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Jhumpa Lahiri and Amara Lakhous:  
Resisting Self-Translation in Rome



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## Introduction

Recent research has brought to light ever-growing numbers of bilingual writers who on at least one occasion prepared dual-language versions of the same text through a process of “simultaneous” or “consecutive” self-translation (Grutman 2009). Scholars such as Simona Anselmi (2012: 33-55) in Italy, Josep Ramis (2014: 32-77) in Spain, or Eva Gentes (2016) in Germany, have listed and analysed a variety of reasons why authors would go through the trouble of writing the same text twice, and decide to enter what Samuel Beckett, in a letter to his American director, Alan Schneider, called the “wastes and wilds of self-translation” (qtd in Cohn, 1961: 617).

In this paper, I shall focus instead on bilingual writers who are reluctant to engage in this time-consuming, difficult, toilsome exercise. In the above-quoted letter Beckett admits to dreading the “many miserable months” he will spend turning *Fin de partie* into *Endgame*. Vladimir Nabokov, arguably the other most-studied self-translator, uses more colourful language in his correspondence with princess Zenaïda Schakovskoy to describe a process he likens to “sorting through one’s own innards, and then trying them on for size like a pair of gloves” (qtd in Beaujour, 1989: 90). A holistic perspective on self-translation would neither dismiss nor discard, but rather include, the study of these opinions. Writers who master two (or more) languages, are well-read in more than one literary tradition and therefore able to fine-tune their writing accordingly, view self-translation as either an opportunity to be seized or an obstacle to be avoided. Even when they refuse to self-translate, however, they ponder the (im)possibility of doing so, weighing the pros and cons of self-translation. Indeed, to the extent that the decision to prepare an other-language version is made by the bilingual individuals themselves (and not forced upon them by external forces such as political patronage or censorship), it remains an option without ever becoming an obligation. Non-self-translation, in other words, is part of the bigger picture of self-translation.

The outright hostility sometimes displayed by publishers who refuse to mention, let alone advertise, that a book previously existed in another language, while certainly a valid object of enquiry, lies beyond the scope of this article, which primarily addresses resistance to self-translation among authors who, qua bilingual subjects, might have been tempted to rewrite their work across languages. Interestingly enough, the most obvious explanation for such resistance, i.e. a real or perceived lack of linguistic skills in the target language, rarely enters into the equation. A much more common argument is related to the time that goes into preparing a second version, time many bilingual writers feel is better spent producing

“original” work. Even a seasoned self-translator like Raymond Federman (1993: 80) acknowledges as much:

Most of my poems and short-stories exist bilingually. My feeling here is that the original text is not complete until there is an equivalent version in French or in English. Perhaps the same need for completeness, for finishedness into the other language is there too for the novels, but laziness, fear, apprehension, *and of course time* prevent me from doing the work. (emphasis mine)

The “fear” and “apprehension” he mentions are linked to another trait of self-translation, namely its tendency (which it shares with translation tout court) to reveal, lay bare, even expose “the poverty, the semantic but also the metaphorical poverty of certain words in the other language” (Federman, 1993: 80), i.e. the source language, that of the original. Once the translation process has begun, it no longer is a stand-alone text, to be judged on its own merits, but will inevitably be compared and weighed, with the risk of being found wanting (*minus habens*, as per Jerome’s translation of the *Book of Daniel*, 5.27).

Some bilingual writers, e.g. Nancy Huston in France or André Brink in South-Africa, are not deterred by this but see the shadow their self-translations cast on their originals as something more positive: they use it as a form of feedback, of quality control. Many others, however, are intimidated by the thrust of translation. The fear of exposing the frailty of her newly acquired Italian and the need to protect this “newborn,” this “little brother” (Lahiri, 2016: 119) from being crushed by her older and stronger English sibling, both played a role in Jhumpa Lahiri’s decision not to translate her Italian book(s) into English herself. Amara Lakhous, the second exophonic writer discussed here, illustrates a very different type of resistance to self-translation. He is part of a breed of writers who did in fact transfer their work into another language but refuse to view this activity, and the product thereof, as anything resembling “translation”. It is quite surprising to see the lengths to which self-translators will go to avoid calling a spade a spade. Many prefer to speak of “rewriting”; others, following I.B. Singer’s example, do not hesitate to refer to their second versions as “second originals”<sup>1</sup>. Raymond Federman probably deserves the award for the most eloquent stance against self-translation: he claimed to “write (rewrite, adapt, transform, transact, transcreate – I am not sure what term I should use here, but certainly not translate) the original into the other language” (1993: 79).

