TRANSLATORS' FORUM

Translating the 'Plultiple': Awaking Joyce in *Finnitalian*

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When a text changes in front of your very eyes, the whole concept of translation has to be revisited. Joyce's last book, *Finnegans Wake*, has been described as untranslatable. Nothing could be more true. Or more false. My annotated *Ulisse*, translated in collaboration with Carlo Bigazzi, came out in 2012,[1] but I've only recently accepted the challenge of translating, jointly with Fabio Pedone, *Finnegans Wake*. We are starting from Book 3, as Books 1 and 2 have already been translated by the late Luigi Schenoni. Books 3 and 4 will be published by Mondadori between 2016 and 2019.

In facing this challenge of 'untranslatability', if translators (or whatever they should be called in this case) really wanted to be true to the multilingual mission of the work, they should leave things as they are. And this in the spirit of the warning given one day by a senior person in the Joyce estate to the French translators of *Ulysses*, when he told them: 'Do not change a single word of it.' To keep the work as it is could also, in some distorted way, be seen as a possible mode of translation. When Pierre Menard, in Borges' 'Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote', rewrote *Don Quixote* by 'not changing a single word of it', he did not copy; he produced a new text that happened to be identical to the old one – the only difference between his work and the preceding one being not in the text itself, nor in what we could call the visible, but in the invisible: the minds of its new readers.

[1] See my 'Who's Afraid of Translating *Uiysses*?', *T&L*, 22 (2013), 240–8.

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Those minds would necessarily be totally different from the minds of the seventeenth-century readers for whom, supposedly, Cervantes had written the *Quixote*.

According to the Italian-English translator and lexicographer John Florio, his friend Giordano Bruno had 'taught publicly, that from translation all science had its offspring'.[2] By 'science' he presumably meant a mixture of wisdom and knowledge about the human condition, the same knowledge that Bruno had tried to impart in one of his London dialogues, *La cena delle ceneri* ('The Ash Wednesday Supper'), in which both he and Florio feature as characters. In another work by this proto-translation theorist we discover the profound and occult meaning of a favourite word of his, the term 'shadow'. On reading the epigraph to one of Bruno's so-called magical books, a text about the art of memory called *De umbris idearum* ('Of the shadows of ideas'), we encounter an uncanny warning: 'Umbra profunda sumus' – 'We are a deep shadow.' Why does Bruno mix singular and plural? He could have written 'We are deep shadows', and some of the mystery would have dissipated. But he said that we are *a single* shadow, meaning that we take part in the same, or in a sort of shared condition. We do not partake in the light, which is the main source of shadows. But we do aspire to it. Unfortunately, we are locked in the mortal condition, and this is our shadowy world. The vegetable world, Blake called it in *Milton*, a world that for Joyce too was but a shadow of eternity.[3] If this deep shadow that we are has boundaries and limits that some might hope to overcome, I suspect that Joyce, drawing on the secret wisdom of Bruno, spotted a similarity between those very limits of mortality, and the borders of language.

Is language infinite? Even a quick look at the *Wake* would make us believe so – as in music, where, although the number of notes is limited, the combinations are infinite, mainly because they draw on the mathematical resources of time (rhythm) and the frequency of vibrations (pitch). Is language akin to music in that respect, then? Once we establish that language is, at its core, sound, then the equation 'language = music' becomes clearer. It is on such an equation that writers like Joyce, who constantly translate themselves from an adopted language into another, primarily rely. In fact, the difference between

[2] John Florio, from *The Essays of Montaigne*, in *English Renaissance Translation Theory*, edited by Neil Rhodes *et al.* (London, 2003), pp. 382–95 (p. 390).

[3] 'Through spaces smaller than red globules of man's blood they creepycrawl after Blake's buttocks into eternity of which this vegetable world is but a shadow.' *Ulysses*, edited by Declan Kiberd (London, 2000), p. 238. Subsequent quotations from the novel are from this edition, cited by page number.

the *Wake* and other books that translators might find themselves faced with is not the degree of complexity or obscurity. It is its aim of becoming music, which is really the only way one can 'understand' it – musically. But how can we refer to the idea of translation, when rewriting a text 'according to its music'? It might be of some use to reflect for the umpteenth time on the many 'shadows' of the concept of translation; it might also be useful to remind ourselves that all sorts of metaphors have been used to explain that translation often draws inspiration from what translation does. And what translation does is to turn one thing into another: at times into something better, at times not. It much resembles a fallible alchemical process, for it does not often turn inferior materials into gold. In this light, how rightly wrong would Borges be in wisely and mischievously suggesting that even mistakes in translation are sometimes welcome, for they lead to new discoveries that even the author could not have imagined?[4]

