Mario Domenichelli

Wyatt's 'translation' of Petrarch's «una candida cerva»

yatt's Who so list to haunt *is no translation of sonnet 190 of Petrarch's* Canzoniere, *unless we take 'translation'* lato sensu, *and literally, as 'transmutation' into something different, which is exactly what I am interested in.*

Una candida cerva sopra l'erba
verde m'apparve, con duo corna d'oro,
fra due riviere, all'ombra di un alloro,
levando 'l sole a la stagione acerba.
Era sua vista sì dolce superba,
ch'i' lasciai per seguirla ogni lavoro
come l'avaro che 'n cercar tesoro
con diletto l'affanno disacerba.
«Nessun mi tocchi – al bel collo d'intorno
scritto avea di diamanti et di topazi –:
libera farmi al mio Cesare parve».
Et era 'l sol già vòlto al mezzo giorno,
gli occhi miei stanchi di mirar, non sazi,
quand'io caddi ne l'acqua, et ella sparve.[1]

Indeed one may even say that Wyatt, the first English Petrarchist and sonneteer, never really translates Petrarch. He rather adapts Petrarch's poems, even when he seems to literally translate them (*which is not the case of Petrarch's sonnet 190*) *de-contextualizing Petrarch's language, situations, emblems in order to record what would seem to be Wyatt's* Erlebnis, *his life-experience. Wyatt's poems often refer to the courtier's dangers and frustrations and difficult survival in what Skelton once had defined as the* Bowge of Court, *the kind of hell also described in other socials contexts by Pietro Aretino in his* Court Dialogues. *Not infrequently these two dimensions, the love-game and court policy, or court intrigues, or simply court life, easily melt into one and the same situation.*

Needless to say the kind of verse used by Wyatt is different from Petrarch's eleven-syllables line, naturally turned into the obvious English solution of the iambic pentameter, or, more probably, into nine,

or eleven, or even twelve-syllables lines. But one may also say that, in any case, Wyatt, trying to shape his iambic pentameters, frequently, if not always, falls into the English natural four-beat lines inherited by the alliterative tradition; the rime scheme also changes thus defining a new structure and therefore a new tone. Wyatt generally seems to keep to an eight-lines unit, which I would not dare to define as an octave if not from a merely formal point of view. This 'octave' is divided into two quatrains (*ABBA ABBA in the case we are dealing with, elsewhere with variations of course more or less loosely linking the first and the second quatrain*), *and is followed by a* sestina *whose two last lines form a couplet* (*CDDC EE*), *which is quite typical in Wyatt even though somewhere else he adopts other solutions* (*CDECDE*). *Be as it may, the final couplet, with its epigrammatic effect, is Wyatt's more obvious and effective legacy and contribution to the shaping of the English sonnet, that is the form used by Spenser and Shakespeare, which may come from Wyatt's experiments with Serafino Aquilano's* strambotto. *This, as we shall see, is one of the prosodic contaminations through which Wyatt succeeds in turning Petrarch into an early Tudor 'maker'.*[2] *We may also say that, after all, in Wyatt one has often the impression of having to deal with a sonnet form composed of three quatrains closed by a final couplet. In Wyatt's semi-translation, partly imitation, in any case a rewriting of Petrarch in a quite different key, also the lexicon is changed, and the narration too, with some effect of* degradatio *of the original from a sublime to a middle style, from mysticism to realism. Wyatt moves from Petrarch's sublimation effect (transplanting the urgency of fleshly desire into a spiritual dimension) to just the opposite effect. With Wyatt,* das irdishen Leben, *earthly life, is exactly what counts, and attracts the poet's attention with all the urgency of the flesh, love checkmates, political fears, disillusions, frustrated ambitions. Petrarch talks about heaven, Wyatt takes him down to the earth, even though with all the* levitas, *the frequently bitter lightness implicit in the ending couplet witty* cauda. *This* Stylmischung *is the Auerbach-like thesis we shall try to demonstrate.*

The imitation / translation we are going to deal with is sonnet 7 in Kenneth Muir's 1949 edition of Wyatt's poems (*see also, of course, Muir and Thompson's edition*).[3] *The sonnet is taken from the Egerton Manuscript:*