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<sup>1</sup> “[W]orking on the translation and working on the book itself go together, because when it’s being translated I see some of the defects and I work on them – so in a way the English translation is sometimes almost a second original” (Singer in Dembo & Pondrom, 1972: 61; the interview took place on March 29, 1968).

## **The Roman connection**

Many other examples could be given. In what follows, I will focus on two writers who chose to publish in Italian, a language they both discovered when in their mid-twenties (albeit in very different circumstances) and decided to add to their repertoire. Both had to address the issue of self-translation. Both resisted, if not always the practice, certainly the idea. They are: Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, better known as Jhumpa Lahiri, born in London in 1967 to Bengali parents, and Amara Lakhous, born in Algiers in 1970 to Berber (or, more correctly, *Imazighen*) parents.

There are a number of striking and not necessarily superficial similarities between them, but on the whole, their paths are quite different (and indeed have never crossed). Both are products of postcolonial displacement, yet neither tries to “write back” at the centre of the relevant former colonial empire. Lahiri writes from the United States of America (where her parents moved to when she was two), not from the United Kingdom, where Salman Rushdie famously referred to “British Indian writer[s]” as “translated men”, both because they “ha[d] been borne across the world” and because they do “not have the option of rejecting English” even when dealing with “Indian themes” (Rushdie, 1992: 17). Something comparable characterizes Amara Lakhous. In choosing to write in Italian, the language of his adoptive country, he distanced himself from or at the very least, eschewed writing in French and in France, a much more common option among North-African writers, particularly Algerians (from Kateb Yacine and Mouloud Feraoun to Assia Djebar and Yasmina Khadra).

Both writers also exemplify migrant writing. Amara Lakhous was twenty-five when he escaped the strife of the civil war between the army-led Algerian government and the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Not wanting to join the ranks of assassinated journalists, he went into exile alone, settling in Rome in 1995. Starting with the novel, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (2006), his first and last self-translation from Arabic, Lakhous successfully carved out a space for himself beyond the potential ghetto of Italy’s so-called *letteratura della migrazione*.

His situation is at the same time different from and similar to that of Jhumpa Lahiri. Different, in the sense that Lakhous feels much more comfortable expressing himself in Italian than Lahiri does. She discovered Italian at the same age (Lahiri, 2016: 153) but started learning the language quite a bit later, outside of Italy which is more, hence perhaps her more bookish and romanticized view. Their situation is nonetheless similar inasmuch as she, like Lakhous (an Algerian of Berber stock) speaks but cannot write her native tongue (Bengali), having first learned to write in an acquired language (English for her, Arabic for him). Lahiri

grew up in the States and is widely recognized as an American writer, winning the prized Pulitzer prize in 2000 for her literary debut, *Interpreter of Maladies*.

By pure coincidence, their transcontinental travels mirror each other. Lakhous recently (in 2014) moved to New York City after spending the better part of two decades (1995-2013) in Italy, a country of which he became a citizen in 2008. Lahiri briefly made Rome her home, from 2012 until 2015, as an American writer in residence at Trastevere's John Cabot University, before taking up her current position in creative writing at Princeton's Lewis Center for the Arts. It was in a library in Rome's Jewish ghetto, in December 2014, that she finished *In altre parole*, an autobiographical memoir chronicling her infatuation with Italian. Ten years earlier, in November 2004, also in Rome, more precisely on the Capitoline Hill, Amara Lakhous had been the first to intervene in a conference cycle on immigrant writing. Several of those talks were later bundled by Sapienza Professor Armando Gnisci (2005), in a volume entitled *Allattati dalla lupa: Scritture migranti*. Although Lakhous' text was not included, this title echoes what then was the working title of his novel, *Come fatti allattare dalla lupa senza che ti morda* (Farah 2005).

