Human Translators in the Machine Age

What is the place of human translation in the golden age of artificial intelligence? *Human Translators in the Machine Age* looks at the millennia of history that have shaped the discipline and its practitioners, and asks what it is that makes translators central in human civilization, and fundamentally different from linguistically competent machines.

Contrary to the age-old emphasis on source adherence and the sacredness of text, it presents translation as a continuous process of semantic and pragmatic drift, and translators as agents of linguistic and cultural change. In doing so it questions all traditional and contemporary dichotomies (faithful/unfaithful, domesticating/foreignizing) and exposes the textual bias which lies at the root of all Western ideas on translation.

Oral in origin, rich and irreducible in its processes and outcomes, deeply and inevitably personal in output, human translation remains central in the machine age precisely because it is the most common human way of receiving, accounting for, and modifying all forms of knowledge and experience. This concise volume offers both a compelling history of translation and a fresh examination of the translator's role in an AI-dominated world. It engages critically with contemporary translation theory while innovatively exploring the intersection of written and spoken discourse. Essential reading for translators, students, scholars, and anyone interested in linguistic theory.

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Introduction

Human translation in the age of the machine

In the golden age of artificial intelligence, it is more urgent than ever to define the human nature of the translation process. Or rather – let me rephrase that, because I did not phrase it in the first place. I did not formulate that initial sentence myself. What I did was write a sentence with that approximate meaning in correct Italian, and ask an artificial intelligence to translate it for me in correct English. Then I copied the translated sentence from the browser of my computer and pasted it onto a new file in my word processor. Given that the sentence works well as an *incipit* for a book on translation, it turns out that this *is*, indeed, the golden age of artificial intelligence, which means that maybe writing a book on translation as a human activity *is* urgent. A book on human translation opening on a bit of non-human translation – how long before the machines take over, and dictate what we write or do not write?

Well – actually, on the evidence of that very machine-translated *incipit*, the takeover is not that imminent. Firstly, if it is true that the author of this introduction did not write the initial sentence himself, it is also true that the artificial intelligence did not compose it of its own volition. What it took for the sentence to originate was an initial thought formed by the author, who then decided to give it linguistic shape in Italian, rather than English. The sentence itself, if it had been formulated directly in English, would probably have been slightly different (something like: "In the golden age of artificial intelligence, defining the human nature of the translation process is a matter of some/great urgency"): but it would still have been a recognizable variant of what is printed above. Thus, even if it does not

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totally belong to the author, that sentence is not 100% artificial. It is a mechanical variation on a human thought.

Secondly, even the part of that formulation for which the machine appears to be responsible does not originally proceed from the machine itself. The current programmes for transforming linguistic material into other linguistic material have of course been created by humans, on the basis of human ideas of how interlingual communication works. More crucially, those programmes exploit the immense corpora of linguistic data that are now available online, and try to arrange the wordings they produce according to statistical evidence gleaned from those very corpora. In other words, the machine based its decisions on the previous decisions of countless human writers and translators. Rather than as a computerized transformer, the machine works as a distiller of human experience.

Thirdly, the machine would not have been able to translate that sentence so efficiently if it had been phrased in a less clichéd manner and with less common words. If I had written, in archaizing and poeticizing Italian, "Ora è il trionfo dell'elaboratore turingano, laonde vuolsi la virtù del trasporre umano mensurare", the machine would have misinterpreted the word *elaboratore* (simply "computer" in Italian – *elaboratore elettronico*), the adjective *turingano* (a neologism derived from Alan Turing's surname) and my convoluted, vaguely Dantean syntax (*vuolsi... mensurare*). It would not, therefore, have produced something like "Now is the triumph of Turing's computer, therefore we need to gauge the virtues of human transposing"; but the darkly fascinating, near-incomprehensible sentence "Now is the triumph of the Thuringian author, hence the virtue of transposing human mensuration". And even if I had formulated my archaizing sentence less confusingly, the machine would still have translated it in standard modern English ("Now is the triumph of Turing's computer, therefore we need to gauge the virtues of human transposing") – thus losing the individuality of my poeticizing diction, and obscuring the reason why I had decided to use that diction in the first place.

These three points do not amount to a critique of contemporary machine translation, which looks like magic to anyone who used a computer to translate anything, from any language to any other language, around the turn of the millennium. However, they are meant to direct the attention of the reader to a fundamental fact. Translation, like human communication in general, has the potential to be infinitely creative. When it is least creative, its workings become predictable,

and its form and content can be reproduced mechanically. The mechanisms are still human in their inception and in the materials they use, but the actual work of slavish repetition can be delegated to machines. With greater creativity come greater difficulties of prediction: only humans can interpret and transpose messages that are both complex and original – and if the messages are truly complex and original, the humans in question must be specialists in the arts of interpreting and transposing. Of course, those humans – whom we will call translators – may enlist the help of machines (they can look for factual and linguistic information online, for instance): but in the end, they will have to make their own decisions as to the encoding of the target message.

The fact that the most uninventive forms of (interlingual) communication can now be delegated to a computer may herald an epochal change in the way translation is viewed, particularly inside the Translation Studies community. After World War II, scholars and politicians on both sides of the Iron Curtain dreamed of mechanizing the translation process, thanks to the developments the war itself had brought about in the field of information science. At the very beginning, the utopian plan was teaching computers to translate, thus making human specialists completely redundant. Then scholars became aware that it would probably be necessary to simplify the language fed to the machines if the dream of automatic translation was to become at least a useful reality. But in the last few years, and after decades of disappointments, a series of advances in the use of data-fed, neural-network driven systems have produced immense improvements (Sharma, Diwakar, Singh, Singh, Kadry and Kim 2023). Now that machines are effectively able to produce workable translations of simple messages, the hope has turned into fear: translators and translation scholars are afraid that their services will no longer be necessary, and that in the course of time a whole profession may become redundant.

The fear is both reasonable and misplaced. On the one hand, machine translation now makes a lot of menial work unnecessary or quickly doable: the numbers of those who used to make a living by translating instruction manuals will certainly decrease, and in the current economy that may force many professionals to change and adapt, like accountants when the electronic calculator became a universal commodity. On the other hand, in certain domains the need for a human mediating touch will be felt as strongly as ever. When creative

language is involved, human translation is necessary because novels, films and TV series are appreciated for their individuality (the individuality of an author's or a character's style): and while machines can imitate the forms of human interaction, they have not been able to successfully imitate their ever-varying uniqueness. If Anthony Burgess' 1962 dystopia *A Clockwork Orange* began not with its author's choice of words, but with the words of its *incipit* machine-translated into Italian and then back-translated into English, it would sound much less memorable and frightening – still slightly cryptic, but a bit bureaucratic and rather dull:

> What's it going to be then, eh?
> There was me, that is Alex, and my three droogs, that is Pete, Georgie, and Dim, Dim being really dim, and we sat in the Korova Milkbar making up our rassoodocks what to do with the evening, a flip dark chill winter bastard though dry.
>
> (Burgess 1962: 1)

> What will it be then, huh?
> There was me, i.e. Alex, and my three sonics, i.e. Pete, Georgie and Dim, Dim being really weak, and we sat at the Korova Milkbar preparing our rassoodocks about what to do with the evening, a freezing, dark winter. bastard even if dry.
>
> (Google Translate)

One might object that this passage is difficult for the machine because it is a highly deviant piece of writing, containing words that are either invented or not English: and it is true that the machine is unable to understand that "making up our rassoodocks" means "making up our minds" because it has no idea what rassoodocks are. Note, however, that even where plain English is involved the machine is less personal, less interesting, and at times less clear than its human source. "What's it going to be then, eh?" must be Alex the narrator, or a barman, asking what the guys are going to drink (and/or Alex wondering what mischief they are going to do tonight); while "What will it be" is a more generic, less conversational question. The machine is unable to understand the mild joke about Dim being dim (it leaves "Dim" unchanged in Italian because of its capital initial, but translates "dim" as "weak" (*debole*), rather than dull-witted). The colloquial, spat-out concision

of that conclusive "a flip dark chill winter bastard though dry" feels mechanical in the computerized rendering.

What the machine cannot recognize, apart from radical deviations, are the local, personal, idiomatic inflections of language that identify certain (classes of) writers or speakers. The only existing mind that is capable of catching those human inflections, and of understanding their function in a given context, is the human mind; and it takes a woman or a man to understand the Dim/dim joke, and to find a joke that works in another language and in a comparable social group. Again, this is not to play down the possibilities of machine translation: if the style of other, more linguistically conformant writers is put to the test of that game of interlingual Chinese whispers, it is only a phrase here and there that suffers from loss of individuality. But even a phrase here and there is highly significant, where individuality is the reason why people read, watch or listen to a product of the imagination. A machine translation of *Pride and Prejudice* would have to be overseen by a human editor, with an investment in time and attention comparable with, if not higher than, that which is required to translate the novel from scratch.

I said above that the ascendancy of the machine may spell a seismic change in how translation is viewed. More specifically, the change I envisage is not so much in how *machine translation* is viewed, but in how theoreticians and lay people will view translation as performed by humans. Throughout the recorded history of mankind, translators have been at pains to describe themselves as mere parrots or faithful copyists, or they have tried to justify a need to be less than faithful in the name of some higher fidelity to style or beauty. Since the beginning of translation theory as an academic field and discipline, scholars have attempted to establish the conditions in which a translation could be defined as invariant, equivalent, or of high quality with respect to the source – a pursuit that has not been brought to an end even by the rise, in the 1970s, of a descriptive, comparative school of Translation Studies. Now, with the machines performing in competent fashion the task of invariant or equivalent transposition, the time may be ripe for a full acceptance of human translation as an agent of constant, inevitable change. Humans translate endlessly, when they communicate with their cats or when they rewrite a poem in a new language; and every act of translation they perform carries, for better or for worse, the indelible stamp of their individuality.[1]

This book embraces the idea of translation as constant drift and individual difference, even as it describes the human compulsion to stop the drift and deny the difference. Chapter 1 views the infinitely productive and unpredictable nature of the process in the context of all the historical definitions of translation as a problem to solve, as a task yielding results which can be measured merely in terms of the distance between source and target. Chapter 2 looks at the history of translation theory in the light of the modern centrality of text – a state of affairs which has led humans to obsess over source-target identity, similarity, or equivalence, and over the moral concept of faithfulness (rather than over more practical ideas such as usefulness and efficacy). Chapter 3 is dedicated to the agents or overseers of incessant linguistic slippage: it attempts to understand what position translators occupy and have occupied in society, how they are viewed and how their minds work. They too, incidentally, often obsess over closeness, fidelity, and objectivity, and try to deny that their work produces constant drift and bears the stamp of individual difference.

Of course, accepting that translation is drift and difference is not equal to claiming that every translation is good, useful, or appropriate: translators will always have to satisfy the demands of teachers and clients, as well as their own desire to recreate certain qualities they find in their sources. But each translator, at each moment in time, will respond to those demands and that desire in her/his own way, thus producing something individual and new. Those who gave birth to the 1611 "King James" Bible over the course of a century were generally bent on giving a faithful account of what they found in their hallowed sources: yet they ended up creating a specific English register, and published something which had not been there in English, Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. If I produce a translation from Chaucer or Dickens, it will sound not as Chaucer or Dickens, but as myself posing as Chaucer or Dickens, and trying to assimilate in Italian the mind style of a narrator and a set of characters. And if I try to close the gap by translating phrase for phrase, and by keeping as close to the source syntax and morphology as I can, I will produce something which does not sound at all similar to Chaucer or Dickens – something which will therefore still be new, in its wooden, awkward, implausible Italian style.

Which brings one back to the computerized Burgess version seen above, and raises one question which threatens to topple the whole

rhetorical edifice of this introduction. If by rewording *A Clockwork Orange* into Italian, and then rewording it into English again, Google Translate does create something new, does it not mean that machine translation is exactly like human translation – that it creates difference in the same way, that it possesses the same individuality? Yes and no. On the one hand, being based on human translation, its machine counterpart will end up producing difference in similar ways, if only by simplifying, normalizing, watering down. On the other, machine translation is unable to show the same infinite variability that is inherent in human translation: two machines employing the same technology at the same time will produce the same results; the number of different technologies is finite; and coeval technologies will tend to behave in very similar ways. In other words, even if machine translation can be viewed as moderately creative, its workings cannot be said to be individual: no computer will ever translate as a single person reacting to a certain stimulus in a given context (though of course a computer can be told to do so by a single person reacting to a certain stimulus in a given context). The possibility that computers learn to react in individual ways is not to be discounted, for the simple reason that no possibility is ever to be discounted. For the time being, though, it seems sensible to describe human translation as a completely separate process in terms of essence and form, though its automated version can produce results that are superficially similar.

The history of human culture is largely a history of translation, if translation is seen not merely as cross-linguistic transposition but as the more general semiotic operation whereby signs are transformed into other signs. Women and men learn to interpret the sounds and movements of other animals to hunt and domesticate them. A mathematician looks at the outside world and translates its phenomena into numbers and formulae. A civilization decides to translate the books of another in order to take its place and learn a number of practical things. This book is only about "interpreting" or "translating" in that third sense, but the point of this introduction is that learning about humans as linguistic translators, and about the history of translation, can be a decisive step if one wants to learn about humans as semiotic translators and interpreters, and about the history of the world *as* general semiotic translation. And since this appears to be a golden age of artificial intelligence, it may be more urgent than ever to define the human nature of the translation process. There – in my beginning is

my end. A machine would never be able to end a piece of writing on that kind of repetition-with-variation, and to cap it off with a quotation from T.S. Eliot's "East Coker" (Eliot 1944: 23).

(Unless we told the machine to do just that. And until the machine learns to translate.)

Note

1 "Individual" here does not mean "produced by a single translator", but "different from everything else". The products of translating collaboration, or "translaboration", in this sense, are as individual as those of Saint Jerome. See Iamartino and Agorni (2023).

1 Untranslatability

Everything can be translated; nothing stays the same. Consciously or not, these two propositions are implanted in the minds of all those whose job, pastime or vocation it is to translate words (or anything) from one language into another (or from anything into anything). Given any two codes,[1] it will always be possible to transfer content[2] from one to the other. It will be possible to translate a German clause into an English one, or an Inuit phrase into one or more English phrases; to turn a book into a film, or vice versa; to transform a succession of binary numbers into a series of words.

The feasibility of transference is etymologically inherent in the very terms we use to characterize the process of translation. All the verbs used for the task in the European languages – *translate*, *tradurre*, *traduire*, *traducir*, *übersetzen* – are either direct borrowings or calques of Latin words which mean "to carry across": *transducere*, *transferre*.[3] But every time content is carried across borders, those responsible for the transmission will feel that something has been modified or lost in the process. The film is not like the book. English cannot reproduce the peculiarities of remote Arctic dialects. Words like "if" and "then" are not like a succession of zeros and ones.

Some translators may not care that something is lost or altered, others may relish their selecting powers – the authority they are given, as border agents, to decide what crosses the frontier and what does not. All agents, whether more or less permissive, know in their heart of hearts that whatever they are offering to the target user is to some degree similar to, but never the same as, the source content. That content has been turned into the target content, and now in the minds of translators there are three things: the source content, the target

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content, and the relationship between the two. Some users who know both codes may wish to compare the two contents: which means that other people, as well as the translators, will have those three ideas in mind. But each of the three ideas will be different for each and every observer.

Because of that link between source and target, humans, when they think about translation at all, tend to think of it in relational, binary terms. They interrogate themselves about the relationship between source and target. In the geometry of their minds, source and target will represent points A and B, translation the line going from one to the other. It is perfectly natural for them, therefore, to see translation in terms of *distance*. After the process of translation, how far removed is B from A? Is the target text or object close to or distant from the source? Or, in the well-known moralistic formulations of the question: is the target text faithful or unfaithful? Is the translator a mere parrot or imitating monkey, as some metaphors in Renaissance prefaces had it (Morini 2006: 72), or is s/he a faithless traitor, as in the Italian dictum *traduttore traditore*?

This vision of translation as the segment uniting A and B is one of the greatest commonplaces of the history of ideas, and it has produced hundreds of dichotomic definitions from Roman times to the present age. Around 46 BCE, Cicero pointed out that in translating Greek oratorical speeches he had not meant to count each coin in his readers' hands, as it were, but to pay them by weight (Robinson 1997: 9). Towards the end of the fourth century CE, St. Jerome wrote to a correspondent that normally his policy was that of translating according to the sense (like Cicero), but in the case of the Scriptures he felt a word-by-word rendering was necessary (Robinson 1997: 25). In 1995, American scholar Lawrence Venuti proposed the use of foreignizing translating techniques to counteract the domesticating tendencies he saw at work in the Anglo-American world (Venuti 1995: 1–42). In all these cases, though the motives, historical contexts and ideological positions were widely different, it was assumed that what defines the process and products of translation is the AB segment, and that the only real decision for the translator to make is whether s/he shall keep that segment short or long.

Humans like to think in pairs – good and evil, beginning and end, black and white – though occasionally they add a third term of comparison to signify that virtue sits in the middle. However, these either/

or definitions of translation are useless, in the actual practice of the craft, for at least a couple of reasons: the first is that the AB segment can be of any length, and not just *short* or *long*; the second is that different versions of the same source can differentiate themselves from one another in a myriad ways, and it will not always be feasible or sensible to characterize those differences in terms of distance. To exemplify, here is a relatively simple clause from George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" (1946), followed by three Italian versions penned by three groups of my translation students at the University of Urbino "Carlo Bo", Italy:

> ORWELL: In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible.
>
> GROUP1: Ai nostri tempi, i discorsi e la scrittura politica sono soprattutto la difesa dell'indifendibile.
> [In our times, political speeches and writing are above all the defence of the indefensible]
>
> G2: Di questi tempi, i discorsi politici servono in gran parte a difendere ciò che è indifendibile.
> [These days, political speeches largely serve to defend what is indefensible]
>
> G3: Nel nostro periodo storico, il linguaggio politico scritto e orale viene sovente utilizzato per difendere l'indifendibile.
> [In our historical period, political language, written and spoken, often gets utilized to defend what is indefensible]

If one reads these translations (and back-translations) in terms of the AB segment, one will immediately be tempted to say: the G1 version is closest to the source, while G3 is the most distant. However, that instinctive judgment relies on a series of unverified assumptions and obscures some of the most interesting aspects of the three alternatives. One unverified assumption is that what counts, in the measurement of distance, is a surface adherence to morphology and syntax – the painstaking reproduction of word-order, the replacement of verb with verb, noun with noun, etc. The G1 translation is very close to the original in this sense, but arguably very distant from Orwell's writing on other counts. If rewriting is seen in pragmatic terms (saying what one means, not what one says) and as a stylistic exercise (deploying one's

style to create something similar to the source style), then G2 does sound a bit more like Orwell. In fact, all three versions fall rather short (*distance* again) if one is interested in recreating the source author's concision in Italian. In that case, something like "Di questi tempi, il linguaggio politico serve quasi solo a difendere l'indifendibile" (In this day and age, political language serves the near-exclusive purpose of defending the indefensible) might do the trick better.

In other words, as soon as the close/distant, faithful/unfaithful question is asked, other questions are begged: close *to what*?, distant *from what* aspects of the source? But even when those questions are answered, some vital aspects of the process and product of translation are overlooked by focusing exclusively on the relationship between A and B. These three Italian clauses, callow translation exercises as they are, have a life of their own as pieces of writing: each of them has its own *style*, which makes it slightly different from any other alternative. Chapter 3 will consider in more detail this question of translational style, and chapter 2 will discuss the latitude that is allowed by any given society in the source-to-target transition. For the moment, it is sufficient to look at G3 and note that while it reproduces Orwell's argument that political language is used to defend what cannot be defended, it does so, unlike Orwell, in very formal terms. In Italy there is a strong tendency to equate elegance with formality, and to use a very un-colloquial, even bureaucratic register whenever pen is set to paper.[4] Translation students and trainees are particularly sensitive to that norm, because they are afraid of failure and eager to please. Therefore, literary adverbs like "sovente" (oft-times) and administrative verb forms such as "viene utilizzato" (is utilized) cannot be explained merely in terms of their relationship with the source: they are reflections of the target culture. More advanced translations like the one I proposed above, by contrast, reflect the individual translator's style, the textual habits acquired in a lifetime of writing.

If the dualistic, A-B view cannot embrace the myriad ways in which translations is done, it still retains a powerful hold on the human imagination. Even those who practice and teach translation for a living, and who might therefore be expected to entertain more pluralistic notions of their craft, tend to fall prey to its fascination in their autobiographical reflections (see for instance Basso 2010; Bocchiola 2015). And even theoretically aware academics, at some point of their discussion of any target text, will say something about the distance

dividing A from B: they will say that some portion of B is phonetically, syntactically, semantically equivalent to some portion of A.[5]

Of course, some notion of equivalence is necessary if a society wants to maintain a normative, perhaps even a legislative distinction between translation and non-translation – though it should be pointed out that those norms and distinctions are by no means universal, and in fact vary greatly from one epoch to another (see chapter 2). Again, what does not seem to vary is the basic idea that the defining feature of translation is the distance from A to B. The translating human, in this sense, could be pictured as Freud's grandson, repeatedly throwing his cotton reel out of his cot, happy when the reel was retrieved for him by grown-ups. The inevitable *fort* (away movement) of translation apparently needs to be accompanied, in the translator's mind, by the conviction or illusion that the source is still *da* (there) at the end of the process (Freud 1920: 10–15).

This psychological wavering between forward movement and nostalgia is consonant with the formative experiences of anybody who has had any sort of career in translation, and maybe even of all those who have a knack for learning languages. I myself can trace the course of my linguistic experiences in *fort/da* terms, as a series of alternate movements between exultant facility and sense of loss. When I began attending secondary school, I discovered that after some initial study of declensions, I had no trouble understanding what some Latin author had written two millennia before. The words danced on the page for me, and the whole clause took on a direction and a colouring, with no perceptible labour on my part. This meant that I could rephrase a Latin passage in Italian after the shortest of glances. It felt like writing rather than translating, and it gave me an intoxicating sense that I had power over both languages. Just like Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*, I felt I was the master of the words I was using, and that I could get them to mean just what I wanted them to mean (Carroll 1988: 196).

The feeling was so intoxicating, in its intellectual way, that I have tried to recreate the process again and again: by learning English at university, by getting better at German or French, and more recently by trying to teach myself Greek. What I crave is that moment of sudden clarity, when something that was previously arduous and obscure becomes easy and transparent. However, the more one gets immersed in a language, and the more languages one gets immersed in, the more one realizes how intractable they are, how impervious

to one another, all the more so when their temporal or genetic distance from one another is considerable. Part of the fascination of learning, in fact, resides precisely in one's growing awareness that there are expressions or features of a certain language which cannot be easily replicated in another. In my personal linguistic range, it is often German which reminds me of that rather obvious but ceaselessly surprising fact. Whenever I find the word *Mensch* used with the general meaning of "human being", and applied in very specific, gender-blind wordings like "Jenes Mädchen ist ein guter Mensch" (That girl is a good person), it gives me a little thrill of linguistic difference.[6] If I had to translate its use in the works of Robert Musil, Elias Canetti or Christa Wolf, I know that I would find co-textual solutions to reproduce the gender-blindness – but I would still feel slightly bereft because I have to lose the word, and in an academic edition I would be tempted to mention my loss in the accompanying paratext.[7] At the level of syntax, when I experience for the nth time the deferral of meaning of a German clause like "I have the birds in my friend's garden sing heard", I know that I would have no hope of passing on the experience to any Italian or English readers. I can only try to explain, or have them learn German.

