

Sonnets by Giuseppe Gioachino Belli

Translated by Mike Stocks. Oneworld Classics. ISBN 9781847490117 £8.99

The Roman dialect sonnets of Belli (1791–1863) have made a couple of desultory sorties into English, only to disappear as quickly as they came, leaving disappointingly little trace. If the poems are of great interest, the poet himself is fascinating only because of the contrast between the jaunty, jocular, irreverent, often obscene verse he wrote and the staid ordinariness of the man himself. He aspired to bourgeois respectability, perhaps, as Stocks implies, as a reaction to the turbulence he had known in Rome as a boy when the armies of revolutionary France invaded his native city, or when in his more mature years the forces of Italian Unification subverted the peace of Papal Rome.

Anyone coming fresh to his poetry would expect the writer to be a roistering, goliardic Villon, but the reality was humdrum. There are two defining images of him, one in stone and one in biography, and both are phoney. The first is the statue erected in his honour in the Trastevere district, portraying him as admirers would have him, top hat, long coat, slightly rakish air, the quintessential man about town he never was. The other has that element of truth about it which pleases those, such as Anthony Burgess, who wish to attribute to him enigmatic depths he never had. In a novel, *Abba Abba*, Burgess imagines that Belli met John Keats, who was in Rome at the same time, and he delights in the image of Belli working by day as a censor for the Papal government and by night writing anarchic or obscene verse which would have scandalised any censor. He was indeed a theatre censor, and an exacting one, who found much to reprove even in Shakespeare, Rossini and Verdi, but it was a brief spell. As a man, he lived in fear that his poetry would, if the word got out, ruin his standing, so he published only one dialect poem in his lifetime, and frequently, but weakly, gave orders for his output to be burned. He did publish some Italian verse, but its few modern readers dismiss it as stiff and formal, like Burns in English.

Belli has enjoyed posthumous celebrity, particularly among writers, like Dario Fo, who are enthusiastic about the ideal of popular culture. However disrespectful the subjects of his verse, Belli revelled in the rigidity and conventions of the classical, Petrarchan sonnet. Inside that fixed structure, his poems have a snap, a bite, a joyousness and an energy which seem to war with the restrictions of the genre. Mike Stocks strives to reproduce the colloquial vigour of the original, and has himself a fine command of the

technique of poetry, paying due heed to rhyme and metre, even if he does not always reproduce the schemes used in the original. Dialect is a problem for the translator, since dialect has a status in Italian which seemingly comparable idioms in what can broadly be called English do not. Stocks has to struggle with the limitations of the standard English he employs and with the sense of twee conventionality which willy nilly it imposes. His bravest decision is to include twelve samples of translations by Robert Garioch into wiry Scots.

He is generous to Garioch, and he deserves the same generous respect himself, so it is probably unfair to put the two side by side, but here goes. Both confronted a whimsical, irreverent piece by Belli entitled 'Judgement Day'. Stocks first:

Four portly angels, trumpets raised up high,
will plonk down in the corners at their ease
and blow their horns, and with a booming cry
will start to state their business: 'Next up please.'

As a translation it is faultless. The colloquial 'will plonk down' has the right ring to it, and the quartet ends with fine conversational flourish which exactly reproduces Belli's *ffora a cchi ttocca*. Now Garioch:

Fowre muckle angels wi' their trumpets, stalkin
till the fowre airts, sall aipen the inspection;
they'll gie a blow, and bawl, ilk to his section
in their huge voices: 'Come, aa ye'es, be wauken.'

It is question of feel. Here there is a sinewy toughness, a relaxed humour and an energy of spirit which matches exactly the voice and tone of Belli. Garioch takes the liberty of adding the 'sall aipen the inspection' which is not there in Belli, but his is a translation and not a mere parallel text, unlike many of the translations which come as an appendix to Burgess's short novel.

The comparison is not meant to patronise Stocks, who at his best displays great brio and panache, and who is always a splendid guide around Belli's work. The quartet and tercet on either side of the *svolta* of another eschatological sonnet, given the title 'The Damned', catch the flavour and curious whimsy of an idiosyncratic and decidedly erotic reflection on what happens in hell when men and women are allowed to mingle in unrestrained freedom:

Now then, imagine what takes place with these
damned folk, who lack all common decency:
there's kicks and punches and – believe you me –
shockers of every kind, like pregnancies!

Yes pregnancies – what else is there to say,
knowing that on the fateful Judgment Day
you're taken with your little box of tricks.

What is the man about? Is Belli merely playful, happy to twist any topic in accordance with a wayward humour of his own, or should we – unlikely – be on the lookout for some deeper purpose? The closing lines contain a jibe at the Cardinal charged with attending to the moral wellbeing of the Eternal City, but who would find the disciplining of the damned in the pell mell of hell beyond him. Everything is grist to Belli's endlessly grinding mill, and it is this eccentric vision that is so beguiling. 'What Does the Pope Do?' he asks in another poem, suggesting that putting in his time must be something of a problem for a man who is reduced to taking coffee, staring out the window over a city which is totally his, and who will never have kids to bother him. Elsewhere, Belli writes, without any undue compassion, of the fate of a would-be assassin of the King of France. His shot missed the King and his children but blew to bits 'the heads and chests and bellies' of innocent bystanders. 'Surely we see the hand of God in this!' he concludes, in a final line of devastating, ironic power.

Roman life passes in array before his eyes – elderly prostitutes, mothers doting on their babies, condemned murderers, pompous clerics, impoverished families and, once, two Highland chieftains who were presented to the Pope in all their tartan finery. Belli, who seems to have known what Scotsmen wear under their kilts, wondered in a sonnet what might have happened had a gust of wind blown through the Papal chambers, kicking up the kilt. It is a good summing up of a quixotic poet who aspired to be a gentleman in public.

Joseph Farrell