### **The Writer in Residence (Lahiri)**

Jhumpa Lahiri discovered Dante's language as a student, on a study trip to Florence in 1994. It was love at first sight, *un colpo di fulmine* (Lahiri, 2016: 12-17). While enthralled by the sound of Italian (which, for the longest time, she barely understood), it took her a decade to work up the resolve to learn the language. Curiously, this Romantic fascination with the "*lingua di cui si vanta Amore*", as John Milton wrote in one of his sonnets (providing Furio Brugnolo [2009: 79] with a title for his comprehensive overview of exophonic writing in Italian), is a very British fantasy. A century or so before E.M. Forster requested *A Room with a View*, Shelley reworked several of his English poems in Italian and Lord Byron informed his publisher, John Murray, that he meant "to write [his] best work in *Italian*", giving himself "nine years more thoroughly to master the language" (Byron 1986: 998-999).

Nine years: this is about the time it took Lahiri to reach the point where she was able to pen her first short story in Italian, *Lo scambio*, which tellingly evolves around "a woman, a translator, who wanted to be another person" (Lahiri, 2016: 67). It is included in *In altre parole* (66-81) as it is part of Lahiri's road map (2016: 219). She charts her slow progress in a language that continues to elude her – a bit like French forever eluded Agota Kristof (2004: 23-24), the celebrated Swiss author who, as a Hungarian refugee, only learned French as an adult. Lahiri (2016: 224-225) quotes Kristof's *L'Analphabète* towards the end of her own

language memoir, which, though by no means a hefty tome (the original edition, published by Parma's Ugo Guanda in February 2015, comes in at less than 150 pages), cost her a lot of effort. The effort did not go unnoticed in Italy, where *In altre parole* went on to win the international Viareggio-Versilia literary award. In April 2015, Lahiri herself would receive an honorary doctorate in Italian language and culture from the Università per Stranieri at Siena. In North-America and in the rest of the English-speaking world, the book came out in 2016 after being excerpted in *The New Yorker* (Lahiri, 2015). It was marketed in a bilingual edition with Lahiri's Italian text on the left and Ann Goldstein's, not the author's, translation on the right.

At the beginning of *In Other Words*, an "Author's Note" explains why Lahiri did not prepare the English-language version herself: "I instinctively felt [...] that another translator, one with more experience and with greater objectivity, was best suited to perform this operation" (Lahiri, 2016: xiv). Ann Goldstein obviously fits the bill: an experienced translator, she did books by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Alessandro Baricco before becoming famous for rendering Elena Ferrante's best-selling Neapolitan novels in English (she is also the translator of Amara Lakhous' novels, incidentally). Lahiri's admission is nevertheless remarkable, of a candour rarely seen among writers and one that deserves to be saluted accordingly. By saying that somebody else is both more qualified ("experience") and in a better position ("objectivity") than herself, the original creator, she belies the widely held view (by both writers and literary critics) that self-translators can per definition do more and better, to the point where they are right even when they are wrong.

There is a moment in the book where Lahiri's husband, Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, echoes this view, apropos of a piece she had written directly in Italian for the 2013 edition of Capri's literary festival, *Le Conversazioni, scrittori a confronto (Conversations between Writers)*: "You should do the translation yourself. Better you than someone else, otherwise it won't be under your control" (Lahiri, 2016: 115). So she sets out to translate the piece, but is soon "astonished at how demanding" (2016: 117) the task of self-translating turns out to be, even into a fully-mastered language. Lahiri "feel[s] split in two", unable to "deal with the tension", "incapable of moving like an acrobat between [two] languages" that "aren't equal": her "Italian remains much weaker" (2016: 119). "The translation is devouring, dismantling the original text" (2016: 117), breaking the charm by unveiling, revealing, exposing the (relative) stylistic poverty of her Italian.

Control is indeed a key-issue for bilingual writers, but Lahiri (unlike Beckett or Nabokov, for instance) trusts her translator, whose work she salutes. Goldstein was able to

bring the translingual sheep that is *In altre parole* back to the fold of the English language, all the while “render[ing her] Italian honestly, without smoothing out its rough edges, without neutralizing its oddness, without manipulating its character”, more successfully resisting the temptation “to make it stronger” than Lahiri (2016: xiv) thinks she could or would have done herself. The ultimately reterritorializing gesture of translation seems to be beyond the reach of a writer who had so deliberately sought to distance, uproot, deterritorialize herself by changing languages.

