

## Extremes of “Remembering”: Translation as “Figura”

by Anne Milano Appel, Ph.D.

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“No man is an island...” wrote John Donne. Or is every man indeed an island, his thoughts and emotions bound by his words with no possibility of being communicated to another human being? If so, what does this mean for translation? Is the translator’s task (duty?) an impossible dream? Where do the borders of translation lie?

Many images have been put forth throughout the years to try to answer these questions. They range from the more negative tones of Nabokov’s head of a poet served up on a platter, Frost’s poetry lost in translation and the well-known Italian “traduttore-traditore”, to the more positive view of the translator as transformer, re-creator, performer, even liberator of the original text. Perhaps what all of these have in common is the idea of translation as a dialectical process, the product of a dialogue which occurs between the author and the translator.

Some have suggested that the questions confronted by Pierre Menard in the well-known short story by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges<sup>1</sup> represent the entire range of issues associated with the process of translation. George Steiner, for example, writes in *After BabeĀ*:

**Arguably, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” (1939) is the most acute, most concentrated commentary anyone has offered on the business of translation. What studies of translation there are, including this book, could, in Borge’s style, be termed a commentary on his commentary.**

And a reviewer, writing about Borges’ *Collected Fictions*<sup>3</sup>, takes the “commentary” even further, broadening it to include issues of authorship:

**Implicit are all basic questions pertaining to authorship: If a text can be re-created by someone other than its author, what exactly is an author and how are we to understand his connection to his text? The death of the fictional author, Pierre Menard, comes to mean the theoretical death of the Author, or more precisely, authorship.**

For the sake of argument, I suggest that Menard represents an extreme case at one end of a wide spectrum dealing with the concept of translation, and that it might be helpful to think in terms of two poles: repetition or replication on the one end (the kind of minimalism - though modified, as we will see - found in the Borges story) and re-creation and fulfillment (a kind of “remembering”) on the other.

In the story by Borges, fictional novelist Pierre Menard sets out to “write” (not “rewrite”, not “recreate”) chapters nine and thirty-eight plus a fragment of chapter twenty-two of the first part of *Don Quixote*. As Borges puts it: “Pierre Menard did not want to compose *another* Quixote... he wanted to compose *the* Quixote.”<sup>4</sup> Not a mechanical transcription of the original,

then, not a *copy*, but a process which Steiner refers to as “utter mimesis” or “transubstantiation”, that is, total identification (what in Italian we would call “immedesimazione”) with the author.

It was not so much that Menard aimed to achieve his goal by *becoming* Cervantes; he discarded this approach as being too simple. Rather, he wanted to remain Pierre Menard and arrive at the Quixote “*through the experiences of Pierre Menard*”. His approach was a deliberate attempt to recreate what in Cervantes was a spontaneous process, and the impossibility of the task was clear from the outset. In addition to a certain loss of artlessness, there was the fact that three hundred years “freighted with the most complex events” had passed since Cervantes’ words were written. On this aspect Steiner comments:

**In other words, any genuine act of translation is, in one regard at least, a transparent absurdity, an endeavor to go backwards up the escalator of time and to re-enact voluntarily what was a contingent motion of spirit.**

In the end, Menard’s *oeuvre* (dare we call it a translation?) and the original text turn out to be identical. Despite claims of “transubstantiation”, regardless of the fact that the same words are said to be charged with additional meaning, and notwithstanding the fact that the story’s narrator argues against the notion of mere “transcription”<sup>5</sup>, the result is, in fact, repetition and replication - the minimalism referred to earlier. Steiner himself appears to use the words “repetition”, “recreating” and “re-enacting” as though they were interchangeable, though he may simply be paraphrasing Borges. The narrator, after telling us that only those lacking in insight and acuity would view Menard’s work as a *transcription*, specifically states that Menard’s task was “*repeating* in a foreign tongue a book that already existed”.

With regard to the aspect of recontextualization, Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia provides an example of words taking on a different meaning with the passage of time and the unfolding of events in his book *L'affaire Moro*. Citing text referring to certain events of March 16, 1978, Sciascia notes that when written and read soon after Aldo Moro’s abduction, the words convey a particular meaning, whereas “if I were to write this today - the same words in the same order - the meaning would be quite different for me and for the reader”. We know that Sciascia has Borges’ story in mind, because a few paragraphs earlier he explicitly mentions it while calling our attention to the publication in 1905 of Miguel de Unamuno’s *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho*:

**From that moment on it was no longer possible to read the *Don Quixote* as Cervantes had written it: Unamuno’s interpretation, which seemed as transparent as glass with respect to Cervantes’ work, was in fact a mirror: of Unamuno, of Unamuno’s times, of Unamuno’s feelings, of Unamuno’s vision of the world and of Spanish affairs.”<sup>6</sup>**

Again, historical context has intervened.

