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Foreign Literature in Fascist Italy: Circulation and Censorship*

Jane Dunnett

A striking feature of the cultural life of Italy in the 1920s and 1930s was the publication and widespread distribution of novels in translation. The ability to disseminate foreign literature under Fascism might seem surprising given the regime's strong nationalist agenda, with its rhetoric of self-aggrandizement and its emphasis on the state's achievements at home and, increasingly, abroad. Italy's much-vaunted political independence—its freedom from foreign influence—was highlighted in official documents and speeches which pointed to the new sense of pride that its people now enjoyed. On the face of it, importing cultural goods was as alien to the spirit of economic autarky that the regime would promote in the second decade of its rule as was the importing of other goods. It certainly clashed with the aim of promoting *italianità*, or “Italianness”, that was so loudly trumpeted by Fascist leaders.

Nevertheless, throughout the twenty-year dictatorship, large numbers of books were translated into Italian, mainly from the French, English, German and Hungarian. American novels, especially, enjoyed considerable commercial success. There is no denying that readers frequently gave preference to foreign literature over domestic literature; their desire to look beyond the narrow confines of their own country found an outlet in the consumption of such fiction and was fuelled by publishers who willingly supplied and stimulated demand.

* I wish to acknowledge financial assistance from the “University of London Central Research Fund” which enabled me to carry out archival work in Italy in spring 2000.

Whilst publishers and translators may have been content to capitalize on this taste for non-Italian fiction, there were many within the literary establishment who viewed the situation with alarm. Critics would periodically complain about what they regarded as the excessive amount of translations being produced, warning that the latter were exacerbating the “book crisis” which, it was claimed, existed in Italy.¹ Calls were made for publishers to stem the flow of translations, but to little avail. They merely paid lip service to such admonitions, and carried on publishing the foreign authors whose novels the public was so eager to read, authors such as Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, Jack London, Sinclair Lewis and Edgar Wallace, to name but a handful. Although the publication of translated novels could not be encouraged openly by a nationalist government, there was however a pragmatic acceptance that, if publishers were to survive, they needed to be able to offer readers translations.² It is one of the many paradoxes of Fascist cultural policy that the regime allowed the circulation of such literature which permeated Italian society at every level.

Research into the censorship of books in Italy during the Fascist period is fraught with difficulty; many documents are missing, and those which have found their way into the archives are not always easy to interpret.³ Indeed, they are often inconclusive, partly because of the government’s unwillingness to admit, even in the late stages of its

¹ The debate on the precarious state of book publishing in Italy began in the early 1920s and was still an issue in the late 1930s, as can be seen from the numerous articles that appeared on the subject. For the background to this debate, see Sorani (1925).

² Indeed, the industry robustly defended its right to have recourse to translations, as emerges from the pages of the publishers’ official organ, *Il giornale della libreria*. One common tactic was to lay the blame on Italian authors for not writing the kind of books people wanted to read. See, for example, Marrubini (1931).

³ This may account for the fact that the subject has been relatively under-researched, particularly when compared with films and newspapers. Books are discussed, along with these media, in Cannistraro (1975) and Cesari (1978). The first full-length study devoted entirely to books is Fabre (1998); its main focus is on the banning of works by Jewish writers. Few studies deal specifically with the censorship of translations; the recent article by Rundle (2000), however, begins to address this question, and provides a useful overview of the institutional framework set up by the regime to monitor what was published.

dictatorship, the extent to which there was State interference in publishing, and partly because what “evidence” does exist is dispersed amongst ministerial files which have yet to be fully ordered. Despite such limitations, this material is clearly a fundamental resource for researchers, particularly when complemented by documents from publishers’ archives. The latter allow us to gain an insight into the relationship between the State and the private sector in which publishing houses operated; the correspondence between editors and translators in particular contributes to our understanding of censorship and self-censorship practices in relation to books. Fragmentary by their very nature, these various archival sources are nevertheless invaluable in order to contextualise decisions which might otherwise appear to be motivated solely by ideology, but were rarely divorced from more pragmatic, political and economic considerations.⁴

It is important to bear in mind that the regime set great store by demonstrating to the outside world that it was not repressive; consensus, or at least the appearance of it, was therefore a priority. The fact that publishers dealt with foreign writers probably also ensured that the regime did not apply as much pressure on them as they did on other cultural mediators: the impact of translations on the Italian reading public was not initially deemed to be significant enough to warrant alienating publishers and writers, both within and without Italy.

During the early years of Fascism, the censorship of books (whatever their provenance) received only scant attention from the authorities who concentrated instead on gaining absolute control of the press. To achieve this goal, directives were issued by the Ministry of the Interior which had its own Press Office (*Ufficio Stampa*), and ensured that such directives were strictly enforced. As a result, by the end of 1926, all newspapers had been brought into line with the regime.⁵ Control of

⁴ I am especially grateful to Fulvio Barbarino at the Archivio Einaudi in Turin, Luisa Gandolfi at the Archivio Bompiani and Daniele Sironi at the Fondazione Mondadori, both in Milan, for making available to me some of the material on which this article draws. Thanks are also due to staff at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome, in particular to Patrizia Ferrara.

⁵ For a concise account of this in English, see Forgacs (1990, pp. 72-76). For a more detailed account of the measures adopted by the state between 1925 and 1943 in order to censor all manner of news reports, see Murialdi (in Tranfaglia *et al.* 1980).

another mass medium, the cinema, was under way as well.⁶ Both were perceived as key channels of communication, and the government was determined to exploit fully their considerable propaganda potential. Books, on the other hand, in a country with large pockets of illiteracy⁷ and relatively low reading rates, were not initially subject to anything more than sporadic checks (Cannistraro, 1975, p. 115). They, too, fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior, and were monitored locally by regional police prefectures whose agents would alert the Ministry to the presence of any printed matter (newspapers and magazines as well as books) that they suspected might contain subversive material. They also sent in reports detailing publications, usually of a political nature, that had been posted from abroad and that they had intercepted. These vetting methods were far from thorough, but they did succeed in weeding out anything written by Italian opponents of the regime, most of whom were now living in exile, or by foreign writers who were perceived to be hostile to Fascism. Thus, works by known anti-Fascists, for instance the novelist Ignazio Silone and the historian Gaetano Salvemini, were proscribed.⁸

⁶ Here, as David Forgacs points out (1990, p. 68), it is important “to distinguish between on the one hand the production of documentaries and newsreels (*cinegiornali*), in which the state became directly involved early on, and on the other that of feature films. The former were from 1927 the competence of the Istituto Luce (acronym for l’Unione Cinematografica Educativa), a body under government control. Four newsreels were made each week. They were propagandist and, like Pathé or Movietone newsreels in Britain, were always screened before the big film. Feature films, on the other hand, although they were subject to political vetting of treatments and scripts and to post-production censorship, were otherwise left alone by the state.” An account of film censorship can be found in Argenterii (1974).