These twin feelings of fascination and frustration are linked up with the vexed question of linguistic relativity – the question of how much language affects or even predetermines thought categories. Formulating answers like "it does, but people can still conceive of anything in any language", has taken a substantial number of linguists, anthropologists and philosophers of language the best part of two centuries.[8] If speakers of different languages have different sets of names for colours (English *blue* does not cover the same chromatic spectrum as Italian *blu* or *azzurro*), does that mean that they *see* colour differently? Whatever the state of the art in contemporary cognitive linguistics, to translators linguistic relativity means that they must always be suspended between impossibility and feasibility, power and nostalgia. They love translating – the authority it gives them in the transference process, the fact that when it works it is a satisfactory game, that it produces sonorous clicks in the mind; but they also love the languages they work with, which means that many of them want to give as full an account as possible of their experience as interpreters of those languages.

The extension and frequency of this to-and-fro oscillation is never stable: even for a single translator, it is constantly shifting and

changing, depending on the source s/he is working on at the moment as well as on the different stages of life s/he is going through. A young person embarking on a career may wish to show a self-assurance s/he does not really possess – or, if that young person has a completely different disposition, s/he may feel compelled to parade her/his respect for the source. Conversely, seasoned translators may either have stopped to care about conveying the singularity of their sources, or acquired new means of doing so. Also, one has to take into account external conditions: the people one is working for may have a marked preference for a certain kind of translation and a certain attitude. And there may be classes of texts for which an attitude of respect is generally deemed to be necessary, while other classes may leave more space for individual preferences. Again, coupled with each translator's stylistic idiosyncrasies, this makes for an astonishing variety of translating possibilities.

The same variety and variability apply to the gatherings of people which are commonly called cultures or civilizations. Even for them – though they are composed of countless variable humans – it is possible to observe the same irregular, oscillating to-and-fro movement with regard to other cultures and civilizations. At a given moment in time, culture number one can display an attitude of awed respect towards culture number two, and a rapaciously acquisitive behaviour towards culture number three. These attitudes and behaviours can depend on the balance of power between cultures,[9] on their relative youth or maturity, or on factors like genre. Naturally, the fact that a culture displays a certain attitude as a whole does not mean that all individual translators follow suit: but a general tendency, a norm, will still be observable in spite of the anomalies.

Very few cultural enterprises exemplify the rapacious side of translation like the wholesale Roman Latinization of Greek culture. As seen above, one of the earliest and most famous binary definitions of the craft is due to Cicero, who in the first century BCE specified that with his versions of Greek orators he had not intended to pay his reader coin by coin (word by word), but rather by weight (according to the sense, as later commentators would say). Cicero's declaration is often considered as the *de facto* beginning of translation theory in the West. Roman translation, however, was not born with Cicero: when he wrote *De optimo genere oratorum* (c. 46 BCE), the rhetorician had nearly two centuries of Greek-Latin translation behind his back, open to his observation. In the third century BCE, Livius Andronicus

had reworked classical Greek tragedy and the *Odyssey*; between the third and the second centuries, Plautus and Terence had re-elaborated the "new comedy" tradition of Menander and others. The verbs here (*reworked*, *re-elaborated*) indicate that in these translations a lot of latitude was allowed: in other words, to make the geometrical metaphor explicit once again, it was considered normal for the AB segment to be rather long. Livius substituted Homer's Muse with a local goddess; Plautus added Roman farcical characters to Menander's Greek casts; Terence occasionally combined the plots of two source texts in his comedies.[10] Though we have Cicero's – and not Livius', Plautus' or Terence's – definition of translation, therefore, we may take it for granted that he was not speaking for himself only, but summarizing the attitude of a whole civilization.

That civilization had been on the rise for roughly the same amount of time as it had been translating: in 241 BCE the Romans won the First Punic War; and 240, according to Cicero, saw the first theatrical performance of a Livius Andronicus play. This theatrical work, if it existed and was really performed in 240 BCE, must have been a translation from Greek, just like the rest of early Latin literature.[11] Thus, at a time when the Romans were expanding beyond their initial regional borders, they were also transferring material from the only prestigious literature they knew into their own nascent culture. The contemporary decadence of Greece as a political power in the Mediterranean and in Asia makes the nature of the whole operation very clear: we, the Romans, are incorporating all this treasure in our own coffers, and adapting it to our practical and ideological ends.

Nowhere is this clearer than in a very famous work of fiction which was begun only a few years after Cicero's death in 43 BCE, and which is not normally thought of as a translation. Virgil's *Aeneid* (29–19 BCE) was meant as a celebration of traditional Roman mores, of victory in the Punic wars as a realization of historical destiny, and more generally of a foundation myth which would connect the Greeks with their political and cultural heirs in Italy. Virgil chose Aeneas, a Trojan prince of divine origin mentioned in the *Iliad*, as the forefather of Roman civilization and a direct progenitor of Caesar Augustus – who had put an end to all civil strife and was now reigning over Rome as an emperor in all but name. The literary enthroning of Augustus was therefore effected by means of the emulation of the greatest Greek poems, and of the *translation* of a mythical Trojan prince. If it seems strange that a Trojan rather than a Greek hero was chosen for the

purpose, it must be remembered that: a) the Aeneas story had long been current in Roman society, particularly in its upper echelons; and b) it is often easier to model one's life on an uncle's or grandfather's, rather than on one's actual father's. Setting that foundation myth in Troy, and not Athens, Thebes or Sparta, probably allowed Virgil to celebrate Greek culture without having to exalt the past greatness of the Greeks in the Mediterranean political sphere.

In the few centuries before Virgil and Cicero, the Romans were an up-and-coming people who needed to provide themselves, as quickly as possible, with a prestigious culture. They found that culture ready-made in the south of the Italian peninsula and a few sea miles to the east, and decided to appropriate it with little ceremony. One could well claim, with another first-century BCE poet, that Greece, though conquered, conquered its fierce victor. But that kind of poetic statement is little more than an act of common courtesy towards those who can no longer threaten one's supremacy – and it is very interesting to note that certain scholars have seen in Horace's line an allusion to the Roman conquest of Corinth in 146 BCE, which was followed by the transportation of Grecian statuary to Rome as very tangible form of cultural plunder.[12]

In subsequent phases of their development, even dominant cultures can display gentler traits, which will lead some of their finer interpreters to translate from minority languages and cultures with a more respectful attitude (McElduff 2013: 178–179). One example of this is the extraordinary development of ethnography and anthropology in the twentieth century. From the sixteenth century onwards, Europeans had set out to explore, subjugate and exploit as many areas of the world as possible, quite often replacing their aboriginal inhabitants with their own settlers. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this process was arguably complete: Africa had been partitioned between the main powers, and in other areas of the world non-Europeans had been pushed to the margins – mountain ranges, deserts, remote islands. It was exactly at this time that the captured cultures began to exert a fascination on their captors, some of whom suddenly wanted to learn everything about their rites and customs.[13]

The most fascinating figure of the period is Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), the scion of an aristocratic Polish family (and son of a linguist) who became a British researcher and an American professor, and who made his name by living for months with humans that his noble forefathers would certainly have viewed as savages. One of

Malinowski's academic mentors was James George Frazer (1854–1941), the famous author of *The Golden Bough* (1890) – a learned scholar who only travelled to Italy and Greece, and whose notions of extra-European myths and rituals were largely indebted to missionary accounts. In contrast with this second-hand accumulation of expertise, Malinowski decided that it was all-important to experience at close hand the societies he was studying. He pitched up tent for months in the midst of the peoples he visited, and in the course of time understood that he had to dispense with any mediating figures, in order to become a member of the community. He called this method "participant observation", and used it as the basis for his most famous studies – such as *Coral Gardens and their Magic*, the final two-volume instalment of his analysis of the Trobriand Islands, in Oceania.

Inevitably, linguistic and translational preoccupations played a large part in Malinowski's studies. How can one really understand a culture, the ethnographer reasoned, without mastering its language? And how can one best present that culture to people who do not speak its language? In volume 2 of *Coral Gardens*, Malinowski wrote that it is "[the anthropologist's] task to give a full description of language as an aspect and ingredient of culture" (Malinowski 1935: ix). In keeping with his respectful attitude to the cultures he was attempting to analyze and describe, he developed translating techniques which were designed to keep the AB segment as short as possible (his aim, to put this in the terms of German Romanticism, was to have his readers move towards the source culture, rather than the other way round; Schleiermacher 1816). His strategy involved four stages which would progressively distance the ethnographer's interpretation from the source utterances of his native informants; but the traces left by each stage would still be visible on the English page. The source utterance would be followed by 1) a word-for-word or phrase-for-phrase interlinear rendering; 2) a freer translation; 3) a comparison of the two translations leading; to 4) a presentation of the meaning in context. Here is an example of stage-1 translation concerning the dangers of famine:

Mimilisi	*boge*	*i-kariga-si*	*tomwota*	*o la*	*odila;*
sundry	*already*	*they die*	*humans*	*in*	*bush*

(Malinowski 1935: 24)

Naturally, any readers who are not proficient in the Kilivila language will have to rely on Malinowski's interpretation, and having the utterance in print in the source language will not make them any wiser as to the nature of communal life and communication in the islands. However, such is the nature of linguistic and geometrical prejudices: the exact superimposition of groupings of unknown graphemes with English words will create for many the impression that some extra insight into the islanders' culture is being provided.

The stage of development of a translating culture is certainly relevant in determining its degree of respect towards the discourses and cultures it translates. Whenever cultures are young and in their formative phases, it is quite common for them to make short work of sources: this is as true of republican Rome as it is of early modern Britain.[14] However, in any phase of development, the balance of power between source and target cultures is also an important consideration. Early modern British translators, for instance, were much more respectful in their dealings with the *Aeneid* than in their versions of modern European works such as Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. In his famous monograph on *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995), Lawrence Venuti noted that in late-twentieth-century American culture, the fluency of target texts was valued above any considerations about reproducing the qualities of the source. He showed this convincingly by lining up a series of excerpts from British and American reviews of translated literature, and argued that the translator's pariah status serves the purpose of presenting the translation itself as an original. The position of complete dominance enjoyed by English as a world language clearly means that any qualms of conscience of the Malinowski variety are relegated into the background, as largely academic questions to be pondered by academics like Venuti himself.

Naturally, though, when the tables of linguistic power are reversed, those qualms of conscience may turn into inferiority complexes. Venuti himself expatiates on the "trade imbalance" of the post-war global book market, and singles out Italy as an exemplary peripheral country, importing foreign works rather than exporting its own (Venuti 1995: 14–16). Naturally, when a culture is in a subservient position, its translators regulate their behaviour accordingly. In a wide-ranging study on Italian versions of modern English classics, Paola Venturi has shown that translators tend to display a form of lexicogrammatical "immobility" that makes for awkward rather than fluent texts; and that their general use of formal and literary registers (even where the source

is informal or colloquial) is a token of awed respect, as are the elegant editions and rich paratextual apparatus favoured by their publishers (Venturi 2009). On occasion, the results are strikingly similar to those of Malinowski's first-stage versions, as shown by Alessandro Serpieri's translation of a line from Shakespeare's Sonnet 18:

Rough	winds	do shake	the	darling	buds	of	May
rudi	venti	scuotono	i	diletti	boccioli	del	maggio

(Shakespeare 1995: 102–103).

Once again, it is important to note that the general prevalence of a cultural attitude at any given time (what Toury calls a *norm*) does not mean that all translators in the culture show the same behaviours or attitudes. Firstly, there will always be contrarians, people who refuse to follow suit. Secondly, and more importantly, even if the attitude is widely shared, the ways in which the attitude is realized stylistically are inevitably as many as there are translators. Even when similar attempts are made to show respect by way of morpho-syntactic reproduction (a noun for a noun, a verb for a verb, all words in the same positions they occupy in the source), the stylistic results will inevitably be different. My interlinear arrangement of Shakespeare and Serpieri evokes a similarity with Malinowski, but the effects of Malinowski's English and Serpieri's Italian are by no means the same: the English line is not an English line at all, while the Italian line does sound Italian, though it is unlikely to have been written or spoken by anybody else before it was first printed.

It is equally important to remember that if an attitude of awed respect or plundering acquisitiveness is the norm at any given time, between any two given cultures and for any given genre, that does not mean that the opposite attitude is totally absent from the culture. The most careless translator, after all, will still be motivated by a feeling of love for the things s/he translates. The most loving interpreters will still be forced to keep some aspects of their beloved sources out of their target texts. Though Malinowski decided to immerse himself completely in the cultures he studied, the posthumous publication of his diaries led to accusations of rampant egotism and Western ethnocentrism; his own cultural biases would evidently come to the surface at more unguarded, less scientific moments, and influence his judgments on certain aspects of native life (Malinowski 1989; see also Hsu 1979). Conversely, Cicero can be seen as the unrepentant

heir to two centuries of ethnocentric Greek-Latin translation; but he was also a fervent admirer of Sparta, and a well-travelled man with a wide-ranging network of Greek intellectual and political friends (Rowland 1972).

Given this ambivalence, the realization that humans have always looked for ways of resolving or bypassing it comes as no surprise. We tend to think in pairs, but we also like to think that there are other solutions, some third possibility that will put to rest all our binary indecisions. In the long dichotomy-riddled history of translation theory, there are moments when the existence of a deciding alternative is announced. In 1680 the poet, playwright and very successful translator John Dryden (1631–1700) proposed a middle path between "metaphrase, or turning an author word for word", and the much looser form of "imitation". He called this third way "paraphrase, or translation with latitude" – a word choice indicating that Dryden liked to keep the AB segment longer rather than shorter (Steiner 1975: 68).

A different, more idealistic way of resolving the ambivalence is offered two centuries and a half later by the German essayist and translator Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who in all matters linguistic can be said to be a late exponent of the Romantic movement. In "The Translator's Task", the introduction to his 1923 translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, he scorned the idea that the poetic translator had to try and reproduce the sense of the source text, but he was also aware that a mere word-for-word translation would be a meaningless exercise. Like Dryden, though in much more convoluted language, he proposed a third way: in his case, though, the solution was not so much technical and linguistic as it was philosophical and mystical. To Benjamin, translation is a technique for investigating the relationships between languages, and above all for liberating the pure language (*reine Sprache*) which is potentially inherent both in the source and the target texts, and exists in and before all living tongues. Again, though as said above he knows that mere word-for-word translation produces stilted texts, his receipt for liberating this pure language puts him very much in the "literalist" camp. The key term here is "Wörtlichkeit", which might be translated as "fidelity to the word" or, more neutrally, as "wordism". Benjamin acknowledges that mere inert wordism ends up producing nonsense, as in some of Hölderlin's versions of Greek poetry; but he still insists that in true translation, i.e. the kind of translation that lets the source shine through, the clause is the wall and wordism is the arcade.[15] What is being offered, clearly,

is less a practical method than a metaphysical way out of the duality perceived by humans when they think of translation. The way out, as Benjamin's mention of the interlinear versions of the Bible indicates, is essentially religious, and it posits the utopian possibility of a messianic return (always distantly envisaged, always postponed) to some sort of pre-Babelic commonality.

In the Western world, people have been impatient of linguistic walls for quite a long time. The story of Babel proves that the idea of humanity as a single linguistic community has been around for millennia, though it is arguable that in that Biblical passage the stress is laid more on the divine punishment of pride than on communicative nostalgia (*Genesis* 11: 1–9). The intellectuals of classical Greece had mostly elected to ignore the problem of linguistic relativity, secure as they felt in the superiority of their own societies. The Romans had decided that only the Greeks were worth conquering and absorbing. But in Europe, centuries after the dissolution of the western half of the Roman empire, the intellectuals were confronted with a multiplicity of languages which could no longer be seen as mere varieties of Latin, and which were starting to produce their own cultures. This confrontation generated a desire to overcome all divides, in the name of universal humanistic learning or with the methods of modern science. Late medieval poets and thinkers tried to fashion perfect, potentially universal languages out of their own vernaculars. In 1668, John Wilkins published a book called *Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language*, in which a new combinatory idiom was presented which had the purpose of making the communication of ideas both universal and perfectly logical. Around two centuries later, the Warsaw ophthalmologist Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof created Esperanto, still the most famous of all constructed universal languages (See Eco 1993: 255–278, 348–354). These and many other attempts at providing humanity with a common idiom ultimately failed: but they go some way towards explaining why so many translators feel dissatisfied with their solutions, and foreign users want to believe that they are experiencing "the original" in translation. If we are troubled by the existence of barriers hindering fluent intercultural communication, and if all our attempts at substituting a single universal idiom for the existing multiplicity are doomed, then fatefully we will tend to burden translation itself with the heavy task of perfect, universal transmission. We will ask our translations, as Benjamin does, to bring us back to the time before Babel was built.[16]

The most consistent and concerted effort in this direction was produced around the middle of the twentieth century. The people who were entrusted with this ambitious project were not poets or philosophers, but computer scientists and linguists. The earliest computers had been developed during World War II by Alan Turing and a few other pioneers on both sides of the Atlantic – their functioning involving a series of translations from human idioms to binary electrical impulses, and back to the same human idioms (see Copeland 2002). The first applications had been, roughly speaking, linguistic, in the sense that the early realizations of these machines had been employed to decipher enemy code. Now that the war was over, and the political alliances had changed, some thought that these new, marvellous machines could be used to decode any language, and for a while a number of American and Soviet scientists managed to convince their respective governments that it was worth their while to fund machine translation projects. Unsurprisingly, in the US and the USSR there was a special interest in the possibility of translating from Russian to English and vice versa (see Kulagina 2000; Oettinger 2000). Quite often, though, the aspirations of this new brand of scientists extended to creating hardware and software which would enable universal translation.

The initial enthusiasm was short-lived. Most researchers thought universal translation feasible through the late 1940s and early 1950s. By the late 1950s doubts were already setting in: the publication of the official, rather damning ALPAC report in 1966 led to drastically revised funding in the US, and fed further scepticism.[17] Naturally, research in the field did not end in 1966, and it was revived in the 1990s by the introduction of new approaches based on corpora and statistics. While in 1966 computers would have been unable to distinguish between the two meanings of the Italian phrase "le chiese" (s/he asked her / the churches), today Google Translate is capable of doing that, provided it is fed with sufficient co-text.[18] More complicated wordings such as Orwell's opening sentence in "Politics and the English language" can be turned into awkward but comprehensible Italian: "Nel nostro tempo, la parola e la scrittura politica sono in gran parte la difesa dell'indifendibile" (In our time, political words and writings are largely the defence of the indefensible). However, while this means that humans can now use machine translation to understand messages in a lot of remote languages – an astounding technical feat – it still does not mean that the dream of universal translation has come

to pass. With longer and more complex stretches of text, errors remain frequent. Even more crucially, translated sentences like the one from Orwell are understandable, but they would require human revision to sound more plausible – more human, self-evidently. Google Translate and other applications in its line are immensely useful, but they are still little more than advanced interactive dictionaries, which work very well at the level of the phrase and the clause. They are largely unable to understand allusions, ambiguities and register variation, and it is hard to imagine that they will ever be able to understand why humans should wish to fashion allusive, ambiguous and linguistically stratified messages.[19] In short, it is hard to imagine that they will ever be able to supplant human translators, though they are a great help to any human wishing to translate. And the idea of getting rid of human translators, of "solving" translation as a problem once and for all, was at the root of the whole enterprise as it was conceived in its utopian beginnings.[20]

That this is indeed the ultimate purpose of machine translation appears to be confirmed by that repository of futuristic fears and dreams, twentieth-century science fiction. Having to put into contact intelligences from different planets or distant galaxies, the creators of books, films and TV series have been faced with the inevitable problem of communication. The solutions have ranged from the mechanical (the C-3PO droid in *Star Wars*) to the neurological and near-mystical (telepathy in *Doctor Who*, brain-wave scans in *Star Trek*; or the humorous "babel fish" used as an ear-plug implement in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*). By contrast, actual human translators have been rarely involved in these deep space romps, and then generally in stories produced in the very late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (See Meyers 1980; Mossop 1996). To appreciate the power of the automatic translation myth in the central decades of the twentieth century, it is interesting to compare this plethora of imaginary inventions with the magical artefacts of the Middle Ages. In the whole of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, for instance, there are only two objects which can be loosely defined as translational: a mirror and a ring given to Gengis Khan (in the squire's tale) which allow their wearer, respectively, to read thoughts and to decode the language of birds (Chaucer 1988: 169–177). Evidently, though Chaucer himself was a translator, he lived in a world where educated people were confident of understanding each other (by means of Latin, when they had not been raised in the same vernacular). They still liked to conjure up

ways of deciphering what they were unable to decipher, but their curiosity was directed towards people's hidden intentions and the minds of other animal species.

The translation magicians of the twentieth century did not work in isolation with their large computers and their punched cards. In most cases they were helped or directed by linguists, when they did not have some specialist expertise themselves. Soon enough, a large body of linguistic theory was born with the express purpose of solving the translation problem by coming up with fixed mathematical solutions which could hopefully be turned into computer programmes. The idea was to align translation theory with the hard sciences: consequently, the discipline at the time of its inception was not christened as Translation Studies, but as Translation Science. One typical monograph was written by the illustrious Scottish phonetician and dialectologist J.C. Catford (1917–2009). *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (subtitle: *An Essay in Applied Linguistics*) was published in 1965, with the express purpose of providing "translators and language-teachers", but also "electronic engineers and mathematicians", with usable definitions (Catford 1965: vii). Catford repeatedly acknowledges that translatability has limits, but also expresses his hope that those limits may one day be overcome; he measures degrees of "formal correspondence" between languages in probabilistic terms; and he wonders whether algorithms can be established for all cases in which there is a gap between those formal correspondences and what he calls "translation equivalence" (Catford 1965: 103, 27–34). Read carefully, this short book provides the reader with as many motives for scepticism as the ALPAC report (which would be published the following year): but its air of scientific rigour and its mathematical language appear to refute some of its conclusions, and to leave the window open for a future, and final, solution of the problem.

The word "problem" has been used more than once in the preceding paragraphs, precisely because it was used in the treatises written by linguists and computer scientists in the 1950s and 1960s. This was not only a consequence of their mathematical approach (to mathematicians, everything is a problem to be solved), but also a recognition of the troublesome quality of language and translation – of the fact that no matter how hard one tried, this particular nut could never be cracked once and for all (one chapter of a history of machine translation quoted above, for instance, bears the significant title "The trouble with translation"; Poibeau 2017: 7). Since the problem refused

to be solved completely, in time the linguists tried to reduce its size by excluding from view some of its most irreducible aspects. These had been identified with certainty, as early as 1959, by the great Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982): it was in imaginative literature, and particularly in poetry, that "death" being feminine in Russian and masculine in German posed seemingly insurmountable obstacles to intercultural communication (Jakobson 1959: 237). In the 1970s and 1980s, the optimism of the early days of Translation Science was superseded by more prudent, limited theories which were predicated on the exclusion of certain registers or text types.[21] The magic of automated translation could only extract a limited range of rabbits out of specifically-designed hats.

Just as the mathematical and linguistic school of translation was losing its faith in the discovery of universal solutions, a completely different set of scholars started their systematic investigation of precisely the genres that Translation Science wanted to exclude. Descriptive Translation Studies, to mention the most popular label for a very diverse set of scholars from Belgium and the Netherlands, Israel and Britain, became the name of the game in the early 1970s[22] – and the definition ended up becoming synonymous with the whole discipline dedicated to the study of translation, which is now called Translation Studies. Itamar Even-Zohar, Gideon Toury, André Lefevere, Susan Bassnett and others declared that their purpose was not finding algorithms, receipts or methods for translators, but observing the features of existing translations. With different emphases and varying degrees of consistency, they claimed that the systematic study of translated texts would enable scholars to understand the cultures that had produced them. Far from attempting to reduce the distance from A to B, these scholars accepted that translations were new texts, dependent on the target context at least as much as on their sources.[23] And though the scope of (Descriptive) Translation Studies was later widened, and is now so wide that it embraces any kind of translation at any time of the history of humanity,[24] in the early phase the focus was almost exclusively on literature – the general idea being that the cultural significance of translation is never as strong as in this most canonical of modern discourses.

