# Translating Ruins

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the relationship between a neo-Latin poem by Ianus Vitalis and three vernacular sonnets, versions of the Latin original, by Du Bellay, Spenser, and Francisco de Quevedo. The purpose of the essay is to ponder the problems and choices that the translators had to resolve in order to refashion Vitalis. The essay further seeks to show the strangeness of Vitalis' poem and how his translators effetively created three original poems. This is an exploration of translation, more concerned with that problematic art than with the history of the European sonnet.

Writing in 1932 about the numerous English versions of Homer, Jorge Luis Borges asserts—perhaps ironically though perhaps not—that the relationship between translations and originals defines the relationship between any text, its myriad literary sources, and the experiences an author assimilates to produce it. Unlike so-called originals, translations reveal rather than hide their sources: "El modelo propuesto a su imitación es un texto visible, no un laberinto inestimable de proyectos pretéritos o la acatada tentación momentánea de una facilidad"[1] (Borges 1965, 105).

Borges denies original composition, declaring all texts to be translations and writing (like reading) nothing more than translating. This anti-Romantic theory of literary creation makes the juxtaposition of originals and translations complex: we are no longer comparing the original with an imitation (the translation) but actually comparing coequals.

Fair enough, but even though Borges deals with English translations of Homer—the paucity of Spanish translations making his

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[1] "The model proposed for imitation is a visible text, not an incalculable labyrinth of past projects or the yielded-to, momentary temptation of an opportune insight." Translation mine.

essay impossible to write—he does not discuss the role played by nationality and national language in translation. Why did the English, century after century, feel the need to translate and retranslate Homer? And what was the impact of these translations on the history of English literature? If Borges had elected to study the many translations of *Don Quixote* into English, he would have reached the same conclusions about the relationship between translation and original; but he might also have noted that the history of the novel in English was changed because of Cervantes.

Literary history abounds in translations or imitations that somehow acquire the status of originals. For example, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's *La verdad sospechosa*, from about 1634, is the basis for Corneille's *Le Menteur* (1644), which in turn spawns Carlo Goldoni's *Il Bugiardo* (1750) and Samuel Foote's *The Lyar* (1762). Ruiz de Alarcón engenders not just translations and imitations but an entire theatrical tradition in four languages and four cultures, each of which reshapes the original to national tastes. This idea, that translators would deliberately accommodate a work to a national language, appears in Alastair Fowler's *Times Literary Supplement* review (April 27, 2012) of a new edition of Gavin Douglas's 1513 Scots translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The translation crystalizes the language into which it is translated, much in the way the King James Bible or Luther's translation consolidated English or German.

Less important in terms of fixing a national language, but equally fascinating in terms of the relationship between original and translation are three sonnets, freestanding works of art in themselves, which directly or indirectly derive from the epigram *De Roma* (1552) by Ianus Vitalis (1485–1560):

Qui Romam in media quaeris novus advena Roma,
Et Romae in Roma nil reperis media,
Aspice murorum moles, praeruptaque saxa,
Obrutaque horrenti vasta theatra situ:
Haec sunt Roma. Viden velut ipsa cadaver, tantae
Urbis adhuc spirent imperiosa minas.
Vicit ut haec mundum, nixa est se vincere; vicit,
A se non victum ne quid in orbe foret.
Nunc victa in Roma Roma illa invicta sepulta est,
Atque eadem victrix victaque Roma fuit.
Albula Romani restat nunc nominis index,

Quinetiam rapidis fertur in aequor aquis,
Disce hinc, quid possit fortuna; inmota labascunt,
Et quae perpetuo sun agitate manent. (McFarlane 1980, 24–26)[2]

Vitalis' poem invites the recently arrived (*novus advena*) visi-
tor who has come to Rome seeking ancient Rome to learn a moral
lesson: Rome is now nothing but ruins. All that endures is, paradox-
ically, the Tiber: The river flowing like time itself remains, while
the ancient capital of the world is *disjecta membra*. The elegiac tone
of Vitalis' poem, enhanced by the repeated "o" in Rome, reflects
the ancient fusion of elegy and epigram—which is to say that by
Vitalis' time, a neo-Latin epigram was simply a short poem. It
might be of intellectual rather than emotional cast, though there is
nothing consistent or absolute about its subject. Like the sonnet,
the epigram could treat any theme, although concision is one of its
principal features: the verbal economy of Latin would be an ideal
for Renaissance vernacular poets to strive for, especially in sonnets.

