

MARIO MATERASSI

From *Light in August* to *Luce d'agosto*.
Elio Vittorini's Literary Offences

William Faulkner's work began to be known in Italian in 1937 when Mondadori published Lorenzo Gigli's translation of *Pylon*.¹ It was a modest beginning. *Oggi si vola*, as *Pylon* was entitled in Italian, received very little attention on the part of critics at the time.² A number of reasons may account for this tepid reception. It is possible that the settings—contemporary New Orleans during Mardi Gras—was both too foreign and yet not exotic enough for the Italian public of the thirties. Perhaps the ambiguity of the narrating voice's tone—a mixture of irony, hard-boiled detachment, and rich, almost baroque diction—proved too alien to the current literary taste. Undoubtedly, the Waste Land subtext, which gives the novel its structural unity, escaped detection among a readership that for the most part was innocent of any contact with T. S. Eliot's work. Whatever the reason for its scanty success, *Oggi si vola* did little more than just break the ground for the publication, two years later, of *Luce d'agosto*, Elio Vittorini's translation of *Light in August*—to this day, the only translation of that novel into Italian.

In the history of the reception of Faulkner's work in Italy, Elio Vittorini played a pivotal role. He used his influence in the publishing world to urge the translation of Faulkner's books, was himself one of Faulkner's early translators, and from the end of the thirties to his death in the mid-sixties, in his double capacity as a writer and an editor, constantly promoted Faulkner's work, extolling him as one of the greatest authors of this century. Unquestionably, his translation of *Light in August* proved to be of

the utmost importance in arousing, and sustaining, the public's interest in Faulkner's work. No other translation, either before or after the hiatus of the war years, had a comparable impact. Indeed, *Luce d'agosto* set an early and enduring imprint, owing, of course, to the intrinsic worth of Faulkner's novel but also to the literary stature of the translator.

It was with this novel that William Faulkner became for Italian critics a presence to be reckoned with, whether or not they liked his writing. *Luce d'agosto* set the tone of the critical discussion on Faulkner as well as, more broadly, on American contemporary fiction at a time when, access to the original texts being limited to a very small elite, critical consensus or dissent was generally grounded only on the available translations. Even later, when the reading public gained a better knowledge of English, the terms of the discussion remained substantially unchanged since they had been first set forth by—and in opposition to—Vittorini as the unchallenged Italian champion of William Faulkner.³

As praiseworthy as Vittorini's activity was in making known Faulkner's work, it did have a serious drawback. Vittorini had a less than respectful approach to the writers he translated and to Faulkner in particular, taking a great many liberties with the original text. As a result, he presented an essentially unfaithful (one could even say, a deformed) image of the writer. With all his good intentions, ultimately he corroborated the old adage that "il traduttore è un traditore"—the translator is a traitor. The fact that Vittorini's systematic betrayal of the text of *Light in August* went well beyond the inevitable changes inherent in any translation, and that it was a matter of deliberate choice, makes his case all the more problematic, especially when we consider the formidable influence that *Luce d'agosto* had in shaping the Italian readers' perception of Faulkner's art.

The most glaring of these liberties are a number of cuts in Chapter 12, amounting to about seventy lines of text, which significantly alter the relationship between Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas by drastically reducing the erotic quality of its initial phase. One might be tempted to assume that these excisions were imposed by Fascist censorship, always on the alert to suppress any

expression of political or social criticism, and ever ready to eliminate any reference to sexuality as offending Catholic sensibilities. The following words of one of the reviewers of *Luce d'agosto* aptly illustrate the official intellectual climate in Italy at the end of the thirties. This reviewer praised Faulkner because

he could teach a lot to those compatriots of his who rose to their feet in more or less genuine indignation over Italy's and Germany's racial policies. The innate racism of Americans stands out triumphant and brutal because it is left free to act on its own instinct instead of being ruled by law, as it must be in any civilized nation.⁴

Considering the epistemological framework of the time, one could easily assume that the excision of the most torrid details of lovemaking in the novel was owing to the censor's concern for the moral susceptibility of at least *his* "civilized nation."