In reading Lahiri’s *In altre parole*, one is struck by the abundance of spatial metaphors relating to language, and in particular by the many images expressing distance and separation, or both at the same time: “this Italian project of mine makes me acutely aware of the immense distance between languages. A foreign language can signify a total separation” (2016: 91). This quote comes from a chapter that looks back on the book’s initial image, likening language learning to swimming across a lake, letting go of the shore that is the native language (2016: 2-5). Lahiri now feels this metaphor was “wrong”, not in itself, but rather because of the size of the vehicle chosen: “in fact a language isn’t a small lake but an ocean”. “In Italian I lack complete perspective”, she goes on to say, using another spatial term: “I lack the distance that would help me. I have only the distance that hinders me” (2016: 91).

Some similes are predictably poetic: visiting Italy, Lahiri (2016: 93) summons the subterranean passages below Hadrian’s Villa in Tivoli, or the maze of Venice’s *sestieri* with all their “dead ends” and “tight corners” (2016: 99), to convey her own language travels and travails. At one point, discussing life in a foreign language in a foreign country, Lahiri says she keeps on hitting a “Wall” (2016: 134-145). In Italy, because of her “physical appearance, [she’s] seen as a foreigner” (2016: 139), as an *extracomunitaria* (my word, not hers). Locals who don’t know her cannot imagine that she actually speaks Italian, “no matter how well [she] learn[s] it” (2016: 137). They “don’t understand [her] because they don’t want to listen to [her], accept [her]. That’s how the wall works” (2016: 139). Her level of Italian is unfavourably compared to her husband’s, an American of Greek and Guatemalan descent who is prone to mixing up Italian and Spanish but looks the part, and can pass as an Italian...

Underlying spatial metaphors is an “equation of location with locution” (to use one of Steven Kellman’s expressions), an assumption that once upon a time, languages were anchored in space before being uprooted. In this linguistic Eden, nothing was out of place, words fit like gloves around the meaning they were trying to convey. In Lahiri’s world view, “every language belongs to a specific place. It can migrate, it can spread. But usually it’s tied to a geographical territory, a country. Italian belongs mainly to Italy, and I live on another

continent, where one does not readily encounter it” (2016: 19). This is a surprising statement coming from someone who grew up in a country, the United States, where English was once transplanted (it did not naturally “spread”) yet now seems to belong almost naturally (the same goes for French, Spanish or Portuguese in other parts of the Americas). Lahiri, however, is not thinking of the languages brought with them by early European conquistadores and settlers, but rather of those that, imported later on (and perhaps belatedly), failed to take root or did so with much more difficulty. For her, Italian is on the other side of the Ocean. In her version of the United States, it is spoken by individuals, not by members of more or less tight-knit communities. The Italians that surround Lahiri (2016: 131) at the airport are tourists “going home after their vacations in New York”, not immigrants going back to visit relatives in the Old Country. Her Venetian teacher spent more than thirty years in Brooklyn and “brought up her children in America” (2016: 31) yet packs up her belongings and leaves, destination and destiny unknown (2016: 131). Even Lahiri’s parents are described as language islands, cut off from the home base, using Bengali outside of its supposed biotope (2016: 126-127, 148-151).

This need to spatially anchor languages leads Lahiri (2016: 129) to think in terms of distance, emotional as well as physical, of separation, even of “straniamento” (“estrangement”) – a word used with respect to both Bengali (2016: 18-19) and English (2016: 128-129). Italian enabled her to drive a wedge between her and the English language, “a stepmother” (2016: 147) that had previously displaced Bengali, her “mother tongue” as well as that of roughly 200 million other people around the world, but which in the United States had been reduced to “a secret, unknown language, lacking any correspondence to the environment” (2016: 19). Consequently, she felt “suspended” between her two languages, the mother and the stepmother, “rather than rooted” (2016: 111) in one of them. Thanks to Italian, the line drawn in the sand between English and Bengali becomes a love-and-hate “triangle” (2016: 153), with English as its “base” and “most stable, fixed side” (2016: 157). Inevitably, if one feels that languages are meant to each inhabit specific and separate spaces, they will look out of place as soon as they change places, or worse, take each other’s place, as they do in translation. Even without being “domesticating” (Venuti), translation is a form of appropriation, of conquest of meaning, and therefore of reterritorialization.