That Vitalis' poem is comprised of fourteen lines is a fascinat-
ing irony. A poem in Latin on mutability that seeks to avoid the mu-
tability of vernacular tongues uses a structure that to Renaissance
readers would immediately recall the sonnet. *De Roma* is an open
invitation to vernacular translation, and Malcolm C. Smith (1977)
lists over a dozen versions of the epigram. Not all are sonnets, but
those under consideration here adapt Vitalis to that compact form.

The first of the three, a translation of a translation, is Edmund
Spenser's version of Joachim du Bellay, which appears in his ap-
propriately titled sonnet series *The Ruines of Rome* (1591). Spenser
obtains that alliteration by not translating the title of du Bellay's
sonnet sequence, *Les Antiquités de Rome* (1558)—he changes it
utterly. *Antiquités* are ancient, but *ruines* might be recent. While the
name Rome itself implies antiquity, the sack of Rome in 1527 (and
still in living memory in the second half of the sixteenth century) by
the troops of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V certainly created
modern ruins. But setting aside historical anecdote and focusing

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[2] McFarlane's version of Vitalis' epigram is accompanied by Thomas Heywood's version, from
*The Hierarchie of the Blessed Angells* (1637). Readers wondering about possible sources for
Vitalis' epigram might consider an idea in James Nohrnberg's 1976 *The Analogy of* The Faerie
Queene. Nohrnberg suggests two passages in Isaiah (34:14 and 13:21–22): "Both of the Isaiah
passages would impress a poet on literary grounds alone; they are supreme in their kind, which
is the elegy over fallen buildings, *letterature delle rovine. . .*" (236).

exclusively on du Bellay's words, it is clear that Spenser's use of ruins is a transformation, a deviation from the original for rhetorical effect.

Spenser had been translating du Bellay since before 1569, when he published translations of both Petrarch and du Bellay. Herbert Grierson, in the introduction to his seminal anthology *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*: *Donne to Butler* (1921), the inspiration for T.S. Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets," wryly observes: "Over all the Elizabethan sonnets, in greater or less measure, hangs the suggestion of translation or imitation." (xviii) We may confirm his statement by looking at sonnet number 3 (in the 1678 edition):

> Thou stranger, which for Rome in Rome her seekest,
> And nought of Rome in Rome perceiv'st at all,
> These same old walls, old arches, which thou seest,
> Old palaces, is that, which Rome men call.
> Behold what wreak, what ruine, and what wast,
> And how that she, which with her mighty powre
> Tam'd all the world, hath tam'd her self at last,
> The Pray of time, which all things doth devowre.
> Rome now of Rome is th' only funerall,
> And only Rome, of Rome hath victory;
> Neought save Tyber, hastning to his fall
> Remains of all: O worlds inconstancy!
> That which is firm, doth flit and fall away,
> And that is flitting, doth abide and stay. (Spenser 1679, 161)

A suitably stern sonnet charged with a chastened Renaissance sense of fleeting time (wherever I turn my eyes I see nothing but death and decay), the ephemeral nature of all human creation, and of course the "mutability" so important to the eponymous "Two Cantos of Mutability" at the end of *The Fairie Queene*. Rome is absent from the "mutability cantos," but Rome in this sonnet is a *memento mori*, so it is no wonder the poem figures among many similar poems in Spenser's *Complaints Containing Sundry Small Poems of the Worlds Vanity* (1581) "as the Printer gathered them up" (as he says in the 1678 edition) to capitalize on the success of *The Fairie Queene*.

