

Translating Europe

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEOFFREY BROCK
Recipient of the 2006 Lewis Galantière Prize

In 2005, Geoffrey Brock succeeded William Weaver, whom many consider the preeminent English-language translator of Italian literature, as translator of Umberto Eco's fiction. Like Weaver in 1984, Brock was recognized for his excellence in translating Eco with the 2006 Lewis Galantière Prize. Brock earned the prize for his superb translation of Eco's latest novel, The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana, which is the story of a sixtyish antique-book dealer nicknamed Yambo who remembers only cultural references and historical events after suffering a stroke. The bulk of the novel takes place in Yambo's childhood home in the country, as he sifts through memorabilia stored in the family attic in an attempt to recover his personal memory. The reader follows along as Yambo reconstructs not only his own memory, but that of the generation that came of age in Fascist Italy during the 1930's and 1940's.

Traci Andrighetti: A few years ago, after I saw you read from your translation of Roberto Calasso's *K.*, I enviously predicted to a colleague that you would be the next William Weaver. Now that my prediction has come true, tell me how you came to translate Eco.

Geoffrey Brock: Whoa there—that's nice of you to say, but I certainly can't claim to be "the next William Weaver." I mean, he must have translated close to a hundred books, among them many of the greatest Italian works of the twentieth century. Surely he's done more to bring modern and contemporary Italian literature to the Anglophone world than any other single figure. I won't ever be in that category. And despite my good fortune in the field of translation, it remains a secondary interest for me: my own poetry, though it has taken a back seat to translation in the past few years for various reasons, has generally been and will continue to be the focus of my literary energies. In fact, I've more or less retired from translating prose. I'll continue to translate poetry, on and off, because I love the challenges of it and because I see it as part of my task as a poet, but

it would take an extraordinary set of circumstances for me to take on another book of prose anytime in the foreseeable future.

But to answer your question: I came to translate Eco after Weaver's health declined and he stepped aside. When Harcourt began looking for a replacement, my name came up—my Pavese translations had recently gotten a lot of positive notice—and so I was among a small handful of translators who were asked to “audition” for Weaver's old job by translating the first chapter of Eco's new novel. The editors and Eco himself examined the translations and picked mine. Incidentally, I had been chosen by Knopf for the Calasso gig in exactly the same fashion, following Tim Parks' retirement from translation.

TA: Do you know why Eco and Calasso and the editors at Harcourt and Knopf chose your translations over the others? I'm curious as to whether you received any type of feedback from them in terms of the quality of your work.

GB: Well, I assume they chose them because they thought they were better in some way. I never saw the other translations, so I don't know any specifics or even whether they made the right choice. But in general the difference between a really good prose translation and a merely adequate one has less to do with the translator's knowledge of the source language (though obviously that is important) than with the quality of the writing in the target language—particularly how successfully the translation creates and maintains appropriate analogs for the style and voice and tone of the original. A good translator of prose, in other words, must have a good ear for tone and voice and must also be a good prose stylist in the target language, just as a good translator of poetry has to be, at least on a line-by-line level, a good poet. I'm pretty sure I have those talents. Perhaps it sounds arrogant to say that, but I think translation requires (in addition to the humility proverbially associated with our profession) a dose of arrogance.

TA: But do you think that being a “good prose stylist,” as you describe it, is adequate to translate Eco? Or should one have some sort of background in poetry? I ask because so much of *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* is poetic in nature. For instance, on the very first page, Eco depicts the amnesiac haze of the main character, Yambo, by quoting from the works of Rodenbach and Poe.

GB: You're right—many, many passages of the Eco novel demanded a talent for translating verse. The main character quotes copiously not only from poems but also from Italian song lyrics of the thirties and forties, and such passages were among the most challenging and the most fun. I always tried to make the lines of poetry feel like poetry in English—if the quoted passage was metrical or rhymed, I tried to make the translation metrical or rhymed, so that the experience of the English-language reader would be as similar as possible to that of the Italian reader. And with the song lyrics, I tried to make sure that my translations could be sung to the original tunes.

In the early stages of the project I spent hours online tracking down the songs Eco quotes from, and after I had found and downloaded mp3s of nearly every song, Eco sent me a CD containing all of them! Of course he had compiled them for his own use—I could have saved myself a lot of work had I thought to ask. But at that point I was still a little star struck, afraid to ask any unnecessary questions

An aside: with the poem quotes, I felt compelled to find and read the whole poem from which each quote was taken, to make sure I understood the fragment's context. Sometimes that did influence how I translated the fragment, but more importantly, at least for my purposes, I discovered in this way some wonderful poems I hadn't previously known. I ended up translating several for my own pleasure, and one, “In the Fog” by Giovanni Pascoli, recently won *Poetry* magazine's annual translation prize. So I have Eco to thank for that prize, too.

TA: Speaking of challenges, I was particularly impressed with your translation of a paragraph in the first chapter in which fragments of memories come flooding back to Yambo—bits of nursery rhymes, political slogans, famous sayings, and so on. You did an excellent job of maintaining the “Italianness” of these references, while simultaneously rendering them accessible to your English-speaking audience. Can you share any of your thoughts in regard to how you approached this passage?