I have found no evidence, however, that this was the case. In all probability, these cuts were spontaneously made by the translator himself who, anticipating the objections of the censor, eliminated those portions of the work most likely to be deemed offensive. This was common practice at the time to help reduce the chances of entering into a dangerous confrontation with the censor. It was a practice recommended by Vittorini to publisher Valentino Bompiani in a letter dated April 19, 1939: urging the translation of E. W. Turpin's *These Low Grounds*, Vittorini suggested, "perhaps we should cut the most significant portions [of the novel] in deference to the censorship."⁵

A paragraph-by-paragraph and line-by-line analysis of *Luce d'agosto* evinces that, scattered throughout the translation, there are many more cuts, some of them quite substantial although none so extensive as those in Chapter 12; but these excisions cannot possibly be ascribed to the moralistic or ideologic idiosyncrasies of Fascist censors. Close examination shows a continuous tampering with the original text on the part of the translator, including habitual breaking up of paragraphs, frequent addition of whole sentences, and persistent alteration of emphasis in the sentence structure by the unnecessary shifting of phrases. Quite clearly, Elio Vittorini had overstepped his function as the translator and taken

on the role of editor as well.

The fact that Vittorini was given the translation of *Light in August* is hardly surprising.⁶ This self-taught intellectual who only a few years before had learned English by translating some of Edgar Allan Poe's fiction and looking up every single word in the dictionary, was a distinguished essayist, novelist, and short story writer.⁷ More important for us in the present context, he had become, with Cesare Pavese, the leading Italian propounder of American literature. Going against the grain of the prevailing Italian literary taste of the time, Vittorini persistently upheld American literature for being, as he was to put it in 1946, "the only one to coincide, right from its birth, with the modern age, the only one that can be called entirely modern."⁸ In 1938, when Fascist autarkic cultural policy was in full swing and the rhetoric of Imperial Rome all-pervasive, he had written:

In this sort of universal literature written in one language which is today's American literature, the most American ends up by being precisely the one who does not carry the American passport and America's particular past within him, the one who is freest of local historical precedents and who, in short, is open to the common culture of humanity. He may even be someone who has just arrived from the Old World and who carries the weight of the Old World on his back, but carries it as if it were a cargo of spices and aromatic essences, not of ferocious prejudices. America for him will be a stage of human civilization. ... He will make America richer, and he will cause the Old World to be left even further behind."

When he undertook the translation of *Light in August*, Vittorini's major contribution to the dissemination of American literature in Italy was yet to come. It was only in 1940 that he began work on his seminal *Americana*, an anthology of American writers several hundred pages long which had the distinction of being seized by the Fascist authorities even before it reached the bookstores, and which was eventually published with an introduction by ultraconservative critic Emilio Cecchi. Still, Vittorini's role as a pioneer of American studies in Italy was already well established by the end of the thirties.

We can hardly overestimate Elio Vittorini's importance as an intellectual and a writer who against all odds, and in the middle of

the most infamous period of our recent history, attempted to lift contemporary Italian literature from the quagmire of its provincial complacency, mainly by forcing it to measure itself against the accomplishments of American authors. Present-day American studies in Italy owe both Vittorini and Pavese an indelible debt, and whatever criticism one may level against Vittorini's translation of *Light in August* does not affect this incontrovertible fact.

At the same time it must be said that, as is often the case with men driven by a sense of mission, Vittorini was not troubled by any doubts about his ideas and views. It is well known that at the height of his fame as one of the foremost literary Solons of Italy in the mid-fifties, he dissuaded both Mondadori and Einaudi from publishing Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il gattopardo* on the ground that it was a reactionary book, both from a political and a literary stand-point. (Ironically, under the imprint of Feltrinelli—a leftist publisher—*Il gattopardo* later became a run-away best seller and a classic of twentieth century literature.) Vittorini was an idiosyncratic and exacting editor who up to his death in 1966, through the series "I gettoni" (of which he was the general editor) and his magazines *Il Politecnico* e *Il Menabò*, strived to stamp upon Italian postwar fiction the seal of his own aesthetic and ideologic preferences. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise to us to discover that already at the end of the thirties he felt no compunction about changing the text he was translating. After all, as he flatly stated in 1941, at times Faulkner "makes mistakes."¹⁰ In his translation of *Light in August*, Vittorini set out to correct these "mistakes." He was to do the same with Faulkner's "Wash," with Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," with Ring Lardner's "A Day with Conrad Green"—in short, with every American text he ever translated.

Before taking a look at some of the changes Vittorini made in his *Luce d'agosto*, I should specify that I will not concern myself here with the many instances where he misunderstood Faulkner's text. Vittorini did not enjoy the advantages which facilitated the task of later translators. He had no personal, direct knowledge of America, never having visited the United States; moreover, he lived at a time when fewer English-speaking individuals were available

for consultation and advice—and, to be sure, very few of these, if any, came from the backwoods of Northern Mississippi.