Of course, the idea that literature is the most significant form of writing is historically determined, and one can see it slowly evaporating at the present time, when newer entertainment genres are replacing novels, poems and plays. Equally, Jakobson's certainty that

poetry is not amenable to translation only makes sense if "translatability" is intended in that special "Translation Science" sense. What Jakobson means when he says that poetry is untranslatable is that it cannot be translated by computers, or by humans using dictionaries in a mechanical manner. Just after announcing this dogma, in fact, the Russian linguist adds that "Only creative transposition is possible" (Jakobson 1959: 234). While literary writing has not always been at the cultural centre of civilization, it is true that it has often shown off men at their most creative, individual, and unrepeatable. Therefore, though in the terms of linguistic relativism nothing ever stays the same when it crosses a linguistic barrier, in the translation of literary and poetic discourse this becomes more evident than elsewhere. What also becomes more evident is that it takes a creative human to translate the discourse produced by another creative human: when language is used in a creative manner, it displays a rich multiplicity of meaning, and in the absence of clichés and ready-made phrases, machines and algorithms are going to be made to wait at the doors of perception. The translation scientists of the 1950s and 1960s may have experienced frustration at this irreducibility, just as the creators of universal idioms despaired at the illogical nature of existing ones:[25] but it is equally possible to revel in all this abundance, to marvel at the infinite possibilities for individual interpretation.

A single line from one of the most famous poetic corpora of all time is enough to show how impossible it is to reduce this richness, and how powerful the human mind is as a translating tool. When Shakespeare opens Sonnet XVIII by asking "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?", one finds his poetic *persona* wondering whether the traditional Petrarchan simile might work with reference to the young man who, the sonnet says in its final couplet, can defy old age and death because this very verse will make him immortal. Such simple paraphrase, of course, does not exhaust the effects produced by this very innovative first line. In its abruptness, the question sounds as if it is the outcome of prolonged meditation – much as if a painter were looking alternately at the canvas and the landscape and asked, "Shall I add a bit of red?". A side effect of this is that one seems to *hear* the poet talking; one can picture him gesturing at a person, or balancing his pen in the air to find inspiration. In technical terms it is worth mentioning, because it is relevant to how the sonnet is received and may be relevant to how it gets translated, that "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" is a line of iambic pentameter, its main stresses

roughly falling on the second, fourth, fifth, eight and tenth syllables. And it may also be important to consider that English decasyllabic lines, from Chaucer onwards, were often used to translate Italian *endecasillabi* (eleven syllables, or ten if you count to the last syllable bearing a stress).

After considering all of the above, the Italian version proposed by Google Translate falls a little flat:

> Devo paragonarti a un giorno d'estate?
> (Must I compare you to a day in summer?)

The first thing to be noted here is that the Italian line is metrically very weak – due to the fact that poetic prosody is certainly not a priority for the application. "Devo paragonarti a un giorno d'estate" is dodecasyllabic, and its three perceivable stresses are positioned at the greatest possible distance from one another (1-6-11). If the computer scientists and statisticians behind this application had included metrical considerations in their coding work, the line might have been shortened by substituting the genitive "d'estate" (of summer) with the adjective "estivo", which allows for the synaeresis between "o" and "e". In this way, a perfectly formed 1-6-10 hendecasyllable could have been produced ("Devo paragonarti a un giorno estivo?"). Even if that had been the case, however, one would still have to observe that: 1) the 1-6-10 stress distribution is relatively rare, not particularly easy on the ear, and rather awkward at the very beginning of a poem; 2) quite apart from all prosodic considerations, the use of the modal "Devo" creates an odd psychological picture in the reader's mind. In Italian, that strong deontic is used when one is either asking doubtfully for confirmation (Really? Are you sure I should compare you to a summer's day?), or vaguely threatening a misbehaving interlocutor (Will you eat your food? Shall I call your father?). Considering the celebratory tone of the English sonnet, this is a very confusing Italian *incipit*.

Let us now look at three published human versions produced between 1988 and 2008 – very different from each other, yet in their several ways richer and more interesting than the one above:

> 1. Dovrò paragonarti a un giorno d'estate?
> (Will I have to compare you to a day in summer? Shakespeare 1995: 103)

2. Ti dirò uguale a un giorno d'estate?
(Shall I pronounce you exactly like a day in summer? Shakespeare 2008: 47)

3. Paragonarti a un giorno estivo?
(Comparing you to a summer day? Tempera 2009: 371; Morini 2013a: 100)

Just like Google Translate, translator 1 might have obtained an eleven-syllable line quite easily, simply by substituting the adjective "estivo" for the genitive "d'estate". In prosodic terms, however, this line works slightly better than the one produced automatically, because the initial iamb reduces the distance between stresses (2-6-11). If the rest of the Italian sonnet is examined, on the other hand, metrical regularity does not appear to be a crucial consideration, as the occasional hendecasyllable is counterbalanced by a number of very long and very unrhythmical lines. As evidenced by the rich academic apparatus and lengthy endnotes, the lodestar of this translation is philological precision. This is realized, as far as the translation itself is concerned, by following as closely as possible both the syntax and the morphological choices of the source. Nowhere is this clearer than in the above-mentioned third line "Rudi venti [...] Maggio", which renounces common Italian usage to mirror the corresponding English line ("Rough winds [...] May"). In the first line, this philological bent is betrayed by the choice of "Dovrò", which, as the translator himself explains in an endnote, reproduces the early modern semantic ambiguity of "Shall", caught in the middle between the future tense and a deontic value. Clearly, this translation is not particularly striking either in poetical or dramatic terms, but it opens up interesting vistas on the innermost linguistic workings of the source.

The priorities in the second translation are visibly different, though the full plan only becomes perfectly clear as one goes on reading this particular poem and the book as a whole. Translator 2 is a poet, and her version of Shakespeare's sequence pays specific attention to the metrical and rhyme patterns of the English sonnet. The average Italian word being longer than its English counterpart, this translator chooses to employ a slightly outdated register, which is more compact and richer in elisions, and has the advantage of sounding literary to ears attuned to Dante or Petrarch. An example of this is the use of "dirò" in the first line – a verb which signifies "will I say" or "will I tell"

in contemporary Italian, but which is here used with the more antiquated meaning of "will I pronounce" (as in "I pronounce you man and wife"). However, in light of this translator's overall plan, this line is slightly unsatisfactory because it cannot be read as a good hendecasyllable (the line chosen as the equivalent of iambic pentameter for the entire sequence): if the "o" and "u" in "Ti dirò uguale" are conflated the line is read as decasyllabic, whereas if they are kept apart one has a very awkward and rare hendecasyllable with a stress on the fifth syllable. Of course, even when the metre is handled in a more satisfactory manner, this "archaizing" version does not have great dramatic force.[26]

Finally, translator 3 has decided to forego the auxiliary part of the verb altogether, both in its future and in its deontic senses, thus presenting the act of comparing in infinitive form. This opening line is much more abrupt than in the other two versions, and has therefore a more dramatic quality. The rest of the Italian poem provides confirmation that translator 3 has attempted to mime the theatrical potential of the sonnet rather than its metrical qualities: rhymes or half-rhymes appear only sparingly, and not necessarily in the right places (except for the final couplet); the lines are of varying length; and many words and expressions transport Shakespeare's language to contemporary Italy, and put paid to any illusion the reader might have of reading, if not the "original", a Renaissance sonnet ("perché con questi versi eterni *freghi* il tempo"; "because with these eternal lines you're *duping* time"; italics mine). In short, where translation 1 is philological, and translation 2 is poetical and archaizing, translation 3 is dramatic, modernizing, and metrically irregular.

Different readers with different habits, interests and prejudices will choose their own favourite version: and some of them, no doubt, will express their preference for the automatic translation. However, the difference between Google Translate and translators 1, 2 and 3 could not be more marked – even though a single line may not be enough to spot the Computer among the humans, and a whole sonnet would probably be needed for an ideal translation Turing test to be carried out.[27] The disparity is not necessarily one of competence: one can well imagine an untrained human translator doing worse than today's very advanced machines, both in the choice of vocabulary and in the interpretation of the relationships between words and phrases. The reason why the three human translations feel human, while the one produced by the machine does not, is that each is clearly made according to

some individual plan. That plan is not preordained and universal, but personal and contingent, i.e. determined by the encounter between a target author and a source text, which was produced by a source author – both authors being human. Each translating human reads each human text in a personal way (though that personal way is dependent on societal constraints[28]), decides which aspects of the text are worth relaying, and finds personal ways of relaying them. This is what Benjamin means when he says that translations ensure the afterlives of their originals, that they enrich them in endlessly creative ways (Benjamin 2007: 112–113).

In the end, what makes these translations different from each other, and each of them different from the automated version, is not their AB distance from the source text: each of them has evidently been made by people who thought they were reproducing some essential aspect of Shakespeare's writing – that they were, in one way or another, attempting a close rendition of that aspect. What makes those three translations distinctive is the different personalities of the three translators, their different points of view on the source text, and the way those personalities and viewpoints express themselves in language, in a series of specifically tailored stylistic choices. In order to understand that, though, it is necessary to appreciate that (human) translation is a purposeful activity, that it has a performative side which forces each translator to be a (partially dependent) creator – in this case, a writer.[29] In other words, it is necessary to acknowledge that impersonal translation is impossible, or at the very least that impersonal translation does not feel human. That, however, means accepting that when we read a translation we are not reading the original. As Lawrence Venuti pointed out three decades ago, that is precisely what most people cannot accept. That is why the dream of total, automatic translation is still alive, and that is also the reason why in so many countries translators are treated poorly, at least in financial terms: if they were handsomely remunerated, that would amount to an admission that they are actually creating something, rather than merely reproducing it (Venuti 1995: 9–12).

Arguably, the more original the source, the more creative Jakobson's "transposition" needs to be. This is at its most evident when source authors do not confine themselves to crafting a distinctive style, but use language in unconventional or unprecedented ways. Artificial intelligence would not know what to do with works like James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) or David Jones' *Anathemata* (1952), and that

for two related reasons: on the one hand, no statistical survey would ever be able to predict the linguistic behaviour of those two authors in those two books, or to unearth the sum total of their allusions; on the other, even in the unlikely event that a machine were able to understand both works thoroughly, it would not know what to do with them in translation. In fact, it is easy enough to prove that if a computer is faced with a highly individual and inventive use of language, what it ends up producing is very close to the source – but in the very special sense that many words found in the source are relayed without any interlingual modification. Here is the opening stanza of Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky", followed by its Google Translation and an English back-translation of the same (where the unchanged or near-unchanged words are highlighted in italics):

> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe
> All mimsy were the borogoves
> And the mome raths outgrabe (Carroll 1988: 140)

> 'Twas brillante, e le toves scivolose
> Ha fatto gyre e gimble nel wabe
> Tutti i mimsy erano i borogove
> E il momento in cui i ratti superano

> *'Twas* brilliant, and the slippery *toves*
> Made a *gyre* and a *gimble* in the *wabe*
> All the *mimsies* were *borogoves*
> And the moment in which rats outstrip

This poem is found by Alice, the protagonist of *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), in a book that can only be read by using a mirror – and Alice's first reaction to it, just as the reader's, is that its language is utterly nonsensical. In fact, the poem is one of the finest specimens of nineteenth-century "nonsense" poetry, and is normally discussed in Translation Studies under the rubric of "untranslatable" literature (see Morini 2016: 141–142). A more careful reading, however, soon reveals that this nonsense poem is not utterly devoid of sense. In this opening stave, for instance, all the auxiliaries and grammatical words belong to standard if on occasion slightly outmoded and poeticizing English ('Twas; and; the; did; in; all; were); and it is only the nouns, adjectives and non-auxiliary verbs which look odd (brillig, slithy,

toves, etc.; the single exception is "gyre"). But even those apparently "nonsensical" words yield some kind of meaning on closer inspection: because while none of them are common English lexemes, they all evoke other words and convey some vague meaning, by dint of their lexical associations or general phonetic qualities. "Brillig" reminds one of "brilliant", and may conjure up the idea of light; "slithy" makes one think of slimy or slithery things; "raths" sounds very much like "rats". All these associations and intimations evoke an atmosphere for the reader if they do not amount to a description. And if an atmosphere is evoked in English, it can be evoked in any other language.

Google Translate, however, is not interested in atmospheres, and can only base its work on interlingual dictionaries, combinatory statistics and, as far as graphology is concerned, very close similarities. That is why, in its Italian translation, the machine decides that "brillig" must mean "brilliant", that "slithy" is "slithery", that "raths" must be "rats", and that "outgrabe" cannot but be a misprint for other verbs starting with "out", and roughly meaning "overcome" or "outstrip". Unfortunately, however, by transforming slight intimations into normal meanings, the machine misses the point of this stave entirely. Also, when it is impossible to find any close matches, Google Translate decides to leave words exactly, or almost exactly, as it finds them in English (toves, gyre, gimble, wabe, mimsy, borogove). The programme has also trouble decoding outdated usages such as the contracted form "twas" and the emphatic or literary "did": the latter it converts to a non-auxiliary verb, thus transforming "gyre" and "gimble" into nouns. Finally, because it cannot find matches for most words and is therefore unable to assign each one to its proper morphological class, the machine turns that final "momes" into "moment" and decides that the poem must begin at "the moment when rats outstrip". The end result is still strange – indeed, it is far odder than Lewis Carroll's source poem – but in a way that is utterly confusing, and profoundly unfunny. Google Translate has not passed the poetic Turing test.

It could be argued that it is not fair to present a computer with something that hardly makes any sense, and that many humans would encounter the same difficulties. This is patently not true. Most humans who know English and another language, when faced with this quatrain, and endowed with an understanding of how the poem works in the narrative context of Carroll's second *Alice* book, would be able to

come up with a more or less effective translation. Here, for instance, is the "creative transposition" proposed less than a decade ago by a group of translation trainees at an Italian university:

> Era brillo, e i sordidi pitocchi
> Giravano e gimbolavano nell'onde;
> Erano tutti fieri gli articiocchi,
> E i razzi momi ne avevano ben donde[30]
>
> It was *brillo*, and the sordid beggars
> Were turning and *gimbolating* i'th'waves;
> The *articiocchi* were all proud,
> And the *razzi momi* had very good reason

The words in italics in my back-translation correspond to those which are "nonsense" words in Italian. It is immediately noticeable that their number is smaller than in Lewis Carroll's poem, and that therefore, in general, the Italian stave is less strange than its English counterpart. It is also arguable that it is less disquieting, as all these humans (the beggars) or imaginary creatures seem to be at ease and rather happy. But unlike the one produced by Google Translate, this quatrain still works in much the same way as the one from "Jabberwocky": notwithstanding a few metrical irregularities, it is perfectly recognizable as rhyming poetry; and on reading it in the looking-glass, the Italian Alice would surely be puzzled, if not quite as puzzled as her English namesake.

Naturally, accepting that texts such as this Italian quatrain *are* translations entails abandoning any pretence that translations can ever be perfect and complete. For perfection and completeness entail uniqueness (there can be no *two* perfect versions), and if even a simple clause can warrant ample variation (as in Orwell's case), when the level of source creativity is higher the potential permutations are infinite, arguably as many as there are human beings (if not many more). A final proof of this is the following quatrain produced by Fosco Maraini, an Italian twentieth-century anthropologist who occasionally delighted in writing nonsense poetry. "Il lonfo", a hendecasyllabic poem rhyming ABAB, was published as an original poem in 1978. It is Maraini's description of an imaginary, exotic, apparently elusive animal: but it could as easily be a translation of Carroll's "Jabberwocky", and it would work perfectly, in narrative terms, as the

poem that introduces Alice to the inverted, nonsensical mirror-world. Here is its opening stave:

> Il lonfo non vaterca né gluisce
> E molto raramente barigatta,
> ma quando soffia il bego a bisce bisce
> sdilenca un poco e gnagio s'archipatta.
>
> The lomphus does not vaterk nor gloouie –
> It barigates, but only very rarely,
> And when the begus blows zig-zagging snakes
> It sdilencates a bit, and archipates, all gnage.[31]

Only one conclusion is possible, and it leads back to the beginning of the chapter. Translation is a creative activity, and therefore a human preserve. Though they have killed one another since the dawn of time, humans have always found ways of understanding each other across all language barriers. As has been made evident above, when a linguistic border is crossed, nothing ever stays the same – but everything, anything can be translated.

Notes

1 This book is about human languages, though it incorporates examples about non-linguistic codes and sees linguistic translation as a specialized form of general semiotic translation. "Code", in its semiotic meaning, is used as a hyperonym of "language". Roman Jakobson (1959) has provided scholars with a very succinct semiotic theory of translation which puts "interlingual translation", or "translation proper", in parallel with "intralingual" and "intersemiotic translation".. On translation as a semiotic process, see also Short 2003; Marais 2019.

2 "Content" is not defined at all here, as any attempt at definition would lead the writer into a world of difficulties. Let it suffice to say that the "content" of a translation is here taken to be whatever aspect of a source the translator is interested in relaying in the target code.

3 The main Slavic term for the activity is also a calque which means "carrying through". It is also worth mentioning here that the term used by the Romans themselves for the translator was "interpres", which had a more interpersonal and commercial meaning (the second part of the word is probably related to "pretium", "price"; see chapter 3). That word has been retained, in English and other languages, for the oral practice of translation. On how etymology reflects historical conceptions of translation, see Folena (1991: 6–10).

4 This kind of "tendency" is known in Translation Studies as a "norm". Norms are social constraints that may lead translators (or writers) to behave in a certain way, even though they are not absolutely binding. On the application of the concept in Translation Studies, see Toury (1995). On the "formality" norm in Italian writing and translating, see Venturi (2009).
5 The title of Umberto Eco's 2000 book on translation is "saying almost the same thing" (*Dire quasi la stessa cosa*).
6 My love for this word may be motivated by gender blindness or bias. In either case, this note is the right place for mentioning the existence of feminist theories of translation (for an overview, see von Flotow 1997; Federici and Santaemilia 2022).
7 The "paratext", as defined by Genette (1982: 9), is everything that is not part of the text but surrounds and accompanies it, typically in the modern format of the printed book (prefaces, introductions, appendices, notes). Research in the paratextual elements of translation is relatively recent but very vital; its findings will be presupposed in this book (see for instance Gil-Bajardí, Orero and Rovira-Esteva 2012; Batchelor 2018).
8 The notion of linguistic relativity is popularly known under the slightly misleading rubric of "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis", from the names of American linguists and anthropologists Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941). The idea that different languages express different thought systems, however, did not originate in early twentieth-century American academia: in its most general forms, it can be traced back to the German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), if not to Renaissance ideas on the incompatibility of languages (see Morini 2006: 56; and more generally, Pütz and Verspoor 2000).
9 Which does not mean that the more powerful culture is necessarily out to subjugate the less powerful one – as witnessed by modern Indian attempts to adapt European literatures to their values (Gobinathan 2006). On occasion the powerful or colonizing culture can choose the path of humility to infiltrate other cultures more effectively – a strategy that can be observed in the history of Bible diffusion (see Nida 1964; Israel 2006).
10 In Andronicus' *Odusia*, Homer's "muse" becomes "Camena", the name for a nymph in ancient Roman religion. On Plautus and Terence see Morini (2022: 10–13), and chapter two. It must be pointed out in passing that there are great differences in outlook and style between Plautus and Terence, Livius Andronicus and later epic writers: but a certain degree of "Romanization" was common to all these practitioners, at least from the origins to the early imperial age (McElduff 2013: 43).
11 Of course some Romans knew Punic, Gallic, Egyptian, and the other languages one needed to navigate one's way around Italy and the Mediterranean. They employed interpreters in their dealings with neighbouring peoples, and occasionally penned written translations from

and to languages other than Latin or Greek (McElduff, *Roman Theories*, 21–30).

12 "Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit". Q. Horatius Flaccus, epistulae, II, 1, l. 156.

13 See note 8 on linguistic relativity.

14 Itamar Even-Zohar, one of the founding fathers of Descriptive Translation Studies, claimed in a famous 1978 paper that given a "literary polysystem", translations tend to be central when the system is young, peripheral, or not fully crystallized (Even-Zohar 2000: 193–194). On the liminal status of translation in Renaissance England, see Morini (2006: 3–34).

15 "Die wahre Übersetzung ist durchscheinend, sie verdeckt nicht das Original, steht ihm nicht im Licht, sondern läßt die reine Sprache, wie verstärkt durch ihr eigenes Medium, nur um so voller aufs Original fallen. Das vermag vor allem Wörtlichkeit in der Übertragung der Syntax und gerade sie erweist das Wort, nicht den Satz als das Urelement des Übersetzers. Denn der Satz ist die Mauer vor der Sprache des Originals, Wörtlichkeit die Arkade." (Benjamin 2007: 120).

16 One of the most important journals in the field is called *Babel* (1955–), and the title of a famous twentieth-century monograph on translation is *After Babel* – though it has to be said that its author, George Steiner, adopts a gleeful rather than a nostalgic post-Babelic stance (Steiner 1992; and see Steiner's discussion of Benjamin, pp. 66–68).

17 See Poibeau (2017: 35–36). The acronym ALPAC stood for "Automatic Language Processing Advisory Committee": it was established in 1964 by the United States government to assess the progress and usefulness of research in the field.

18 In this book, the samples of machine translation are all provided by Google Translate. Different services and applications, like Microsoft Translator or more specialized programmes, may yield slightly different results; but the differences are not big enough to be significant in this context (for a recent comparative study of three systems, see Almahasees 2022).

19 It is interesting to consider Google Translate's Orwell in the light of recent attempts at creating AI capable of passing the Turing test, or "Imitation Game" – the test devised by Alan Turing, whereby a computer is deemed to have human intelligence if it is mistaken for a person by a sufficient number of people eavesdropping on its conversation with an actual human. In 2014, one judge in a Turing test competition thought that Eugene, a programme created by a team at the University of Reading, was human: but two more judges recognized "him" as artificial intelligence", and even the one judge who did give Eugene a pass arguably did so only because "he" was presented as a thirteen-year-old (the judge thought that his inconsistencies and non sequiturs were attributable to age). Analogously, one might well imagine that Italian version of Orwell's clause as having been

penned by a fledgling trainee translator. In translation as well as conversation, in short, no AI has as yet been created that is capable of reacting in real time to all the contextual complexities of human communication. See Alex Hern, "What is the Turing test? And are we all doomed now?", *The Guardian*, 9 June 2014.

20 See Christine A. Montgomery's significantly titled 2000 chapter: "Is FAHQ(M)T Impossible? Memories of Paul Garvin and Other MT Colleagues". FAHQMT stands for "*fully* automatic high quality machine translation" (italics mine).

21 The Canadian scholar Jean Delisle, in a monograph published in French in 1980 and then partially translated in English, confined himself to the study of what he called "pragmatic" texts (Delisle 1988). Around the same period, two German linguists tried to base their observations on the craft of translation on the differences between genres and linguistic functions (Reiss and Vermeer 1984).

22 The foundational moment of (Descriptive) Translation Studies is normally identified with the publication of James S. Holmes' seminal 1972 paper, "The name and nature of Translation Studies" (Venuti 2000: 172–185). On the other names of this heterogeneous "school", see Hermans (1999).

23 See Toury's characterization of translations as "facts of a target culture" (Toury 1995: 29), or André Lefevere's concept of "refraction" (Venuti 2000: 233-249).

