Italics vs. black-letter: The triestine typography

ITALICS VS. BLACK-LETTER: THE TRIESTINE TYPOGRAPHY*

Davide Stimilli

Umberto Saba writes in one of his aphorisms, titled *Scorciatoie* (or *Shortcuts*), that

> Svevo could write well in German. He preferred writing badly in Italian. It was the last homage to the assimilatory charm of the "old" Italian culture. It is a story of love —before the "redemption"— of Trieste for Italy.[1]

Saba's opening remark may now sound as a paradox, but it was rather a commonplace in Svevo's early reception, especially in his hometown. Silvio Benco, the influential Triestine critic and writer, puts it in very blunt terms in his memoirs of Svevo: "as far as his writing is concerned, the opinion that he was a bad writer was one of those consolidated and unanimous appraisals that wall up a man alive (*guanto allo scriver male, era uno di quei giudizi unanimi e massicci, che murano vivo un uamo*)."[2] The first to explain to him why Svevo wrote so poorly, Benco recalls, was Isidoro Reggio, his director at *L'Indipendente*, the leading Italian newspaper in Trieste; for it Svevo had worked, too, as a reader of the German press: Svevo's poor style was due to "the remnants of his Teutonic education (*i residui della sua educazione teutonica*)," [3] it was the enduring legacy of Svevo's upbringing in a German school in Bavaria. While he seems willing to qualify this indictment, Benco is in fact reinforcing it:

---

* A version of this essay was presented at the 1994 MLA Annual Convention in San Diego, California.

1 "Svevo poteva acrivere bene in tedeaco; preferì acrivere male in italiano. Fu l'ultimo omaggio al fascino assimilatore della "vecchia" cultura italiana. È la storia dell'amore—prima della "redenzione"—di Trieste per l'Italia." Umberto Saba, *Scorciatoie e raccontini* (2nd ed., Milano: Mondadori 1963) 69. Transl. Estelle Gilson, slightly modified, *The Stories and Recollections of Umberto Saba* (Riverdale-on-Hudson: Sheep Meadow Press 1993) 188.

2 Silvio Benco, "Italo Svevo" (1929), now partially published as "Ricordo di Svevo" in the collection of Benco's essays, *Trieste tra '800 e '900* (Bologna: Boni 1989) 256.

3 Benco, Trieste, 257.

> The last Svevo was able to get rid of many mistakes. But he certainly inherited from his studies in Germany the German architecture of the period, the German syntax, a great uncertainty in the construction of the verbs: the result was somehow laborious, and loaded with solecisms (*L'ultimo Svevo seppe correggersi di molti errori. Ma certo dagli studi fatti in Germania egli portava l'architettura tedesca del periodo, la sintassi tedesca, una grande incertezza nelle costruzioni verbali: gliene veniva alcunché di faticoso, aggravato di solecismi*).[4]

Besides his mimicry of German syntax, Benco reproaches to Svevo his lexical choices, which gave to his language "a barbaric strangeness (*una stranezza barbarica*)."[5] Writing out of Trieste, and not being as familiar as Benco with the German language, Giacomo Debenedetti could not pinpoint the interferences of German with Italian that marred Svevo's style in the eyes of his Triestine critic. More generically, but no less disparagingly, he labels Svevo's language an "esperanto," an Italian language only by analogy.[6]

But Svevo himself had certainly been aware of his stylistic deficiencies well in advance of his proof-readers, and had declaredly worked hard at correcting them. In later autobiographical remarks he dates at his seventeenth year the recovery of his "italianità;"[7] however, as a note probably written shortly after the death of his brother Elio in 1886 laments, he did not know his mother tongue yet.[8] At the same time he always kept an ironic distance from a too puristic attitude toward the Italian language. In later years, his distance will become a conscious resistance to jump in "the great national sea;"[9] but already at the time of his collaboration to *L'Indipendente*, Benco reports, Svevo liked to repeat that "it is a curious Italian vice to always look at one's tongue."[10]

In 1926 Svevo cracks a similar joke in a letter to Montale, this time in defense not of his own language, but of that of Saba. The

---

[4] Benco, Trieste, 257.

[5] Benco, *Trieste*, 257.

[6] Debenedetti, "Svevo e Schmitz" (1929), in *Opere* (Milano: Saggiatore 1969) vol. II: 82.

[7] Letter to Enrico Rocca, 24 August 1927, in Bruno Maier, "The lettere inedite di Italo Svevo a Enrico Rocca," *Dimensione Trieste: Nuovi saggi sulla letteratura triestina* (Milano: IPL 1987) 164.

