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COLERIDGE'S TRANSLATIONS OF GABRIELLO CHIABRERA

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Kathleen Coburn has shown that before leaving England for Malta in April 1804 Coleridge 'had almost certainly read very little Italian literature in the original, though he had made a beginning in the language.' During his stay in Malta he improved his knowledge of the Italian language and this was probably also due to the fact that, contrary to what Coburn maintains (Coleridge-Notes 1962: 397), the island was 'almost completely isolated from [anything but] Italian culture.' Ever since 1249, the year the Arab dominators were expelled from the island, and in particular after 1530, when Malta was taken over by the Order of the Knights of St. John, the cultural life on the island was almost totally dependent on what was forthcoming from the nearby peninsula. This was also the case at the time of Coleridge’s stay in Malta.

In November 1804 he was quite capable of understanding spoken Italian; at the beginning of 1805 he was definitely having a few conversations with Vittorio Barzoni, one of the first Italian exiles to set foot in Malta, in the Italian tongue and in 1806 he could distinguish between the Tuscan and Roman variants of Italian (Coleridge-Notes 1962: 398). A few years later, he even devoted some of his time to translating Italian authors, amongst whom was Gabriello Chiabrera, a lyric poet he found incomparable (Coleridge-Notes 1962: 401). The Chiabrera translations can provide an approximate but reliable checkpoint on Coleridge’s knowledge of Italian in the years 1808-1810.

The first time Coleridge mentions Chiabrera is in the following notebook entry (n. 2365), dated 21 December 1804:

2365 22.13 Jupiter & the Poet -cut your throat & come to me? in Chabrera- Jupiter divided the world -The Poet came in after the division- he had been gazing on the Heaven- &
'Chabrcrta' for 'Chiabrera' could be a slip of the pen, as suggested by Coburn (Coleridge-Notes 1962:2364), but the more or less-contemporaneous error 'Bassoni' for 'Barzoni' (Coleridge-Notes 1962:398) leads me to suggest that in late 1804–early 1805 Coleridge's mastery of written Italian was still quite approximate.

The first three Chiabrera odes which Coleridge partly transcribed were Per l'Altezza Serenissima di Ferdinando I, Gran Duca di Toscana, Loda il gran Duca di Toscana: Ferdinando II and Per Cristoforo Colombo. These extracts were reproduced from the 1782 Venetian edition of Chiabrera's Opere, which Coleridge possessed. His being very faithful to the Italian original (Coleridge-Notes 1973:3318) is an indication of laudable philological accuracy, but his reproducing even the misprints of the 1782 edition, such as Ne for Ne' at line 5 of the following extract, proves that his approximate knowledge of Italian prevented him from fully understanding the meaning of these texts:

Columbus
Certo, da cor, ch'alto destin non scele,
Son l'imprese magnanime neglette;
Ma le bell'alme alle bell'opere elette
Sanno gior nelle fatiche eccelse;
Ne biasmo popolar, frale catena,
Spirito d'onore/il suo cammin raffrena.  

Cosi lunga stagion per modi indegni
Europa disprezzò l'incita speme:
Schernendo il vulgo (e seco i Regi insieme)
Nudo nocchier promettitore di Regni;
Ma per le sconosciute onde marine
L'invitta prora et pur suspense al fine.

Qual uom, che torni alia gemil tonsorte,
Tal ci da sua magion spiego l'antenne;
L'Ocean corse, e i turbini sostenne,
Vinse le crude immagini di morte,
Poscia dell'ampio mar spenta al guerra,
Scorse la dianzi favolosa Terra.

Allor dal cavo Pin scende veloce
E di grand'Orma il nuovo Mondo imprime;
NC men ratto per l'Aria erge sublime
Segno del Ciel, insuperabil Croce;
E porge umile esempio, onde adoraria
Debba sua Gente.

(Coleridge-Text 1973:3318-3318)

Coleridge actually published this his Essay on the Principles of Metre the 1818 issue of The Friend, apostrophe at 1.20 (grand Orma): to m at 1.16 ('imagini') might distraction on the author or the 1 or removal of capital letters (L. 'mondo'), the integration or adapt 'dal cor'; 1.13 'al gentil') and the 1 perfect (1.23 'porse') could point the Italian language and a greater style of Italian poetry on Coleridge.

The third Chiabrera entry in the September 1809. Coleridge here Chiabrera's Canzone eroica no.
Sforza Duca di Milano (Coleridge was published without any signif literal translation, in The Friend,

I semplici pastori
Sul Vesolo nevoso
Fatti curvi e canuti
D'alto stupor son muti
Mirando al fonte ombroso
Il Po con pochi umori;
Posciudendo gli onori
Dell'urna angusta e stretta,
Che 'l Adda, che 'l Tesino
Soverchia in suo camino
Che ampio al mar s'affratta,
Che si spulTla, e si sua,
Che gli si da corolla

The simple Shepherds of Vesolo, are mute with deep astonishment, gazing
with his scanty waters, then hearing of the Ho
he receives as a Sovereign the ADDA and the T
on to the Sea, how mighty his Ves
N.B. I give literal translations of my poetic as we
of their introduction often depends on the ex
is impossible always to retain in a metrical v

[...]
Coleridge actually published this same extract ten years later in his *Essay on the Principles of Method*, contained in Volume III of the 1818 issue of *The Friend*. Whilst the omission of the apostrophe at line 1.20 ('grand Orilla') and the reduction of double *mm* to *m* at 1.16 ('imagini') might indicate a certain amount of distraction on the author or the printer’s part, the introduction or removal of capital letters (1.1 ‘Destin’; 1.15 ‘ocean’; 1.20 ‘mondo’), the integration or adaptation of the definite article (1.1 ‘dal cor’; 1.13 ‘al gentil’) and the change of tense from present to perfect (1.23 ‘porse’) could point towards a better knowledge of the Italian language and a greater degree of familiarity with the style of Italian poetry on Coleridge’s part in 1818.

The third Chiabrera entry in the *Notebooks* dates back to July-September 1809. Coleridge here transcribes the first stanza of Chiabrera’s *Canzone erotico* no. XXVII, entitled *Per Francesco Sforza Duca di Milano* (Coleridge-Text 1973: 3578)). This stanza was published without any significant changes, together with a literal translation, in *The Friend*, no. 4, 7 September, 1809.:

I semplici pastori
Sul Vesolo nevoso
Fatti curvi e canuti
D’alto stupor son muti
Mirando al fonte ombroso
Il Po con pochi umori;
Poscia udendo gli onori
Dell’urna angusta e stretta,
Che l’Adda, che ’l Tesino
Soverchia in suo cammino
Che ampio al mar s’affretta,
Che si spuma, e si suona,
Che gli si da corona!

*Literal Translation.* The simple Shepherds grown bent and hoary headed on the snowy Vesolo, are mute with deep astonishment, gazing in the overshadowed fountain on the Po with his scanty waters; then hearing of the honors of his confined and narrow Um, how he receives as a Sovereign the ADDA and the TESINO in his course, how ample he haste on to the Sea, how he foams, how mighty his Voice, and that to Him the Crown is assigned.

N.B. I give literal translations of my poetic as well as prose translations, because the propriety of their introduction often depends on the exact sense and order of the words which it is impossible always to retain in a metrical version.

(Coleridge 1969, v. II:55)
The author's note on literal translation sheds light on his theory of translation: in order to capture the 'exact sense' that a foreign literary work conveys to the native speaker, Coleridge is ready to sacrifice the outward 'form', and therefore even to limit the intrinsic artistic value of the literary product. Consequently, in the case of translations, 'meaning' is more important to him than 'artistic appreciation'. Despite Coleridge's intentions, the last part of this literal translation is not at all faithful to the Chiabrera original! At lines 9 – 12, he even goes against his maxim which stresses the importance of retaining the 'order of the words'. This is due to his non perfect knowledge of Italian. First of all, he confuses the Italian relative pronoun che ['that'] with the adverb come ['how']. This in turn leads him to perceive soverchia, the present tense of the third person singular form of the verb soverciare ['to overflow'], as a noun (he translates it as 'Sovereign'). Finally, his inability to distinguish the difference between si reflexive (as in 's'affretta') and si ('thus'; in such a way') with an accent (as in 's'ipuma' and 's'suona') renders the latter part of his translation a completely different text from the original.  

Another Chiabrera poem that inspired Coleridge was the Epitaffio VII entitled Per il Signor Ambrosio Salmeron. In fact, as Coleridge himself points out, 'Tis true, IDOLOCLASTES SATYRANE, which appeared in issue no. 14 of The Friend (23 November 1809), was 'limitated, though in the movements rather than the thoughts, from the VIIth of Gli Epitafi of Chiabrera: [...]'. (Coleridge 1969, v.11:184). Of the Chiabrera original, Coleridge actually gives a more or less faithful poetic translation of lines 8 – 12: 

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E fu forte a seguir il belle Muse.
Non è chiuso sentier che men all'ombra
Dell'amato forresto di Parnaso,
Che a lui fosse nascosto; e non è calle.
Che sorga a puri rivi d'ippocrone.
Che a lui non fosse aperto. [...] 11
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which take up lines 20 – 24 of the English text: 

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The Citadel unconquer'd; and in joy
Was strong to follow the delightful Muse.
For not a hidden path, that to the shades
Of the belov'd Parnassian forest leads,
Lurk'd undiscover'd by him; not a rill
There issues from the fount of Hippocrone
But he had trac'd it upward to its' source
Thro' open glade, dark glen, and secret dell,
Knew the gay wild-flowers on its' banks, and cull'd
Its' med'cine herbs. [...] 24
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While lines 20 – 23 of Coleridge's version depart from the Chiabrera original at line 20, line 23 and line 24 present the reader with a literal translation. Coleridge translates calle ['path'], sorga ['stream'], with respectively, rill, issues might reason out that Coleridge, being a poet, having openly declared that his was more important to him than a proper translation, felt free to give the poem. However, internal evidence leads one to believe that changes in these two lines were not the author's on his part, but of a misunderstanding.

The key to my supposition lies in the way Coleridge uses the Italian singular form in the subjunctive. The corresponding meaning of sorga is 'to come forth', 'to spring'. However, the Italian verb can be used both in the present tense of the third person singular form and also in the present tense of the third person singular form of the subjunctive: for instance, the verb can be used as a verb in the present tense of the third person singular form and also in the present tense of the third person singular form of the subjunctive. Thus, one could say: 'il sole sorge alle due', implying a literal meaning, and also: 'il sole sorge alle due', implying a meaning, and also: 'il sole sorge alle due', implying a meaning. Consequently, Coleridge's translation indicates that in his mind he was not aware of the difference between the two uses of calle in Chiabrera's original. Thus, Coleridge renders in English the figure of 'to come forth', 'to spring'. In this case, the verb is used in the present tense of the third person singular form of the subjunctive, with a different central image, Coleridge had trac'd it upward to its' source Thro' open glade, dark glen, and secret dell, Knew the gay wild-flowers on its' banks, and cull'd Its' med'cine herbs. [...] 24

Obviously, if one were to interpret solely on the basis of Italian, it would be quite out of context in the English version. It is quite possible what happened to Coleridge, which is not really how calle, which is used in a poetic context, meant. Thus, because Coleridge, who probably found himself in such a way as to shift attention from the Italian version (calle ['the path']) to the 'fount of Hippocrone' itself. In fact, this is a part of a different central image, Coleridge, in this case, is making the three alterations (even rill, issues modified into a rill) since this vocabulary best fits the immediate context.
While lines 20 – 23 of Coleridge’s version do not in any way depart from the Chiabrera original at lines 8 – 11, the last part of line 23 and line 24 present the reader with three significant changes. Coleridge translates *calle* ['path'], *sorga* ['rises'] and *rill* ['brook', 'stream'], with respectively, *rill*, *issues* and *fount*. Obviously, one might reason out that Coleridge, being a creative artist himself and having openly declared that his was more of an ‘imitation’ rather than a proper translation, felt free to produce his own ‘original’ poem. However, internal evidence leads me to suspect that the changes in these two lines were not the result of a ‘free’ choice on his part, but of a misunderstanding of the Italian original.

The key to my supposition lies in the verb *sorga*. This is the third person singular form in the subjunctive mood of the verb *sorgere*. The corresponding meaning of *sorgere* in English is ‘to rise’. However, the Italian verb can be used both literally and figuratively. Thus, one could say: ‘Il sole sorge alle cinque’ ['The sun rises at five'], implying a literal meaning, and ‘Il Reno sorge dalle Alpi’ ['The Rhine rises in the Alps'], with an obvious figurative one. Coleridge’s translation indicates that in 1809 he was not yet able to distinguish between the two uses of the Italian verb. In fact, Chiabrera meant *sorga* to literally convey the meaning ‘rises’, while Coleridge renders in English the figurative one: *issues*, in fact, conveys the idea of ‘to come forth’, ‘to emerge’. His interpretation might have possibly been further complicated by another factor: the similarity (visual, but not semantic!) between *sorga* and *sgorga* (*rises* and *issues*). Obviously, if one were to interpret *sorga* in its figurative sense, it would be quite out of context in the Chiabrera epitaph. This is possibly what happened to Coleridge, and especially so if he did not really know what *calle*, which is usually only made use of in a poetic context, meant. Thus, because of his limited knowledge of Italian, he probably found himself reorganizing the two lines in such a way as to shift attention from what was the central image in the Italian version (*calle* ['the path by the Hippocrene fount']) to the ‘fount of Hippocrene’ itself. In this ‘new’ poetic context, with a different central image, Coleridge feels fully authorized in making the three alterations (even *rill* ['brook', 'stream'] is modified into a *fount*) since this vocabulary is more pertinent to the immediate context.
The two Chiabrera translations here reproduced bear witness to the concept that creative genius cannot be in any way constrained within certain boundaries: Coleridge's limited knowledge of Italian might have been the initial reason for his modifying the original Italian versions; the end products however, i.e., the English versions, prove that successful translations are in fact those that, whilst departing from a set point (the text in the original language), give birth to a 'new', autonomous text. Ironically enough, in this case, the fact that Coleridge did not fully master the Italian language did not constitute a drawback. On the contrary, it proved to be a spark powerful enough to set alight his creative genius.

Notes
3. Cf. S.T. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, v. III, *Text* (1808 - 1819), ed. by Kathleen Coburn, London, 1973, pp. [3318 - 3318]. The date on the manuscript is not clear at all but, according to K. Coburn, 1808 seems to be the most likely year (Coleridge-Notes 1973: [3318 - 3318]).
5. Contrary to what K. Coburn suggests (Coleridge-Notes 1973: 1.6) is correct and should not be emended into in.
7. Obviously, his appreciation of certain nuances is far from perfect: 'al gentil consorte' is grammatically correct in Italian, but since the subject of the sentence is non, it stands to reason that the neuter noun consorte ('spouse') can only refer to a female spouse. In this context, therefore, the feminine qualifying article alla could never be changed into the masculine one, al.
8. In the published version, Coleridge corrects 'ampiao' into 'ampio' (1.11), inserts a comma after 'canali' (1.13) and an exclamation mark after 'corona' (1.13), eliminates the comma after 'cammino' (1.10) and changes the full stop after 'suona' (1.12) into a comma.
9. The same extract is published again in 1812 and in 1818. Coleridge changes the phrase 'prose translations' into 'prose quotations'. Cf., e.g., Coleridge 1969 v. I: 65 - 66.