⁷ According to the *Associazione per lo sviluppo dell’industria nel Mezzogiorno* (1954), 20.9% of the Italian population was illiterate in 1931, a figure which rises to over 38% if one considers Southern Italy separately (cited in De Mauro, 1970, p. 91).

⁸ Silone had sought refuge in Switzerland in 1930. From there he wrote fictionalised but transparent accounts of life under Fascism in which he denounced the brutality and tyranny of the State. The most famous of these was *Fontamara*, first published in Zurich (in a German translation) in 1933, and later that year in Paris in the original Italian. Local prefectures were alerted to the danger of its being smuggled into Italy and confiscated any copies that they found. Salvemini, who had opposed Fascism from its inception, fled to France in 1925 and then, when that

Ernest Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) was pronounced anti-Italian (it evoked Italy's defeat at Caporetto in the First World War) and was blacklisted.⁹ Although none of his novels could be published in Italian translation until the fall of Fascism, a handful of his short stories did appear on the pages of literary reviews.¹⁰

Whilst the press and the film industry were closely monitored by the State, the publishing industry was allowed a far greater margin of movement. Essentially, it was required to regulate itself. Until 1934, there was no preventive censorship, although books were liable to sequestration after publication. Such an outcome was not only politically undesirable for publishers, it also represented a heavy financial burden for them since they were then forced to pulp their warehouse stocks. To avoid this, they were careful not to publish anything which they felt might not meet with the approval of the censors. If, during the 1920s, there were no official guidelines concerning what could or could not be published as far as books were concerned, editors certainly knew which subjects to steer clear of.¹¹ One such subject was pacifism. Predictably, then, Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* was banned in Italy; given this precedent, the Mondadori publishing house decided not to take an option on Roger Martin Du Gard's nine-volume *roman fleuve*, *Les Thibault* (1922-40), on account of the book's "carattere pacifista e socialiste" (Decleva, 1993, p. 226) [pacifist character and Socialist tendency]¹² Other topics that were taboo included abortion,

proved unsafe, to the United States where he taught at Harvard and published strongly worded attacks on Mussolini's government. His dissection of the regime, *Under the Axe of Fascism*, appeared in London and New York in 1936.

⁹ Where foreign books were banned, it was not uncommon for surrogate French versions to be read in Italy; this seems to have been the case with *A Farewell to Arms*. On the clandestine circulation of *L'adieu aux armes* (1931), see Ungaretti, 1998, p. 81.

¹⁰ These are listed in Ungaretti, 1998, p. 84.

¹¹ Publishers' readers were equally aware of the constraints of censorship, as is apparent from their *pareri di lettura* [readers' reports]. For a selection of reports commissioned by Mondadori, see Albonetti (1998).

¹² See the letter from Mondadori to Gherardo Casini, dated 2 December 1937, in

incest and suicide;¹³ it was common knowledge that the press were under strict orders not to report similar occurrences, and more generally to avoid alarming the public with “bad news”.¹⁴

Obvious impediments to publication also included portraying Italian characters in a negative light,¹⁵ and making any remarks that might be construed as representing an insult to the dignity of the Italian nation. Needless to say, criticism of Mussolini or of Fascism itself was not to be countenanced.¹⁶ Anything contrary to what was referred to generically as “Fascist morality” was also prohibited; this could cover a whole range of attitudes or beliefs that were deemed at the time to be out of step with the regime, and could be adapted to conform to its shifting ideological foundations. Moreover, it should be stressed that the defence of Catholic morality was an important component of censorship policy, such as it

Archivio Fondazione Mondadori, Fondo Arnoldo Mondadori, “ f. Ministero della Cultura popolare.” (cited in Decleva, 1993, p. 549). All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

¹³ Mondadori had to alter the ending of a short novel by the Austrian writer Joe Lederer (*Storia di una notte*) which was confiscated in 1933 as it ended with a suicide (Decleva, 1993, p. 183). He negotiated with the Minister of Press and Propaganda Galeazzo Ciano, and it was agreed that if this episode were expunged from the book, it could then be republished. In the case of a novel by Gina Kaus, *Sorella Kleh*, it was the German scholar and translator Lavinia Mazzucchetti who, in her reader's report, suggested that passages which described an attempted abortion and an attempted suicide should be removed in order to ensure the book passed muster with the censors (Decleva, 1993, p. 184).

¹⁴ See, for example, the instructions to the press issued (c. 1931) by the head of the Press Office, Gaetano Polverelli. Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), MCP, b. 155, f. 10, “Ufficio Stampa”; reproduced in Cannistraro, 1975, pp. 419-24.

¹⁵ Elio Vittorini, for example, removed anti-Italian comments from his translation of Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* (Patruno, 1988, pp. 326-27) and from Fante's *Ask the Dust* (Bellesia, 1989, pp. 261-62). See section on *Tortilla Flat* below.

