

## **CAROL O’SULLIVAN**

### **Translation, Pseudotranslation and Paratext: the Presentation of Contemporary Crime Fiction set in Italy**

This is a good moment for the translation of fiction from Italian into English. A new Umberto Eco novel in English is always an event, and he is one of the few translated authors to be guaranteed a place in airport bookshops, but new names are also appearing in English translation, such as Niccolò Ammaniti, whose 2001 novel



Joensuu from Finnish, among others. As with Mankell's Kurt Wallander, many of these translated writers have produced series featuring a named detective, such as Jakob Arjouni's Kamal Kenankaya or Gunnar Staalesen's Varg Veum.

The case of Italian fiction is perhaps unique in that it is being translated into a literary milieu in which English-language thrillers set in Italy already have a very high profile. Michael Dibdin has written nine highly successful novels featuring Aurelio Zen, of the Criminalpol squad, whose cases take him all over Italy, and Donna Leon's forthcoming *Blood from a Stone* will be the fourteenth in the bestselling series featuring Commissario Guido Brunetti, based in Venice. A number of other writers including Magdalen Nabb have had success with a similar format. We must ask what the implications are for translated literature in this genre.

The novels by Dibdin, Leon *et al.* constitute what Mark Chu, whose work on thrillers set in Italy has been fundamental to the development of this article, has called a "significant sub-genre... a fusion of the detective novel, the travel book, and the tradition of Grand Tour literature."<sup>1</sup>





herring; for this reason the author's name is crucial in the presentation of pseudotranslations. As Nicci Gerrard suggests in a 1994 interview, de Bernières has “remained an oddly retiring figure in the literary landscape. Perhaps his French name (centuries ago, his family came from Normandy) and his South American content made him seem foreign.”<sup>16</sup> The South American setting of his first three novels, *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts* (1990), *Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord* (1991) and *The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman* (1992), which were conspicuously influenced by magic realism, certainly contribute to an impression of foreignness. Though *CCM* represents a departure in setting from his previous novels, and de Bernières has explicitly described its style as differing from his earlier work,<sup>17</sup> the colourful, busy, hand-lettered cover design by Jeff Fisher,<sup>18</sup> uniform with the three previous novels, links them together powerfully in the reader's imagination. Not only does translation involve a set of textual practices, but a set of paratextual ones. Although at no time do the publishers of *CCM* suggest that the book was not first written in English, the author's name, the setting and the cover design combine to

It is into this publishing climate, with these pseudotranslations in a pre-eminent market position, that Camilleri, Lucarelli and Carlotto are being translated. A most striking feature of these translations is the way in which they come to share in the presentational features of their English-language predecessors. We can identify broad tendencies in the presentation of source and target texts which illustrate this convergence.

The Italian cover images mostly feature the human figure, within the constraints of the different publishers' house styles, but differ radically in style and composition. The covers of the two Carlotto novels, published by e/o, feature tinted pencil sketches of characters ([fig\\_01](#) and [fig\\_02](#)) drawn with thick, crude lines on a yellow background reminiscent of the original yellow covers of the *giallo* (thriller) which gave their name to the genre in Italy. *Il corriere colombiano* (*The Colombian Mule*) features a swarthy man lighting a cigarette, the eponymous "mule" or drug-runner, for.9( g6d4.0021 Tm)-4.3(ulti4r, fo)-10.8(r.9(19.8on)-22.1(y)27.91( g6d4.88 0 TD)a2(e0 TD-0.00

Lucarelli's thrillers are published by Einaudi in the (also highly recognisable) paperback series Einaudi Tascabili "Stile libero." The homogenisation of typeface and the slightly unusual format of books in this series make it possible to vary the cover graphics widely without compromising recognition. *Almost Blue* (the original title) features a cropped drawing of a reptile's back legs and tail ([fig\\_05](#)) while *Un giorno dopo l'altro* (*Day After Day*



as the key to the narrative,<sup>23</sup> though the unusual wrought iron of the gates in the foreground of the English cover could be read as echoing the novel's sado-masochistic subject matter. The replacement of the original cover designs by images of Italy reflects a fundamental shift in the focus of the story. The foregrounding of what is iconically Italian on the cover makes the Italianness of the setting that much more important than the plot (though not, as we will see, than the genre).

The English covers of Camilleri ([fig\\_09](#) and [fig\\_10](#)) are less iconic in terms of architecture; these novels are set after all in Camilleri's fictional town Vigáta in Sicily. They make great play with light and shade, the heavy iron grill-work over a window seen from below with a light above it, a light illuminating part of a waterside street with the lit buildings reflected on the water, or light falling from an unseen source down a flight of steps with a railing. In each case, the lit portion of the photograph is seen from the darkness, and the illuminated space ends in shadow on all sides. There are no people in these pictures. Interestingly, the first edition of *The Shape of Water* from 2003, though designed in a similar format, uses an opposed image ([fig\\_11](#)), one of blinding sunlight, so bright that the picture looks overexposed, falling on a house with an ornate pediment over the door and the familiar louvred shutters closed against the sunlight, and hiding who knows what in the dim interior.

