

## 4.6 Translation is the closest way to read: Ann Goldstein and Saskia Ziolkowski (AV)

### Transcript

#### **Aarthi Vadde**

Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. I'm one of your hosts, Aarthi Vadde.

Our long-time listeners know that Novel Dialogue got its start bringing novelists and literary critics together. This season, we both spread our wings and narrowed our focus to the theme of translation. We have discussed the nitty-gritty of word choice, the politics of writing in colonial versus indigenous languages, and how both freedom and constraint have shaped the task of the translator. And today is our capstone episode on the topic, featuring eminent translator Ann Goldstein in conversation with the wonderful scholar of Italian literature and my colleague Saskia Ziolkowski.

Ann might be the most well-known translator working today, and while her star rose as the translator of the *Neapolitan Quartet* by Elena Ferrante, her translations of Italian literature range across the canon. She has brought us Italo Calvino, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Elsa Morante, and Primo Levi. And English-language readers can also look forward to her most recent works, which bring lesser-known writers into translation, writers who might not otherwise have met American readers on American shores. Her most recent translations are *A Sister's Story* by Donatella di Pietrantonio and *Distant Fathers* by Marina Jarre. I believe Jarre's novels are only now available in English because of Ann, and this is the first, maybe not the last. So welcome, Ann. Thank you for being here.

#### **Ann Goldstein**

Thank you very much for that very nice introduction.

#### **AV**

Of course, and Saskia is an assistant professor, the Andrew W. Mellon assistant professor of Romance Studies at Duke University. And her book, *Kafka's Italian Progeny*, offers a fascinating look at Kafka's influence over a range of major Italian writers, including Calvino and Elena Ferrante. Saskia, you didn't tell me this, but your book was awarded the 2020 Book Prize in Literary Studies by the American Association of Italian Studies. So congratulations on that.

#### **AG**

Congratulations.

#### **Saskia Ziolkowski**

Thank you.

**AV**

It sounds like such a fantastic book, and I'm excited to read it. And I'm also thrilled to be passing the mic to you and to listen to your Italian pronunciation because I can't do justice to these names, so.

**SZ**

You did great. Thank you. Thank you so much. It's such a pleasure to have this conversation. Ann has brought so many important Italian works to English readers, and I have a number of questions as an Italianist, but I have to start with Ferrante for obvious reasons. She's the focus of so much press, popular attention, and some controversy. And Ann, you're also in a unique situation as translator because Ferrante is a pseudonym for an author whose identity is unknown. You are her face in English. And in a profession that's often characterized by its invisibility, you're recognized as a star. With Ferrante's essays for *The Guardian*, your translations were also the originals. And I was just wondering, does all this affect your relationship to translating? Do you feel different kind of responsibility or freedom, or rather, is there anything you'd like to clarify about translating Ferrante specifically?

**AG**

No, but I think it's an odd situation. It always, it surprised me when people began to care about it, but I guess that was because they began to care about the books. But that people began to take an interest in the translator, which, of course, I think is a good thing for translators in general. But in terms of responsibility, I think it does give you, in a way, a greater, I mean, I felt a greater responsibility to, well, to the author, although I don't know who the author is, and I've never been in touch with her directly. But also to the text, I mean, it seems like you have to be, I mean, I feel to some extent, of course, you always feel that you have to be faithful to what you think is what you interpret as the writer's text. But in this case, it's almost more that way, because there are two parts of it. I mean, there's the writing, and then there's the speaking, because people wanted to hear from Ferrante, and there was no Ferrante to hear from. So they had to hear from me. But I, and I try to make this very clear, probably, for me to say this, I mean, I'm not Ferrante. I don't even speak for Ferrante. I speak for her books.

**SZ**

You've translated not only her fiction, but also her essays and her nonfiction. So how differently do you approach translating nonfiction and fiction? Do you approach novels the same way you do other forms of writing? Do you feel like translating so much of an author, in this case, Ferrante, changes how you translate, say, the novels or vice versa, having done so many of her works?