I will, however, briefly comment on his linguistic choices which, especially where concerning dialogues, are stridently out of tune with the original. Vittorini tended to use a high register of diction that sounds stilted in the mouth of a Yoknapatawpha County hillbilly. So stilted, in fact, that these characters could be brought in as state evidence against Vittorini for offending Mark Twain's fifth rule governing literary art in the domain of romantic fiction; namely, that "when the personages of a tale deal in conversation, the talk shall sound like human talk, and be talk such as human beings would be likely to talk in the given circumstances." Lost is Faulkner's complex interplay of linguistic registers, from the high-sounding rhetoric of the narrator to the down-to-earth conversational English of Armstid or Sheriff Watt, for instance, or to the Black English of the various African American characters. Vittorini's occasional attempts at resorting to less formal Italian in the dialogue results in an even more glaring effect precisely because these attempts call attention to their asystematic and, therefore, gratuitous nature.

This aspect of Vittorini's translation is probably more annoying to our ears today than it was to Italian readers over half a century ago. In fact, the literary quality of his diction may be more evident to us than it was to his contemporaries, largely because our taste has been modified by the constant exposure to the very American writers first championed by Vittorini. Ironically, what strikes one most in the context of Vittorini's struggle against the stuffy literary taste of his time is the fact that many of the changes he made in his translation seem to have been prompted by a form of respect for that very taste. One even suspects that Vittorini toned down the innovative quality of Faulkner's writing in order to make it more consonant with his readers' literary expectations and, therefore, make the author's message more easily acceptable. Whether his choice of diction was a calculated strategy or the product of his own stylistic inclinations (and I tend to believe this latter hypothesis is closer to the truth), there is no doubt that Vittorini's heavy-handed manipulation of Faulkner's text

reduces its peculiar originality.

The most immediately visible of Vittorini's unwarranted interventions is his systematic alteration of Faulkner's use of paragraphs. The 21 chapters of *Light in August* are subdivided into a total of 1,571 paragraphs. Vittorini's *Luce d'agosto*, on the other hand, has 3,978. This means that the translator/editor created nothing less than 2,409 new paragraphs, thus more than doubling the original number. A chapter-by-chapter breakdown shows that in some cases the increase in the number of paragraphs has been of over three hundred percent. For instance, the 65 paragraphs of Chapter 17 became 221 in Vittorini's translation. Only 660 of the original paragraphs were respected. Of these, over 85% are paragraphs from one to five lines long, which indicates that Vittorini's systematic fragmentation was aimed at Faulkner's longer paragraphs. The effect of this continuous fragmentation of the original text varies. Although always disconcerting, it is less damaging where dialogue abounds. It is devastating, however, where the narrative is long-winded and Faulkner's dense, convoluted continuum suggests the slow, all-pervading, "inescapable" weight of history and, ultimately, of human destiny. The 134 lines comprising a single paragraph in Chapter 11 which is part of Joanna's account of her family history are divided into 19 paragraphs in Vittorini's translation. As bad as this is, it is nothing compared to the fragmentation, in Chapter 16, of a paragraph 136 lines long into 77 paragraphs.

Vittorini's breaking up of the narrative to conform to a traditional understanding of paragraph size severely interferes with Faulkner's personal sense of rhythm and undermines the semantic function he entrusts to his unorthodox paragraph organization.¹¹

Other types of textual manipulations in *Luce d'agosto* also bear testimony to the arrogant nature of Vittorini's editing.

In *Light in August* as elsewhere in his macrotext, Faulkner uses italics to convey a character's inner thoughts. Unless as part of a dialogue (a typology which I will not discuss here), the italicized segments never occur in this novel at the beginning of a paragraph. The very fact that they are embedded within segments in Roman type underlines the intimate quality of the thoughts

expressed—an effect that is lost when Vittorini makes new paragraphs of the italicized segments. Moreover, these segments are never preceded or followed by a period—a device by which Faulkner communicates the fluidity of the character's thought process at that moment.¹² Vittorini ignores this. He consistently adds a period both before and after the italicized segments, thus undermining the effect of a multi-level mental experience intended by the author.

Vittorini profusely adds exclamation points and question marks. Both types of editorial interventions have repercussions on the tone of the passages where they occur. I will give a few examples of these minor, but significant, alterations of the text.

The number of exclamation points more than doubles from *Light in August* to *Luce d'agosto*: from 143 they swell to 320. In one case, the added exclamation point is found within the narrating voice's own discourse—something which is totally alien to Faulkner's tone throughout his work. All other cases occur in a dialogic context and result in the speaker's tone becoming more shrill or eager or hysterical than is warranted by the text.

