DOROTHY PARKER’S *IL MIO MONDO È QUI*,
OR THE STORY OF A SURPRISING FAILURE

1. Montale, Vittorini, Bompiani and *Il mio mondo è qui*

*Il mio mondo è qui*, the first Italian translation of a work by Dorothy Parker, appeared in the fall of 1941.¹ Potentially, it had all the qualities to become an important translation. It was published by Bompiani, who had already offered some successful contemporary American writers to the Italian public.² It was endorsed by Elio Vittorini who was, together with Cesare Pavese, the great propounder of American literature in the pre-war period. It was the work of Eugenio Montale, who was not at his first experience as a translator³ and whose literary stature was already acknowledged. Finally, it was published at a critical moment of Italian intellectual history, when the stricter censorship of the Ministero della Cultura Popolare was rendering the appearance of a new book by a contemporary Ameri-

¹ D. Parker. *Il mio mondo è qui*. Milan: Bompiani, 1941. In this article I will refer to the 1993 edition in the “Tascabili Bompiani” series, which is a reissue of the 1971 new Bompiani edition. For the original short stories I will refer to *The Collected Dorothy Parker* 1989.


can author a complicated matter 4 – a fact that heightened the
curiosity and the expectancy of the public.

However, in spite of all these promising circumstances, the
book was not a success. It is true that, from a commercial
point of view, it was not a downright disaster, and a second
edition was issued in 1943.5 But from the point of view of its
impact on the Italian cultural scene it was a complete failure.
Its appearance went completely unnoticed: no critical reviews
acknowledged it, and the name of Dorothy Parker remained
almost as obscure as before its appearance.6

Illustrious fiascos can often reveal significant things about
the people involved, and Il mio mondo è qui is no exception to
the rule. But before investigating the reasons of its indifferent
reception, we should have a look at the few available facts
about this translation.

4 On the difficulties encountered by Italian publishers in this period (as
well as for a fascinating inside view of life in a big publishing house) see
Pietro Albonetti’s “Trafite di Romani” (P. Albonetti. Non c’è tutto nei
romanzi. Leggere romanzi stranieri in una casa editrice negli anni ’30. Blu
Equally interesting are several essays contained in Editoria e cultura a Mi-
convegno. Milan: Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, 1983). Cf. also
V. Bompiani, “Gli americani (1938)”, in Il Mestiere dell’editore. Milan:
Longanesi, 1998: 119-122; and Caro Bompiani. Lettere con l’editore, ed. by

5 The first edition of Il mio mondo è qui, 8,000 copies, appeared in the
collection “Letteraria”. The number of copies shows that Dorothy Parker’s
book was regarded as a promising investment: in those years a first edition
of 2 to 5,000 copies was common, while a first edition of 12 to 15,000
copies (or more) was normally reserved only to sure best-sellers. The selling
rate of Il mio mondo è qui was slow, however: a second edition was issued
in the collection “La Zattera” only after two years, and the number of
copies was reduced to 5,000 (a best-seller in those years could easily sell
45,000 copies in two or three years). The book never reached a third edi-
tion. It was only in 1971, in the wake of the rediscovery of Dorothy Parker
after her death, that Bompiani published a new edition. On the number of
copies and the selling rate of foreign fiction in the 30s and 40s see P.
Albonetti. Non c’è tutto nei romanzi, cit.: 100-102.

6 Only one (short) Italian article on Dorothy Parker appeared in the 40s:
P.F. Paolini’s “Dorothy Parker intellettuale di sinistra”. L’Illustrazione Ital-
tiana 24 (1949): 806. As the title suggests, this article was prompted more by
Dorothy Parker’s political stance than by an interest in her work as such.
The first important Italian critical study of Dorothy Parker appeared several
years later: it was Fernanda Pivano’s “Dai boa di struzzo alla protesta”, the
introductory essay to the new edition of Il mio mondo è qui in 1971.
**Here Lies** is first mentioned in a letter written by Valentino Bompiani and addressed to Elio Vittorini. It is a routine communication that reads as follows:

Milano, 8 Maggio 1940-XVIII
Dr. Elio Vittorini
presso Coleschi

... Firenze

“HERE LIES” di Dorothy Parker.
Caro Vittorini, prima di concludere definitivamente il contratto per l’acquisto dei diritti italiani del libro vorremmo avere il Vostro giudizio sull’opera. Scriveteci non appena possibile. Grazie.
Soc.An. Editrice
Valentino Bompiani & Co.
Il Consigliere Delegato

We do not have Vittorini’s answer to this letter, but he must have given a favourable opinion since Bompiani – who had brilliant intuitions of his own but greatly relied on his collaborator’s advice – went on with the transaction and acquired the rights to Parker’s work.

