

IN THE GARDEN OF BETRAYAL: TEXT TO FILM, LANGUAGE TO LANGUAGE

Adapting a literary work for a motion picture is always somewhat risky, as is translating a literary work into another language. Should a translator have misgivings about his editor a priori, in anticipation of possible betrayal? Should an author be wary of the director assigned to make his book into a motion picture, again as a defense against potential unfaithfulness? Giorgio Bassani's reaction to the 1970 screen adaptation of his novel *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* left no doubt about his feelings of betrayal. And translators frequently express ire and indignation when their carefully-wrought translations are subjected to the treacherous pen of an insensitive editor. Editore, traditore after all rhymes just as handily as traduttore, traditore.

In Tennessee Williams' play *Camino Real*, Marguerite says to Jacques: "We have to distrust each other. It is our only defense against betrayal." Betrayal, of course, can take many forms. Following Marguerite's advice, must a translator distrust his editor a priori, in anticipation of betrayal? Must an author distrust the director assigned to make his book into a motion picture?

Adapting a literary work for a motion picture is always somewhat risky, since those devoted to the book — foremost among them the author — are liable to rebel against anything that is the least bit unfaithful to the original work. Giorgio Bassani's reaction to the 1970 screen adaptation of his novel *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* was no exception. Writing shortly after Vittorio De Sica's Finzi-Contini film was released in December, 1970, the author let his feelings be known in no uncertain terms in an essay entitled "Il giardino tradito," The Betrayed Garden (included in the collection *Di là dal cuore*, Milan: Mondadori, 1984, pp. 311-321). In the essay he goes back to "the now distant year 1963," to retrace the origins of the "strange story" he is prepared to tell us. It was in that year that Documento Film, a production company in Rome, acquired the motion-picture rights to *The Garden of the Finzi-Contini*. Valerio Zurlini, who had already been designated the director, was assigned the task of writing the screenplay for the upcoming film. Zurlini set to work immediately, calling in scriptwriter Salvatore Laurani to collaborate with him, and in a short time put together an initial screenplay which was given to Bassani to read.

The author's reaction was one of dismay. "What on earth could I say about it? Instead of basing it on the novel and only that, Zurlini and Laurani had drawn copiously on all my other books, from the *Cinque storie ferraresi* to the *Occhiali d'oro*. So that in addition to the characters in the novel,

other figures met up around the tennis court in the garden of the Finzi-Contini estate: Elia Colcos, the doctor protagonist of the *Passeggiata prima di cena*, the elderly Socialist teacher of the *Ultimi anni di Clelia Trotti*, the physician Athos Fadigati, the distinguished homosexual professional who is at the heart of the story narrated in the *Occhiali d'oro*, and so on." The effect, he admits, was at times downright comical. Though readily acknowledging the decency and sincerity of purpose which had fundamentally inspired the work — "after all, what else had Zurlini and Laurani wanted, if not to take their lead from the undersigned and his books to produce a kind of fresco about the Jewish tragedy in its entirety: that of Ferrara, Italy, and the world?" — his response to the end result was one of genuine perplexity. As fate would have it, there was no need for much discussion. The production company itself did not appear to be won over by the script, and for the time being the project was shelved.

Bassani tells us that Zurlini and Documento Film returned to the project several times in the years that followed, never actually setting aside the first Zurlini-Laurani screenplay, but calling in new scriptwriters to modify it, among them Tullio Pinelli and later Franco Brusati. None had much success and Zurlini definitively abandoned the project around 1966. Still, Documento did not give up on the idea of making the novel into a film: "In early 1970, the producers turned to Vittorio De Sica, who accepted the assignment with pleasure. They sought me out as well, asking if I would agree to collaborate." As it turned out, however, the "collaboration" did not involve the actual writing of the screenplay itself, which was assigned to a scriptwriter *di fiducia*. Bassani, on the other hand, was expected to participate later on, during the revision phase. "Interested as I too was in seeing the film made, I did not hesitate to say yes. And I trustingly prepared to read the new screenplay." In hindsight, an instance where distrust might have been a better defense against betrayal?