24 Just to give some idea of the variety, McElduff's above-quoted *Roman Theories* belongs in this category of secondary literature, as do works on the English translations of classical Spanish theatre or on the circulation of early modern science (Braga Riera 2009; Fransen, Hodson and Enenkel 2017).

25 This frustration can on occasion be defused by creating simplified, mathematically logical versions of existing languages, which are the ideal working material for automated translation programmes. These "prepared languages" are used extensively in specialized online environments, and their implementation falls within the domain of "human-assisted machine translation", or HAMT (Bowker 2002: 4). Within the confined space of a meteorological application or an online journal on information technology, English, or any other language, is used in such a way as to avoid all semantic ambiguity or syntactic confusion. One is reminded of Newspeak in George Orwell's fictional Oceania, or of certain Soviet attempts to reduce the natural complexity of human communication. In "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation", Roman Jakobson recalls that "In the first years of the Russian revolution there were fanatic visionaries who argued in Soviet periodicals for a radical revision of traditional language and particularly for the weeding out of such misleading expressions as 'sunrise' or 'sunset'" (because astronomically, in a Copernican solar system, the sun neither rises nor sets; Jakobson 1959: 234).

26 Regarding archaizing translation, a 1918 article by Pound ("Guido's Relations"; Venuti 2000: 26–33) and a 1971 paper by J.S. Holmes ("The cross-temporal factor in verse translation"; Holmes 1988: 34–44) are essential reading.
27 See note 19.
28 These societal constraints are, once again, Toury's "norms" (see note 4). In this context, however, it is important to point out that this sociological notion has been subjected to criticism because it tends to overshadow the translator's individual contribution. The proponents of "habitus" theory have tried to shift the focus away from the society and back on the single practitioner (still seen as a social agent: Simeoni 1998). Other translation scholars have tried to make Translation Studies more "translator-centred" (see chapter 3, p. 84).
29 In 2013, in an attempt at formulating a new linguistic theory of (textual) translation that would steer clear of all prescriptiveness, I postulated the existence of three functions for all source and target texts: performative (what humans do with texts), interpersonal (how people communicate by means of texts), and locative (what gets dislocated in translation). At the time, it struck me as very significant that whenever I asked students to give me their own definitions of translation or the translation process, their answers were mostly metaphorical, and almost invariably locative and/or interpersonal. The idea that by translating they were also *doing* something (i.e., writing) did not seem to cross their conscious minds (Morini 2013a: 156–157).
30 Morini (2016: 126). This translation was proposed by one of my groups of MA Translation trainees.
31 Maraini (1994: 25). My translation is half-human, half-automatic, in that it is meant to maintain the words in their morphological categories and to give some account of the Italian sounds (and of which Italian words are "nonsense" words). To give the reader an idea of the atmosphere created by Maraini's inventions, one would have to start again on the infinite chain of creative translation – or go back to Carroll's poem. Google Translate, by contrast, provides a version that is corrective and normalizing – when it is not defeatist ("barigatta" and "bego" are kept intact): "The lung does not float or gulp / And very rarely barigatta, / but when the bego blows in snakes, snakes / he blurts out a little and he turns away."

2 Text

Everything gets translated all the time. Signs, just like energy, are subjected to continuous transformation. Words get turned into other words, in the same or in a different language. Or they are converted into images, which in turn may be described linguistically, or interpreted musically, or analyzed electronically. A writer turns her/his own experiences into a book, in the process converting any number of conversations s/he may have had with real people in the shortened, rationalized form of dialogue; a director likes the book and decides to make it into a film, with all the inevitable processes of selection and interpretation that such an operation entails; people go to see the film and talk about it later, discussing its cinematography and soundtrack, maybe comparing the experiences therein depicted to their own, thinking of conversations they have had which were similar to those they heard in the movie. In the larger semiotic sphere just as in its linguistic subset, it is easy to see that if some process of transposition and transformation does not take place, signs do not even acquire meaning. Scrawls on a rock or on a page only become meaningful if someone is there to interpret them. The tree falls in the middle of the forest, and if some semiotic animal is there to record its falling, the event will acquire significance – and in the process be transformed into something other.

If translation is viewed in this general semiotic light,[1] it is inevitable to consider it as a continuous, fluctuating, ever-changing phenomenon, with no fixed set of rules and no predetermined outcome. As seen in chapter 1, however, most humans like to think of translation as a relatively predictable operation, leading from point A to point B and producing verifiable results. The reason why they are able and willing

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to do this – to reduce infinity to a finite, even very limited set of possibilities – is that they rarely consider translation as a general semiotic operation, or even as a linguistic phenomenon comprehending all written and oral imitations, paraphrases, and reports. When humans think of translation, they think of an interlingual operation involving a source text and a target text. And texts, particularly in their most familiar modern garb as books, have a couple of important qualities which influence human ideas about translation: on the one hand, they give off an impression of solidity, of being discrete physical objects that cannot be modified by time or the mutability of interpretation; on the other, for reasons which will be discussed below, they emanate an aura of importance, of special status, of concentrated meaning.[2] Because humans mostly think of translation as a *textual* operation, they have always shown a tendency to regulate it rather strictly, and to be as prudent as possible in the definition of its prerogatives.

Arguably, in Western civilization,[3] no single text is more richly endowed with solidity and aura than the Bible. In order to understand what these qualities mean, therefore, it is probably a good idea to look at how The Book came to acquire them (in the account presented within the Holy Writ itself), and then at how different periods and cultures dealt with the problem of preserving those qualities in and through the translation process. Though the Bible must of course be treated as a special case in the long history of Western textuality and translation, a condensed summary of its interlingual vicissitudes will probably shed some light on the fate of lesser texts.

If one is looking within the Bible for a real or metaphorical account of how this series of texts ended up acquiring solidity and aura, the best starting place is the book of Exodus. Probably composed between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, this is one of the most ancient sections of Hebrew Scripture. It tells the story of the Pharaoh's persecution of the Israelites and of their flight from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. More importantly for our purposes, it also tells the story of how Moses, who is in direct contact with Yahweh and his representative for his people, receives moral and behavioural instructions from God in the course of a series of encounters on and around Mount Sinai, and by means of at least two textual deliveries. The whole story of the commandments, and of the stone tablets in which they are carved, is known to most Western people in its simplified form. Its actual unfolding is very complex and puzzlingly repetitive. What follows is a relatively brief and slightly interpretive summary of the

narrated events that are most significant in the present context, bible chapter by bible chapter:

> In the wilderness of Sinai, the Lord calls Moses to himself and tells him: you have seen how powerful I am. I drowned all those Egyptians. Now set foot on the mountain, tell your people not to ascend on pain of death, and I will come to you as a voice so that they will know that I speak to/through you (19). Moses is now established as the voice of God. He relays to his people a series of general commandments (20), but also a long list of devotional, moral and practical rules (21–23). God reiterates how important it is that nobody but Moses go near him. Moses writes down the Lord's words, and reads this book of the Covenant to the people. God calls again, and this time Moses stays on the top of the mountain for forty days and forty nights (24). In the course of all this time, God dictates incredibly detailed instructions on how to worship him (25–31), and in the end also gives Moses "two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God" (31:18). Moses goes down and finds that the people, worried because of his long absence, have made a votive golden calf: he is so enraged that he breaks God's tablets (32).The Lord is also angry with the Israelites, but in the end, after more negotiation with Moses, he relents (33) and bids him hew "two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon *these* tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest" (34:1).[4]

A lot of details are left out of this summary, as they are more relevant to devotion than to the history of translation. What this account aims at highlighting is the gradual process whereby the word of God is sanctioned, and Moses is confirmed as its sole interpreter. In the first instance, it is made clear that only Moses can be in the presence of the Lord and hear His voice. Moses, however, appears to think it important that God's laws and commandments are not merely spread orally and memorized: he writes a "book of the Covenant" (a scroll or tablet) and reads its contents out to his people. Clearly, it is Moses' conviction that the presence of a material object containing the voice of God makes the Law more convincing. The only flaw in this state of affairs is that the "book" may be a tangible representation of God's will, but it is still written in a human hand. Therefore, Moses absconds for a much longer time, and is given another "book" that has been penned

directly by God, and actually bears the mark of his "finger": the two original tablets. These get destroyed in Moses' rage at discovering that the Israelites have been worshipping idols in his absence – and at this stage of the narrative comes the most extraordinary textual permutation in this long section of Exodus: the Lord tells Moses to prepare two tablets exactly like the first, and he will inscribe them with the exact same words. Or as a translation theorist might say: he asks Moses to prepare the writing materials for him, and he will produce a perfectly faithful reproduction of his own original text.

To believers, this is a moving tale on the resilience of faith in extreme circumstances. But in the eyes of linguistic and translation historians, it reads as an account of how texts got to occupy a special place in civilization, because, as powerful people everywhere realized much earlier than Moses, their solidity made them especially apt to be endowed with aura. Imagine a Sumerian ruler around the year 3400 BCE: like all his predecessors, he has to tell his subjects what to do and what not, and needs to establish a set of penalties for all punishable offences; unlike his predecessors, he has at his disposal a new technology that can make his decisions tangible and visible, and minimize the need for memorization.[5] He will, therefore, have some tablets carved. Quite probably, to reinforce the message, he will have it set out in the tablets that the laws, or the tablets themselves, have been given to him by a god. Inherently solid, the tablets will therefore become a hallowed object, to be treated by the subjects at least as reverently as their content.[6] If tablets and content have to be replicated, because the kingdom is too big for a single set to cover it all, the king himself or some of his high priests will certify that the copies are absolutely the same as the original. Analogously, Moses, or the author of Exodus, realizes that though the Word may be the beginning of all things, it becomes more authoritative if presented to the people as text, and even more so if the text is made of stone and directly authored (or guaranteed as an authentic copy, in terms of both material and content) by God.

Even aside from its exemplary power, this tale is particularly significant as it appears precisely within the text (or collection of texts[7]) which was itself meant to play much the same role as Moses' tablets, and assumed a central legal and religious role for ancient Hebrews by virtue of its solidity and aura. Before it was written down, precisely around the time of composition of Exodus, what is today known as "the Bible" was a series of oral recitations (Schniedewind 2004). Its

oral nature, in fact, is still perceivable in certain rhythms and prosodic qualities, in the speakability and repetitiveness of various sections. When a cultural shift took place in ancient Palestine which made the written word more accessible to a larger number of people, it was thought expedient to write down these oral formulae. This move made the Word of God more tangible, and in turn endowed the tangible object which was destined to contain it with an aura of sacredness. Stories like the ones told in Exodus, about God appointing Moses as His spokesman and providing him with "Manuscripts", as it were, serve as certifying moves which prove the existence of that aura.

What happened afterwards, and particularly after the first century CE, is known to most adult humans, but fewer people are aware of the central position held by the Bible in the history of textuality and translation. A number of centuries after becoming *the* book for the Hebrews, a version of this corpus assumed the same centrality for the Roman Empire, and then for the whole of Western civilization and a significant part of the Near East. Inevitably, such success highlighted the limitations of a collection of texts which had initially been written in a minor regional language. Thus, in the third century BCE, the Hebrew books were translated in Greek in the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt: this version was called the Septuagint, because it was said to have been produced by seventy-two translators (see Wasserstein and Wasserstein 2009; De Troyer 2013). Around six centuries later, Jerome (342/347–420), a Dalmatian Christian priest, was entrusted with the task of revising the Latin versions of the Bible already in circulation, and ended up extending them, going back to the Hebrew scrolls for part of his work, and producing what came to be known as the Vulgate version (Brown Tkacz 1996). In the Renaissance, after Luther's schism, translations of the Bible were quickly produced in all the major European languages, starting from the countries and areas where Protestantism was dominant.[8] Though condensing nearly two millennia in a single paragraph entails an extreme simplification of complex historical changes, of all the currents and counter-currents of human thought and opinion, these three moments of translational enterprise reflect the growing importance and diffusion of Scripture, as well as big shifts in cultural and linguistic power. In the third century BCE, the scrolls of the Hebrews needed to be read in Greek – the *lingua franca* of the near East – if they were to have any international impact. For the same reason, in the fourth century CE and throughout the Middle Ages, a version in Latin was needed for the West. Finally,

in early modern Europe, the vernaculars were starting to replace Latin as the languages of science and instruction: having the Bible translated in German, English or French, with all the (Catholic) resistance this implied, meant popularizing the Word of God and reiterating that German, English and French were now as good as, if not better than, Latin.

Now, in all these cases, it is fairly evident that the very process of translation poses a fundamental ontological question. If translation is, as has been established, transference and transformation, how can the faithful be sure that the Word, when rewritten in a different language, does not lose its initial capital letter and its cultural capital? It is Moses' "second tablet" problem, but with the added difficulty that while in Exodus the first tablet is broken, and presumably abandoned (so that no comparison is possible with its real or assumed replica, which, at any rate, has been written by the finger of God in the same language as the first), in all the other cases the original scrolls or books are still in existence, which means that the target texts can be unfavourably compared with their sources. For each new translation, therefore, some kind of guarantee will be needed of the absolute identity between source and target. Its creators or promoters[9] will need to claim that the target text is also inspired by God, or at the very least that it has been realized painstakingly, by the best sort of translators, with recourse to the best principles of seriousness and fidelity.

As regards the Septuagint, very little can be known with certainty about the actual circumstances of its preparation: therefore its composition is shrouded in myth, and some of the stories accruing around it are meant to demonstrate that it was directly inspired by God. First of all, the very number of translators (seventy-two, simplified to seventy in the popular title of this version of the Old Testament) is meant to represent the twelve original tribes of Israel (six translators for each tribe). The very fact that these seventy-two translators, according to the story, were sent for from Jerusalem by the Hellenistic Pharaoh Ptolemy II, is certainly a reflection of the historical scarcity of Hebrew-speaking Hebrews in Egypt at the time – but it also serves as a stamp of authenticity for a target text which has been produced by going directly to its source. An even greater guarantee of authenticity, and indeed of absolute "finger of God" fidelity, is another myth that grew around this version and was repeated centuries later by Philo of Alexandria (c. 20BCE–c. 50CE). According to this story, each translator was kept in a separate cell and told to translate the Text on his

own: at the end, it turned out that everyone had produced exactly the same version, with "the self-same nouns and verbs" (Borchardt 2012: 17). Evidently, each translator had been inspired by God, and therefore this translation was to be seen as another original, like Moses' second tablet.

Made between six and seven centuries later, and resulting from a relatively spurious mix of revision, translation from the Septuagint and recourse to the Hebrew originals, Jerome's Latin version could hardly be accompanied by comparable legends of divine perfection. However, some facts about its production and some of Jerome's declarations demonstrate that the fourth-century Christian priest, just as the people responsible for the Septuagint, felt the need to guarantee that his work had authority, if not direct divine authorization. Firstly, in the course of his enterprise he did not merely go back to the Hebrew text, but went physically to Palestine and established his place of work near the Church of the nativity (Sutcliffe 1969: 85–92), Secondly, as hinted at briefly in chapter one, he wrote to a correspondent that whereas in general he translated according to the sense (as Cicero had stipulated more than four centuries before), in the case of Scriptural versions even the order of words was a mystery ("et verborum ordo [...] mysterium est"; *Epistulae*, 3, 57, 5). While this statement can be considered as at best rather dubious when Jerome's actual writing is analyzed stylistically (Brown Tkacz 1996, 43–45), what counts here is that absolute lexical fidelity is once again presented as a guarantee of the validity of translation (as in Philo's awed mention of the seventy-two translators producing "the self-same nouns and verbs").

By the time of the great vernacular Bibles, it had become impossible not only to propagate legends of collective inspiration, but also to claim that one's version was faithful because it kept the order of words. In point of fact, it was often on single words that the battle between Catholics and Protestants raged: it made a big difference in devotional terms whether one translated the Greek word *πρεσβύτερος* with the more traditional Latin calque "priest" or with the newer and more etymological "elder". The debate was essentially a philological one, and the Protestant translators took their bearings from such humanist predecessors as Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus.[10] As shown neatly in Miles Smith's preface to the King James Bible (1611), philological accuracy could now be used as a guarantee of the validity of a new translation. Thus, any insistence on word-for-word reproduction, or even complete lexical coherence, could be dismissed as pedantry

("For is the kingdom of God become words or syllables? Why should we be in bondage to them, if we may be free [...]?" Rhodes, Kendal and Wilson 2013: 197), and Jerome could be praised because he was "the best linguist, without controversy, of his age" (Rhodes, Kendal and Wilson 2013: 187).[11] Though it was characterized as a scientific process, however, the end of Bible translation was still the prophetic uncovering of the fundamental truths contained in the source (see chapter 3).

The tale of the Hebrew and Christian Bible from its very composition to its modern European translations perfectly exemplifies how a book may be presented as solid and endowed with aura, and how solidity and aura may force translators to behave in certain ways, or to present their behaviour in certain ways. Because the Bible is an object whose actual existence and consistency cannot be doubted, and because its contents are not simply words, or ink, but the Word of God, the translation process has to be depicted as either miraculous or miraculously painstaking. This proves that humans have been aware for a very long time of the uncomfortable fact that translation is not only displacement, but also continuous, fluctuating transformation: knowing as they do that the second tablet cannot be *exactly the same* as the first, they need to make up a story or to produce philological credentials in order to claim that it has at least *the same value*, that even though the material may not be identical God has nonetheless condescended to write on it with His very finger.

As pointed out at the beginning of this excursus, The Text is not the same as all texts: other kinds of books cannot command the same awed reverence as Scripture, and therefore what happens in Biblical translation is not the measure for what happens in translation at large. In the same letter in which he claimed that in translating the Bible even the word order is a mystery, Jerome told a friend that in secular versions Cicero's freer method was to be preferred. The centuries between the Vulgate and Luther's work saw the appearance of a great quantity of very free secular translations. In the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer produced versions of Boccaccio which bore little or no resemblance to their sources, yet he was called "grant translateur" by his contemporaries (Burrow 1969: 26). Around the same period in which the King James Version was being assembled painstakingly, the English translator of Ariosto cut more than eight hundred staves from his *Orlando Furioso in English Heroical Verse*, and was able to claim that since this was not, after all, a serious work, the omissions

hardly warranted an apology on his part (Morini 2006: 20). Even in our day and age, notwithstanding a fairly general agreement on the idea that translations must be a close enough reproduction of the source they purport to reproduce, a substantial number of texts can be proved to be reliant on intermediate versions rather than their so-called "originals".[12]

If these and a myriad other cases are factored in, it is evident that a theory comprehending all historical varieties of translation would have to be as open-ended as possible, and descriptive rather than prescriptive.[13] Nevertheless, since the beginning of what one might call translation theory proper – the first extant treatise of any significant length was written by the Italian humanist Leonardo Bruni around 1426 – intellectuals and practitioners have been insisting on the point of absolute identity, or as close as possible equivalence, between source and target. If one reads the recommendations of Renaissance thinkers like Bruni and Etienne Dolet alongside the formulae of twentieth centuries translation scientists,[14] and if one compares the protestations of fidelity of early modern translators with those of contemporary professionals, one is led to conclude that translators and translation theorists have always aspired to create perfect, second-tablet copies of their sources. The translation must look like its original, in all its lines and colours; the translator must have perfect knowledge of the source and target languages and cultures; a number of strategies and processes must be set in motion so as to secure invariance, or at least the closest natural equivalence between the two texts; and whatever the result, in the end the translator will still feel that some essential, beloved aspect of the original has been irretrievably lost in the transaction, so that the target text does not say the same things that the source used to say.[15]

The general reason for this insistence on faithful reproduction is that at least since the late Middle Ages, most systematic or episodic thinking about translation has concentrated on the written text; and particularly with the emergence of humanism, a growing number of written texts started to acquire a similar (if never equal) status to that of Scripture. The process can be seen at work in Leonardo Bruni's above-mentioned early treatise, *De interpretatione recta* (On the correct way of translating, c. 1426), which sums up at least a century of scattered reflections on translation by Italian poets and intellectuals, from Dante onwards. Though it can be seen as an essay on the universal requirements of good translation and a good translator, *De interpretatione recta* is first and foremost a manual on how to translate

from Greek into Latin, and a defence of Bruni's Latin versions of Aristotle. Bruni compares his own linguistic expertise and philological accuracy with the looser methods of his predecessors, who did not have direct access to the Greek books and were not interested in the creative reformulation of the source elocution (Bruni 2008: 24–27). What is interesting for our purposes is Bruni's absolute reverence for the ancient texts he is working on – an attitude that is at the root of the rediscovery and reconsideration of the classical Greek and Roman past in that epoch of Western history. If a secular book is worthy of that kind of veneration, it must have acquired some of the cultural capital previously assigned almost exclusively to Scripture; and if a secular book has acquired cultural capital, it means that it too is somehow "sacred", that it possesses a mystical aura that the translator will have to preserve or reinstate.

Once the idea took hold that secular writing could also be endowed with aura, the catalogue of books which were seen as "sacred" began to expand. At first, it was the works of the Greek and Latin philosophers, scientists and historians which were accorded the greatest reverence in the late Middle Ages and the early modern era. From the very beginning, however, there was at least one great poem that was treated with almost as much respect as Aristotle, Plutarch, and Cicero: Virgil's *Aeneid* was considered to be so packed with knowledge and religion that it had to be read allegorically as well as literally. In translational terms, this meant that at a time when other secular works were being hacked to pieces and reassembled with the same liberty exercised by Chaucer on Boccaccio, anyone who dealt with Virgil in this cavalier manner had to watch their step. In 1513 and in Britain, i.e. at a time and in an island where secular translation was characterized by a great degree of liberty, Gavin Douglas chastised his immediate predecessor, William Caxton, for daring to call *Eneydos* a book that had actually been derived from French sources. In the course of the following two centuries, an immense number of complete and partial vernacular *Aeneids* were produced all over Europe, all of them with painstaking attention to detail and great care being exercised in the choice of poetic diction (see Lefevere 1998; Morini 2013b; Petrina 2017).

In early modern Europe, there were other Latin poets (Horace, Ovid) who commanded almost as much respect as Virgil, and were consequently accorded a central position in the school curriculum and a "faithful" treatment in translation. With the consolidation of national

languages and the quick diffusion guaranteed by the printing press, modern vernacular writers soon realized that they too could aspire to their own portion of literary immortality.[16] In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, great epic, chivalric and religious poems were written which openly imitated, rewrote and tried to vie with the masterpieces of Virgil, Homer and Hesiod. Soon other genres besides epic poetry were seen as offering the same promise of literary fame. In 1616, the English dramatist Ben Jonson decided to publish a collection of his *Workes*, with the clear intention of presenting his plays as instant classics by a living author.[17] The modern trinity of "poems, plays and prose" (Short 1996) would only be completed more than a century later, with the definitive "rise" of the novel (Watt 1957): but by the beginning of the seventeenth century it was already clear that literary authors and their works could be accorded at least a portion of the reverence which had been thus far reserved for sacred writings. After adapting his *Pastor fido* for the English stage, Elkanah Settle had to apologize, however archly, for daring to tamper with Giovanni Battista Guarini's "sacred dust" (Settle 1677: Sig. A3): important secular texts were now endowed with aura, which meant that the utmost care had to be exercised in one's dealings with them.

