Literary translation

Before we start looking at specific examples of Italian–English and English–Italian literary translation, and before we start considering Chantal Wright’s book on the subject of literary translation, I would like to dedicate this week’s two classes to some of my own considerations on the subject.

The first thing I have to say is that literary translation is not so much a subject as rather a way of reading and a way of communicating, not a million miles away from the sort of textual awareness that Critical Discourse Analysis requires and encourages.

Five epigraphs (to what, we wonder … or do we?):

The vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language to another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower.

Percy Bysshe Shelley
“A Defence of Poetry” (1832)

Anything can happen!*  
* I casi son tanti! (21)

Allora sono andato nei boschi e mi sono seduto a pensare a lungo.*  
* Le avventure di Huckleberry Finn (translated 2002 by Giovanni Baldi)

*“I set down, one time, back in the woods, and had a long think about it.” (20) Even in the translation of something as simple as a brief narrative sentence used as an epigraph to a chapter, we can comment on the translator’s choices, often made in that sometimes barely liminal space between comprehension and expression. Here Baldi has suppressed Huck’s “one time”, a small but significant part of Huck’s English voice in that it reinforces his characteristic eschewal of thinking overly on any event. Also suppressed is the impersonal pronoun “it”, representing the matter (the mysterious benefits of prayer as promulgated by Miss Watson) Huck has thought about. The literary translator, unlike Huck, is obliged to sit down and think continually, rarely does he or she enjoy the luxury of thinking just once.
I don’t believe in children’s books. I think after you’ve read Kidnapped, Treasure Island and Huckleberry Finn, you’re ready for anything.

John Mortimer, Books and Bookmen (May, 1986)

I remember once we managed to do 150 pages in two days because we needed 150,000 lire for the gynaecologist. We did it, but then for 48 hours the pair of us did nothing, what with the after effects of the operation and the hard slog.*

Luciano Bianciardi
La vita agra (1962) [my translation]

* Una volta ricordo che riuscimmo a fare centocinquanta cartelle in due giorni, perché ci urgevano cinquantamila lire da dare al ginecologo, e ce la facemmo ma poi per quarantott’ore restammo fermi tutti e due, fra i postumi dell’intervento e la sgobbata. (134)

1 Theory and Hubris
2 Three Pinocchios
3 Five Huckleberry Finns
4 Kids’ Stuff for Grown Ups: Art as Translation
5 Praxis and Humility