**Here Lies** is next mentioned in a letter to Eugenio Montale:

Milano, 22 Gennaio 1941-XIX
EUGENIO MONTALE
VIALE DUCA DI GENOVA, 38
FIRENZE
Siamo lieti di mandarvi per traduzione “HERE LIES” di Dorothy Parker. Saremo lieti se potrete iniziare subito il lavoro. Diteci anche, per favore, quando Vi sarà possibile consegnarci il manoscritto. Come compenso Vi proporremmo L. 2.500= (Duemila-cinquecento). Diteci se sta bene. Molto cordialmente,
Soc. An Editrice
VALENTINO BOMPIANI & C.
Ufficio Segreteria

In February Bompiani asked Montale to send him a short publicity notice about **Here Lies** to be inserted in the spring

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7 Unpublished letter in Bompiani’s archive (file “Vittorini”).
8 Unpublished letter, dated May 8, 1940, in Bompiani’s archive (file “Vittorini”).
9 Cf. his letters to Vittorini in V. Bompiani, Caro Bompiani, cit.
10 This and the following (unpublished) letters about the translation are kept in Bompiani’s archive (file “Montale”).
catalogue; and in May he acknowledged having received the completed translation of “Qui Giace” in manuscript. In June Bompiani sent Montale the first printed draft of the work, urging him to send it back as soon as possible since “ Abbiamo urgenza di pubblicarlo”. The book was to be published only at the end of November, however, and in the letter announcing the good news to Montale, for the first time Bompiani referred to it as “Il mio mondo è qui”.  

In the whole available correspondence about the book there is only one letter that goes beyond business concerns and sheds a little light on the actual translating process:

Firenze 2 Settembre 41 XIX

... Spett. Casa Editrice Bompiani Milano


Con molti cordiali saluti dev.mo

Since we possess only these scanty pieces of direct information about Il mio mondo è qui, we must inevitably formulate a series of hypotheses in order to delineate its ‘hidden’ story. These will be largely based on what we already know about the eventful context of this translation – “il decennio delle traduzioni”, as Cesare Pavese, one of its protagonists, predicted that the 30s and 40s would be called. To use an image, we will try to guess the shape of this missing piece of the puzzle by putting all the other pieces around it in their place.

11 The delay in the publication of Il mio mondo è qui apparently alarmed Montale, who had already lost the opportunity of translating for Mondadori after the Minculpop had vetoed his version of Steinbeck’s To a God Unknown (Al dio sconosciuto, ready in 1940, was published only in 1946). For a study of this translation see S. Bozzola. “Steinbeck, Rodocanachi, Montale. Tra traduzione e revisione”, cit.

12 Montale is here referring to an expression from the short story “Il piccolo Curtis”. The original reads “My husband... is the Matson Adding Machines.” (“Little Curtis”, The Collected Dorothy Parker, cit., 348.).

The last letter by Montale quoted above is a good starting point for our investigation. A first inevitable reflection regards Montale’s attitude towards the translation: he does not give the impression that he enjoyed reading the book. On the contrary, he distances himself from the humour of the story by calling it “presunto” – a kind of criticism the works of Dorothy Parker, celebrated as “the wittiest woman in America”, had probably never received before.

A second observation is that Bompiani and Vittorini must have been very active as supervisors, and that they surely gave their own contribution to Montale’s work. In the case of the problem discussed above, for instance, they decided against Montale’s translation: the published version (presumably Vittorini’s) reads “E mio marito... è le addizionatrici Matson” (p. 171). But who knows how many other ‘foglietti’ were passed among them?

One of these lost ‘foglietti’ probably concerned the question of the title. As we have seen, in the correspondence about Here Lies available to us, Montale entitles his manuscript “Qui giace” (translating literally from the original, although inevitably losing its double entendre), and Bompiani never expresses any objections to Montale’s choice. So it must have been Vittorini who was instrumental in changing the title. But whoever was responsible for the decision, it was accepted by all – and it is this assent that interests us, for it betrays the fact that none of them knew much about the author. In fact, not only did a macabre overtone characterize the titles of all of Dorothy Parker’s books, but it had become one of her distinctive traits. 14 Had anyone of them been aware of this, surely he would have objected to discarding the morbid “Qui giace” in favor of the lighter Il mio mondo è qui.

But there is also another circumstance that casts serious doubts upon the extent of their knowledge of Dorothy Parker. Like all the other contemporary Italian publishers of foreign fiction, Bompiani had to contend daily with the censorship of the Ministero della Cultura Popolare. In addition to this, at the time of the translation of Here Lies he was engaged in what was to become the most emblematic of these disputes

14 Among Dorothy Parker’s works published before Here Lies we encounter such titles as Enough Rope; Sunset Gun; Laments for the Living; Death and Taxes.
with censorship: that for the publication of *Americana*, the American anthology in which both Bompiani and Vittorini had invested all their energies. Considering the situation, it is highly improbable that he would have chosen such a critical moment to defy the 1938 racial laws and publish a Jewish-American writer. We must conclude that neither Bompiani nor Vittorini were aware of the fact that Dorothy Parker’s maiden name was Rothschild, and that ‘Mrs. Parker’ not only was the wit who had declared on one occasion “I married him [Edwin Pond Parker, II] to change my name”, but that she was also the writer who, referring to the glamorous years of her career, was to confess “I was just a little Jewish girl, trying to be cute”.

Her Jewishness was not the only fact that could have displeased Fascist censorship, however. Without knowing it, Bompiani was publishing a writer whose political record was more than enough to blacklist her in Italy. Since the mid-thirties Dorothy Parker had been a communist sympathizer, at the center of several political activities which had as a common denominator an opposition to the authoritarian right-wing political movements of the time. Among other things, she had helped to found an Anti-Nazi League in Hollywood, and she had exploited her celebrity to raise money for the Loyalist cause in Spain.