The consequences for translation theory can be illustrated by observing what happened when the writings of one particular canonical[18] author started to find their way around Europe. When Shakespeare's plays were acted outside Britain, the scripts used by directors and actors were often quite different from their English sources.[19] The versions created by French playwright Jean-François Ducis (1733–1817) were meant to satisfy the taste of audiences whose habitual fare was neoclassical tragedy: in order to make *Macbeth* popular with his public, for instance, the translator had the usurper repent his sins at the end of the play, and eliminated the scene of the banquet so that no gluttony would be seen on stage (Ducis 1827: 205; see also Heylen 1993: 26–44). Between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Ducis' versions became very popular in France and elsewhere – so popular, in fact, that in certain countries the entire Shakespearean tradition was based on them, rather than on direct translations of the English plays (Delabastita and D'Hulst 1993). When the popularity of Ducis' Shakespeare was at its peak, however, European theorists and writers also began to deliberate on how best to translate Shakespeare in the various national languages. Here the focus was never on the actual French, German or Italian stage

versions, but on the books collecting the bard's translated plays. Any version prepared for the stage could admit for a number of adaptive changes; but whenever the printed plays were discussed, their aura and solidity meant that no "deviation" was allowed. In one of the earliest book-length treatises on the art of translation, Tytler's *Essay on the Principles of Translation* (1791), the author criticized Voltaire for presuming to turn Hamlet into a modern *philosophe* (Tytler 1907: 207–208). Only five years later, August Wilhelm Schlegel proposed a new German translation of the complete works which would better reproduce the poetic strengths of the originals (Schlegel 1796: 76). In both cases, the central unspoken idea is that since Shakespeare is a great author, his poetic corpus is to be considered as the closest thing to Scripture, and therefore any French or German translation must strive to preserve, as if by magic, what is to be found in the English source. By the end of the eighteenth century, literature, to use T.E. Hulme's terms, has become "spilt religion" (Hulme 1994: 62).

To this day, whenever a "canonical", "classical" work gets translated, it is quite likely that the translator, and all the agents involved in the transaction, will insist on treating the "original" with the utmost respect. This attitude can take very different shapes at different times and in different countries, but in the most exemplary cases it will be visible at all levels of textual recreation and book production. This, for instance, is how "modern classics" are commonly presented in my country. I have in my hands an Italian paperback edition of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), first presented to the public by the Rizzoli publishing house in 1999. "Presented" is an apposite choice of verb, because the book is cheap but quite elegant. It is also quite sizeable – more sizeable, in fact, than certain cheap English editions of *Mansfield Park*. The jacket is in elegant marble grey. The author's name and the title, typed in a classical-looking font, feature at the top of the cover, together with the notices "Introduzione di Tony Tanner" (Introduction by Tony Tanner; in a smaller font) and "Traduzione di Laura de Palma" (Translation by Laura de Palma; in a still smaller font). Between the title and these notices stands the colour reproduction of an eighteenth-century picture portraying an elegantly dressed couple in a woodland setting, credited in the back cover as Thomas Gainsborough's *Conversation in the park* (1746). At the top of the page the book is identified as part of the "BUR Classici" series, the acronym standing for "Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli" (Rizzoli Universal Library). Between the covers, besides the

translated novel itself and Tanner's introduction, the reader finds a frontispiece repeating the information already given in the cover, a chronology of Jane Austen's life, and an essential bibliography of secondary literature.

Clearly Jane Austen's work is being treated with great editorial reverence. The idea is that classical books need to *look* important – hence the jacket, the eighteenth-century portrait, the frontispiece. Classical books are also necessarily difficult, which means that they need to be interpreted and contextualized – hence the chronology, the essay by a distinguished British critic and the bibliography. Finally, the status of canonical works may be signalled and reinforced by accompanying them with other artefacts which have a similar status – hence the Gainsborough portrait. The whole paratext accompanying the translation is meant to parade the sacred literary aura of this work – so that it is no surprise, when one finally gets to the opening page of the novel, to find that it reads like this:

> Circa trent'anni fa, Miss Maria Ward di Huntingdon, con sole settemila sterline, ebbe la buona sorte di affascinare Sir Thomas Bertram di Mansfield Park, nella Contea di Northampton, e di venire quindi promossa al rango di moglie di un baronetto, con tutte le comodità e i vantaggi di una bella casa e *una* rendita cospicua.
>
> (Austen 2002: 63; italics mine)

> About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income.
>
> (Austen 2003: 3)

Much like the Italian version of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 quoted in chapter one, this *incipit* is an attempt at following Austen's English as *verbatim* as possible. I have, in fact, underlined in italics the only Italian word that is in excess of the source; and the only occasion on which the translator has allowed herself an inversion is in "moglie di un baronetto" for "baronet's lady", because Italian grammar would not allow a different construction. It is to be noted that "moglie di un baronetto" has an indefinite article ("*a* baronet's lady"), where doing without the article would have been more natural in Italian ("moglie

di baronetto"). The translator is more interested in providing a sort of crib for the source text than in writing fluent Italian, as evidenced by the awkward passive construction of "di venire quindi promossa" (which perfectly mirrors "and to be thereby promoted"). This style, or this exhibited absence of style, is of a piece with the overall respectful presentation of a great author's classical work: it is Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* that is important in itself, not its Italian reproduction – which only acquires cultural capital insofar it can mirror and celebrate its source.

About twenty years ago, I proposed a retranslation of all the novels to an important Italian publishing house. This publisher has a series of single hardbound books which collect the *opera omnia* of authors which are deemed to be canonical – and inclusion in the series is, in fact, one of the strongest marks of canonicity in the country. Since Austen had never been included, this seemed to be a perfect occasion to remedy an oversight and to produce translations which would somehow convey in Italian the pragmatic niceties of Austen's style. At the time I was writing an article on the distance between what Austen's characters and narrators say and what they mean (Morini 2007): and my proposal to the publisher hinged exactly on this point. All existing translations, I wrote in my letter to the general editor of the series, fail to do justice to that fine line separating semantic from pragmatic meaning because of their insistence on lexical and syntactical faithfulness. In my academic mind, an elegant hardbound edition combining a very informative paratext with creative translations would be perfect for all sorts of readers.

I was asked to produce a couple of pages as a test, and duly did so. I sent the package by snail mail, as directed, and forgot all about it for a while, secure in my conviction that my Austenian style could not fail to impress the editor. I was therefore shocked, a couple of months later, when I received a package containing a rejection slip, my translation test covered in red ink, and a cover letter in which an "expert reader" explained why my work was not up to the desired level of quality. When I could bring myself to read this letter and study the corrections in detail, I realized that most of them were aimed at transforming my version into something which would reproduce as closely as possible the syntax and lexicon of the source text. Whenever I had transformed a passive construction into an active one, a complex conditional verb into a simpler form, an adjective into a noun, my text was marked by a red stroke. In her cover letter, the reader explained that on occasion

I had omitted single important words or expressions like *now*, *too much*, *also*. I tried to reply to this crushing response by writing to the editor that what the reader objected to in my version was exactly what I had proposed in the first place: a style which would not stick to the outer lexicogrammatical carcass of the novels, but would recreate their pragma-stylistic soul. It took me a while to realize that the mistake was all on my part: as said above, I had thought that the lifeless translations were a blot on the precious editions conceived for Jane Austen by all major publishers. The reality was that those translations were all of a piece with the elegant jackets, the "essays by Walter Scott", the endnotes, the chronologies and the biographies: what was wanted was not a recreation of the intricate dialogue, but the presentation of a bible-like object which would look important, and where the translations could be presented as *exact replicas* ~~to~~ the originals. And for that kind of claim, nothing worked better as material evidence than near-*verbatim* reproduction.

I am not of course suggesting that this kind of "classical" translation is prevalent in all countries – Lawrence Venuti (1995: 1–17), for instance, has famously demonstrated that "fluency" is, or was, at the heart of the translating enterprise in Britain and the United States. A number of studies have shown that stylistic "immobility" is far more prevalent in countries which are culturally peripheral and/or where formality of register is a value in itself (Berman 1995; Sela-Sheffy 2005; Venturi 2009). But even supposedly "domesticating" cultures offer an overwhelming amount of evidence of the special status which classical literature still enjoys in the eyes of translators, translation instructors, and even translation scholars. The text itself may be allowed to be less stiff and more stylistically creative: but the editions are still elegant, rich and well-edited; and sooner or later the fateful word "faithfulness", or some near-equivalent, will pop out in the translator's or the commentator's discourse.[20]

The ideology of textual faithfulness, invariance, or equivalence is so ingrained in Western culture that most people cannot even see it as an ideology: they just think that it is the way things ought to be – that it is in the nature of translations to be faithful, invariant, or equivalent. However, it is sufficient to go back to the recorded beginnings of translation practice and theory to realize that things could have taken, and did take at times, quite a different ideological course. As mentioned in passing in chapter 1, around 46 BCE Cicero wrote a treatise called *De optimo genere oratorum* ("the best kind of orator"). The treatise

incorporated Cicero's versions of public speeches by Demosthenes and Aeschines, which the Roman prefaced by presenting his translating methods. The short passage in which Cicero declares that he did not choose to pay each coin in the reader's hand, but decided to pay him by weight, is universally known as a defence of free vs word-by-word translation. What tends to be overlooked here is the oral emphasis of Cicero's declaration: rather than construing a text as a grammatical student would do, he is interested in preserving, and recreating for himself and his own polemical purposes, the rhetorical force (*vim*) of the Greek orators. Clearly, though he is working on speeches which have been written down, what concerns him most is appropriating the source orator's voice – a term Cicero does not use in this particular passage, but which, as shall be seen below, appears elsewhere in his pronouncements on translation (McElduff 2013: 108–115). In other words, Cicero's is a predominantly *oral* view of translation, where the source text is seen as a generic starting point rather than a venerable object. The text, in Cicero and most of Roman translation up to Cicero, has little solidity and no aura.[21]

It is fascinating to imagine what Western translation theory might have been if it had retained this emphasis on voice and oral delivery. Certainly it would never have come to idolize the text, and it would not have set up faithfulness (with all its historical permutations) as an absolute value. One gets a glimpse at this alternative reality by considering the nearest thing we have to an oral theory of translation – the corpus, much slighter than the one on written translation but still fairly substantial, of secondary literature on interpreting studies. If one peruses such recent general books as *The Routledge Handbook of Interpreting*, *The Interpreting Studies Reader*, or *Introducing Interpreting Studies*, or if one scans the contents of such journals as *Interpreting*, one finds that most of the chapters and articles are dedicated to the history and status of the profession and to overwhelmingly practical questions (Pöchhacker 2016; Pöchhacker and Schlesinger 2002; Mikkelson and Jourdenais 2015): how to train in the various branches of the trade and for the multifarious settings in which interpreting takes place, how to assess quality and reliability, how to condense and sum up efficaciously, how to develop and exercise memory, how to use aids such as corpora and lexicons. Generally, the emphasis is on the *effects* of interpreting work rather than on the correspondence of source with target content.[22] Talk of "faithfulness", "correspondence" or "equivalence" is relatively rare, and mostly

confined to the occasions on which the source production is viewed textually, post-factum, as a whole possessing its own coherence and cohesion (Pöchhacker 2016: 131–139).

Such phenomena of interference between the oral and written dimensions of translation can be observed in other traditions. Whenever a discourse genre is predominantly oral, but some of its productions take up written forms, its translations end up being considered in their textual rather than in their performative manifestations. The most significant illustration of this is offered by theatre translation. Until very recently (Morini 2022: 41– 49), studies in this field have suffered from a dissociation of sensibility between reality and academic enquiry: the practice of theatre translation has always been oral and performative, while its theory has almost invariably been text-centric. The effects of this dissociation can be observed in the contrast, briefly sketched above, between the behaviour of translating playwrights such as Ducis and the attitude of critics and literary translators such as Tytler and Schlegel. Abridgment and cultural adaptation are the norm when Shakespeare is presented on stage, but they are frowned upon when his plays appear in printed form.

Again, the very origins of theatre translation history open up vistas on alternative possibilities. When Terence brought his plays to the Roman stage in the second century BCE, he had no problems presenting himself as, at the same time, a playwright *and* a translator. He took plots and lines from the authors of New Attic Comedy and modified them, or condensed two source plots into one comedy; on the other hand, though he openly declared that his plays originated in Greece, he defended himself in his prologues if someone accused him of plagiarism (McElduff 2013: 87–89; Morini 2022: 10–12). In short, Terence was aware that stories, characters and plotlines may come from elsewhere, but what matters on stage is the efficacy of the final text as well as the presentation of the show. Interestingly, a century after Terence's death, Cicero is reported to have praised the Latin playwright because he alone had managed to "convert and express Menander in a Latin voice" (*Conversum expressumque Latina voce Menandrum*) by means of his (Terence's) "high style" (*lecto sermone*).[23] Again, theatre translation is presented as a mixture of creativity (the style is Terence's) and imitation: but the form of imitation that Cicero praises is oral, rather than written. What is at stake, it seems, is less the reproduction of words or phrases than the creation of an aural effect of similarity, or mimicry. As long as one

feels that Terence sounds like Menander, it does not matter whether the ending is the same, or whether the Latin playwright has invented new characters for a new subplot.

In Western Europe, after the heyday of Greek and Roman theatre, stage spectacles of some sort or other obviously continued, but the writing of plays became a relatively neglected art. It was only with the Renaissance that playwrights started to be considered as serious writers again, first in Italy and then in the rest of the continent – and this happened exactly at the same time as a humanistic, philological, textual and source-centric theory of translation gained dominance in the field of secular writing. Incidentally, and rather ironically, Terence was now in the curriculum of most continental schools: the playwright who was also a translator, and who would take its materials freely from his Greek predecessors, would now be pored over, parsed, construed, and often translated into the vernacular with painstaking attention to all the lines and colours of his partly borrowed elocution (see for instance Ascham 1570). Thus, plays whose construction owed as much to orality as to the written word (one can picture the Latin translator/playwright speaking lines aloud to verify their efficacy), and which could also be seen as resulting from complex collaborative productions, were turned into solid, aura-endowed texts to be translated with the utmost consideration for every single word.

That finishing clause is something of an exaggeration, as Renaissance theories of translation did not necessarily fixate on Jerome's *ordo verborum* (Morini 2006: 8–29): but the exaggeration is meant to capture the shift in emphasis from orality to textuality, from spoken mimicry to lexicogrammatical composition. The posthumous history of Shakespeare's dramatic production may be seen under a similar ironical light to the one illuminating Terence's literary afterlife. As seen above, the theorists of translation of the late eighteenth century treated the plays as (sacred) original texts. Shakespeare himself, however, could largely be seen as a translator of existing material – whether that material be linguistic, narrative or theatrical, derived from Plautus and Terence or former English plays, from Plutarch or Holinshed, from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* or contemporary pastoral plays (Gillespie 2001). Even more significantly, Shakespeare was not an isolated literary author with full control over his manuscripts and printed works: he was an actor and shareholder in a company in which other actors and shareholders might, quite literally, also have their say. Even before showing the script

to anyone else, the writer would be influenced by his knowledge of the acting strengths and weaknesses of the main tragic actor or the fool. Initial scripts would surely be modified during rehearsals and a run of shows, also depending on audience reactions. And since at the beginning of Shakespeare's career English playwrights were not held in the same reverence as non-dramatic poets, the printed versions of their plays – when they got pressed at all – were often put together by actors or even by spectators, and as such were the record of collective performances rather than isolated composition. But the following centuries needed to think of Shakespeare as a "divine" author, a powerful deity whose wordings had to be relayed faithfully and in their entirety. For this reason, twentieth-century scholars attempted to weed out all the sections of his texts which did not seem to originate in the author himself, or to be worthy of his greatness (Pollard 1909); and any serious discussion of Shakespeare in translation has until very recently involved the same kinds of philological strictures (as seen in Tytler and Schlegel). Anything that did not conform to those strictures had to be relegated to the rank of "adaptation", "imitation", or "parody".

Shakespeare, like Terence, is a special case: a playwright who has become canonical as a dramatic poet. The centrality of text, however, has far-reaching consequences on theatre production and translation as a whole. Even in our day and age, when the notion that page and stage are necessarily connected has largely been dispelled, theatregoers and producers may still be tempted to pay homage to that solid, aura-endowed object. One recent example will suffice: in 2016 an Italian company started to tour the peninsula with a play called *L'anatra all'arancia* (The duck à l'orange). The ur-source for this play was a relatively obscure 1967 English play by Scottish playwright William Douglas Home, *The Secretary Bird*, which had been translated into French before 1974 and renamed *Le Canard à L'orange*. This version, which differed on many points of plot and language from its English source, was in its turn translated into Italian as *L'anitra all'arancia* in 1974. The Italian production was so successful that it spawned a film, *L'anatra all'arancia* (1975), nominally based on the French play but actually very distant from any previous source. The film was also successful, which means that most Italians above fifty are still familiar with its title. This familiarity was probably the reason why director Luca Barbareschi and his company decided to revive the play, and it was obviously the reason why they kept the French-derived title. As for the source text they used, it is almost certain that it was one of

several Italian scripts created from 1974 onwards. In short, this new production was more an intralingual than an interlingual theatre translation, depending as it did on an Italian tradition which had taken its bearings from the French play.

This kind of behaviour is completely normal in the theatrical field, where the efficacy of the mise-en-scène and the reactions of audiences are much more important than any consideration of textual transmission or fidelity. Barbareschi's company also modernized the script and the staging, changed the names and the professions of the characters, and included in their lines some topical references to contemporary Italy. Despite all this, the company felt the need to claim that theirs was not just another version of a very French-Italian story, but a translation of the English play. The early playbills for the show claimed that it was based on the text of Douglas Home's *The Secretary Bird* ("dal testo The Secretary Bird di W. Douglas Home"), and the director stated that they had decided to re-translate that ur-version in order to endow their script with British humour. In actual fact, the final production bore no similarity at all with the 1967 play: but the director and the company still felt that claiming derivation from the *original text* would make their work more prestigious. They could have said that they had found a number of existing versions and tried to make theirs as funny as possible – this is how theatre translation often works. Instead, they tried to cover their tracks and claimed that they had respectfully gone back to the source – because they thought that this is how theatre translation is supposed to work in a text-centric world (Morini 2022: 97–104).

Thus, even if translation happens all the time, even if all forms of oral or written production can be seen as transformations of preexistent linguistic signs, the word "translation" evokes a painstaking textual process that turns A into B, and preserves as many textual elements as possible from A into the textual structure of B. Indeed, the very fact that this little formula only comprehends A and B – and not three, four, or an infinite number of elements – is an indication of the limited latitude that is allowed for the process and its results. In actual fact, other elements are often interposed between A and B. If the example above is considered, it is evident that at least two intermediate stages and one mediating language intervene between the 1967 English play and the twenty-first-century Italian production. Plutarch has been mentioned above as one of Shakespeare's sources: but the English playwright would have read Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* in Thomas North's 1579

translation, which was itself dependent on Jacques Amyot's famous French version, and not on Plutarch's Greek. Even if one moves away from the world of the theatre and theatre translation, and concentrates on our supposedly more philological times rather than on the late Renaissance, one is soon forced to realize that indirect translation, the use of intermediate texts and languages, is far from having become a thing of the past. Whenever a source text is not easily retrievable, or is written in a language that is known to few target speakers, it is quite likely that someone will look for alternative gateways. In Italy, for instance, a working knowledge of Russian has been very rare until very recently: as a consequence, works by important authors like Chekhov and Grossman were initially translated not from their prime sources but from French versions, and some of those indirect translations are still in circulation (Ghini 2017).

If indirect translation has not become a thing of the past, however, it has surely become a thing to be hidden out of sight. Those French-Italian versions of Chekhov and Grossman may still be around, but their paratexts claim that they are translations from the Russian, or gloss over the question of textual provenance. Barbareschi's company may have used and modified an Italian script that was already a re-elaboration of a French play, but when they decide to mention the fact that their play has a history, they publicize a return to the original *textual* source, rather than to any theatrical or cinematic precedent.

Spelling out the motives for such lies and evasions leads one back to the humanists and their inclusion of secular texts in the catalogue of "sacred" books. As soon as Bruni started to treat Aristotle like God, he also began to list the requirements of a good translation and the qualities of a good translator. A good translator had to know perfectly both the source and the target languages and cultures. That double knowledge was essential because in translation (in the translation of important books, of cultural capital) it was not only the *inventio* (the themes, the story, the argument) and the *dispositio* (the organization of parts, paragraphs and sentences) that had to be preserved, but also the *elocutio* (all the rhetorical figures; Morini 2006: 8–11). Evidently, such requests placed a huge burden on the shoulders of even the most gifted and knowledgeable of translators, who were faced with the impossible task of recreating a target text that would work and sound *just like the source*. Less evidently but even more significantly, this created an immutable hierarchy between target and source, between the "original" and the "translation": in Bruni's view, the former was

somehow magically solid, independent and immutable (even at a time when philological scholarship was rediscovering and trying to reconstruct a great number of classical texts), while the latter was dependent and derivative. Even today, most lay people (and most scholars without a grounding in Translation Studies) would be prepared to repeat the following cliché: originals are eternal, but translations age – so that once every few years, a new translation is needed.

The figures used by translators to describe their craft are always telltale indicators of the state of translation theory: and if one sifts the metaphors and similes used by Renaissance translators (i.e., used by translators at a time when modern humanistic theories were becoming dominant), one finds a growing awareness of the secondary, derivative nature of translation, and of the fact that this nature makes translations less valuable than originals. At best, they are seen as windows opening on their sources and shedding some light on them, as in the King James Bible or in the vernacular versions of certain important classical texts. At worst, they are a poor surrogate, if not a thick curtain impeding a good view of the original. John Florio, a man who was certainly not prone to self-flagellation, admitted in the preface to his Montaigne book that "every language hath it's Genius and inseparable forme", and that therefore in translation "The sense may keepe form", but "the sentence is disfigured; the finenesse, fitnesse, featnesse diminished; as much as artes nature is short of natures arte, a picture of a body, a shadow of a substance" (Florio 1603: preface to the reader; Morini 2006: 35–61).

Naturally, if the original is treated as a stable, solid, aura-endowed fetish and translations are seen as perishable by-products, it follows that translations are naturally bad – which paradoxically explains the artful evasions of indirect translators. As a group of scholars specializing in this particular sub-topic have put it recently: "If translation is deemed bad, because derivative, ITr [indirect translation] is worse" (Assis Rosa, Pieta, and Bueno Maia 2014: 114). Unlike the Romans, unlike the secular writers of the Middle Ages, modern Western societies have turned texts into sacred objects, and have based their translation theory on the translation of texts. As a consequence, though translation happens everywhere, at all times and in a great variety of ways, those societies have tended to concentrate only on certain forms and modes – on those forms and modes, in particular, which appear to guarantee the integrity of the source, and to create as short a distance as possible between A and B.

Everything gets translated all the time. Signs, just like energy, are subjected to continuous transformation. But for centuries we have preferred to concentrate our attention on certain classes of signs, and we have chosen to believe that limits can be set to that process of infinite, boundless transformation.

Notes

1 In chapter 1, such a semiotic view has been presupposed at the beginning, and then with every mention of Roman Jakobson's (1959: 233) tripartite definition of translation. It must be taken into account that the notion of translation is central in semiotic theory. According to Charles Peirce, whose formulations form the basis of Jakobson's, translation is actually the necessary condition for the creation of meaning, because any sign only *becomes* a sign with the apparition of another sign (Peirce's *interpretant*). Meaning is thus "the translation of a sign into another system of signs" (Pearce 1933: paragraph 127; Petrilli 2016).

2 The word "aura" inevitably recalls Walter Benjamin's considerations on its loss in an age in which art can be reproduced mechanically (Benjamin 2007: 378–413). Benjamin's considerations are about the figurative arts; but though books had been mechanically reproducible for nearly nine or five centuries when the German thinker was writing (1935; the earliest forms of printing press appeared in China between 1041 and 1048, and in Germany around 1450), books still preserved, and preserve to this day, a great deal of cultural prestige. While ownership of a medieval codex may be rare, one need only think of the impression created by an ample and well-organized book collection to realize that even printed texts may be endowed with what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu terms "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1984). Self-evidently, certain books and certain editions have more capital than others: a modern classic in scholarly garb is a more prestigious object to own than a contemporary romance with a garish cover. But the mere fact of mechanical reproduction does not destroy the aura or exhaust the capital.