At the same time, is Rome a suitable subject for an English Protestant poet? Among the three poets scrutinized here only one is

a Protestant, whose only argument, leaving aside the desire to translate du Bellay, could be that the ruins of Rome are a fitting subject for a humanist lamentation. By the same token, the subject virtually disappears during the Baroque, just when we might expect to see it deployed with fervor. None of the poems in Jean Rousset's 1968 *Anthologie de la Poésie Baroque Française* exploits this subject (although it could also be said that the same holds true for Grierson's anthology). So the wars of religion, the English Revolution, the Reformation, and the Counterreformation efface Rome's ruins from poetry, although they turn up again during the Romantic era, reflecting the Romantics' antiquarian side.

The next case is Francisco de Quevedo's 1648 collection, patriotically titled *Parnasso Español, monte en dos cumbres dividido, con las nueve musas castellanas, donde se contienen Poesías de don Francisco de Quevedo Villegas* (literally, Spanish Parnassus, mountain divided into two peaks, with the nine Castilian muses, which contains poems by don Francisco de Quevedo Villegas). No ruins or antiquities for Quevedo, just rockribbed Castilian poetry inspired by Castilian muses—who, it seems, could inspire translation as well as original creation. We smile, but Quevedo's patriotism reminds us that each of these sonnets brings the subject of Roman ruins into a national literary tradition by transmuting it into a national literary form.

The title usually attached to the first poem in this collection is "A Roma sepultada en sus Ruinas" (To Rome Buried in her Ruins):

Buscas en Roma a Roma, ¡oh peregrino!,
Y en Roma misma a Roma no la hallas:
Cadáver son las que ostentó murallas,
Y Tumba de sí propio el Aventino.
Yace donde Reinaba el Palatino,
Y limadas del tiempo las medallas,
Más se muestran destrozo a las batallas
De las edades que blasón latino.
Sólo el Tibre quedó, cuya corriente,
Si Ciudad la regó, ya sepultura
La llora con funesto son doliente.
¡Oh Roma, en tu grandeza, en tu hermosura
Huyó lo que era firme, y solamente
Lo fugitivo permanece y dura! (de Quevedo 1968, 260–261)

The utterly Baroque de Quevedo is much more specific in his Roman references, and to the Tiber mentioned by du Bellay and Spenser he adds the Aventine and the Palatine, two of Rome's seven hills, symbols of an antiquity that precedes republican or imperial Rome, here turned, respectively, into a grave and a corpse.

Joachim du Bellay, in his 1558 collection *Les Antiquités de Rome*, is the progenitor of Spenser's sonnet and the likely source (along with Vitalis) of Quevedo's. Du Bellay's title curiously echoes the title of Andrea Palladio's 1554 book *Le Antichità di Roma*, though the similarity could hardly be more ironic: Where du Bellay is concerned with the ravages of time, Palladio stresses the enduring grandeur of Roman architecture. His text contradicts the lesson of the three poems and defines the difference between a humanist literary tradition that more often than not found itself weeping over the loss of the classical past—whatever that meant for them—and an architectural present with Palladio endeavoring to use the Roman past (its architecture specifically) as a steppingstone to the future.

This sense of the past as a foundation could not be more different from the view of du Bellay:

> Nouveau venu, qui cherches Rome en Rome
> Et rien de Rome en Rome n'aperçois,
> Ces vieux palais, ces vieux arcs que tu vois,
> Et ces vieux murs, c'est ce que Rome on nomme.
> Voy quel orgueil, quelle ruine: & comme
> Celle qui mist le monde sous ses loix,
> Pour donter tout, se donta quelquefois,
> Et devint proie au temps, que tout consomme.
> Rome de Rome est le seul monument,
> Et Rome Rome a vaincu seulement.
> Le Tybre seul, qui vers la mer s'enfuit,
> Reste de Rome. O mondaine inconstance!
> Ce qui est ferme, est par le temps détruit,
> Et ce qui fuit, au temps fait résistance. (du Bellay 1970, 5–6)

All three sonnets are simultaneously the same and different, translations and originals, and it is here we begin to see the difference between translation and adaptation, though maintaining that distinction is by no means easy. Du Bellay recommends imitation in his 1549 *Défense et Illustration de la Langue Françoyse* (as

does Sir Philip Sidney in his 1595 *Apology*), and it may be that we should understand Spenser more in the mode of imitation rather than literal translation.