But let us return to Borges’ story. Menard, as we have seen, sets himself the task of trying to “reconstruct” parts of Cervantes’ original work (“I have assumed the mysterious obligation to reconstruct, word for word, the novel that for him was spontaneous”, he tells the reader) and

ends up producing a “translation” which, word per word, is identical to the original text! This is because the two “rules” he follows are paradoxical: the one allows him to try out different variants, while the second forces him to sacrifice these variations to the original text. (Sounds familiar?) The results are both positive and negative: negative in that a loss of spontaneity must inevitably follow the deliberate re-creation of a work which originally flowed forth naturally and unforced; positive in that each word becomes laden with additional meaning accumulated during the three hundred years of history which have intervened between the writing of the two texts. Indeed, the enhancement of meaning - a “layering” of meaning associated with each word, as it were - is viewed as both ambiguous and enriching. The story’s narrator tells us:

**The Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is infinitely richer. (More *ambiguous*, his detractors will say, but *ambiguity* is richness.)**

Menard’s task proves ultimately impossible, however, and he repeatedly tears his work into scraps, realizing the hopelessness of it all. Yet Menard’s task (duty?) is the “mysterious obligation” of every translator: namely, to “repeat” an already existing work in a foreign tongue. As Steiner puts it: “It cannot and must be done”.

But is the translator’s task indeed that of repetition? To produce a text verbally identical to the original? To make of translation a perfect transcription? Steiner likens the realization of such a task to passing into a “state of mirrors” in which the translator lives on in the author, his “precedent shadow”. And yet translation may also be viewed as a means of self-affirmation, an act of creation through which the translator sets himself apart from “the other”, the “foreigner”. Viewed in this way, the translator’s “self” is identified through his language and voice which are distinct from those of the author.

Staying with the theme of Don Quixote, one cannot help thinking of Erich Auerbach’s essay “The Enchanted Dulcinea” in *Mimesis*<sup>7</sup>, in which Don Quixote himself may be seen as a kind of “translator” or “transformer”. Given the fact that the external reality - the crude peasant woman whom he is led to believe is Dulcinea - is in insuperable contrast to his idea (illusion?) of Dulcinea as the paragon of beauty and sole meaning of his life, some solution must be found to reconcile the two. Don Quixote’s solution is to imagine that Dulcinea has been enchanted, cast under a spell by some vile sorcerer. As Auerbach puts it, his “madness translates him into another, imaginary sphere of life”. He continues: “the persons and events of everyday life are constantly colliding with his madness and come out in stronger relief through the contrast”. Does the translator’s “madness” do this too? Is translation a way of transforming the author’s creation into another creative act which imitates the first and reconciles the two realities: the author’s and the translator’s? Indeed if literature is viewed as an imitation of reality, is translation another form of mimesis?

Menard’s dilemma raises a host of questions which most of us consciously or subconsciously confront every day: Should the translator try to duplicate the original work, or should he bring something of his own to it? Should he simply (or perhaps not so simply) mirror the

author's voice, or allow his own voice to occasionally be heard? Is it possible (or even desirable) to be one hundred percent faithful to a text? And if so, in what should that faithfulness consist? Moreover, is the translator's principal responsibility to the author or to the work? It seems clear up to a point: aside from the facetiousness of the Italian "se sono belle, non sono fedeli"<sup>8</sup>, faithfulness means not adding or subtracting any text, and trying to render the meaning that the author intended to convey. But how can one be *positive* of that meaning?

With regard to rendering the author's intended meaning, one is tempted to repeat with Steiner "It cannot and must be done". What makes it impossible is that the mind of the translator - the "lens" of the translator, if you will - inevitably comes between the original work and the translation. As a result, it is the translator's "interpretation" of the author's intended meaning that is ultimately rendered and conveyed to the reader of the translation. The translator cannot become completely invisible even if he wanted to. This is why if you give the same text to ten different translators, you will get ten different translations, expressing what each translator assumes to be the author's intended meaning. Gideon Toury, writing in *Culture Planning and Translation*<sup>9</sup>, refers to this as the novelty claim:

**In fact, the novelty claim would still hold for the n<sup>th</sup> translation of a text into a given language; be it for the second or the hundredth time: it is the *resulting* entity which is crucial here, the one which would actually be incorporated into the target culture; and this entity will *always* have never been there before. Unless, of course, one is willing to take Borges' speculations on "Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*" at face value and apply them to the process of generating translated texts.**

For better or worse, then, the translator is an added link in the chain of communication and this cannot help but have an effect on the transmission, sometimes facilitating it, sometimes not.

Viewed this way, the task of translation may indeed be an impossible dream. Some say that the challenge lies in seeing how close the translator can come to perfection, and they may be right. But how is "perfection" defined? In my opinion, there can be no such thing as a perfect translation. Rather, there are as many "perfect" translations as there are ways of experiencing and being.

