Trieste

I crisscrossed the whole city.  
Afterwards I climbed a slope,  
crowded at first, but deserted here,  
closed off by a low wall,  
a confined space in which I sit alone,  
and it seems to me that where it ends  
the city ends.

Trieste has a peevish grace.  
If you please, it’s like  
a sharp-tongued, ever-hungry, street smart boy  
with blue eyes and hands too big  
to offer up a flower,  
like a love  
with jealousy.  
From this slope, I can distinguish  
every church and every lane,

whether it leads to the cluttered seashore  
or along the ridge to the summit  
where one house, the last one, clings onto it –  
on every side  
flowing through everything  
a strange air, a tormenting air,  
the native air.

My hometown, which thrives in every part,  
has framed a narrow corner for me,  
for my bashful and thought-worn life.

Since much of our Institute has involved visits to Jewish cemeteries, I will close with “Three Streets” which I also translated upon my return to Venice after walking those same Trieste streets several weeks ago. The second stanza poignantly describes Via del Monte and the disused Jewish cemetery there. The woman who suddenly emerges at the end of the third stanza is Rachel Coen, Saba’s Jewish mother who raised him by herself after his Gentile father abandoned them. This poem has three seventeen line stanzas that adhere to the following rhyme scheme: ABACBCDEDFEFGGFHH. Once again, I have been forced to resort to a flurry of slant rhymes (e.g., “reflected/Vecchio” or “houses/base”) in place of Saba’s sonorous full rhymes. Nonetheless, I hope they convey most of the rhythms and resonances that Saba intended.

### Three Streets

In Trieste there’s a street where I see myself reflected  
in the long days of shuttered sadness.  
It’s called the Via del Lazzaretto Vecchio.  
Among homes like ancient almshouses,  
it has one note, just one, of cheerfulness:  
the sea perpendicular at its base.  
Scents of spices and sea tar are rising  
from forlorn warehouses facing out  
to trade in netting and rigging  
for boats; a flag shop flies a pennant  
as its sign; on the inside, it floats  
against the passerby, barely worth a glance;  
with bloodless faces bowed down  
to the colors of every nation,  
the workers take the harsh sentence  
of life, innocent prisoners,  
their gloom stitched across the merry banners.

In Trieste where much sadness and beauty  
mingle in neighborhood and skyline,  
there's a steep path called Via del Monte.  
It starts with a synagogue  
and ends at a convent, and half way down  
a chapel, where the gloomy fugue  
through life allows a glimpse of pasture  
and promontory and the sea with its ships  
and the market awnings and crowded shore.  
However, flanking the incline is an abandoned  
holy ground, where no funeral groups  
enter, and no burials have occurred for as long  
as I remember; the ancient cemetery  
of the Jews, so dear to my memory;  
if I think of them, they are my elders, after bargaining  
much and suffering much, entombed here,  
a fellowship of souls and faces everywhere.

Via del Monte is the street of holy  
affection, but the street of joy and ardor  
is Via Domenico Rossetti, always.  
This green suburban neighborhood,  
which loses, every day, some of its color,  
forever a little more city, a little less field,  
still retains much charm from its era  
of beauty, with skinny rows  
of saplings, and the first scattered villas.  
It passes her on these final, summer  
evenings, when all the windows  
are wide open and everyone gathers  
on the terrace, where darning or reading, she awaits.  
Perhaps she daydreams that her delight  
will rekindle the long lost pleasures  
of living, of loving him, him alone,  
as well as the more ruddy health of her son.

Thank you for listening and for the wonderful fellowship of scholars that has enriched my knowledge and, I hope, my ability to do these poets justice in translation. I am appending the Italian originals of the translated works for your convenience.