Bassani's disappointment in the new screenplay (the fourth in chronological order) was great. Rather than attempting anything new, the writer Vittorio Bonicelli, whether upon the production company's advice or on his own initiative, had based his work on the previous screenplays. Though his objective was to retain the best and discard the worst, Bassani's opinion of the resulting job of stitching things together could only be negative. "I immediately said as much to both Documento and Bonicelli himself, who, being the candid, intelligent person he is, acknowledged at once that the screenplay should be entirely rewritten from scratch." And so it was that Documento and Vittorio De Sica assigned Bassani and Bonicelli the task of

retracing the path that the other scriptwriters had traveled in the past with scant success. It was this screenplay that became the “betrayed garden.”

Before going on to detail the specific examples of betrayal, Bassani carefully outlines the points of agreement that he and Bonicelli reached with Documento upon delivery of their screenplay:

First, that the screenplay would be returned to them “in a few days” following a “technical” review by an unidentified individual of Documento’s choosing. They would therefore have time to add any finishing touches and finalize their work.

Second, that the film’s story line would be interspersed with the recurring, obsessive image of the round-up of the Jews of Ferrara which took place following September 8, 1943. These images were to be filmed in black and white, as in a news documentary, the color of raw, naked truth. The expedient was deemed necessary for a number of reasons. To begin with, because it would in some way restore the structure of the novel, which is built around two distinct temporal planes, that of the present (a Sunday in April, 1957), and that of the past (the period 1938-1939). But most of all because it would save the film from flat, boring, caricaturish pedanticism.

Contrary to the agreements that were made, the screenplay was returned to Bassani and Bonicelli almost two months later, “when work on the film, though not completed, had progressed to the point where any further protest became impractical, purely theoretical.” It turned out that the mysterious reviewer, scriptwriter Ugo Pirro as they only then came to learn, had radically modified the Bassani-Bonicelli script. Bassani writes: “The plan to respect the novel’s two different temporal planes in the film had not been taken into the slightest account. The new screenplay, crammed with didactic tirades foreign to the book’s spirit, now ran decidedly along a single plane, that of the past, with the effect, moreover, of reducing the character of Giorgio, the leading male figure, to a meager not to say insignificant role. Structured this way, his story became trite, sentimental, ordinary, so that it was not clear why it was necessary to devote a lengthy film to it.”

Besides the alteration of the temporal structure of the novel, numerous scenes were deleted, meaningless additions inserted, and dialogues grossly altered. All gratuitous touches that Bassani found alien to the substance and spirit of his work. “...all these little occurrences had an obvious pedantic function. They were tantamount to so many winks, a sly twinkling of the eye put there to instruct the children, namely the public. It should be said moreover that such supporting documentation at times lacked any basis in objective truth. In Italy, prior to 1943, to September 8, 1943, the pursuit of Jews was never practiced.”

But what Bassani disliked the most was the considerable liberties taken with the treatment of some of his characters in the Pirro revision and in the resulting film. Later on in the essay he talks about these figures individually: The Micòl in De Sica's film is a fairly ordinary girl, rather fatuous, who displays no hint of unpredictability. Alberto isn't even a character — "elegant dressing gowns, fine sweaters, impeccable white trousers, paleness, ... vague faggotry" — and neither is Malnate — "undeniably an attractive young man, ... but in the end the actor who plays him seems far more suited to the role of cowboy or sailor than that of a young Milanese antifascist of the 1930s." And Giorgio is perhaps the character most sacrificed in the film: "the film, continually uncertain as to whether to portray the love story between him and Micòl, or present a documentary on Mussolini's Italy on the eve of the Second World War, or describe the anti-Semitic persecutions carried out under Fascism, makes him into a lifeless, minor character, lacking any moral significance. In the novel, Giorgio is only seemingly a young man like all the others. He looks like a twenty-year-old, but his mind and heart are those of an adult: the mind and heart of the writer who, at nearly fifty years of age, looks back and judges himself as a young man."

Rather than replying directly to Documento's letter asking for his opinion on the Pirro revision — since the film was so far along, any effective intervention was by then impossible — Bassani, through his attorney Franco Reggiani, merely requested that his name be omitted from the list of scriptwriters. He had no wish to endorse, against his will, something that no longer reflected his work. "Documento turned a deaf ear to this letter from attorney Reggiani. As the film was finalized over the course of the following months... no one came forth to respond to my request to not be included among the scriptwriters, or to at least discuss it. Verbally, through intermediaries, and once even in writing, I was merely advised to wait. First I should see the film. It had turned out magnificently. I would be overjoyed with it..."

