Don Chisciotti and Sanciu Panza by Giovanni Meli

Rosaria Pipia
poemetti di Pound,” Il verri, no. 12 [Sept. 1986], 71-72). But if Bacigalupo’s “straziato” cannot convey the shock of “scarified,” he captures the pathos and dignity of the passage:

You will follow the bare scarified breast
Nor will you be weary of calling my name,
nor too weary
To place the last kiss on my lips
When the Syrian onyx is broken.
Seguirai il petto nudo straziato
E non ti stancherai di chiamare il mio nome,
non sarai troppo stanca
Per porre l’ultimo bacio sulle mie labbra
Quando l’onice sira si spezza.

“Scarify” (to scar, to cut, to criticize severely) derives from the Greek scariphasthai, to scratch an outline, to sketch; it is related to scribe—another example of logopoeia.

We should add that Omaggio a Sesto Properzio is another elegantly produced volume from the publishing house of Edizioni S. Marco dei Giustiniani (vico Fieno 13, Genoa).

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Don Chisciotti and Sanciu Panza
By Giovanni Meli
Trans. into English verse
with intro. and notes by Gaetano Cipolla
Illus. by Giuseppe Vesco
Ottawa: Canadian Society for Italian Studies, 1986

The title of Giovanni Meli’s most ambitious poem should not mislead readers into thinking that it deals with the further adventures of Don Quijote and
his squire. That the title contains the name of Sanciu Panza is a clue to the greater importance that Meli has placed on this character. Sanciu is indeed the real hero in the poem. Don Chisciotti is characterized as a man who, not even knowing how to fix a salad, pretends he can fix the world. He is a mass of undigested notions that run counter to the Melian recipe for happiness, for, as Meli says in canto III,

li proprii disii limitati
sù la filicità la chiù sicura

[The surest happiness resides ... in placing limits on one's own desires]

Don Chisciotti always allows his desires to stray beyond his ability and means to make them come true. Challenged by Sanciu, he tries to straighten out an old, crooked tree, and dies of a ruptured hernia.

Sanciu, on the other hand, is an unskilled though sensible man, with a sound and realistic perception of the world who learns the lessons that experience and suffering can teach him. As Cipolla points out in his introduction, the poem is humoristic in the Pirandellian sense of the term. Don Chisciotti and Sanciu Panza embodies the conflict that raged in the soul of the poet. Meli was "an empiricist with idealistic tendencies, a realist with a penchant for dreaming, a skeptical man who harbored optimistic views, a man who relied on facts, but tended to be governed by principles" (xxix).

A poem of such dimensions and complexity (twelve cantos and a Vision, containing more than 8600 lines) represents a serious and intimidating challenge to any translator. However Cipolla, who has already published a verse translation of Meli's satiric masterpiece L'origini di lu munnu, is certainly equal to the task. Translating poetry into poetry is an act of sympathy, Dryden once said. It is clear that in the case of Cipolla it is something more than that. His translation—into iambic pentameters with final couplets of each octave rhymed—published exactly 200 years after the appearance of the original, follows Meli's text very closely. It is a faithful but not a slavish rendition of the original, and indeed it can stand on its own as poetry. Consider the following octave chosen at random from canto XII in which Meli is describing Sanciu looking over Don Chisciotti's shoulder as the knight was busy writing his socialist recipe for world happiness:

Smiccia, stenni lu coddu, sgargiulia,
ma nun cumprenni cifri, ne scrittura;
si smidudda in se stissu e sfirncia
e tanti stravaganzi si figura;
finalmenti si scopri e poi ci spia:
"Si forsi si diletta d'incisura?
E si mai ddi figuri soi gruttischi
fussiru veri littiri o rabbischi."

[He squinted, craned his neck, peered over him, but signs and writings he could not make out.
He racked his brains to no avail at all.
Many a weird conjecture came to him, but finally, he showed himself and asked:
"A fancy have you taken to woodcuts, perhaps? Those ciphers that look so grotesque,
are they real letters or some arabesques?"]

Don Chisciotti and Sanciu Panza is an epic poem which reflects the multifaceted personality of Meli. The Sicilian poet can play many "instruments." The poem contains passages that are satirical, bucolic, lyrical, pastoral, elegiac, realistic and earthy. Cipolla knows how to respond and reproduce all of Meli's shifting moods. If Meli's tone is lyrical, Cipolla changes his strain accordingly:

Già e cuetu lu munnu e in senu stassi
di l'umbri friddi tutta la natura

[The world was still and nature was at rest within the bosom of most gelid shadows.]

If Meli sings a pastoral strain, Cipolla is quick to seize the change of tone:
Felici etati, in cui la valli alpestri 
pasturi accussi saggi producia!

[O happy age wherein the alpine dale 
ever so wise a shepherd did produce!]

Undoubtedly translation implies cer-
tain losses, but in this version, the 
losses are often counterbalanced by the 
gains. Consider the following couplets:

pirchì di tutti l'imprisa la chiù dura 
e jiri unni 'un n'aiuta la natura.

[because the hardest tasks of all consist 
going where our nature won't assist.]

pertantu pozzu oprari a miu piaciri 
pirchi la morti scio g ghi ogni duviri.

[I can behave, meanwhile, just as I please, 
for death from every duty grants release . . . .]

Sta terra 'un sapi daricci autri frutti 
chi disgrazi, amari z zi ed anchi rutti.

[This earth another fruit cannot supply 
saves woes, misfortunes and a broken 
thigh.]

In the final analysis, Cipolla's trans-
lation must be regarded as an example 
of talent, scholarship, and dedication, 
which will surely spark new interest in 
Meli's work. His learned introduction 
and the abundant annotations in which 
past critical appraisals are reviewed 
offer a reevaluation of Meli's position 
in the world of Italian letters, as well 
as an important introduction of this 
great Sicilian poet to the English-speak-
ing public. Meli is indeed a poet who 
needs to be read and studied more, 
and linguists, folklorists, and anthro-
pologists will find him as rich and re-
warding as will literary historians and cultural critics.

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