[8] "In cingue o sei anni mentre io sognava e lavorava tanto poco da non conoscere ancor oggi la mia madre lingua egli lavorava, lavorava al violino, al pianoforte, al contrappunto" (Maier, "Uno scritto inedito di Italo Svevo," *Dimensione Trieste*, 148)

[9] "nel grande mare nazionale" (letter to Rocca, 11 October 1927, Maier, *Dimensione Trieste*, 166)

[10] "è un curioso vizio italiano il guardarsi sempre la lingua". (Benco, *Trieste*, 257)

occasion is provided by a review of Saba's poetry by Pietro Pancrazi, published in the *corriere della Sera* on June 25, 1926. Pancrazi's critique deserves to be quoted in detail, for it is typical of the condescendence with which Italian critics treated the outsider Saba, Triestine and Jewish:

> Saba overcame the handicaps deriving from his birth and his race, and recovered for himself, as a man earlier than as a poet, a raison d'ètre, a tradition, in the study of the style of our best lyric poetry (*Saba vinse le difficoltà della nascita e della razza, ritrovò a sé uomo prima che a sé poeta, una ragione vitale, una tradizione, nello studio, nello stile di quella che è l'ottima lirica nostra*).

He then draws a parallel with a countryman of Saba, "il dalmata Tommaseo,"

> who clung very early on to language, to draw out of it nourishment and life. And there is no page of that prodigy, which does not betray the toil of somebody who came to Italian through the detour of Latin (*di buon'ora abbarbicatosi tutto nella lingua, a trarne succo e vita. E tanto non c'è pagina di quel portentoso, dove un dì più o un meno non accusino la fatica di chi giunse all'italiano per il latino*).

But Saba, "on a scale and in proportions that are very different (*su scala e in proporzioni tanto diverse*)," cannot even pride himself to have arrived to Italian through a nobler language; he just unseemingly translated his native, naive dialect into Italian:

> A certain awkwardness still affects the Triestine Saba; a sort of difficulty, a slow labor, a secret avoidance and transferral of the naivety of the dialect into the language (*A Saba triestino un certo impaccio è naturalmente restato; una sorta di difficoltà, una fatica lenta, un segreto eludere e trasporre in lingua le ingenuità del dialetto*).[11]

"Pancrazi looks at his tongue as if he were to take a medicine (*Pancrazi si guarda la lingua come se dovesse prendere l'olio*)," is Svevo's caustic comment. He seems to excuse, if not to justify, Saba's paranoid attitude toward his critics, and avows to be very susceptible, too, to this kind of criticism, in spite of the reached renown: "Saba suffers of a special neurosis and one has to excuse him. Maybe he was not granted in the past what he deserved, but this happens to many who are still alive (isn't it true, Montale? [...] Now sometimes I doubt whether I don't resemble him too much (*soffre di una speciale nevrosi e bisogna scusarlo. Forse non ebbe in passato quello che meritava ma ciò avviene a molti vivi (nevvero Montale?) [...] Ora talvolta mi viene il dubbio di somigliargli troppo)*."[12] An exchange of letters with Enrico Rocca from the following year is particu-

---

11 Pietro Pancrazi, "Poeta in versi," *Corriere della Sera*, 25 giugno 1926, 3.

12 30 June 1926, Italo Svevo-Eugenio Montale, *Cartaqqio con qli scritti di Montale su Svevo* (Milano: Mondadori 1976) 22.

larly symptomatic of Svevo's sensitivity: he vehemently rejects Rocca's suggestion that a writer should distance oneself from one's own dialect through a self-imposed discipline, and vows not to subject himself to "the bizarre operation of translating oneself (*la bizzarra operazione di tradurre se stesso*)."[13]

Another Triestine writer of the turn of the century had to withstand criticisms because of an uncertain command of his language of adoption, this time German: the poet Theodor Daubler, author of the visionary epos *Das Nordlicht*. German, he emphasizes, had "become once again his mother tongue" only in 1898 (he was born in Trieste in 1876), after listening in Vienna to the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven and to Wagner's *Siegfried*.[14] Up to that moment the title of his work-in-progress was still *L'Impero del sole*, and it was meant to be a continuation of Campanella's *Città del sole*.[15] In a letter addressed to the Prague Germanist August Sauer, who had complained about "Dialectismen" in his poetry, Däubler offers a true profession of faith in the German language:

> I will never create in another language than in our wonderful German: my poetry is so rooted in the German language, that almost nothing of mine will be ever translated (*Schöpfen werde ich nie in einer anderen Sprache als in unserer herrlichen Deutschen: meine Dichtung ist derartig im Deutschen verwurzelt, das wohl kaum je etwas von mir übersetzt werden wird*):[16]

a fulfilled prophecy, for Däubler has remained practically unknown to foreign audiences; nor has he been rediscovered in German-speaking countries, due in part to the obscurity of his lengthy cosmogonic poem, but in larger measure to the language in which his personal mythology is woven; a language that even to an admirer and personal friend of Däubler such as Ernest Barlach, the great Expressionist sculptor, sounded like "a translation." Barlach gives voice to his perplexity apropos of Däubler's idiom in a letter to a friend:

> I can read him only now and then, without having to translate him in my beloved German [...] what makes me always truly sad and even mad at him is that I cannot understand his German, my ear tells me that it is as a matter of fact Italian (*nur zuweilen [...] kann ich ihn lesen, ohne ihn in mein*

---

13 Maier, "Tre lettere inedite di Italo Svevo," 166.

14 "Wien hat mir etwas Unerhörtes offenbart: Musik [...] Zum ersstenmal hat mich die IX. Symphonie von Beethoven erschüttert. Dann bin ich zweimal von Wagners Siegfried bezaubert worden. Von nun an konnte ich nur noch in Versen grübeln, schlieBlich denken: Wahngebilde hat Musik in mir zu Gestalten vereinfacht. Die deutsche Sprache ist abermals meine Muttersprache geworden." *Theodor Däubler, 1876-1934* (Marbach am Neckar: Doutsche Schillergesellschaft 1984) 13.

15 *Theodor Däubler*, 13.

16 11 September 1907, *Theodor Däubler*, 18.

geliebtes Deutsch zu übertragen, [...] was mich aufrichtig immer betrübt, ja erböst, ich kann sein Deutsch nicht verstehen, mein Ohr behauptet, es ist eigentlich Italienisch).[17]

Later on in his life, deeply embittered by what he regarded as the failure of the German public to appreciate the most strenuous poetic effort "ever made since Dante," Däubler will express his regret for his fateful linguistic choice, which had even contributed to deform his physical appearance (Däubler had developed into an obese, giant-like figure):

> I have a very bad suspicion, namely, that I ruined my health because of my language choice. If I had made myself at home in Italian, then I would have been also granted a different body. For language shapes the body for its own sake, as sounds look after musical instruments in order to know themselves. Instead of a harpsichord, like Carducci, [*the author of "Saluto italico" was certainly the most beloved Italian poet in Trieste] I have become a German organ for movie theaters (Ein sehr böser Verdacht will mir überdies noch eingeben, daB ich mit der Sprachwahl gegen meine Gesundheit gesündigt hätte. Hätte ich mich im Italienischen heimisch gemacht, wäre mir eine andere Leiblichkeit beschieden gewesen. Denn die Sprache bildet sich den Körper, wie der Ton nach Instrumenten sucht, um sich zu erleben. Statt eines Cembalos, wie Carducci, bin ich eine deutsche Kinoorgel geworden*).18

In his poem *Il canto dell'amore* (*Una domenica dopopranzo al cinematografo*), Saba resorts to the same musical imagery, but reverses the terms of Däubler's comparison: the Italian "cimbalo," too, would run the risk of remaining without an echo, if it were to remain "alien (*estraneo*)" and "remote (*remoto*)" from the "folla domenicale" that crowds the movie theater (vv. 29-32). But even the echo of an audience was not enough to a Triestine writer: more than just "fama," what he needed was "popolarità." Saba draws this conclusion by looking in retrospective at his own experience:

> fame is worth nothing. Only when an artist's work entirely coincides with his own times, and the artist is only slightly different from the people for whom he writes, sings, or paints, and fame transforms itself in popularity [*here he makes the example of Verdi, an "obsession" of his old age*] then it becomes also a subjective value. [*and then goes on to bitterly conclude*] Evidently, this is not my case. (*la fama [...] vale poco o nulla. Solo nei casi nei guali l'opera di un'artista coincida interamente col suo tempo, e che l'artista sia poco differenziato dal popolo per il quale scrive, canta o dipinge, e che la "fama" si trasformi in popolarità essa acquista anche valore soggettivo Non è, evidentemente, il mio caso*.)[19]

---

17 15 September 1915, *Theodor Däubler*, 99.

18 Letter to the sister Edith, 14 February 1933, *Theodor Däubler*, 51: "die ungeheuere Anstrengung, die gewaltigste, die seit Dante durch einen Mensch zustande kam." According to Dario De Tuoni, *Ricordo di Joyce a Trieste* (Milano: Scheiwiller 1966) 58, Däubler "chiacchierava con la massima opeditezza, e senza la minima ombra di una flessione straniera, sia in dialetto triestino che in lingua."