**AG**

Well, first of all, I don't think that the approach is really different from nonfiction or fiction. I mean, and fiction. It's the same. I mean, I'm still, it's just me and the sentences, but certainly nonfiction is much more complicated, and nonfiction, in the case of Ferrante, especially of the essays *In the Margins*, they gave such a great, greater depth of understanding of what she was, of where her books came from, in a way, of what was behind them, what's the sort of the depths of them, you know, because she really sort of explicates her sort of her writing process, but also her thinking process over many years. And so I think in that way, of course, I haven't really translated any fiction of hers since I worked on those novels, so it's hard to, I mean, on those essays, but those essays were very complicated. I mean, they were far

more compressed than her novels. Every sentence was like kind of a minefield, in a way, because it would have, it has so many, she's trying to do so many things in every sentence, and each one is full of references. So it was really kind of a complicated operation.

**SZ**

There's sort of this growing movement around, or debate about recognizing the translator, not only making the translator visible, but also that the translator is, in fact, an author of fictional works, which maybe wouldn't be said of nonfiction, that you're reading the words of the translator, and there's been a lot of debate about this partially because of recognition, despite your crucial role in bringing Ferrante to English speakers. You're in this group of famous translators whose names are still sometimes not on the cover, for instance, on the cover of Ferrante novels. And I was wondering, did you think having the translator's name on the cover changes how someone views a novel? And does it change your relationship, your relationship to a work?

**AG**

I don't think so. I mean, it's something that I, especially when I started, you know, I didn't, I didn't think about it for myself, but I also think it wasn't such a big, you know, it wasn't a, it wasn't really, hadn't become an issue in any way, I mean, hadn't become a question. I mean, I do think that the translator's name should be on the cover. I think it's a publisher, many publishers just have a policy where they don't put the translator's name on the cover, and that's it. And I'm sure you know Jennifer Croft has this, you know, whole movement, and she claims she won't translate a book unless her name is on the cover. So that cuts out some publishers for her. I mean, it's, it's ridiculous that publishers don't rethink their policies, of course. I mean, they should, but, but again, I'm sort of going off to the side here a little bit. But, but I think, you know, it's always said that people that when, when readers or when book buyers see that a book has two names on the cover, I mean, has a translator name on the cover, they turn off, you know, and they decide they're not interested. I mean, I don't know if that's true or not, if that, if that would make a difference. On the other hand, maybe you, you know, now that translators' names are beginning to be known a little bit, you would say, oh, if so and so translated this book, maybe it's interesting.

**AV**

Do you have particular translators who you feel that kind of excitement when they release a new book, and you think I must get that the way somebody might say my favorite author just published something, I must buy that?

**AG**

Probably not.

**AV**

Okay

**AG**

I mean, I know I said that, but I don't really know, I mean, I don't read that much. I don't have that much time.

**AV**

That's a nice secret for us to be—

**AG**

But I'm judging the National Book Awards in translation this year. So I have a way, way greater sense of, I mean, I've read a lot of books in translation in the last few months and a lot of translators, some of whom I knew, you know, and had read before and stuff, but.

**AV**

No scoops you can share yet, right?

**AG**

No.

**AV**

Okay.

**AG**

I can tell, that's as far as I can go.

**SZ**

I'm going to switch gears a little bit to another amazing Italian author, Primo Levi, whom you've really been also responsible for his growing presence in English, and you edited all of and translated many of the works in this really impressive three volume set of his complete works, which include his famous Auschwitz memoirs, but also science fiction and other works. And I was wondering if you would maybe share a little bit about this incredible feat of translation and perhaps a specific passage.

**AG**

Well, I mean, it is, I mean, it was a, I mean, I, it was astonishing to me to be able to do this, to do that. I mean, it was a, it was a very long project. Nobody likes to remember exactly how long it took, but, but it was an amazing project because I mean, yes, there were, there are his famous books and they're, you know, they're amazing. But it was really, I thought it was a great pleasure and a great service to the world to bring his, to make his other books known.