Bassani eventually saw the film in the presence of a judge, who had meanwhile pronounced him right, and Documento and Vittorio De Sica wrong. And so he wrote his essay to express his feelings "about a work from which justice has so fittingly removed my name. That the film was in some way derived from my novel is indisputable, nor had I ever dreamed of contesting that. But that it betrays my novel, in substance and above all in spirit, I believe no one can deny."

Bassani ends by declaring his satisfaction in asserting his due right not to share in the film's paternity, even marginally: "How could I! Trusting

that the film would be shot in accordance with the Bassani-Bonicelli screenplay, I had granted permission (cordially, of course, without asking for any monetary return) for Giorgio's house in Ferrara to be the same house at no. 1 Via Cisterna del Follo which had belonged to my grandfather, to my father, and which is now mine. A very recognizable house: everyone in the city knows whom it belongs to. Now, to use my house, in Ferrara, the better to attribute to me a story that had nothing to do with me; to demand that I appear capable of having put the life and death of the person I loved most in the world, namely, my father, on the line: these are two extremely atrocious outrages that they had attempted to impose on me. Had I borne them without protest, I would not have been a writer, nor even a man."

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As I read the passionate, outraged words of this writer whose work had been betrayed, I was reminded of the ire and indignation I have heard expressed by my translator colleagues when their carefully-wrought translations are subjected to the treacherous pens of an insensitive editor. *Editore*, *traditore* after all rhymes just as handily as *traduttore*, *traditore*.

Parallels come to mind that indicate betrayal at the hands of albeit well-intentioned editors, though there are of course some differences as well. For one thing, the editing of a text is rarely a concurrent collaborative effort between editor and translator but rather a process that unfolds sequentially. Like Bassani, the translator is not generally expected to be an active participant during the editing process, but is called upon at a later stage to review the editor's revisions. And so he trustingly hands over his meticulously rendered text, placing it on the altar like a sacrificial lamb. Another instance where distrust might be a better defense against betrayal? Timing comes into play here, because just as Bassani's screenplay was returned to him when work on the film had progressed to the point that any further protest was useless, sometimes edited proofs come back for review too late for the translator to impose any effective changes.

While I should state at the outset that my own experience with the editors I have worked with has been more providential (indeed sometimes the author himself can serve as "editor," an occasion which I have experienced and treasured), that has not always been the case. Nor have other translators been as fortunate. The translator's disappointment and dismay in seeing his assiduously considered solutions undone by a stroke of an editor's pen may indeed be great, and the resulting effort may seem like a crazy-quilt unraveled and then patched back together. There is a lot of

retracing that goes on, a backtracking that sometimes leads to losing the original trail. To undoing, if you will.

At times this backtracking can seem purely subjective not to say gratuitous, based on an editor's momentary whim. Other times it comes down to a matter of personal preference: An editor once changed my translation of *lebensraum* to a more literal "room to live," whereas I preferred "vital space," especially in the context: Jews of Rome confined to a ghetto and deprived of *lebensraum*. Another editor deleted a detail because he felt that the point was already made by the protagonist's action, without it having to be spelled out. While I agreed that it was more subtle to leave it out, I expressed concern that it might "flatten out" the character of the protagonist, an historical figure whose irascible nature and shortcomings the author had chosen to emphasize.

At still other times there may be a lack of knowledge or understanding on the editor's part. Numerous examples may be cited: A reference to the Roman artichokes known as *mammole*, literally "violets," was once questioned, requiring me to explain that the artichokes may be called that because they appear in the spring, like the flower. The use of the term "decuman" also raised a question, though later on in the same paragraph it was explained that the term refers to the two main Roman streets that made up every city plan: the decuman (east-west) and the cardinal or card (north-south). Another editor questioned the use of the word "epicedium," saying that no general readers were going to know what it means, though conceding that it might be worth leaving it in for "color." I confirmed that I had indeed left it in for "color" since it was a word that the protagonist and other intellectuals of his day would have used. I added that a reader could get it from the context or refer to a dictionary, and that I did not think we should "dumb down" the text too much or we'd lose the special flavor of the period.

