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*Traduttore traditore: Dante and the Treachery of Translation*

Non-Italian speakers face a cruel disadvantage in their study of Dante. They are separated from the man and his works by over six hundred years and the nearly insurmountable language barrier; they are at the mercy of tyrannical men and women, more learned than they, without whom they would be unable to read Dante at all. These cruel, despotic people are generally referred to as translators. Joking aside, the translator of any work is faced with both an enormous responsibility and a daunting task. How is one to translate any work, especially a poem, into another language while retaining the striking and powerful details of the poet's verse? Although translators such as Samuel Butler and John Ciardi believe that a translation ought to be idiomatic in order to be comprehensible, a translation must remain faithful to the original even in details of phrasing, because this allows the reader of the translation have the closest experience possible to reading the original work.

There is a school of thought regarding translation that maintains that the meaning of the original work is subservient to the comprehensibility of the translation. Samuel Butler writes in the preface to his translation of *The Iliad* that the original work ought to give way to the translation. Essentially, he is saying that the translation is more important than the original. He writes that he accepts three canons regarding translation: "in the first place, the Latin [language of translation] must be idiomatic, in the second it must flow, and in the third it must keep as near as it could to the English [original language] from which it was being translated" (Butler XXIX).

The first two of Butler's canons deal with the comprehensibility of the translation; it is only the last and least of them that deals with the translation's responsibility to the original.

While it may seem that this school of thought does not force a translation to depart from the original, it just this. Following his canons, Butler goes on to say that "a translation should depart hardly at all from the modes of speech current in the translator's own times..." (Butler XXIX). This mode of translation becomes increasingly popular and arguably necessary as the reader moves farther away from the time of the original writer.

This paper will examine different methods and ideas of translation as they have been applied to Dante's *Divine Comedy*; more specifically, a passage from the *Comedy*. The passage is from *Inferno*, Canto XXXII, lines 106-108. The context of the passage is as follows: Dante and Virgil have reached Antenora, the second round of the ninth circle of hell, where Dante encounters a sinner frozen in ice up to the neck, whom he kicks in the head. Dante begins questioning the sinner as to his identity, which the sinner refuses to reveal. Dante begins ripping out the sinner's hair, which causes the sinner to scream.

The Italian text reads: "quando un altro gridò <<Che hai tu, Bocca? / non ti basta sonar con le mascelle / se tu non latri? Qual diavol ti tocca?>>" (*Inferno* XXXII. 106-108). An extremely literal translation of this passage into English would read: "when one other yelled 'What have you, Bocca? / does it not you satisfy to sound with your jaws / if you do not bark? Which devil touches you?'" This translation, provided by the author of this paper, is intended to give a standard by which to compare translations in order to measure their adherence to the meaning and implications of the original.

Before going further in examining the passage and various translations, it is crucial that the reader understand the essential difficulties of translation. First there is the difficulty of

translation in general; the fact that there are “losses any translator must incur” (Esolen xxiii). It is impossible to perfectly recreate the original in another language. In *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis writes that :

Nothing about a literature can be more essential than the language that it uses. A language has its own personality; implies an outlook, reveals a mental activity, and has a resonance, not quite the same as any other...*heaven* can never mean quite the same as *ciel* (Lewis 6).

A given word, to be termed *word A* in language *A*, does not necessarily have an exact counterpart in language *B*. Oftentimes, the closest a translator can come is the word *C* in language *B*, which shares the essential meaning of *word A*, but not all of its implications.

Secondly, there are the specific difficulties of translating from Italian to English. Translating poetry from Italian to English is especially difficult. Italian, like all Romantic languages, is abundant in rhymes, whereas English is infamously deficient in rhymes. On the proverbial flip side, the translator is given some freedom because of the many syllables of most Italian words; however, this can also become a difficulty, especially if the translator is attempting to maintain a consistent meter.