So I was just going to read a little passage from *The Truce*, which is one of the books that I translated, or retranslated actually. Not all of it was retranslated. Some of it hadn't been translated. Some of the stories hadn't been translated, but most of them had, but I'll just—

**AV**

Could you tell us a little about the passage before you read it?

**AG**

Yes, I'm going to, I am. So *The Truce* is the story of, I mean, *The Truce* is the story of Primo Levi's long, roundabout journey after he was freed from Auschwitz and how he got back to Italy. It was about 10 months, I think it took him about 10 months. And this is, the passage that I'm going to read is from the very beginning of the book where he's still at Auschwitz and he's just, the camps have, the Germans have fled and the camps are being liberated by the Russian, the Red Army, the Russians. So complicated. You don't know it, it seems so counter-intuitive, some way, all that. But the Russians were the first people that they saw who were not Germans, that the prisoners saw who were not Germans. And this is in the early days of January of 1945. So the Germans had left the camp and at Auschwitz all the healthy prisoners were evacuated and they were made to march to other camps. And many of them, this is when many of the prisoners died. They hadn't died in the camp, but they died on the way to, on the, in the evac, during this evacuation. Primo Levi was lucky because he was in the infirmary, so he wasn't evacuated. He was basically left to die. But actually those people were better off, the people who were left, because they didn't have to walk basically barefoot in the snow for many, many miles. So this little, this is just a very short passage. And this is when the first Russian patrol came in view of the camp. This is early January, January 27th of 1945.

“Erano quattro giovani soldati a cavallo, che procedevano guardinghi, coi mitragliatori imbracciati, lungo la strada che limitava il campo. Quando giunsero ai reticolati, sostarono a guardare, scambiandosi parole brevi e timide, e volgendo sguardi legati da uno strano imbarazzo sui cadaveri scomposti, sulle baracche sconquassate, e su noi pochi vivi.

“Four young soldiers on horseback, machine guns under their arms, preceded warily along the road that followed the perimeter of the camp. When they reached the fences, they paused to look. And with a brief timid exchange of words, turned their gazes checked by a strange embarrassment to the jumbled corpses, to the ruined barracks, and to us few living beings.”

So I was just going to talk about this one word actually, *scomposti*, which is really, in a way, was one of the hardest words in this whole, this whole little passage. Actually there were two hard words. The other hard word was this word *imbracciati*, which Italians disagreed about whether it meant under their arms or slung over their shoulders. So it was kind of an interesting, this is just to give you a little bit of the range of, of issues that come up. So there were, it was kind of fascinating.

Anyway, but *scomposti* is a different, is a different idea. It's also complicated because it has many different meanings. Again, in translation, words with many meanings are often the hardest, or sometimes they're the easiest because you can just grab whatever meaning you need. But you don't always know what that meaning is. So in this case, the *scomposti* is the past participle of the verb *scomporre*, which means to take apart, but also to throw into disorder, to disarrange, to make a mess of. And it also has a kind of undertone of unseemly or obscene. So the problem is to decide like which of those meanings was stronger in this case of bodies piled up, or of corpses piled up even, you could say.

So the translator has to choose. You have, it involves elimination, essentially. Like this isn't, you're going to, you try this, you try that. And another important point that I would make is that you have to try it, you sometimes you think, you know, you think of all the meanings of a word, or you look at a million different thesauruses, look at dictionaries, but, but, and then you think, oh, okay, this, this, this word is, this seems like just the right meaning. And then you read it in the sentence, and it's not right at all. And then you also, it also has to work in the paragraph. So it has to work in all these different, different ways.

Anyway, the dictionaries in this case offer, you know, a bunch of possibilities. The cognate would have been discomposed, but that's really not right. I mean, that's usually more of a person who's out of order. And my first idea actually was purely physical, although in a slightly different sense, because I thought of them as corpses and that they were, first I thought, oh, well, maybe they were decomposing. But then I realized, well, no, it's winter. It's freeze, they, they've been talking about how freezing it is. They couldn't be, they aren't decomposing. So that, that was too literal. And when I thought about the different meanings and I thought about the, about the actual scene, I did think of it as a jumbled pile of bodies, of corpses all jumbled together because we know that there's a common grave and the grave is overflowing the bodies.