Spenser made his mark on English prosody with the Spenserian sonnet (ABAB BCBC CDCD EE), but in rendering du Bellay he falls back on a standard English model: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Du Bellay's rhyme scheme reflects the sonnet of the French, Spanish, and Italian worlds: ABBA ABBA CCD EDE, with two tercets used variously to summarize or expand the thoughts expressed in the quatrains. The lapidary couplet of the English sonnet makes it radically different from the continental sonnet whose often-interlaced tercets are an invitation to enhanced complexity rather than concision. So du Bellay, by using enjambment to link his tercets and recapitulate the rest of the poem, also, simultaneously, imitates the course of the Tiber as it winds through Rome. Spenser on the other hand must reach a moral conclusion, which he musically reinforces with alliteration: "That which is firm, doth flit and fall away, / And that is flitting, doth abide and stay."

"Flit" applied to stone buildings seems an unlikely metaphor, and "flitting" applied to a river seems odd. This is so even though the *OED* includes shifting position or passing away among the verb's early meanings because *flit* implies flight and speed, which the time involved in the erosion of stone excludes.

Du Bellay's compressed ten rather than fourteen-syllable verses "Ce qui est ferme, est par le temps détruit, / Et ce qui fuit, au temps fait résistance" make a more sparing use of alliteration, just enough to create an ironic juxtaposition of "ferme" with the verb "fuit," reinforced by the repetition of "temps" to mark the difference between that which is destroyed by time and that which, though liquid, resists the corrosion of time. But alliteration and internal rhyme provide the musical lamentation in both du Bellay and Spenser: as in Vitalis' epigram, the "o" in Rome is repeated so often and echoed in so many other "o"s that the entire poem sounds like a dirge. (This musicality raises another conundrum: we know how French, English, and Spanish sound, but for most of us Latin is a visual language and when spoken pronounced with the speaker's own national accent: how would Vitalis' hexameters "sound" to a Frenchman?)

Du Bellay's poem resorts to French commonplaces—for ex-

ample the lamentation "O mondaine inconstance!" (not in Vitalis), which Spenser translates into English commonplaces "O worlds inconstancy!" Du Bellay's disillusioned senior lectures the "nouveau venu," the novice who has come to Rome seeking the Rome of antiquity and finds only ruins, as if the traveler were ignorant of Roman history since the fifth century and as if no building had been erected or destroyed since then. Spenser uses "stranger" to obtain the same effect—the stranger or foreigner versus the experienced or native inhabitant—but to modern ears the word suggests a person unknown to the speaker rather than to the city.

The problem of how to translate "nouveau venu" goes back to *De Roma*. Here, as in Mikolaj Sep-Szarzynski's epigram (in *Delitia italorum poetarum* 1608), the novice is referred to as the "novus advena." When the dramatist Thomas Heywood (in his 1637 *The Hierarchie of the Blessed Angells*) translates Vitalis' poem, he coins the awkward "New Stranger" to translate "novus advena." Heywood needs twenty-eight couplets to translate Vitalis' fourteen Latin verses.

Lost in Spenser's translation is du Bellay's manipulation of the concept so important to the Hispanic baroque: "desengaño," the loss of illusion that comes with moral experience, when the scales fall from our eyes and we see the fallen world for what it is. This sense is fundamental to the sonnet because of the innocence–experience relationship between the newcomer and the speaker.

Quevedo, perhaps reflecting a Counterreformation sensibility, transforms du Bellay's "nouveau venu," Spenser's "stranger," and Vitalis' "novus advena" into a "peregrino." The word had various meanings in seventeenth-century Spanish: as an adjective, it suggests the bizarre or exquisite; as a noun, it may mean a traveler abroad or a pilgrim traveling to a shrine. Quevedo's choice of the term creates an ambiguity: Catholic pilgrims would visit Rome, the heart of the Church, but they would certainly not be looking for ancient Rome, and in fact the ruin of the ancient city would constitute a triumph, malgré Saint Augustine, of Christianity over paganism. So "peregrino" here cannot be a pilgrim and is, once again, a sentimental humanist who for some reason thinks contemporary Rome ought to look like ancient Rome.

The second verse becomes more precise in Quevedo.