The *Wake* has been called by one of its most brilliant exegetes a 'book of the dark', in opposition to *Ulysses* which, as Joyce himself explained, was associated with the light of day.[5] As a translator of both works, I wouldn't necessarily see them in the light of such a dark opposition. To me *Ulysses* is dark enough, dark as the soul, as Stephen Dedalus would say. A lot of its most complex episodes are set at night, and without its nightly atmospheres we would be somehow lost in a sort of 'darkness shining in brightness which brightness could not comprehend' (p. 34). And yet *Finnegans Wake* is undoubtedly darker than *Ulysses*, or rather, dark in a different mode. It is in the *Wake* that Giordano Bruno's teaching about the shadowy nature of the human condition really materializes, as a queer ghost hanging over Joyce's œuvre.[6] Bruno – a word that, incidentally, means both 'brown' and 'dark' in Italian – is *really* a shadowy presence in Joyce's works. Very much like Shakespeare, who in *Ulysses* was said by Stephen to be 'a ghost, a shadow now, the wind by Elsinore's rocks or what you will, the sea's voice, a voice heard only in the heart of him who is the substance of his shadow' (p. 252). Bruno is one of the most important impalpable presences in Joyce's works, to the extent that his motto 'in tristitia hilaris, in hilaritate tristis' ('sad in happiness, happy in sadness') gets translated in the *Wake* into

[4] See *Borges on Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery*, edited by Sergio Gabriel Vaisman (Lewisberg, PA, 2010), p. 11.

[5] Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford, 1982), p. 695.

[6] Bruno did not invent his idea of the shadow. He derived it from a long tradition spanning back to Plato's *Republic* and *Timaeus*, but also including a number of Christian authors, such as Origen and St John. Most probably, though, it was through Bruno that Joyce began to entertain the philosophical implications of the word 'shadow'.

the names of the couple (brother and sister) Tristopher and Hilary. Joyce was allegedly fond of Bruno's works. He even 'translated' his name, or rather, his toponymic, Nolano, in his 'book of the dark', where we have him, for instance, as Noland – which also happens to be the opaque 'translation' of the name of another philosopher, John Toland, who had translated Bruno's *Spaccio della bestia trionfante* into English.

There is a sort of reasoning according to which, from within the borders of the mortal condition (a linguistic condition in the first place) one can envisage two types of outlook: silence or infinity. His is a sort of infinity that Joyce ironically placed side by side with the prospect of immortality, when he defiantly suggested that he had put in the *Wake* 'so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of ensuring one's immortality'.[7] As a programme, to reach immortality through (textual) obscurity is akin to the ways in which many religions speak of mysteries in terms of something unknown and unknowable – emanating directly from the divine abyss. Joyce, being fond of the ritual and credo of the Eastern Orthodox Church,[8] might have endorsed one of the tenets of the mystical tradition of the Orthodox: the doctrine of *agnosia*.[9] Roughly, this proposes that, since God is unknowable, above every possible object of knowledge, in order to come closer to him we need to get rid of all our mortal knowledge and empty our minds, till they are no more capable of thinking the thinkable. The goal is to end up residing in the obscurity of knowledge. But some might object that this also resembles silence, which is fundamentally the absence not of knowledge but of sound – and silence, as we have noted, was not Joyce's way. Joyce chose obscurity, the void, and filled it with a multiplicity of meaning-making sounds. In fact, he had no intention whatsoever of taking away meanings or even sounds from the texts he produced. Rather, he was obsessed by the never-ending strategy of introducing in his works (most of all in *Finnegans Wake*) as many 'voices' as possible, and this he achieves by creating his own literary music.

Actually, this utterly obscure complexity might ironically turn out to be an advantage for translators rather than an obstacle. It was Giorgio Melchiori who first put forward the idea that paradoxically the *Wake* is

[7] Ellmann, p. 521.

[8] R. J. Schork, 'James Joyce and the Eastern Orthodox Church', in *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 17 (1999), 107–24.

[9] Joyce most probably became interested in this doctrine through Dionisius the Pseudo-Aeropagite, whom he often quotes in his works, a theologian very much revered in the Eastern Church. See Colleen Jaurretche, *The Sensual Philosophy: Joyce and the Aesthetics of Mysticism* (Madison, WI, 1997).

more easily translated than Dickens, because the text proves almost as obscure to an English-speaking general reader as it is to a non-anglophone one – though the latter has to be at least proficient enough in English.[10] Umberto Eco seems to agree with this, pronouncing the *Wake* one of the easiest texts to translate, as it gives translators a maximum of creative liberty.[11]

Now, though I am partly reassured by such suggestions, I am at the same time conscious that linguistic competence is not the only problem posed by the *Wake* for translators. Nor are one's creativity or musical ear always going to help, when the text proves simultaneously, and on many levels, obscure and ineffable. And yet, at least judging by the way in which Joyce attempted to translate a most fascinating section of his work into (an invented and very musical) Italian, creative and interpretive freedom might actually end up being an important asset of any translation of his final work.[12] Translators should, of course, refrain from feeling that their position towards the target text has to be too close to the author's position towards the source text. They are 'just' readers, so to speak.