So I also consulted at this point with an Italian Levi scholar who, who, he was actually the person who brought up the idea of, I mean, he's who noted the underlying idea of the, of what's something unseemly, something obscene, which is this pile of bodies that are unburied. But so he, he suggested he was talking about like a pile of bones and limbs thrown together. And then a few lines earlier you've read about, we've read about this common grave. And so it seemed like it could be, it could be something like unseemly because he says, I'm sorry, I'm just going to read this, that "they dumped him not into the grave, but on the dirty snow because the grave was full and no other burial could be given." That's Levi writing. And the fact that no burial could be given is already indecent is already obscene. So it didn't need that extra connotation of obscenity. And so I went back to the, the idea of the jumble of bodies. I thought that the, you know, to say something obscene or unseemly would carry too much moral judgment because the, the soldiers have already given their moral judgment by the way they're looking. So in the end, it was just, it was the jumbled bodies, I think, what did I say? The jumbled corpses. And I also use the word corpses as a, more, as a less, more impersonal word than bodies.

So that was, that's one word. I mean, that's how, that's an extreme case maybe, but, but still you couldn't do that with every word. But that's really, the process is like that, especially when you have a word that seems important.

## **SZ**

I, what I, part of what I find so strong about this passage in both the Italian and the English is sort of the visual external ending with the "us", the "noi" at the end. And I feel like the translation did such a amazing job of sort of getting that this, you know, the gaze from the outside and how visual it is before it gets to that these are, you know, people that are, that are on the inside and they're, they're, it does seem like it could be a little hard to get that contrast, since you're dealing with the people at the end, but this very visual experience at the beginning.

## **AG**

Yeah, well, actually that the ending, there was a little, I mean, a question about one of the, I mean, I ended up, it's in Italian, it's just "pochi vivi", just a few living. And in English, just didn't seem to work as the few living. So I added, I added beings, because it seemed that it needed another, it needed, it needed a real noun. I mean, because in English, that doesn't work so quite as neatly to have a, to use an adjective as a noun, as it does in Italian.

## **SZ**

Since this was one of the retranslated works, I was wondering about the, the differences between the canonical authors, like *The Truce* and *The Periodic Table* and Morante's *Arturo's Island* and Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees*, versus the contemporary authors Amara Lakhous and Nadia Terranova, Donatella Di Pietrantonio, Jhumpa Lahiri and of course Ferrante who you're translating for the first time, as when you had different decisions to retranslate both in terms of taking on the project, but then also if it changes the process at all for you.

**AG**

Well, it's kind of nerve-wracking because first of all, for two reasons. One is because they're great writers and that it's already nerve-wracking to translate it, you know, someone who is known to be, who is a great writer. But it's also a little nerve-wracking to re-translate something because, you know, you don't, you just feel like are you, there's a, it's not, it's not, I wouldn't call it competitive, but it's just like, you know, maybe the, their solutions were better. Or maybe they can't, maybe they, or he, in most cases, I think it was a he of all these books, as a matter of fact. I don't know. I mean, I just always think the other person could, did it better. That's my problem.

On the other hand, it's also true that, and I've never been able to answer this question, that translations do date. I mean, translations date in a way that original works don't. And there's reasons to re-translate books. You know, the old ones, the old translations just don't read that well. I mean, the, the Levi was interesting because in, in, *If This is the Man*, Stuart Woolf, actually, I think he's still alive. He had, he was the original translator. He had always wanted to revise this translation. And so this gave him a chance to do that. I mean, I worked with him a lot on it, but, but he, you know, that was really great. And I wonder how many other translators would, would want that opportunity. But, but it had, but, but also the translation was dated. So, and he understood that, you know, and he was happy to go along with suggestions and to make his own corrections.