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16 On the cultural consequences of these racial laws see P.V. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso. Fascismo e mass media*. Pref. by Renzo De Felice. Milan: Laterza, 1975.

17 ‘Mrs. Parker’ was her persona rather than her real self: in fact, she continued to be known as ‘Mrs. Parker’ even after becoming Mrs. Alan Campbell in real life.


19 She declared this in one of her last interviews (M. Capron. “Dorothy Parker”, in *Paris Review* 13 (Summer 1956): 72-87.).

On top of this, she had an open and strong dislike for “Signor Benito Mussolini”, whom she had ridiculed as early as 1928 by making him the butt of her irony in a ruthless review of his novel *The Cardinal’s Mistress*. The censorship, not to talk of Mussolini himself, would have never forgiven her such pert words as the following:

It is rumored that Il Duce is having one of those old-fashioned Latin tantrums over the translation and publication of his literary gem. That would be, for me, the one bit of cheer in the whole performance. Anything that makes Mussolini sore is velvet so far as I am concerned. If only I had a private income, I would […] devote the scant remainder of my days to teasing the Dictator of All Italy […] Indeed, my dream-life is largely made up of scenes in which I say to him, “Oh, il Duce, yourself, you big stiff,” and thus leave him crushed to a pulp […] Weak though the ordeal has left me, I shall never be the one to grudge the time and effort I put into my attempts at reading *The Cardinal’s Mistress*. The book has considerably enlarged that dream-life I was telling you about a few minutes ago. It has broadened now to admit that scene in which I tell Mussolini, “And what’s more, you can’t even write a book that anyone could read. You old Duce, you.” You can see for yourself how flat that would leave him.21

All things considered, there can be few doubts that Dorothy Parker was published in Italy only thanks to her sponsors’ lack of information about her – a fact that is both highly ironical and indicative of the state of things in the country at the time.

Presumably, Bompiani had first met Dorothy Parker’s name in one of the literary magazines he used to read regularly. In the same “modo quasi casalingo” he had ‘discovered’ Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and Caldwell’s *God’s Little Acre*, the two books that, according to his own testimony, started the epoch of the great American translations in pre-war Italy.22 So it would not have been unusual for him to pick an author of whom he knew almost nothing. *Here Lies* had appeared in 1939, had been praised by the critics and was selling well; and we can safely suggest that it was on this basis that Bompiani made his choice – thus becoming the first European publisher to translate Dorothy Parker.23

21 “Duces Wild”, in *The New Yorker* (September 15, 1928), now in *The Collected Dorothy Parker*, 514-516.
23 The second European translation of Parker’s short stories I have been able to trace was published in Portugal in 1945 (*Dorothy Parker. Selected
However, as we have seen, Vittorini was equally involved in the decision. We must assume that he judged *Here Lies* sufficiently good to be acquired by Bompiani, but that he did not like it exceedingly – certainly not well enough to take into consideration translating it himself. It is true that at the time he had his hands full with *Americana*, but the very fact that he made no mention of Dorothy Parker in the introductory notes he was writing for the anthology confirms that he was not particularly impressed by her stories.

And yet, his choice of Montale as translator suggests that he recognized some quality to her work. For Vittorini was a friend and an admirer of Montale’s, and all the translations he had entrusted to him up to then concerned authors he might not prize personally, but whose significance he did not deny.  

The fact that Vittorini assigned the translation of *Here Lies* to Montale can be accounted for in two ways. The first explanation is very prosaic. Vittorini might have decided for Montale for the simple reason that the bulk of the book made it a palatable assignment, and he knew that the poet was in reduced circumstances. Such matter-of-fact behaviour would not have been exceptional for him. Only a few months earlier he had refused Pavese the translation of *Billy Budd* in order to favor Montale, and to the Piedmontese writer who had – legitimately – complained about it he had written: “mi dispiace and Translated by Linda Loubet and Raâul Roque. With a Preface by Victor Palla. Coimbra, Atlãantida, Livraria Editora).


As his correspondence with Bompiani shows (see for instance the letter in note 24 above) Vittorini was in charge of finding the translators for the books he supervised. On the friendship between Montale and Vittorini see A. Andreini. “Vittorini e Montale”, in *Belpaese*, 6 (1987): 268-286.

In 1938 Montale, who had refused to join the PNF, had been fired from the Gabinetto Vieusseux where he had been working since 1929. Since then he had had to rely mainly on his translation work to support himself. Pavese was the undisputed Italian expert on Herman Melville. In addition to his critical writings on Melville, he had already translated *Moby Dick* in 1932 and *Benito Cereno* in 1940. On the Italian translations of Melville see S. Perosa. *Le traduzioni italiane di Herman Melville e Gertrude Stein*. Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1997. On Pavese the translator see M. Stella. *Cesare Pavese. Traduttore*. Rome: Bulzoni, 1977.
che ti sia seccato di Melville. Ma è Montale che lo fa, e ha insistito tanto per farlo (avendo anche bisogno di mettere insieme il maggior numero di pagine possibile) e io gli sono troppo amico.” 28

But there could be another explanation for his choosing Montale – if not alternative, at least complementary to the first one.