Perhaps it makes more sense to speak in terms of equivalence rather than duplication. I read somewhere that in Norwegian a translator is said to "å gjendikte" a poem (or a novel, or a short story). I do not know the Norwegian language at all, but from the note I scribbled down at the time I read this, to "å dikte" apparently means to compose a work while "gjen" means to do it again. So the translator does it again, not in the sense of rewriting the work, but in the sense of creating an equivalent text using the words of his own language.

I stated at the outset that Menard represents one end of the spectrum. It might be helpful to think in terms of two poles: Menardian repetition or replication on the one hand, and re-creation and fulfillment - a kind of "remembering" - on the other. I would like to discuss this

second way of thinking about translation by borrowing the concept of “figura” used by Erich Auerbach in his studies on the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>10</sup>

Figural anticipation, or the use of the past to foreshadow and illuminate the present, forms the core of Auerbach’s studies on the *Commedia*, and his work is useful for establishing a terminology that can be applied to translation. Auerbach’s premise was that the *Commedia* was based on a figural view of things in that Dante’s *Weltanschauung* perceived a direct relationship between each earthly phenomenon and the plan of God. He pointed out that figural interpretation had a wide diffusion in the medieval period and beyond, and defined the use of the “figura” in the Christian world as a prophetic technique used to preannounce or prefigure events which were to follow. In addition to this, Auerbach distinguished between the “figura anticipatrice” or “futurorum,” the forward-looking “figura” which prefigured the future event, and the “figura svelata o adempiuta”, that is, the figure unveiled and fulfilled by the future event. Moreover, the future event which fulfilled the figure (the “adempimento”) was viewed as a form of “imitatio”, a “figura imitativa” which “remembered” the earlier event. In order to distinguish the figural technique from that of allegory, it was important to emphasize that the figure itself was a real, historic fact or person which represented or announced some other event which was equally real and historical. To Auerbach’s way of thinking, the difference between figure (“figura”) and fulfillment (“adempimento”) did not mean that the one was less real than the other.

Before applying these ideas to translation, I would like to give two examples of the use of “figura” in the *Commedia* as a means of further clarifying the concept. The first is Matelda, the “donna soletta” who appears in canto xxviii of the *Purgatorio*. Dante has been walking along a stream and gazing at the abundant variety of ever-flowering boughs, when suddenly

**I saw a solitary woman moving,  
singing, and gathering up flower on flower -  
the flowers that colored all of her pathway.<sup>11</sup>**

Viewed in the context of figural interpretation, Matelda may be seen as an example of a “figura” which is both anticipational and imitational. On the one hand, she represents humanity before the Fall from grace, earthly life in a state of harmony and perfection. On the other hand, she prefigures Beatrice, and thus anticipates “paradise regained”, the return to the primal Garden. In the figural interpretation of Matelda as the image of humanity unfallen as well as of humanity restored to grace, we sense the backward and forward movement of Dante’s Terrestrial Paradise, which is itself an anticipational and imitational “figura”: imitational in that it “remembers” the state of grace before the Fall, anticipational to the extent that it foreshadows a return to the Garden, to *what could have been*.

A second example is St. Francis of Assisi. Francis was one of the most suggestive and fascinating figures of the Medieval period, and though dead for many years, offered the possibility of influencing future action through the memory of his example and the exemplary lives of his early followers. Dante saw Francis as destined to revive that form of

poverty practiced by Christ, who was Poverty's first bridegroom<sup>12</sup>, and he developed this theme through a figural representation of Francis that promised spiritual renewal (both individual and societal) through "imitatio" of Francis himself, as well as of Christ. As the second bridegroom of Poverty, Francis "imitated" Christ's way of being in the world. In Auerbach's terminology, this was a "figura capovolta", an overturned figure, in that Francis did not prefigure Christ. Rather he was an imitative figure which emulated certain events characteristic of the life of Christ: a "figura imitativa" which came after the "figura anticipatrice."