After one has dealt with these general difficulties of translation, one reaches the difficulties of translating *The Divine Comedy*. Many of these difficulties are the same as the general difficulties, simply applied to the *Comedy*. For example, the problem of the abundance of rhymes in Italian and their lack in English makes it notoriously difficult to maintain the triple rhymes of Dante’s *Terza Rima* in an English translation.

Other difficulties arise from the complex poetic structure of Dante’s writing. There are two elements to Dante’s writing which may be referred to as *meaning* and *music*: meaning

referring to the actual literal significance of the words, and music to the poetic structure and feel of the poetry. It is not difficult to observe the complexities of Dante's meaning, since the *Comedy* is an allegory in which nearly every detail holds deep significance, even those of mathematics or astronomy. Likewise, every detail of Dante's poetic structure holds deep significance, from his unified hendecasyllabic line to the number of cantos in each canticle. The music of Dante's poetry is intricate beyond belief, and a translator faces enormous difficulties in communicating it to the reader.

These difficulties may not matter for a prose translation, but the *Divine Comedy* is a poem, and a poem in which music is essential. Dante's music is not simply an ear-pleasing embellishment to the work, but an essential facet of the *Comedy*. While prose translations are valuable to those pursuing an in depth study of Dante, especially as an aid to reading the Italian text, the average reader of Dante in English relies solely on a single translation. Most translators agree that a good translation should attempt to retain some of the *Comedy's* music; if for no other reason, some music makes the translation memorable and hints at the sublimity and complexity of the original (Esolen xxiii-xxiv).

Having examined the difficulties with translating the *Comedy* into English, it is now possible to understand the methods and mindsets different translators have employed in order to overcome them. The thirteen translations this paper shall examine may be classified into four categories: Prose translations, musical translations, literal translations, and idiomatic translations.

Two of the thirteen translations are in prose: the Carlyle and the Singleton translations. Both translations give an adequate translation of Dante's meaning, but fail to take advantage of the precision that a prose translation affords. If one examines the annotated bibliography at the end of this paper, and compares either of the prose translations of the passage to the other

translations, one will see that there is not much difference between the meaning of the prose translations and the meaning of the verse translations

Next, one may examine the musical translations. There are three of them: the Binyon, the Cummins, and the Sayers. It is slightly misleading to refer to these three alone as musical translations, since all the translations other than the two discussed above make some attempt at Dante's music. However, all three of these make music their especial project, choosing to maintain *Terza Rima* and some sort of meter, and in Cummins case, going a step farther by retaining the hendecasyllabic line. A brief perusal of the musical translations will demonstrate how awkward a musical translation can be. However, the musical translations are not so awkward as to be useless, and in fact, Binyon's translation is extremely similar to many of the prose and literal translations.

Next are the literal translations of Longfellow, Mandelbaum, and Musa. Longfellow's translation, which was first published 1867, may seem to be excessively archaic and flowery, but this is only due to the time which distances it from the modern reader. Out of the twenty-four words of the passage, only six can properly be called archaisms, and almost all of them can be easily replaced by a modern counterpart (*Inferno* XXXII 106-8, trans. Longfellow). All of the literal translations are moderately musical, mostly attempting to maintain an unrhymed iambic pentameter line. The literal translations seek to maintain a balance between the prose and the musical translations, or rather, between meaning and music; and while they incline more to the side of meaning, music is not completely abandoned.

Finally, there are the idiomatic translations of Cary, Ciardi, Kirkpatrick, and Pinsky. Technically, these may be called literal translations: Pinsky and Ciardi even attempt different sorts of "dummy" *Terza Rima* stanzas. However, the idiomatic translations seem to adhere to

Butler's canons; the meaning of the original is bent slightly to create a translation that reads like an English poem (Pinsky xix). In varying manners and degrees, Cary, Ciardi, Kirkpatrick, and Pinsky have discarded some of Dante's meaning in order to make the *Comedy* fit into English better. Esolen's translation is, as a whole, a literal translation; yet in the passage in question, he draws on Ciardi and uses American slang rather than translating Dante's own Italian phrase, placing the translation in the idiomatic camp for the purposes of this paper.

