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John Willingham: "John Graves, Larry McMurtry, and the Nature of Goodbyes"

Chris Arthur: "Priests"

Elizabeth Metzger: "Unit of Wonder: Traveling through the Sentences of Four Great Writers"

Gorman Beauchamp: "Art and the Ambiguity of Terrorism: 'Benito Cereno' to *The Death of Klinghoffer*"

Paul Reiferson: "He Wears the Mask"

M. D. Stein: "Acting like a Doctor"

Todd Portnowitz: "Translating Amy Clampitt into Italian"

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Translating Amy Clampitt into Italian

That I would come to translate Amy Clampitt's poetry into Italian is due in most part to Francesco Consiglio, whose name, to the pleasure of us all, translates to Frank Advice. Mr. Advice served as the dormitory president of the Residenza Mattioli in Siena, Italy, my lodgings in 2010–2011 while on a teaching exchange with the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I was twenty-three years old. Frank Advice was maybe twenty. He tucked his collared shirts, studied philosophy, wore glasses, grew disreputable facial hair. To the other students in the dorm he was known as "Il presidente," a nickname they often sang in chorus, to the tune of Paul Anka's "I Love You Baby," whenever he walked into the room. "Oh pre-si-deente, la la la la la la, Oh pre-si-deente..." As part of his presidential duties, perhaps his sole duty, he managed the dorm library—an armoire of books in the study room—and our first encounter came when he lent me a copy of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*.

Frank, my good squire. We ate at separate tables at the *mensa*, though he was always mindful to secure me free tickets to shows at the Palazzo Pubblico, to alert me to upcoming concerts at the Duomo, to run me through the plots of the Italian classics I was studying for my Master's exam. And it was he who invited me to join Le Mille Giubbe Blu—the Thousand Blue Coats.

"Le Giubbe" is a literary group that still meets in Siena, and had been meeting for a decade when I joined in 2010. The name is owed to Giuseppe Garibaldi's volunteer army, the "Giubbe Rosse" (Red Coats), during the mid-1800s surge toward Italian unification (which also leant its name to the literary café in Florence, Caffè Giubbe Rosse), and to the popular song of Italian singer Mina, "Le Mille Bolle Blu" ("A Thousand Blue Bubbles"). Meetings are held twice a month in the offices of the university complex and former psychiatric hospital San Niccolò. At around 8:45 PM, beneath the massive brick and travertine arch still bearing the words "Ospedale Psichiatrico," the first mem-

bers arrive—usually the six or so regulars that make up the group's core, walking together from their customary pre-meeting pizza, led by Filippo Gioffrè, the group organizer, and the Latin professor Alessandro Fo, the group elder. Come 9 PM, a conglomerate of more or less fifteen lit nerds walks through the dark to the offices in the back. (Those may be my sweetest memories of *Le Giubbe*, the five minute strolls across the lawn of San Niccolò, past the deep green gloss of the monkey puzzle and deodar trees). For each meeting a new theme is chosen—the window, the pocket, the stairwell, shame—around which group members read a literary passage from a favorite, recently read, or expressly sought out work, often including the word of the theme itself. Photocopies of the passage must be distributed. No original writing permitted. Comments kept to a minimum, though an occasional dialogue naturally arises. A moderator is chosen each week to determine the order of participants, and a “verbalista” records the entire event in a comic, sometimes awe-inspiring improvised essay, summarizing the passages chosen, the resulting discussions, and playing on the theme, which is read in celebratory spirit at the conclusion of each meeting.

All of this, of course, in Italian. Rarefied Italian, with frequent Latin footnotes. Which was no simple matter for an American exchange student who'd taken Italian Studies as a minor at the University of Florida and who had completed only one year in a Master's program. So I learned to fake it, to laugh when they laughed, to pick up as much as I could and spit it back. My language level was somewhat higher than your average Italian grad student—the year before in Madison I'd set up an exchange of sorts with a new student from Turin: I gave him my social security number to borrow for a bit, my old apartment, helped him to buy a cell phone and deal with the cable company, and in return he gave me free Italian conversation lessons. Good ones. So I was in over my head but I wasn't drowning, and the group respected me for it, took me in, let me speak, lampooned me at times, and drastically improved my language skills.

My *Giubbe*, the fifteen or so of us who participated between 2010–2011, were all in some way affiliated with the university—mostly students or, at the very least, teaching in a local high school—with the exception of Michele, an engineer in his sixties who came by bike and kept his spandex on through the meeting and who brought

in a Borges passage every week. In truth, we all played favorites. A Jewish-Italian professor constantly brought in Primo Levi. Andrea, always contemporary Italian poets. Ugo, always Emily Dickinson in translation, and often the absurd lyrics of Franco Califano, "Il Califo," a Roman pop singer, which he'd recite in a lumbering *Romanesco* accent as gravely as if it were a John Donne sonnet. Elena, a blonde with light freckles from Reggio-Emilia, for two months brought us only Anna Karenina. Filippo favored Mayakovsky and Bukowski. Fo assaulted the theme from all directions, bringing us a patchwork 13x19 photocopy crammed with verse and prose and a sketch of an elephant bearing his initials. It was he who most often selected the theme, in times of desperation even plucking a book from the nearest shelf and nominating the first word he pointed to. When, one week, he pointed to the word "fog," I thought I'd bring in Amy Clampitt.