How does the concept of "figura" relate to the second of the two poles of translation mentioned earlier? On the face of it, it might seem like just another form of repetition or transcription: the "figura imitativa" (the translation) as replication of an earlier event, the "figura anticipatrice" (the original work). But in figural interpretation, the "figura imitativa" does not just *repeat* its preceding event. In reference to Dante's representation of Francis with its promise of spiritual renewal through "imitatio", one critic was quite emphatic on this point, calling it "not imitation... but a unique reincarnation of the evangelical ideal."<sup>13</sup> Considered in this sense, the "figura" is more about re-creation and re-embodiment, rebirth and fulfillment, than it is about repetition. Viewed in a figural context, the translation is a re-creation of its "occasion, begetter and precedent shadow"<sup>14</sup>, not a mere transcription. There is a backward and forward movement which is both anticipational and imitational. The author's original work is the "figura anticipatrice" or "futurorum," which is later "fulfilled" by the translation, both being concrete, historical "facts" (texts) in which a direct relationship may be perceived; the translation is no less "real" than the original. Moreover, the "figura anticipatrice" (the original text) may be said to have a significance - or multiple levels of significance - which is at first hidden and later revealed or illuminated by the "adempimento", the translation which "fulfills" it. Anny Sadrin, in *The Tyranny of Words: Reading Dickens in Translation*<sup>15</sup>, describes this concept in terms of "liberation" of meaning:

**Each new translation, as we see, is a new performance of the text, each one brings out ("liberates") potential meaning and potential emotion. Translations, in other words, like stage or screen adaptations, fertilize, energize and sometimes even rejuvenate the old standard version which in the source-language is, of course, immutable.**

The original work, thus "liberated", becomes the "figura svelata o adempiuta", the figure unveiled and fulfilled by the translation. One is reminded of Michelangelo's concept of the sculptor's task, that of "liberating" the figure from the stone.<sup>16</sup>

Auerbach's terminology, then, appears to hold up well as a context within which to consider translation as re-creation: the original text looks forward to the future work which "imitates" and "fulfills" it while "remembering" it, and both texts are equally "real" with all that the word implies: validity, authenticity, legitimacy, etc.. In Borges' story, Menard himself alludes to the first part of a figural approach, the anticipatory relationship:

**My general recollection of the Quixote, simplified by forgetfulness and indifference, might well be the equivalent of the vague foreshadowing of a yet unwritten book.**

And the narrator of the story seems to sense that had Menard's task been realized, it would have represented the kind of manuscript which bears signs of "remembering" an earlier work:

**I have reflected that it is legitimate to see the "final" Quixote as a kind of palimpsest, in which the traces - faint but not undecipherable - of our friend's "previous" text must shine through.**

What else is a palimpsest if not a "figura svelata"? But Menard's task is not realized. We are told that not a single page survived the bonfires to which he subjected his notebooks. One can only assume, therefore, that his efforts fell short of realizing the impossible task of re-creation, of composing *the* Quixote, and that they remained at the level of transcription.

Some time ago I was discussing the concept of "figura" with a writer friend of mine, who told me that in contemporary Italy this concept of looking backward and forward is called "remembering the future." I like this idea for translation: the original work looks forward to the translation, while the translation looks backward to the original, in a kind of reciprocal "remembering".

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The story is found in the collection *Ficciones*. Translation copyright by Emecé Editores S. A., Buenos Aires, 1956. Initial Grove Press copyright 1962. First included in Everyman's Library, Knopf, in 1993.

I am indebted to colleague Roberto Crivello for having suggesting I read the Borges story and the related passage in Steiner's *After Babel*, and for having provided me with a copy of the text by Leonardo Sciascia (see below).

<sup>2</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel : aspects of language and translation* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Fictions* was translated by Andrew Hurley (Viking Penguin, 1998). The review by Jordan Mackay appeared in the Austin Chronicle and is available on-line at <http://www.austinchronicle.com/issues/vol18/issue12/books.VSBR.html>.

<sup>4</sup> All citations from the story are taken from the translation by Andrew Hurley, cit. sup.

<sup>5</sup> Referring to Pierre Menard's chapters, the narrator tells us: "others (lacking all perspicacity) see them as a transcription of the Quixote".

<sup>6</sup> Leonardo Sciascia, *L'affaire Moro* (Palermo: Sellerio editore, 1978). The English translation of Sciascia's text is my own and the referenced passages are found on pp. 26 and 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard Trask. New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1957. Original copyright 1953, Princeton University Press.

<sup>8</sup> The saying goes something like this: Translations are like women: if they are beautiful, they must be unfaithful; if they are faithful, they must be ugly.

<sup>9</sup> Available on-line at <http://spinoza.tau.ac.il/~tourney/works>.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, "Figura" in *Studi su Dante* (Milano: Feltrinelli Editore, 1963), and *Mimesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1953).

<sup>11</sup> *Purg.* xxviii, 40-42. From the verse translation by Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, 1982, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> "She was bereft of her first husband," *Par.* xi, 64. Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Vossler, *Mediaeval Culture: An Introduction to Dante and His Times* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1929, 1970).

<sup>14</sup> Steiner's words, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Available on-line at <http://users.unimi.it/dickens/essays/sadrin.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> The concept is expressed most notably in a sonnet to Vittoria Colonna which begins: "Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto / ch'un marmo solo in se` non circonscriva / col soverchio, e solo a quello arriva / la man, che ubbidisce all'intelletto." (Poesie LXXXIII).