Classic Poetry Series

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

- 31 poems -

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Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli (7 September 1791 – 21 December 1863)

Giuseppe Francesco Antonio Maria Gioachino Raimondo Belli was an Italian poet, famous for his sonnets in Romanesco, the dialect of Rome.

Biography

Giuseppe Francesco Antonio Maria Gioachino Raimondo Belli was born in Rome to a family belonging to the lower bourgeoisie.

His father died, of either cholera or typhus, some time after taking up a job in Civitavecchia. Belli, with his mother and his two brothers, moved back to Rome, where they were forced to take cheap lodgings in Via del Corso. Belli began his poetical career initially by composing sonnets in Italian, at the suggestion of his friend, the poet Francesco Spada.

After a period of employment in straitened circumstances, in 1816 he married a woman of means, Maria Conti, and this enabled him the ease to develop his literary talents. The two had a son, Ciro, born in 1824. Belli made some trips to Northern and Central Italy, where he could come in contact with a more evolved literary world, as well with the Enlightenment and revolutionary milieu which was almost totally absent in Rome. It was during a stay in Milan that he came in touch with the rich local tradition of dialect poetry and satire, as modernized by Carlo Porta, whose witty vernacular sonnets provided him with a model for the poems in Roman dialect that were to make him, posthumously, famous.

His sonnets were often satirical and anti-clerical, as when he defined the Cardinals as 'dog-robbers', for example, or Pope Gregory XVI as someone who kept 'Rome as his personal inn'. Nevertheless, Belli's political ideas remained largely conservative throughout his life. During the democratic rebellion of the Roman Republic of 1849 he defended the rights of the pope.

After his wife's death in 1837, Belli's economic situation worsened again. In later years Belli lost much of his vitality, and he felt a growing acrimony against the world around him, describing himself as "a dead poet". Consequently, his poetical production dropped off and his last sonnet in dialect dates to 1849.

In his later years Belli worked as artistical and political censor for the papal government. Works of which he denied circulation included those of William Shakespeare, Giuseppe Verdi and Gioacchino Rossini.

He died in Rome in 1863 from a stroke. His nephew, painter Guglielmo Janni,

wrote a monumental biography in 10 volumes, which was published posthumously in 1967.

Work

Belli is mainly remembered for his vivid popular poetry in the Roman dialect. He produced some 2,279 sonnets that form an invaluable document of the 19th century's papal Rome and the life of its common people. They were mainly composed in the period 1830–1839. Belli kept them largely hidden, apart from his famous recitals before friends such as Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve and Nikolai Gogol and, just before his death, asked his friend Monsignor Vincenzo Tizzani to burn them. Fortunately, the prelate gave them back to Ciro Belli, who when first publishing a selection of them in 1866, severely edited in order not to offend the taste of the time.

The most striking characteristics of Belli's sonnets are the overwhelming humour and the sharp, relentless capability of satirization of both common life and the clerical world that oppressed it. Some of the sonnets, moreover, show a decided degree of eroticism. Although replete with denunciations of the corruption of the world of the Roman Church, and of the 19th century Rome in general, Belli's poems has been defined as "never impious". His verse is frequently obscene, reflecting the exuberant vulgarity and acerbic intuitions of the local world whose language he employed, but is always phrased with an acute technical mastery of rhythm within the difficult formal structures of the Petarchan sonnet, and by a sense of realism which was rarely matched in the poetical production of Europe, until the emergence of raw realism with Emile Zola and James Joyce.

A selection of Belli's sonnets were translated into English by Anthony, who employed a rough slang tinged with Lancastrian as a stand-in for Belli's Roman dialect. These translations appear in the novel ABBA ABBA, which deals with a fictional encounter between Belli and Keats. Belli's works have also been translated by the poet Harold Norse.

Among other English translators of Belli's work are Peter Nicholas Dale, William Carlos Williams, and Eleonore Clark.

Works:

The Sovrans of the Old World (1831)

ER CAFFETTIERE FISOLOFO (The Philosophizing Barman)

L'ommini de sto monno sò l'istesso
Che vaghi de caffè ner macinino:
C'uno prima, uno doppo, e un'antro appresso,
Tutti quanti però vanno a un distino.

Spesso muteno sito, e caccia spesso
Er vago grosso er vago piccinino,
E ss'incarzeno tutti in zu l'ingresso
Der ferro che li sfraggne in porverino.

E l'ommini accusì viveno ar monno
Misticati pe mano de la sorte
Che sse li gira tutti in tonno in tonno;

E movennose oggnuno, o ppiano, o fforte,
Senza capillo mai caleno a fonno
Pe cascà ne la gola de la morte.

English

In this world, men are like
Coffee beans in a grinder:
One in front, one who follows, another one behind,
But all of them move towards the same destiny.

They often change place, and often
The big coffee-bean takes the place of the small one,
And they all cram by the hole
Where the blade crushes them into powder.

And this is how men live in this world,
Mingled by the hand of fate,
Which turns them round and round.