3 The following paragraphs on the translation of "sacred" and "canonical" literature may be seen as illustrative of Maria Tymoczko's characterization of Western translation theory as mostly "formulated with reference to sacred texts, including both religious scripture and canonical literary works" (Tymoczko 2006: 14). Tymoczko also intimates that different, non-Western translating traditions may lead us to different conceptualizations of the process and its results – a claim which I attempt to answer in the conclusion to this book.

4 The summary is based on the so-called *King James* Bible (1611) – and the irony of this being a translation is not lost on this particular reader.

5 The connection between textuality and memorization is commented on by a central figure in the transition from oral to written cultural modes: Socrates, the oral philosopher *par excellence*, as presented in Plato's written account in *Phaedrus*. According to Socrates, the inventor of writing was an ancient Egyptian god, Theuth. He proudly presented this technique to the Pharaoh, who, however, was sceptical. The ruler's objection to writing was that it rendered memory and study unnecessary, and would therefore weaken the minds of his subjects. Socrates goes even further in his criticism of writing and texts, which he considers inferior to spoken discourse in the general pursuit of knowledge. In his opinion, conversation is better suited to philosophy and learning, because if a text is interrogated, the answers it gives are always the same. When some truth is arrived at in conversation, by contrast, it gets written down in the learner's mind. Clearly, Plato tried to resolve the contradiction inherent in presenting Socrates' ideas in written form by choosing the dialogue as a form. The *Phaedrus* is written, and therefore relatively "fixed" and unresponsive, but it is also a text which is constructed to be as hospitable as possible to the mercurial mutability of philosophical talk (*Plat.Phaedr.274a–277a*). Whatever Plato's position may have been, however, Plato's Socrates is one of the few canonical figures of Western intellectual discourse who have expressed their preference for orality (on the oral-written transition in Greek culture, see Ong 1982: 18–30; Havelock 1986).

6 Ancient legal decrees do contain references to some deity as lawgiver: the Sumerian code of Ur-Nammu (c. 2100 BCE) appropriates the authority of Utu, god of justice; and in the Code of Hamurrabi (c. 1750 BCE), the eponymous king is actually portrayed in the company of the same figure.

7 The Greek term from which all the modern names for the Bible are etymologically derived highlights its composite nature (βιβλία, i.e., "books", or "scrolls"). The Hebrew name for what the Christians call Old Testament is a meaningless acronym referring to its three conventional subdivisions.

8 Of course, people had begun producing versions of Scripture since the rise of European vernaculars at the beginning of the Middle Ages, and this work had intensified in the centuries preceding Protestantism in such reformist circles as those gathered around John Wyclif (c. 1328–1384) in England, and in the wake of a renascent interest in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic in the late Middle Ages (see Loewe 1969: 152). The Protestant translators completed the task, and soon produced unabridged, officially approved texts: Luther's *Biblia, das ist die ganze Heilige Schrift* (Biblia, i.e. the full Sacred Text) was published in 1534, while the English authorized "King James" version appeared in 1611 (but had a much longer and complicated compositional history).

9 This book is self-evidently about translators, and in compliance with that aim the actual transactions which produce translations are often simplified. However, it is important to keep in mind, if only in a note, that translations are rarely produced by isolated individuals. The third chapter will briefly discuss the impact and diffusion of plural translation – but what is meant here by the use of such words as "promoters" is that patrons, publishers, editors and other supposedly peripheral figures may have a great impact on the finished product. All these roles may be subsumed under the general definition of "agents" (see Milton and Bandia 2009).

10 Erasmus was of course the most influential religious humanist of the age, but the idea that the Bible could be studied with the same analytical tools deployed on Aristotle had arguably originated in fifteenth-century Italy (Koril 2020). The rise of Biblical humanism was far from painless, even before Luther's break with the Church of Rome: famously, Erasmus' textual scruples in his 1516 New Testament led to accusations that he was denying the Trinitarian nature of God (see McDonald 2016).

11 In this context, it may be worth mentioning that Miles Smith, in the same passage, also praised Jerome for "the translating of the Old Testament out of the very fountains themselves". A very influential contemporary of Jerome's, Saint Augustine, had instead been doubtful on the propriety of using the Hebrew scrolls to correct the Septuagint where it was faulty, essentially because this would shed doubt on the sacred perfection of the Greek version. Again this shows, though in a negative way, the importance of authorization, of insisting on the perfection of existing translations (see Kotzé 2009).

12 But, as will be seen at the end of this chapter, indirect translation is generally frowned upon and hidden from sight.

13 Of course the rise of Descriptive Translation Studies in the 1970s (see chapter 1) is a response to this variability: if translation, even in its restricted textual meaning, can be carried out in infinite ways, the only sensible way of studying it is the impartial observation of all the forms it takes. However, as pointed out in the next paragraph, DTS is a very late contribution if all the history of translation theory is considered – and most lay people and non-specialized academics continue to think in pre-DTS terms, just as most non-physicists continue to see the world as Newton did.

14 Leonardo Bruni is discussed below. In *La maniere de bien traduire d'une langue en aultre* (1540), Etienne Dolet insists that the translator must perfectly understand the meaning and style of the original. In his monograph on *Automatic Language Translation*, Anthony G. Oettinger (1960: 104) sets the goal of "significance invariance" in the source-target transference process. Two decades later, Werner Koller still posited that the qualities of the source text *must* be preserved, but "as far as possible" ("so weit wie möglich"; Koller 1979: 187).

15 The four sections of this sentence, separated by semicolons, contain allusions to: Leonardo Bruni (2008); Bruni and Etienne Dolet (1540); Werner Koller (1979) and Nida and Taber (1969); Bocchiola (2015), and Umberto Eco (2000).

16 The transition from manuscript culture to the technology of print is obviously much more complicated than this paragraph suggests. In certain circles (particularly around court) and for certain genres (particularly poetry) or uses (presentation copies to kings and potentates), manuscripts continued to circulate a long time after the introduction of the printing press (see for instance Richardson 2009).

17 Though he was mocked by some for doing so: at this time, theatrical works were not universally deemed to be on a par with other literary forms. One vocal and witty critic wrote: "Pray tell me Ben, where doth the mystery lurk, / What others call a play, you call a work." (cit. Dutton 1996: 57).

18 Originally, the kanon was a ruler used by Greek architects. The word was then adapted by early Christian terminology to indicate a set of rules or regulations, and it was only between the 18th and the 20th centuries that it came to designate first the accepted corpus of religious scriptures, then the corpus of writings produced by a single author, and finally the catalogue of great books (Bloom 1994).

19 The sources themselves are far from fixed, because most Shakespearean plays were printed more than once, in different versions over which literary historians and philologists are still debating (Pollard 1909; Werstine 1999).

20 If, for instance, one takes into consideration the English-language editions of Dante's *Comedy* currently in print for four publishing houses with world-wide distribution (Penguin, Vintage, Picador, Oxford University Press), one finds that they are all elegant and academically "rich"; and that out of four translators, only the one who was also an established poet (C.H. Sisson; Alighieri 2000: 42) dares to affirm that his version is a stylistic rewriting; while the remaining three unfailingly insist that they have only deployed their techniques to mime those of the Italian poet, even when the metrical differences are striking (Alighieri 2013a: xxv–xxvii; Alighieri 2013b: xlii–xlix; Alighieri 2019: xvii–xix). The same reluctance to abandon the idea of a strong link between source and target texts is omnipresent in manuals and handbooks, even when every mention of terms like "faithfulness" or "close rendition" is avoided out of respect for contemporary scholarly pieties (Aranda 2007: 61–62; Szirtes 2014; Hopkins 2019: 104; Alvstad 2019: 174–176; Hassan 2019: 419).

21 The reason for this is partly technological. When studying or translating, the Romans did not work with books which could be easily kept open and consulted repeatedly. The more cumbersome, unwieldy nature of scrolls

would have led writers, orators and translators to rely on their memory, or to seek the assistance of a literate slave or freedman (McElduff 2013: 113).

22 Of course, effect-driven, functionalist theories of translation have also been developed within "written" translatology from the late 1960s onwards (Reiss and Vermeer 1984; Snell-Hornby 1988; Nord 1997).

23 Cicero's judgment is reported by Suetonius. Significantly, Suetonius also says that Terence was the *author* of six comedies (*Suet.Poet.11.99*).

3 Translators

If translation happens all the time and in all sorts of ways, if it involves any number of codes as well as the communication between different earth-bound species, one fundamental question remains: who is presiding over the process? Who are the translators? Are they a separate class of humans, or is a translator just anybody who happens to be translating at any particular time? And if translators are a separate class of humans, what are the defining characteristics of the class? How is it viewed by other humans? What are the social, economic, and political conditions of its existence and prosperity (or impecuniousness)? Has the class always presented the same characteristics, has it always been viewed in the same manner, or have the class and its social image evolved in the few millennia of recorded human history?

There are two ways of answering these questions – one that is more individual and one that is more social. From a strictly personal point of view, anybody can be a translator – and as a matter of fact, if one considers the semiosphere, everybody is, most of the time. Even keeping a cat requires translating abilities. To decide whether the cat is ailing or hungry one needs to translate cat signals into human communication – not necessarily in verbal terms, though pet owners frequently talk back to their charges.[1] Those who know plants well learn to translate their signs. Any normal functioning adult will learn to interpret the steam coming out of a kettle as a sign of the water being hot. Nevertheless, even though all humans translate all the time, there are some humans who are more versed than others in the craft, or more interested than others in learning how to interpret all sorts of signs. Some of these humans will maybe specialize in the translation

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of mathematical signs, while others will feel drawn to the tasks and pastimes related to linguistic and/or interlingual decoding.

From the social point of view, the latter – those who have a knack for, or an interest in, interlingual decoding – are the only ones who get to be called translators. Whether they work orally or through the written medium – whether they are translators or interpreters, in the parlance of our day and age – what they do is popularly known as "translating". Self-evidently, in the development of human societies and cultures, oral interpretation comes before written translation, for the very simple reason that some people must have been mediating between different linguistic groups before the invention of written characters. However, for reasons that are just as obvious, the most ancient traces of translation that we have are written – Akkadian bilingual tablets from the third millennium BCE (Zólyomi 2012). This fact, and the general prejudice in favour of writing that has been discussed in chapter 2, has led Western societies to identify translators, primarily, as those who work on stone, papyrus, or paper. The patron saint of translators is normally seated, thoughtful, ascetic, meditative Saint Jerome – not Saint Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds (Aliyev 2021). Nevertheless, and though the training processes of contemporary translators/interpreters follow parallel but mostly separate academic paths,[2] it seems reasonable to view the two categories as part of the same professional group. The conflation makes practical historical sense because in less specialized times than these it was more difficult to distinguish sharply between oral and written mediators, and the same person would often be called upon to take on both roles (as shall be seen below, Renaissance humanists presented their patrons with translations to signal their aptness for ambassadorial work). It also makes sense socially, because whatever their specific professional abilities, those who are able to negotiate the border between one language and another, in person or in writing, have always been viewed as mediators, interlopers, go-betweens (see Höfele and von Koppenfels 2005).

Are translators highly regarded as a social group? Are they generally well-paid for their efforts? The semantic prosody of the terms used at the end of the preceding paragraph may provide a key to the mixed nature of the answers to those questions. Certainly, since contacts between different linguistic tribes began, translators have been indispensable. Rulers have always needed translators to parley with other rulers, and to communicate their edicts to minority groups

within their kingdoms. Merchants have always needed translators to sell their wares and negotiate their passages. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding this constant need, translators have always been viewed with distrust more than admiration, exactly by virtue of their being in-between, of their mental positioning at the border between two languages and cultures. Merchants may have suspected their interpreters of favouring the people they were haggling with. Rulers may have wondered whether their enslaved translators were secretly harbouring hate for their conquerors. Translators have been viewed as spies, changelings, double dealers, biased or imperfect foreign reporters: it is therefore no wonder that the Italian punning equation between *traduttore* (translator) and *traditore* (traitor) has been quoted in books of translation theory written in all European languages.

As regards the question of pay, it might perhaps be seen as surprising that an indispensable profession has rarely been viewed as a pathway to monetary success. In his 1995 indictment of *The Translator's Invisibility* in the English-speaking world, Lawrence Venuti famously connected the question of low pay to a wish, on the part of readers, to forget that the translator even exists. Venuti's explanation is psychologically and commercially cogent, in the domain of written translation and in the world of English-language publishing. More generally still, it might be hazarded that it is the very position of translators as mediators and go-betweens that condemns them to their relatively lowly economic status. For one thing, mediators are employees rather than employers, which means that they are slaves, servants or paid professionals – unless they mediate for themselves, in which case, if they become rich, they do so as merchants or publishers rather than as translators. For another, the very definition of the in-between is that s/he is an adjunct to any transaction, rather than its centre: the main agents are the merchants or parties trying to come to an understanding, the author and the reader attempting to communicate across the language barrier. Also, due to a general ignorance of how translation processes are set in motion, the lay person has always been convinced that all that is needed in the interlingual passage is a substitution of equivalent words of phrases: anybody who knows any two languages can do that, and now that computer programmes and mobile apps can provide users with those words and phrases, the human translator is no longer indispensable.

It is therefore hard to imagine, at the present time, that in certain places and at certain times translators have been all-important agents

of historical, societal, and cultural change. This has happened in phases of birth, crisis, and renewal, whenever a culture was in a state of flux, or whenever two worlds, formerly separate and unknown to each other, met for the first time. At such junctures the craft of translation often becomes central, and it tends to produce figures who are then remembered for ages to come (Even-Zohar 2000). This does not necessarily entail that these figures produce better translations than their less illustrious colleagues – those whose lot it is to work in ages when their craft is peripheral – but it does mean, quite often, that they are placed in a rather special position, faced with special problems, hit by more pointed criticism and recompensed with more vocal praise.

During these ages of crisis, change and renewal, translators tend to assume three main positions: they can act or pose as **generals** of an invading army; they can be or characterize themselves as **slaves** to a foreign power; or they can present themselves as **prophets**, on a mission to invest the receiving culture with new and rejuvenating truths. These three positions are generally metaphorical, though as shall be seen below there are historical cases of slaves being employed as translators. They are not always mutually exclusive, because the same translator can present him/herself, for instance, as a harbinger of light *and* a slave to the foreign text, or act as a general and pose as a slave. But in certain cultural phases, one position, or pose, will be much more common than another.

There is normally an abundance of generals whenever a culture is out to assimilate others. When that is the case, whatever the status of the source and the target texts, there will come a moment when the translator will assume authoritarian methods or poses. In a sense, when a whole culture is in a dominant position over another, these stances can be observed in the very grain of all their interlingual dealings: contemporary English-speaking translators do not need to bother too much with Italian dialects, while their Italian counterparts may be led to exercise more caution with English sub-standard varieties (Gutkowski 2009). However, translators need not be in a dominant cultural position to act or pose like generals: that their culture is on the rise, and in need of foreign building materials, may well be enough for a translation to become an act of conquest.

Again, there is no better example of this, and no richer reserve of translators-generals, than republican Rome. We have already seen how Cicero, in introducing his own versions from Aeschines and Demosthenes, defends a relatively libertine method that does not take

into account the single words of his sources or their exact order. That passage from *De optimo genere oratorum* ("The best kind of orator"; c. 46 BCE) is now worth quoting in full:

> And I did not translate as an interpreter, but as an orator, keeping the same ideas and the forms, or as one might say, the "figures" of thought, but in language which conforms to our usage. And in so doing, I did not hold necessary to render word for word, but I preserved the general style and force of the language. For I did not think I ought to count them out to the reader like coins, but to pay them by weight, as it were.[3]

In the history of translation and translation studies, this piece of self-apologetic writing has normally been quoted for its "non verbum pro verbo necesse habui reddere" passage – quite often by translators trying to defend their own less-than-literal practices. What has mostly escaped notice, as seen in chapter 2, is that the view of translation propounded here is essentially oral. In the present context, it must be added that the Roman politician never doubts that he owes very little to the language and culture he is translating from. There is no tremulous reference to the richness of Greek and the poverty of the Latin language, or to the translator's feeble rhetorical powers as compared to the copiousness of the original orators. Cicero specifies that he kept the ideas and figures of thought and speech of his Greek peers (*figures*), but he did so "in language which conforms to *our* uses" (emphasis mine; *verbis ad nostram consuetudinem aptis*). The Latin orator finds a rich vein of rhetorical devices in Greece, and decides to bring it home for his own use and that of his fellow citizens.

Of course, Cicero around 46 BCE was a very prominent politician with a full *cursus honorum* and a reputation as the greatest public speaker of his time: but other examples from the preceding centuries of the Roman republic show that the wholesale importation of Greek texts was part and parcel of the construction of a specifically Roman culture. When they translated Homer, the Romans did so in order to exalt their own mythology, and substituted local deities for Greek gods. When they translated Greek plays, they invariably added local sub-plots and typically Roman characters. Plautus (c. 254–184 BCE) and Terence (195/185–c.159? BCE) may well have produced *fabulae palliatae* (Roman plays with a Greek setting), but even their Greece was at least partly Roman: they treated their sources with

great appropriative liberty, and saw themselves as both translators and playwrights (see chapter 1, note 10; Morini 2022: 10–13).

As said above, however, it does not necessarily take a dominant state to produce translators-generals. Sometimes the need for cultural raiders is felt more keenly when a culture has to be constructed or reconstructed – when there is such a gap between a culture and its sources that the former has to import virtually all of his building materials from abroad. This was arguably the case with England between the end of the fourteenth and the end of the sixteenth centuries. After the Norman conquest of 1066, French had become the official and dominant language in the realm for almost three centuries. In the fourteenth century, however, also as a consequence of the so-called Hundred Years' War between England and France, English began to resurface as a language fit for polite conversation and literature. John Gower (1330–1408) wrote his three major works, respectively and in chronological order, in French, Latin and English. His contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400) opted exclusively for English, and was rewarded by posterity with the honorary title of father of English poetry. However, it is worth noting that the majority of his production consisted of translations from French, Latin, and Italian: he was dubbed "grant translateur", in fact, by a contemporary French poet (Burrow 1969: 26–27). Being faced with the task of inaugurating a tradition almost from scratch, Chaucer took his bearings, his stories and his metrical forms from the dominant traditions of European literature. But every time he translated a salacious French story or a courtly Italian poem, he did so in completely personal fashion (as was typical of late medieval translation; Kelly 1979; Morini 2006: 3–13), and with an eye to the needs of his English readership. The complete transformation of Boccaccio's *Filostrato* into Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* can hardly be summarized here. To illustrate the English poet's methods and conception of translation, it is sufficient to say that he interpolates this work with the following version of Petrarch's sonnet 88:

If no love is, O God, what fele I so?
And if love is, what thing and which is he?
If love be good, from whennes cometh my woo?
If it be wikke, a wonder thynketh me,
When every torment and adversite
That cometh of hym may to me savory thinke,
For ay thurst I, the more that ich it drynke.

And if that at myn owen lust I brenne,
From whennes cometh my wailynge and my pleynte?
If harm agree me, wherto pleyne I thenne?
I not, ne whi unwery that I feynte.
O quike deth, O swete harm so queynte,
How may of the in me swich quantite,
But if that I consente that it be?

And if that I consente, I wrongfully
Compleyne, iwis. Thus possed to and fro,
Al steerelees withinne a boot am I
Amydde the see, bitwixen wyndes two,
That in contrarie stonden evere mo.
Allas, what is this wonder maladie?
For hote of cold, for colde of hote, I dye.
(Chaucer 1988: 478–479)

If it's not love, what is it then that I'm feeling?
But if it's love, by God, what and which?
If it's good, why its bitter mortal effect?
If it is bad, why is my torment so sweet?

If I burn willingly, whence all my weeping and wailing?
If unwillingly, to what end do I complain?
O living death, o pleasant ill,
How do you rule over me without my consent?

And if I do consent, I complain wrongfully.
Between contrary winds in a fragile boat
I find myself out at sea with no one steering,

And the boat is so light of knowledge, so loaded with error
That I myself do not know what I want,
And tremble at midsummer, burn in winter.
(My working translation from Petrarch)

Just like Cicero, Chaucer keeps the general ideas and figurative pattern of the source, but adds rhetorical touches of his own ("Allas, what is this wonder maladie?") and loses some of Petrarch's details (the reference to the boat that is empty of knowledge and filled with error). He also assimilates the Italian poem in one of his favourite metrical forms (the *rhyme royal*, whose rhyme pattern is ABABBCC), and rephrases

it in language that is more consistent with his own pseudo-Homeric "tragedy" than with Petrarch's lyrical tone.

England was arguably in the same position of "aggressive cultural subservience" two centuries later, when it had become a small but ambitious Protestant nation beleaguered by powerful Catholic empires. Renaissance Englishmen, after the introduction of the printing press in 1476 and the beginning of the Tudor dynasty in 1485, had felt that they needed to make up for lost time by translating not only the rediscovered and newly edited masterpieces of Greek and Latin culture, but also all the important books produced by modern European intellectuals. The sixteenth century saw the English appearance of Plutarch and Homer, Castiglione and Ariosto. Those who busied themselves with translating these authors often complained of the poverty of English if compared with the rhetorical *copia* of Greek, Latin, Italian and French (Morini 2006: 42–47). However, they also insisted that it was all-important to translate as many books as possible, and to import a great quantity of terms and concepts – precisely because England and English were still occupying an inferior position on the continental cultural map, and the only hope of changing that was through the practice of translation-as-acquisition.

At the end of the sixteenth century, after a hundred years of translation and relative political stability, the English began to feel more confident in the possibilities of their language and culture. As a consequence, some of the people who were still importing foreign cultural produce began to grow more aggressive. One of the earliest illustrations of this change of attitude is provided by Philemon Holland, a schoolmaster and physician who translated several classical works, generally from Latin, mostly historical. His work in the field was so ample and notable that he was later dubbed "the translator general in his age" (Lee 1891: 151). The word "general" is of course used as an adjective here, but the noun would be perfectly applicable to the combative spirit that Holland brought to his translating activity. His versions of Pliny or Livy were written in a simple, rather colloquial, often periphrastic language meant to make them widely understandable (Matthiessen 1931: 169: 227; Morini 2006: 89–94). All those who objected to the very idea of Pliny or Livy being available in the vulgar tongue only merited Holland's pugnacious contempt – did they not know that it was now time for England to conquer the Romans, just as the Romans had once conquered England?

> Certes, such *Momi* as these [...] think not so honourably of their native country and mother tongue as they ought: who, if they were so well affected that way as they should be, would wish rather and endeavour by all means to triumph now over the Romans in subduing their literature under the dent of the English pen, in requital of the conquest sometime over this island, achieved by the edge of their sword.
>
> (Rhodes, Kendal and Wilson 2013: 381)

This language clearly belongs to the semantic field of warfare – and not only because of the closing military metaphor and the figurative transformation of a pen into a sword. Holland appeals to his countrymen's honour, and imagines the future "triumph" they are going to celebrate after "subduing [Latin] literature". Clearly, the "translator general", or translator-general, is convinced that now is the right moment for a decisive counterattack.