¹⁶ As stated explicitly in a letter from Mussolini, dated 1 December 1929, addressed to all prefects, and headed “*Pubblicazioni lesive della dignità e del prestigio del Fascismo*” [Publications which are detrimental to the dignity and prestige of Fascism]. ACS, MI DGPS DAGR, Massime S4, b. S4.

was.¹⁷ The Lateran Pacts — which included the concordat between the Vatican and the Fascist authorities — had been signed in February 1929 and extended religious education from primary schools to secondary schools. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that, in addition to the ban on abortion and suicide already mentioned, passages describing sex were not encouraged. Books were frequently confiscated on the grounds that they contained “pornographic” material, as the official sequestration orders phrased it. Sexual behaviour that might be regarded as inappropriate could attract the attention of the censors, as could the depiction of emancipated women which, it was feared, might undermine the received view of male superiority or challenge the centrality of the family to Fascist society. Editors were, therefore, cautious when selecting books which touched on any of these areas. Interestingly, as many books appear to have been confiscated because of their alleged “immorality” as they were because of their political unsuitability.¹⁸

Stepping up Censorship

On September 6, 1934, Mussolini’s Press Office, now under Galeazzo Ciano, was reorganised and renamed “Undersecretariat for Press and Propaganda” (*Sottosegretariato per la stampa e propaganda*). The following year, on June 24, the institution was accorded ministerial status

¹⁷ Oaths and other expressions of impiety were strictly edited out of books; it is not clear whether this was the result of censorship or self-censorship. (See, for example, Steinbeck 1940b where all interjections containing the words “Christ” or “Jesus” have been systematically omitted.) The title of Caldwell’s novel, *God’s Little Acre*, was changed to the rather more prosaic *Il piccolo campo* [The Small Field] when it was translated in 1940, presumably to guard against accusations of blasphemy. The novel was in fact sequestered shortly after publication on the grounds that it was licentious. A reference to this can be found in a letter to Bompiani from the Ministry of Popular Culture, dated 14 August 1941. Archivio Bompiani (AB) ; quoted in D’Ina and Zaccaria, 1988, p. 37.

¹⁸ This was the case, for example, with Elio Vittorini’s novel, *Il garofano rosso*, which was first serialised in the literary review *Solaria* between 1933-36. Episode VI was considered “offensive to public decency” because of its description of erotic scenes; the issue was confiscated, and the journal temporarily suspended. A request to publish the work in book form was eventually turned down in 1938. A close examination of the cuts imposed by the censor on episode VII can be found in Greco (1983, pp. 99-132).

(*Ministero per la stampa e propaganda*) and a special “Books Division” created (*Divisione per la censura dei libri*) with powers to confiscate works.¹⁹ The latter had the task of examining books prior to publication, although initially this procedure was not strictly enforced and publishers frequently went ahead at their own risk. Censorship was still not fully centralised and its implementation continued to rely on the local collaboration of police prefects who would vet publications of all kinds, which meant that newspapers and magazines occupied the bulk of their time. It was not until 1937, on May 27, when the Ministry for Press and Propaganda was replaced by a Ministry of Popular Culture (*Ministero della cultura popolare*), with attendant increases in levels of staffing, that book censorship became more stringent. As of January 1938, it became a requirement for publishers to list all the translated works which they had in their catalogue as well as the works which they intended to translate (Rundle, 2000, p. 75).

Finally, as a direct result of the *rapprochement* between Italy and Germany—the so-called Rome-Berlin Axis—anti-Semitic legislation was introduced during 1938. This had serious implications for the publishing industry since between September and October of that year the Ministry of Popular Culture set up a Commission (*Commissione per la bonifica libraria*)²⁰ which had the task of examining all books published in Italy since 1914 with the aim of establishing which books had been written by Jewish authors. The process was slow, and it took over a year for the Commission to come to a final decision. At its sixth meeting in February 1940, it ruled that it was no longer permissible to publish or to distribute books by Jews, unless such books fell into the category of “classics”; in that case, they were regarded as belonging to Italian culture.²¹ Translations

¹⁹ For the legal powers invested in these new institutions, as well as the decrees which they issued, see Fabre, 1998, pp. 28-33.

²⁰ There is no satisfactory translation for this expression which rather unsettlingly links the notion of land reclamation (*bonifica*) with that of books (*libreria*). Rundle (2000), for instance, suggests “Commission for the Purifying of Books” and also provides a gloss (fn. 18, p. 84).

²¹ Evidence of similar convoluted thinking can be found in the official documents relating to the interdiction on Jewish authors as well as in newspaper editorials. For a detailed treatment of this question, see Fabre 1998, *passim*.

were massively affected as a disproportionate number of the writers on the blacklist were not Italian. Famous writers such as Freud and Kafka were inevitably banned, but so was Virginia Woolf who, although not Jewish herself, was married to a Jew and so had an incriminating surname. The “Index” of proscribed authors was long but occasionally a writer slipped through the net.²² Perhaps the Commission was unaware that the author of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was Jewish. Gertrude Stein’s novel came out in Italy in 1938, before the introduction of racial legislation (the *nulla osta*, or permission to publish, was received by Einaudi in March),²³ and no order was received for it to be removed from circulation; indeed, since Stein’s name was not on the blacklist, a further novel, *Three Lives*, was translated in 1940 with the title *Tre esistenze*, and a second edition was brought out in 1943.

Translating Steinbeck: *Tortilla Flat*

The novels of John Steinbeck were translated in Italy in the late 1930s and proved to be immensely popular. I have chosen to examine them because the very fact that they were published on the eve of the Second World War—and against the historical background of mounting restrictions that I have outlined—raises a number of complicated questions.

Tortilla Flat, Steinbeck’s 1935 novella, was translated into Italian in 1939 by the novelist Elio Vittorini.²⁴ The subject-matter does not make

²² Entitled as it was “*Autori le cui opere non sono gradite in Italia*” [Authors whose works are not welcome in Italy], the “Index” for 1942 also included the names of anti-Fascist writers, in addition to Jewish writers, although the two frequently coincided. Reproduced in Fabre, 1998, pp. 472-481, from the Archivio di Stato, Bari, Pref., Gab., b. 932, cat. 31.6, f. 8. An earlier list drawn up by the Commission (“*Elenco di autori non graditi in Italia*” [List of authors who are not welcome in Italy], presumed to date from 1940) is reproduced in Cannistraro, 1978, pp. 427-34, from the ACS, MCP b. 13 f. 180.

²³ Issued by the local prefecture in Turin (“Div. Gab. n. di prot. 237”), dated 2 March 1938. Archivio Einaudi, “Cesare Pavese”.