GB: Yes, the paragraph you’re referring to—a rapid-fire series of pairs of quotations that are yoked together in surprising and often funny ways—is a tour-de-force in the original, and it demanded something less like translation and more like re-creation. Like so much of Eco’s work, it’s both a pyrotechnic display of erudition and genuinely entertaining. No reader of the original is likely to recognize every quotation, but the Italian reader will recognize many of them and also recognize how they are working together. That reader, in short, will get enough of the jokes so that the passage will on the whole seem more amusing than confusing, which is crucial.

A number of the quotes that would have been instantly familiar to the average Italian reader of Eco, however, would have been hopelessly obscure to English-language readers, and as a result the passage as a whole would have become more obscure and less entertaining. It became clear to me, then, that I had to replace some of Eco’s quotations with quotations that would be more recognizable to Anglophone readers. The trick was to do that without making Yambo seem like an incurable Anglophile. I couldn’t, in other words, simply replace a Carducci quote with a Tennyson quote; everything had to plausibly emerge from the brain of this Italian bibliophile. So I decided on two strategies: in some cases I drew on a European canon that is shared by Italians and Anglophones (Cervantes, Tolstoy, the Brothers Grimm, etc.), and in others I drew on English-language sources that Yambo shows familiarity with elsewhere in the novel (Shakespeare, JFK, Joyce, etc.). My goal was to

create a passage that had similar effects in English—roughly the same proportion of easily recognized quotations, roughly the same mix of high culture and low, roughly the same levels of humor and surprise. In short, the passage should be as dizzyingly entertaining to English readers as the original is for Italian readers—and in more or less the same ways.

If a literary text, as Eco has often said, is a machine designed to create certain effects, then a translation should be designed to recreate those effects as closely as possible, and that was my goal in this passage.

TA: Eco has also said that precisely because a literary text is a machine created for eliciting interpretations, he can only serve as a “privileged witness” when assisting his translators. He therefore limits his comments to minor issues such as the selection of a word or the clarification of the meaning of a sentence. Is this how you would characterize your working relationship with him on *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*?

GB: Well, he was certainly more than a privileged witness from my perspective, but I suppose that, on the whole, that phrase does describe his attitude pretty well. For the most part he was fairly hands-off; he occasionally corrected my errors or clarified passages or references that weren’t clear to me, but he never discouraged me from taking liberties (quite the contrary) or meddled with my English in the way that, I’ve heard, some authors do with their translators. About the closest he came to doing that was when he suggested, strongly, that I push Amalia’s speech further into that regionless country idiom I had invented for her. And he was right: I had been too timid with it in the first draft. As a translator, and as a reader, I’ve always been skeptical of invented “dialects,” but there simply wasn’t any choice in Amalia’s case. Her way of speaking has to contrast starkly, not just slightly, with Yambo’s. The cultural specificity of that contrast is inevitably lost in translation, but at least the broad city/country comedy remains. Or I hope it does.

TA: Were there specific passages or aspects of your translation that he was particularly pleased with?

He was very generous with his praise throughout the process, but one of his most gratifying remarks came early on when I was still nervous about everything I sent him. He described my translation of “*Sola me ne vo per la città*” as “bellissima” and added that it could be sung “benissimo” to the original melody. As I mentioned earlier, I had tried to translate the songs so that they could still be sung, so I was delighted that he had both noticed and, more important, approved. And I still like to imagine him singing my English words in his Italian accent to that haunting old tune.

TA: Besides the song lyrics, the novel also contains numerous illustrations of comic book covers, newspaper clippings, advertisements, old photographs, and the like. Did these impact your translation in any way?

GB: Interesting question. At this stage it’s hard for me to recall specifics. I suppose it allowed me to better visualize some of the now-obscure objects he was describing. I could see from the picture, for example, whether a particular “scatola” was a “tin” or a “box.” And now that I think about it, there were a couple of cases when the descriptions in the text didn’t match the images—I think Eco had to change a couple of images after he wrote the text. In those few cases, obviously, I revised the text as necessary to match the images.

TA: You mentioned at the start of this interview that you are presently retired from the translation of prose. Did you translate any other novels after *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*?

GB: I took on two other novels after *Queen Loana*: one of them, *Skylark Farm* by Antonia Arslan, came out earlier this year from

Knopf; the other, a retranslation of *Pinocchio*, is forthcoming from New York Review Books. After that, no more prose for a good long while.

TA: I’m glad to learn that we may be seeing more of your prose translations, after all. Are you working on any projects currently?

GB: I’m putting together an anthology of twentieth-century Italian poetry for FSG, which will be out in late 2008 or so, and working on a second collection of poems, tentatively titled *Voices Bright Flags*. That’s more than enough to keep me busy—especially now that we have a two-year-old in the house...

TA: Well, if you ever do decide to add something else to your overflowing plate, I would really suggest acting. Remember the 2001 ALTA Conference, when we did a reading from *Delictum*, my translation of Dacia Maraini’s play *Delitto*? You (and your purple scarf) were simply smashing as the Principessa.

GB: My finest hour. I should have received an award for that!