Who so list to hount, I knowe where is an hynde,
But as for me, helas, I may no more:
The vayne travail hath weried me so sore.
I am of theim that farthest commeth behinde;
Yet may I by no meanes my weried mynde
Drawe from the Diere: but as she fleeth afore,
Faynting I folowe. I leve of therefore,
Sins in a nett I seke to hold the wynde.
Who list her hount, I put him owte of dowbte,
As well as I may spend his tyme in vain:
And, graven with Diamonds, in letters plain
There is written her faier neck rounde abowte:
Noli me tangere, for Cesars I ame;
And wylde for to hold, though I seme tame.[4]

We have eleven syllables in the first line, eleven in line 13, and 9 in line 14, which can be indifferently explained with Wyatt's peculiar sense of rhythm, or his awkwardness in handling the sonnet form, or with the fact that he was totally inadequate to translate Petrarch, or with the persistence in Wyatt's ear of the alliterative tradition and the four-beats line not very consciously hybridized with Latin prosody and syllable counting. However, we are interested in something different. The first thing one must notice is that whereas with Petrarch we are in a typical dream-vision, with Wyatt we very simply find ourselves transferred on an emblematic-metaphorical ground, with the impression that the poet is talking with urgent directness of real life experience. Petrarch's sonnet is as enigmatical as a dream can be as Rosanna Bettarini says in her recent edition of Petrarch's Canzoniere *on commenting* Una candida cerva. *Bettarini says the sonnet has three movements;*[5] *we think it has four: the first is the dream vision of the* cerva *as a mysterious emblem in some* hortus conclusus *between two rivers, with her golden horns, in the shade of the laurel, in springtime, at dawn. All these details, I believe, need no explanation, as they are clearly part of Petrarch's emblematic jargon, and only seemingly opaque, being in fact totally transparent. The second movement shapes the enchantment effect of the vision on the dreaming onlooker; the third is the interdiction justified by a somewhat seemingly contradictory, and enigmatic* formula *written in diamond and topaz around the* cerva's *neck: «Nessun mi tocchi, libera farmi al mio Cesare parve», through which*

the deer's freedom is denied by the fact she belongs to her Cesar (*her Lord, certainly enough, to whom she is reserved, and by way of allusion our Lord, God*). *But, of course, freedom here means freedom from earthly desires and fleshly drives, and freedom therefore from the chains of earthly love. The fourth movement is the* Noli, *the* cave *movement, in which the* Cerva *is untouched and indeed untouchable as she belongs to her Lord. I am not going to repeat what everybody can find in Bettarini's comment about Petrarch's* Nessun mi tocchi,[6] *which Wyatt, spotting out the evangelical note present in Petrarch, translates as* Noli me tangere, *possibly following Romanello's sonnet 3 in his* Liber Rhytmorum vulgarium *published in Verona in 1470* (*«Tocar non lice la mia carne intera. /* Caesaris enim sum»), *even though Romanello, in his turn, was of course imitating Petrarch. Stefano Carrai strikes the right note by referring to* John *XX 17, in which Christ himself after the Resurrection cannot be touched by anyone and, in the* Vulgata *Latin translation of John's* Gospel, *pronounces the famous* Noli me tangere.[7] *Here Bettarini says something interesting: the* Cerva *is «riserva di caccia» of one Lord who has captured her once and has marked his lordship over her by the collar she wears, however indicating with the diamonds and topaz the virtue of chastity, and the* triumphus castitatis contra cupididatem.[8]

Wyatt, as a matter of fact, understands well both the literal meaning and the spirit of the sonnet (*also using either Vellutello's* Canzoniere *edition published in 1525, or Philelpo's Petrarch, published in 1476 and many times republished, and once in 1522*);[9] *the fact is that Wyatt uses Petrarch's sonnet in order to say something different, and linked to everyday life at court. Of course one may remember that Wyatt was sent to jail in May 1536, perhaps for other reasons, a street-fight in which Wyatt had killed an opponent, and yet in coincidence with Anne Boleyn's indictment and the trial which brought her, with her brother and two other gentlemen of her group, to the scaffold to be beheaded for treason, with Anne also guilty of incest with her own brother, and* impudicitia *with the other two gentlemen. One may also remember the story about Wyatt courting Anne in competition with King Henry in person. In 1525, during some bowl game at Greenwich castle, as is reported by Wyatt's grandson, George Wyatt, King Henry was playing bowls with the Duke of Suffolk, Francis Brian, and Wyatt, when a dispute arose about who had won the last thrown. Henry cried out:*

