

Baldo, Michela. *Italian-Canadian Narratives of Return: Analysing Cultural Translation in Diasporic Writing*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 427 pages

Maria Cristina Seccia
Università degli Studi di Udine

In this volume, Michela Baldo explores the relationship between translation—both as a metaphor and as practice—multilingual writing, and the representation of diasporic identity through the analysis of anglophone literary works by Canadian authors of Italian origin and their Italian translations.

From this perspective, this monograph is a valuable addition to existing book-length studies examining the intersection between translation and different forms of mobility (see in particular Tymoczko 1999; Polezzi 2001; Cutter 2005; Bandia 2008; Steiner 2009; Wang 2019). Significantly, the authors of these studies analyzing transcultural literary texts (and in some cases their translations) produced in different cultural contexts unanimously present the source text as a form of ‘translation’ in a metaphorical sense. These, together with several other scholars, have discussed how the processes of ‘translation’ at work in the source texts themselves are the result of the authors’ transcultural identity and are reflected in the presence of their language of origin. Fewer studies have gone on to examine the challenges and implications of translating multilingual texts (back) into the transcultural authors’ language of origin (see in particular Martín Ruano 2003; Vizcaino 2005; Maher 2012; Pas 2012). Interestingly, these studies share similar findings, namely a neutralization and homogenization of the multilingual texts in favour of monolingual and standardized target texts. In the Italian-Canadian literary setting, Baldo was the first to conduct such research in her PhD thesis (2009), on which *Italian-Canadian Narratives of Return* is partly based. Before the completion of her thesis, a translational reading of Italian-Canadian literary works had been offered mainly by literary studies scholars (see Pivato 1987; Verdicchio 1997; Canton 2004). These were followed by a book-length study pointing out how the processes of ‘translation’ at work in Italian-Canadian literary texts are reflected in the use of code-switching (see Casagrande 2010), thus exploring in depth this linguistic device which had been presented as having a mimetic function (see Camarca 2005). Moreover, some unpublished PhD theses have analyzed similar texts as a form of cultural translation and have explored ways of putting this theory into practice when translating them into Italian (see Seccia 2015; see also 2018). They have also discussed how both Italian-Canadian literary works and their Italian translations are driven by the idea of the journey (see Nannavecchia 2016; see also 2017), and focused on women writers’ self-translations (Spagnuolo 2018).

Within this context, by drawing on some of the studies mentioned above, in *Italian-Canadian Narratives of Return* Baldo explores in depth the notion of the diasporic subjects’ return to their

origins from a translation studies perspective. The scholar points out that the return to Italy not only pervades her corpus of Italian-Canadian literary works at a thematic level, but is also reflected at a linguistic one through code-switching, which is created by the switch from English to Italian and two local languages spoken in the authors' regions of origin: Molise and the Marches. The continuous movement back and forth between English and the diasporic subjects' languages of origin, as well as between Canadian and Italian cultures, which reflects the subjects' transcultural identity, leads Baldo to present code-switching as a translation device. Whilst the links between code-switching and translation in Italian-Canadian writing had already been discussed by Mirko Casagrande, the originality of Baldo's work lies in her presentation of this linguistic notion as a fictional tool playing a key role in constructing plot as it signals the shift in focalization and voice. Based on the premise that code-switching is a strategy used to construct narratives by translating and giving voice to different perspectives, Baldo starts from the hypothesis that the treatment of this translational and fictional linguistic tool in the Italian target texts deeply influences how Italian-Canadian narratives are re-narrated in Italian. She tests her hypothesis through a comparative textual-linguistic analysis of code-switching in five Italian-Canadian literary works featuring the impossibility of the diasporic subjects' return to their origins (Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* trilogy; Mary Melfi's *Italy Revisited*; and Frank Paci's *Italian Shoes*) and in their Italian translations (*La terra del ritorno*; *Ritorno in Italia*; and *Scarpe italiane*). Her analysis is driven by the notion of the return following the results of an insightful preliminary analysis of paratexts (including the titles' translations, the translators' and publishers' profiles, book covers and blurbs, as well as her own interviews with translators and publishers), which significantly reveals that the Italian translations are framed precisely according to the idea of returning the literary texts to their authors' language of origin and the authors to their homeland. Thus, as Baldo points out, return stands out not only as a recurring theme in the plot of the source texts but also in the discourses surrounding their Italian translations. Her textual-linguistic analysis shows that the Italian translators' and publishers' idea of translation deeply influences the strategies used when translating the corpus of literary texts analyzed. More specifically, through an analysis of code-switching in combination with focalization, voice and plot in the source texts, the scholar firstly observes that the repeated code-switched items, which are closely linked to the idea of return as framed in the texts and paratexts, signal the characters' continuous process of translation as well as the development and transformation of the plot. This confirms her hypothesis of code-switching as a linguistic and translational tool playing a key role in the narrative construction of the return. Secondly and more relevant to translation studies, Baldo's analysis of the use of code-switching in the Italian translations reveals a tendency to some neutralization (for instance through the correction or non-italicization of the original Italian code-switched items), thus somehow toning down—to different degrees across the target texts analyzed—the diasporic subjects' transcultural identity and simplifying the ambivalent use of focalization and voice. These results prove her hypothesis that the treatment of code-switching in translation has a remarkable impact on the re-narration of the return. Whilst she objectively acknowledges that these strategies inevitably reflect the translators' and publishers' agency and background in addition to the target-text readers' needs and expectations, she pertinently argues that neutralization and—as a result—a re-narration of the return home portrays the diasporic subjects as if they had never left, thus somehow discarding