In adding so many exclamation points, the translator seems to be motivated by the impression that Faulkner's dialogue is deficient in expressing intensity. The effect, however, is sometimes downright ludicrous, as when Bobbie, the young waitress and prostitute whose voice is described as "downcast, quite empty" (168), then "faint", then again "flat" and "quiet" (169), is given a succession of five exclamation points in a nine line passage in which she and Joe "looked like two monks [who] met during the hour of contemplation in a garden path" (172). At other times, Vittorini's efforts to heighten intensity cancel out all tonal nuances. At the end of Chapter 5, right after Christmas has hurled "'Bitches! ... Sons of bitches!'" at the group of Blacks he meets in Freedman Town (110; he said it "quite loud"), Joe thinks, "'All this trouble'"—which he then repeats aloud: "'All this damn trouble.'" Here Vittorini adds two exclamation points, losing the sense of deflating tension of the original. Immediately after, when the court-house clock strikes the hour, the translator adds yet another exclamation point to Joe's thought, "'Ten o'clock'"—which spoils Christmas' quiet

moment of fatalistic detachment from everything around him.

Similarly, at the end of the first and of the last chapters, the insertion of four exclamation points in Lena's "My, my. A body does get around" destroys the placid tone of acceptance and wonderment in her comment. Vittorini's exclamation points turn this serene Mother Earth figure, whose role is to encompass and transcend the tragedy of Christmas and Joanna, into a sort of excitable, bright-eyed adolescent on a school outing.

As perplexing as his excessive use of exclamation points is, perhaps even more mystifying is Vittorini's habit of turning statements into questions. To cite but one of many possible examples, in Chapter 2 Mrs. Armstid says to Lena:

"And you believe that he will be there when you get there. Granted that he ever was there at all. That he will hear you are in the same town with him, and still be there when the sun sets." (18)

This is a typical Faulknerian utterance. It is a statement expressing the speaker's rocklike conviction of the utter hopelessness and stupidity of the addressee. It expresses the speaker's unshakable understanding of the world as a place inhabited by fools, of life as a succession of corroborations of this fact, and of destiny as the opportunity to watch fools make fools of themselves. One can find a great number of analogous utterances throughout Faulkner's works, and *Light in August* has its fair share of them. Vittorini's turning the above passage as well as several others into questions deprives the text of an element that is essential to the expression of Faulkner's world view.

As I mentioned earlier, Vittorini freely adds to the text. Many of the added phrases or sentences occur in a dialogical context. They are redundancies such as (and I translate Vittorini's Italian into English) "the old woman replied" (400), "the man says" (11), "Thus speaks the husband, and he continues" (469—where the original simply says, "He continues", 479).¹³ Vittorini's explanatory insertions detract from the immediacy of these dialogic exchanges and, therefore, impoverish their mimetic quality.

Moreover, the additions tend to slow down the narrative in order to explain what does not need to be explained. This is

Armstid inviting Lena to spend the night at his house: "You come on home with me.' He puts the mules into motion..." (13-14). Vittorini sees fit to add, "Having said this, he puts the mules into motion" (13), which is both unnecessary and pedantic. This is Percy Grimm jumping in the ditch and clambering right out: "His plunge carried him some distance before he could stop himself and climb back out" (437). Vittorini turns Faulkner's streamlined sentence into two sentences which laboriously purport to explain but never quite show the force and fluidity of Grimm's movements: "The impetus with which he had moved to climb down the ditch pulled him a piece down the slope. But then he was able to stop, and climbed back out" (427).

This is the matron at the orphanage reacting to the dietitian's disclosure that Joe is black: "A what? ... A ne—I don't believe it!" (124). To this, Vittorini adds, "It is not possible!" (119). These words are not and could never be in the original: the question of Joe Christmas being Black is not a matter of possibility but one of *belief*: "I think I got some nigger blood in me," says Joe. "I don't know. I believe I have" (184). And again: "I don't know ... If I'm not, damned if I haven't wasted a lot of time" (240-41). By adding "It is not possible!" Vittorini diverts his reader's attention away from the matron's reiterated "I don't believe it!" and weakens the impact of that subtle hermeneutic clue to the tragic irony of Joe Christmas' story—a clue which evidently Vittorini failed to see, as confirmed by his referring to Christmas as "the Negro in *Light in August*."¹⁴

One could cite a hundred analogous betrayals of Faulkner's text which can be blamed on Vittorini's conviction that the original needed improving. For the present, I wish to discuss only one more passage in his translation in which Vittorini commits a grand total of seven "literary offences" in seven lines. The passage in question occurs in Chapter 3. Hightower is described

waiting for that instant when all light has failed out of the sky and it would be night save for that faint light which daygraneried leaf and grass blade reluctant suspire, making still a little light on earth though night itself has come. *Now, soon*, he thinks; *soon, now*. He does not say even to himself: 'There remains yet something of honor and pride, of life.' (55)

First, Vittorini translates *instant* into *minute*—which makes one suspect he did not know the labile play of light at dusk that Faulkner was referring to.

