THE TRANSLATOR AS READER

To Christine Le Boeuf

For the longest time, I was unaware of the concept of translation. I was brought up in two languages, English and German, and the passage from one to the other was not, in my childhood, an attempt to convey the same meaning from one language to another, through a different set of words, but simply another form of address, depending on whom I was speaking to. A Grimm's fairy tale read in my two different languages became two different fairy tales: the German version, printed in thick Gothic characters and illustrated with gloomy watercolours, told one; the English version in clear, large type, illustrated with black and white engravings. told another. Obviously they were not the same story.

It was only much later, in my adolescence, that I realized that the changing text remains in essence the same. Or rather, that the same text can acquire different identities through different languages, in a process in which every constituent part is discarded and replaced by something else: vocabulary, syntax, grammar, music, as well as its cultural, historical and emotional contexts -- or, as Dante puts it in *De vulgari eloquentia*: "in the first place, the purpose of song, in the second place, the disposition of each part in relation to the others, in the third place, the number of verses and syllables."

But how do these ever-changing identities remain a single identity?

What allows us to say that the hundreds of translations of Grimm's *Fairy Tales,* or *The Arabian Nights,* or Dante's *Commedia* are, in fact, one and the same book? An old philosophical conundrum asks whether a person whose every single body part has been replaced with artificial organs and limbs remains the same person? In which of our constituent parts lies our identity? In which of a poem's elements lies the poem? This is the core mystery: if a literary text is all the various things that allow us to call it Grimm's *Fairy Tales* or *The Arabian Nights*, what remains when every one of these things is exchanged for something else? Is translation a disguise that allows the text to converse with those outside its circle, like that worn by the caliph Haroun Al-Rashid to mingle among common folk? Or is it an usurpation, like that perpetrated by the maid in the story of Fallada, the Speaking Horse, who takes the place of her mistress and undeservedly marries the Prince? What degree of "identity" can a translation claim?

Between annotated editions, illustrated volumes and translations, my versions of Dante's *Commedia* fill five shelves in my library. Every time I study a new commentary (certain annotated editions become effectively new versions of the original in their punctilious editing and erudite density), every time I read a new translation, I don't have the sense of holding in my hands a different book: on the contrary, I have the impression of reading more deeply the same inexhaustible *Commedia*. Partly, because the memory of reading Dante in the original never quite disappears. Even poor, unimaginative versions of the poem echo, in my memory, the lines of original; whether in the deafman's Spanish rendering

of Conde Cheste or in the stilted, donnish version of Henry Cary, Dante somehow shines through.

But is it possible to read Dante in translation alone? Is it fair to say, having gone through a series of translated versions, that we have indeed read the *Commedia*? Dante himself gathered his knowledge of Homer, whom he calls "*poeta sovrano*", "sovereign poet," only through the glosses and translated snippets found here and there in the Latin authors available at the time (and perhaps in a very bad version from the third century B.C. by Livius Andronicus, which Horace had branded "archaic, unpolished and vulgar.") And yet Dante's "reading" of the Homeric poems inspired essential passages in the *Commedia*.

I'm not sure that the question has an answer. What we can, perhaps, try to understand, is what happens with the verses written by Dante when read in a language that is not the original Italian.

Certainly a displacement in time. Perhaps an essential aspect of any translation is the involuntary and inescapable time-shift to which the text is subjected. When we read the *Commedia* in the original, even if, as in my case, our Italian is faulty (and our fourteenth-century Tuscan more so) or when, reading it in translation, we know that there is such a thing as the original in a foreign and distant language, we become aware that, as readers, we exist somewhere in the poem's future. While we, trapped in our present, read Dante's words, the text itself continues to flow inside the geography of Dante's time. Over this geography, successive generations

of readers have layered their own harvests of knowledge and interpretation, transforming the original landscape into something that Dante himself would find far more unfathomable than his most recondite verses are to us. Dante's personal conception of smoke, for instance, whether that of bonfires in autumn or that of the burning fields of war through which he travelled in exile, colour and shape the purgatorial smoke that envelops him and Virgil in the Fifteenth Canto of *Purgatory*. But to that private experience, we have added centuries of other dreadful smoke: the smoke of inquisitorial fires, the smoke of Blake's satanic mills, the smoke of the gas chambers of Auschwitz, the smoke of burnt tyres in bloody demonstrations, the smoke of ecological disasters in our time.