When Joyce translated into Italian the Anna Livia passage (Book I, Chapter 8) he was not afraid of playing freely with compensation. That is, whenever he could not reproduce all the meanings he had crammed into one invented word by creating another invented word, he spread them out into various parts of the sentence, as if they were mobile things, with no fixed abode. He was primarily looking for musical structures, and meanings came second, though they had to be there all the same. Joyce well knew that meaning is relational, and words are not, nor could ever be, the sole vehicle of signifying relations. He chose to create ever-changing new units of sound-related meaning.

He was Joyce, one might add, and a translator has to be much humbler. However, one cannot but feel that, in doing this, Joyce was setting a path for his potential translators: he was teaching them how to cope with his work in translation. By the same token, he was inviting his readers to be as creative as possible. With Joyce, according to Terry Eagleton, the reader who in the past was 'treated

[10] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake H.C.E.*, introduced by Giorgio Melchiori (Milan, 1982), p. li.

[11] Umberto Eco, 'Ostrigotta, ora capesco', in James Joyce: *Anna Livia Plurabelle*, edited by Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli (Turin, 1996), p. xi.

[12] On various aspects of Joyce's Italian self-translation, see among others: Umberto Eco, 'Introduzione', in *Anna Livia Plurabella* (Milan, 1995); Serenella Zanotti, *Italian Joyce: A Journey through Language and Translation* (Bologna, 2013); Jacqueline Risset, 'Joyce Translates Joyce' *Comparative Criticism*, 6 (1984), 3–21; R. M. Bollettieri Bosinelli, 'Anna Livia's Italian Sister', in *Transcultural Joyce*, edited by Karen Lawrence (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 193–8.

as a mere skivvy or dogsbody by a disdainful caste of authors, finally becomes a sort of co-creator of the literary work'.[13] If Joyce is really establishing a new relationship between the reader and the work in these terms, I wouldn't be too shocked at the possibility that he was also inviting those professional readers of his work whom we call translators to play around with it, and to attempt to make his inventions reverberate in the most 'plultiple' way possible.[14] This is because *Finnegans Wake* is designed to include its translations in a (poly)system whose protagonists are, in Patrick O'Neill's words, 'not only the author and his or her text but also an indefinitely large series of translators, who may subsequently, as new "authors" of the "same" text, create their "own" texts based to a greater or lesser degree on their encounter with this one, originary source text'.[15]

Such an approach to the *Wake* ends up eliding the distance between readers of the original and readers of the translation, as the original *is* in many ways itself a translation; not only because it is undoubtedly written in English, one of Joyce's adopted languages, but primarily because it incorporates an impressive amount of other languages, which are used not only semantically but also as other modes of transcribing the same text for new ears as well as eyes. It often happens in the *Wake* that something apparently written in some kind of English turns, if read aloud, into another language – often Italian. Take, for example, the following line from the fable called *The Ondt and the Gracehoper* (Book 3, Chapter 1): '*Your whole's whercabroads with Tout's trightyright token on*' (*FW* 419.02). Here a plurality of meanings, connections, and allusions can be spotted. But read one phrase aloud, and if you have an ear for Italian, 'Tout's Trightyright' will (almost) read as if the Italian words 'Tu tradirai' were pronounced by someone with an anglophone accent. 'You will betray (me)' is a different Judas-inspired version of what Jesus says to Peter in the Gospels, foreseeing his triple denial of him. If we wanted to identify a specific character speaking here, and had to choose between Peter and Judas (the one who actually betrays Jesus), we might even have to refrain from choosing, as their behaviour is so similar that they could be thought of as sharing almost a common nature. One wonders whether that 'joepeter' we encounter in *FW* 426.21 might be, alongside Jupiter, also a conflation of the two Gospel characters. But what is going to be denied or betrayed here?

[13] Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven, CT, 2013), p. 185.
[14] 'Plultiply' is an invented word from *Finnegans Wake* 405.01.
[15] Patrick O'Neill, *Polyglot Joyce: Fictions in Translation* (Toronto, 2005), p. 7.

Let's follow a thread that, leaving Italy, passes by the Latin world, and, going back in time, ends up in the ancient Greece. It could be argued that the direct object of the above betrayal, 'token on', again if read aloud, after having distanced oneself from the visible script of the page, *could* become, in Greek, 'tō kenon', which means the void, emptiness. It is a concept frequently used in Greek philosophical texts, including Aristotle's. To betray the void might sound impossible, unless we read this idea in a metaphysical and almost mystical way, resorting for example to the concept mentioned before, that 'God is the nothing', according to the mystical tradition of the Eastern Church. Something of the kind is also alluded to in some Kabbalistic sources, where God is at the same time the void and that entity which fills it (both sound and silence, in other words), as in the Bible: 'And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness [was] upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.' Needless to say, it has been demonstrated that Joyce knew his Kabbalah well.