The translations of Lucarelli published by Harvill ([fig\\_12](#) and [fig\\_13](#)) feature images of neither interior nor exterior spaces, the liminal spaces of arcades, cloisters and colonnades. Of all the translations, these accord the specific content of the novel most cover space, in the first case with the photograph of "Man with Headphones" superimposed on the photograph of Piazza Santo Stefano, and in the second case with the silhouetted figure in the billowing coat walking away from the camera and watched by the shadow of a dog cast on the wall behind him (the serial killer in this

novel is nicknamed the “pit bull”). We would expect strong series coherence in the titles and cover designs of thrillers and crime novels as well as more or less recognisable publishers’ house styles. However, the degree of convergence in design of these translations, and, as we shall see, the pseudotranslations, published as they are mostly by different imprints and publishers, is startling. The most striking comparison might be of the cover for Donna Leon’s novel *Fatal Remedies* ([fig 14](#)) with the cover of Carlotto’s *The Colombian Mule* (see above). The pictures are of the same view of San Giorgio from the Piazza San Marco taken from two different angles. Similar images feature on a number of other covers.<sup>24</sup>

English-language fiction set in Italy has been routinely presented for some time using images of Italian architecture. The most consistent use of this design strategy is to be found in the novels of Leon, but work by other writers has gradually come to resemble this template. Magdalen Nabb’s first novel featuring Marshal Salvatore Guarnaccia was published in 1981 and the early titles in this series were published in Britain by the Collins Crime Club. By the 1980s the covers of this long-running imprint, while not perhaps as unattractive as Cooper and Pike judge them to be<sup>25</sup> were certainly looking rather dated (e.g. [fig 15](#)). These covers conform to what Powers has called “visual synecdoche”<sup>26</sup> particularly traditional to crime novels “in which a detail stands for the whole atmosphere of the story.” In later titles published in the same series, e.g. *The Marshal at the Villa Torrini* (1993), the objects on the cover are supplemented with images of place. This trend in cover design has continued to the point where in 2004 Hw



“Being there” is an insistent desire and topos of the travel discourse and

high degree of interdependency they exhibit. Far from being displaced from their pre-eminent positions in the literary polysystem, Dibdin *et al.* are called upon to endorse the new arrivals. Michael Dibdin reviewed Ammaniti's *I'm Not Scared* favourably for *The Guardian*. Both *The Shape of Water* and *The Snack Thief* bear a blurb by Donna Leon in the top right-hand corner of the front cover: "The novels of Andrea Camilleri breathe out the sense of place, the sense of humour, and the sense of despair that fills the air of Sicily."<sup>32</sup> The tone of patronage is even stronger in the following *Sunday Times* blurb on the cover of *The Terracotta Dog*: "Camilleri writes with such vigour and wit *that he deserves a place alongside Michael Dibdin and Donna Leon*, with the additional advantage of conveying an insider's sense of authenticity" (my italics).

Sales-wise, these established writers can afford to be generous; certainly the introduction of Italian-set crime fiction in translation has shown no evidence so far of spoiling the market for the home-grown product. Any marketing problems that might be posed for publishers in promoting translations, which have undoubtedly been commissioned at least partly on the basis of the success of English-written crime fiction set in Italy, without destabilising the status (quo) of writers such as Leon and Dibdin, is resolved by figuring the translations as copies of the pseudotranslations, as

translated novels are to be a flash in the pan or if they will achieve comparable success in this country to their success at home, and to the success of the Italian-set crime fiction they have come to supplement. If they do, one thing is certain—there's more where they came from.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mark Chu, "Someone Else's Southerner: Opposed Essences in the 'Italian' novels of Michael Dibdin, Magdalen Nabb, and Tim Parks" in Anne Mullen and Emer O'Beirne, eds., *Crime Scenes: Detective Narratives in European Culture since 1945* (Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), 75-87, 75.

<sup>2</sup> Review in *Ms London*, quoted on the back of Donna Leon, *A Sea of Troubles*.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Mergendahl, *The Rocky Mountain News*, quoted on the Grove Atlantic website at <http://www.groveatlantic.com/grove/wc.dll?groveproc~leonbook~UJ~praise>

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Hale, *USA Today*, quoted on the Grove Atlantic website.

<sup>5</sup> In *Raleigh News & Observer*, quoted on the Grove Atlantic website.

<sup>6</sup> Tobias Jones, "Just because you're paranoid..." (review of Michael Dibdin, *And Then You Die*) in *The Guardian*, 12 January 2002. It is significant that Timothy Holme, whose five novels, mostly set in Venice and featuring Inspector Achille Peroni, were published between 1980 and 1987, was already the author of several non-fiction titles about Italy.

<sup>7</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>9</sup> David McKitterick, "The Acceptable Face of Print" in Ross Harvey, Wallace Kirsop and B. J. McMullin, eds., *An Index of Civilisation: Studies of Printing and Publishing History in Honour of Keith Maslen* (Clayton, Victoria: Center for Bibliographical and Textual Studies, Monash University, 1993), 15-30, 27.

<sup>10</sup>

photographs of places, some of which are clearly intended to evoke well-known or plausibly recognisable locations.

<sup>24</sup> I was surprised in the course of my research for this chapter by how consistently Venice was seen by readers and publishers as epitomising Italy, far more so than Florence or Rome. Chu's list of thrillers