

Leopardi's Voice Through Translation

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral research project analysed the English-language poetic translations of the 19th-century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi and investigated their reception among anglophone speakers. The factors underlying the decision to choose poetry and the specific case of Leopardi in English as the subjects of my thesis were essentially two. Poetry translation is not as discussed as other topics within the broader field of Translation Studies. In particular, an area which has been largely overlooked is readerly reception, especially from an empirical perspective (Kruger, 2013). Despite having central significance in his own culture, Leopardi has been relatively unknown among general English-speaking readers, as interest in his works has remained predominantly confined to academic circles (Perella, 2000). The underlying hypothesis was that this could be ascribed to the difficulty and supposed untranslatability of the poet's peculiar style (Stewart 2017). Research focussing on Leopardi's works in English translation is scant. Moreover, the lack of an appropriate evidence-based approach has hindered the possibility of shedding light on the plausible correlation between translation and readers' response. Based on the above considerations, this thesis addressed two main research questions: a) How was Leopardi's poetry represented in English over time? b) How did translation impact contemporary anglophone readers' reception of the author?

The research was conducted through an original methodological approach combining text analysis with empirical evidence. Text analysis was based on a parallel corpus including a selection of Leopardi's *Canti* (the author's main verse collection) and a series of English-language translations composed by different translators from the second half of the 19th century until the present day. The aim was to identify translation approaches and how they shifted over time. Empirical data was collected from different categories of receptors (literary translators, academics, students) through questionnaires. Participants were asked to read and comment on

a series of translated passages extracted from the analysis. The aim was to determine how readerly impressions of translated poetry varied across different types of readerships.

From a diachronic perspective, the analysis revealed that translations were marked by two opposing trends: the use of overly archaic diction on the one hand and the presence of everyday English on the other. Both tendencies presented some criticalities since employing archaising forms or extremely colloquial diction throughout the whole collection does not reflect the heterogeneity characterising the *Canti* in Italian, where the presence of different stylistic forms, themes, and language variation is reflective of the author's poetic and philosophical evolution. The empirical investigation evidenced that the reception of translated poetic texts was marked by a certain dose of subjectivity, as respondents' preferences were often dependent on personal cognitive associations. Furthermore, language smoothness and meaning transference were generally preferred over adherence to the source text and the reproduction of specific formal features. The findings presented in this thesis had two main important implications: they introduced a translation perspective to the study of Leopardi's poetry's reception; they offered a broader understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms involved in the reception of translated poetic texts.

KEYWORDS: empirical investigation, Giacomo Leopardi, poetry translation, readerly reception

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