**SZ**

Yeah, with the, with the Morante, it was exciting for me that I feel like you were able to bring more of Morante's weirdness into English. And that may be the first time when people are translating sometimes there's like a hesitancy to, she has a lot of weird things in her, in her language.

**AG**

Yeah, she does.

**SZ**

And I felt like *Arturo's Island*, when you translated, it really, really showed that in a way that is wonderful, that maybe it was, you would, one would withhold potentially to make it more accessible the first time. So that's also an exciting, I mean, I'm very excited you retranslated her as well.

**AG**

Oh, thank you. But also, it's also true that, that sometimes I think in a different era of translation, there were different practices, different standards. For example, many, well, speaking of Morante, the original, there is a translation of *Minzogna e sortilegio*, which was just, you know, sort of freely cut and

pasted by the translator. So it's, and which is coming out, I think in the spring, within a new translation by Jenny McPhee from New York Review Books.

**SZ**

I imagine she didn't, she, I imagine she's doing all of it, not, you know, her favorite 200 pages. That's great.

**AG**

And she's doing all of it. Yeah. So there's, so exactly. I mean, there's, there's definitely a feeling that you don't, you wouldn't, you wouldn't like play fast and loose quite as much as I think you might have in the which is kind of what you're, you were talking about in terms of, you know, making something accessible.

**AV**

Have you followed the discussion around female translators of classical texts? I think maybe Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey*.

**AG**

Oh, right.

**AV**

Right.

**AG**

I haven't really followed it. I mean, I know, I know what you mean, what you're talking about.

**AV**

Yeah. In general, what a female translator brings to the classical tradition and whether, you know, translations date, as you mentioned, but whether certain characters come alive in a different way, like Penelope might figure differently in a female translator.

**AG**

I mean, I would think so.

**AV**

Yeah.

**AG**

You know, I do. I actually had this, I went to, I was in Florence yesterday with my friend Jenny, and we were, we went to the, to San Marco and we were looking at the, at the Fra Angelico stuff. But this woman, this guard there told us about, that there were three lunettes by a woman painter of that time, a nun. And when I looked her up, I found that she, she had painted a Last Supper. And that the details apparently are very different from the normal Last Supper. So I haven't seen this painting. So I don't



know any, any of what the details were, but things like the food was different and the silver, whatever they were using to eat, the cutlery was different or something. Anyway, but that's really just to your point. I mean—

**AV**

Can I ask if you've ever had that experience with a retranslation project where you felt something that you retranslated or came out very differently in a certain region of the text than the original translation?

**AG**

I, the fact is I usually don't read the original.

**AV**

Oh, the original translations.

**AG**

Yeah.. I mean, I had read, let's say *The Periodic Table*, of course I had read it many years ago, but I didn't remember it and I didn't, I didn't look. I prefer just to do it as if it's, it was if it were the first translation.

**AV**

Interesting, yeah.

**AG**

Because you know, you can, I mean, and then there, I mean, there's many ways you, you know, you don't want to have the other translator's voice in your mind. And then you could, some things are, some things there's only, sometimes you think, well, there's only one way to say it, but many things there's like, you know, 10 ways to say it. They're all correct.

**AV**

You don't want to foreclose your options with another translator's choice. Thank makes sense.

**AG**

You don't want to have that. Yeah.

**SZ**

I feel like maybe you have to do something different too, I imagine if you read—

**AG**

That too. Exactly. Yeah.

**AV**

But Saskia, you, you've taught multiple translations before, even side by side, right? And so you've told me that you try to eliminate a kind of evaluation model when one is assessing translations side by side.

**SZ**

Yeah. When my, when my students interpret, I often encourage using multiple translations since they're all lead to different paths of interpretation. And I don't want them to say, like, this is better or that is better, but to sort of think about the way they're reading and how they can engage the translations to show how their reading makes sense. Not say like, oh, the translator should use this, this word.