Second, he omits the words, "making still a little light on earth though night itself has come."

Third, he disregards the chiasmus (*Now, soon/soon, now*) by using two different words to translate *soon*.

Fourth, he changes Hightower's last words from direct to indirect speech.

Fifth, possibly as a belated form of compensation for the previous omission, he adds a non-existing "in the leaves and in the grass blades", referring these words to *there* ("There remains yet something of honor..."),

Sixth, he takes this *there* to be an adverb (Where does something of honor yet remain? Well, *there*, of course—in the leaves and in the glass blades...).

Seventh, he drops the comma between *pride* and *of* ("There remains yet something of honor and pride, of life"); as a consequence, that which remains is "something of honor and pride of life."

In a mere seven line passage, Vittorini is guilty of quite a variety of "literary offences": he makes a wrong lexical choice, drops a whole sentence, ignores a rhetorical figure, changes the syntax in a key sentence, invents a new phrase, and twice misses the sense of the original.

Let us now turn our attention to Vittorini's excisions.

The rationale that guided Vittorini in deleting numberless individual words, phrases, and even entire sentence is quite arduous to determine—so arduous, in fact, that one is led to wonder whether there is a consistent logic behind these cuts. As difficult, not to say impossible, as it is to pinpoint the specific reason for any excision, I believe we can formulate a few working hypotheses which may account for at least some of them.

At times, one suspects that Vittorini's difficulty in understanding the original is the reason for the deletion.¹⁵ In some cases, the deletion seems to be the result of carelessness on the part of the translator—or, worse, of his incapacity to assess the

function of the given phrase or word in the original context. In other cases, the reason appears to be related to Vittorini's own literary taste, which he frequently allows to prevail over the author's. Ultimately, of course, there is the translator's preoccupation with the presumable unacceptability of certain passages in the eyes of Fascist censors.

Considering the large number of short excisions, I shall limit my comments to the longer cuts.

In Chapter 7, a block of 33 lines comprising seven paragraphs of the original text is lost in the translation. The missing lines refer to most of the exchange between McEachern and Christmas regarding the disappearance of Joe's cow. Notwithstanding the unpredictability of Fascist censorship, there is nothing in these seven paragraphs that could conceivably be deemed offensive from a moralistic, much less a political, standpoint. I am persuaded that this omission was unintentional and that it can be imputed to negligence on the part of either the translator or the typesetter. Immediately before and at the very end of the omission, we find the same interjection, "Ah"; in both cases, the interjection is placed at the beginning of a new paragraph. My surmise is that either the translator or the typesetter inadvertently jumped from the first to the second "Ah." As bizarre as this may sound, I can think of no other explanation for the loss of these perfectly inoffensive lines in the translation.

On the contrary, the rationale behind the excisions in Chapter 12—the only other major cuts in *Luce d'agosto*—is quite easily perceived. In bowdlerizing this chapter, where the early stages of the relationship between Joe and Joanna are depicted, Vittorini attempted to anticipate the objections of the Ministry of Fascist Culture and its censors by eliminating most of the references to the erotic quality of this relationship, particularly as concerned the woman. In fact, all of the 70 lines deleted in this chapter are part of Faulkner's explicit descriptions of the couple's sexual encounters and of Joanna's role as the initiator and stage director of their trysts. Such passages as "She had an avidity for the forbidden wordsymbols; an insatiables appetite for the sound of them on his tongue and on her own" (244); "her wild hair, each

strand of which would seem to come alive like octopus tentacles" (245); and again, "her clothing half torn to ribbons upon her, in the wild throes of nymphomania, her body gleaming in the slow shifts from one to another of ... formally erotic attitudes and gestures" (245); "physical experimentation that transcended imagining" (248) — all of these, and more of analogous import, disappear in Vittorini's translation, washed down the drain of the translator's preemptive censorship.

In a letter to Cesare Pavese dated August 21, 1940, Vittorini wrote:

In translating *God's Little Acre* I took many liberties. For example, Griselda's boobs have become legs. How can you write boobs in Italian? Griselda would have become a housemaid. As for the title, ... the Ministry [of Culture] eliminated *God's*.¹⁶

When Pavese wrote back suggesting the word "breasts" as a possible alternative, Vittorini answered:

Isn't it about the same as boobs? Perhaps the idea of that part [of a woman's body] has been spoiled for me by its ill usages. Only in a wet nurse can I envisage a beautiful breast. In Italian, Griselda is legs.¹⁷

While we abstain from speculating on the possible Freudian implications of Vittorini's anatomical likes and dislikes, it must be pointed out that in the first of these two letters he made it absolutely clear that he "took liberties" *before* the censor imposed the cuts. Of course, it is only fair to suppose he would not have taken such liberties had he not felt the censor's hot breath down his neck.