When he was offered Here Lies Montale had just finished his translation work for Americana. Of the nine sections into which the anthology was divided, two consisted almost entirely of his translations. The first was 'I classici', which included his versions of Hawthorne and Melville. The second was 'Eccentrici, una parentesi', for which he had worked on Evelyn Scott, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Kay Boyle. As his introduction emphasizes, Vittorini had reserved this section for those contemporary authors he could not ignore, but whom he regarded as secondary and overrated figures:

Tra il 1919 e il 1925 si manifestavano già in pieno i grandi scrittori, Hemingway, Faulkner, Eliot, che hanno determinato definitivamente il carattere della letteratura contemporanea, ma il periodo è, nel fatto della voga generale, connesso a una tendenza minore di piccoli scrittori irrequieti, Dos Passos, Waldo Frank, Ben Hecht, McAlmon, Kay Boyle, Evelyn Scott, tanto che il pensatore e critico Henry Mencken ne domina la scena, pur con la sua smorfia esagerata, il suo sarcasmo spesso triviale e la sua malafede […] Il movimento […] nella [sua] baldanza libertaria, tutta pseudo euforia […] non sviluppava […] l'opera iniziata nel 1905 […] e finiva per perdersi entro la propria effervescenza. Gli scrittori che ne erano protagonisti sembravano conoscere soltanto fantasmagorie di un'eccitazione presa dai nervi e di volta in volta condotta […] a suscitare gorghi di parole. 29

One cannot help observing that, had it appeared in the passage above, the name of Dorothy Parker would not have come as a surprise. In fact, several of the authors referred to by Vittorini – as well as Elmer Rice and F. Scott Fitzgerald, mentioned later on – moved in the same literary circles she frequented. Some had been in close association with her. Ben Hecht was part of the team of top-quality writers hired by

Hollywood producer Sam Goldwyn – a team Dorothy Parker joined in 1937. Henry Mencken, co-editor of *The Smart Set*, was among the first to appreciate and publish her short stories. Elmer Rice collaborated with her in the writing of *Close Harmony*, her first play. And F. Scott Fitzgerald, besides being a good friend, embodied for the general public the type of the glamorous writer as much as she did. He also wrote novels and short stories that basically dealt with the same subject matter she treated.

Therefore we can safely assume that, had Vittorini chosen to include Dorothy Parker in his anthology, it is in this section that he would have placed her. And we can read in Vittorini’s assigning the translation of *Here Lies* to Montale, his ‘expert’ in American “eccentrici”, an implicit – and basically negative – critical assessment of her work.


It is necessary to remember that Dorothy Parker was not the only author to be ‘mistreated’ by Vittorini: his proneness to dismiss writers that have since been recognized as major figures – and to exalt others he would himself diminish later on – is notorious. The fact is, Vittorini’s approach to modern American literature was highly biased. As Pavese promptly recognized after reading *Americana*, in his introductory notes to the anthology Vittorini had written “Una storia letteraria vista da un poeta come storia della propria poetica”:

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certainly when your notes will spread across the world [...] it will be up to someone to notice that they are fine indeed but fantastic. Now [...] precisely because they tell a story, a novel if you want, invention, for this reason they are illuminating [...] I want to talk about the thematic game of your exhibition, the drama of corruption, purity, ferocity, innocence that you have installed in that story [...] you have brought the tension and the screams of discovery of your own poetic story [...] which has been a conflict with the literature of the world (that implicit literature that is universal, in universality, in the American – I hope I understand?), it results that all the American half of the century and half has been reduced to the essential evidence of a myth that we have all lived and you tell us.31

We can therefore presume that Dorothy Parker was excluded from Vittorini’s attention – and consequently from the influential Amerciana – because her work did not conform to the myth that he was delineating for himself and his entire generation. In an essay written after the war, when the ‘American infatuation’ was already a phenomenon of the past, Pavese offered a famous recapitulation of that myth:

Verso il 1930, quando il fascismo cominciava a essere “la speranza del mondo”, accadde ad alcuni giovani italiani di scoprire nei suoi libri l’America, una America pensosa e barbarica, felice e rissosa, dissoluta, feconda, greve di tutto il passato del mondo, e insieme giovane, innocente.32

From Vittorini’s perspective – as well as from the perspective of those who were creating the American myth with him – the first ‘fault’ of Dorothy Parker would be her lack of optimism. She depicted a world in which the potentially negative aspects recognized by Pavese were not counterbalanced and redeemed by any positive quality: her America (like Fitzgerald’s) was “rissosa” without being “felice”; it was “dissoluta” without being “feconda”; and even when young, it was hardly ever innocent. It was precisely on this negativity – interpreted as cynical – that Vittorini based his condemnation of the “eccentrici”: “il loro radicalismo [morale] era alzata di spalle e mostrava [...] come disperassero della possibilità di fabbricare purezza con i materiali stessi della corruzione, e proclamassero, disperando, l’abbandono “tout court” alla corruzione.”33 And in his attack against Henry Mencken – who

33 Americana, cit., 666.
typified for him this ‘deviant’ current in American intellectual history – his accusation became even more explicit: “[Mencken] assimilava le energie […] del disagio generale, e introduceva una voga di assoluta negazione umana, celebrando […] quello che credeva fosse lo scacco definitivo dell’America, cioè di un nuovo mondo per l’uomo.” 34

The literary champions Vittorini opposed to these ‘eccentrics’ were writers like Hemingway and Faulkner, who “per ogni faccia del caos che affrontano raccolgono la sporca creta della corruzione e la plasmano, ne traggono purezza”; 35 or those like Steinbeck, Caldwell and Saroyan, by his own admission not so outstanding, but reading whom he had first formed his ideas about the universality of American literature. 36

On comparing Dorothy Parker’s short stories to those written by the modern authors advanced by Vittorini, one cannot help perceiving another significant factor that plausibly represented a further stumbling block to his appreciation.