to Wyatt with a smile: «'I tell thee it is mine!'. Wyatt replied 'if it may like your Majesty to give me leave that I may measure it, I hope it will be mine'». Wyatt, of course understood well what the King meant, and in the end he very simply withdrew. But that was not enough; as is told by Wyatt's grandnephew, the young man was immediately after sent to France on a diplomatic mission.[10] *There might be something true in all this, but what interests us now and here is the fact that both the story we've just been telling, and the sonnet we are dealing with, seem to refer to one and the same atmosphere. Wyatt's sonnet, for aught we can see, has only two movements: the first defines the situation of the* vox poetans. *He is one who has been defeated in the deer's hunt, which he considers as tiring, wearing, and vain as it would be with one who would «seek in a nett to hold the wynde» (from Petrarch's* canzone *239*);[11] *the second is the* cave! *movement, formulated as an advice to all the other hunters who are doomed to the same defeat since the Hynde is the reserved property of a Lord, if not of a king:* «Noli me tangere *for Cesars I ame»; on the other hand the hynde is wild, and cannot be captured and held. In Wyatt we find no golden horns, no* hortus conclusus, *no springtime, no rising sun, no laurel tree. In Petrarch the* vox poetans *leaves his daily work to follow the* Cerva, *and this is his delight that* disacerba l'affanno, *lightens grief. There is no competition in Petrarch, there are no hunters, no hunting, no struggle to be the first in the* Cerva's *hunt; there is only a dream enigmatically closed by a fall into the water, and the vanishing of the vision.*
In short we may suggest that Wyatt simply cut what was useless to him, as he was writing a comment of his own life at court, and added all the elements that allow us to read his poem as a comment on his Erlebnis, *shaped and perceived through an ancient common place which we find, for example in some songs which Wyatt must have known well:*

I have bene a foster
\ Long and many a day
Foster wyl I be no more
No lenger shote I may;
Yet have I bene a foster.[12]

This incipit *is followed by a some six-stanzas development of the common-place theme of the old man's renounce to love. Surely Wyatt*

also knew Blow thi horne hunter! *Another early Tudor period ballad:*

Sore this dere strykyn ys
And yet she bledes no whytt;
She lay so fayre, I cowd not mys;
Lord, I was glad of it!
As I stod under a bank
The dere shoffe on the mede;
I stroke her so that downe she sanke,
But yet she was not dede.
There she gothe! Se ye nott,
How she gothe over the playne?
And yf ye lust to have a shott,
I warrant her barrayne.
He to go and I to go,
But he ran fast afore;
I bad hym shott and stryk the do,
For I might shott no mere.
To the covert bothe thay went,
For I fownd wher she lay;
Am arrow in her hanch she hent;
For faynte she might not bray.
I was wery of the game,
I went to the tavern to drink;
Now the construccyon of the same –
What do yow meane or think?
Here I leve and mak an end,
Now of this hunter's lore;
I think his bow ys well unbent,
His bolt may fle no more.

And yet, Wyatt is probably closer, or so it seems to me, to another Italian source, Angelo Poliziano's Stanze per la Giostra (tempo secondo o di Simonetta, *stanze 34-37*)*, in which Poliziano rewrites Petrarch's* Una candida cerva:[13]

E con le sue mani di leve aere compose
La imagin di una cerva altiera e bellla

Con alta fronte, con corna ramose,
Candida tutta, leggiadretta e snella.
E come tra le fere spaventose
Al giovan cacciatore si offerse quella,
Lieto spronò il destriere per lei seguire,
Pensando in breve darle agro martire.

E con tanto furor il corsier mosse
Che 'l bosco folto sembrava ampia strada.
La bella cerva, come stanca fosse,
più lenta tuttavia par che s'en vada,
ma quando par che già la stringa o tocchi,
picciol campo riprende avanti agli occhi.

Quanto più segue invan la vana effigie
Tanto più seguirla in van s'accende:
tutta via preme sue stanche vestigia,
sempre la giunge e pur mai non la prende.

Era già dietro alla sua distanza
Gran tratto dai compagni allontanato:
né pur d'un passo ancor la preda avanza,
e già tutto il destrier sente affannato:
ma pur seguendo sua vana speranza,
pervenne in un fiorito e verde prato.
Ivi sotto un vel candido gli apparve
Lieta una ninfa; e via la fera sparve.