That Vittorini was keenly alert to the threat of censorship is evidenced by the one deletion in this chapter which is clearly prompted by political preoccupations. The two lines missing are part of a dialogue between Joe Christmas and Joanna about having a child. Joe says, "'If we were going to have one, I guess we would have had one two years ago'" (251). To this, Joanna replies, "'We didn't want one then.'" And Joe counters, "'We don't want one now, either.'" Vittorini deleted these last two lines in which the

implication that the lovers have practiced birth control is quite evident. Any reference to birth control would have unleashed the ire of the censors at a time when Mussolini's much-touted "demographic campaign" was in full swing and the Fascist government financially rewarded Italian families for every child born after the first two.

Lest I sound like an ungrateful son to one of our generation's spiritual fathers, I should reiterate that whatever one may think of him as a translator, our debt to Elio Vittorini is immense. His almost single handed efforts to rejuvenate Italian literature through exposure to contemporary models more than compensates for the indifferent philological quality of his translations. Nevertheless, one question remains: did Vittorini's translations from Faulkner, and that of *Light in August* in particular, negatively affect the reception of Faulkner in Italy?

To an extent, I believe they did.

In his role as propounder of American literature, Vittorini translated many other contemporary authors beside Faulkner, including Hemingway, Steinbeck, Caldwell, Wilder, Lardner, Saroyan, Callaghan, and Fante. This intense activity as translator had one peculiar side effect which was the literary equivalent of what happened when Hollywood movies were brought to Italy and the same dubber lent his voice to Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Cary Grant, and Gregory Peck. As Vittorini himself lucidly pointed out in a letter dated March 29, 1941 to critic Enrico Falqui, "each of the Americans I have translated has his own language in the original, while in my translations they only have one, at least as regards the rhythm of their discourse."¹⁸ And he added: "I speak in retrospect, I speak of facts—not of anything I ever intended to do."

This was a sore point with Vittorini, as the influence of American writers on his own fiction was repeatedly denounced by reviewers and critics. A few days after the above letter, Emilio Cecchi, in reviewing Vittorini's translation of John Fante's *Ask the Dust*, lamented that

too many contemporary American authors have been translated—and, at times, quite slovenly so. In an artistic translation, a foreign text acclimatizes and naturalizes itself into the new language and the new literature. It loses

its rough edges and its exotic poisons... As far as the Americans are concerned, this has happened all too seldom. As a result, this American prose has had a totally negative influence on certain strands of our own prose, so much so that at times one doesn't know whether to laugh or to cry.¹⁹

Cecchi went on to inveigh against

this sort of bewildered, cerebral, neurotic, improbable writing that seems to have been poorly translated from some bad literature issuing from equivocal countries where everything, including language and poetry, is born second hand.

On record for declaring that *The Sound and the Fury* is a novel that not even an ostrich could stomach, Cecchi was culturally and ideologically unprepared to appreciate the worth of, much less the need for, Vittorini's experimentation with language, both in his translations and in his own fiction.²⁰ Cecchi's scathing words about the language of the translations from the American should be seen in their historical context: that is, as part of the reaction staged by a good portion of the Italian literary establishment in defense of the traditional literary values under assault from Vittorini. In this diatribe, positions were defined in advance, independently of the individual book being reviewed or the individual author being discussed. They were shaped by the opposing claims to superiority put forth by the upholders, respectively, of the American and of the Italian literary models.

Faulkner and the other American writers championed by Vittorini, were mere pawns in what was actually a power struggle to define Italian literature in the thirties and forties. So controversial was Vittorini's position as an advocate of American literature, and so politically charged his stance in the dispute of the time, that, paradoxically, the translator/mentor ended up by upstaging the very writers he was promoting, William Faulkner foremost among them. It is evident in Cecchi's review of *Ask the Dust* that the primary—albeit unstated—target of the critic's assault was Vittorini rather than John Fante. Vittorini's uneven style, his willingness to take risks and go against the grain of the established literary taste by grafting a new, peculiarly American branch to the old trunk of the Italian literary discourse, only gave his opponents

an all-too-easy weapon to use in their attack on the "exotic poisons" which he had begun liberating on our pure native soil. And none better than Emilio Cecchi was able to capitalize on the specific deficiencies of Vittorini's "improbable" language. He could have had *Luce d'agosto* in mind when he wrote his review of *Ask the Dust*. And as much as one may differ from Cecchi's views—and I certainly do—it must be acknowledged that he was correct in his assessment of that "improbable" language.