Most characters inhabiting the world of Vittorini’s favorite authors are common people – not infrequently downright outcasts – struggling with the basic, often tragic problems of their undistinguished lives. They are mediocre heroes, and their story takes place against such backgrounds as the road, the field, the factory. Because of their ‘simplicity’ Vittorini saw them as symbolizing a universal humanity, and it was easy for him to transfigure them into illustrations of his ‘new’ man. 37

By contrast, Dorothy Parker’s typical protagonists are middle class people moving in sophisticated (or would-be sophisticated) surroundings. Many of them are party-goers, forever dealing with the after-effects of intoxication or unsuccessful

34 Ibid.: 667.
36 On the ‘universality’ of American literature see E. Vittorini, Diario, cit.: 64-65: “In questa specie di letteratura universale ad una lingua sola, ch’è la letteratura americana di oggi, si trova ad essere più americano proprio chi non ha in sé il passato particolare dell’America [chi] insomma è più aperto con la mente alla civiltà comune degli uomini […] America significa per lui uno stadio della civiltà umana, egli l’accetterà come tale, e sarà americano in tal senso, puro, nuovo, senza nulla in sé di quanto dell’America è già morto e puzza”.
37 On Vittorini’s ‘new man’ (and on parallel conceptions in Pavese and Pintor) see D. Fernandez, Il mito dell’America negli intellettuali italiani dal 1930 al 1950, cit.: 71-82. See also N. Carducci, op. cit.: 205-206 and passim.
love affairs. Others are wealthy men and women who treat subordinate people with carelessness. It was not easy to find among them specimens of a new, better humanity; on the contrary, they could strike one as a confirmation of Emilio Cecchi’s notorious view of the United States as “la coda alcolizzata dell’Europa”.

Perhaps, had Vittorini not been engrossed in *Americana* when he first met Dorothy Parker’s work, he would have judged her differently. It seems incredible that a writer with his interest in colloquial language and dialogue should not appreciate her masterly command of the technique he had so much admired and studied in other American authors. But an uncongenial subject matter obscured Dorothy Parker’s merits – to the eyes of Vittorini and, as a consequence, also to the eyes of those for whom *Americana* became the bible of the American myth.

3. Montale the Translator

It is a well-known circumstance that Montale’s strenuous translation work in the late 1930s and early 1940s was not a choice, but the consequence of his dire financial straits after losing his job at the Gabinetto Vieusseux: he openly talked of it as a “mestier vile” and as “la mia sgradita e forzata attività di traduttore”. This is how he recalled that period in 1964:

[La voga della letteratura americana] fu tale che io stesso ne fui in qualche misura coinvolto. A dir il vero, mi trovai a nuotare in quel fiume senza troppo volerlo. A partire dal ’38 dovesti vivere esclusivamente di traduzioni e i libri che mi venivano proposti dagli editori erano quasi esclusivamente americani. Ebbi così la fortuna di volgere nella nostra lingua il *Billy Budd* di Melville [...] e tradussi poi alcuni racconti di Hawthorne, di Faulkner e il *Rich Boy* di Scott Fitzgerald che mi divertii ad adattare come aveva fatto Vittorini col *Piccolo Campo* di Caldwell. Trascuro testi accettati *oborto collo*; due libri di Steinbeck; uno di Dorothy Parker... 40

38 Cf. S. Bozzola, “Note”, cit., and Bonsaver, *op. cit.*
40 *Ibid.*: 2654-5.
The lack of emotive and artistic involvement in Parker’s *Here Lies*, emphasized in the passage above, is confirmed also by the only letter in which Montale let his opinions emerge at the time of the translation. As we have seen, replying to Bompi, who was perplexed by his rendering of a phrase, he wrote: “L’originale dice addirittura: “mio marito è le macchine addizionatrici Matson.” Io non potevo tradurre: “mio marito è il proprietario ecc.” perché il (presunto) *humour* della frase andrebbe perduto.”

We can read that “presunto” as a disclosure of Montale’s opinion of the story in question. First of all it indicates that, personally, he was not able to partake in the humor of the expression. Secondly it shows that, although he did his best to be as scrupulous as possible, there was a limit to what he could do to kindle in others a sympathy for the text he himself did not feel. That ‘presunto’ betrays a basic coldness on his part: a coldness that – as a reading of *Il mio mondo è qui* confirms – stayed with him throughout his translating work. And this unresponsive attitude ended by affecting his translation.