Here we find the same emphasis on the hunter's weariness, and the alluring, tantalizing vanity of the hunt, which characterizes Wyatt's sonnet. I am not suggesting that Wyatt's real source is Poliziano, even though Poliziano's octave with the ending couplet may even encourage suppositions. I am only saying that evidently enough the two poets' expressive need was analogous, and the analogy involves also the need to transfer, transpose Petrarch on a more adaptable worldly level. In this light we might even be tempted to say that Wyatt's Who so list *is a sort of involuntary parody* – stricto sensu, *and etymologically speaking – of Petrarch's sonnet.*
The fact is that Petrarch is translated by Poliziano into a sort of pageant, into visual language, so to speak, in accordance with the

celebrative function of the Stanze per la giostra *written as a sort of pageantry text for a great Florentine tournament, while Wyatt directly translates Petrarch into court language, and all emblems, symbols, allegories seem to compose an extended metaphor of Court life. This is also shown by another tendency in Wyatt who frequently enough transin Petrarch sonnets turning them into Serafino Aquilano-like* strambottos, *or into epigrammatic forms. This happens for instance with Petrarch's* Quel foco ch'i' pensai che fosse spento (Rvf 55) *translated with clearly personal references into* Some tyme I fled that fyre that me brent[14] (*much in Serafino Aquilano's manner*). *In Wyatt's* strambotto *the story is told of the poet's voyage to Calais, following «coles that be quent», with a sort of melancholic humour about himself and some gone-by love grief, probably hinting at a diplomatic mission in which Wyatt with followed King Henry and Anne Boleyn; also Petrarch's* Vinse Hanibàl e non seppe usar poi (Rvf 103) *supplies Wyatt material and imagery for his epigram* Of Carthage he, that worthie warier,[15] *another Serafino-like* strambotto, *with the usual personal references. In this particular case Wyatt refers to the situation in which he found himself during the period of his embassy in Spain, and to his hope to be called back to London. Wyatt's sonnet* The Piller pearisht ys whearto I lent[16] *partly translates, partly rewrites in a gloomier tone of black desperation* Rotta è l'alta colonna e 'l verde lauro (Rvf 269), *written by Petrarch in a somewhat analogous situation, with reference to a powerful friend's death, and the poet's consequent anxiety about his future. Thus the death of Petrarch's friend, Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, is turned into the ruinous political fall of Wyatt's political patron, Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell's death meant to Wyatt disgrace with the King, and the poet knew too well he was to face a very difficult period, and a decline in his* fortuna. *As a consequence of Cromwell's fall Wyatt was sent to jail in the Tower in 1541, and had good reasons to fear for his own life. What strikes more in Wyatt's poetry, both in his original compositions and in his translations or imitations, is the impression of some personal anxiety, frustration, urgency, expectations, as happens with Catullus, or Propertius. However, Wyatt expresses all this by mixing several models in a totally original way. Thus we find Chaucer, for instance, the Chaucer in his turn influenced by Ovid, in Wyatt's royal rhyme composition* They Fle from me.[17] *This poem clearly imitates some*

stanzas in Chaucer's Troilus and Cresseyde *in which the cruel lady and Fortune have one and the same face.*[18]
The effect, as I was saying, is one of Stylmischung, *of the sublime with common every-day language, or the reduction of the sublime to a medium colloquial language, on a more informal register of speech, the kind of* Stylmischung *we also find in Shakespeare's* Sonnets.
Wyatt was in Italy on a diplomatic mission in 1527. Only two years before, in 1525, Bembo had published his Prose della Volgar lingua *in which Petrarch was defined as the very linguistic model to be followed in poetry, and also the language model for the* cortegiano, *the courtier. Bembo's perspective in favour of a highly refined language is clear in the words of the 'Magnifico' discussing with Giuliano in Book I, Chapter XVIII:*

Debole e arenoso fondamento avete alle vostre ragioni dato, se io non m'inganno, Giuliano dicendo che perché le favelle si mutano, egli si dee sempre a quel parlare, ch'è in bocca delle genti, quando altri si mette a scrivere, appressare, o avvicinare i componimenti, conciòssiacosacché di esser *letto e inteso dagli uomini che vivono, si debba cercare o procacciare per ciascuno.* Perciocché se questo fosse vero, ne seguirebbe, che a coloro che popolarescamente scrivono, maggior loda si convenisse dare, che a quegli che le scritture loro dettano e compongono più figurate e più gentili [...] non è la moltitudine, Giuliano, quella che alle composizioni di alcun secolo dona grido e autorità.[19]

