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Traduttore Traditore

The Instrumentalism of Conventional Wisdom

“a stitch in time saves nine”

The visitor . . . ought to be able to speak fluently the language of the country visited. Working through an interpreter is roundabout and in many cases hopeless. As the Italian proverb says: *Traduttore traditore*.

D.M. Stevenson, "Trade with South America," *The Times of London*, 7 Aug. 1929, p. 3.

I know translation is an “impossible” task, and I have never forgotten the Italian phrase *traduttori/traditori*: “translators/traitors.” Which translation does not in some way betray its original? In considering the process of my own translations, I am aware of loss and transformation, of destruction and renewal.

Arthur Sze, ed. and trans., *The Silk Dragon: Translations from the Chinese*, Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2001, p. 3.

The pun, or to use a more erudite, and perhaps more precise term--paronomasia, reigns over poetic art, and whether its rule is absolute or limited, poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition--from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition--from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition--from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting.

If we were to translate into English the traditional formula *Traduttore, traditore* as “the translator is a betrayer,” we would deprive the Italian rhyming epigram of all its paronomastic value. Hence a cognitive attitude would compel us to change this aphorism into a more explicit statement and to answer the questions: translator of what messages? betrayer of what values?

Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” (1959)

- 1 Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.
- 2 Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.
- 3 Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.

Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation"
(1959)

Niccolò Franco, *Le pistole vulgari*, Venezia: Antonio Gardane, 1539.

Veggio, in un altro cantone, I•
TRADUTTORI, li quali tal che mostrino
al volgo, & a chi non sa, di sapere due
lettere, traducono l'opre da la latina ne
la lingua volgare. Veggo quando per
non intender bene il testo de gli
autori, danno giù di mostaccio. Veggo
quando distillano fino al grasso de le
lor barbe per trovare un vocaboluccio
ne i rifugi de i commentari. E per che
gli veggo morire con tutte le lor fatiche
da quell'ora che le cominciano, per la
pietà grande che me ne viene, non
posso far che non dica: Ser Traditori
miei, se non sapete far'altro che
tradire i libri, voi ve ne anderete bel
bello a cacare senza candela.

In another corner, I see THE
TRANSLATORS, who just to show
the common people, & whoever
doesn't know, that they know two
literatures, translate works from
Latin into the vernacular. I see
them pulling an ugly mug when
they don't understand the authors'
text. I see them concentrating
down to the grease of their beards
to find a measly word in the shelter
of commentaries. And because I
see them dying from all their labors
at the very moment they begin,
because of the enormous pity that
comes over me from it, I can't help
saying: my Esteemed Traitors, if
you can't do anything but betray
books, you'll slowly go shit without
a candle.

Joachim du Bellay, *Défense et illustration de la langue française* (1549)

Mais que diray-je d'aucuns, vrayement mieux dignes d'estre appellés traditeurs que traducteurs? Veux qu'ilz trahissent ceux qu'ilz entreprennent exposer, les frustrant de leur gloire, et par mesme moyen seduysent les lecteurs ignorans, leur montrant le blanc pour le noyr: qui, pour acquerir le nom de sçavans, traduisent à credit les langues, dont jamais ilz n'ont entendu les premiers elementz, comme l'Hebraïque et la Grecque: et encor' pour myeux se faire valoir, se prennent aux poëtes, genre d'auteurs certes auquel si je sçavoy', ou vouloy' traduyre, je m'adroisseroy' aussi peu, à cause de ceste divinité d'invention qu'ilz ont plus que les autres, de ceste grandeur de style, magnificence de motz, gravité de sentences, audace et variété de figures, et mil'autres lumieres de poësie: bref ceste energie, et ne sçay quel esprit, qui est en leurs ecriz, que les Latins appelleroient *genius*. Toutes les quelles choses se peuvent autant exprimer en traduisant, comme un peintre peut représenter l'ame avecques le corps de celuy qu'il entreprend tyrer apres le naturel.

Joachim du Bellay, *Défense et illustration de la langue française* (1549), trans. Richard Helgerson (2006)

But what shall I say of some who truly deserve rather to be called traitors than translators? For they betray those they undertake to reveal, denying them their glory and by the same means seduce ignorant readers, showing them white for black. To gain the name of learned men, they translate on credit languages, like Hebrew and Greek, of which they have never understood the first elements and to raise their standing still further, take on poets, a race of authors that, if I could or would translate, I would address as little as possible because of that divinity of invention they have more than others, that greatness of style, magnificence of words, gravity of thoughts, boldness and variety of figures, and a thousand other adornments of poetry; in short, that energy and indefinable spirit in their writings which the Latins would call *genius*. All these things can be no more rendered in translation than a painter can represent the soul along with the body of the person he undertakes to portray from life.

Joachim du Bellay, *Défense et illustration de la langue française* (1549), trans. Richard Helgerson (2006)

il est impossible de le rendre avecques la mesme grace dont l'auteur en a usé: d'autant que chaque langue a je ne sçay quoy propre seulement à elle, dont si vous efforcez exprimer le naif dans une autre langue, observant la loy de traduyre, qui est n'espacer point hors des limites de l'aucteur, vostre diction sera contrainte, froide et de mauvaise grace. Et qu'ainsi soit, qu'on me lyse un Demosthene et Homere Latins, un Ciceron et Vergile Français, pour voir s'ilz vous engendreront telles affections, voyre ainsi qu'un Prothée vous transformeront en diverses sortes, comme vous sentez, lysant ces aucteurs en leurs langues.

it is impossible to render a work with the same grace that the author put into it, inasmuch as each language has an indescribable something that belongs to it alone, so that if you try to express its inborn quality in another language, abiding by the law of translation, which is never to stray beyond the bounds of the author, your diction will be constrained, cold, and graceless. And as proof, just read a Latin Demosthenes and Homer, a French Cicero and Virgil, to see if they will beget such emotions in you--will, indeed, transform you like a Proteus into differing kinds--as you feel reading those authors in their own languages.

Campbell writes so glibly he has the air of being triumphant--whereas he is continually misrepresenting the poetry of St. John, with its *frescura*, *virginalidad*, *originalidad*, *condensación*, *intensidad*, *velocidad*, *desnudez*--these are some of the words Dámaso Alonso uses in trying to give its essential qualities. Not one of them comes through in the Campbell translation.

John Frederick Nims, "Traduttore Traditore: Campbell's St. John of the Cross," *Poetry* 80.3 (June 1952): 153-58.

A Hermeneutic Model for Translation