19 Elvio Guagnini, ed. *Il punto su Saba* (Roma: Laterza 1987) 137.

Neither was this the case of Däubler, nor of Svevo, at least until the very last few years of the latter's life. The unachieved popularity condemns the Triestine writer to the ambiguous status of a dilettante of literature. Even after the European recognition of his work, Svevo remained in Benco's eyes, as in those of most of his fellow Triestini, not a writer, but "an amateur writer (*un uomo che si dilettava di scrivere*)." "He was a good musician (*Era buon musicista*)," Benco concedes, "but he had no ear for the language (*ma nella lingua non aveva orecchio*)."[20]

Differently from Svevo, who started only relatively late, as a substitute for literature, his career as a *dilettante* of violin, Saba had received as an adolescent violin lessons, but had soon relinquished the instrument. In his *Storia e cronistoria del "Canzoniere"* Saba thus revisits his past as a violinist:

> Saba had no ear, but he wasn't completely without a certain sense, or taste, for music (the two things are not, as is known, irreconcilable) [...] Saba felt then for many years nostalgia of the violin, a nostalgia that was probably linked to the nostalgia of adolescence [...] Now it happened that one day, in listening to a niece of his playing some exercises on the piano with deplorable laziness, Saba came upon a "strange idea," the idea, as Italo Svevo smilingly told him some time later, of "playing the violin on the piano." (The piano, for those who don't have ear, is a much more suitable instrument than the violin.) In order to carry out this strange idea, Saba bought for himself in installments a little piano. He took also lessons, but only limited to the treble clef. He was aiming, in other words, at playing on the piano those pieces, the studies, that he had not been able to play on the violin as a youngster (*Saba non aveva [...] orecchio ma non mancava del tutto di un certo senso, o gusto, musicale (le due cose non sono - come si sa - inconciliabili)[...] Del violino Saba conservò poi, per lunghi anni, la nostalgia, legata - è ben probabile - a quella dell'adolescenza [...] Ora accadde che un giorno - udendo una sua nipotina eseguire al piano, con deplorevole svogliatezza, alcuni esercizi, Saba ebbe egli pure la sua "strana idea"; quella - come gli diceva più tardi, ridendo, Italo Svevo - di "suonare il violino sul piano". (Il piano, per le persone che non hanno orecchio, è un istrumento molto più indicato del violino.) Per attuare la "strana idea", Saba - che faceva allora il libraio antiquario - si comperò, a rate, un pianino. Prese anche delle lezioni, ma limitatamente alla sola chiave di violino. Si proponeva, in una parola, di eseguire al piano i pezzi - gli studi - che, da ragazzo, non era riuscito a eseguire sul violino.*)[21]

This "strana idea" points to a way out of the dilettantismo of the Triestine writer who plays on the strings out of tune of his "triste italiano:" the willful choice of the dialect. Saba's "pianino" is transparently the Triestine dialect. Yet Saba, still under the spell of "the assimilatory charm of Italian," will use it only once, not in verse, but in

---

[20] Benco, *Trieste*, 256, 257.

[21] Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* (1948; 2nd ea., Milano: Mondadori 1963) 201.

prose, and with great reluctance: in the dialogues of his posthumous, unfinished, autobiographical, and programmatically "unpublishable" novel *Ernesto*; with the additional caution that his characters speak a slightly softened dialect and the ortography has been italianized as much as possible, in the hope that the reader—if this story will ever find a reader—will be able to translate it on his own (*un dialetto un po' ammorbidito e con l'ortografia il più possibile italianizzata, nella speranza che il lettore—se questo racconto avrà mai un lettore—possa tradurlo da sè*)."[22] The final episode of the novel is the story of the friendship, tinged with envy, between Ernesto, who passionately loves violin but has no ear, and the "born violinist (*violinista nato*)" and "future concert performer (*futuro concertista*)" Ilio. Maybe not by chance the novel breaks on Ilio's promise to play for Ernesto a *Notturno* by Chopin "adapted for violin (*ridotto per violino*)"[23]— virtuoso feat, but antithetic to the nature of the piece. By admitting the failure of his attempts at translating Virgilio Giotti's poems into Italian,[24] Saba seems to have acknowledged that the translation of dialect into language was precisely an adaptation (*reduction*), and not a *redemption*; yet he never ventured on the path that the "most truly humble (*più veracemente umile*)" of the Triestine poets—as Biagio Marin described Giotti[25]—was willing to pursue.

Taking a shortcut in the hope that it will not turn into a dead end: Saba could write well in dialect. He preferred writing badly in Italian. This is another story of love—before the "translation" of Triestine into Italian.

Davide Stimilli
Department of Humanities
University of Puerto Rico
Mayagüez, Puerto Rico 00681

22 Umberto Saba, *Ernesto* (Torino: Einaudi 1975) 3.

23 Saba, *Ernesto*, 134.

24 U. Saba, "Lettera a Giotti," *Pagine istriane* 26/27 (1956) 68.

25 Biagio Marin, *Strade e rive di Trieste* (1967; Milano: Scheiwiller 1986) 253.