When translators act or characterize themselves in this aggressive way, it is normally either because they belong to a dominant society, or because they see themselves as emissaries of a society on the rise and in need of foreign plunder. Conversely, societies that have an inferiority complex tend to produce a higher number of translators that see their work as a form of slavery to the source culture, author or text. Naturally, textual translators in modern times will always feel, at least partly, that they have to serve the needs of a foreign master (see chapter 2): but some translators will tend to focus more insistently on the subservient nature of their craft.

Though the label "translator as slave" is again largely meant as metaphorical, there have been countless historical cases of servile translation: as seen above, for instance, it is easy enough to picture the legions of slaves who must have acted as translators/interpreters, or human aids to translation and interpreting, in ancient Rome. And the history of Latin American colonization offers various sketchy biographies of captured or sold indigenous people who ended up aiding the conquerors by interlingual means.

Perhaps the most famous captive translator of the Spanish *conquista* was an indigenous Nahua woman known as Malinalli, Malintzin, Doña Marina, La Chingada and La Malinche (c. 1500–c.1529). This variety of names mirrors both her complexity as a historical figure and the impossibility of pinning a single, "true" identity on this translator: it is apparently impossible to tell, for instance, whether the Spanish name

Marina is a corruption of the Aztec Malinalli, or whether it was the indigenous Mexicans who ended up calling this woman by an adaptation of her Spanish moniker. However, what is known of Malinalli/Marina is that she was probably of aristocratic Aztec birth, that she was sold by her own mother to Mayan merchants, and then resold by the Mayan merchants to the Tabascans and gifted by the latter to the Spaniards. The *conquistadores* soon found that this native woman, because of all the troubling experiences she had gone through, would be invaluable to them as an interpreter – or *lengua* (tongue), as they said in Spanish. The invading army was so small that Cortés's men could not hope to subjugate the various Mexican peoples by force, and had to rely on alliances and diplomacy. Initially, Marina helped them by translating for them from Nahuatl into Mayan, while another interpreter (a Spanish clergyman who had been held prisoner by the Mayans – a former slave himself, in a sense) would translate from Mayan into Spanish. Soon, however, Marina learned Spanish, gained the trust of her European masters (she became the *Doña* Marina of the Spanish chronicles) and helped them at a couple of crucial junctures, probably saving them from an ambush by Moctezuma II and taking up an important role in the events that led to the emperor's capture and death.

Predictably enough, the extant historical documents offer no clue as to how Malinalli/Marina might have seen herself, as a person and as a translator; however, the way she is seen by European and American chroniclers is a telltale indicator of the plight in which these sold and enslaved mediators find themselves. Bernal Diaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* treats her with great respect, and assigns to her the honorific *Doña*. The indigenous *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* gives her the same size as Cortés in all its pictorial representations. Interestingly, though, the *Lienzo* often depicts her in the same position as Cortés, and as making parallel gestures to those of the Spanish conqueror. This is a neat iconic representation of the interpreter's work, of course – but also a sign that this native woman is seen by her fellow Mexicans as siding with the invading Europeans. This view is reflected by one negatively connotated moniker in particular: Malinalli/Marina is today best known as *La Malinche*, and the term *malinchismo*, in Mexico, designates a deferent, almost treacherous preference for everything foreign. Another, more insulting name for the translator is *La chingada* (the fucked one), which reflects the fact that Doña Marina bore Cortés a son who is symbolically

considered to be the first Mexican man of mixed race (Valdeón 2013; Spotorno 2014).

The judgments inherent in these nominal choices say more about the people who make them than about a person who may have been sold into slavery by her own mother, and whose allegiance surely did not go to a notional "Mexican" identity, but at most to certain regional, tribal or family groups within a complex geographical and political area. However, those names and those judgments also reveal a lot about the universal condition of the translator, divided between two or more cultures and two or more peoples. Any loyalty one may feel for one's origins gets mixed up with the loyalty one feels for one's foreign masters, and with the proud pursuit of a job well done. Caught between A and B, even the translator as a free woman may feel that she is not really at liberty to do her own thing.

As seen in chapter 1, translators do not need to be slaves to feel a strong obligation to the source culture, the source author and the source message/text. Their very position as go-betweens often produces a sort of linguistic "Stockholm syndrome" which leads them to extremes of punctiliousness, rather than to Cicero's ease or Holland's aggressiveness. Again, this happens with particular frequency when the translated culture is perceived as important, or when the translated text is seen as cultural capital. In our post-Humanist, post-Romantic epoch – and even at a moment in time when books are starting to lose their centrality – it is still mostly textual, literary translators who tend to agonize over the impossibility of doing full justice to their revered "originals". Leafing through academic books on poetic translation or looking up such expressions as "perfect translation" online means finding a great number of variations on Robert Frost's lament that "poetry is what gets lost in translation".[4] Manuals insist on the fact that the source text must never be lost sight of, and propose a great number of working phases and stages which will ensure that the job is done to perfection (Bly 1983). Literary translators who write professional memoirs tend to see their work in terms of "losses [...] which guarantee even more effort on [the translator's] part in the future" (Basso 2010: 20).

It is this kind of sentiment, and this form of cultural obligation, which has led many translators to try and efface themselves from the text, to become as invisible as possible in stylistic terms. As seen in chapter 1, translators cannot really disappear from their works (even refusing to choose a style is choosing a style): but they can *pretend*

that they are not there. This attitude is made possible by the fact that translators are not only caught between A and B, between source and target; they are also engaged in an activity which is suspended between creativity and passive reproduction, writing/speaking and mere copying/repeating. All translators know that their craft forces them to find words, phrases and a suitable word-order, but they are also aware of doing that in the interest of a pre-existent discursive organization. All translators, therefore, either for psychological reasons or for reasons of expediency, may decide to foreground either the creative or the reproductive part of their work.

Once again, this does not necessarily mean that the translators who choose to emphasize the invisible, plodding, slavish nature of their activity produce unimaginative, plodding translations. Self-advertisement is one thing, discursive reality always another. In the Renaissance, for instance, women often used translation as a creative outlet, at a time when public writing was considered to be inappropriate for them: therefore, when they did present their productions to the world, and particularly when those productions were likely to be seen as morally dubious, they tended to declare that their own creative input had been minimal, if not non-existent. Margaret Tyler, who in 1578 had the daring to translate a Spanish *romance* (rather than a more permissible religious tract), felt obliged to point out that "the invention, disposition, trimming, and what else in this story is wholly another *man's*, my part none therein but the translation" (Robinson 1997: 115; italics mine), thus implicitly excluding "invention, disposition, trimming" (*inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*) from the domain of translation. To avoid trouble and forestall criticism, Tyler decides to cast herself in the role of servant to another man's invention.

As shown by the latter example, the reasons of expedience mentioned above are common to all situations in which translation is used to introduce foreign elements which the source culture does not produce autonomously, or that it tends to deem as morally, religiously, politically unacceptable. Whenever translators use their craft for this purpose, they may wish to minimize the importance of their creative contribution, and therefore to characterize themselves as slaves, servants, "mere translators" mechanically repeating someone else's words. James Mabbe, translating the *Celestina* for Jacobean England in 1631, knew that the puritans would exclaim against this immoral Spanish book: in his dedication, he tried to defend it on the grounds

of what one might call "negative morality" (by reading the book one would learn how *not* to behave); but he also defused responsibility by reminding his dedicatee and his readers that he, after all, was not the author but a "poor parrot" (Mabbe 1631: dedication).

Finally, the translator-as-slave simile can also be useful to all those practitioners who wish to pre-empt criticism by apprising readers that the task of translation is an extremely difficult one. John Dryden, one of the most creative and expansive translators of the modern era, prefaced his 1697 *Aeneis* with the following "colonial" lament:

> We are bound to the author's sense, though with the latitudes already mentioned [...] But slaves we are, and labour on another man's plantation; we dress the vineyard, but the wine is the owner's: if the soil be sometimes barren, then we are sure of being scourged: if it be fruitful, and our care succeeds, we are not thanked; for the proud reader will only say, the poor drudge has done his duty.
>
> (Steiner 1975: 73)

The third category of translators has something in common both with the translators-as-generals and with the translators-as-slaves. Prophetic translators proclaim that they are the harbingers of a message which is of the utmost importance for the receiving culture; and yet they also feel a strong sense of obligation towards the culture, text or texts within which they have found that message. They are convinced that the receiving culture will be enriched by their contributions; but their attitude is respectful rather than rapacious. The perfect incarnation of the translator-as-prophet is of course the translator of religious texts, out to propagate a light which may be shining through some foreign text, but is not ultimately confined within any single language or text. Since the light is universal, the process of translation, after all, does not alter its strength and its quality; and conversely, the process of translation must be such that its strength and its quality are not altered. The most eloquent expression of this attitude was probably formulated five centuries ago by Miles Smith, in the preface to the 1611 "King James" Bible:

> Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water, even as Jacob

> rolled away the stone from the mouth of the well, by which means the flocks of Laban were watered.
>
> (Rhodes, Kendal and Wilson 2013: 185)

These metaphors characterize translation as a process that breaks down barriers and reveals what is hidden. What is revealed is, alternately, light and the very necessaries of life (themselves seen metaphorically in the terms of religious mystery: the bread and wine of Christianity). Thus, translating the Holy Writ will allow Christians to see the truth, to "look into the most holy place" for themselves and to find all the spiritual nourishment they need.

Seen from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, these figures look rhetorically elegant but hardly expressive of a revolutionary sentiment. Everybody who has had a religious education in the Christian world may have heard some variation on them. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, it is almost certain that Bishop Miles Smith meant to infuse his argument with a mixture of triumph and defiance; for in 1611, the publication of a new edition of the Bible in the national vernacular was not an event to be taken lightly. Eight decades before, Martin Luther had published the *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* (1530; "Circular Letter on Interpreting") which clarified the linguistic nature of his Reform. In his translation of the Bible, Luther had gone back to the ur-texts, but at the same time he had decided to employ a colloquial form of German modelled on the speech of "housewives, street urchins and common men at the market".[5] From the very beginning, the Protestant Reform set great store by the direct availability of the Holy Writ for the common Christian; in reaction to that, the Church of Rome soon decided to regulate very strictly the circulation of vernacular Bibles, and to ban any translations or annotated editions which were not centrally approved and dogmatically impeccable (Fattori 2014). In this context, the messianic tone of the 1611 Anglican edition takes up a completely different meaning: and when Miles Smith ask indignantly "is the kingdom of God become words or syllables? Why should we be in bondage to them if we may be free [...]?" (Rhodes, Kendal and Wilson 2013: 197), he is clearly referring to the terminological disputes which had raged on in Europe for little less than a century, and again presenting the new translation as a liberating force.

Prophetic translators are inevitably legion in the religious domain, because the discovery of a new or forgotten devotional truth cannot

but be all-important. However, as seen in chapter 2, in the course of centuries other textual forms have acquired comparable prestige; consequently, these textual forms have attracted their share of translator-prophets, who have presented their versions as absolutely necessary and refreshingly new. From the thirteenth century onwards, the humanists translated the classics of ancient philosophy with a proselytizing fervour similar to that of religious reformers. When Leonardo Bruni railed against previous Aristotelian translators in *De interpretatione recta* (ca. 1426), he was clearly animated by the absolute conviction that Aristotle was of central importance in fifteenth-century Europe, and that he himself was perfectly placed, with his novel philological ideas and translating techniques, to present his readers with the correct, "true" Latin version of that Greek fountainhead of knowledge. More than a century later, and at a time when Protestant translations of the Bible were being printed everywhere, Nicholas Grimald adopted the same messianic tone in presenting his English version of Cicero's *De officiis*, and in the process also prefigured Miles Smith's triumphant depiction of translation as a harbinger of light. Just like Scripture, ancient wisdom is a treasure which should not be kept hidden from (common) men.

> I have made this Latin writer English, and have now brought into light that from them so long was hidden, and have caused an ancient wryting to become, in a manner, new again, and a book used but of few to wax common to a great many. So that our men, understanding what a treasure is among them [...] may in all points of good demeanour become people peerless.
>
> (Rhodes, Kendal and Wilson 2013: 252)

After the Renaissance, and even more after the Romantic period, it was most often on literature that the prophetic translators concentrated their efforts. Again, just as with Scripture, the idea was that translation would serve to introduce certain themes, motifs or stylistic traits that would be of great benefit to the target culture. Eighteenth-century German writers and translators, for instance, used Shakespeare to promote a new "gothic" view of dramatic poetry, and to counteract the influence of French classicism (Theisen 2006). An extreme example of translation being used in this way is "pseudotranslation", i.e., the presentation of original material as if it had a source in some imaginary foreign text (Toury 1995: 40–41). This strategy has been

used by religious sects (the Book of Mormon), poets (the "Ossian" corpus) and fantasy novelists (Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*): in these cases, the translator is not always or necessarily presented as a prophet, but the point is exploiting the potential of translation as a harbinger of good news or forgotten truths.

Leaving the question of pseudotranslation aside, it is important to point out that the good news announced by prophetic translation is not necessarily the translated text itself: when the King James version is published in 1611, a great number of partial or complete translations have already been produced in Old, Middle and Early Modern English. In that case, just as in many cases of literary re-translation, the novelty must therefore (also) reside in the manner in which the new version is realized or presented – in some novelty of style of presentation, for instance. The translator is convinced that there is something missing in the target culture, some aspect of the source text that monolingual target readers have no way of accessing: consequently, s/he translates the source *in a certain way*, and if possible notifies readers about it.

Academic translators are often engaged in some minor or major plan of the prophetic kind. The story of my frustrated attempt at retranslating the whole Jane Austen corpus, around twenty years ago, is told in chapter 2. More recently, I proposed to another important, canonizing publishing house an Italian edition of the prologues and epilogues of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Once again, my main reason for re-presenting Chaucer to the Italian public was essentially prophetic: I thought that no former translator had been able or willing to give a fair rendition of his comic qualities in rhyming verse, and I was convinced that my version in hendecasyllabic couplets would go some way towards doing that. This time, however, I did not explain what my real motivations were: I knew that the Italian literary system was just as formalistic and literal-minded as it had been a decade before. I presented a plan that would meet the interest of specialists as well as history enthusiasts, with little or no reference to questions of register and pragmatic equivalence. This time, the project got approved and the book was published (Chaucer 2023). My former mistakes had taught me that unless the translator's prophetic plan happens to be in accordance with the norms and biases of the receiving system, it will probably be rejected, and it will have no chance of influencing the system itself.[6]

As illustrated by this autobiographical case, no translator ever falls completely within one of the three categories sketched above. Even

while I was prefiguring with prophetic eagerness the advantages of my new Chaucer for the Italian system, I was keen on presenting Italians with what I thought was a truer version of the English author. Analogously, there is ample proof that Cicero and Holland felt great respect for their Greek orators and their Latin historians. Dryden, a great poet and dramatist in his own right, may really have felt diminished by the constraints of translation; and yet, at the same time, he acted as a conqueror in subjugating Virgil's story and verse to his invention and prosody. La Malinche, a real-life slave to a foreign army, may have felt a bit like an invading general in furthering the aims of the side for which she was working. The point of this taxonomy, in fact, is not to distinguish sharply between translator profiles, but to identify discursive, textual and psychological traits which may be common to all translators and transactions; and all translators, in all transactions, are caught in-between texts, languages and cultures. They want to serve their readers, and they want to do justice to their sources, in a swaying movement from A to B and B to A that is complicated by the awkward fact that translators can also have ambitions of their own.

The introduction of the autobiographical case study also has another motivation, at once more personal and more general. On the one hand, it amounts to an open admission, to the declaration of a conflict of interest: this is a book about translation, but it is also a book written by a translator; as scientific as its arguments may sound, they will never be free from the taint of individual experience. On the other hand, the introduction of personal cases, of translations done by professionals who are not in the public eye and whose lives are not in the encyclopaedias of this world, is necessary to verify the general applicability of the definitions and the categories proposed here. Compiling the lives of the great translators is easier than observing the careers of relatively obscure figures, for the obvious reason that one has much more information on Martin Luther than on any contemporary translator or interpreter. However, it would be misleading to treat the whole category as if such figures as Cicero, Chaucer, Luther, La Malinche, or Holland were typical. Any consideration on the nature of the translator's mind and plight can only be valid if it is also applicable to everyday journeymen of the craft, to amateurs and trainees. But this poses a problem: where is one to find information on all those relatively obscure translators, how can one learn about their aims, where can one hear their voices, outside the limited purview of autobiography?

Part of the answer may lie in corpus linguistics and statistical studies. In the last few decades, a substantial number of scholars have tried to look for regularities of behaviour in translation processes. One of the most interesting discoveries of corpus-based studies has been that translators, as a category, tend to normalize and standardize texts, to explicate ambiguity and eliminate repetitions (Laviosa 2002: 36). This points to the possibility that though many translators love their sources, their loyalty to the target culture and their wish to please their readership exercise a stronger pull. Alternately, it just says something about how the human mind works – about how, in re-conceptualizing content in a different language, it needs to understand it (and will therefore tend to solve ambiguities) and to frame it so as to make it sound and look well-written (which will perhaps lead to the elimination of errors and repetitions). But these are very general hypotheses which would probably not stand the test of closer inspection and bilingual reading – and even if they could, they would only describe what translators produce, rather than what they think, what they feel, and what they are.[7]

What translators think, feel and are has been at the centre of a relatively recent line of enquiry within the discipline, which some have tentatively termed "Translator-centred Translation Studies" (Gengshen 2004) or "Translator Studies" (Chesterman 2009). Dating from the beginning of the 1990s, a number of scholars began to point out that while the "descriptive" turn of the 1970s had healthily shifted the focus from process to product, and from "originals" to "translations", it had largely diverted attention from single translators, their problems, their solutions, and their style. In 1991, Douglas Robinson proposed a "somatics" of translation which would look at how practitioners react, psychologically and physically, to the texts they are working on (Robinson 1991: xvi). In the following years and decades, other well-known figures in the field followed suit, either by expanding Robinson's categories or by calling for a more biographical and/or stylistic approach to translation (Maier 2006; Venuti 2013: 32–56; Munday 2014; Morini 2020).

Stylistics, as a matter of fact, can provide a unifying trait for all these translator-centred approaches thanks to the concept of "mind style". Roger Fowler first coined the term in 1977 to describe a writer's choices as "distinctive mental representation[s] of an individual mental self" (Fowler 1977: 103). In Fowler's view, the accumulation of consistent structural options contributes to the presentation

of the (fictional) world according to a certain angle, and ends up giving the impression of a specific world-view. Of course, that stylistic angle and that world-view are all the more evident when they are sufficiently removed from the norm: when James Joyce begins his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) as a fairy tale told in broken and repetitive English, it is easy enough to grasp that it is his intention to mimic the mental processes of the artist as a very young child. However, even less experimental writers have their own set of terms, phrases, syntactic constructions and techniques, the gradual accumulation of which serves to present their fictional world in a distinctive way: reading one E.M. Forster novel means adjusting one's mind to the writer's turns of phrase and narrative habits, and reading more than one means finding the same phrases and habits in varying modulations. Technically, the same kind of analysis must be possible for translators, once the varying modulations necessary for the different tasks they have to perform (source books with disparate styles, for instance) have been accounted for: in other words, it must be possible to describe the "mind style" of single translators, and inevitably that mind style will reflect their habits, inclinations, mental backgrounds, preferences, their mental and emotional setups.

In chapter 1, a line of Shakespeare as translated by Alessandro Serpieri was quoted in order to illustrate the Italian preference for "immobility" (close lexicogrammatical reproduction; Venturi 2009) in the presentation of prestigious literary classics. In that context, the focus was on the translator's style as a symptom of a larger tendency – as the manifestation of a more general translation "norm", to adopt Toury's terminology. However, that very unmetrical, rather implausible Italian line ("rudi venti scuotono i diletti boccioli del maggio") which attempts to reproduce Shakespeare *verbatim* ("Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May") can also be seen as an emanation of Serpieri's translational mind style. Alessandro Serpieri was an Italian academic and translator whose versions of canonical English works were always informed by a strong philological respect for the linguistic surface of his sources. The edition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* that contains that Italian line shows this attitude in all its paratextual features: its introduction, prefatory materials and annotations occupy more space than the sonnets themselves and their Italian versions. The translation of that line from sonnet XVIII, therefore, and the similar translations of many other lines from many other sonnets, are not to be seen in isolation, but as a consequence of Serpieri's choices

as a translator and editor, which in turn are a product of his professional "habitus" (Simeoni 1998), but also of his personal ideology and preferences. Confirmation of this can be found by looking at Serpieri's Italian edition of T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922), which was first published by Rizzoli in 1982:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow	Che sono le radici che s'avvinghiano, che rami crescono
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,	Da queste pietrose rovine? Figlio dell'uomo,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only	Tu non puoi dirlo, né indovinarlo, perché conosci soltanto
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,	Un mucchio di immagini frante, dove il sole batte,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,	E l'albero morto non dà riparo, né il grillo sollievo,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only	E l'arida pietra non dà suono d'acqua. Soltanto
There is shadow under his red rock,	C'è ombra sotto questa roccia rossa,[8]

The source and the target passages are presented side by side, but each English line might as easily have been superimposed on its Italian counterpart. Just as in the Shakespearean sonnet, the rendering is always phrase-by-phrase and often word-by-word. Each Italian word can be back-translated into its English source, and every Italian word in the whole passage belongs to the same morphological category as its English counterpart (noun for noun, adjective for adjective, verb for verb). Occasionally, the translator even inverts the normal order of the Italian noun-phrase (noun plus adjective) to reproduce the English word-order ("arida pietra" for "dry stone"). Naturally, the fact that a sort of interlinear rendering is being attempted does not entail that there are no choices (i.e., no style) involved in the translational process. Firstly, the very fact of choosing surface adherence as one's lodestar is a conscious choice, and produces a certain brand of strangely wooden Italian; secondly, this form of adherence still leaves some room for the selection of Serpieri's favoured words and phrases at the paradigmatic level. Whenever there are available alternatives, the translator appears to prefer the most formal or less usual word: he selects the rather occult "frante", where "rotte" or "spezzate" would have been neutral choices for "broken"; and picks the specific, poetic word "arida" for the drily descriptive "dry". Again, the Serpieri translation is inscribed

within a Serpieri edition: the long poem itself is complemented by Eliot's first draft and accompanied by a very long introduction and a very substantial body of notes. This is academic editing at its most complex and official: the text is seen as something to be interpreted rather than simply enjoyed, and the translation performs an analogous task of construing and explicating, line for line, phrase for phrase, and ultimately *verbum e verbo*.

It may be objected that this kind of style arises as a reaction to the source text, rather than as a direct emanation of the translator's personality: and an answer to that objection might be that it takes a certain personality to produce that kind of translation within that kind of academic book. However, to confirm the hypothesis that what one may call "translator style" exists, and that it has a degree of consistency whatever the nature and the style of the source text, it is probably necessary to pair the analysis of Serpieri's work with that of other translators who follow the source lexicogrammar less closely, and allow themselves more licence in terms of stylistic recreation.