But going back to the half-line above from the fable of the Ondt, who is it that is betraying that precious void which represents both the invisible and the inaudible (the ineffable, God), and the visible and audible (the earth)?[16] No doubt Joyce liked to play with words just as the old rabbis did. Words were void for him – 'In the buginning is the woid' he writes in *FW* 378.29 – and they had to be filled with meaning by a godlike creator of new combinations of sound and sense. More than that, he had to do the whole thing playfully, so to speak, for he also wrote: 'In the beginning was the gest he jousstly says' (*FW* 468.05). To him the 'just' way to approach language was by starting to recognize its fluidity, the distance between what we see on the page and what our minds 'hear'. Snippets of sentences that might look as though they are written in English, as soon as we read them aloud seem to reveal themselves as belonging to another language. It is not only the English language Joyce uses to create such 'dislocuting'[17] effects. In fact, something similar happens with Irish, as in the case of 'cuistha first' (*FW* 422.18). Though 'cuistha' seems to allude to hunger during Irish famines,[18] the two words together sound like the

[16] To support the mock-religious diatribe Joyce alluded to in the 'trightyright/tradirai' bit, and the connection with Peter the potential betrayer, we might consider how the betrayal/denial is going to happen three times: *tray* had already been used in the *Wake* as a distorted version of the Italian *tre* (*FW* 403.04). And we might even remind ourselves that 'to tray' is obsolete for 'betray'.

[17] I allude to the title of a fundamental work in Joycean scholarship, Fritz Senn's *Joyce's Dislocutions: Essays on Reading as Translation*, edited by John Paul Riquelme (Baltimore, MD, 1984).

[18] Roland McHugh, *Annotations to 'Finnegans Wake'* (Baltimore, MD, 2006), p. 422.

Italian 'guastafeste', meaning 'spoilsport' or 'killjoy', which perfectly fits the context.

When I said that *Finnegans Wake* is a translation, I meant exactly this: as a book, a novel, or whatever it is, we cannot rely only on the invented (though English-sounding) language in which it is written; we also need to have an eye to the dynamics of translation which finally turned it into whatever it is. After all, Joyce's language was not English, and an argument can be made to sustain the hypothesis that all he does in his later work, but also partly in *Ulysses*, is to attack the English language (and English culture), to undermine it, to seek a sort of vengeance[19] with the help of a number of 'minor languages' which end up 'colonizing' and threatening the status of English as a *lingua franca*.

Joyce with *Finnegans Wake* employs multilingualism to undermine this politically and historically imposed position that English as a global language happens to enjoy. Accordingly, the problems for a translator of his work are numerous and seemingly insurmountable, whether we approach them from a solely interlinguistic point of view (as should never happen when issues relating to literary translation are at stake), or whether we culturalize the question by resorting to the idea of equivalence. In fact, if an Italian translator of the *Wake* wanted to, say, undermine the status of Italian as a *lingua franca*, he would completely miss the target, as Italian is *not* a *lingua franca*. In fact, when Italian *was* an international language (for the educated classes of Europe, during the Renaissance), it was, as English is now, much more easily permeated by other languages.

When Florio's *New World of Words* was published, in 1611, educated Italian readers of this wonderful dictionary were obviously familiar with a lot of words we don't use any more, words that now have for us a 'Joycean' touch. They seem invented, but they are not. One of them, a beautiful word, is *infinitiplicare*, which Florio explains as meaning 'to multiply in infinitie'. That is what Joyce does in order to reach back to the future of languages through the 'allmurk' (*FW* 404.10) of creation. In fact, in creating a space in which the future of a new invented idiom virtually incorporates all other idioms – an idiom, to be sure, that translators will help readers re-imagine in turn – he is also alluding to the imagined past of Babel, before the multiplicity of the languages was born out of some kind of mythical linguistic uniformity. Of course, *Finnegans Wake* is not a treatise on the history

[19] On this point see Luke Gibbons, *Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics, and Aesthetics in 'Ulysses'* (Oxford, 2002).

of languages. It is a literary work before being a political one. Its most revolutionary statements only work when they are reproduced through translation dynamics: the dynamics of reading, of course, and those of professional translation, which will make new readings and new translations possible.

Finnegans Wake is Joyce's attempt to bypass all literary expectations born out of readers' relationship to written texts, so being able to reach back to the very 'buginning'. And this, to be sure, was a time when literary works were 'oral books', sacred texts just a sequence of consonants, and music, even silent music, was at the core of it all.

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