Sometimes there is a presumed knowledge. An amusing instance concerned the Roman dish known as *cazzimperio*. The editor suggested adding an "explanatory" paraphrase in parentheses, namely "(*cazzo* being a rude term for the male organ)." I tactfully suggested that we not do this — not only because the text goes on to say that the word comes from *cacio* (cheese) and that it stood for "melted cheese with pepper," but also because some etymologies say it derives from *cazza*, a melting-pot or ladle, not *cazzo*, the referred-to organ. I also pointed out that the *imperio* was thought to be a corruption of *in pepe* (with pepper) and that elsewhere the recipe is called *cacimperio* or *cacimpero*. The male organ surfaced again in regard to the term *cazzotti*: is it "*cazzo*" at the base of this word, the editor asked.

I replied that *cazzo* is at the base of a lot of Italian words that no longer have any relation to the derivation, and that a *cazzotto* is a sock or a punch, with no sexual connotation.

Another amusing example of presumed knowledge concerns the use of the word “cocagna” [sic] in a sentence taken from an English translation of Goethe’s *Travels in Italy*. Writing about feast days in Naples, Goethe said that “a general Cocagna” occurred at these times. When the editor questioned the word, I explained that it is also spelled “cucagna” and “cuccagna,” that “Il paese della cuccagna” means Land of Plenty, and that it is also found in the *Adventures of Pinocchio*. When the editor insisted that we find an English word, I suggested using Cockaigne, or Cockayne, or simply the word “feast.” A second editor got into the act, insisting that Cockaigne in English was a legendary land of plenty, not a celebration. Moreover their two Italian-English dictionaries did not provide a definition of “cocagna” and she could not find anything on the Internet that identified it as a feast. “Unless the translator has a better Italian dictionary,” she asked whether combining the two options and saying “Cockaigne feast” would make sense. At this point my patience ran out! “No, it does not make sense to combine the two options!” I replied. “Trust me, my ‘dictionary’ in this case is also in my head! The word *cuccagna* is definitely used to mean a feast, the good life, good times, etc. In Italian they even say ‘è finita la cuccagna,’ the party’s over.” The final result: “At such times a general cocagna [*cuccagna*, feast] is celebrated...”

Like Bassani and Bonicelli, the translator sometimes thinks he has reached an understanding with the various editors along the way — the content editor, the managing editor, the production editor, the copyeditor, and so on — regarding certain points that are essential to his rendering of the text, only to later find revisions that completely overlook these issues. Though the translator might think that his “final draft” is really final, there are still numerous stages and drafts for his manuscript to go through. Sometimes there are radical modifications that are disruptive and distract from the text. The sequence of events may be changed, altering the essential structure of the novel. Other times the author’s intentional ambiguity is affected by the intrusion of “clarifications” that are meant to be helpful but that result in lackluster predictability and eliminate subtle nuances that lend mystery. This can happen when the editor does not understand the author’s style.

Sometimes altering the sequence of events or reshaping the structure of the novel may result in a change for the better, producing a more logical arrangement and a more coherent flow. A very skillful editor with whom I

had the privilege of working provided a fine example of this type of editing. The project was unusual to begin with, since the original text had not yet found a publisher in Italy. Accordingly the first editing of the manuscript was done on the translation and not the original. As the editor put it, “If the author were to submit the work to an Italian publisher, he’d have to be partly translating the English back into Italian. It’s surely a first in my experience!” Another unusual feature was that pursuant to the editing of the translation, the author decided to try rewriting in English those few passages that had to be rewritten or newly written. This entailed close collaboration among author, translator and editor. The editor made sure that the material was organized in the best possible way and worked to ensure clear development and expression, and to identify gaps or inconsistencies in logic. The end result was a pruned and reshaped version which read much better than the original. As I remarked to the editor: “The fact that not all chapters were pruned to the same degree shows judicious editing! Brava!” All in all I thought the editor had done a wonderful job of cutting the text down to essentials, thereby tightening and focusing the narrative. Indeed the manuscript went from almost 67,000 to approximately 47,000 words! In addition to the excision, I felt the plot modifications and other substantive changes also added to the effectiveness of the narrative. And on a grammatical level, I thought changing the verbs that were in the past perfect to the simple past tense was a big improvement. All in all, the author and I were extremely pleased with the results and with the editor’s guidance throughout the process.