I was introduced to Clampitt's work by the poet Debora Greger, as an undergraduate in her creative writing course. It must have been "Beach Glass" that we read first: I'd never seen such saturation, words so charged with reflection and allusion and possibility. Concrete word after concrete word mounted to form an abstract argument, with asides and jokes and doubts and joys. Her poetry is euphorically cerebral; she celebrates the brain and its productive idleness, delights in weaving philosophy tightly into her imagery. And somehow the less concrete the subject the more precise and detailed her descriptions—which is why I remembered her early fog poems best. Out of airiness she manages to make something almost tangible. In her later work, when she turns her attention from such vagaries to the solid subjects of history and classical literature, her elaborate style begins to cloy—and it is perhaps due to this that her reputation has suffered. Since her death in 1994, just over ten years after the publication of her first book, *The Kingfisher*, and the meteoric rise to fame that it spurred—Guggenheim and MacArthur fellowships, four subsequent books with Knopf—she's been lost somewhere beneath the more eccentric Marianne Moore and the more consistently measured Elizabeth Bishop.

Which means, to my disappointment, that in 2011 Amy Clampitt had not yet been translated into Italian. This was my first lesson in translation, perhaps a simple one, even stupid: not everyone has been translated. But it shook me at the time—how could it be that a poet whom I'd considered canonical, a poet handed down to me by my

unerring creative writing professor, be unknown internationally? Of course, this was my own ignorance and exaggeration as a twenty-three-year-old who still believed that the poets our professors assigned us held some special status in the world... or at least in America... or at least in American poetry. As I'm still learning, and struggling to accept, a contemporary poet's fame is a fragile banner upheld by other poets, most of whom are busy waving their own banner with the opposite hand. Amy Clampitt's banner, I decided—particularly those first ten poems of *The Kingfisher*—was one worth waving. And what better way to wave a banner than to translate?

Though Clampitt does have a poem entitled "Fog," the poem I chose to translate for Le Giubbe was instead "A Gradual Clearing," which seems to get the fog better than "Fog":

the sheened no-color of it,
the bandings of platinum
and magnesium suffusing,
minute by minute, with clandestine
rose and violet, with opaline
nuance of milkweed, a texture
not to be spoken of above a whisper

My process was simple: nudge the Italian as close as I could to the English then seek counsel from Frank Advice. At my level of Italian I was in no position to be translating a twenty-six line poem that unfolds as a single sentence, involving "bandings of platinum /and magnesium suffusing," without mother-tongue supervision. Advice and I met in my dorm room and bickered over the fog for nearly an hour, sanding each image down to its smoothest surface. Translation as debate: it may be the only way to get it right, at least in the case of poetry—a representative for each language, one to describe the notion and connotations of the original, one to approximate the closest possible rendering in the second language, all to reach a radiant compromise: the poem.

I brought my radiant compromise into the Giubbe that week with some reluctance. Was I violating the group's sacred rule never to bring in original work? The translation felt original or, if not original, it at least bore my stamp and could potentially earn me praise, perhaps even more than it would Clampitt, who wasn't around to accept it

anymore. But then, I reasoned, the entire purpose of the Giubbe was to give voice to someone else's words, often a dead someone else, to add to the literary chorus in the minds of the other members. And wasn't a reader just as guilty as a translator of siphoning praise and reward from the authors he chose to bring in? To read another's words aloud is at least to lend those words your timbre, or *timbro*, in Italian, which also means "stamp." And if everyone else in the group could put their stamp on a writer's work then why couldn't I? Or this could all just be a bullshit excuse to justify bringing in my own work and collecting praise. Which did indeed occur. The translation of Clampitt's "Gradual Clearing" raised my status in the group from questionable American to worthy contributor. It also earned me an impassioned appeal from Alessandro Fo, who was then completing a new Italian translation of the *Aeneid* (now out with Einaudi), to continue translating Clampitt's work.

Thus was born my first translation project. In my comically excessive free time—I worked only Tuesdays, leading English conversations in the University of Siena language lab—I would translate six or seven more of Clampitt's poems and see what came of it.

Most of the translating I did in the church of Sant'Agostino, near my dormitory, which had been turned into a makeshift study hall, complete with one of the espresso vending machines found throughout Italy (which, for €0.50, somehow pull a better shot than most fully equipped American coffee shops). Next door to the church was the physiology academy, whose macabre museum with skeletons of Siamese calves and human brains on display I often visited when my own living brain began to flag. Just to catch up with Clampitt's wide and well wielded vocabulary I had to keep a fixed array of ten windows open in my browser: Oxford English Dictionary, Miriam-Webster, an Italian thesaurus, Wordreference, Garzanti Linguistica, Wikipedia in English and Italian, Google in English and Italian, and an online Italian botanical dictionary. Even with this deck of resources I often fell short of finding the proper word, and was forced to seek out the most prized and elusive resource—the living, breathing Italian. Around the dorm and cafeteria I plugged friends and acquaintances for clarifications, being careful to spread my inquiries thin and avoid abusing any one counselor. Except my supreme counselor, Mr. Advice himself, whom I abused quite readily with the entire batch of poems, and with whom

I labored for hours trying to scare the write words from the woods.