Emilio Cecchi's rearguard battle proved to be a losing one. By the end of the forties, American literature was widely, almost voraciously translated into Italian, and many young writers began patterning their work after American models. In the long run, Vittorini (and Pavese) won the war. But before the tables were turned, both politically and culturally, among those who could not read English (and most couldn't—although Emilio Cecchi was not one of them) there was the tendency to "dump" all American authors together along with their translator. As always happens when critical discrimination is waived and shortcuts are taken, everybody suffered: the individual authors, whose personal tone and rhythm were ignored; the translator, whose language was quickly dismissed as "American"; and the reading public, which had no choice but to read books written in a language that was neither American, of course, nor, at times, Italian.

To conclude, I am persuaded that a number of factors concurred to create the indifferent quality of Vittorini's translations. First and foremost, I would consider Vittorini's crusading spirit, the enthusiastic drive he put into his cause, which may explain his impatience with the minutiae of philological accuracy and his lack of respect for the texts he translated. The second factor was the complex interplay between his creative writing and his work as a translator. Cesare Pavese once wrote that translating taught him how *not* to write. Vittorini, who was perhaps more of an experimentalist than Pavese was, used both his own writing and his translations as reciprocal sounding boards. Thus, as he wrote Enrico Falqui, he evolved a personal language that reduced to a minimum the differences among the idiolects of the various authors he translated—a kind of private koine which could be

used for Faulkner as for Hemingway, for Vittorini (or, at least, for some Vittorini) as well as for Steinbeck.

Another factor to be considered is Vittorini's urge to edit the original texts. Aside from his natural inclination to correct his authors' "mistakes," Vittorini effected a sort of preemptive censorship of what he may have felt were their most offensive "rough edges," as Emilio Cecchi called them. By toning down the experimental quality of some of his authors, and of Faulkner in particular, Vittorini seems to have tried to appease not only the Ministry of Fascist Culture but also the critics, whom he knew all too well to be out there, their fingers twitching on the trigger, ready to pot him from the literary pages of the dailies and the periodicals. Ironically, while it is doubtful that he reached a broader critical consensus, he definitely detracted from his authors some of the very strength for which he justly appreciated them.

His translation of *Light in August* is a perfect case in point. The Faulkner that Vittorini's contemporaries came to know through *Luce d'agosto* (but also present-day Italians who can read *Light in August* only in Vittorini's perpetually recycled translation) was a writer decidedly less innovative, less direct, and at the same time less complex than he actually is. If one were to judge solely from Vittorini's *Luce d'agosto*, Faulkner would appear to be a lesser writer than we know him to be.²¹

Vittorini's translations of Faulkner and other modern American writers can—indeed, *must*—be appreciated for the invaluable role they played in helping to bring Italian culture into the twentieth century. They are not, however, faithful, respectful renderings of the original works. Once their political function was completed and the various ideologic connotations attendant this function lost their poignancy, they revealed themselves to be period pieces. In the realm of literature, they now strike us as means, no matter how fruitful, rather than ends.

¹ Translations of Faulkner's other works were published in the following order: *Light in August* (*Luce d'agosto*, 1939); *The Hamlet* (*Il borgo*, 1942); *Sanctuary* (*Santuario*) 1946; 1955); *The Sound of the Fury* (*L'urlo e il furore*, 1947); *Go Down, Moses* (*Scendi, Mosè*, 1947), *These 13* (*Questi tredici*, 1948); *The Unvanquished* (*Gli invitti*, 1948); *Intruder in the Dust* (*Non si fruga nella polvere*, 1951), *Soldiers' Pay* (*La paga del soldato*, 1953, *La paga dei*

soldati, 1986); *Absalom, Absalom*, (*Assalonne, Assalonne*, 1954); *Requiem for a Nun* (*Requiem per una monaca*, 1955); *The Wild Palms* (*Palme selvagge*, 1956); *Mosquitoes* (*Zanzare*, 1957); *As I Lay Dying* (*Mentre morivo*, 1958); *Miss Zilphia Gant* (*La pallida Zilphia Gant*, 1959); *New Orleans Sketches* (*New Orleans*, 1959); *The Town* (*La città*, 1961); *The Mansion* (*Il palazzo*, 1963); *The Reivers* (*I saccheggiatori*, 1963); *Doctor Martino and Other Stories* (*Il dottor Martino e altri racconti*, 1968); *A Fable* (*Una Favola*, 1971); *Flags in the Dust* (*Bandiere nella polvere*, 1984); *Knight's Gambit* (*Cambetto di cavallo*, 1989). The critical discussion on Faulkner in Italy began as early as 1931; cf. Mario Materassi, "Faulkner Criticism in Italy", *Italian Quarterly* 15 (Summer 1971): 47-85.