Like a monstrous chrysalis, the *Commedia* contains in itself all possibilities of migration and change. By means of ongoing readings, the original poem, though grounded in Dante's time, becomes nomadic, and its translations, for better or for worse, render explicit the amorous progress of Dante's words from the past to the reader's present tense. The notion of "I too feel this" that the poem so often elicits is made obvious in the act of translation: it is literally put into words.

The incarnation of the poem in a text that is not the original, is for me the clearest indication of the creative powers of the reader, a proof that translation is the highest, deepest form of reading. Entering a text, taking it apart, rebuilding it in words and sentences that obey the rules of different ears and eyes and minds, allow a text to begin life again, but this

time conscientiously, aware of its own workings and its debts to chance and pleasure. Translation brings to a text a logic and an articulation of purpose that the original disregards, or rejects, or is shy of. In the much-debated letter to Can'Grande della Scala of c. 1316, Dante (if it was Dante who wrote it) proposed four levels of reading: the literal (according to the exact meaning of the words), the allegorical (following the allegory implied), the analogical (as an analogy) and the anagogical (according to Biblical interpretation). Readers tend to suspect that, in Dante's case at least, four stands for infinity, since every proposed level breeds in turn four or forty more, and so unto the farthest shores.

To those infinite levels of reading, we must add one more: that which remains after the reading is concluded, after the last word is reached and the book is shut. There are fortunate beings who know the entire *Commedia* by heart, but even for those of us whose memory is wanting, there remains in the aftermath of reading the *Commedia* the burning presence of the poet's words, of the story and its loving details, of its music and its moments of silence -- a memory like that pain of "recalling bliss in moments of unhappiness" of which Francesca speaks from the whirlwind, causing Dante to faint with understanding and pity. Readers know that every verbal construction, while simultaneously carrying sense and sound, exists in the time and space of its reading, and also those of its literal recalling. But it also exists in its wake, once the words have been said, when only the shadow of sound and sense linger on. In some sense, a translation (a good translation) renders visible that lingering shadow of the text. That is perhaps what we mean when we say

that it is possible to read the *Commedia* in translation alone.

But what precisely is that shadow?

I would like to comment on a comment made by Jorge Luis Borges in the mid-fifties. We know that every writer produces a series of drafts of any given text, one of which he might decide to publish. The published version, though it has the prestige of being made public, does not however cease from being a draft. Seen in this light, a translation can be considered as yet a further draft of that same text. Just as the published text (draft nº 9, let's say) might be considered by its author to be better than an earlier draft, (nº 4 for example) a translation of the text (draft nº 9+) might be judged better than the so-called original. Of Beckford's *Vathek*, written first in French and then translated into English, Borges famously observed that "the original is unfaithful to the translation." Though it is hard to imagine saying the same of any translation of the *Commedia*, the endless libraries of translations of the poem allow for the idea of a Gestalt-*Commedia*, a kaleidoscopic *Commedia* made up of all its many versions in dozens of languages over centuries of meticulous and inspired readings. The notion of a definitive *Commedia*, even when applied to the poem Dante finished shortly before his death in 1321, seems to limit uncomfortably what to any sensible reader must appear as an infinite poem. And yet, its collected translations surpass that monstruous notion and propose instead a series of neverending metamorphoses that, in spite of their occasional depth and originality, never pretend to supplant or ignore the original.

The many translations of any single text grant that text something like the miracle of Pentecost, allowing readers the possibility of hearing the original words spoken each in its own tongue. Unlike my early intuition of utterly distinct entities, every translation is very much the same text, but the text questioned, re-examined, doubted, amplified, revised, moved into a different context, commented upon, brought up to date and changed as the tongues of flame changed the speech and thought of each of the twelve apostles. In this endless cumulative process, an infinity of translators might approach something like the perfect, definitive, archetypal text, fulfilling in its congress all its aesthetic possibilities and making explicit all its nuances of emotion and meaning.

