

On Translating Mario dell'Arco

Bionote:

Mario dell'Arco is the pen name of Mario Fagiolo, born in Rome on March 12, 1905. The pseudonym "dell'Arco" is itself a dellarchian witticism; trained as an architect before the war, he was paying homage to his other life: "Archi-tect, arch, dell'Arco."

"Warning!" dell'Arco wrote, "if you see me on the scaffolding of a house under construction...I'm Mario Fagiolo. If, instead, you see me belly up in the field, tickling the clouds with a blade of grass between my teeth, make no mistake: I'm Mario dell'Arco."

As early as the late 1940s (his first book, *Taja, che è rosso!* came out in 1946) dell'Arco was considered an innovative voice not only among his fellow dialecticians, but on the Italian literary panorama in general. He was reviewed favorably by Pier Paolo Pasolini (with whom he published the anthology *Poesia dialettale del Novecento* in 1952) and Leonardo Sciascia, among other influential - though less well-known - critics of the day.

Dell'Arco published nearly fifty books over the next five decades: slim volumes with sometimes as few as nineteen short poems, illustrated by various artists. There are the *Octaves* (1948) which deal more formally with Roman concerns - plague, gang warfare, the sack of Rome - but they are outweighed by more playful titles like *Homage to Aesop*, *Martial for a Month*, *The Gospel of Mario dell'Arco* and *Bacchus in Frascati*.

After a long, self-imposed exile in Genzano (a town in the hills near Rome, famous for its bread), dell'Arco died on April 4, 1996. The last poem in his *Collected Romanesco Poems* (Gangemi, 2005) is appropriately titled *The Bread of Genzano*.

On translating Mario dell'Arco:

Mario Dell'Arco's poetry is marked by its bittersweet, almost jaded stance, a hallmark of the Roman attitude towards life (and death). Dell'Arco has been slower to find recognition than his predecessors Trilussa, Pascarella and - of course - Belli, though he is widely considered the most important Roman dialect poet of the last half-century. This is perhaps unsurprising, considering the competition.

In today's Italy dialects are mostly the stuff of one's barely literate or illiterate grandparents (yes, they still exist), or the fanatical political separatism of the Lega Nord. Young Romans talk tough as they always have, but they can no longer boast more than a few words which would send a foreigner to the dictionary. Roman Jews have a few more in their arsenal - imported mainly from Hebrew, ancient and modern - but even they aren't wholly conversant with their greatest poet, Crescenzo Del Monte, a contemporary of Trilussa.

Which brings us to Mario dell'Arco, whose major achievement was a lyrical *romanesco*. Gone are the nasty, brutish accents of Belli; gone, too, are the sonnets, an extremely popular form of *romanesco*

poetic expression well into the twenty-first century. Dell'Arco famously vetoed his early sonnets from republication. After WWII he wrote, "No more sonnets. Concise poems, almost epigrams." We are left with hundreds of six- to ten-line poems of an inward intensity and lyricism that one might compare to Ungaretti, or even the American poet Samuel Menashe.

Dell'Arco poses a few difficulties for the translator. His poems are wonderfully rich with internal music. I sought to mimic this music without sacrificing the epigrammatic punchline, which often led to my being tongue-tied on the page. I was left backpedaling my way out of much lyrical chaos.

Then, of course, there are the *romanesco* words themselves with all their shades of meaning. How are they best approached in English? American vernacular is felicitously hodgepodge, and finding equivalents can be enjoyable work in itself. Dell'Arco described his versions of Martial as "encounters" between the ancient Latin poet and the modern Roman one. He liked to mix it up and see what worked. Perhaps every such encounter is an experiment in the possibilities of literary translation, testing the limits of invention.

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