

## **No book to call one's own: Perspectives on translation and literary creation in Francesca Duranti's *The House on Moon Lake***

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*Francesca Duranti's prize-winning novel The House on Moon Lake (La casa sul lago della luna, 1984) has been hailed by various critics as an intriguing concoction of reality and illusion. However, the story's main dichotomy seems to be between translation as frustrated desire for possession, and original writing as more fulfilling ownership of the text. The fact that even the possession of a text on the part of its author ultimately proves to be ephemeral does not change the image of translation with which Duranti presents the reader: a mechanical transfer of words, a cowardly, unimaginative antagonist to 'true' literary creation. This essay examines the ways in which this portrayal is carried out in the text, and its implications in a perspective on translation that perpetuates notions of weakness and passivity as its defining characteristics.*

Francesca Duranti's prize-winning novel *La casa sul lago della luna*, first published in Italy in 1984 and then in English translation as *The House on Moon Lake* in 2000, has been called by various critics "a fascinating study of the links between concrete reality and the truth known to the human soul" (Cox 1986), a "story of fascination, delirium, and magic" (Del Buono 1984), "an Italian mosaic, a mystery thriller of possibilities" (Chiavola Birnbaum 1987), "a novel-fairytale"<sup>1</sup> (Giudici 1984), and a "ghost story with moral and psychological roots" (Eder 1986). However, I would argue that the story does not revolve as much around the dichotomy of reality versus illusion (or fiction, fabrication, dream, magic, depending on how we might perceive the bizarre events related in the book) as around the leitmotif of possession. The choice of a translator, Fabrizio, as protagonist is crucial to Duranti's approach to this theme.

From the very beginning of the novel, Fabrizio is portrayed as a frustrated, unrecognized, downright pathetic figure, the heir of a once-wealthy aristocratic family now forced to work as an underpaid translator as a result of his father's bad investments. When we first encounter him, he has just completed the translation of a novel by Theodor Fontane and is indulging in an almost pleasant exercise of self-commiseration, reflecting on the meager income and unwholesomeness of his occupation. Only very few objects he chose to keep before auctioning all of his family's possessions can be seen around him, but certain details about his house reveal Fabrizio's self-image as that of a man from another time, a misunderstood intellectual, a lonely soul who is too sensitive to bear the shallow company of his fellow beings:

“The ornate glass of the door leading to the foyer reflected his image surrounded by floral motifs; in the leafy frame and background of morning bird-songs it appeared to be that of a young faun frowning slightly” (Duranti 2000: 4). Fabrizio’s clothes suggest a sort of “sophisticated shabbiness”, the careless style of a potentially elegant man who is too encumbered by matters of the mind to waste time on appearance. In fact, he despises the expensive designer outfits his lover Fulvia flaunts, and regards them as vulgar indications of her bourgeois status. And yet, he is clearly obsessed with the idea of possession, and unsatisfied with being “just a translator”, one who has no rights over the text, who cannot claim ownership of a literary work but must forever live in the shadow of someone else’s accomplishments. He envies those who have achieved a “celebrity status in the culture industry” (7) and secretly considers himself better than them, worthier of the title he has been denied so far just because he is less sly, less shallow and calculating than they are. “Sure, he was considered a good translator; but did anyone give him credit for his training, taste and talent as a man of letters?” (24).

In an extremely enthusiastic review of the novel published in the weekly *L'Europeo*, Oreste Del Buono observes that, after all, Fabrizio “does not mind his job, and knows how to do it”.<sup>2</sup> I am hesitant to agree with either of these statements for several reasons. First of all, the protagonist’s sense of humiliation for being exploited is palpable throughout the first part of the novel – and in the second part it is absent simply because Fabrizio does not translate anymore. With the publishers who provide work for him he has at best an uncomfortable relationship, and at worst, one of distrust. He has no colleagues to confide in or to collaborate with: “he was not part of any professional organization, since there were no such things as ‘translators’ circles,’ as far as he knew; and even if such sorry coteries did exist, he would flee them like the plague” (Duranti 2000: 25). He regards the texts he is given to translate in merely economic terms: “dense writing, little dialogue, few new paragraphs. Six hundred pages as solid as a black wall” (6-7). His “expert eye of the translator paid by the page” is apparently not concerned at all with anything that might remotely deal with content, style, language, etc. And yet we infer that, at least for the moment, he is not in so bad a situation that he would have to consider resorting to “boring technical translations” (39). He translates literature, and well-known authors like Fontane and Döblin – not obscure writers or “dank German philosophical tomes” as Michael Spinella (2000: 519) suggests in his review. Nevertheless, Fabrizio feels exploited and, perhaps for this reason, until he makes his “discovery”, he never betrays any particular interest in literature, or in his very profession: “He let the Döblin novel fall onto the desk with a dull thud. ‘With a thing like that,’ he went on, ‘you can’t even do a page an hour. My time will be worth less than a cleaning woman’s’” (Duranti 2000: 11). Granted, he does hide in the library when the uninteresting and petty company of other human beings becomes too unbearable, and does claim he finds, in the works of the masters, words of “encouragement, praise, or sometimes just a discreet wink, as if to say: ‘You and I understand each other perfectly’” (14), but such elec-