Bembo's Prose *started a querelle on what the «lingua di palazzo», «la lingua cortigiana» should be: whether any man of quality should speak a* lingua d'eccezione *or rather a* lingua d'uso, *with Calmeta, Sperone Speroni, and even Castiglione in his* Book of the Courtier, *taking sides with the* lingua d'uso *partisans. As I wrote a few years ago, Wyatt came to Italy at the right moment, when the* lingua cortegiana *question* was à l'ordre du jour, *and the debate at its peak. Thus we may perhaps assume that Wyatt's Petrarch came to him through that debate. Wyatt was probably the first maker who decided that his native tongue needed refinement; through translation, he began to shape his English version of* lingua cortegiana, *taking sides, I believe, with Calmeta, Speroni, Castiglione on the* lingua d'uso, *reading, and translating Petrarch accordingly in that lower more colloquial register, a more common speech style. Wyatt's* ars poetica, *his poetics,*

are in the obvious renaissance key of mediocritas, the key note also struck by Castiglione in Il Cortegiano with the idea of sprezzatura *as the main principle not only of literary style, but of the very* ars Vivendi *as a manifestation of* karis, *of grace in writing, in dressing, in manners as manifestations of a higher type of* karis *concerning the mind, the heart, and the soul.*[20]

The idea of writing in lingua d'uso *of course entails a direct contact between life-experience and the mode of its representation on the background of the expressive needs of a political life dangerously close to absolute power. This seems to me to explain the whole of Wyatt's production, and the singularity of his 'original' translations, in the sense that all his translations re-write their models as originals, that is as the original expression, and perception, at the same time, of the translator's peculiar life experience and corresponding perception of his inner life. Wyatt learned the language of* Selbstanschauung *from Petrarch, and yet reinterpreted that language of inner life in order to name a different* Erlebnis, *a different experience, and a different* psychomachia.

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1. Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere, Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini, 2 vols., Torino: Einaudi 2005, vol. 2, p. 874 (from now on Bettarini).

2. Raymond Southall, *The Courtly Maker*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964; Id., «The Personality of Sir Thomas Wyatt», in *Essays in Criticism*, vol. XIV, n. 1, January 1964; on Wyatt, in this perspective, see also Steven Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

3. Kenneth Muir, ed., *The Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949 (from now on Muir); Kenneth Muir & Patricia Thompson, eds., *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1969.

4. Muir, *The Collected Poems* cit., p. 7.

5. Bettarini, cit., p. 874.

6. Bettarini, cit., p. 877-78.

7. Stefano Carrai, *Il sonetto «Una candida cerva» del Petrarca*, in *Rivista di Letteratura Italiana*, III (1985), pp. 233-51.

8. Bettarini, cit., p. 878.

9. *Le volgari opera del Petrarca con la espositione di Alessandro Vellutello*, Venezia: Giovannatonio et fratelli da Sabbio, 1525; con commento di Francesco Philelpo et al., *Petrarcha...*, Venezia: Bernardino Stagnino, 1522.

10. Patricia Thompson, *Sir Thomas Wyatt and his Background*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964, p. 28.

11. But see also Morris Palmer Tilley, *Dictionary of Proverbs,* W 146, Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press 1950.

12. See on what follows my *Wyatt: il liuto infranto. Formalismo, convenzione e poesia alla corte Tudor*, Ravenna: Longo, 1975, pp. 126-27; the texts of this song and of the one that follows come from John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the early Tudor Court*, London: Methuen, 1961, pp. 408, 400.

13. Domenichelli, *Wyatt*, *il liuto infranto* cit., p. 124-25.

14. Muir, *The Collected Poems* cit., p. 45.

15. Muir, *The Collected Poems* cit., p. 82.

16. Muir, *The Collected Poems* cit., p. 162.

17. Muir, *The Collected Poems* cit., p. 28.

18. On this see my essay on *La clôture d'amour dans les histories de Troyes*, in *La clôture*, Textes réunis par Xavier-Laurent Salvador, Bologna: Clueb, 2005; on Wyatt see pp. 95-99.

19. Pietro Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, in *Opere in volgare,* Firenze: Sansoni, 1961, p. 299.

20. On all this see Mario Domenichelli, «Sir Thomas Wyatt's translation from Petrarch», in *Textus*, 1 (2002), pp. 65-86.