

TRANSLATING CALVINO, CALVINO TRANSLATED, CALVINO TRANSLATOR

ABSTRACT

In questo saggio viene analizzato il rapporto di Italo Calvino con il processo di traduzione rispetto al timing della pubblicazione internazionale delle proprie opere a partire dalla fine degli anni sessanta, cioè in un momento in cui le opere di questo autore ricevono un progressivo riconoscimento internazionale, e in cui simultaneamente Calvino è sempre più interessato al dibattito teorico riguardante la traduzione. Si presentano qui anche alcuni aspetti della relazione di Calvino con William Weaver, il più rappresentativo traduttore americano di letteratura italiana moderna e contemporanea, e figura che ha avuto un ruolo decisivo nella ricezione di questo autore sia negli Stati Uniti che internazionalmente, vista la posizione dominante del mercato letterario americano dal secondo dopoguerra. Infine, propone un'analisi della complessa mediazione culturale di Calvino traduttore de *I fiori blu* di Raymond Queneau; in questa traduzione, Calvino sceglie una riscrittura creativa del romanzo di Queneau, considerando questo il miglior modo per esser fedeli a un romanzo davvero sperimentale.

The aim of this essay is to investigate Calvino's evolving relationship with both the translation process and the timing of the international publication of his own work from the late sixties on: at a time when the author first gains international recognition, he is also increasingly interested in the international theoretical debate about translation. This essay also deals with Calvino's relationship with William Weaver, the most representative contemporary American translator of modern and contemporary Italian literature, and a figure who had a tremendous impact in the American reception of this author, both in the USA and internationally, thanks to the privileged position of the American marketplace worldwide after WWII. Finally, it presents an analysis of the multifaceted cultural mediation performed by Calvino when, in 1967, he translates Queneau's *Les fleurs bleues*, a work in which the Italian author chooses a creative re-writing of Queneau's novel as the best way to be faithful to a very experimental work.

«We read only when we translate»
Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. II¹

Every cultural transfer implies relentless reinterpretation, rethinking and re-signification. Culture itself may be read as transfer, and, more specifically, as an ongoing negotiation and differentiation in relational systems. The fluidity of words, texts and images, media, etc. that characterizes cultural transfer stresses the diverse nature of

¹ CALVINO 1995a, vol. II, p. 1882.

the objects, the fluidity of the persons involved and the constant transformation of the environments.² Cultural transmission, and particularly the editorial mediation of this transmission,³ has always been central to my scholarship. The global mobility of words and their continual reinterpretation, rethinking, and re-signification (of a given work, its author, translator, and public as well as the institutions that transmit this cultural transfer) are therefore fundamental issues with which my research engages. I am currently working on William Weaver, the most representative American translator⁴ of modern and contemporary Italian literature. At the Lilly Library of the Indiana University, Bloomington, I have systematically studied his considerable archive of still largely unexplored papers – 12,000 meticulously organized documents consisting of letters, diaries, interviews, and writing dedicated to the process of translation – that offer an exemplary case study of the evolving multifaceted cultural mediation practiced by a translator for the American literary marketplace in the period following the Second World War.

In this essay, I focus on Italo Calvino⁵ (for whom Weaver was the principal American translator), a figure who contributed to the growth of my interest in translation and in this particular translator, and through whom I see the process of cultural transfer effected by an author expert in editorial mediation. I will first explore here the position of Calvino vis-à-vis the translation of his own works;⁶ then, his relationship to one of these translators (Weaver); and finally Calvino's role as translator of a work of Queneau's, *Les fleurs bleues*.