Stylistic recreation was certainly prevalent, though by no means universal, during the European Renaissance – when, as seen above, the emphasis was on plundering the source culture and showing one's proficiency in the source language. In this context, it is generally easier to identify the style of single translators, even when they busy themselves with a diversity of sources. John Harington, godson to Queen Elizabeth I, tried his hand at two very different long poems in order to present his linguistic and humanist credentials to very different monarchs. To Elizabeth he dedicated his complete (though heavily abridged) version of *Orlando furioso*, a comic, sophisticated modern romance rich in adventure and erotic incident (1591); to the more sedate and intellectual James I, he presented the manuscript of the sixth book of the *Aeneid* – Virgil's sombre and majestic account of Aeneas' descent into Hades (1604). In both cases, he complemented his poetic versions with notes meant to show off his classical knowledge, but also to showcase his own life and times. In both poems, he turned Ariosto's flowing hendecasyllables and Virgil's stately hexameters into very rhythmical, end-stopped iambic pentameters, filled with his own concrete English lexicon. To further reduce the distance between Ariosto and Virgil, he employed the *ottava rima* he had learned and adapted from *Orlando Furioso* in his *Aeneid VI*. A juxtaposition of three stanzas – two from the translations and one from an original poem – shows that whatever the source, and even

in the absence of any direct source, all the lines come from the same hand and the same brain:

> Where bidest thou, where wanderst thou my dear,
> So young, so lovely and so faire of hew?
> Even like a lamb, when stars do first appear,
> (Her dame and shepherd being out of view)
> Bleateth aloud to make the shepherd hear,
> And in her kind her evil hap doth rew,
> Until the wolf doth find her to her pain,
> The selie shepherd seeking her in vain.
> (Harington 1591: 62)

> The prince himself a sable-coloured lamb
> With his own sword in his own hand doth quell
> Unto th' Eumenides and to their dam;
> A barren cow he gives the queen of Hell,
> The bowels warm of bulls with oil a dram
> To Pluto black that underground doth dwell,
> And now when all this sacrifice was done
> Which was before the rising of the sun,
> (Harington 1991: 22)

> Madam, I read to you a little since,
> The story of a Knight that had incurred
> The deep displeasure of a mighty prince:
> For fear of which, long time he never stirred,
> Till watching once the King had come to Chapel,
> His little son fast by him, with his gardon,
> Enticed the Infant to him with an apple;
> So caught him in his arms, and sued for pardon:
> Then you shall tame your angry frown to laughter
> As oft as in mine arms you see your daughter.
> (Harington 1930: 194)[9]

These three stanzas make it clear that whenever Harington is writing or translating poetry, he stamps his verse with a stylistic imprint that is clearly his own. These three excerpts are about very different things (Orlando brooding over the loss of Angelica, Aeneas sacrificing to enter the netherworld, the poet's mother-in-law), but they

sound strikingly similar. One superficial aspect that binds the three productions together, as seen above, is the stanzaic form: Harington applies the *ottava rima* (ABABABCC) he learns from Ariosto in his Virgil, and modifies it as two quatrain and a distich (ABABCDCDEE) to compose a poem "to pacify my wife's mother, when she was angry". The strong impact of this stanza on any subject matter is particularly evident in Harington's Virgil, where a jaunty portentousness is substituted for the stately pace of the source. Harington's lines always tend to be end-stopped, and they are predominantly iambic (with a couple of trochaic beginnings: "Bleateth", "Madam") and monosyllabic (though the mother-in-law poem has disyllabic rhyme-words). Here as elsewhere, Harington's language is very Germanic and concrete, and Harington's imagination is normally captured by material objects (the apple in the poem, rhyming with "Chapel"). Certain terms are also used with great frequency in Harington's translations and original writing, and give his oeuvre a sense of linguistic cohesion: here, one can observe the recurrence of "dam/dame/madam", as a respectful title but also to signify "woman"; and the use of "prince" to indicate, in late medieval and Renaissance fashion, any ruler or titled person. Apart from the ones found here, a list of Harington's favourite words would have to include "toys", which the poet and courtier uses in his poems, translations, prefaces and letters, always with the meaning of "trifles, unimportant things" – again, a sign of his tendency to conceptualize the world by means of concrete things.

In Harington's case as well as Serpieri's, it is easy to see a connection between the style of the translator and the inclinations, mental setup and habits of the man (see Scott-Warren 2001; Morini 2019). If Serpieri is the translator as philologist and serious academic, Harington is the poet/translator as courtly entertainer. For family reasons, his birth was graced by Elizabeth I's favour, and at his father's death he had a country seat as well as a place at court. As a Renaissance courtier, he conceived of his literary works as means to seek preferment: but his temper led him to do that by posing as a witty man, if not at times as the monarch's jester. The list of his original and translated works includes a modern poem containing a lot of erotic adventures (the *Furioso*), a satirical treatise on the water-closet, and a substantial number of witty and occasionally libellous poems, which he circulated among his friends and acquaintances in variously-assembled manuscripts. When he found that his behaviour did not necessarily bring him the kind of attention he craved, he tried

to mend his ways by presenting James I with the serious *Aeneid VI* version: but his effort at sobering up was not rewarded by the new monarch, maybe because his reputation was by now beyond repair; or maybe because even his Virgil includes a lot of half-humorous references to the translator's life, times and social circle.

It is worth pointing out that to Harington, Ariosto's and Virgil's texts are not starting points for his own poetic composition: though he occasionally gets tired of following the complicated plotlines of the Italian poem, he does reproduce most of the *Furioso* pretty closely; and though one recognizes that the same hand is at work on *Aeneid IV*, one also feels that the contact with Virgil's unrhymed hexameters leads the English translator to some kind of stylistic sobering up. However, one also sees that the hand is the same, and when one has sufficient biographical information, one sees the connection between the translator's personality and his work.

So far, only poetic translators have been considered for stylistic analysis – and poetic translation forces practitioners to take a number of preliminary decisions (on metrical form, for instance) which may make their imprint more evident than in other, less constrained forms of writing.[10] But if it is true that translating prose is a task that is often taken in hand with no specific preparation, that does not mean that it does not lead translators to employ recurring phrases and strategies. The translators, of course, may not be at all aware of their choices – if asked about them, in fact, they may very easily reply that they are not "writing", and that, on the contrary, they are just trying to be "faithful" to or "respectful" of the source writer's style. Nevertheless, whenever more than one work of translation by the same person is available, it becomes possible to identify a pattern of repetitions and regularities, both in terms of that person's reactions to similar stimulus and in terms of original linguistic production. Faced with direct speech in the source, for instance, a translator will use similar patterns and rhythms of colloquial language in her/his target text. More generally, s/he will tend to arrange clauses and sentences in similar ways – and having to recreate a coherent and consistent fictional world, s/he will tend to fall on the same lexical choices for the same or analogous source objects and concepts.

Such analyses, if done thoroughly, are not at all easy, because they have to balance an appreciation of the target texts with a constant awareness of the sources. However, there are translators whose style is strong and consistent enough to shine through, more

or less consistently, in all their productions. This is not only true of Renaissance courtly translators: it also happens with a lot or contemporary professionals, who have to turn out a lot of pages of work and therefore find it advantageous to develop a set of routines which are flexible enough to be applied to a variety of situations. I myself, as a translator, am aware that in the presence of certain features in the source, I tend to react in the same ways – and that I have a general preference for certain words and phrases over others, irrespective of what I find in my English texts. As a translator and translation scholar, I am usually able to guess at the processes which have been at work in my colleagues' minds. When I read the translations or original writings produced between 1957 and 1962 by Luciano Bianciardi (1922–1971), for instance, I find that he has a preference for composite sentences where clauses or phrases are separated by commas; that he uses a lot of left- or right-dislocations to create the impression of a colloquial style, and reinforces that impression by eliding the final vowel in verbs ("son[o]"; "star[e]"), even though he paradoxically peppers his colloquial sentences with formal words ("stimava" for "held dear"); that he likes terms which are typical of his native Tuscan ("desinare" for "eat"; "sì che" for "so that"; "quietavano" for "quieted down"); that he has a habit of domesticating foreign things and concepts (American football becomes soccer/European football); and that, on the other hand, both in his translations and in his own works he loves such English-sounding constructions as "si è andata aggravando" (it's been getting worse and worse). Finally, that there are certain terms which he invariably uses, whatever the context or the source ("certi" with the value of "such", as in "certi calzolari hegeliani" ("such Hegelian shoemakers!")).[11]

Naturally, sifting a translator's life-work for patterns and regularities is only one way of measuring the uniqueness of her/his mind style. Another, already briefly illustrated in the first chapter by lining up a few translations by students, is comparing her/his choices horizontally with those of other practitioners faced with the same tasks. If Harington's *Furioso* is compared with the near-contemporary Scots version by Stewart of Baldynneis (Petrina 2022), its individual rhythm and diction stand out in bolder relief. If Serpieri's Shakespearean sonnets are set alongside the Italian poetic versions crafted by Rina Sara Virgillito (1988), the aims of the academic translator become even more perspicuous. Virgillito's lodestar is musical and metrical rather than philological, so that to form perfect

and harmonious hendecasyllables she is ready to change the word-order, to use terms with a slightly different meaning from those in the source, and to employ the occasional archaizing term. Thus, Serpieri's "rudi venti scuotono i diletti boccioli del maggio" (which reproduces Shakespeare's line *verbatim*, but is completely unmetrical and has a syllable count of 16!) becomes "i molli bocci sferza il vento al maggio" ("the soft buds lashes the wind at May", to back-translate it in somewhat ungrammatical English; Shakespeare 2008: 47). The "darling" buds become "soft", and the wind "lashes" them; "bocci" is an archaizing shortening of "boccioli", while "al maggio" is a poetical alternative to "in maggio". This line, and the whole of Virgillito's translation of the sonnets, sounds gracefully old-fashioned where Serpieri's sounds stiffly competent.

But I am now belabouring the point. That all translators have their individual styles, that they treat their source texts according to their temperaments and impress their target texts with their personalities, should by now be obvious, and may have been self-evident from the very beginning of this book. Everything gets translated all the time, nothing ever stays the same. No two translators, working on a sufficiently long text, will ever produce the same translation. Even the same person, faced with the same source text after a lapse of time, will be led to change at least some minor points of her/his target text, because experience will have taught her/him something new or modified her/his linguistic habits, and in short turned her/him into another person. The same, of course, is true of oral translation: no two interpreters, however impeccably trained, will ever produce the same consecutive or simultaneous renditions – and if it was feasible or sensible to present single interpreters with the same tasks again and again, they would end up performing differently each time. In the end, in spite of a bi-millennial history of metaphors which have tried to characterize it as a solid, reliable process (you pay the target reader by weight; you keep the kernel of the source intact; you dress the original in new clothes; you act as a slave to the source writer), translation can only be figuratively characterized as a game of Chinese whispers: what comes out at the far end of the chain of giggling whisperers is anybody's guess.

For most of the history of mankind, this uncertainty, this process of continuous semantic slippage, has been seen as a problem.[12] Religions have invented myths according to which their translators, inspired by God, have worked in isolation and still impossibly produced exact

replicas of the same source text. Translator theorists and trainers have dictated rules and formulae to minimize the distance from A to B. Even more radically, the linguists and information scientists of the twentieth century have tried to do away with human translators, thus turning the whole world into a pre-babelic global village mediated by computers. All this has often been done with specific political interests in mind; but it has also been done with a view to soothing the anxiety humans feel in the presence of things that do not have a stable and definite shape. However, there may be another way of seeing all this shape-shifting activity: maybe, if the need for a definite and unchanging truth is laid aside for a moment, the transformational power of translation can also be seen as a good thing. Plato's Socrates considered books as unsuitable to philosophy, because when interrogated they always give the same response (see chapter 2, note 5); but by dint of being translated, books can give answers that are ever new, illuminating or obfuscating in slightly different ways. By translating Boccaccio's *Filostrato* in a very creative way, Chaucer creates *Troilus and Criseyde*, which in turn gets translated in modern English and in other languages. Dickens' *Great Expectations* is translated as *Grandi speranze* (great hopes) in Italian, which may lead Italian readers to see the book (and all its audiovisual versions) in slightly different ways, maybe with rose-tinted glasses. A new utterance is created when we report something heard in a previous conversation. A new novel or film is born whenever a writer or a director read a novel or watch a film they like, and decide to create their own version of that novel or that film. Something new is born every time a translator reworks something old, whether the translator wishes to create something new or not.

Consider the alternative. In the last couple of decades, as seen in chapter 1, great advances in the field of artificial intelligence have allowed computers to imitate human language, and therefore also human translation, with great accuracy. The main trick has been to use neural-network programming in order to teach the machine to make correct decisions as to what goes with what and what comes next (what word/phrase follows another, in the linguistic domain). This model is predicated on the machine being able to sift through an enormous number of human productions – multilingual databases, in the sub-domain of translation. This means that machine translation, rather than being the clean, impartial, inhuman process that had been dreamed about in the 1950s and 1960s, has become a statistical

distillation of fallible human output. This result, in itself, should be hailed as a victory for human practitioners over the machine: far from enabling humanity to dispense with its own translators, progress in computer programming has forced the machine to rely on human decisions. Nevertheless, machine translating still feels a bit lifeless, and is generally at a loss when faced with very creative, non-normative source texts. Furthermore, if humans stopped translating altogether and left that activity to the machines, in the course of time the machines would be left with their own productions as the main bulk of their processing material – which would in all evidence lead them to produce even more lifeless material.[13] If humanity does manage to self-destruct, in the end, the machines will be left to communicate with one another, and they will have nothing new, wrong or original to say to each other.

At the end of Primo Levi's *The periodic table* (1975), a sort of episodic autobiography of the writer as chemical scientist, the narrator tells the story of a carbon atom. It is a long story, spanning several human generations, starting with the atom being bound in a rock and ending with its presence in the writer's mind. Every time a ray of light changes the chemical composition in which the atom finds itself, it becomes involved in a different cycle. Every time a man, another animal or a plant employs the atom in one of its natural processes or artificial activities, the atom gets bound in a new compound. The life of all the organisms in which the atom finds a place is, as Levi has it, a downward path leading to death. In this continuous downward movement, life makes a bend and lingers, as long as it can; but the movement can never be stopped, and the atom can never cease its transmigrations, because the only stasis allowed by nature is the stillness of death (Levi 1994: 212–220, 217).

Translation happens everywhere, all the time, and it changes everything. It is like life. It is a ray of light, arranging atoms in ever-different combinations in the life-cycle of communication.

Notes

1 See chapter 1, note 1. Naturally, pets also translate their owner's utterances and gestures (see Marais 2021).

2 All the universities in the world offer degrees in "Translation and Interpreting". See for instance the 66 European degrees listed by *Bachelorsportal* (www.bachelorsportal.com/search/bachelor/translation-interpreting/europe).

3 The translation is by E.W. Sutton and H. Rackam's (Robinson 1997: 9). The Latin text reads: "Nec converti ut interpres sed ut orator, sententiis isdem et earum formis tamquam figures, verbis ad nostram consuetudinem aptis. In quibus non verbum pro verbo necesse habui reddere, sed genus omne verborum vimque servavi. Non enim ea me annumerare lectori putavi oportere, sed tamquam appendere" (*Cic.Opt.Gen.14*).
4 For an analytical debunking of the idea of poetic untranslatability, see Robinson (2010). Robinson inevitably quotes Frost's remark (107).
5 "Man muss die mutter ihm hause, die kinder auff der gassen, den gemeinen man auff dem markt drumb fragen, und den selbigen auff das maul sehen, wie sie reden"; (Luther 1909: 637). Note the emphasis on orality, rather than literacy, implicit in the expression "auf das Maul sehen": the translator has to look at the faces and mouths of the common people in order to understand how they speak. A similar position (but with greater emphasis on reading and the written word) was reportedly assumed by the English biblical translator and Lutheran follower, William Tyndale, when he told a learned man that "if God spare my lyfe ere many yeares, I wyl cause a boye that dryveth the plough, shall knowe more of the scripture than thou doest" (Foxe 1563: 514).
6 Of course it also helped that the editor I contacted was a very intelligent person, and that the publishers did not have any edition of Chaucer in their catalogue.
7 Asking what translators "are" may sound too essentialist, but this chapter is intended as a pluralistic, partly autobiographical and historically founded answer to that question. Regarding what translators "feel", see what follows. Regarding what they "think", the exploration of their minds has been attempted by a number of scholars who have applied the methods of cognitive psychology to the study of the translation process (see for instance Tirkkonen-Condit and Jääskeläinen 2000).
8 Eliot (1982: 76–79). The quotation reproduces the English text as it is presented in the Italian edition.
9 All three quotations have been somewhat modernized in spelling to make the stylistic similarities more evident.
10 Poetic translation is arguably constrained by the limits of metre and rhyme; the term "constrained translation", however, is normally reserved in Translation Studies for multimodal genres like illustrated literature, comic art and film (Titford 1982; Mayoral, Kelly and Gallardo 1988).
11 These observations are collected from Bianciardi's works *Il lavoro culturale* (1957; 1991: 66–67) and *La vita agra* (1962: 10–11), and from his translations of Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* (1959; Bellow 1990: 12–13) and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1962; Miller 1967: 52–53).
12 Humanity has traditionally obsessed over semantic slippage – the idea that some kernel of meaning may or will inevitably get lost in the translation

process. In this regard, a couple of notations are as obvious as they are necessary. Firstly, as pointed out by deconstructionist theorists, even primary meanings are ultimately indefinable and constantly slipping (see Derrida 1987: 203–234; Venuti 2013: 57–79). Secondly, while most lay people and theorists tend to think of meaning in semantic terms, the transference of pragmatic meaning is at least as central in the translation process. Of course, the same difficulty of definition and the same degree of slipperiness are observable even when translation is considered as a pragmatic operation (Morini 2007).

13 Even with (almost) exclusively human material at their disposal, machines are still apt to "hallucinate" and produce demonstrably false or illogical texts (see Huang, Yu, Ma, Zhong, Feng, Wang, Chen, Peng, Feng, Qin and Liu 2023; but also Townsen Hicks, Humphries and Slater (2024), who characterize these episodes as the production of "bullshit"). Naturally, the correctness of machine-produced texts largely depends on the machine being asked the correct questions, and being told to look in the right direction – which, again, proves that AI writing and translating are very human things.

Conclusion

Is this (only) a Western view?

A final word needs to be said on the limitations of this book. *Homo interpres* aims to provide a comprehensive definition of what translation is today by looking at the history of Translation Studies as an academic discipline, and of translation as a human activity. It reviews the conditions in which translators have to work with reference to contemporary developments and to ancient opinions on the process, and the results of translation. When the scope is so extensive, there is a legitimate expectation that the range of examples from the past and the present will be all-encompassing as well – that the scholar proposing a bird's eye view of the subject will effectively be able to survey the terrain from such a height that nothing will escape his/her attention. However, no single monograph written by a single scholar can provide such an overarching view: the mental and physical limitations of the writer, his/her cultural background and chosen fields of study will set inevitable limits to his/her perspective. The author of this book is Italian. He has a PhD in English and American Studies, and a working knowledge of (in diminishing order of competence) Italian, English, German, French, Latin, Spanish, Portuguese, and classical Greek. It follows that his perspective is largely Græco-Roman, Eurocentric, Anglocentric and Western, as well as Jewish-Christian in terms of religious culture. Therefore, his ideas on translation history and on the history of translation theory, as well as most of his examples and illustrations, will be drawn from this cluster of interlocking traditions.

In the past couple of decades, the problems arising from such a limited outlook, which happens to have been the dominant one in the short history of Translation Studies, have been pointed out by a number of scholars within the discipline. In his introduction to a two-volume

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collection of essays on *Translating Others*, Theo Hermans has noted that a view of translation which "owes its key categories and protocols to [Western] concepts of language and culture" is not capacious enough "for an encounter with the complexities and inequities of an unstable, postmodern, postcolonial, globalizing world" (Hermans 2006: 1). In keeping with this premise, the contributors to the two volumes discuss oral and written translation, theory and practice, and the image and social position of translators with a wide geographical and historical scope that includes India, China, Tibet, Somalia, the European middle ages, nineteenth-century Egypt, and ancient Japan. And as Hermans notes, and Maria Tymoczko reiterates at the beginning of the opening theoretical section, the motivations for including such a diversity of views go far beyond the claims of intellectual curiosity or a healthy, post-colonial cultural relativism. In the encounter with the non-European other, Europeans can also find their way to "reconceptualizing" their own translation theory (Tymoczko 2006).

Some of Tymoczko's examples can be mentioned to elucidate the point. Her procedure involves listing a number of Western theoretical ideas or clichés, and questioning their general validity by showing that in certain cultures, translation has evolved in completely different ways. In the West, for instance, we normally think of the translating process in individualistic terms; in China, by contrast, the activity has traditionally been viewed as collaborative, involving groups of experts assuming differentiated roles (Tymoczko 2006: 18; see also Hung 2006). The main European languages use terms which lead their speakers to think of the process as a "carrying across", and of the object being carried across as remaining potentially or ideally unchanged. In other cultures, the terms for what we call "translation" may entail inevitable transformation, as in the cases of the Indian *rupantar* ("change in form") and of the Chinese *fan yi* ("turning a leaf of a book", but also "somersault, flip"; Tymoczko 2006: 22). An even more general, existential question is raised on the centrality of linguistic translation in human communication and the transmission of culture: we Westerners may see things in that way, but there are situations in which an extreme multiplicity of idioms (India), the dominance of a regional language/alphabet (China and the Far East) or widespread multilingualism make the activity marginal, if not completely unnecessary (Tymoczko 2006: 16–17; see also Trivedi 2006: 104; Wakabayashi and Kang 2019).

This widening of perspective, like any widening of perspective, is invaluable to the theorist – in the first place, because it gives scholars an inside view of translating cultures which might otherwise have been seen with the eyes of the cultural colonist. As for seeing Western theory with non-Western eyes, that too may be very useful as an exercise in cultural relativism. But while I acknowledge the validity of Tymoczko's suggestion in that sense, I would also like to add that the same degree of cultural relativism, the same widening of horizons, can be achieved by giving a long, hard, and unflinching look at the history of Græco-Roman, Eurocentric, and Jewish-Christian translation. The non-Western examples provided by Tymoczko and many others have Western parallels which do not lead the scholar to dismiss the relevance and uniqueness of each individual case, but to conclude that each case is an equally significant detail in the wider picture that is human translation. *Interpretatio* is not the same as *Rupantar*, but the existence of the term is a reminder that translation can be seen as inevitable change in the West as well as in India. The Latin word also functions as a reminder of the oral origins of translation, and of the fact that our textual categories are limited and distorting. If someone mentions Chinese writers working in tandem with language experts explaining to them what the source text says, my mind immediately goes to Roman translators using slaves as readers or interpreters, or to the forms of collaboration inevitably entailed by theatre translation. If I read of times and places during which translation was virtually non-existent, I think of the Greeks, or of the Latin *koine* of the early Middle Ages. Tymoczko herself, in point of fact, is able to see the possibilities offered by non-Western theories because she sees the limitations of Western theories *from within*: she does that at the beginning of her chapter, when she points out that "Western theorizing has been distorted by its concentration on the written word", and that "most views have been formulated with reference to sacred texts, including both religious scripture and canonical literary works" (Tymoczko 2006: 13). Her studies on non-European views may have given her a clearer insight into these matters; but the same insight can be gleaned by casting a critical glance at European views. Tymoczko may well have read the same studies on Roman theories of translation, Medieval translation, interpretation, and theatre translation which are mentioned in this book. And her point about the limitations of a theory based on the (faithful) translation of (sacred) texts is the same I make

here, in chapter 2, with quasi-exclusive reference to the Bible and to the history of literature.

This does not mean that scholars working on Western translation theory are more ideally placed than others to discuss the past, present, and future of translation; but it does mean that they are as ideally placed as anyone else to do that. *Interpres* may be Latin, but what s/he does is essentially and uniquely human, though some aspects of translation/interpretation/rupantar/fan yi can be observed in other animal species. To paraphrase rather radically (i.e., translate, interpret, transform, exploit) a Philip Larkin poem, here is as good a place as anywhere to observe what translation means and brings, how it works and what it entails.[1] And if any of the observations to be found in this book are mistaken, they are mistaken because of the author's analytical flaws, not because of the limitations of his perspective.

Or that, at least, is how I see it.

Note

1 The line is " 'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere'", from the poem "I remember, I remember" (1954; Larkin 1988: 80–81).

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