2 The title (literally, "Today We Fly") is a borrowing from the posters announcing flying events and exhibitions.

3 I am referring to the literary discussion among those Italianists who, from the thirties on, were interested in the influence of other literatures of the twentieth century on contemporary Italian literature. The later, more specialized, and much less publicized discussion on Faulkner among Italian Americanists grew mainly along critical lines pursuant to the literary debate in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in France.

4 Cf. J. M., "*Luce d'agosto*," *Radio Corriere* 15 (August 20-26, 1939): 38. My translation.

5 Elio Vittorini, *I libri, la città, il mondo. Lettere 1933-1943*, ed. Carlo Minoia (Turin: Einaudi, 1985) 85; my translation. Analogous considerations on the part of the translator and/or the publisher may be the reason for the disappearance in Cesare Pavese's translation of *The Hamlet* of the following lines: "What did you expect—that she would spend the rest of her life just running water through it?" (*The Hamlet*. New York: Random House, 1940. 164-65).

6 It was at Vittorini's urging that Mondadori decided to publish an Italian translation of *Light in August*.

7 "[The publisher] asked me if I wanted to translate [Poe's fiction]; I accepted with enthusiasm, and that's how I learned English." Letter to Sebastiano Agliano dated February 11, 1940. *I libri* 99. My translation.

8 Elio Vittorini, *Diario in pubblico* (1957; Milan: Bompiani, 1970) 271. My translation. Originally in *Politecnico* 33-34 (1946).

9 *Diario in pubblico* 97. My translation. Originally in *Letteratura* 5 (1938).

10 *Diario in pubblico* 161. Originally in the sequestered edition of *Americana*.

11 Compared to Vittorini, in his translation of *The Hamlet* Cesare Pavese was much more respectful of the original text in that he created "only" twenty-six new paragraphs. (In one case, he also merged two paragraphs into one.) It should be noted that Pavese's comparatively few changes concern only short paragraphs. The fact that he did not break up Faulkner's longer paragraphs indicates that, unlike Vittorini, Pavese understood their importance in Faulkner's peculiar discourse.

12 Of the thirty italicized segments in *Light in August* that occur at the end of a paragraph, only two are followed by a period. Cf. William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Harrison Smith, 1932) 10, 224. In the first case, Faulkner's typescript setting copy shows that the period was added in pencil by the editor—the only such instance through the 470 surviving pages of the document. Cf. *William Faulkner' Manuscripts 10*, vol. 2, ed.

Joseph Blotner (New York: Garland, 1987) 13. As for the second case, the typescript setting copy clearly shows that the period was typed by the author himself (*Manuscripts 10* 247). Perhaps this was an oversight on the part of Faulkner who may have typed the period at the end of the sentence out of habit. This is undoubtedly what happened on page 227 of the typescript setting copy, where there is a succession of very short italicized paragraphs only one of which is followed by a period. This period was excised in the printed text (*Light in August* 205).

13 Page references are to William Faulkner, *Luce d'agosto*, trans. Elio Vittorini (1939; Milan: Mondadori, 1990).

14 *Diario in pubblico* 364. Originally in *La Stampa* 8 Dec. 1950.

15 One such case may be the omission of Byron's answer ("Or maybe you mean a drummer, a agent, a salesman") to Hightower's exclamation, "What a dramatist you would have made" (368). Possibly, Vittorini did not understand the meaning of *drummer* and decided to eliminate the whole sentence.

16 *I libri* 105-06. My translation.

17 *I libri* 107. Letter dated Aug. 29, 1940. My translation.

18 *I libri* 121. Cf. also: "I don't at all deny their influence. I know that, by translating them, I have been greatly helped in the shaping of my own language. At the same time I know I translated them into a language of my own—not one that was already there, fixed and stable, but, on the contrary, one that was evolving". My translation.

19 Emilio Cecchi, "Pane al pane e vino al vino", *Corriere della Sera* 30 March 1941. Qtd. in *I libri* 126 n.

20 Emilio Cecchi, "Note su William Faulkner", *Scrittori inglesi e americani Saggi, note e versioni* 2 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 1964) 2: 200. Originally published in 1934.

21 The fact that *Luce d'agosto* keeps being reprinted to this day without any restoration of the missing parts, any correction of the innumerable mistakes, and any removal of Vittorini's additions, is a disheartening commentary on the publisher's cynical exploitation of Vittorini's name and callous indifference to the requirements of philologic respect for the text.