²⁴ See Vittorini’s letter to Bompiani, dated 7 June 1938, where he enthuses about the book, recommending it unreservedly, and offers to translate it; AB reproduced in D’Ina and Zaccaria, 1988, pp. 28-29.

it an obvious choice for approval by the Ministry of Popular Culture. It is the story of a group of Californian hobos who move into the house that their friend Danny has just inherited; they spend their days lounging around, drinking wine, devising ruses by which to procure food and alcohol for themselves and, above all, telling one another stories. Their main objective is to avoid working at all costs. Everything they possess has either been stolen, begged or borrowed. (On rare occasions, they make the things they need.) As such, they are members of a small community which exists outside the rules and regulations of conventional law-abiding society; the notion of saving in order to accumulate wealth and possessions, for example, is absolutely alien to their way of thinking and to their happy-go-lucky attitude.

It seems astonishing that a book which extols the freedom of the individual—freedom from the tyranny of money and ownership, freedom from social constraints, freedom from marriage, freedom from the slavery of working for someone else—should have been deemed suitable for publication in Italy at that time; indeed, it could easily have been regarded as subversive. The novella is, in effect, a hymn to anarchy but, as it is set in America, presumably its social implications were deemed harmless. What was acceptable when presented through the mediation of a translated text might not have been quite so acceptable had it been presented as the work of an Italian author. However, one would be wrong in thinking that the authorities were unaware of the potential for anti-Fascists to use translated texts in order to smuggle dissenting views into Italy. A number of official documents attest to the need for vigilance. For example, a circular headed “*Scrittori di sentimenti antifascisti*” [Anti-Fascist writers] from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and dated 13 April 1938, states that the Ministry of Popular Culture has taken measures to prevent “l’ulteriore diffusione in Italia, sia nella lingua originale che nella traduzione italiana, di quei libri stranieri, il cui contenuto non appaia consono tanto dal punto di vista politico, quanto da quello morale, con i principi del Fascismo.” [The further circulation in Italy, both in the original and in Italian translation, of those foreign books whose content does not appear to be consonant with the principles of Fascism, either politically or morally speaking].²⁵

²⁵ ACS, DGPS DAGR, Massime S4, b. 103B.

Yet in Vittorini's translation, the only concession made to censorship appears to be the decision to remove from the text some remarks concerning Italians. Those most likely to cause offence occur in Chapter I. On his return from the war, Danny learns that he has inherited a couple of houses; burdened by this new responsibility, he immediately goes out and gets drunk. In his alcohol-induced rage, he tries to get people to take notice of him and wanders down to the harbour where he finds a group of Italian fishermen, old acquaintances of his, preparing to go out to sea:

Race antipathy overcame Danny's good sense. He menaced the fishermen. "Sicilian bastards," he called them, and "Scum from the prison island," and "Dogs of dogs of dogs." He cried: "*Chinga tu madre, Piojo*." He thumbed his nose and made obscene gestures below his waist. The fishermen only grinned and shifted their oars and said, "Hello, Danny. When'd you get home? Come around tonight. We got new wine." Danny was outraged. He screamed, "*Pon un condo a la cabeza*". They called, "Good-bye, Danny. See you tonight." (Steinbeck, 1996, p. 6)

The translator has dealt with Danny's overtly anti-Italian abuse by simply expunging the entire passage, reducing the dialogue to the bare bones of a brief exchange of greetings where even the Sicilians' invitation to drink some wine with them has been excised:

"*Ohì,*" *egli gridò vedendoli. Quelli gli risposero: "Ciao, Danny. Passa stasera"*. (Steinbeck, 1942, p. 14)

("Hey," he called out when he saw them. They replied: "Hi Danny. Come by this evening.")

Since the point of the source text is to highlight Danny's lack of self-discipline and to prepare the reader for his subsequent behaviour, omitting this small but telling episode suggests an excess of sensitivity about the representation of Italians which overlooks the fact that it is Danny, rather than the Sicilians, who is cast in a poor light here. Indeed, the latter respond to Danny with equanimity, ignoring his insults (they are presumably accustomed to seeing him in a state of inebriation) and welcoming him back warmly. The target text, therefore, removes Steinbeck's social observation on the latent prejudice against foreigners which coloured the discourse of the day, whether it was in the mouth of a *paisano* such as Danny or, by extension, of a WASP American.

Furthermore, it is worth contrasting the intolerance to anti-Italian remarks with the acceptance, and hence reproduction, of the anti-Semitic remarks made by various characters in the book; clearly, being the target of racism did not immunise against being racist. Whilst Vittorini's translation postdates the racial laws against Italian Jews, one can safely assume that, even prior to 1938, no "correction" of anti-Semitic remarks would have been made.

Later in the book, Steinbeck caricatures the reputation of Italian men for being over-romantic, writing: "Torrelli had, Pilon knew, the Italian's exaggerated and wholly quixotic ideal of marital relations" (p. 31). The attribution of sexual jealousy specifically to Italian husbands is replaced, in Vittorini's translation, by the characterisation of Torelli as jealous man, a reference which is, nonetheless, implicitly stereotypical (1939, p. 63).

In Dubious Battle

The translation of *Tortilla Flat* was followed by an even bolder choice, that of Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* which was published on 25 August 1940, with the title *La battaglia*.²⁶ The novel recounts a strike by agricultural workers in California and the tragic consequences of its failure. However, with the aid of the cover blurb, it is pointedly presented as a book whose significance transcends the specificity of its context (a coded reference to its Socialist content, a phrase that is studiously avoided), and concerns

²⁶ An exchange of letters between Valentino Bompiani and the noted critic Emilio Cecchi reveals that the publisher had had serious doubts about whether or not the novel would obtain permission from the censors (3 November 1938). In his reply, Cecchi wholeheartedly endorsed the novel, saying that he regarded it as essential for an understanding of the American working classes and adding that "l'atteggiamento dell'autore è imparziale, e finisce in una condanna dei 'rossi'; un censore intelligente ne avrebbe favorito la pubblicazione in italiano" (14 November 1938) [the author's attitude is impartial, and he ends with a condemnation of the "Reds"; an intelligent censor would support publishing the book in Italian]. AB, quoted in D'Ina and Zaccaria, 1988, pp. 31-32. Cecchi, who was very much part of the literary establishment and would soon be elevated to the position of Academician at the *Reale Accademia d'Italia*, was no crypto-Socialist; his justification of Steinbeck's intent, curious though it is, should therefore be taken at face value. There is no doubt that Cecchi's words would have reassured Bompiani and encouraged him to go ahead with the project.

human nature and the way men react at times of crisis: “La battaglia è in apparenza la descrizione di uno sciopero fallito; in realtà è un libro che mostra le incognite psicologiche della lotta sociale, le contraddittorie reazioni dell’animo umano di fronte ai problemi del lavoro e degli uomini considerati come gruppo”.²⁷ Concepts such as “class struggle” (*lotta di classe*) and the “social struggle” (*lotta sociale*) are mentioned but simply in generic terms, thereby rendering them ambiguous, as we shall see shortly.