And each of them moving, fast or slow,
Unawares, they sink down
To drop in the jaws of death.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

ER COMMERCIO LIBBERO (The Free Trade)

Be'? So' pputtana, venno la mi' pelle:
Fo la miggnotta, si, sto ar cancelletto:
Lo pijo in quello largo e in quello stretto:
C'è gnent'antro da dì? Che cose belle!

Ma ce sò stat'io puro, sor cazzetto,
Zitella com'e tutte le zitelle;
E mo nun c'è chi avanzi bajocchelle
Su la lana e la paja der mi' letto.

Sai de che me laggn'io? No der mestiere
Che ssarìa bell'e bono, e quanno butta
Nun pò ttrovasse ar monno antro piacere.

Ma de ste dame che stanno anniscoste
Me laggno, che, vedenno quanto frutta
Lo scortico, ciarrubbeno le poste.

English

What's wrong? Yes, I'm a prostitute, I sell myself:
I'm a whore, yes, I work at the window [1] :
I take it in the wide and in the narrow [2] :
Nothing else to say? Wonderful! [3]

But, dear mister fool, also I have been
A maiden like any other girl;
And now there is nobody
Who has not yet visited my bed.

Do you know what I dislike? Not the work itself
Which is fine and, if it's well going,
There's no pleasure like it.

But these great ladies, who remain undercover
And who, having realized how profitable
This business is, steel our customers.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

ER COMPANATICO DER PARADISO (Heaven's Food)

Dio doppo avé creato in pochi giorni
Quello che c'è de bello e c'é de brutto,
In paradiso o in de li su' contorni
Creò un rampino e ciattaccò un presciutto.

E disse: "Quella femmina che in tutto
Er tempo che campò nun messe corni,
N'abbi una fetta, acciò non magni asciutto
Er pandecèlo de li nostri forni".

Morze Eva, morze Lia, morze Ribbecca,
Fino inzomma a ttu' moje a man'a mano,
Morzeno tutte, e ppijele a l'inzecca.

E ttutte quante cor cortello in mano
Quando furno a ttajà feceno cecca:
Sò sseimil'anni, e quer presciutto è sano.

English

After having created in a few days
What is good and what is not, God
Created in heaven, or in its whereabouts,
A hook, and hung a piece of ham to it.

He said: "The woman who during her whole life
Has not been unfaithful to her husband
Will receive a slice, to be eaten with
The heavenly bread of our bakehouse".

Eve died, Leah died, Rebecca died [2] ,
Little by little, up to your wife,
All of them passed away, every single one.

And each of them, knife in hand,
when it was their turn to slice it, failed:
After six thousand years that piece of ham is untouched.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

ER CONFESSORE (The Confessor)

Padre... -- Dite il confiteor. -- L'ho detto. --
L'atto di contrizione? -- Già l'ho ffatto. --
Avanti dunque. -- Ho detto cazzo-matto
A mi' marito, e j'ho arzato un grossetto. --

Poi? -- Pe una pila che me róppe er gatto
Je disse for de me: "Si' maledetto";
E è cratura de Dio! -- C'e altro? -- Tratto
Un giuvenotto, e ce sò ita a letto. --

E lì cosa è successo? -- Un po' de tutto.--
Cioè? Sempre, m'immagino, pel dritto. --
Puro a riverzo... -- Oh che peccato brutto!

Dunque, in causa di questo giovanotto,
Tornate, figlia, con cuore trafitto,
Domani, a casa mia, verso le otto.

english

Father... -- Say the Confiteor [1] . -- I did. --
The act of contrition ? [1] -- I have already made it. --
Well then. -- I called my husband an idiot,
And I stole from him a silver piece. --

What else? -- When the cat broke a pot
I shouted to her in rage: "Curse on you";
She is God's creature! [2] -- Anything else? -- I'm having
An affair with a young man, and I have slept with him. --

And what happened there? -- More or less, everything. --
You mean always frontwards [3] , I suppose. --
Also backwards... -- Oh what a terrible sin!

So, by reason of this young man,
Come, my dear, with a grieving heart,
To see me at home, tomorrow at eight o'clock.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

ER DUELLO DE DAVIDE (David's Duel)

Cos'è er braccio de Dio! mannà un fischietto
Contr'a quer buggiarone de Golìa,
Che si n'avessi avuto fantasia
Lo poteva ammazzà cor un fichetto!

Eppuro, accusì è. Dio benedetto
Vorze mostrà ppe tutta la Giudia,
Che chi è divoto de Gesù e Maria
Po' stà cor un gigante appett'appetto.

Ar vede un pastorello co la fionna,
Strillò Golìa, sartanno in piede: "Oh cazzo!
Stavorta, fijo mio, l'hai fatta tonna".

Ma er fatto annò ch'er povero regazzo,
Grazzie all'anime sante e a la Madonna,
Lo fece cascà giù come un pupazzo.

English

How powerful is God's hand! to send a child
Against that huge Goliath,
Who could have killed him with a cuff,
If only he had wished to!

But this is how it went. The holy God
Wanted to show throughout the land of Judaea,
That he who is devout to Jesus and Mary
Has the same strength of a giant.