The particular phrase in question is the Italian "qual diavol ti tocca", which to Dante was a common phrase meaning "what's wrong with you?" The phrase literally means "which devil touches you?" Obviously, there is a great irony in this phrase, given that those speaking are, in fact, in hell, where one might be touched by a devil at any moment. How is the translator to communicate this irony to the reader?

One answer to this question is to replace the Italian phrase with a suitable English idiom; an obvious choice is the slang phrase "What the Hell's the matter?" This phrase, or a variation, seems to communicate all of the brash rudeness and morbid irony of Dante's own phrase.

However, in rendering Dante's slang into modern slang, idiomatic translators such as Ciardi and Esolen leave out the idea of a devil attacking Bocca. Given the repeated questions of Buosa da Duera, the other sinner who yells, it could be that he is in a state of nervous fear, wondering if something is adding to Bocca's suffering, and wondering if perhaps he is next.

Also, Dante's original phrase provides an image of a devil torturing a traitor in the inner circle of hell. This image may not seem especially important, except that it happens later in *Inferno*. Dante could possibly be foreshadowing the terrible image of Satan in Canto XXXIV. Perhaps, Dante is even comparing Bocca with the traitors in Satan's mouths, saying that his sin is terrible like that of Cassius, Brutus, or even Judas. These details, though they seem insignificant,

may infer certain hidden details in the work; these implications are given in the Italian, and a translation would do well to present these implications to the English reader.

A true translation must attempt to completely reproduce Dante's work in another language, including all of the complexities of Dante's meaning and music. A translation is necessarily clumsy; the best case scenario for a serious student of Dante would be to learn Italian (Esolen xxiii). Sayers writes that at moments of sublimity, the best a translator can do "is to erect, as best one can, a kind of sign-post to indicate: "Here is beauty; make haste to learn Italian, so that you may read it for yourselves" (Sayers 64). While no translation can ever hope to match the original, it is necessary that it come as close as possible (Sayers 55-56). Sayers writes that, while Dante loathed translations himself, seeing as how he also "was eager above all things that his poem should bring as many people as possible to salvation, we must hope that he forgives us all."

In order to stay faithful to the original work, it is even helpful, if not vital, to preserve some nuances of the time and language in which the author is writing. Butler writes that these nuances are unessential to a poem, and thus, ought to be replaced with modern idiom. However, preserving these nuances is the only way to stay faithful to a work. To state the obvious, it is a translator's job to translate, not to interpret; and the excessive use of modern idioms forces the translator to interpret, pushing the reader farther and farther away from the original work and robbing them of the experience of reading Dante. Therefore, idiomatic translation, especially in Dante, constitutes nothing short of treason to the work.

Annotated Bibliography

Alighieri, Dante. The Divine Comedy: Hell. Trans. Laurence Binyon. London: MacMillan, 1952.

Binyons musical translation employs full *Terza Rima* while maintaining a very literal translation. The terzain in question reads: “When another cried: ‘What ails thee, Bocca, say! / Is it not enough to chatter with thy jaws? / Must thou howl too? What fiend has thee for prey?’”

---. Trans. John Aitken Carlyle. New York: Modern Library, 1932.

Carlyle’s prose translation is slightly more awkward than Singletons and takes less advantage of the particular benefits of prose translation. The terzain in question reads: “when another cried: ‘What ails thee Bocca? Is it not enough for thee to chatter with thy jaws, but thou must bark too? What Devil is upon thee?’”

---. Trans. Henry Cary. London: Dent & Sons, 1908.

Cary’s idiomatic translation demonstrates the short-lived popularity of such translations, which soon become old and need to be translated into new idioms. The terzain in question reads: “What ails thee, Bocca? Sound not loud enough / Thy chattering teeth, but thou must bark outright / What devil wrings thee...”

---. Trans. John Ciardi. New York: New American Library, 1954.