**AG**

It's, I mean, in poetry, it's sort of famously said, I guess, that, that you, you know, well, I myself would never translate poetry, but that if you read maybe five or six translations of a poem, then maybe you get something of the idea of it.

**SZ**

Yeah. So helpful to read, I mean, for them to, for everyone to read translations too, in terms of understanding the meaning.

I wanted to sort of go back to Aarthi's question about a little bit about the identity of the translator changing how one potentially either translates or understands the text on the more recent debates so Homer, but with say Amanda Gorman, where there's been a lot of debate about identity of the author and translator and how close they maybe should be or shouldn't be. And many of your translated works feature women with intense relationships. And then a sizable number also are by authors with Jewish heritage. And I was wondering if the relationship between your identities and those of your authors influence how or why you translate?

**AG**

Well, why I translate is usually because somebody proposes a book for me, to me. And I do decide, you know, I don't, I do say no. But, but, but I think especially with a first person woman narrator, it's impossible for me not to identify in some way. I mean, certainly with the Neapolitan novels. And also because there's no author, I mean, even for me, there's no, I mean, the author to me is the voice of the writer, of the text in a way. So I do kind of, I mean, however different I am from the actual person, I'm still somehow that voice in fiction, particularly. I mean, it's less true in nonfiction.

**SZ**

Sort of easier to inhabit the imaginary space. Not that you're saying you are that person, but that it's, it's easier.

**AG**

No, but, but I definitely, yeah, that's a better way of putting it. Thank you.

**AV**

And that's what the concept of fictionality has historically enabled, right? That license or that leap, that one is more, I think, careful about taking when there feels like a biographical person that one is reading, right? So when the nonfiction seems to align more with a body in the world, whereas the fiction character is some as one person scholar said it, nobody's story, there's no physical body in the world that the character can be pinned to. And that, that does allow you a kind of freedom.

**AG**

Yeah, yeah, no, that's true.

**SZ**

You mentioned being asked to translate things, which was how Primo Levi ended up translating Kafka, which I think also had to do with their identities, why they were, why they're asked and Primo Levi really felt tortured by the experience. I was wondering if there are any authors that you regret translating or that, or that tortured you in some way, that you took on a project and then later thought, I don't, you know, that maybe it wasn't as good a fit as the, the person asking thought it was.

**AG**

Well, there's two ways to answer that. First of all, I don't think I, there are authors who I've been tortured by and who I was, I did kind of regret. I mean, in some, on some level regret, but I'm not going to say who they are.

**SZ**

Well, and Kafka is wonderful. So it's not an insult to the author, it's sort of the experience of translating, right?

**AG**

And then, and then the other way to answer that is to say, I never regret anything because I always learn something from whoever I translate. And even if it is torturous, I mean, in the way of that I'm talking, that I was talking about, which is that, you know, that the prose just isn't, it just isn't good, isn't, it just turns out to be too hard or too, not, just not that good.

But, and Primo Levi, you could also say was kind of torturous because, because of the subject. I mean, because of his problems with Kafka, I had some problems like that with him. I mean, not problems, but, you know, moments where you have to walk away. This, the new Marina Jarre is, has moments like that. I don't know if you've read it in, well, I guess it doesn't, it has never come, it hasn't come out in Italian yet.

**SZ**

I did, an older copy existed.

**AG**

You have the—

**SZ**

The *Lettonia*, you're, that's what will be coming out in February.

**AG**

I think something like that, yeah.

**SZ**

And it's, it's, were you happy at the end? I can imagine it. I mean, I found her first one also, there's a lot of hard topics in there. And as a, as a reader, it can be hard, but I, I would imagine the translator even more with Primo Levi and Marina Jarre.

**AG**

Yeah, because you're, I mean, because you're, you're so in the middle of it, and you're so involved in it, whether you're the writer or the translator. I mean, Calvino has this essay about, you know, translation is the, is the closest way to read, to read. And it's true. And so you get, you can get overwhelmed when the, when the subject is difficult. I mean, is, is painful, I guess one should say, like in those two cases in the, in the Primo Levi, especially in, you know, in survival in Auschwitz and in, in the return to Latvia.