In seeing a young shepherd with a sling,
Goliath jumped to his feet, shouting: "Damn!
This time, my son, you've really done it".

But it turned out that the poor boy,
Thanks to the blessed souls [1] and to Our Lady,
Made him fall down like a puppet.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

ER GIORNO DER GIUDIZZIO (On Judgement Day)

Quattro angioloni co le tromme in bocca
Se metteranno uno pe cantone
A ssonà: poi co ttanto de vocione
Cominceranno a dì: "Fora a chi ttocca".

Allora vierà su una filastrocca
De schertri da la terra a ppecorone,
Pe ripijà ffigura de perzone
Come purcini attorno de la biocca.

E sta biocca sarà Dio benedetto,
Che ne farà du' parte, bianca, e nera:
Una pe annà in cantina, una sur tetto.

All'urtimo uscirà 'na sonajera
D'angioli, e, come si ss'annassi a letto,
Smorzeranno li lumi, e bona sera.

English

Four big angels with trumpets
Will stand one in each corner
Playing: then in a loud voice
They will start calling: "Who's next?".

So a row of skeletons
Will come out of the earth crawling on all fours,
To take human form again
Like chicks around the brooding hen.

And this hen will be the holy God
Who will divide them into two groups, white and black:
One to be sent to the cellar, one to the roof [2] .

In the end a crowd of angels
Will come out, and, as if going to bed,
They'll turn out the lights, and everything will be over.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

ER LOGOTENENTE (The Lieutenant)

Come intese a ciarlà der cavalletto,
Presto io curze dar zor Logotenente:
"Mi' marito... Eccellenza... è un poveretto
Pe carità... Ché nun ha ffatto gnente".

Dice: "Mettet'a ssede". Io me ce metto.
Lui cor un zenno manna via la gente:
Po' me s'accosta: "Dimme un po' gruggnetto,
Tu' marito lo vòi reo o innocente?"

"Innocente", dich'io; e lui: "Ciò gusto"
E detto-fatto quer faccia d'abbreo
Me schiaffa la man-dritta drent'ar busto.

Io sbarzo in piede, e strillo: "Eh sor cazzeo..."
E lui: "Fijola, quer ch'è giusto è giusto:
Annate via: vostro marito è reo".

English

As soon as I heard about the judicial punishment [1]
I hurried to the Lieutenant:
"Your Excellency, my husband is a poor fellow...
For goodness sake...he didn't do anything wrong".

He says: "Sit down". I sit.
He waves the other people away:
Then he comes close to me: "Now tell me, pretty face,
Do you want your husband guilty or innocent?"

"Innocent" I say; he says: "I'm glad";
And straight away that loathsome fellow [2]
Tucks his right hand inside my corset.

I jump up, and shout: "Hey you fool..."
He says: "My dear, fair's fair:
Go away: your husband's guilty".

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

ER RIFUGGIO (The Refuge)

A le curte: te vòi sbrigà d'Aggnesa
Senza er risico tuo? Be', tu pprocura
D'ammazzalla vicino a quarche chiesa:
Poi scappa drento, e nun avé ppavura.

In zarvo che tu ssei dopo l'impresa,
Freghete del mandato de cattura;
Ché a chi tte facci l'ombra de l'offesa
Una bona scomunnica è ssicura.

Lassa fà: staccheranno la licenza:
Ma ppe la grolia der timor de Dio,
C'è sempre quarche pprete che ce penza.

Tu nun ze' un borzarolo né un giudìo,
Ma un cristiano c'ha perzo la pacenza:
Dunque, tu mena, curri in chiesa, e addio.

English

In short: do you want to get rid of Agnes
Without any risk? What you have to do
Is to kill her near a church:
Then run inside, and don't worry [1] .

Once you're safe after the action,
Don't care about the warrant of arrest;
Because anyone trying to harm you
Would surely be excommunicated.

Let them do: they'll issue the warrant:
But for the glory of the fear of God
There's always a priest who will care.

You're not a thief nor a jew [2] ,
You're a man [3] who lost his temper:
So, strike and run inside: that's it.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

ER VOTO (The Vow)

Senti st'antra. A Ssan Pietro e Marcellino
Ce stanno certe moniche befane,
C'aveveno pe voto er contentino
De maggnà ttutto-quanto co le mane.

Vedi si una forchetta e un cucchiarino,
Si un cortelluccio pe ttajacce er pane,
Abbi da offenne Iddio! N'antro tantino
Leccaveno cor muso com'er cane!

Pio Ottavo però, bona-momoria,
Che vedde una matina quer porcaro,
Je disse: "Madre, e che vò dì sta storia?

Sete state avvezzate ar monnezzaro?!
Che voto! un cazzo. A dio pò dasse groria
Puro co la forchetta e cor cucchiaro".

English

Listen to this one. At San Pietro e Marcellino's church
There are such nasty nuns,
Who, as a vow, had the bad habit
Of eating food using their bare hands [1] .

Just imagine if a fork and a spoon,
A small knife for cutting bread,
Could be an offence to God! They almost
Licked the dish like dogs!

But the late Pius the Eighth,
Who one day saw that filth,
Told them: "Mother, what does all this mean?

