

## BOOK REVIEWS / RECENSIONI

**Giorgio Bassani, *Gli occhiali d'oro/The Gold-rimmed Spectacles* translated by Jamie McKendrick, Penguin, 2012.**

The appearance of a new, a third translation of Giorgio Bassani's novella, *Gli occhiali d'oro* is indeed a welcome occurrence, coming within five years of Jamie McKendrick's equally welcome translation of Giorgio Bassani's acclaimed *Il giardino dei Finzi Contini*. While the merits of the new translation is one thing, the fact remains that a major publishing house has seen its way clear to publish a new translation when the previous translations are still widely in circulation. It serves to cement the reputation of Giorgio Bassani in the English-speaking world and makes a new generation aware of Bassani, and his contribution to Italian post-war letters. For any author, to have three translations of a work, within a space of barely fifty years, is an honour indeed. While for Italianists Bassani's reputation is a given, for many in the English-speaking world, especially a younger generation, Jamie McKendrick's translation will be the first point of contact with Bassani.

Many will be familiar with the Isabel Quigly translation from 1960, followed by the 1976 translation by William Weaver, in a compendium entitled *The Smell of Hay*. While it is tempting to suggest that the latest translation is the best translation, this does not necessarily follow. As those who are familiar with translation, one will never find a translation that is uniformly and consistently good, never mind indisputably better than any other one. However, it can be said that McKendrick's translation of *Il Giardino dei Finzi Contini*, does the original greater justice than the previous translations in that his translation reveals a deeper level of research into the symbolism and metaphors employed by Bassani. In that excellent translation he moved away from adhering to the Italian words as such and closer to the spirit of Bassani's intent. The efforts on his part were amply rewarded I that the ensuing translation is much more

accessible, is much more in touch with the melancholic and poetic elements that characterise Bassani's *œuvre*.

That said, in McKendrick's translation of *Gli occhiali d'oro* it is not so easy to say that it is necessarily better than the Weaver translation by the late William Weaver, which in turn is more readable than Quigly's 1960 translation. Quigly, for all her monumental erudition, seemed to be very cautious of the aspects of the novella that were a bit "osati", and deals with the homosexuality of Dr Fadigati rather gingerly. Given the time it was published, this may not be surprising. However, the Weaver translation is to all intents and purposes more than adequate, and in fact one notes that McKendrick, far from being precious about his own work, desists from the temptation of changing things just for the sake of doing so. Often the Weaver and the McKendrick translations are identical, and what this means is that McKendrick recognises the fact that a fellow translator's interpretation is adequate and he leaves well alone. Very wise.

However, the word "dolce" provides both Weaver and McKendrick with a problem: "Then suddenly watching them and the vast urban landscape which displayed itself to me at that height in all its breadth, I was struck by a great sweetness, by a feeling of peace and the tenderest gratitude." This translates the following: "Quand'ecco guardando a loro e al vasto paesaggio urbano che mi si mostrava di lassù in tutta la sua estensione, mi sentii d'un tratto penetrare da una grande dolcezza, da una pace ed da una gratitudine tenerissime." To the English mind the word sweetness does not, cannot, have the resonance that the word "dolce" has in Italian, with all the latter's echoes going down the centuries back to Dante. This is not the translator's fault, obviously, but reveals the difficulty that a simple word such as "dolce" can cause. Variations such as tranquility, harmony, or a host of alternatives come to mind, or a "sense indeed of well-being", might have done the trick, but the word sweetness in its abstract sense does not sit well in English, whereas in Italian it obviously can. The literal uses of "dolce" in the novel do not present a problem, but this particular word – and there are other minor inadequacies in the text – in this introspective context, does.

One minor error is that McKendrick refers to the Caffè Majano in Bologna, when the original states clearly, Majani, but that the editors should have picked up too.

This edition of McKendrick's translation is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of very useful footnotes. Thus, he gives an explanation of words that appear in dialect, or of references to artists, authors, events and the like, which for a novice reader and a seasoned one, are always useful, especially in a classroom situation.

English translators will forever battle with the difficulty of rendering the elegant and frequent use Bassani makes of the subjunctive. McKendrick manages to translate the subjunctives well, because, as he did in his translation of *Il Giardino dei Finzi Contini* he constructs the English sentence in such a way that one understands the often tentative, ephemeral and evanescent quality of Bassani's prose, which obviously can happily rely on the subjunctive. In English the subjunctive can seem stilted and this pitfall McKendrick has avoided most deftly.

The elegance and "empirical poetry" of Bassani's prose requires great sensitivity and insight on the part of the translator; McKendrick has risen to that challenge – as does Weaver. But whereas Weaver was a prolific translator, McKendrick, an established poet in the United Kingdom, seems temperamentally suited to Bassani. He understands the absence in Bassani of wasteful sentimentality and of needless psychological speculation. Rather, he understands Bassani's preference for observation of people and events, and allowing the reader to draw conclusions and to tune in to the symbolism and metaphor at work in Bassani's writing. McKendrick's poetic sensibilities have stood him in good stead in translating the "poetic prose" of Bassani. Indeed, it is only fitting that Bassani has found an equally poetic English translator in Jamie McKendrick.

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