**SZ**

Do you, are there, or have those works, or are there other works that you feel like have changed your relationship to language or translating, or sort of at all, are there any Italian works that have transformed what you think of, how you think in English or think about English?

**AG**

I don't, I mean, I mean, in a way you could say, yeah, everything changes the way I think about language. I mean, every, every translation, the way every translation teaches you something about the language. I mean, about, well, it teaches you, I mean, you could say it teaches you about English too, because every time you have to find a way in English of conveying a different author or a different style, a different Italian style into English. So in a way, you could say that that's, you're transforming your English every time.

I mean, because it, because it does, I think that by being faithful to the text, which of course, I don't mean literal to the text, I think that, that that's really the way of, of emphasizing the style of, of bringing out the writing, the style. And I think that, that if you, I mean, I'm going to say something very bold. If you, if you read a bunch of my translations, I don't think they all sound the same. They don't, I mean, whether, you know, some people say, oh, you can recognize a translation by so-and-so or by so-and-so. I don't know if that's true or not. But, but to me, it seems like the, that the different authors have different styles and that they, that's clear.

**SZ**

Primo Levi and, and Ferrante certainly feel extremely different to me in terms of voice. Yeah.

**AV**

Do you feel like the translator has to be a ventriloquist or a medium in the way that you inhabit sometimes the pain of the translation that you're doing? Or do you try to avoid these kinds of other metaphor, translator as something else to explain the process?

**AG**

No, I mean, I, I do, I think you are inhabiting it. I mean, one of my favorite ones is the actor. Is this, I don't know if you know this essay by Cesare Garboli about the translator, translators as actors. And I, that's, I think the performer idea is really kind of a good one, because it works for me as, that you're,

this is one version of something, you know, of a, I mean how do you separate the pianist and the, and the work? They sort of become each other for that moment or those moments of the performance. So, yeah, so I think that's, that's one of the things I like.

There's an Italian translator, a woman who translates from English into Italian, Martina Testa. She says she thinks of herself as a mechanic. I don't think she really believes that, but that's how she, that's her, her metaphor.

**AV**

Craft. Yeah.

**AG**

Yeah.

**SZ**

Actor, mechanic, author, it's so interesting, the different, the different ways that it can be characterized.

**Ag**

Yeah. And then there's the puzzle solver.

**AV**

Oh, right, especially for Calvino, maybe. Yeah.

**SZ**

So there's so little that's translated to English, you know, often estimated to be less than 3%. And the small percentage of that, that is translated from Italian to English has really grown, thanks in large part to you. Another—

**AG**

Is that true?

**SZ**

It has. Yeah. They've done studies or at least there's been a couple of things that come out that says there's now more that's being translated from Italian. And I certainly feel like my people I meet are more likely to know Italian authors than was true for a while. And you're really shaping what English readers consume from Italy. And I was wondering how you decide to translate the less obvious authors and work. Like, I'll name two that I've been recommending to a lot of people. So Bucci's *Always Remember Your Name* or Jarre's *Distant Fathers*, which are wonderful, but wouldn't necessarily, you know, you didn't have to be translated necessarily.

**AG**

Well, the Bucci, Bucci has a very, has sort of a long story. And which is that someone, a woman I didn't know, whose son-in-law, if you want to hear this whole story, but sometimes this happens, whose son-in-law is, was the Italian consul in San Francisco. I mean, Italian. She was, she saw, he presented Andra

Bucci, one of the sisters who wrote that book, with a prize and, or some kind of award or prize or something. And this woman, the mother-in-law, who had spent time in Italy and knows Italian, but she read, she read the book in Italian. It's like the first book she'd ever actually read in Italian. And she just thought this has to be published. And she wrote to me out of the blue and said, would I consider translating it or trying to get it published? And I, you know, I read it and I thought it should be published. I thought it was a really, it's a very moving book and it's a story that isn't that common. Their whole story was so interesting. And the fact that they didn't write it until they were in their 80s or 70s. I mean, it was just, I mean, I thought that in a way, you know, the, the part of the book that was almost more interesting is how they, how they came around to being able to do it.