In connection with the imposition of “clarifications” or other “helpful” touches which interfere with the author’s intentional stylistic features, such editing or “tinkering” can only be described as meddling, and can seriously undermine the translator’s effort to respect the author’s text. Take sentences that run on and on, for example, or series without commas. When these are intentional, they are meant to contribute to the rhythm of the text, somewhat like a crescendo building and swelling. At the same time they may be a syntactical expression of a protagonist’s confused or disturbed state of mind. Sometimes, of course, the opposite is found in a text: short, choppy sentences. Douglas Hofstadter, for example, recently translated a novel entitled *The Discovery of Dawn*, written by Italy’s Walter Veltroni, a former mayor of Rome. In his Translator’s Preface Hofstadter referred to “Veltroni’s habit of using sentence fragments instead of full sentences” and told of his decision to occasionally turn those fragments into full sentences. If an editor were to encounter those unacceptably run-on sentences or those equally unacceptable sentence fragments, he might be tempted to make

them more conforming to generally accepted English syntax. If he does not understand the author's style, he will not recognize the translator's attempt to reflect the strategies of the original, and may well make "revisions" that undo what the translator strove to achieve.

While added material — such as the extended dialogue between Alberto and Malnate or other examples cited by Bassani — is not generally an issue for the translator, deleted or abridged sections of text can be, especially if there is a later reference to a section that has been cut. Moreover an abbreviated passage may assume an entirely different significance, a less significant import, or even become a meaningless remnant. Some deletions or other editorial changes, when gratuitous or unfounded, may end up being misleading or downright erroneous, having no factual objective basis.

Betrayal, as noted earlier, can take many forms. It's one thing when the editor reviewing the translation knows the source language, another situation when he doesn't.

An editor who knows the source language is liable to demand a more literal translation, rebelling against anything that seems the least bit unfaithful to the original work. He may object to the translator's attempt to "naturalize" the prose in order to have the English flow more smoothly. One such editor stated: "I come across dropped words, transpositions, and other deviations from the original, which are disturbing." Because an editor familiar with the source language may be more sensitive to the rhythms of the original prose, he may tolerate or even welcome a certain amount of idiomatic "foreignness," even if the resulting translation sounds stilted and unnatural. Precisely because he is so attentive to the original, this editor may introduce revisions that can sound awkward. Moreover he continually compares the translation to the original, and may ask numerous questions, sometimes more out of personal curiosity and interest than to check for accuracy.

On the other hand, an editor who does not know the source language edits the translation without reference to the original text. This editor is more apt to accept, and indeed welcome, "naturalizing" — and may even contribute to it — because he wants the translation to work well in English. Any revisions he makes will likely be aimed at enhancing the fluency and general readability of the target text. Then too, such an editor will be less aware of elisions or omissions on the part of a translator who slides over aspects of the original that a more literal translator would render more thoroughly. When foreign words are left as such in the translation, he will expect an explanatory footnote perhaps, or an accompanying paraphrase within the text, if the meaning is not clear from the context.

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In a worst case scenario, editors may take considerable liberties with a text, which are comparable to those encountered in the betrayed garden. Whether the adaptation is from text to film, or from source to target language, such liberties may be alien to the spirit of the work and can even alter its essential message. While most revisions are unlikely to be as dramatic as those Bassani experienced, they can be dramatically — and disturbingly — altering. Just as Bassani intentionally composed his work to leave the reader with a certain message which was later altered, if not distorted, by the scriptwriters, so the revisions made by an editor can subtly or not so subtly affect the translator's intentional attempt to faithfully render the message of the author's text.

In the end, though Bassani was promised that he would have an opportunity to review the screenplay, the opportunity to do so came too late to make a difference and his only recourse was to dissociate himself from the film production — an extreme solution and an option which some translators have sadly had to resort to from time to time. That the film was based on Bassani's novel was unarguable, yet it undeniably betrayed that work in substance and spirit. The same can be said of a poorly edited translation. While no one can contest the importance of the editor's role in substantially improving and bringing out the best in a manuscript, moderation and restraint should prevail over self-indulgence. The word "tinkering" should be remembered: not all revisions result in a better text. When I was an art student at Cooper Union, many lives ago, an instructor told us that the most important thing about painting was to know when a work was finished, when to stop fussing with it. I try to apply this to translation, though we all know (as did Borges) that there is no definitive translation and that a translation can be revised indefinitely, each time you go back to it. True, but not always for the better!

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