The events leading up to the publication of *La battaglia* are worth describing in some detail. The novel was translated by the poet and future Nobel laureate Eugenio Montale who, after completing work on the text in March 1940, wrote to his publisher, Valentino Bompiani, and commented on some of the difficulties which he had encountered, such as rendering American slang in Italian:

*Il libro è così irto di slang e lontano da ogni contatto col nostro mondo che non ho potuto tentarne una completa trasfusione, che ne facesse un libro italiano. Mi sono tenuto a mezza via tra la traduzione letterale e la ricreazione. Ho reso lo slang (non sempre però) con modi bassamente colloquiali e magari con qualche anacoluta; ma con prudenza — per non produrre troppo stacco tra la parte dialogata e quella descrittiva. Ho soppresso due spiacevoli allusioni all’Italia, e ogni accenno al comunismo, visto che lo St[einbeck] lo chiama più spesso ‘partito radicale’. Ho adottato quest’ultima forma. Ma a parte ciò, la traduzione è integrale. Qualche lieve ritocco farò nelle bozze, ma non tale da provocare spese e fastidi.*²⁸

²⁷ From the dust jacket of the first edition of *La battaglia* (Steinbeck, 1940a). “*In Dubious Battle* appears to be the description of a failed strike; in reality, it is a book which reveals the psychological conundrums of the social struggle, the contradictory reactions of the individual when faced with labour relations and the problems created by treating human beings as a *group*.”

²⁸ Letter from Montale to Bompiani, dated 31 March 1940. Archivio Bompiani; reproduced in D’Ina and Zaccaria, 1988, p. 36.

[The book is so full of slang and so far removed from our own world that I was unable to attempt a complete transfusion that might make an Italian book out of it. I have trodden a line between literal translation and re-creation. I have rendered the slang (not always, however) using coarse colloquialisms and even some anacolutha, but cautiously — so as not to create too great a gap between the dialogue and the narrative. I’ve removed two disagreeable references to Italy, and all allusions to Communism, given that Steinbeck talks mostly about the “radical party”, which is the expression that I’ve employed. But, apart from this, the

In addition to linguistic complications, therefore, Montale also encountered several awkward passages — described tactfully as “two disagreeable references to Italy” — which, we may note in passing, he automatically censored by editing out the offending remarks about Italy in both instances. These remarks are identical, although they occur in different sections. The first comment is made by Mac, the strike organiser, who remarks to Burton: “They’ve got this valley organized like Italy. Food supply’s cut off now” (p. 156) translated as “*La valle è troppo organizzata. E ci hanno tagliato i viveri*” (p. 232; emphasis added). The second “disagreeable” remark is to be found in Mac’s letter to Harry (p. 227; emphasis added):

Christ Sake get some help down here. Doc Burton was snatched last night. I think he was. Doc was not a man to run out on us, but he is gone. *This valley is organized like Italy. The vigilantes are raising hell.* [...] if we don’t get some outside help I am afraid we are sunk. I never ran into a place that was so God-damn organized. About three men control the situation.

Here, as in the first example, the allusion to Italy has been replaced in translation by the assertion that the valley is excessively organised or controlled: “*La valle è troppo organizzata. I vigili fanno un putiferio*”, literally, “The valley is too organised. The police are kicking up a shindy”.

It is worth pausing to consider the second extract as it also contains a reference to vigilantes. In the target text the term “vigilantes” becomes *vigili*, or policemen, the resulting translation suggesting the repressive action of a local police force, rather than the para-military activity of paid vigilantes. It is impossible to know whether or not the semantic shift is deliberate. *Vigili* could, of course, quite simply be the italianisation of “vigilantes”; the term occurs a number of times in the novel and is always translated by *vigili*, thereby creating a curious effect in the target text, and one which it is hard to imagine a writer as sensitive as Montale would have been unaware of.²⁹ Thus, when Mac is asked, “who

translation is unabridged. I’ll make some slight amendments to the proofs but these won’t incur expenses or cause any difficulty.]

²⁹ The term “vigilantes” occurs in a number of passages, for example: “Was it vigilantes, Mac?” and “Mac, who in hell are these vigilantes?” (p. 133); “They’re great guys, these vigilantes. Not long ago they shot tracer bullets through a

in hell are these vigilantes ?” (p. 133), he replies:

Why, they're the dirtiest guys in any town. [...] The owners use 'em, tell 'em: “We have to protect the people against reds.” Y'see that lets 'em burn houses and torture and beat people with no danger. And that's all they want to do, anyway. They've got no guts; they'll only shoot from cover, or gang a man when they're ten to one. I guess they're about the worst scum in the world. (Steinbeck, 1974, pp. 133-134)

These politically charged comments are reproduced, with no significant modifications, in the Italian version:

Sono la feccia d'ogni città. [...] I padroni se ne servono, a sentir loro per proteggere il popolo dai rossi. E così possono bruciare le case, torturare e picchiare senza pericolo. Ed è quello che vogliono. E' gente senza fegato, capace solo di sparare da un riparo o di aggredire quando sono in dieci contro uno. E' la gente peggiore del mondo. (Steinbeck, 1940a, p. 199)

Three months after submitting his translation for approval, in July 1940, Montale received a letter from Bompiani telling him that the Ministry of Popular Culture had given permission for publication to go ahead, with one proviso — and here he quoted verbatim from the ministerial diktat— “purchè l'editore provveda in una nota introduttiva a chiarire come il libro offra pagine interessanti sulle lotte sociali e i conflitti economici della democrazia americana” [on condition that the publisher provides an introductory note which emphasises that the novel contains interesting passages on the social struggles and the economic conflicts of American democracy].³⁰ Bompiani asked Montale to write this note, and he obliged, giving him free rein to add to, or to alter his piece; Montale did, however, insist that the required introductory note should not bear his signature so as to give the appearance of having being penned by the publishing house

kerosene tank and started a fire in a bunkhouse. They didn't even have the guts to do it with a match.” (p. 134); “We got word the damn vigilantes is goin' to try something on Anderson to get back at him for lettin' us stay on his place”; “When they were all out of the barn Mac blew out the lantern. 'Vigilantes like to shoot at a light', he explained” (p. 158).