tive affinities seem to be based less on their being masters than on their being deceased. This also functions as an anticipation of the tragedy that is to occur. In case there might be any need for further evidence on this point, Fabrizio translates from German, a language which, by Duranti's own admission, carries a series of bad memories for her, since it represents Duranti's separation from her mother. It is a language she was forced to learn (much like Fabrizio himself) from obnoxious tutors whose only purpose was to keep her away from her mother.<sup>3</sup> Although Duranti did some translations from German, she claims she finds "no pleasure at all in reading a book in German, or in seeing a German movie",<sup>4</sup> and I hardly believe that the choice of making Fabrizio translate from this very language was casual.

As for being good at his job, perhaps I lack the "*esprit de finesse*" that Duranti requires in her ideal reader<sup>5</sup> but, despite being assured by the other characters and by Fabrizio himself that he knows his craft very well, I cannot help being highly suspicious of a translator who loathes his job, completely disregards the content of a six-hundred-page book he is about to translate, and most of all, does not proofread (on his own or with others) the work he has done. Given that, as John Gross informs us in his very positive review of the novel published in the *New York Times*, Duranti has translated novels from French, German and English, it is unquestionable that she "plainly knows the professional milieu she describes" (Gross 1986),<sup>6</sup> but perhaps her portrayal of Fabrizio is rather lacking in this regard, or at least unconvincing as far as the protagonist's work ethics.

At any rate, Fabrizio is to be perceived as a talented aspiring Germanist whose flaw is that of being "unfit" for a society that feeds exclusively on appearance and clichés. He is disgusted not only by the liberated women of his time and by the fake intellectuals who rob him of the title he deserves, but also, and much more generally, by "cutthroat greengrocers" (despite the fact that we never see him buying groceries), "rude and bewildered teenagers and noisy motorcyclists" (completely absent from the novel), and even "river-polluters" (although he does not seem to be environmentally conscious or even mildly appreciative of nature's wonders). In other words, he considers himself to be "the unhappy incarnation of all the historic defeats of the twentieth century" (Duranti 2000: 8-9) but has never even fought a single battle. While Duranti rejects the suggestion that the novels Fabrizio translates might have a direct impact on the way he sees the world,<sup>7</sup> it is undeniable that his uneasiness and impatience with the society around him are typical traits of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century fictional dandies, after whom he is modeled. One example would be Andrea Sperelli of Gabriele D'Annunzio's 1889 novel, *Il piacere* (*The Child of Pleasure*),<sup>8</sup> who in turn has often been considered a mirror image of the author himself. A snobbish intellectual at once fascinated by and bored with women, Sperelli possesses similar qualities as Fabrizio's. However, the latter's contempt for society, and the spleen and *ennui* with which he faces everyday struggles are also those of Romantic figures such as Goethe's Werther and Foscolo's Jacopo Ortis.