Have you been brought up in a dump?
Damn that vow! God can be praised
Although using a fork and a spoon".

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

ER ZAGRIFIZZIO D'ABBRAMO I (Abraham's Sacrifice 1)

La Bibbia, ch'è una spece d'un'istoria,
Dice che ttra la prima e ssiconn'arca
Abbramo vorze fà da bon patriarca
N'ojocaustico a Dio sur Montemoria.

Pijò dunque un zomaro de la Marca,
Che ssenza comprimenti e ssenza boria,
Stava a pasce er trifojo e la cicoria
Davanti a casa sua come un monarca.

Poi chiamò Isacco e disse: "Fa' un fascetto,
Pija er marraccio, carca er zomarello,
Chiama er garzone, infilete er corpetto,

Saluta mamma, cercheme er cappello;
E annamo via, perché Dio benedetto
Vò un zagrifizzio che nun pòi sapello".

English

I
The Bible, which is a kind of history,
Says that between the first and the second ark [2]
Abraham, as a good patriarch, wanted
To pay a sacrifice to God on Mount Moria [3] .

He therefore took a donkey,
Who, peaceful and easy,
Was enjoying his clover and chicory
Like a king, in front of his house.

Then he called Isaac and said: "Make a bundle,
Take the knife, load the donkey,
Call the servant, wear your jacket,

Say goodbye to mum, fetch me my hat;
And let's go, because the holy God
Demands a sacrifice you ought not to know".

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

ER ZAGRIFIZZIO D'ABBRAMO II (Abraham's Sacrifice 2)

Doppo fatta un boccon de colazzione
Partirno tutt'e quattro a giorno chiaro,
E camminorno sempre in orazzione
Pe quarche mijo ppiù der centinaro.

"Semo arrivati: alò", disse er vecchione,
"Incollete er fascetto, fijo caro",
Poi, vortannose in là, fece ar garzone:
"Aspettateme qui voi cor zomaro".

Saliva Isacco, e diceva: "Papà,
Ma diteme, la vittima indov'è"?
E lui j'arisponneva: "Un po' ppiù in là".

Ma quanno finarmente furno sù,
Strillò Abbramo ar fijolo: "Isacco, a tte,
Faccia a tterra: la vittima sei tu".

English

II
After having a little breakfast
All four of them left at dawn,
And walked in prayer
A bit further than one hundred miles.

"Here we are: come on", said the old man,
"Take the bundle, dear son",
Then, turning towards the servant, he told him:
"You wait here with the donkey".

While climbing, Isaac asked: "Daddy,
Tell me, where's the victim?"
And he answered: "A bit further on".

But when they finally reached the top,
Abraham cried to his son: "Isaac, it's up to you,
Lay face down: you are the victim".

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

ER ZAGRIFIZZIO D'ABBRAMO III (Abraham's Sacrifice 3)

"Pacenza", dice Isacco ar zu' padraccio,
Se butta s'una pietra inginocchione,
E quer boja de padre arza er marraccio
Tra cap'e collo ar povero cojone.

"Fermete, Abbramo: nun calà quer braccio",
Strilla un Angiolo allora da un cantone:
"Dio te vorze provà co sto setaccio..."
Bee, bee... Chi è quest'antro! è un pecorone.

Inzomma, amici cari, io già sso' stracco
D'ariccontavve er fatto a la distesa.
La pecora morì: fu sarvo Isacco:

E quella pietra che m'avete intesa
Mentovà ssur più bello de l'acciacco,
Sta a Roma, in Borgo-novo, in d'una chiesa.

English

"I resign myself", said Isaac to his evil father,
Dropping to his knees over a stone,
And that wicked father raised the knife [1]
Over the neck of the poor fool.

"Stop, Abraham: don't let your arm down",
Cried an Angel from a corner:
"God wanted to put you to the test..."
Baa, baa... Who's there! a ram.

In conclusion, dear friends, I'm now tired
of telling you the story in full.
The ram died: Isaac was saved:

And that stone you heard me mention
At the crucial stage of this abuse,
Is in Rome, in Borgo Nuovo, in a church [2] .

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

From Hand to Hand

The Pope, God's locum, Our Lord, is someone I'd
Liken to an eternal Father, like Our Eternal Father.
That is, he doesn't die, or, sure he dies, but rather,
To be precise, he only really dies on the outside.

Because when his body leaves off being a governor,
His soul, still stuck in its ancient honour,
Doesn't go to paradise or hell - it ain't a goner -
But passes straight into the body of his successor.

In this way, he can undergo slight changes in his brain,
His stomach, ears, nose, skin, mouth or eyes;
But the Pope, inasmuch as he's a Pope, stays the same.

An that's the reason why every body fated to receive
That kind of dignity, falls down from the sky
Soulless, with nothing else but the power to breathe.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

Greed

When I watch folks of this world and see how widespread
It is for those, that pile up treasure and put on fat, to chafe
At the bit and grasp for more, the way they hunger for a safe
As broad as the ocean, and so deep, that it'd never touch the seabed,

I say to myself: ah, you herd of blind fools, bank away, bank,
Ruining your days with anxieties, lose night after night of sleep,
Do shady deals and diddle: then what? Old Granpa Time'll creep
In with his scythe, and slice away at your bundle of plans, hank after hank.