³⁰ Letter from Bompiani to Montale, dated 11 July 1940. AB.

itself.³¹ The anonymous “*Nota dell’editore*”, which is in fact a three-page preface, begins by recalling the context of the novel, just as the Ministry had recommended: “*Romanzo, dunque, di lavoro e di scioperi, espressione del presente travaglio sociale ed economico nord-americano.*” (Montale, 1940, p. v) [This is a novel about labour and about strikes and, as such, it reflects the social and economic unrest that is rife in North America today.] Montale then goes on to say, somewhat disingenuously, that Italian readers may find some of the text “unfamiliar”, since they themselves live in “*un paese dove le lotte di classe, nel senso inteso dallo Steinbeck, non esistono più*” (p. v) [a country where the class struggle, as understood by Steinbeck, no longer exists].

This seemingly heavy-handed ideological “interpolation” is, in fact, a shrewd strategy on the part of the translator, Montale, to address head-on the political principles that underpin American society and Italian society, presented here as diametrically opposed, and hence with nothing in common. It allows him to exploit the claim made by the Fascist regime that the problem of class has been overcome in Italy by adopting the “Third way”, an alternative to the polarities of capitalism and communism; in short, class had been declared a redundant category in the Italian corporatist state. By repeating the official mantra, Montale is implying that Steinbeck’s novel does not represent a threat to Fascist ideology nor is it in any way subversive since, he emphasises, readers will *not* recognise the political situation of the United States that is portrayed, and this, Montale notes, is the reason why the publishers decided to translate the novel. The logical leap in the argument here is revealing: the reader, and more especially the censor, is thus induced to infer that there is no danger that the Italian public will identify with the striking agricultural workers who revolt against their tyrannical paymasters.

Having dispensed neatly with what was evidently the main obstacle to publishing *In Dubious Battle*—its Socialist stance, as expressed in the depiction of the strike which occupies a large part of the novel and Steinbeck’s sympathetic treatment of the workers—Montale then moves on to a discussion of its literary merits. At the same time, he reiterates the fact that the social struggle in Italy has found solutions which “non sono probabilmente quelle desiderate dallo scrittore americano” (p. vi) [are

³¹ Letter from Montale to Bompiani, dated 15 July 1940. (AB ; an extract from this letter is quoted in D’Ina and Zaccaria, 1988, p. 570.

probably not those sought by the American writer]; in so doing, Montale finds yet another justification for bringing the book to Italian audiences. He remarks slyly: “Forse lo Steinbeck, che vede dovunque all’opera le forze della reazione, si meraviglierà di veder tradotto il suo libro nella nostra lingua.” (p. vi) [Perhaps Steinbeck, who sees reactionary forces at work everywhere, will be astounded to see his book translated into our language.] Publishing this translation, Montale hints, can be taken as proof of the tolerance of the regime—as well as a sign of its self-confidence.

A measure of this confident attitude can perhaps be gauged from the fact that one reference to Italians was not edited out. It is an unflattering, although not overtly racist, comment about Italian workers: “With Dakin in the tent sat Burke, a lowering, sullen Irishman, and *two short Italian men who looked very much alike*” (Steinbeck, 1974, p. 110; emphasis added). Thus, whilst the two references to Italy mentioned earlier have been excised, this particular comment has been retained in the target text: “*Erano con Dakin, Burke, un basso e tetro irlandese e due italiani di bassa statura e molto somiglianti fra loro*”, Steinbeck 1940a, p. 164; emphasis added). Indeed, it may even have been felt that it was useful to show Italians the kind of racial stereotypes employed by Americans; here, however, as the examples from *Tortilla Flat* seem to suggest, there were clearly divergences in views concerning what was and was not acceptable.

The Grapes of Wrath

The third and final book by Steinbeck that I shall discuss is *The Grapes of Wrath*. It was translated into Italian by Carlo Coardi with the title *Furore* [Fury], and first published in January 1940; within seven months some 40,000 copies had been sold.³² Indeed, by November 1941, the book had been reprinted six times.³³ The historian John Diggins contends that the

Fascist authorities deliberately published John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, assuming its depressing agrarian scenes would demonstrate the

³² According to the publicity blurb on the back cover of the first edition of *La battaglia* (printed on 25 August 1940).

³³ Second edition: March 1940; third edition: May 1940; fourth edition: September 1940; fifth edition: March 1941; sixth edition: November 1941.

virtues of the Corporate State to Italian intellectuals. But the strategy backfired; instead, Italians came to admire a country which allowed authors like Steinbeck and Lillian Smith to write such caustic social criticism. (1972, p. 251)

Whatever the case may be, in July 1942, a request to go ahead with yet another reprint was finally turned down by the Ministry of Popular Culture; the reason given for this was rather vague. The official letter which was sent to the publishers simply stated: “Si informa che questo Ministero non ritiene opportuna, almeno per il momento, la ristampa del volume accennato in oggetto, essendo il contenuto del libro incompatibile con le nostre idee e col nostro costume” [the Ministry does not consider it opportune, at least for the time being, for the volume in question to be reprinted, since the content of the novel is incompatible with our ideas and our customs].³⁴ The “inopportuneness” of allowing a reprint of *Furore* is tempered by the relativeness of prohibition, as the expression “for the time being” suggests. Whilst the use of such abstract language was typical of ministerial memoranda, the tone employed is noteworthy for its understatement, not to mention its restraint, two features which should strike us as remarkable given the date of the letter: by this time, Italy had been at war with the USA for the previous seven months (since December 1941). Diplomacy rather than mere bureaucracy seems to be at work here. Why this should be the case is not an easy question to answer, and would require a deeper analysis of the relationship between politics and publishing than space permits, a relationship which reflects the ideological divisions at the heart of Fascism itself. Suffice it to say that cultural imports from America—literature, but perhaps even more so film and music—had been an important influence on Italian life throughout the Fascist period, and far from the regime being invariably opposed to expressions of American culture, as is usually presumed,³⁵ there are strong indications that quite the opposite may have been true. Its attitude towards

³⁴ Letter from the Ministry of Popular Culture, addressed both to the Prefecture of Milan and to Bompiani, headed *Furore*, and dated 15 July 1942. AB; reproduced in D’Ina and Zaccaria, 1988, p. 37.