**SZ**

Thank you so much for all these wonderful answers. And I now have the signature question for, for the, the season of the podcast, which is, is there a word or concept that you consider untranslatable or very difficult to translate? And what is it?

**AG**

Yes, every word, every concept. But I mean, I actually just, I'm not joking, but it sounds like a joke. The word that I, that I recently had a lot of trouble with was, it's just a very common word in Italian "portiere." It's like a doorman, but you can't say doorman in an Italian context. It's just not right. But it's sort of a person with some doorman functions and some other functions. And sometimes in this, in actually, this is in *Forbidden Notebook*. There are two ways that portiere is used. One as a sort of doorman person and the other as a sort of office receptionist, but it's not really like a receptionist. So how do you translate these words? I mean, do you say doorman? Do you say concierge? Do you say porter? I mean, it's these kinds of small, physical, almost, or, you know, jobs and physical things, objects that don't exist in the other culture that in a way are the hardest to translate. I mean, I don't know if they're the hardest, but they're, it's difficult to find the, an equivalent because there isn't an equivalent. I mean, there isn't one that's an exact match.

But, but, but the other, the other, I mean, I won't go into this too much. But the other thing that I think is untranslatable, of course, and especially in Italian is dialect. I, you know, people talk about dialect all the time. People, Italian writers use it, not exclusively, but they're, I mean, Ferrante actually less than others. Pasolini famously has this kind of made up Roman slang. I mean, part, part real and part his own. So those are things that I think are really hard to convey. I mean, that, that someone is, I mean, you know, Ferrante solved the problem, solved the problem in a way for her translators by saying somebody, so and so said this in dialect. So then you don't have to worry, and then she writes in Italian. But other writers don't necessarily do that.

**SZ**

Have you, do you tend to, I mean, I think of "Argon" too, do you tend to keep the word then, when it's in dialect or go with, I mean, what are, what are some of the ways that you approach that? Because I agree that such a difficult—

**AG**

Sometimes I leave the word in dialect. It was just a word. But then in, well, actually in, well, maybe not, maybe that wasn't really a dialect, sort of a dialect word in *The Lying Life of Adults*, there were some words. And I think sometimes I left them and sometimes I just tried to find a word that was, you know, basically slangy, but not too slangy because slang is so particular. It ends up, it ends up sounding false in some way. So you can't really, I mean—

**SZ**

Age—

**AG**

And it ages much faster, than everything else. I mean, I can't speak to a young person now.

**AV**

Could you tell us the choice you used for doorman versus porter versus?

**AG**

I think that what we end what we so far, this book has not come out yet. So it could change. We ended up saying, actually saying porter, using porter for the person who was at the apartment building, the person who would open the door, let's say, or hand you your mail. It's not precise, but it seems better than, I mean, concierge just seems too French or too fancy or something.

**AV**

Right.

**AG**

It's just like a poor building.

**AV**

You know, I don't know if this is helpful to know or not, but there's a beautiful short story by Salman Rushdie from *East West*. It's called "The Quarter." And it's a play on the role a porter plays in for this building in a multicultural London neighborhood, not a particularly wealthy building.

**AG**

Yeah.

**AV**

Yeah. And he's just the porter, but he does things that go beyond the call of duty . And he's romantic. And so the title is "The Quarter."

**AG**

Oh, yeah. Huh.

**AV**

I really appreciated having this conversation with you both. And I feel like I've learned so much about translation from the inside. So Ann and Saskia, thank you. Thank you again for making time for Novel Dialogue.

As we approach the end of the show, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, public books for its partnership, and acknowledged support from Duke University. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern and designer and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Our backlist includes episodes with George Saunders, Viet Tan Nguyen, Ruth Ozeki, Damon Galgut, and more.

So from all of us here at Novel Dialogue, thank you for listening. And if you like what you heard, please subscribe on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.