Death's hidden away, and hunkers inside the clock-tower;
And no one can say: Tomorrow, once more I'll
Still hear midday ring out like today, at this very same hour.

What's the poor pilgrim do when he takes on a rough and tough
Journey, knowing he'll travel but for a little while?
He packs a crust or two of bread, and that's enough.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LA BOCCA DE-LA-VERITA' (The mouth Of truth)

In d'una chiesa sopra a 'na piazzetta
Un po' ppiù ssù de Piazza Montanara
Pe la strada che pporta a la Salara,
C'è in nell'entrà una cosa benedetta.

Pe ttutta Roma quant'è larga e stretta
Nun poterai trovà cosa ppiù rara.
È una faccia de pietra che tt'impara
Chi ha detta la bucìa, chi nu l'ha detta.

S'io mo a sta faccia, c'ha la bocca uperta,
Je ce metto una mano, e nu la striggne
La verità da me ttiella pe certa.

Ma ssi fficca la mano uno in bucìa,
Èssi sicuro che a tirà né a spiggne
Quella mano che lì nun viè ppiù via.

English

In a church, in a small square
Shortly after Montanara Square [2] ,
Along the road leading to the salt-works,
As soon as you enter there's something holy.

In all Rome far and wide
You could not find something as rare as that.
It's a face of stone, which tells
Who is a lier and who is not.

If in the mouth of this statue, which is open,
I insert my hand and it does not clasp it,
Consider my truth as most reliable.

But if a lier inserts his hand
Be sure that, push or pull,
That hand won't come out.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LA CREAZZIONE DER MONNO (The Creation of The World)

L'anno che Gesucristo impastò er monno,
Ché pe impastallo già c'era la pasta,
Verde lo vorze fà, grosso e ritonno,
All'uso d'un cocommero de tasta.

Fece un zole, una luna e un mappamonno,
Ma de le stelle poi dì una catasta:
Su ucelli, bestie immezzo, e pesci in fonno:
Piantò le piante, e doppo disse: "Abbasta".

Me scordavo de dì che creò l'omo,
E coll'omo la donna, Adamo e Eva;
E je proibbì de nun toccaje un pomo.

Ma appena che a maggnà l'ebbe viduti,
Strillò per dio con quanta voce aveva:
"Ommini da vienì, sete futtuti"

English

The year Jesus Christ kneaded the world,
The stuff for doing so was already there,
He wanted it to be green, big and round,
Like a ripe water-melon.

He made a sun, a moon and a globe,
And a real multitude of stars:
Birds up, animals midway, and fishes at the bottom:
He planted plants, and then said: "That's enough".

I forgot to say that he created man,
And, with man, woman too, Adam and Eve;
And he forbade them to touch a fruit.

But as soon as he saw them eating,
By God, he shouted as loud as he could:
"People to come, you're in trouble".

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LA DISPENZA DER MADRIMONIO (The marriage Licence)

Quella stradaccia me la sò lograta:
Ma quanti passi me ce fussi fatto
Nun c'era da ottené pe gnisun patto
De potemme sposà co mi' cuggnata.

Io c'ero diventato mezzo matto,
Perché, dico, ch'edè sta baggianata
C'una sorella l'ho d'avé assaggiata
E l'antra no! nun è l'istesso piatto?

Finarmente una sera l'abbataccio
Me disse: "Fijo se ce stata coppola,
Pròvelo, e la licenza te la faccio".

"Benissimo Eccellenza", io jarisposi:
Poi curzi a casa, e, pe nu dì una stroppola,
M'incoppolai Presseda, e ssemo sposi.

English

I've worn out that damned street [1] :
But in spite of all this walking
There was no way to obtain the permission
To marry my sister-in-law.

It was driving me crazy
Because, I say, what a nonsense
That I already had a taste of one sister [2] ,
But not the other! Isn't it just the same?

Finally one evening the damned abbot
Told me: "My dear, if there has been copulation,
Prove it, and I'll give you the licence".

"Very well, Excellency", I answered:
Then I rushed home and, not to tell a lie,
I had sex with Praxedes [3] , and we got married.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LA PENALE (The Fine)

Li preti, già sse sa, fanno la caccia
A 'gni sorte de spece de quadrini.
Mo er mi' curato ha messo du' carlini
De murta a chi vò dì 'na parolaccia.

Toccò a me l'antra sera a la Pilaccia:
Ché giucanno co certi vitturini,
Come me vedde vince un lammertini,
Disse pe ffoja: "Eh buggiarà Ssantaccia!"

Er giorn'appresso er prete già informato,
Mannò a ffamme chiamà dar chiricone,
E m'intimò la pena der peccato.

Sur primo io vorze dì le mi' raggione;
Ma ppoi me la sbrigai: "Padre Curato,
Buggiaravve a voi puro: ecco un testone".