Fabrizio's sentimental life reflects his ostrich-like attitude. He refuses to make a commitment, but has no problems accepting Fulvia's sexual availability and promiscuity, only to avoid her when she tries to turn their relationship into a less volatile one, or to label her a strumpet anytime she seeks the company of other men and in this way compensate for – or retaliate against – his chronic fear of any ties. Being (or considering himself to be) a man from another era, he is turned off by emancipated women like Fulvia because they cannot be truly possessed. The leitmotif of possession re-emerges: in the same way as translation represents an inane effort because the text will never be his, an ordinary love affair or, worse, a long-term commitment is bound to give him no pleasure because possession is precluded in the modern notion of man-woman relationships. And even when it is not precluded, it is controlled by the woman, who has the exclusive right to decide when, where, how, and how long, thus turning the very idea of possession into an illusion. In the case of Fulvia, even rape fantasies don't hold up and collapse against their own creator: "One of his erotic fantasies was to take her by surprise, block her path, force her against a wall, tear off her clothing and make her cry out in shame and humiliation: to violate not so much her body as her modesty ... And he always snapped out of his fantasy with the same words: 'With Fulvia, no less!'" (40).

In Fabrizio's mind, possession must be achieved through struggle, subterfuges, and if necessary, even invention. Fabrizio's chance of a lifetime materializes in the form of a brief article he finds by accident. The author of the article mentions an obscure book, namely *Das Haus am Mondsee*, by an Austrian writer, and hails it in the following terms: "I am perfectly confident that it would take the public by storm, because of the profound, delicately conceived love affair between the two protagonists. The subtle ambiguities and contradictions that hide behind their emotions and, in a sense, sustain them are part of an original, successful invention that is both surprising and convincing" (18). The premise seems perfect: a fascinating novel, still untranslated, written by a virtually unknown and – more importantly – dead author. This can become *his* discovery, his key to access the realm of fame as (finally!) a Germanist and not a mere translator. "A complete unknown. A great writer. A great *Viennese* writer" (19). Yet, a few details sound suspicious: don't the "subtle ambiguities and contradictions" remind one of precisely the traits that characterize Fabrizio? And isn't it too fortunate a coincidence that so little is known about the author? Later on, we follow the protagonist in his discoveries and find out that the life of Fritz Oberhofer, the Austrian writer, was just as fulfilling sentimentally as it was mediocre artistically, with the exception, of course, of his masterpiece, *The House on Moon Lake*, which remains unmentioned in all biographies and documents of the time. Curiously, the author died at 38, Fabrizio's own age. Oberhofer represents not only the dead author whom Fabrizio can unearth and offer to the world while still claiming possession of his work as its discoverer, but an alter ego through whom he can vicariously live a satisfactory love story he has never had. After fruitless searches, Fabrizio stum-

bles upon the book by mere accident in a nameless guesthouse along the lake:

Now the final confirmation of his hope lay right before his eyes, for in the glass showcase behind the hotel desk was a book. It stood there together with a large stuffed fish with a sinister look on its face, a signed photograph of Franz Lehar, a silver cup won by a certain Joseph Wunsch at a horse show held in Sterzing in 1906 and an old-fashioned deer-hunting rifle. It was displayed like a painting, propped flat against the back of the showcase so that all could plainly see the yellow cover with the title printed diagonally across it in florid lavender Gothic lettering: Fritz Oberhofer – *Das Haus am Mondsee*. (72)

It might be worth reflecting upon the objects surrounding the book: all of them seem to imply an idea of achievement, and in the case of the stuffed fish and deer-hunting rifle, an achievement carried out by force. No one in the guesthouse has ever read the book, no one has even heard of Oberhofer, and the book mysteriously disappears after Fabrizio photocopies it, never to be found by anybody. I don't think it would be too far-fetched to suggest that the book might not exist, or rather, that it might have been produced by Fabrizio's own imagination. The strongest element in support of this point is, I believe, the symbiotic and extremely unlikely relationship between text and translator. All of a sudden, Fabrizio is inspired, on the borderline of fanaticism:

Fritz Oberhofer came back to life with each new sentence, preparing to receive the glory that was his due. The German flowed smoothly and naturally, settling into a melodious, parallel Italian. The transformation came about without effort.

'It falls into place all by itself,' Fabrizio said to Fulvia one evening at dinner. 'It slides around, flips over, then finds its own way, like a dolphin in water. It's as though Fritz wrote just to be translated by me, and I learned German just to translate him. (77)

Fabrizio claims he already has, within himself, the formless images that existed even before Oberhofer wrote the book. What follows from this reasoning is that possession of the text precedes the creation of the text itself. However, the logical, practical Fulvia rejects such "gratuitous meditation" and refuses to accept the possibility of a relationship, between author and translator, other than the one sanctioned by contractual terms. Identifying with the author would be ludicrous and ultimately quite dangerous for a translator, and particularly for Fabrizio, as it would sever the already loose ties he has with reality.