Calvino went to work at an early age for Einaudi, the most prestigious Italian publishing house of the post-war era. Einaudi's standing stemmed from its consistent anti-fascist position,⁷ its relationship to the Communist Party, which for a long period funded its work, and a close-knit circle of writers – among them Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini, and Leone Ginzburg – who were the most significant representatives of the 'new' in literature, importers of American, English, and Russian authors in a moment of prevailing nationalism. Calvino began his career at Einaudi first as communications manager, then as associate editor, and after the death of Pavese in 1950 as principal editor. Calvino's involvement with Einaudi guaranteed him immediate literary recognition when at age 24 he published his first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* [The Path to the Nest of Spiders]. For Einaudi, Calvino was author, reader, translator, creator of paratexts, and literary agent (in 1959, he was in the United States on a year-long Ford Fellowship during which he represented Einaudi to the American market-

² BOURDIEU 1971; BOURDIEU 1977; BURDIEU 1990; BOURDIEU 2005.

³ BOURDIEU 1999.

⁴ See HEILBRON SAPIRO 2002; CASANOVA 2000; CASANOVA 2002; CASANOVA 2015; EVEN-ZOHAR 1990.

⁵ For a bibliography on Calvino's work: BARANELLI 2007.

⁶ For a perspective on Calvino's evolving theoretical position on translation and on the textual analysis of the author's creative translation of Queneau's *Les fleurs bleues*, see CALVINO 1995; FEDERICI 2009.

⁷ MANGONI 2001.

place and came to know its retailers and agents).⁸ Calvino was also in charge of the firm's relations with the press; he contributed to establishing new scientific, young-adult, and literary series; and among the latter, he was the directors of *Centopagine* [One Hundred Pages], whose jacket-flaps and inside covers he wrote and signed. At Einaudi, Calvino was editor of his own literary works and essays, taking a crucial part in their material production and even – to some extent – in their reception. Calvino was well aware of how best to publish his work and reach out to his public, both nationally and internationally. At the same time he was also in a key position to orient the publication and promotion of the authors he most admired.

In his international dealings, Calvino was both cautious and precise. Publication abroad was seen as the road to widespread recognition at home, opening up the possibility of reinventing one's career. Determining the timing of publication within new cultural systems made it possible to carefully control the presentation of new works, creating an effect of consistency and cohesion in the output of an author already famous in Italy for the originality and variety of his writing. But the translation of one's own work also carries the risk of an obsession with loss, with the impossibility of being entirely true to oneself in new linguistic, cultural, and conceptual systems.

The literary viability of a language is measured by the number of literary polyglots who have direct access to that language without need of translation. But via both translation and the theoretical speculation on the language they use in their writings, authors from 'eccentric' literary spaces are able to participate in the debate through which literary differences are comprehended and valorized. In the years following the Second World War French enjoyed this primacy in Italy.⁹ One parameter of this hegemony is clear in the example of French translation of Italian writers of the Resistance: the texts of Vittorini, for example, were published without introductions (therefore as, in effect, French authors) in Sartre's journal *Tel Quel* (a process defined by Canova as «assimilation by negation of diversity»),¹⁰ while French authors of the same period were always introduced by way of textual apparatus.

La langue est l'enjeu majeur des luttes et des rivalités distinctives: elle est la ressource spécifique avec ou contre laquelle vont s'inventer les solutions à la domination littéraire, le seul véritable matériau de création des écrivains permettant les innovations les plus spécifiques: les révoltes et les révolutions littéraires s'incarnent dans les formes créées par le travail sur la langue.¹¹

For Calvino the dominant position of the United States and France on the international literary stage was indisputable. He realized that through the encounter with foreign literatures an author might modify the position of his own national literature, recognizing in translation an effective system of understanding and appropriation of new forms and styles. At the same time, being translated in these countries afforded

⁸ About the role of Calvino at Einaudi see: MANGONI 2001; SCARPA 1999; FERRETTI 1997; NIGRO 2007.

⁹ See BOSCHETTI 2007.

¹⁰ CASANOVA 2004, pp. 254-255.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

access to a wider international recognition for an Italian author, something Calvino had perceived from the moment of his move to France in 1967, where he became the first foreign member of OuLiPo in 1973; additionally, in spite his own professional credentials, Calvino entrusted the management and promotion of his works abroad to Eric Linder, the most important Italian literary agent of the period.