³⁵ Rundle (2000), for example, contends: “there can be no doubt that the fascist regime deeply disapproved of Anglo-American culture” (p. 75), and refers to the alleged “hostility that was afforded to [...] manifestations of Anglo-American culture” (p. 68).

the USA was undeniably marked by deep ambivalence, combining curiosity with condemnation; indeed, leading figures from within the establishment, including Mussolini himself, frequently displayed open admiration for the achievements of American society.³⁶ It is in this context that the continued permission given for translations of US fiction to be published should be seen, I would argue, rather than in the conventional context of a deep ideological divide between two nations. Attitudes towards the USA—and towards translations of its literature—did change during the war years, when America became officially an “enemy state”, but not as radically as one might suppose.

Eventually, all novels by Steinbeck were to be banned, but with a tardiness that seems astonishing, given the fact that Italo-American relations were now under extraordinary strain. Thus, it was only at the end of 1942 that the Ministry of Popular Culture turned down a request by Bompiani to republish Montale’s 1940 translation, offering the standard nebulous explanation: “*Poiché il contenuto e lo spirito del libro La battaglia di John Steinbeck non appaiono conformi, in massima, ai principi del nostro tempo, si ritiene opportuno che codesta Casa Editrice non proceda ad eventuali ristampe del volume*”.³⁷ (Given that the content and the spirit of the book *In Dubious Battle* by John Steinbeck do not appear generally speaking to be in conformity with the principles of our age, we believe it is opportune for your publishing house not to undertake any further reprints of this volume). By then, however, thousands of copies of this and other novels by the Californian writer were circulating in Italy.

Americana

I shall turn now to what is almost certainly the best-known episode of

³⁶ The unimpeded circulation of American novels in translation during the Fascist period is one of many examples which offer evidence that a significant strand of pro-Americanism existed alongside anti-Americanism. I examine this complex issue in my forthcoming Ph.D. thesis, “The *mito americano* and Italian Literary Culture under Fascism”.

³⁷ Letter dated 20 November 1942. AB; reproduced in D’Ina and Zaccaria, 1988, pp. 37-38.

literary censorship under Fascism and one which concerned an anthology of American writing ranging over three centuries, entitled simply *Americana*.³⁸ A number of leading writers had been commissioned to do the translations, which were then assembled and edited by the novelist Elio Vittorini, who was himself one of the translators contributing to the volume. The book, a huge tome running to well over a thousand pages, had already been printed and was waiting to be bound and distributed when the ministerial veto arrived. Thus, in December 1940, Vittorini went to Rome to plead his case with the then Minister of Popular Culture, Alessandro Pavolini, bringing with him the proofs of *Americana*. Shortly after Vittorini's visit, Pavolini wrote to Bompiani; he praised the volume, but pointed out that the timing was not right for a similar publication given that "*Gli Stati Uniti sono potenzialmente nostri nemici*" [The United States are potentially our enemy].³⁹ He added, however, that he would regard the idea of publishing *Americana* most favourably, if there were a project to publish a similar volume containing an anthology of Italian writings in America at the same time. The prospect of reciprocal translation agreements with foreign publishers in general was supported, indeed strongly urged, by Pavolini.⁴⁰ That this should also apply to the USA, "potentially [Italy's] enemy", is paradoxical to say the least: it appears to indicate a desire to keep communication between the two countries open.

Finally, by October 1941, Bompiani had succeeded in persuading Pavolini to reconsider his application for permission to publish *Americana* by suggesting that Vittorini's introduction be replaced by a preface written

³⁸ Archival material allows for a reasonably precise reconstruction of this episode which has been dealt with in detail in Manacorda, 1978; D'Ina and Zaccaria, 1988; and, more recently, Rundle, 2000. I shall therefore focus on the aspects that are most germane to my argument.

³⁹ In the same series ("Pantheon") in which it planned to publish *Americana*, Bompiani would soon bring out similar anthologies containing representative pieces of literature from nations which were Italy's ideological allies. One of these was a collection of Spanish writing (*Narratori spagnoli*, 1941) and the other was a collection of German writing (*Germanica*, 1942).

⁴⁰ Letter from Pavolini to Bompiani, dated 7 January 1941. (ACS, MCP, b. 116 "Bompiani Val. Editore"); reproduced in D'Ina and Zaccaria, 1988, pp. 39-40.

by Emilio Cecchi.⁴¹ The latter was now a figure of some prestige, having been appointed to the Italian Academy, and hence could act as a sort of guarantor, ensuring that this new edition of the book met with the approval of the Ministry of Popular Culture.⁴² Bompiani therefore decided to send Vittorini to Rome again to negotiate with Pavolini and to find out precisely which aspects of the anthology the Minister objected to, so that the publishers could “*attenuarli e modificarli*” [play these down or alter them].⁴³ Vittorini received a sympathetic hearing from Pavolini, and it was agreed that a new preface would be written by Cecchi.⁴⁴

Some six months later, in March 1942, Pavolini wrote to Bompiani, approving Cecchi’s preface which cast American society in a less-than-favourable light.⁴⁵ He added that, for the sake of consistency, Vittorini’s critical introductions to each section also needed to be replaced. Furthermore, he suggested Bompiani should use the following quote (taken from Cecchi’s preface) for the blurb on the book cover and any other publicity: “*Trent’anni fa era stato abdicato all’ineffabile dell’anima slava; ora si abdicava a un ineffabile dell’anima americana. Ed incominciava un nuovo baccanale letterario.*” [Thirty years ago we fell for the ineffability of the Slav soul, now we have fallen for the ineffability of

⁴¹ Letter from Pavolini to Bompiani, dated 2 October 1941. AB, reproduced in D’Ina and Zaccaria, 1988, pp. 40-41.