### **The Educated Immigrant (Lakhous)**

According to the slogan used on his website and in many interviews, Amara Lakhous wants to “Arabize Italian and Italianize Arabic”, to hybridize, cross-pollinate, creolize each



language from within. Between 2003 and 2010, he thus produced “twin versions”<sup>2</sup> (“versioni gemelle”) in both languages of two novels: *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* and *Divorzio all’islamica a viale Marconi*. The first novel was *the* literary surprise of 2006. It made the *Corriere della sera*’s list of bestsellers in the category of “narrativa italiana” (not “narrativa straniera”) and received two awards: the Flaiano (named after Fellini’s screenwriter<sup>3</sup>) and the Racalmare-Leonardo Sciascia (in memory of the great Sicilian novelist). It was even turned into a movie by Isotta Toso.

However, *Scontro di civiltà* was neither conceived nor originally written in Italian. When the novel hit the bookshelves in Italy, it had been available in the Arab world for two years as *Kayfa tarḍa’u min al-dhi’ba dūna an tarḍa’aka* (*How to be suckled by the she-wolf without her biting you*). The original title evidently references the foundation myth of the Eternal City, but with a twist: in addition to nourishing the descendants of Romulus and Remus, the she-wolf is a decidedly ambivalent agent of social integration, capable of mauling and killing those she welcomes within the walls of the *urbs*:

Molti immigrati emarginati [...] non smettono di ululare tristemente, perché il morso della lupa è doloroso. Ogni tanto l’ululato è come il pianto. Invece io ululo di gioia, un’immensa gioia. Mi allato dalla lupa insieme ai due orfanelli Romolo e Remo. Adoro la lupa, non posso fare a meno del suo latte. (Lakhous, 2006: 117)

Though this excerpt is taken from the Italian self-translation, all agency is removed from the more abstract title chosen for that version: *Scontro di civiltà* (“clash of civilizations”). This is no doubt a significant shift, but one would be mistaken to extrapolate from there that the novel as a whole underwent substantial changes in the process of passing from Arabic into Italian. In fact, as has been shown by Maria Grazia Negro (2006), Lorenzo Casini (2016) and Chiara Lusetti (2017), plot and setting remain identical, as do the number and names of the characters (with one exception, where Lakhous corrects the too Portuguese-sounding name of a Peruvian character). The novel’s very particular structure, with chapters alternating between the point of view of one of its eleven characters and “wailing” sessions by its narrator, Ahmed, has barely been touched either. On the whole, resemblances far outweigh

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<sup>2</sup> On one occasion, Lakhous describes them as “*due versioni gemelle dello stesso libro, con titoli e copertine differenti, la stessa trama e gli stessi personaggi, anche se con nomi diversi*” (D’Alessio 2014). On another, he underlines the differences instead: “they are twin texts with the same mother, the same father — but maybe one is male and one female, one is tall, one is short — they aren’t identical” (Ray 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Coincidentally, Ennio Flaiano was also the author of one of Italy’s first (post)colonial novels, *Tempo di uccidere* (1947) – with thanks to Loredana Polezzi for pointing this out to me.

differences, with changes chiefly taking place on the micro-structural level of words and individual sentences.

The process that gave rise to *Scontro di civiltà* is perhaps even more interesting than the finished product. This aspect has been equally well documented by Negro. Her article shows Amara Lakhous translating the Arabic text “pagina per pagina, senza dizionario”, a detail meant to attest to his very solid knowledge of the target language a decade after his arrival in Italy – this, incidentally, is the very opposite of Jhumpa Lahiri, who surrounds herself with dictionaries and consults them constantly.