their transcultural identity as well as its complex cultural aspects and the reasons behind it. Baldo therefore successfully attains the aim of her book, that is “to show how Italian-Canadian returns are narratively constructed through code-switching and how they are renarrated through translation into Italian” (24). Moreover, based on these findings, she develops a very persuasive argument centered around the notion of the return by capitalizing on the fact that this idea, as well as those of restoration and restitution, revolves both around the source texts as well as the discourses surrounding the translations. In fact, just as Italian-Canadian authors conceive their writing as a way to give something back to their Italian parents by paying them homage, Italian translators and publishers see translation as a way to honor Italian authors who emigrated to Canada. Baldo argues that their idea of translation as return suggests an attempt to give some dignity to the topic of emigration, which has long been ignored by Italian institutions, thus paying homage to those migrants who have often been forgotten. Moreover, according to the scholar, the publishers’ and translators’ idea of restitution can be seen as an important tool for self-knowledge, a way of constituting social identity. However, she legitimately points out that the return hoped for by translators and publishers is only illusory, as standard Italian, through which they attempt to reinstate original texts and to return their authors to their origins, is not their mother tongue (which are, rather, the regional languages spoken in Molise and in the Marches). In light of this, Baldo persuasively theorizes interlingual translation as a re-turn, a turning back to origins in a movement back and forth and she establishes a parallel between translation and the impossible return: returning is not possible through translation in the same way as it is not through narration.

Baldo develops her argument seamlessly by dividing her book into six chapters, each one of which is provided with a reader-friendly introduction and conclusion. These additions make the chapters independent from one another although they are put together in an exceptionally cohesive way that helps readers to orient themselves very easily throughout the monograph. Introductory Chapter 1, which presents code-switching as a translational and a narrative device, immediately reveals the lucidity and attention to detail characterizing Baldo’s writing, which makes her interdisciplinary study accessible to scholars from multiple disciplines. This stands out clearly, for instance, in her explanation of the relationship between code-switching and translation as well as focalization, voice and plot, and when justifying the use of key terminology such as ‘diasporic’ and ‘multilingual’ with reference to Italian-Canadian writing. This literary body is introduced in Chapter 2, which offers a refreshing reading of Italian-Canadian literary works through the lens of diaspora instead of ethnicity, as has long been done by Italian-Canadian literary studies scholars. Moreover, Baldo’s overview helpfully situates her corpus of source texts, which are first examined, together with their translations, through an insightful paratextual analysis. Chapter 3 illustrates in detail the theoretical approach underpinning the scholar’s textual-linguistic analysis by reviewing in depth the notions of plot, focalization and voice as theorized in classical and poststructuralist narratology as well as in narrative theory. It then discusses their relationship with code-switching and the role played by translation within the framework of style in translation. This model is tested with methodological rigour in Chapter 4 through an in-depth textual-linguistic analysis of code-switching in relation to focalization, voice and plot in the source texts and in their Italian translations within a discussion of return. The findings concerning the treatment of code-switching

in the target texts are discussed in Chapter 5 in light of the social narratives of return circulating around the translation of these works into Italian. By capitalizing on the ideas of restoration and restitution mentioned by Italian translators and publishers in some interviews, Baldo originally establishes a link between these notions and translation at a more theoretical level. The concluding Chapter 6 illustrates how the ideology behind the strategies used in the translations analyzed can lead us to see the return as a metaphor to understand how translation is conceived and practiced in diasporic settings.