An author lives on only when rewritten, recontextualized, and reinvented. In a talk on translation given in Rome on June 4, 1982, Calvino sees translation in relation to the deep understanding of a text and to the problematic sense of language that «is an essential element of our time».¹² A literary translator is always up against translating the untranslatable: «Whoever writes in a ‘minor’ language such as Italian comes to understand sooner or later that the possibility of communications hangs on threads as fragile as a spider’s web». Every translation poses the risk of stylistic falsification, a risk that – speaking of his own translated work – Calvino considered a significant problem, particularly in translations between languages close to one another.¹³

But important changes can also be introduced through the editorial process. In England and the United States, for example, the first edition of the *Nostri Antenati* [Our Ancestors] trilogy was effectively mangled due to commercial exigencies; in other instances new relations were established between texts, their publication chronology altered, their architectural structures undone, their paratexts rewritten and re-adapted. In Calvino’s dialogue with his translator he seized the opportunity to revisit his own work with new eyes, and in the inevitable flattening of style in translation he saw the occasion to reflect deeply about his own writing. Translation is thus conceived of as a literary and moral commitment, and a good translator is obliged to seek the hidden sense of words, collaborating directly with the author. Calvino spoke French, Spanish, and English, and he enjoyed a direct relationship with his translators in these languages, helping to correct their work and thereby partially reconstituting his own style. For Calvino, the fundamental problem of Italian was the discrepancy between written and spoken language as well as the necessity of maintaining the architectural composition of the paragraph within the text:

The drama of translation is especially heightened when the languages in question are relatively close to each other, while between Italian and English the distance is such that translation means to some extent re-creation, preserving the spirit of a text the less it is exposed to the temptation of a literal plaster-cast rendering. The discomfort happened most often reading my work in French, wherein the possibilities of hidden distortion are legion.¹⁴

Weaver describes his own engagement with Calvino’s work in these terms:

Calvino was in some ways not difficult to translate, because the works are very literary, and literary or writerly language is much easier to translate than dialect and popular speech. In another way, he was not easy to translate. With him, every comma and sound has an importance, and it isn’t only a question of getting the words right. It’s a question of not spoiling the rhythm,

¹² CALVINO 1995b.

¹³ See CALVINO 1980; CALVINO 1995b; CALVINO 1995c; CALVINO 1995d. See also BELPOLITI 1991.

¹⁴ CALVINO 1995.

of getting the cadences and the tone exactly right. Although he was not a scientist, both of his parents were, and he liked to read scientific works. He had an entire technical and scientific vocabulary that I don't have. He would fall in love with technical terms, and he would rewrite the translation because he was actually rewriting the Italian. I had problems with Calvino because he thought he knew English. He would fall in love with English words. Every now and then he would fiddle with a sentence in his English. At one point he fell madly in love with the word *feedback*, and he didn't realize that in America feedback is like closure or spinning out of control, something you hear constantly on television. It's jargon and cliché, and you can't use it anymore. The word is dead to literature, but to him it was new and fascinating. He thought it was fun and so he kept putting it into this story where it really didn't belong, and I kept taking it out. Finally the last proofs came, and I took it out definitively. And I'm sorry to say he died before he had the book in his hands, so he never knew that I'd done this to him.¹⁵

Calvino and Weaver had, nevertheless, established a very precise working relationship, as the translator revealed in a recollection written following Calvino's death:

Calvino and I shared a consuming passion for words and for using them, deploying them, stretching and tightening them. [...] Translating Calvino is an aural exercise as well as a verbal one. It is not a process of turning this Italian noun into that English one, but rather of pursuing a cadence, a rhythm—sometimes regular, sometimes willfully jagged—and trying to catch it, while, like a Wagner villain, it may squirm and change shape in your hands. This tantalizing, if finally rewarding task could not be performed entirely at the typewriter. Frequently, I would get up from my desk, pace my study, testing words aloud, listening to their sound, their pace, alert also to silences. [...] He felt the allure of neologisms, of technical jargon, and he would become stubbornly fixed on a word like "input," which makes me wince even as I type it.¹⁶

It is interesting that even with regard to his critical essays the sense of loss is ever present in Calvino: in both the French and American editions of *Una pietra sopra* [The Uses of Literature], according to Calvino, the translations lose their value of intellectual biography – the new timing of the publication, the new cultural context, the new translated texts were all factors that emphasized the sense of loss of his original intentions.

