

Conversations with Writers

Presents interviews with writers, publishers and literary activists

Friday, June 30, 2017

Interview **Pietro Deandrea**



Pietro Deandrea has, for many years, been researching into literature and the arts connected to contemporary migrations.

His books include [*New Slaveries in Contemporary British Literature and Visual Arts: The Ghost and the Camp*](#) (Manchester University Press, 2015); [*Fertile Crossings: Metamorphoses of Genre in Anglophone West African Literature*](#) (Rodopi, 2002); and; [*L'occhio della terra*](#) (Le Lettere, 2006), his translation into Italian of [*Niyi Osundare*](#)'s poetry collection, *The Eye of The Earth*.

In this interview, Deandrea talks about the arts, literature, migration and Journeys in Translation.

How would you describe the work that you do?

I teach English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Torino, Italy (Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere e Culture Moderne).

My aim is to make students enjoy the peculiar power of literature to incarnate ethical values. My ideal wish is also to help them develop their autonomous skills in decoding literary texts in all their nuances. Nowadays we are exposed to all sorts of manipulative messages, so I wish they could arrive (again, through literary sensitivity) at an active practice of critical interpretation.

What first drew your attention to the connection between the arts, literature and migration? And, what are some of the things you've found?

Working in the field of Postcolonial Studies, migration is the most relevant topic we are currently bound to come across, both in texts and in everyday life. It is part and parcel of the inherent porosity and adaptability of Postcolonial Studies. To paraphrase Hannah Arendt, refugees (and by analogy asylum seekers and migrants) are the key figures of our incomplete modernity: the historical drive towards political engagement shaping Postcolonial Studies point to the urgency, I feel, to concentrate on migration and its latest developments.

My recent monograph [*New Slaveries in Contemporary British Literature and Visual Arts: The Ghost and the Camp*](#) (Manchester University Press, 2015) focuses on a particularly tragic aspect of globalization's migrants in the heart of 'civilized' Europe, something that I feel everyone should be aware of.

The book makes an effort to bring to the fore new forms of enslavement that have been recently growing side by side with the ordinary lives of European citizens, something that might be taking place at our doorstep. Many different kinds of novels (including crime fiction), plays, films and photographic projects poignantly represent this phenomenon from various perspectives, in its spatial and psychological effects. In some cases, the boundaries of artistic genres are modified, when dealing with new slaveries.

I felt it important to offer a wider picture of the emergence of this topic in British culture, not least because the peculiar power of literature that I mentioned above, is capable, more deeply than sociology or political studies, to inspire an empathy with these new slaves and to offer viable strategies of resistance, both individual and collective.

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What sets the book apart from other books that have been published on these issues?

I might be wrong, but this is the first monograph on the topic as far as the British context is concerned.

Other researchers have published brilliant books on asylum or refugees narratives, such as Agnes Woolley's [*Contemporary Asylum Narratives: Representing Refugees in the Twenty-First Century*](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and David Farrier's [*Postcolonial Asylum*](#) (Liverpool UP, 2011). I am certainly in debt with books like these, in their opening new areas of postcolonial investigation and in their theoretical strategies.

At the same time, I aimed at examining how the emergence of new forms of slavery includes a wider range of migrants, not least economic migrants and documented ones. Besides, I was also keen on discussing the ways in which these migrants' lives are reduced to a spectral existence and spatially stifled – when not literally detained, by both illegal organizations and British institutions (the continuities in the strategies of these two apparently opposite poles is, sadly, one of the evidences highlighted by my research).

What were some of the most challenging aspects of the work that went into the book?

The genres that the book deals with are many: crime novels, sociological papers employing literary strategies, films, documentaries, novels for young adults, humour novels, plays, dystopian novels, photographic exhibitions – I had to struggle to examine them under the light of a single, possibly coherent perspective. But they do share so many features... Moreover, they deal with characters that are not always 'postcolonial' in its strictest sense, and come from countries that were not part of [the colonies]. And some of its authors could be defined as white Britons. But then again, this demonstrates the suppleness of Postcolonial Studies as a critical reading of literature and the arts.

Theoretically speaking, I found that in a research like this postcolonial critical approaches had to be enriched with other perspectives coming into play: therefore, I had recourse to theory from Holocaust and Trauma Studies.

How did you get involved with Journeys in Translation?

In March 2017, I came across the project while I was teaching a course in Literature and Translation where we were working on texts dealing with migration, such as Samuel Selvon's "The Lonely Londoners", David Dabydeen's "The Intended" and Caryl Phillips' "The Lost Child", amongst others. So I couldn't help grabbing this chance to work, together with my students, on poems which deal with such an urgent topic.

How would you describe the work you and your students have done as part of Journeys in Translation?

Basically, we gave flesh and blood to the translation theory we had been discussing during the course. Interpreting the texts, reflecting on them in all their nuances and supposed effects on readers, and finally trying to transpose them into your language, into another readership.

I was quite satisfied to experience the students' active participation, and in some cases their observations and translation proposals went well beyond my expectations – we happened to spend two hours on a single poem! I even had to limit their contribution, at times. It was really a collective engagement with the poems, and a collective production.

Lydia Towsey's "Come In", *Over Land, Over Sea: Poems for those seeking refuge* (Five Leaves Publication, 2015) p.16. Translated into Italian by English Literature and Translation MA students as part of a seminar that was held at the University of Turin between March and April 2017.

What would you say is the value of initiatives like Journeys in Translation?

As I said above, literature has the power to inspire empathy with its subjects.

In our case, I had a feeling that we all understood the condition of contemporary migrants' more deeply. Besides, translation made us move a step deeper in our comprehension of the phenomenon, when we dirtied our hands with the raw material of these situations through the manipulation of words. So many times we were faced with a sentence, a line, or simply an image that subtly conveyed more than one aspect in the lives of contemporary refugees, and we consequently felt the ethical responsibility of transferring all these nuances into Italian. Maybe we did not always succeed in doing that, but we certainly reached the goal of fully engaging both our linguistic and humane alertness. In fact, these two aspects of a translator's activity eventually seemed to merge into one, and that is something I am quite proud of.

Editor's Note:

[Journeys in Translation](#) aims to facilitate cross- and inter-cultural conversations around the themes of home, belonging and refuge.

The project encourages people who are bilingual or multilingual to have a go at translating 13 of the 101 poems from [Over Land: Over Sea: Poems for those seeking refuge](#) (Five Leaves Publications, 2015) from English into other languages and to share the translations, and reflections on the exercise on blogs, in letters and emails to family and friends, and on social media.

So far, the 13 poems that are being used as part of the project have been translated into languages that include Italian, German, Shona, Spanish, Bengali, British Sign Language, Farsi, Finnish, French, Turkish and Welsh. Currently, over 20 people from all over the world are working on the translations. More translations and more languages are on the way.

In Leicester, Journeys in Translation will culminate in an event that is going to be held on September 30 as part of [Everybody's Reading](#) 2017. During the event the original poems and translations will be read, discussed and displayed.

Over Land, Over Sea: Poems for Those Seeking Refuge (Five Leaves Publications, 2015) was edited by Kathleen Bell, Emma Lee and Siobhan Logan and is being sold to raise funds for [Doctors Without Borders/ Médecins Sans Frontières \(MSF\)](#), [Leicester City of Sanctuary](#) and the [Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum](#).

Copies of the anthology are available from [Five Leaves Bookshop](#) (Nottingham).

More information on how Over Land, Over Sea came about is [available here](#).

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