One of the most evident strengths of *Italian-Canadian Narratives of Return* is its innovative interdisciplinary approach, to which I believe the narrow focus suggested by the possibly misleading book subheading “Analysing Cultural Translation in Diasporic Writing” does not do justice. In fact, cultural translation, which is only touched upon in the monograph, had already been engaged with in the analysis of Italian-Canadian literary works and their translations (see Seccia 2015). On the other hand, Baldo originally combines socio-linguistics, narratology, narrative theory and translation studies theories, thus making her monograph an important point of reference for linguistics scholars working on code-switching and for literary (translation) studies scholars, among others.

From a translation studies perspective, what is particularly commendable is the comprehensive theoretical framework through which Baldo manages to create a dialogue between different areas of this wide discipline (which regrettably often remain separate even in the most valuable contributions), and to discuss translation issues and practices from different angles. For instance, the product-oriented descriptive translation studies approach underpinning the textual-linguistic analysis, which reveals a good balance between qualitative and quantitative methodology, is deftly combined with a translator studies approach that enables Baldo to highlight the translators’ and publishers’ role as cultural agents and to show how their nationalist ideology sheds light on the neutralizing translation strategies. Similarly, the author’s discussion of translation as a metaphor and as practice, the gap between which has long been debated in translation studies, is notably well-balanced. Besides presenting diasporic writing as a form of translation, which confirms the results of previous book-length studies (see in particular Tymoczko 1999; Polezzi 2001; Bandia 2008; Steiner 2009), the originality of Baldo’s work lies in her presentation of translation as an hermeneutic tool to understand the position adopted by narrators in order to construct plot and as a metaphor for the (impossible) return, thus contributing to the dialogue on the metaphorization of translation (see in particular St. André 2010; Guldin 2016). Both the metaphor of translation as writing and translation as return are based on the analogy between translation and migration that has been extensively discussed in seminal theoretical studies (see in particular Polezzi 2012, 2014; Inghilleri 2017) to which Baldo adds a practical perspective by examining how transcultural texts characterized by processes of ‘translation’ are translated interlingually. Moreover, the textual analysis of the treatment of code-switching in the target texts and the metaphor of translation as return make Baldo’s monograph a primary contribution to existing studies on the translation of transcultural and multilingual literary texts (see in particular Batchelor 2014) and particularly on their translation (back) into their author’s language of origin (in this respect, *Italian-Canadian*

Narratives of Return is the first book-length study). Finally, showing how interlingual translation plays a crucial role in the re-narration of the plot allows Baldo to contribute not only to those studies on translation in mobility settings but also, more generally, to the rich dialogue on translation as a form of re-writing (see in particular Lefevere 1992; Gaddis Rose 1997; Bush and Bassnett 2006; Venuti 2013; Gentzler 2016).

In view of this, *Italian-Canadian Narratives of Return* will be of particular interest to translation studies scholars with different interests such as the link between narrative theory and translation, the metaphorizations of translation, the intersection between translation and different forms of mobility, the translation of multilingual and transcultural literary texts, and translation as a form of re-writing. Moreover, its clarity and detailed explanations make Baldo's monograph suitable as a literary translation studies teaching tool. In fact, the case studies analyzed are an eloquent example of how literary translation is a complex social practice reflecting the cultural context in which it is produced. More specifically, the paratextual analysis will offer translation studies students concrete examples of how translation is the result of a dialogue between translators and publishers inevitably reflecting their agency and ideology, market trends as well as readers' needs and expectations. The textual analysis will give students a clear idea of how literary texts inevitably undergo a certain level of transformation through translation, thus influencing the way these are read and received across different languages and cultures. It will also help students to appreciate the benefits of using a descriptive—rather than prescriptive—translation studies approach. Overall, the combination of paratextual and textual analysis will help students to become aware of the importance of the analysis of extratextual elements and how these shed light on the textual ones. Baldo's detailed textual analysis of the target texts will also be useful to literary translators specialized in the translation of multilingual and transcultural writing. Finally, outside of translation studies and linguistics, *Italian-Canadian Narratives of Return* will be of interest to scholars working on Canadian and Italian-Canadian literatures, diasporic writing and diaspora studies, as pointed out in other book reviews (see D'Alfonso 2017; Nannavecchia 2019; Gatto 2020) as well as to transnational Italian Studies and comparative literature scholars.

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