Weaver becomes Calvino's translator in 1968, when he is already an established translator with more of 20 years of experience, generally cited and praised in book reviews, and already a legitimizing name in the American literary field (at this point he's the translator of Silone, Pirandello, Gadda, Moravia, and poetry (Montale Penna and so on). But this relationship proves to be fruitful and constitutes a real turning point in his career: he wins a National Book Award in 1969 for his translation of Calvino's *Cosmicomics* and, eventually, he becomes the translator of *The Name of the Rose* and Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* for which he receives the PEN translation Prize; finally, he becomes the rare member of the elite American Academy of Arts and Letters voted in for his achievements in translation.

In 1967 Calvino published with Einaudi his translation of Queneau's *Les fleurs bleues*, originally issued by Gallimard in 1965, a «re-invention», as Pavese had characterized translation (famously, Pavese was a translator of Melville into Italian).

¹⁵ GUARNIERI 1996.

¹⁶ WEAVER 2011.

Queneau's literary trajectory bears some resemblance to that of Calvino: Queneau was an experimental author, interested in the relationship between science and literature as well as in the literary text as mathematical derivation of textual axioms; he was an editor with Gallimard; and he was the founding father of OuLiPo in 1960, a group with which Calvino developed a particular intellectual affinity.

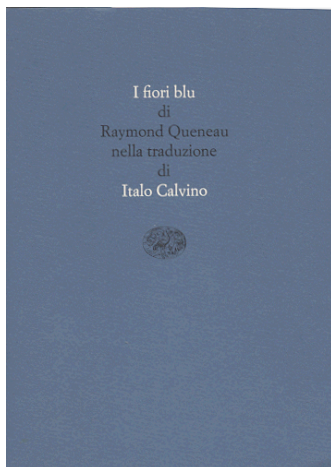
'Serious play', activity that within the national literary tradition linked Calvino to Ariosto, is now entirely oriented toward the present, to science and mathematics, to the *ars combinatoria*, to logic, to stylistic compression. In opposition to the automatism of surrealist experience, «literature is the science of the possible» or, as the Pataphysics would have it, «the science of imaginary solutions», that is a discipline in which volition and logic make a whole.¹⁷ His family environment certainly nourished the scientific predisposition that brought Calvino and the elder French writer together. The ideal of exactness, a theoretical precision, is based on the confidence that literature, via self-imposed restrictions, has an explanatory and fundamental power (recall the gnosiological metaphor of the weft, or the spiral, both geometric constructions). Both writers shared the same professional expertise, and Queneau enjoyed several of the same privileges that Calvino had with Einaudi, among them control of the publication of their own works by the publishing house for which they were employed. Calvino – an atypical author within his own national literary context, distinguished equally by political activism and constant aesthetic innovation – found his way to international legitimization in France. Calvino's recognition of the importance of innovative work like Queneau's changed the coordinates of the Italian literary field and opened up new stylistic possibilities for it; but Queneau's reception in Italy is also guaranteed by the authority of his translator.

The work of translation is based on an analysis of language, structure, genre, content, and style. Calvino's choice of *Les fleurs bleues* was explained in a postscript published seven years after the first Italian edition of Queneau's book. That is to say that in 1967 the translation first published by Einaudi contained no introduction, and no account of any kind explaining the choices adopted in making the translation. Its cover (see fig. 1) displays the title, author, and translator in the same sized font: the name of Calvino serving to introduce an experimental text to the national literary market, inviting its faithful readers to welcome a foreign author whose profile was similar to his own in those years. But even at the level of typography the cover plays a strange mirroring game that could have led the Italian reader to confuse author and translator. Against a periwinkle background that evokes the title of the novel, title and translator are given in white lettering on separate lines framing *di Raymond Queneau nella traduzione di* [by Raymond Queneau in the translation of] printed in black. No image accompanies the writing, not even the name of the publisher, only its emblem: the ostrich. Beginning

¹⁷ In an essay of 1967, Calvino defines his attraction to Queneau's work: CALVINO 1995a, p. 197; on the new position that Calvino was able to occupy in the national literary field, see also: BOSCHETTI 2007. Etymologically «that which is above metaphysics», Alfred Jarry defines Pataphysics as the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments.

with its cover, this product is thus completely Calvinian, and the early Italian reader who found his or her way to the novel naturally associated it with Calvino's hand.