Giovanni Boccaccio, Dante's near contemporary, copied into one of his manuscripts a curious account by a monk of Corvo, telling of an encounter with a stranger in the diocese of Luna. To thank the monk for his hospitality, the stranger offers him a few pages of a poem he has written in the Florentine tongue. The subject and art of the poem are so lofty, so exquisite, that the monk asks the stranger why he chose to express "so much learning in plebeian garb." The stranger explains that the Florentine vernacular was not his first choice, but that he had begun his poem in the language of Heaven, that is to say, Latin:

> Ultima regna canam, fluido contermina mundo,
> Spiritibus quae lata patent, quae premia solvunt
> Pro meritis cuicumque suis.
>
> The furthest realms I sing, that have common boundaries with the

fluid universe
stretching far out towards the spirits who give rewards
to each according to his merits.

Boccaccio included these verses in one of the last chapters of his loving biography of Dante.

If the anecdote is true, then the *Commedia* is, at least in its inception, a translation, a second draft of an unfinished Latin original. Certainly, the *Commedia* is at least a bilingual poem, and more than two, if we include such occasional uses of other languages such as that of Arnaut Daniel's Provençal in *Purgatorio* and the magical tongue of Pluto in *Inferno*. Latin lends nobility to Dante's Florentine Italian and Florentine Italian gives Latin a companionable domesticity. And though the vernacular is the language in which the *Commedia* is written, Latin is its linguistic undercurrent, implicit in glossed passages from Virgil and Statius, and in hymns and quotations of Scripture, and explicit in the occasional Latin word appropriate to a certain character or episode. Even before Dante the pilgrim knows that the apparition outside the dark forest is Virgil, he addresses it in a mixture of Latin, "*Miserere*", "Have pity" and the vernacular, "di me", "on me."

Much in the *Commedia* is translation of a very free kind, such as Dante's wonderful neologisms for that which has (or had) no term in Florentine Italian: "trasumanar", "to go beyond what is human" or "con l'ali si plaude", "with the wings clapping" (combining in the Ovidian verb *plaudere* both the actions of "clapping" and "flapping.") Dante, of course,

would not have recognized these forms of writing as translation. Rather, he would have known translation to follow the method adopted by Boethius in the early sixth century, continuing a tradition whose precursors were St. Jerome and Cicero and Horace. At the beginning of one of his learned commentaries (to Porphyry's *Isagoge*), Boethius wrote: "I feel that I have been most useful if, in composing books of philosophy in the Latin language, through the integrity of a completely full translation, not a single letter of the Greek is found missing." This method, which came to be known as *verbum ex verbo*, a "word for word" translation, is as far removed as possible from what we might label "translation" in our readings the *Commedia*. For us, the hymns sung by the blessed on each of the cornices of Purgatory, Dante's personal version of the Our Father recited in Purgatory, the various glosses of passages of the Apocalypse in Paradise, are all translations.

Above all, the purpose of the entire journey, the divine final revelation, is told by Dante, not as a translation of the vision but as the account of the failure of that translation: "A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa," "To the high imagination here power fails." As every translator knows, this is the point in the reading of any text when such dearth of power becomes all too evident, when words will not cross the conceptual border between this and the other language, when imagination fails to conceive perfectly, in a different tongue, a certain illumination which something that is not the intellect has finally managed to grasp.

This ultimate impossibility does not however render the translator's

task impossible: on the contrary. All art is approximation, and that which we construct out of words even more so. But perhaps, by attempting the wordsmith's craft through multiple voices, the orginal drafts and the successive translations, something of what the poet has imagined can begin to take shape.

Paul Valéry (and Shelley as well) imagined that all poems are part of an unfinished universal poem. More modestly, the original text of any poem, together with its translations, can be read as a single stanza of that poem, which, like the entire inconceivable whole, is still in the process of being written. Magically, we readers have been granted the privilege to be present at the creation.

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto IV:88
Dante, *Inferno*, Canto V:121-122
Jorge Luis Borges, "Sobre el Vathek de William Beckford" in *Otras Inquisiciones*, paragraph one before last.
Giovanni Boccaccio, "A Document Preserved in a Manusciot of Boccaccio's", appendix to Boccaccio's *Life of Dante*, transl. by Philip Wickstead, Oneworld Classics, London, 2009, p. 106

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I: 65-66
Boethius, *Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge*, translated by George MacDonald Ross, Univ. of Leeds, 1975
Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII: 142