English

A well-known fact is that priests go hunting
For money of all sorts and kinds.
Now my vicar has decreed a sixpence fine [1]
For anyone saying a foul word.

It was my turn, the other night at the Pilaccia inn:
As I was gambling with some coach drivers,
When I lost a silver coin
I said in anger: "Damn Santaccia!" [2]

On the following day the priest, already informed,
Sent out the sexton for me,
And inflicted me the penalty for that sin.

At first I tried to put forward my reasons,
But then I cut it short: "Father Vicar,
Damn yourself too, here's a shilling" [3] .

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LA PIGGION DE CASA (The Rent)

Nun pòi sbajà ssi vòi. Qua ssu la dritta,
Ner comincio der Vicolo der Branca,
Doppo tre o quattro porte a manimanca
Te viè in faccia una pietra tutta scritta.

Svorta er collo tra l'oste e l'artebbianca
E ppropio attacc'a quella casa sfitta
Lì a ppianterreno ciabbita er zor Titta
Er barbiere a l'inzeggna de la cianca.

L'hai capito mo adesso indove arresta?
Be', domatina tu vacce a quest'ora,
Ché l'ora lui de non trovallo è questa.

Dì: "C'è er zor Titta?" -- "No". -- Tu dije allora:
"Dice zia che a ppagà viè st'antra festa
Ché glieri lei lo rifaceva fora".

English

You simply can't miss it. Here on the right,
At the beginning of Branca Lane,
After three or four doors on the left
You'll come to a stone covered with writings.

Turn your head between the tavern and the grocery
And just by that vacant house
There on the ground floor lives Mr.Titta [1]
The barber with the leg sign [2] .

Have you understood where it is?
So tomorrow morning go there at this time,
Because this is the right time not to find him.

Ask: "Is there Mr.Titta?" -- "No". -- You then say:
"Auntie says she'll come to pay next holiday
Since she thought that yesterday he was still out".

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LA PORTERIA DER CONVENTO (The Monastery's Porter)

Dico: "Se pò pparlà cor padr'Ilario?"
Dice: "Per oggi no, perché confessa". --
"E doppo confessato?" -- "Ha da dì messa". --
"E doppo detto messa?" -- "Cià er breviario".

Dico: "Fate er zervizzio, fra Maccario,
D'avvisallo ch'è cosa ch'interessa".
Dice: "Ah, qualunque cosa oggi è l'istessa,
Perché nun pò lassà er confessionario".

"Pacenza", dico: "j'avevo portata,
Pe quell'affare che v'avevo detto,
Ste poche libbre qui de cioccolata...".

Dice: "Aspettate, fijo benedetto,
Pe via che, quanno è ppropio una chiamata
De premura, lui viè: mo ciarifretto".

English

I said [1] : "May I speak to father Hillary?"
He said: "Not today: he administers confession". --
"And after confession?" -- "He must say mass". --
"And after saying mass?" -- "He'll say the breviary".

I said: "Do me a favour, friar Maccario,
Tell him it's something that might interest him".
He said: "Ah, today anything would be just the same,
Because he can't leave the confessional".

"Never mind", I said: "because of that
Business I had mentioned you, I had brought him
These few pounds of chocolate..."

He said: "Wait, my dear,
Because when it's really an urgent matter
He does come, I'll think about it".

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LA SCERTA (The Choice)

Sta accusì. La padrona cor padrone,
Volenno marità la padroncina
Je portonno davanti una matina,
Pe sceje, du' bravissime perzone.

Un de li dua aveva una ventina
D'anni, e du' spalle peggio de Sanzone;
E l'antro lo diceveno un riccone
Ma aveva un po' la testa cennerina.

Subbito er giuvinotto de quer paro
Se fece avanti a dì: "Sora Lucia,
Chi volete de noi? parlate chiaro".

"Pe dilla, me piacete voi e lui",
Rispose la zitella; "e ppijerìa
Er cicio vostro e li quadrini sui".

English

This is how it went. My master and mistress,
Wishing to have their daughter married
One morning brought in front of her
Two very respectable persons to choose.

One of the two was about twenty
Years old, and had shoulders wider than Samson's;
While the other one was known as a rich man
But had a few grey hair.

Immediately the young man of the couple
Started saying: "Miss Lucy,
Who of us do you want? speak frankly".

"Really, I like both of you",
Answered the girl [1] ; "and I would take
Your tool [2] and his money".

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

L'ABBICHINO DE LE DONNE (Womens Abacus)

La donna, inzino ar venti, si è contenta
Mamma, l'anni che ttiè ssempre li canta:
Ne cresce uno oggni cinque inzino ar trenta,
Eppoi se ferma lì ssino a quaranta.

Dar quarantuno impoi stenta e nun stenta,
E ne dice antri dua sino ar cinquanta;
Ma allora, che aruvina pe la scenta,
Te la senti sartà ssubbito a ottanta.

Perché, ar cresce li fiji de li fiji,
Nun potenno esse ppiù donna d'amore,
Vò ffigurà da donna de conziji.

E allora er cardinale o er monziggnore,
Che j'allisciava er pelo a li cuniji,
Comincia a recità da confessore.