Fig. 1



Bookcover of the 1967 translation published by Einaudi in the series *Narratori Stranieri Tradotti*

Seven years later, by which time Calvino was already a member of OuLiPo (he became the first foreign member in 1973), he explained:

As soon as I had begun to read the novel my first thought was that “it was untranslatable!”, and the continuous pleasure of reading couldn’t be separated from editorial concern, from foreseeing what would have become of this text in a translation wherein not only its word-play would necessarily have been elided or flattened, its tissue of intentions, allusions, and winking knotted, but its drive – alternately crackling and dispersive – would have been undone [...] it is a problem posed by every book of Queneau, but this time I felt immediately that in some way the book was seeking to involve me in its problems, grabbing me by the lapel, pleading with me to not abandon it to its own fate while simultaneously launching a challenge, provoking me to an entirely constructed duel of unexpected blows.¹⁸

The challenge of an «untranslatable» text compels him to embrace the enterprise: as we have already seen, according to Calvino, the proximity to French renders a translation less ‘faithful’ to its source text precisely because of the ease with which it becomes a literal version of the original. But impossible challenges can also prove to be the most fruitful ones: «I must say that the largest part of the books that I have written, and of those that I still have in mind to write, are born of the idea that to write a book such as this seemed to me impossible».¹⁹ In the name of «untranslatability» all of the limits linked to the initiative delineate a paradoxical project, by definition imaginative:

¹⁸ Postface by Italo Calvino to the 1974 edition of QUENEAU 1974.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

The problem was to make as effective as possible each single contrivance, but doing so lightly without revealing the effort involved and avoiding snags, because in Queneau even the most calculated things leave the impression of having been carelessly thrown out there. In short, what was required was to create the impression of a text written directly in Italian, and there is nothing more demanding of time and attention than rendering the impression of spontaneity. The translation that is here republished (identical to the edition of 1967, except for minor corrections) is an example of 'creative' (or 're-creative') translation that is the only form of remaining 'faithful' to a text of this kind.²⁰

Fidelity to a literary text is connected to the reinvention of the same text. The challenge is not only linguistic, but also cultural, and the reader's attention is fundamental in this re-writing. As in all of Calvino's work, technique and play mix; to write is to re-write.

The translation of Queneau's novel in Italy had a number of consequences: Calvino consolidated his ties to the most experimental French literature of the period; he made the initial move that would position himself in the eyes of French criticism as Queneau's Italian equivalent; and, thanks to his unique authority in the national literary field, Calvino was identified in Italy with the work of the author who would have the greatest impact on his own production in the years immediately subsequent to its publication. It is therefore essential to bear in mind the crucial role of this translation (of a work that was soon to be considered an original re-writing) in understanding the new range of aesthetic possibilities in Calvino's succeeding work.

Analysis of the opportunities offered by translations in the redefinition of the position of an author, within both the national and global literary fields, has led me to think about translation from the translator's perspective. And I have further identified interests and trajectories (even, at times, opportunism) that a cultural mediator such as Weaver clearly delineates, first with the intention of providing visibility to his own originality as writer (as the talented discoverer of the new lively aesthetic and cultural debate of post-war Italy), and then with the forward-looking ability of the acclaimed translator – in Weaver's case, a monopoly – that contributes in a decisive fashion to the visibility of an author in his/her own country.

Giorgio Alberti
Dartmouth College
giorgio.alberti@dartmouth.edu

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²⁰ *Ibidem*.

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