⁴² Cecchi had recently published a book entitled *America amara* [Bitter America], based on his travels in the United States, which was highly critical of many aspects of American society.

⁴³ Letter from Bompiani to Cecchi, dated 28 March 1942. AB; reproduced in Vittorini, 1985b, pp. 214-215 and also in D’Ina e Zaccaria, 1988, p. 42.

⁴⁴ Extracts from the correspondence between Vittorini and Cecchi concerning revisions to *Americana* can be found in Vittorini, 1985b, pp. 214-216.

⁴⁵ Cecchi asserted, amongst other things: “*Da una civiltà che, non da ieri, ha come postulato supremo il benessere e la felicità materiale, era ovvio che potesse nascere soltanto un’arte di disillusioni, e disillusioni senza conforto.*” Vittorini, 1985a, p. 1047. [From a civilization that has as its supreme postulate welfare and material happiness — and this is no recent phenomenon — it was obvious that there could only emerge a literature of disenchantment, and disenchantment without consolation.]

the American soul. And thus a new literary bacchanal has begun.]⁴⁶

Vittorini's anthology *Americana* was finally republished in December 1942 in a new edition which bore the imprint of censorial guidance: the translations themselves had not been altered but it was felt that the combination of Cecchi's preface and the new introductory material which he had selected for each section would alert the Italian reader to the spiritual poverty and hollow appeal of American literature. But the authorities were proved wrong and, as Bompiani had anticipated, the book was a commercial success on its release in December 1942, and was reprinted within a month, on 25 January 1943.⁴⁷

In February 1943, the Minister of Popular Culture, Alessandro Pavolini, was replaced by Gaetano Polverelli who adopted a far stricter attitude towards translations of literary works by writers from enemy states. As a result, he issued a sequestration order for *Americana* on 26 June 1943. Nevertheless, the book continued to be read clandestinely since anti-Fascists were keen to lay their hands on it, despite the risk of confiscation; by now, it had gained a reputation for being a subversive text, a reputation that was only enhanced by the authorities' attempts to have it removed from circulation.

Conclusion

The censorship of books in Italy under Fascism was, to some extent, a fairly subjective, ill-regulated affair. Whilst the regime's attitude towards translation may appear to have been lacking in rigour and consistency, the authorities nonetheless succeeded in persuading publishers and translators alike to cooperate in censoring their texts. Conversely, publishers and translators proved adept at negotiating with the authorities in order to

⁴⁶ Letter from Pavolini to Bompiani, dated 30 March 1942. ACS, MCP, b. 116. "Bompiani Val. Editore; reproduced in D'Ina and Zaccaria, 1988, p. 43. Cecchi's preface can now be found in Vittorini, 1985a.

⁴⁷ Within a few weeks, one Milanese bookseller alone had sold some 500 copies. These sales figures were reported on 21 January 1943. (D'Ina and Zaccaria, 1988, p. 590).

ensure their book projects were approved. As we have seen, one convenient strategy they had recourse to was the use of prefaces as a means of counterbalancing the contents of the books in question, thereby producing texts that had all the appearance of conforming to the prevailing ideology.

The readiness to allow the publication of foreign fiction in general, and American fiction in particular, during the 1920s and 1930s demonstrates that the Fascist regime did not have an *a priori* objection to translations. Provided that books did not challenge—or were not seen to be challenging—the established order, it was usually possible to circumvent censorship through some relatively superficial textual and para-textual adjustments. The fluidity of the mechanism aimed at regulating the influx of translated works assured the regime the all-important consensus of a majority of editors and intellectuals, whilst safeguarding the business interests of publishers. An unintended outcome of this process was that the Italian public was able to have access to the literature of many other nations for the entirety of the Fascist period.

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ABSTRACT: Foreign Literature in Fascist Italy: Circulation and Censorship — In this article the author sets out to illustrate some of the strategies which Italian translators and publishers adopted, or were forced to adopt, to ensure that their texts passed muster under Fascism. “Taboo” areas are identified and an attempt is made to sketch out what were often rather vague criteria for acceptability. The author proceeds to survey the mechanisms that were put in place to vet books—essentially, preventive censorship and police confiscation—for the duration of the dictatorship. It is argued that the apparatus of the State was only partially successful at monitoring the content of works of literature. This historical contextualisation, drawing on archival and published material, is followed by a number of case-studies, first of three novels by John Steinbeck, and then of *Americana*, a famous anthology of American literature published during the Second World War. In her conclusion, the author draws attention to the failure of the regime to implement a watertight policy on translation, despite its desire to influence the way readers interpreted books.

RÉSUMÉ : La littérature étrangère en Italie fasciste : circulation et censure — Dans cet article, l’auteure présente certaines des stratégies que les traducteurs et les éditeurs italiens adoptaient — ou étaient obligés d’adopter — pour s’assurer de l’acceptabilité de leurs textes aux yeux du régime fasciste. En premier lieu, l’auteure identifie les sujets considérés comme « tabous » et cherche à décrire dans leurs grandes lignes quels étaient les critères d’acceptabilité, au demeurant plutôt flous. Dans un deuxième temps, elle examine les mécanismes qui furent mis en place pour le contrôle des livres — essentiellement, la censure préventive et la saisie par la police — sous la dictature. L’auteure soutient que l’appareil

étatique n'eut qu'un succès partiel sur le contrôle du contenu des œuvres littéraires. Cette contextualisation historique, basée à la fois sur des documents d'archives et sur des documents publiés, est suivie de plusieurs études de cas portant d'une part sur trois romans de John Steinbeck et d'autre part sur *Americana*, la célèbre anthologie de littérature américaine publiée pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. En conclusion, l'auteure met en évidence l'absence d'une politique rigide de la part du régime en matière de traduction, malgré sa volonté d'influer sur l'interprétation des livres.

Keywords: censorship, self-censorship, Fascism, publishers, Steinbeck.

Mots-clés : censure, auto-censure, fascisme, maisons d'éditions, Steinbeck.

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