Ciardi’s idioatic translation attempts a dummy *Terza Rima* by rhyming the first and third lines of every stanza. The terzain in question reads: “when another said: ‘Bocca, what is it ails you? / What the hell’s wrong? Isn’t it bad enough / to hear you bang your jaws? Must you bark too?’”

---. Trans. Patrick Cummins. St. Louis: B. Herder Co., 1948.

Cummins' musical translation pays special attention to Dante's hendecasyllabic line as well as *Terza Rima*, demonstrating the intricacy of the poem. The tercain in question reads: "when a shade cried: 'Bocca, what noise thus bruited? / not yet enough thy jaws that ever clatter, / But thou must howl, as if by demon hooted.'"

---. Trans. Anthony Esolen. New York: Modern Library, 2002.

Esolen's blank iambic pentameter translation is usually literal, although occasionally it becomes idiomatic. The tercain in question reads: "'Hey Bocca, what the hell's the fuss? It's not / enough to play the snare drum with your jaws, / you've got to bark too? What's got into you?'"

---. Trans. Robert Kirkpatrick. London: Penguin, 2006.

Kirkpatrick, whose translation replaced Sayers' as the Penguin Classics translation, is extremely idiomatic, even down to nicknaming characters. The tercain in conflict reads: "Another yelling now: 'What's with you, Big Mouth? / Not satisfied to castanet cold jaws? / You bark as well. What devil's got to you?'"

---. Trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005.

The first American translation of Dante, being literal, gives a wonderful example of the necessity of preserving meaning in translated works. The tercain in question reads: "When cried another: 'what doth ail thee, Bocca? / Is't not enough to clatter with thy jaws, / But thou must bark? what devil touches thee?'"

---. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. New York: Bantam, 1982.

Mandelbaum's translation is extremely literal, and is essentially the only translation of the thirteen that carries the idea of Bocca barking for his own sake. The *terzain* in question reads: "when someone else cried out: "What is it, Bocca? / Isn't the music of your jaws enough / for you without your bark? What devil's at you?"

---. Trans. Mark Musa. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1971.

Musa's translation is literal, with the slightest possible attempts at idiomatic renderings of Italian sentences. The *terzain* in question reads: "when someone else yelled: "What's the matter, Bocca? / It's bad enough to hear your shivering teeth; / now you bark! What the devil's wrong with you?"

---. Trans. Robert Pinsky. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994.

Pinsky's idiomatic translation seeks to stay true to the nature of English rather than Italian or Dante's meaning. He employs a dummy *Terza Rima* that functions on the basis of Yeatsian rhyme. The *terzain* in question reads: "When a new voice called: 'Bocca, what is it-/ What ails you? Are you so weary of the tune / Your jaws create that now you are barking too? / What devil is at you?"

---. Trans. Dorothy Leigh Sayers. London:Penguin, 1949.

Sayer's musical translation gives a technically masterful, if occasionally awkward rendition of Dante's *Terza Rima*. The *terzain* in question reads: "When another called: 'Hey, Bocca, what's to do? / Don't thy jaws make enough infernal clatter / But, what the devil! must thou start barking too?"

---. Trans. Charles Singleton. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970.

Singleton's prose translation of the *Inferno*, published with facing-page Italian text, gives a clean, simple translation of Dante's verse that is not unlike many blank verse translations. The tercain in question reads: "when another cried, 'What ails you, Bocca? Is it not enough for you to make noise with your jaws, but you must bark? What devil is at you?'"

Homer. The Iliad. Trans. Samuel Butler. New York: Classics Club, 1942.

In the introduction to his translation, Samuel Butler lays out certain principles for idiomatic translation. These principles and views on translation elevate the translation above the original, and arguably advocate the creation of a whole new poem rather than a translation.

Lewis, Clive Staples. The Discarded Image. London: Cambridge UP, 1964.

Lewis demonstrates the essential importance of a language to its literature as a part of his introduction to medieval literature and thought. This point of view is helpful in providing insight as to the reasons for preserving linguistic nuances in translations.