Nevertheless, Fabrizio does identify with the author, and suffers like a Saint Sebastian when his publisher and more-or-less friend Mario dismisses Fabrizio's "hopelessly bad" preface to his own translation and decides to hire an "illustrious Germanist" to write the introduction. But what was the trouble with Fabrizio's preface? It "resembled an author's introduction to his

own work. It had that deliberately modest tone that deep down smacks of self-satisfaction" (94). Again, the recurring fantasy of possession looms over Fabrizio's relationship with the work and is destined to bring him more disappointment and frustration. By being denied a chance to express himself in his own voice (since he clearly does not regard a translation as his own voice), he is again cut off from the "object of desire", that is, a true ownership of the masterpiece, and the prestigious title of "Germanist". However, perhaps the "resigned suffering trembling on his handsome, delicate face" (97) moves Mario to pity, and he proposes an alternative: instead of the preface, Fabrizio can write a short biography of the writer, to be published separately from the novel. This new endeavor proves to be Fabrizio's greatest opportunity and at the same time his doom: unable to find information on Oberhofer's last lover and inspiration, he decides to invent her. The once scrupulous "converter of words" who loathed "'creative' translations" (82) has turned into a creator himself. Out of his obsessed imagination Maria is born, a sort of fluid figure that responds to his need for ambiguity: she is perfectly undefined, she embodies all elements of nature yet none of them in particular, she is tree, flower, mushroom and bird, but more importantly, she is *his*.

Or is she? Certain details seem to betray the fact that tables have been turned and that even Maria, the pure, untranslated manifestation of Fabrizio's mind cannot be possessed by her creator. On the contrary, she has possessed him:

Fabrizio was completely taken up with Maria Lettner; her presence filled his apartment like a fragrance, or like a shadow that sidles up stealthily whenever one turns away, and then playfully runs and hides the moment one tries to look at it. He had let himself sink into a sweet state of weariness a bit like an illness, though painless. It was a sensation similar to what one is supposed to feel when losing blood; something seemed to be flowing slowly out of his body, taking with it, along with his strength, the black clots of his suffering. (116)

Vampire-like images become more and more common as the novel progresses and Fabrizio plunges headlong into the surreal vortex of Moon Lake. Maria develops a life of her own and does not need him anymore; "she roamed alone through the world he despised", and he regrets not killing her off when there was still time to do so. He is contacted by a woman who claims to be Maria's granddaughter, and decides to meet her at her house on Moon Lake. In this last part of the novel, the story "crosses over into the absolute fantastic" as Fabrizio, now weaker and weaker and incapable of tearing himself off from the spell of a place and a figure (Maria's) he himself has created, gives in (mentally and physically) to Maria's imaginary granddaughter, Petra, thus succumbing, in a sadly ironical twist of fate, to his own dream of possession. Significantly enough, towards the end of the novel Petra is compared to a paper figure: "She remained completely motionless, as though cut out of black paper and set against the window's bright frame.

[...] The paper-doll figure rippled for a moment as Petra made a half-turn to face him, then settled back into its previous form, a two-dimensional, featureless silhouette” (176). Even more significantly, this paper figure that has possessed Fabrizio crushing his own struggle for possession is not the one he had invented, but one that popped out of his creation without his permission, like a whimsical yet utterly passionless imp. The joke played on Fabrizio and his ambitions could not have been any crueler. There is nothing wrong with invention as such, but claiming ownership of an invention (and all the more so of a literary invention) is a mortal sin, and Fabrizio the sinner is punished by being smothered (figuratively) in its deadly embrace.