There are translators for whom an affinity with the author and the world he/she depicts are not crucial factors. But Montale was not one of them. As the scanty critical investigations of his prose translations have shown, it was only when something in the text aroused his private poetic world that he gave his best. And it is significant that, during his previous

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41 Cf., for instance, Caproni’s “Divagazioni sul tradurre” (Premio Città di Monselice per una Traduzione Letteraria. A cura dell’amministrazione comunale. Monselice: 1974) in which we read: “non credo [...] che il traduttore sia mosso [...] da una ricerca di affinità elettive [...] Il criterio della cosiddetta “congenialità” (stilistica soprattutto), tranquillamente posso affermare di non averlo mai seguito in ogni mio scontro [...] con gli autori da me tradotti” (26).

activity as a translator, when financial problems had not pressed on him, all the authors he had chosen to translate were poets, and all presented some affinity with his poetic work.  

So Montale found himself translating the book of an author of whom he did not know much, and who had probably been presented to him as a popular writer. An author whose subject-matter did not arouse any special response in him, and whose language presented difficulties that were considerably increased by his lack of either translating aids or direct experience. All things considered, Montale was far from being the ideal translator for a book like *Here Lies*.

Montale did not write anything about Parker at the time of his translation, and continued to ignore her also in the following years. He did not refer to Parker even when he was writing about topics that positively invited allusions to her work. In 1950, for instance, he reviewed Don Marquis’ *archy and mehitabel* and, after some observations on the great difficulties that a hypothetical Italian translator would meet because of Don Marquis’ *New Yorker* kind of humour “legatissimo a un
tempo, a una civiltà e a una cultura che non sono le nostre”, 45 he concluded by stating that in this work readers would find:

un quadro fedele della vita bohème della Nuova York nelle twenties [...] il periodo che Scott Fitzgerald ha illustrato in altra maniera, riuscendo forse più moderno ma non più divertente del giornalista Donald Marquis. 46

Not a word about Parker, who had not only humorously depicted the same New York of the twenties, but had also published most of her stories in the New Yorker. 47

I have written that Montale ignored Parker – but, in reality, he did bring up her name on four occasions while working for Il Corriere della Sera.

The only time he wrote directly about her was in a 1953 review in which he was reflecting on the short story as a genre:

Il racconto breve, così com’è venuto configurandosi nel moderno tipo della short story, ha raggiunto nel mondo di lingua inglese una tale perfezione che in certi casi (per esempio nel caso di Dorothy Parker) solo un espertissimo orafo della critica potrebbe stabilire se si tratti d’arte o mestiere. 48

This might sound as an acknowledgement of Parker’s merit, although “obtorto collo”. Montale was definitely inclined to class Parker as a ‘mestierante’, however – a fact confirmed by his openly labeling her “una scrittrice di terz’ordine” nine years later, in an article about Hemingway. 49

45 “Raccolse le confidenze di gatti e scarafaggi”, in E. MONTALE, Il Secondo Mestiere, cit.: 974. Ironically, Montale’s observations could be used as an explanation of the inadequacies of his translation.
46 Ibid.: 978.
47 For an interesting work on the New Yorker and other American magazines of the time see G.H. DOUGLAS. The Smart Magazines. 50 Years of Literary Revelry and High Jinks at Vanity Fair, the New Yorker, the Esquire and the Smart Set. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1991.
48 E. MONTALE. “Letture”, in ibid.: 1499.
49 An article in which he ascribed to her a sarcastic remark about the writer of which she was innocent (from E. MONTALE. “Schietta umanità”, in op. cit., ibid. 2402): “Ernest Hemingway, che aveva affrontato con fermo ciglio combattimenti e difficili situazioni, si turbò una volta, quando una scrittrice di terz’ordine disse che egli aveva del “falso pelo sul petto”; il che significava disconoscere l’autenticità del suo vivere inimitabile. Non aveva del tutto torto Dorothy Parker; ma trascuравa il dramma autenticissimo del poeta che col volgere degli anni deve far mestiere dell’originario suo dono.”
In conclusion, Montale’s opinion of Parker did not improve over the years: if anything, his references to her became harsher with the passing of time. However, it is important to emphasize that his growing disapproval of Parker does not appear to have been the result of a fresh assessment of her work: it is highly probable that, after that fateful 1941, Montale never read Dorothy Parker again.

4. Here Lies and its Ideal Translator: a Speculation

It is very risky to talk of the ideal translator. For there seem to be few – if any – incontrovertible criteria in this field. Is it imperative to know the language of the author one wishes to translate? Apparently not, for, as the following paradoxical statement by George Steiner indicates, “some of the most persuasive translations in the story of the métier have been made by writers ignorant of the language from which they were translating”. 50 Is it indispensable to have a good knowledge of the culture informing the original work? Not necessarily, for there have always been translators like Pound who – again according to George Steiner – could “imitate and persuade with utmost economy not because he or his reader [knew] so much but because both concur[red] in knowing so little.” 51 Nevertheless, it is equally indisputable that most great translations have been the fruit of an ideal meeting of two authors. And this is why we can dare advance a speculation on who Dorothy Parker’s ideal Italian translator in the 1940s might have been.

Translating an author like Dorothy Parker could be particularly challenging, for she was a writer extremely bound up

In reality, this notorious remark had been made by Max Eastman in a 1933 review of *Death in the Afternoon* (The New Republic, June 7 (1933): 94-97, now in J. Meyers (ed.). Hemingway. The Critical Heritage. London, Boston, Melbourne: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982: 172-180). Hemingway was enraged by Eastman’s remark, and the episode ended in a fistfight between the two (reported in the newspapers) four years later.


with her time and place. This does not mean that she could never rise above them, of course; but it is almost impossible to read her work and forget when, where and for whom she was writing.