For a translator, Amy Clampitt's language is frustratingly precise. Into each line goes her knowledge of word origin, of botanical nomenclature, of literature, her own emotive and intellectual depth, her humor, her whim, her curiosity, and all calibrated for sound and effect. Such exactitude, in the hands of a lesser poet, might result in lines that stutter and brag; Clampitt's poetry is liquid and muted, as eager to please as it is to pinpoint. In the most fortunate of cases, as in "Marine Surface, Low Overcast," this liquidity slips into the Italian:

Out of churned aureoles
this buttermilk, this
herringbone of albatross,
floss of mercury,
deshabille of spun
aluminum, furred with a velouté
of looking-glass,

a stuff so single
it might almost be lifted,
folded over, crawled underneath
or slid between, as nakedness-
caressing sheets, or donned
and worn, the train-borne
trapping of an unrepeatable
occasion,

this wind-silver
rumpling as of oatfields,
a suede of meadow,
a nub, a nap, a mane of lustre
lithe as the slide
of muscle in its
sheath of skin,

Dalle aureole sbattute
questo laticello, questo
spinato di albatrì,
filo di mercurio,
deshabille d'alluminio filato,
foderato d'un velouté
di specchio,

una stoffa così singola
si potrebbe quasi sollevarla,
ripiegarla, le si può strisciare sotto,
o ci si può infilare in mezzo, come in lenzuola
che accarezzano nudità, o indossarla
e portarla, la rete di tulle
a strascico d'una irripetibile
occasione,

questo argento a folate
sgualcito come un campo d'avena
uno scamosciato di prato
un pile, un pelo, una criniera di lustro
liscia come lo scivolare
d'un muscolo nella sua
guaina di pelle,

There's a certain advantage to translating such an acutely aware poet into a romance language—principal among the many factors informing her word choice is Latin word origin. However, this linguistic intimacy can create problems when she begins to toy with English's warped Latin roots, which still carry much of their original significance

in modern Italian. In her poem "Fog," for example, Clampitt speaks of "the nodding campanula / of bell buoys," playing gleefully on the Latin *campana* for "bell" next to its English counterpart. Of course this falls flat in Italian, "la ciondolante campanula / di boe a campana," in which the hidden, Latin root of "bell" is no longer hidden, and the sportiveness undermined. An inverse crisis occurs when things get botanical—wanting to distance herself as far as possible from stodgy Latin nomenclature, Clampitt favors common American names: foxtail, needlegrass, dropseed, hawkweed, rose-hips, and moonflower all appear in the poem "Fog." In cases where no equivalent could be found, rather than sacrifice such color I mimicked the common name in Italian and paved over the confusion with a footnote—as I did with "The Sun Underfoot Among the Sundews," where the common English name "sundews," for the carnivorous plant "drosera," basically leverages the entire poem.

An ingenuity too astonishing
to be quite fortuitous is
this bog full of sundews, sphagnum—
lined and shaped like a teacup.

A step

down and you're into it; a
wilderness swallows you up:
ankle-, then knee-, then midriff-to-
shoulder-deep in wetfooted
understory, an overhead
spruce-tamarack horizon hinting
you'll never get out of here.

Un'ingenuità troppo stupefacente
per essere tanto fortuita è
questo pantano pieno di rugiade di sole, di file
di sfagni e a forma d'una tazza da tè.

Un passo

in giù e sei dentro; una
selva che t'inghiotte:
le caviglie, poi le ginocchia, poi il diaframma
sommerse nello zuppo
sottobosco, e sopra la testa
un orizzonte peccio-nero che accenna
al tuo restare impantanato per sempre.

Once I had completed a draft of the translations I brought them to the project's instigator, Alessandro Fo, who sent me to prepare a second draft with yet another collaborator, Cristiana Franco, who in return needed help (far less) with her translations of Margaret Atwood. We met two or three times and the translations again went back to Fo, who now felt they were ready to pass on to Nicola Crocetti, the editor at the Italian literary magazine, *Poesia*. They would need a 1,500 word critical biography, I was told, given that Italian readers had never heard of Clampitt. This set things back another month and led to more abuse of the above collaborators—my gratitude survives—but it

too, in the end, came to fruition, and in March of 2012 I saw my first publication, under the title "*Amy Clampitt: A casa nella nebbia*"—at home in the fog.

Taking on this project I had no idea of the supreme haze I was stepping into, that in translation resolution meant compromise, iffy-ness, tangential invention, that Clampitt's ocean in "Beach Glass" could turn the same objects "over and over/over and over" in English, and turn them more flippantly "di qua e di là/di là e di qua" in Italian, without depriving the sea of its long monotony. The imprecision of language, I came to learn, was not its failure but the essence of its great poetic potential—to besiege an idea creatively, to approximate enlighteningly.