Yet nothing in the peritextual material of Lakhous’ novel (be it on the cover or inside, on the title page or even the copyright page) informs readers that another text, in another language, stood model for this one. There is no indication that it was “translated by the author” or even that it was translated tout court, an omission that qualifies *Scontro di civiltà* as an “opaque self-translation” in Dasilva’s (2016) sense. The decision to publish a translation without advertising it as such may well lay with the publisher, of course. After all, most literary awards (including the ones given to *Scontro di civiltà*) are the purview of “original” writing; few are available for translations. But there seems to be more at stake than matters of marketing. With *Scontro di civiltà*, we witness the birth of a writer, or rather the careful crafting of a writer’s persona. In that process, there is no place for translation.

When interviewed, Lakhous is fond of turning the paronymic pun, ‘traduttore traditore’, to his advantage, e.g. “I wrote *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* in Arabic first and then I re-wrote it in Italian. I didn’t translate it – in fact I betrayed it (‘Non l’ho tradotto, l’ho tradito’)” (Esposito 2012: 422). The outcome of his linguistic forays takes the form of a binary kind of bilingualism which gives short shrift to translation: “Io ho scelto di scrivere in due lingue: ogni romanzo ha due versioni, una in arabo e una in italiano” (Brogi, 2011: 3). What Lakhous claims to do with his novels is therefore deemed “a creative act, an act of rewriting, not translation” (Lakhous in Ray 2014). This, however, is a statement of principle, an axiomatic assertion, not an empirical one: existing comparative analyses of his twin versions did not yield much textual evidence to back it up.

Looking at what lies behind statements such as these (of which many more examples can be found in his interviews, see Grutman, 2016), not so much in terms of what motivates them psychologically as of what larger purpose they serve, we realize that they mainly stand to benefit the writer *qua* agent. His refusal to acknowledge the role played by translation is central to his stance as a writer. He constructs the latter as a persona that is inherently different from, and fundamentally incommensurate with, that of a translator.

In an early interview from 2005, when he was ‘rewriting’ his Arabic novel, Lakhous was asked by Cristina Ubaq Ali Farah, an important exponent of Italy’s migrant literature: “Che cosa intendi quando dici che riscrivi il tuo romanzo in italiano?”. Rather than describing his work method and techniques, he invoked his privileged status as author of the original:

dico che lo riscrivo in italiano perché non si tratta di una semplice auto-traduzione. Non essendo obbligato a rispettare il testo originale, lo ricreo a mio piacimento. In tal senso godo di una libertà che il traduttore normalmente non ha. (Farah 2005)

The keyword here is “libertà”. Freedom is what sets apart authors and translators, with the latter subjecting themselves to the former’s text, wish and will. Their work is dismissed as being too “limited” in scope or too “simple” altogether: the qualifier chosen (“semplice”) nothing less than disqualifies translation as an endeavour, and, metonymically, the individuals involved. This (and every) condition of servility, subordination or colonisation, is precisely what Lakhous rejects. Very much aware of the fact that getting published involves a series of asymmetrical negotiations with different stakeholders, he resists relinquishing control of his work:

Io preferisco non dare il mio testo ad un *editor* di una casa editrice che ne può fare quello che vuole. Questo è noto e succede ai migliori scrittori, soprattutto per quel che riguarda la struttura del linguaggio. Ci sono autori che riescono a negoziare, perché alla fine si tratta di una questione di potere. Credo che la decolonizzazione consista in questo, nel non lasciarsi colonizzare da altri. Voglio essere io il comandante della nave. Sono io che decido quali modifiche apportare al mio testo. (Farah 2005)

Lakhous learned to speak and write the language fluently. Unlike other migrant writers, he did not need to be “chaperoned” by Italian journalists who ended up co-signing their memoirs (Burns, 1998). By granting his self-translations the more prestigious status of “creative acts”, of “acts of rewriting”, Lakhous seeks to promote them to a higher echelon. But he also wants to stay in control of texts that he alone, “the captain of the ship”, is allowed to modify, to transform, to rewrite.