In the formative years of her career she was associated with a group of New York intellectuals that came to be known as the Algonquin Round Table. The Round Table was an exclusive group whose members were in a position to shape the public opinion of their time. It included famous wits from the city’s theatrical, journalistic and literary worlds – people who, reacting against the solemnity and pretentiousness of highbrows, adopted a pose in which cynicism was mixed with a cult of youthful gaiety and up-to-dateness. Dorothy Parker was a leading figure of this coterie, and she greatly contributed to the myth of the Algonquins by elaborating and popularizing their smart attitude and idiom through her writings.

The persona of ‘Mrs. Parker’ was a fruit of these years, the ‘smart’ years of American history; but the life and work of Dorothy Parker kept on being an emblematic mirror of her epoch even afterward. By the time Here Lies appeared Parker was known for her fabulous salary and her glamorous life in Hollywood as a screenwriter; but also – an incongruity indicative of those years – for her eager commitment to the communist cause.

Not only was Dorothy Parker imbued with the spirit of her time and place, but she also represented a type of writer that had no real equivalent in the Italy of the 1930s and early 1940s. In fact, none of the authors who were translating and writing about American literature were, like her, at the center of the fashionable society of their time; or as much involved in the world of the performing arts.


The ideal translator of Dorothy Parker would have been someone who had had access to American culture in its context. Such a direct contact would have been profitable also because, although Parker’s characters were moving in a world perceptibly different from contemporary Italy, there still remained a treacherous proximity that could confound the translator. In other words, an ‘untraveled’ translator ran two different risks: that of not recognizing Parker’s references; and that of unwittingly superimposing on Parker’s world her/his (only) apparently equivalent national standards.54

It is notorious, however, that hardly any of the authors who were in the forefront during the making of the American myth had ever visited the United States.

The one notable exception was Emilio Cecchi, who crossed the ocean twice: the first time in 1930, when he taught Italian culture at Berkeley for one year; the second time in 1937. He was perfectly aware of the fact that his American sojourns put him in a privileged position: in 1934, for instance, in order to obtain the translation of Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* from Mondadori, he insisted that to understand and translate a book like that correctly “bisognava essere stati in America e non di passaggio”.55

Would Cecchi have been the ideal translator for *Here Lies*? It is evident that it would have been easier for him to appreciate the context and the allusions of Parker’s stories – and also that his fluency in spoken English would have been an asset when confronting Parker’s idioms and colloquialisms. A difficulty of a different nature would have probably undermined his translation, however. Cecchi was interested in the United States, and he undeniably contributed to the knowledge of the country in Italy, but he never concealed his strong prejudices and his feelings of belonging to a superior culture: the America he sternly described in his essays and in *America Amara* was a country whose cultural and social institutions were a trivialization, or downright barbarization, of European standards of civilization.56 Because of his strong bias, therefore, he might

54 On the dangers of cultural proximity for a translator cf. R. Steiner, *op. cit.*: 380 ff.
55 Letter to Mondadori April 1, 1934 quoted in P. Albonetti, *op. cit.*: 90.
56 On E. Cecchi’s *America Amara* (Florence: Sansoni, 1940), cf. D. Fernandez, *op. cit.*: 149-152. Cecchi’s negatively biased attitude towards the United States was welcomed by the MinCulPop, of course. Significantly, it
have run the risk of missing or misunderstanding the irony informing Parker’s stories. He would have surely deplored her use of slang, which he considered to be ‘transient language’ not to be used in serious literature. And he would not have accepted favorably her public image: with her worldly life, her wit, her collaborations with Hollywood and with popular magazines, she blatantly contradicted his ‘European’ idea of the intellectual as a person religiously and totally devoted to his superior art and mission.

But there was a writer of the younger generation who had a completely different attitude towards the United States: Cesare Pavese. His lively interest in contemporary American culture and his enthusiasm for the American language – early illustrated by his vivacious letters to Antonio Chiuminatto – potentially made him the perfect translator for an author like Parker.

Pavese would not have been disconcerted by her frequent use of slang; on the contrary, he would have reveled in it, as he had reveled in the expressions he used to discuss with his friend in Turin, Antonio Chiuminatto, during their extensive correspondence. The first volume of Pavese’s letters, 1926-1950, offers a fascinating insight into his impressions of contemporary American life, culture, and language.

was Cecchi who wrote the new introductory notes to Americana after the first edition with Vittorini’s notes had been vetoed.

57 “Da un punto di vista strettamente letterario, potrà lamentarsi che il bisogno di cogliere la verità nei tratti più fuggevoli e minuziosi, induca spesso gli autori ad accettare troppe parole di vernacolo e di slang, le quali nascono e muoiono con le stagioni” (“Chi cavalca una tigre non può più scendere”, in E. Cecchi, op. cit.: 129).

58 This is how Cecchi presented witty intellectuals: “Quando sono sprejudicati, audaci, rotti a qualunque avventura, sparano bolse cartucce che già presero l’umido al tempo di Wilde” (“Intellettuali e dilettanti”, in E. Cecchi, op. cit.: 51).