English

Women, till the age of twenty, if mother agrees [1]
Always declare their age:
They count one every five until they are thirty,
And then they stop counting until forty.

From forty-one onwards they barely move,
Declaring two more, until they are fifty;
But then, spoilt by time,
They suddenly reach the age of eigthy.

Because, as the children of their children grow,
No longer being women of love,
They wish to appear as women of wisdom.

And then, cardinals and bishops
Who used to be in friendly terms with them [2] ,
Start playing the role of the confessor.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

L'ADUCAZZIONE (Education)

Fijo, nun ribbartà mai tata tua:
Abbada a tte, nun te fà mette sotto.
Si quarchiduno te viè a dà un cazzotto,
Lì callo callo tu dajene dua.

Si ppoi quarcantro porcaccio da ua
Te ce facessi un po' de predicotto
Dije: "De ste raggione io me ne fotto:
Iggnuno penzi a li fattacci sua".

Quanno giuchi un bucale a mora, o a boccia,
Bevi fijo; e a sta gente buggiarona
Nun gnene fà restà manco una goccia.

D'esse cristiano è ppuro cosa bona:
Pe questo hai da portà ssempre in zaccoccia
Er cortello arrotato e la corona.

English

My son, never do wrong to your daddy,
Take care, don't let yourself be subdued.
If someone ever hits you,
Straight away you hit him twice.

And if any other bastard
Tries to lecture you,
Tell him: "I don't care a damn about these reasons:
Everyone mind his own business".

When you bet a jug of wine playing morra [1] , or bowls,
Drink, my son; and don't let these fools
Have a single drop.

To be a cristian is another good thing:
For this reason always keep in you pocket
A sharpened knife and a rosary.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LI FRATI D'UN PAESE (The Friers of The Village)

Senti sto fatto. Un giorno de st'istate
Lavoravo ar convento de Genzano,
E ssentivo de sopra ch'er guardiano
Tirava giù biastime a carrettate;

Perché, essenno le gente aridunate
Per cantà la novena a ssan Cazziano,
Cerca qua, chiama là, quer zagristano
Drento a le celle nun trovava un frate.

Era vicino a notte, e un pispillorio
Già se sentiva in de la chiesa piena,
Quanno senti che ffa ppadre Grigorio.

Curze a intoccà la tevola de cena,
E appena che fu empito er refettorio
Disse: "Alò, frati porchi, a la novena!".

English

Listen to this story. During last summer one day
I was working at the monastery in Genzano [1] ,
When I heard upstairs the sacristan
Swearing like a trooper.

Because while the people had gathered
To sing the novena [2] for St.Cassian,
The sacristan, looking for the friars high and low,
Could not find any of them in their rooms.

Night was approaching, and a whispering
Already came from the crowded church,
So listen what Father Gregory did.

He ran to sound the dinner bell
And as soon as the refectory was full
Said: "Hurry up, lousy friars, to the novena!"

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LI GALOPPINI (The Scroungers)

Jeri, a la Pulinara, un colleggiale
Doppo fatta una predica in todesco,
Setacciò tutt'er popolo in du' sale,
E a la ppiù mejo vorze dà er rifresco.

In quella fece entracce er Cardinale
Co l'amichi der Micco e ppadron Fiesco;
E nell'antra la gente duzzinale
Che viaggia cor caval de san Francesco.

Pe sta sala che qui de li spedati
Comincionno a ppassà li cammorieri
Pieni de sottocoppe de gelati.

Ma che! a la sala delli cavajeri
Un cazzo ciarrivò: ché st'affamati
Se sparinno inzinenta li bicchieri.

English

Yesterday, at St.Apollinare College, a collegiate
After giving a lecture in German [1] ,
Divided all the people into two rooms,
And to the most respectable ones offered refreshments.

He let in one room the Cardinal
Together with Micco's and master Fieschi's friends [2] ;
And in the other one the cheap people
Who travel on foot [3] .

Through the room in which the 'walkers' were
Waiters began to pass
Carrying lots of ice-cream cups.

But alas! to the gentlemen's room
Nothing arrived, as these spongers
swept away even the glasses.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LI SPIRITI III (Ghosts 3)

Tu conoschi la moje de Fichetto:
Bè, lei giura e spergiura ch'er zu' nonno,
Stanno una notte tra la vej'e 'r zonno,
Se sentì ffà un zospiro accapalletto.

Arzò la testa, e ne sentì un siconno.
Allora lui cor fiato ch'ebbe in petto
Strillò: Spirito bono o maledetto,
Di' da parte de Dio; che cerchi ar monno?"

Dice: "Io mill'anni addietro ero Badessa,
E in sto logo che stava er dormitorio
Cor un cetrolo me sfonnai la fessa.

Da' un scudo ar piggionante, a don Libborio,
Pe ffamme li sorcismi e dì una messa,
Si me vòi libberà dar purgatorio".

English

III
You know Fichetto's [2] wife:
Well, she swears that her grandfather
One night while half-asleep
Heard a sigh coming from his bedhead.

