

Translating Leopardi

ECLÉA BOSI

O SÁBADO DA ALDEIA^{TN}

Giacomo Leopardi

(translated by Ecléa Bosi)

*Vem chegando do campo a donzelinha,
Quando se põe o sol,
Com seu feixe de erva e traz na mão
Um maço de rosas e violetas
E com elas enfeita
Amanhã, dia de festa,
Os cabelos e o seio.
Das vizinhas ao meio,
Sobre a escada a fiar, uma velhinha,
Naquele ponto onde se perde o dia;
E recordando vai do seu bom tempo
Quando em dias de festa se adornava
E ainda fresca e esbelta
Costumava dançar entre os que foram
Seus companheiros da idade mais bela.
Já todo o ar se embruma,
Volta azul o sereno e as sombras voltam
Das colinas e tetos,
Ao branquejar da recém-vinda lua.
O sino denuncia
Que vem chegando a festa
E àquele som dirias
Que o coração conforta.
Os meninos gritando
Na pracinha em tropel
Daqui e dali saltando
Fazem grato rumor:
No entanto volta à sua parca mesa*

^{TN} See English translation of the poem in the “Notes” section of this paper.

*Assobiando, o lavrador,
Pensando vai no dia do repouso.
E quando em volta toda luz se apaga
E tudo o mais se cala,
Ouve o martelo dar, e ouve a serra;
O carpinteiro vela
Da oficina fechada à lamparina
E se apressa e se esforça
Por terminar a obra antes da aurora.*

*Este dos sete é o mais amável dia
De esperança e alegria;
Amanhã, tristeza e tédio
Trarão as horas e ao mesmo trabalho
Cada um voltará seu pensamento.*

*Rapazinho travesso,
Esta idade florida
É como um dia de alegria pleno,
Dia claro, sereno,
Que prenuncia a festa de tua vida.
Goza, menino meu; estado suave,
Leda estação é esta.
Nada mais te direi; mas a tua festa
Não te pese ao chegar mesmo que tarde.*

Comment

I dedicate this version to José Paulo Paes, translator of Leopardi.

Based on Leopardi's own reflections on gains and losses, let us see what was maintained in the translation.

"Il sabato del Villaggio" describes a familiar picture of the customs and attitudes of the time: professions, characters, the layout of streets and squares, the world of leisure and work in Leopardi's time. The city – I suppose it is Recanati - becomes comprehensible to us. Moreover, it becomes visible in both the original and, hopefully, the translation.

So much movement in the oppositions!

The translation maintains pictorial elements of the text: the girl coming from the countryside carrying a bundle of herbs and a small bunch of flowers, bringing in her arms the two emblems - work and fun. This is the first contrast.



Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837).

Next comes the difference between past and present, old age and youth. The old woman indulges in reminiscences while the young lady gets ready for the holiday.

It is the young lady, the *donzelletta*, who opens the scene and sets, by walking towards the center, the happy mood of the party. And Leopardi, a sober stylist, repeats five times the word *festa*^{TN2} in this short poem, highlighting the contrast between work and fun.

The old woman spins with neighbors, sitting at the highest level on the sidewalk, at that point where the sun goes out. And they reminisce about old holidays while the night falls precisely behind the old woman.

The shadows drop as the young moon whitens.

The night has come and the field-hand marches home whistling to his modest supper, but the carpenter, closed in his workshop, will work all night, as he needs to increase his savings. Locked up, while the others come out to the square to enjoy the holiday. Perhaps the carpenter is Leopardi himself, who watches lonely, as he admits to us in *La sera del dì di festa, Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa....*

But he feels the contrast between Saturday and the other days of the week: This is the most kind of the seven days.”

^{TN} Sabbath, Saturday and holiday, in the English translation.

Contrast within Saturday itself: it is the holiday and the eve of the end. The Italian Leopardi takes on the serious musicality of the evening. How to translate the strokes of the bow over the cello strings of the last verses? It is impossible. But anything is saved here and there. Some rhymes have remained, to some extent, to compensate for the internal Leopardian music.

There are moments in the translation that may remain in the memory of the reader: *E quando em volta toda luz se apaga – E tudo o mais se cala – Ouve o martelo dar, e ouve a serra...*(Then all's at peace - The lights are out - I hear the rasp of shavings, and the rapping hammer...)

Portuguese is smooth and soft, a language suitable for describing states of nature or of the soul, with delicately changing colors. Italian is a more incisive language, especially Leopardi's Italian, and thus more conducive to maintaining the best Latin conciseness.

The poet chose two characters to open and close the poem: the young lady from the beginning and the lively boy from the end, *garzoncello scherzoso*, whom he highlights in the playful group. He draws attention to the contrast between the *stato soave*, the *stagion lieta* and adulthood. And he ends with a votive prayer for the boy's future:

*Godi, fanciullo meo, stato soave,
stagion lieta è cotesta.
altro dirti non vo'; ma la tua festa
ch'anco tardi a venir non ti sia grave.*

Some translations seem to cover up a stupendous piece of furniture with rustic fabric. This fabric wears out over time, and through the tears of memory emerges the original, precious padding. The original transpires, unequivocal, in Leopardi's verses.

Over the years the translator forgets his text, but the original verses burn like fire in his memory and propose themselves time and again for as long as he lives.

Notes

TN

Saturday Night in the Village

Giacomo Leopardi

(translated by Robert Lowell)

The day
is ready to close;
the girl takes the downward
path homeward from the vineyard,
and jumps from crevice to crevice
like a goat, as she holds a swath

of violets and roses
to decorate her hair and bodice
tomorrow as usual for the Sabbath.

Her grandmother sits,
facing the sun going out,
and spins and starts to reason
with the neighbors, and renew the day,
when she used to dress herself for the holiday
and dance away
the nights—still quick and healthy,
with the boys, companions of her fairer season.

Once again the landscape is brown,
the sky drains to a pale blue,
shadows drop from mountain and thatch,
the young moon whitens.
As I catch
the clatter of small bells,
sounding in the holiday,
I can almost say
my heart takes comfort in the sound.

Children place their pickets
and sentinels,
and splash round and round
the village fountain.
They jump like crickets,
and make a happy sound.
The field-hand,
who lives on nothing,
marches home whistling,
and gorges on the day of idleness at hand.

Then all's at peace;
the lights are out;
I hear the rasp of shavings,
and the rapping hammer
of the carpenter, working all night
by lantern light—
hurrying and straining himself
to increase his savings
before the whitening day.

This is the most kind
of the seven days; tomorrow, you will wait
and pray for Sunday's boredom and anguish
to be extinguished

in the workdays' grind
you anticipate.

Lively boy,
the only age you are alive
is like this day of joy,
a clear and breathless Saturday
that heralds life's holiday.
Rejoice, my child,
this is the untroubled instant.
Why should I deceive you?
Let it not grieve you,
if the following day is slow to arrive.

ABSTRACT – The essay presents a version of Giacomo Leopardi's "Il sabato del villaggio" and some comments on the semantic and stylistic aspects of the poem.

KEYWORDS: Italian literature, Giacomo Leopardi, Translation, Literary theory.

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Received on 11 Sep. 2012 and accepted on 21 Sep. 2012.

IL SABATO DEL VILLAGGIO

La donzelletta vien dalla campagna,
in sul calar del sole,
col suo fascio dell'erba; e reca in mano
un mazzolin di rose e di viole,
onde, siccome suole,
ornare ella si appresta
dimani, al dì di festa, il petto e il crine.
Siede con le vicine
su la scala a filar la vecchierella,
incontro là dove si perde il giorno;
e novellando vien del suo buon tempo,
quando ai dì della festa ella si ornavo,
ed ancor sana e snella
solea danzar la sera intra di quei
ch'ebbe compagni dell'età più bella.
Già tutta l'aria imbruna,
torna azzurro il sereno, e tornan l'ombre
giù da' colli e da' tetti,
al biancheggiar della recente luna.
Or la squilla dà segno
della festa che viene;
ed a quel suon diresti
che il cor si riconforta.
I fanciulli gridando
su la piazzuola in frotta,
e qua e là saltando,
fanno un lieto romore:
e intanto riede alla sua parca mensa,
fischiando, il zappatore,
e seco pensa al dì del suo riposo.

Poi quando intorno è spenta ogni altra face,
e tutto l'altro tace,
odi il martel picchiare, odi la sega
del legnaiuol, che veglia
nella chiusa bottega alla lucerna,
e s'affretta, e s'adopra
di fornir l'opra anzi il chiarir dell'alba.

Questo di sette è il più gradito giorno,
pien di speme e di gioia:
diman tristezza e noia
recheran l'ore, ed al travaglio usato
ciascuno in suo pensier farà ritorno.

Garzoncello scherzoso,
cotesta età fiorita
è come un giorno d'allegrezza pieno,
giorno chiaro, sereno,
che precorre alla festa di tua vita.
Godi, fanciullo mio; stato soave,
stagion lieta è cotesta.
Altro dirti non vo'; ma la tua festa
ch'anco tardi a venir non ti sia grave.