59 “È possibile, anzi quasi sicuro, che gli scrittori più autentici sieno i meno ospitati da queste riviste di varietà” (“Autori e Pubblico”, in E. Cecchi, op. cit.: 122. He is referring to The Saturday Evening Post and Esquire, two magazines which published several stories by Parker).

60 Cecchi could not forgive American intellectuals for not dedicating their whole life to their vocation (cf. “Intellettuali e dilettanti”, in E. Cecchi, op. cit.: 48-54) – or American students for preferring to wear the uniform of a waiter to the “schietto pericolo di morir di fame (cf. “Studenti Californiani”, in ibid.: 254).

61 Pavese wrote to Antonio Chiuminatto – an American musician of Piedmontese origins he had met in Turin – between 1929 and 1931. Chiuminatto became his main source of information on contemporary American life, culture and language. The fascinating correspondence between the young Pavese and “Tony” can be read in the first volume of C. Pavese, Lettere 1926-1950, cit.
Chiuminatto. As he explained to his American friend – and restated in his 1931 essay on Sherwood Anderson – in his opinion slang was not “a special language or dialect [but] the bulk of new English words and expressions continually shaped by living people”.

Pavese would not have been put off by Parker’s ‘frivolous’ public life, or by her humor. After all, he had loved reading Anita Loos’s books which, although in a different key, made fun of the same society that was prominent in Parker’s stories. And he had championed writers like O. Henry and Morley Callaghan, who risked being undervalued and misunderstood precisely because of their humor. In short, although he never succeeded in visiting the United States, Pavese made up for the direct experience he never had with his enthusiasm, his curiosity and his open-mindedness. And, in all likelihood, he would have been able to empathize with Parker far more than any other writer involved in the discovery of American literature at the time.

This said, even Pavese might have missed an important el-

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63 C. Pavese. Lettere 1926-1950, cit.: 97 (letter of January 12, 1930). On the care with which he translated slang in his versions from the American, and the brilliant results he attained, see S. Bozolla 63-101). Pavese’s linguistic efforts were not always appreciated at the time, however: see his letter to Enrico Bemporad (April 4, 1931) regarding his contested translation of Our Mr. Wrenn.

64 Cf. his letters to Chiuminatto of November 29, 1929 and April 5, 1930 in C. Pavese. Lettere 1926-1950, cit.: 91; 116-119.

65 On O. Henry see “O. Henry o del trucco letterario”, in C. Pavese. La letteratura americana e altri saggi, cit.: 95-104. An observation Pavese made about O. Henry in this essay would have been perfectly applicable to Dorothy Parker: “E se chi legge le novelle di O. Henry ripensasse all’ambiente culturale da cui queste novelle sono tolte, molte cose gli sembrerebbero ovvie che ora lo urtano, giacché la natura singolare del suo novelliere è stata tutta condizionata dal momento spirituale in cui esso è nato.” (97) On (the Canadian) Morley Callaghan see his letter to Bompiani of November 5, 1940 in Lettere 1926-1950, cit.: 382.

66 After graduating Pavese applied to Giuseppe Prezzolini, head of the Istituto di Cultura Italiana in New York, to obtain a study grant. Although for a while he was confident he would leave, nothing came of it in the end.
ement of Parker’s style, namely, the ‘Vogue’ and ‘Vanity Fair’ touch. It was an art Parker had acquired while working for those two mouthpieces of fashion and high society: it revealed itself in a sophisticated tone which implied a whole series of assumptions; and it functioned like a shorthand that allowed the initiatives to read in such sentences as “The young man with the scenic cravat glanced nervously down the sofa at the girl in the fringed dress” \(^{67}\) social implications that an outsider would have failed to grasp.

In conclusion, Parker’s ideal translator would have been a writer who could have added to Cecchi’s experience and Pavese’s sensitivity a kind of competence that, in the Italy of the time, belonged to a restricted group: the public that identified with high-class fashion magazines – a public mostly composed of women.

Unfortunately, there were no such translators and, as is well known, hardly any woman, in the group of intellectuals that participated in the making of the American myth in the 1930s and early 1940s \(^{68}\) – a circumstance that certainly had important consequences on the contours of the American myth, and which, we can add, probably affected Dorothy Parker’s Italian reputation as well.

\[\text{Works Cited}\]


\(^{67}\) This is the opening sentence of “The Sexes”.

\(^{68}\) The only two notable exceptions were Lucia Rodocanachi – the ‘ghost translator’ who worked for Montale and Vittorini (and other writers: see G. Marcenaro. \textit{Una amica di Montale. Vita di Lucia Rodocanachi}. Milan: Camunia, 1992.) – and Fernanda Pivano – who, however, was still under the direct influence of Pavese (it was only in the years following the war that Pivano started a more autonomous activity).


DOROTHY PARKER’S IL MIO MONDO È QUI


ABSTRACT
The article traces the story of the publication of Il mio mondo è qui, the first Italian translation of a work by Dorothy Parker. The translation – done by Eugenio Montale, endorsed by Elio Vittorini, and published by Valentino Bompiani in 1941 – is interesting both in itself (being an example of how the combination of an uncongenial subject-matter and limited information on the author and her/his time can affect the translation work) and for what it reveals of the “decennio delle traduzioni”, as Cesare Pavese, one of its protagonists, predicted that the 1930s and 1940s would be called.

KEY WORDS
D. Parker. E. Montale. Translation.