I find the house of cards built by Duranti a rather unstable one. Its foundation is the very typical and – I would argue – trite opposition between translation and creation, one being synonymous with frustrated desire, and the other with fulfilling possession of the text. By portraying Fabrizio’s demise, Duranti does ultimately prove that even the latter was ephemeral, but the former point is so easily taken for granted by Duranti that she finds no need to support it at all. Fabrizio the translator is the man who refuses to commit, who wallows in ambiguity, who lacks the strength to make a move and hides in the coils of the unsaid:

Like someone standing in the dark who prefers not to extend his arms so as not to feel the void surrounding him, he had managed, until now, to keep that sensation at bay [that of being on his own with no protection], always taking very short steps and avoiding all risks – such as writing for himself instead of translating others, or responding in full to Fulvia’s affections, or entering the fray of human relations ... (44)

If anything, doesn’t translation clash precisely with ambiguity? Doesn’t it force the translator to constantly take charge and make interpretative and stylistic decisions, while the author had the luxury of hiding behind the curtain of ambiguity? Doesn’t translation entail taking one risk after another? In her essay, “Seductions and Brazen Duplications: Two Recent Novels from Italy”, Sharon Wood (1992: 353) claims that “delirium for Fabrizio begins at the point when translation becomes interpretation, when the linear transfer becomes [and here she quotes Kristeva] ‘mutual indebtedness’, a narcissistic appropriation of the imaginary”. What seems to be an all-too-common assumption (on the part of both Wood and Duranti) is that translation does not have and should not have any ties to interpretation (or, God forbid, to possession of the work). Translators are supposed to merely “transfer” words in a linear fashion, as if the translation process were completely detached from them.<sup>10</sup> They are perceived as being no more two-dimensional featureless silhouettes than the paper-doll figure in the novel, except that she at least acquires a life of her own. In order to aspire at truly possessing a work of art, they have only one option: becoming writers themselves, but, alas, Duranti the writer seems to sigh, possession is but an illusion. Inevitably, a myopic point of departure can only result in a stale, self-centered conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> "Romanzo favola" (translations are mine).

<sup>2</sup> "Fa un lavoro che non gli dispiace e che sa fare" (Del Buono 1984 ; my translation).

<sup>3</sup> In an interview with Donatella de Ferra, Duranti explains: "io ho imparato il tedesco prima dell'italiano, poi lo ho in qualche modo rifiutato, nel senso che per me il tedesco era proprio la lingua della mia separazione da mia madre. Avevo queste signorine che erano per lo più antipatiche, avevo la certezza che erano state messe lì non tanto perché io imparassi il tedesco, quanto perché io non affliggessi la vita di mia madre" ("I learnt German before Italian, but I later rejected it, because to me German was the language that represented my separation from my mother. My tutors were mostly obnoxious governesses, and I was sure they had been put there not so much for the purpose of teaching me German, but so that I would not bother my mother"; my translation).

<sup>4</sup> "Non ho nessunissimo piacere nel leggere in tedesco, nell'andare a vedere un film tedesco" (de Ferra; my translation).

<sup>5</sup> As she claims in her interview with Donatella de Ferra: when asked about her ideal reader, Duranti describes him/her as “smart, patient, not necessarily very erudite, because even if s/he doesn’t recognize a quotation from *Hamlet* it does not matter at all ... but s/he does have to be sharp, with a certain something, an *esprit de finesse*, that’s it” (“intelligente, paziente, non necessariamente coltissimo, perché se anche non riconosce che c’è una citazione di Amleto non ha nessunissima importanza ... però, però sottile, insomma, ecco, con un *esprit de finesse*, ecco”; my translation).

<sup>6</sup> See also Ottavio Cecchi (1984): “Duranti translates from German and English, and is familiar with the many struggles involved in translating” (“La Duranti traduce dal tedesco, dall’inglese, e sa quali e quante siano le pene del tradurre”; my translation).

<sup>7</sup> When asked by de Ferra whether Fabrizio’s view of women comes from Fontane or Döblin, Duranti claims that she doesn’t “believe in these things” and that, rather than being influenced by these authors, he is a slave to his own impotence and weakness.

<sup>8</sup> Other well-known literary dandies are Jean Floressas Des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysmans’ 1884 novel, *À Rebours* (*Against Nature*), Thomas Mann’s *Tonio Kröger* (1903), and Lafcadio in André Gide’s 1914 novel, *Les caves du Vatican* (*Lafcadio’s Adventures*).

<sup>9</sup> “Travalica adesso nel fantastico assoluto” (Giudici 1984; my translation).

<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Fabrizio is doubly exploited: as a translator, and as a translator-character whose only function is that of representing the dangers of trespassing into creation, or of desiring possession of that which cannot and should not be possessed.