He raised his head, and he heard a second one.
So with all his breath
He cried: "Good or evil spirit,
Tell me for God's sake; what are you looking for?"

It said: "A thousand years ago I was an Abbess,
And in this place where the dormitory stood
I was penetrated by a gherkin [3] .

Give one shilling to Father Liborio, the lodger,
To perform an exorcism and to say mass,
If you want to free me from purgatory".

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LI SPIRITI IV (Ghosts 4)

Un mese, o ppoco ppiù, doppo er guadaggno
De la piastra, che ffece er zanto prete,
Venne la pasqua, e 'r gabbiano che ssapete
Cominciò a lavorà de scacciaraggno.

"Ch'edè? Un bucio ar zolaro! Oh, pprete caggno",
Fece allora er babbeo che conoscete:
"Eccolo indove vanno le monete!
Va che lo scudo mio cerca er compaggno?"

Doppo infatti du' notte de respiro,
Ecchete la Badessa della muffa
A daje giù cor zolito sospiro.

"Sor don Libborio mio, basta una fuffa",
Strillò quello; "e le messe, pe sto giro,
Si le volete dì, ditele auffa".

English

About one month, or slightly more, after
the holy priest's profit of one shilling,
Easter came, and the aforesaid fool
Began cleaning his house [2] .

"What's this? A hole in the ceiling! Oh, damned priest",
Said the fool you know:
"This is where my money goes!
I bet that my shilling is going to double" [3] .

And actually after two nights of rest,
There goes the old Abbess again
Whith the usual sigh.

"Father Liborio, one trick's enough"
He cried; "and this time,
If you want to say mass, say mass for free".

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

L'INNUSTRIA (Striving)

Un giorno che arrestai propio a la fetta,
Senz'avé manco l'arma d'un quadrino,
Senti che cosa fo: curro ar camino
E roppo in quattro pezzi la paletta.

Poi me l'invorto sott'a la giacchetta,
E vado a spasso pe Campovaccino
A aspettà quarche ingrese milordino
Da daje una corcata co l'accetta.

De fatti, ecco che viè quer c'aspettavo.
"Siggnore, guardi un po' quest'anticaja
C'avemo trovo jeri in de lo scavo?"

Lui se ficca l'occhiali, la scannaja,
Me mette in mano un scudo e dice: "Bravo!"
E accusì a Roma se pela la quaja.

English

One day, I had really gone penniless,
I had no money at all,
And this is what I did: I ran to the fire-place
And broke the shovel into four pieces.

Then I wrapped it up in my jacket,
And went walking along Campo Vaccino [1] ,
Waiting for some sofisticated English gentleman [2] ,
So to swindle him well.

And what I was waiting for, actually happened.
"Sir, would you take a look at this antique
We found yesterday while excavating?"

He wears his glasses, examines it,
Gives me a shilling and says: "Good job!"
In Rome, this is how we scrape a living.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

LOTTE A CASA (Lot At Home)

Cor zu' bravo sbordone a manimanca,
Du' pellegrini a or de vemmaria
Cercaveno indov'era l'osteria,
Perc'uno aveva male in d'una cianca.

Ce s'incontra er zor Lotte, e je spalanca
Er portone dicenno: "A casa mia"
E loro je risposeno: "Per dia
Dimani sarai fio de l'oca bianca".

Quelli ereno du' angeli, fratello,
Che ar vedelli passà li Ghimorrini
Se sentinno addrizzà tutti l'ucello.

E arrivonno a strillà, fiji de mulo:
"Lotte, mannece giù li pellegrini,
Che ce serveno a noi pe daje in culo".

English

With a staff in their left hand,
Two pilgrims at midnight
Were looking for the tavern
Because one of them had an aching leg.

They met Lot, who opened for them
His door, saying: "Come to my home".
They replied: "By God,
Tomorrow you will be a privileged man".

Those were two angels, brother,
Who, passing by, made the people of Gomorrah [2]
Grow sexually excited [3] .

And those bastards even shouted:
"Lot, send us the pilgrims,
We need them for having sex" [4] .

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, a king saw fit
to send this proclamation through the land:
'I am I, you vassals aren't worth shit —
that's how it is, so kiss my royal hand!
I'll have you as I want you, straight or bent,
or sell you off in lots, so much a pair,
and if I have you hanged, it's only fair —
you never owned your lives, you only rent.

Shut up and bow — there isn't any hope
I'd listen to some turkey-brain like you
unless he's Emperor, or King, or Pope.'
And then he had his hangman take a poll
to see how folks reacted, on the whole.
And all the people said, It's true, It's true.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli

What's the Pope Do?

What's the pope do? Drinks, and takes a nap;
looks out the window, has a bite to eat,
fiddles with the housemaid's garter strap,
and makes the town a cushion for his feet.
No kids for him; a family man he's not —
why should he bother with his own brass band
when, come what may, he'll be the first on hand
to get whatever soup is in the pot?

He thinks he owns the earth — it's mine, all mine —
the air and water, bread and wine, the sun —
as if no dog but he could have a bone.
He'd almost almost like to be alone
in all the world, like God — it might be fun —
before he made the angels and mankind.

Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli