On December 14th, under the series “Linguaggi di carta”, sponsored by the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies on Translation, Languages, and Culture (Dipartimento di studi interdisciplinari su traduzione, lingue e culture, or SITLeC), the recently published book by Dominic Stewart, *Crossing the Cultural Divide: An Englishman in Italy*, was presented. The event was chaired by Delia Chiaro, directress of the Department, and Rosa Maria Bollettieri, Derek Boothman, and Sam Whitsitt contributed comments. Dominic Stewart was also present.

The evening opened with a brief introduction by the Directress of the Department, Delia Chiaro, who after introducing Dominic Stewart and welcoming him back to Forlì where he had taught from 2000 to 2007, turned the floor over to Stewart to give a brief overview of his book. Stewart explained that most of the episodes had been in his head for many years, but that it only occurred to him to put pen to paper towards the end of 2006. As with most expats, he had found himself, over the years, in situations which were often exasperating and baffling, occasionally maddening and even devastating, and yet sometimes miraculously illuminating - scenes which were, however, typical of what happens to anyone who is a foreigner trying to make his or her home abroad. But if exasperating, and if typical, they were also in many cases simply funny - even if those involved at the moment may not have seen the humorous
side of things. What Stewart wanted to give the reader, then, was both a series of scenes of cultural encounters, some 33 in all, which could provide insight into the question of cultural mediation, interaction, and possible stalemates, but also a book in which one sees the humorous side of these attempts to cross, as Stewart puts it, the “cultural divide”. He went on to note that what contributes to the humor of the story is his creation of the character of Hugh Stalwart, who is somewhat based on himself, but more a kind of “Everyman”, trying to make his way through that world of the “Other”. Stewart then concluded by saying that despite the somewhat Mr. Bean-like bumblings of Stalwart, the humoristic dimension of the book should not keep us from seeing the text as making a contribution to studies in cultural mediation, and that he hoped that readers, and teachers in particular, would consider it as material that could be profitably used in the classroom.

Following Dominic Stewart’s introductory comments, Delia Chiaro took the floor. An expert in humor studies, Chiaro pointed out many of the strategies of humor which were at work in Stewart’s book. It is a book, she noted, with an omnipresent narrator recounting Stalwart’s cultural and linguistic faux pas. She went on to refer to the work of Joel Sherzer, who in a seminal work (1978: 3-4), was the first to propose that jokes emulated so-called Freudian slips, and claimed that we laugh at people when they slip on verbal banana skins and laugh with those who recount the slips of others. Readers thus laugh with Stewart (author/narrator) recounting Stalwart’s (aka Stewart?) gaffes and consequently doubling the duplicity already present in the slips themselves.

Chiaro went on to note that from the opening chapter, “When in Turin” (13–22), in which author/protagonists deconstruct Italian morphology with the “s/con-trino” episode, where Stalwart and companion think “scontrino” must mean a drink “with” (con) something called “trino”, Stewart adopts traditional humor techniques. Malapropisms are one of his preferred tropes as they lend themselves well to bilingual humor, such as when his friend visiting from England refers to “Vittorio Gas Men” (284). Furthermore, Stewart/Stalwart continually finds himself in situations of “crosstalk” in which he and his Italian counterparts just do not seem to understand each other. The book is heavily based on bilingual puns, such as the Target Language Translational Pun. There
is a moment in the sketch, “High noon”, where Stalwart is visiting an Italian friend’s family in Lecce, and has been invited to a great luncheon at which is served one of the specialties of the region, cazzomarro. At a certain moment, Stalwart, having eaten and drunk too much in the heat of the afternoon, declares: “Mmm! Questo cazzo di agnello ha una puzza tremenda” (37), which would be “Mmm!, this penis of lamb really stinks!”, which is what he in fact really thought, but clearly should have said, “Il cazzomarro ha un buon profumo”, or the preferred, “The lamb has a wonderful smell!” There are also Source Language Translational Puns such as “tirare l’aria”, in the sketch, “Passage of air” (73), which can mean both “to fart” as well as to “pull the choke” on a car, not to mention the cultural crosstalk of the episode involving where to place a suppository (“The bitterest pill”: 42)

Chiaro wondered whether Stewart had consciously thought about those techniques. She also raised the question of how gendered the text was, of whether, had the book been written by a female ex-pat, she would have recounted episodes in the same “active” manner? Is it true, she wondered, whether female humor generally tends more towards self-denigration?

Rosa Maria Bollettieri then took the floor. The first point that Bollettieri wanted to make clear was the sheer pleasure she had in reading Stewart’s book. It was a book that simply kept her laughing, and laughing out loud; a book written with a keen sense of the comic as such, and which also had a filmic quality which allowed one to easily visualize the bumbling of the main character, the very properly English Hugh Stalwart, as he attempted to make his way in a very different, but likewise bumbling Italian world. But then she raised the question of what it was that made her laugh so, and this led to considering a different dimension of the text. Bollettieri suggested that there was a kind of subtle, but nonetheless clear sense of English superiority with regard to Italians who, in their all-too-ready self-denigration, would laugh at themselves, at how bad they could look, at what a brutta figura they could make, and especially at what awkward attempts they could make in attempting to speak English – which, it was to be noted, the text never hesitated to represent. While this sense of English superiority was always clothed in irresistible humor, Bollettieri wondered whether what that laughter covered was in fact, not a cultural “difference”, but,
as Stewart’s title suggests, something of greater and deeper difference – a cultural “divide”.