So strong is Lakhous’ resistance to the label of (self)translation that it almost prompts one to examine more closely the role translation played in his career. Let us not forget that it was Silvia Ballestra’s translation of *L’Étoile d’Alger* by a fellow-Algerian, Aziz Chouaki, that made him want to publish with Sandro Ferri and Sandra Ozzola’s Edizioni e/o. These Roman

publishers put Lakhous on the map, both in Italy and abroad (the latter through... translations into English, by none other than Ann Goldstein, published by Europa Editions, a U.S.-based subsidiary of e/o). More importantly, it was thanks to unacknowledged self-translations that he became an “agent” in Italy’s literary “field” – using both terms in the technical sense they have in Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology. Translations dressed up as original writing (whether this happened knowingly or not matters little) helped Lakhous carve out a space for himself in the literature of the Italian language, instead of simply becoming one in a long series of immigrants bitten by the Roman *lupa*.

### **Distances and differences**

As can be gathered from the preceding pages, the similarities between Lahiri and Lakhous conceal important differences. First of all, we realize that they do not belong to the same generation even though they are only three years apart. It was Lakhous himself who took the initiative to leave Algiers and cross the Mediterranean, whereas Lahiri was only a toddler when her parents moved from London to Rhode Island. He is a first-generation Italian citizen, therefore, while she belongs in the United States to what sociologists call the “one-and-a-half generation” or, more commonly, “generation 1.5” (Rumbaut, 2004: 1166-1167). If migration scholars have a separate category for foreign-born children who arrive in their new country with (or in the wake of) their parents, it is because these pre-adult immigrants have a foot in both worlds. As a rule, their grasp of the languages and cultural codes of both their native and adoptive countries is superior to that of the generations coming either before (the actual first generation) or after. This comes across very clearly in the pages of Jhumpa Lahiri’s memoir that deal with her and her parents’ lives in the United States.

A second difference regards their respective linguistic repertoires<sup>4</sup>. Italian is Lahiri’s third tongue (after her parents’ Bengali and the English of her American schooling) and the fourth language Lakhous learned to speak (after Tamazight, Arabic, and French). Lahiri fell in love with the sound of Italian when visiting Florence with her sister in 1994. This marked the beginning of a long personal quest that would culminate twenty years later in her successfully starting to write in a language she had “no need to learn [...]: no family, cultural, social pressure” but rather opened up “an independent path”. Italian was “a flight from the long clash in [her] life between English and Bengali” (Lahiri, 2016: 153). Lakhous arrived in Rome a year after Lahiri had her epiphany while touring the sites of Florence. A penniless

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<sup>4</sup> An appreciation and analysis of their respective skills and style in Italian by native speakers can be found in Groppaldi (2012), and Groppaldi & Sergio (2016).

refugee with neither time nor money for tourism, he had no choice but to learn Italian on the street as much as in the classroom, from the bottom up, in what he describes as more of a struggle than an epiphany, more of a conquest than an individual quest:

prima di avere il passaporto italiano, avevo la cittadinanza perché io ne amo la lingua, la cultura, e nessuno mi ha aiutato in questo processo. È stata una cosa che ho conquistato giorno dopo giorno, andando a studiare, a lavorare, e l'ho conquistata da solo. (In Calabretta-Sajder, 2016: 832)

Where Lakhous and Lahiri differ most is in their attitude towards language, translation and self-translation. For Lakhous, language is part and parcel of his integration process into Italian society. A fan of Italian movies and detective novels, he also has a broader grasp of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italian culture than Lahiri, whose approach is more top-down and book-based: “As a writer, in whatever language, I have to take account of the presence of the greatest writers” (2016: 89). She worked her way into Italian culture by reading the canon, the way foreigners (tend to) do: novelists like Moravia and Ginzburg, Calvino and Verga; poets like Quasimodo and Saba, even Ungaretti and Leopardi... Lakhous, on the other hand, worked his way up from colloquial Italian (with its regional inflexions) to standard written Italian, the way Italians themselves used to do up to WW2. While not perfect (Lakhous admires and pays homage to Gadda’s *Pasticciaccio brutto*; Lahiri also reads Massimo Carlotto’s *gialli*), the contrast is nevertheless telling.

This might explain why Lakhous’ Italian is much more solidly anchored in firm soil than Lahiri’s. Lakhous positions himself as a Mediterranean mediator, building bridges by promoting Italian culture in Algeria and Arabic culture in Italy. Regarding the latter, he wants to “recover a shared memory” by un-covering (or, in the eyes of many an Italian, discovering) the Arabic palimpsest hidden underneath the local languagescape. To him, the etymological roots of many Sicilian names, be it of places (Racalmuto) or people (Sciascia), are traces of an erased Arab past, which he reclaims with a very masculine, reterritorializing gesture: “as an Arab writer who writes in Italian, Lakhous tells Daniela Brogi, I do not come but return to Italy”<sup>5</sup>.

Lahiri, instead, prefers the kind of fluid images (swimming, floating, immersion, drowning, sinking are all mentioned on a single page: Lahiri, 2016: 5) that not so long ago

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<sup>5</sup> “[A]rabizzare l’italiano e viceversa significa anche portare l’immaginario da una riva all’altra del Mediterraneo non soltanto nel senso dell’incontro tra le culture, ma pure nel senso della riscoperta di una memoria comune. Perché io come autore arabo che scrive in italiano non vengo ma torno in Italia, che è un luogo abitato dalla cultura araba da secoli e secoli, tanto che, per limitarmi a un paio di esempi, Sciascia e Racalmuto sono parole di origine araba” (Brogi 2011).

(e.g. Showalter, 1985) were associated with feminine writing. Her language memoir paints a picture of successive desertions and deterritorializations, of cumulative differences and accumulated distances. Difference is inscribed in the book's otherwise commonplace title (*In altre parole*: Lahiri is literally "altered" by and through language) as it is in the motto she chose: "avevo bisogno di una lingua *differente*" (emphasis mine). It is a quote from the then recently departed writer and critic, Antonio Tabucchi, more specifically from his foreword to the Italian translation of *Requiem*, a novel he had written directly in Portuguese.

It is a fitting reference. Both as a novelist and as a scholar (of Fernando Pessoa in particular), Tabucchi was fascinated with the language, culture, and history of Portugal, to the point of acquiring Portuguese citizenship. Yet he always wrote in Italian: *Requiem* was an isolated exophonic experiment. Though certainly no stranger to translation – significant parts of Pessoa (himself an occasional self-translator, cf. Figueiredo 2005) are available in Italian thanks to Tabucchi and his Portuguese wife, Maria José de Lancastre – Tabucchi left it to someone else (Sergio Vecchio) to integrate this exception into his larger oeuvre by means of translation, to flatten out the linguistic difference. This is something else he has in common with Lahiri, who confided in Ann Goldstein to translate her book, even though she herself "used to love translating from Latin [the whole of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, we will later learn], from ancient Greek, from Bengali" for her own benefit: "It was a way of *getting close* to different languages, of feeling *connected* to writers very distant from me in space and time" (2016: 121 and 163; emphasis mine). Translation has reterritorializing powers in another sense as well: it "is the most profound, most intimate way of reading", a "dynamic encounter between two languages, two texts, two writers" (2016: 121). She sees translation as a form of writing and quotes admiringly from Cesare Pavese's letters to the Italian translator of Homer, Rosa Calzecchi Onesti (Lahiri, 2016: 174-177). As a matter of fact, after *In altre parole*, Lahiri embarked on the path of translation, preparing the English-language version of at least two novels by Roman author, Domenico Starnone: *Lacci* (*Ties*, translated in 2017) and *Scherzetto* (*Trick*, in 2018).

Nothing could be further removed from the position taken by Amara Lakhous. Lahiri enjoys translating but eschews self-translation because she feels the need to create distances and differences through language, rather than bridging them. Lakhous, by contrast, has no direct experience of translating other people's books when he sets out to translate his own. While he may have little time for the label "translation", he actually has no real point of comparison when he refuses to acknowledge the translational dimension of the work involved

in preparing dual Arabic and Italian versions. If self-translation seems almost beyond Lahiri's grasp, in Lakhous' eyes it would not appear to be beyond but rather beneath him.

As will have become clear (hopefully), the point is not who is right and who is wrong, but rather to deconstruct auctorial statements as "position-takings" (Bourdieu: "prises de position"), as self-fashioning interventions replete with rhetoric. These interventions can sometimes seem self-serving: "intellectual or artistic position-takings", Bourdieu (1985: 40) reminds us, "are also always semi-conscious strategies in a game in which the conquest of cultural legitimacy [...] is at stake." Resistance to self-translation, therefore, is not merely a state of affairs; it is also a stance.

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