Bollettieri went on to also raise the question of the gender of the text, which led her to observations on the difference between the Italian culture and the British with regard to how the body is treated, and how such differences can be seen in several of the stories, as in the one with the suppository (“The bitterest pill”: 42), a story which also deflects a certain English superiority, in spite of Stalwart’s somewhat perverse behavior, through a heavy reliance on unflattering stereotypes of Italian mothers, but which makes one laugh regardless.

The next discussant was Derek Boothman, himself an Englishman and ex-pat. As he pointed out, he too has lived in Italy for some time, and is one who, in one way or the other, feels that he has crossed both a geographical and cultural divide. Boothman felt that Stewart’s book in many ways demonstrated, through the narrator’s voice, just how Italianized the Englishman and author, Dominic Stewart, had become. Just as he felt that in many ways, he too had become Italianized. Which then led Prof. Boothman to wonder just what it was that remained dear and valuable of the English culture to those who had spent so much time abroad. What was clear in any case for Boothman was a certain relief in not having to deal with many representatives of the English middle class who, in their loud and pink-skinned crassness, were well-represented in Stewart’s book.

Bringing the commentaries to a close was Sam Whitsitt, who began by returning to the point raised by Bollettieri about the significance of the use of the word, “divide”. For Whitsitt, what the book seemed to present was how in fact there was a divide and not just a difference since what one experiences in reading Stewart’s book is that the “divides” Stalwart confronts somehow never quite seem to get crossed as a result of the encounters he has. What seems to happen is not a slow development towards a mutual understanding, but just the opposite: the slow buildup towards a moment of total misunderstanding and miscommunication, often described in the text as that moment of “stunned silence” (e.g., 28), when everyone in the proverbial room has understood that something has happened, even if they are not entirely sure what. And while
laughter is what usually ensues following the moment of total silence, it is not clear that what follows laughter is then a cultural crossing, or cultural understanding. After all, coming to a deeper understanding of an Other might lead to a rejection of that Other rather than an acceptance, leaving us with the question of what we mean when we speak of crossing a cultural divide.

A second point Whitsitt raised was the difficulty in general, in any case, of representing the Other. And in a book like Stewart’s, which is specifically about an Englishman’s experiences in a foreign country, Italy to be precise, in which he would make his home, the question of how the Englishman represents himself as the Other, as well as how he represents the Italian Other, becomes acutely interesting. The problem is not having stereotypes, which can also be used in a positive sense, but recognizing that we do and then recognizing their articulations. Whitsitt noted that Stewart is particularly brilliant in this sense, and particularly in showing how dramatically difficult it can be to recognize and then dismantle or destroy stereotypes. But the problem of representing the Other also includes the difficulty that when we attempt to represent the Other, we usually only reproduce what we recognize, know, and want to see, and therefore the perceived differences and similarities will not go beyond this. And since we see what we want to see – which is usually what makes us comfortable, which does not mean that what we want to see is comfortable to see – the question becomes one of how we learn to let appear in our sense and vision of the Other that which we don’t want to see, don’t want to know, and do not have categories for.

Often, when we succeed in dismantling a stereotype, we are in that moment when something of the Other might appear. But these moments are truly rare and fleeting. They can also be, but are not necessarily so, moments of great unease. With no familiar categories which allow us to know, rightly or wrongly, we are in a delicate moment. Which is why Stewart’s moments are “stunned” silence. If laughter ensues, quickly too, that is surely because of everyone’s desire, not to open to anything new, but to retreat to familiar ground. Whether anything will have been seen of the Otherness of anyone can be questionable.
Whitsitt went on to say that Stewart was well aware of these issues, but Whitsitt felt that there was a certain tension in Stewart’s text between the demands of humor – which require the playing with, and maintenance of stereotypes – and the demands of allowing a certain Otherness to appear, both in the Englishman, as it were, as well as the Italian. Whitsitt felt that humor tended to win out in Stewart’s text, except for one truly remarkable chapter – and two others could perhaps be included – where the uncanny presence of an Italian Otherness enters the text. This takes place in the chapter, “Bella figura” (83-87), but since Whitsitt will examine this particular story in the second part of this commentary, we will not pause here to discuss it further here.

Dominic Stewart then took the floor to respond to some of the points that had been raised. He noted that while writing, his main idea was to make sure the reader would laugh, but to do that, he had not intentionally thought of using one particular humoristic device rather than another. As for the “gender” of the text, he simply was not that sure what the text might have been like with a female narrator, but he said that he could see how Stalwart, beginning with the name, was very “male”. Then, after a few more comments, and general discussion which was both lively and informative, Stewart ended the evening by reading a delightful new sketch, still with his hero, Hugh Stalwart, in a Walter Mittyesque dream moment, single-handedly thrashing his opponents in a rugby game, only to be elbowed awake into an “Italian situation” on a train, squeezed between a lively octogenarian Italian couple, and beefy representatives of the bawling English middle class. It was a delightful way to bring the evening to a close.

Works cited