Du Bellay says, "Et rien de Rome en Rome n'aperçois" and

Spenser follows: "And nought of Rome in Rome perceiv'st at all."
Spenser's "at all" is simply an emphatic line-filler, as is du Bellay's
use of "n'aperçois" rather than a simple "see." Quevedo's visitor
comes looking for Rome in Rome and doesn't *find* it—"Y en Roma
misma a Roma no la hallas"—rather than du Bellay or Spenser's
stranger who can't perceive it.

In the third and fourth verses of the first quatrain, Quevedo
Latinizes his word order in a daring use of hyperbaton: "Cadáver
son las que ostentó murallas, / Y Tumba de sí propio el Aventino.
The surprise of a singular noun followed by a plural verb obliges
us to see the verse rather than hear it: "cadáver" starts the poetic
clause and "murallas" ends it, but what Quevedo wants us to see is
the equivalence: the walls are a corpse. The effect would, of course,
be lost if the phrase were regularized: Las murallas que ostentó son
cadáver (the walls it boasted are a corpse). The next verse follows
suit, with "tumba" and "Aventino" thrown into opposition.

The second quatrain, much more restrained syntactically,
simply amplifies the first. The Palatine lies supine where it once
ruled, the medallions, carved in relief but now worn away by time,
look more like the wreckage of the battles of the ages than Latin
glory. The poem loses energy but recovers it in the intertwined
tercets.

Quevedo innovates daringly by abruptly changing tenses.
Where the quatrains are all in the present tense, the first tercet in-
troduces a past preterit, which, curiously, makes little sense here:
"Sólo el Tibre quedó" (only the Tiber remained), which, if it once
bathed (regó) the city, now weeps for it as a grave. Again, Quevedo
uses his first-and-last words to achieve drama: city is played off
against grave. And the Tiber (none of the translations uses Vitalis'
alternative Albula for the Tiber), now back in the present tense,
weeps with a "funereal, dolorous sound".

Quevedo uses the final tercet much in the way Spenser would
use his final couplet. He resorts to apostrophe, addressing Rome
(and turning away from the "peregrino" in the first verse) to point
out that what was solid has fled and only that which is fugitive re-
mains and endures. The phrase "en tu grandeza, en tu hermosura"
(in your grandeur, in your beauty) is amplification, a delaying tactic
that helps us savor the antithesis of a hardness (stone) that disap-
pears, while what remains is flowing water. Naturally, the final verb

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"dura" (endures) echoes the adjective "duro" (hard) so, in enduring, the water acquires a lexical hardness.

Compared with the first-person sonnet "Salmo 17," ("Miré los muros de la Patria mía"), which approaches the tension of "metaphysical" poets like Donne in its amalgamation of ideas and feelings, Quevedo's version of du Bellay's sonnet seems fraught with syntactical flourishes that weaken rather than strengthen the poem. And "Salmo 17" is as much an imitation or translation as his reworking of du Bellay since it derives directly from Seneca's Epistle XII to Lucilius. Quevedo's concluding address to Rome, the most striking innovation within the framework of the two "translations" of du Bellay (and Vitalis) distracts the reader much in the way a bad detective writer's introduction of a new character late in the plot is a nasty trick.

The subject of the three poems, the moral lesson to be learned from a consideration of Rome's ruins, simply lost relevance in the seventeenth century—Quevedo himself does not seem to have revisited the city in any of his sonnets, and it is conspicuously absent from the sonnets of his rival Luis de Góngora. The Renaissance, humanist tradition of lamenting the lost past was lost, especially because of the prime importance of Rome as capital of the Catholic Counterreformation.

The three sonnets here provide a rare opportunity to see three great poets working at translation. Du Bellay fits Vitalis into a well-wrought sonnet with compressed ten-syllable verses that Spenser, overcoming the vast difference between two sonnet traditions, transforms into a perfect English sonnet, while Quevedo seeks to infuse it with the glitter of the Spanish Baroque. Quevedo, perhaps, is the most successful because of his greater specificity and his bold use of antithesis. And yet we sense, as we do not in Quevedo's reworking of Seneca into a Spanish sonnet with hendecasyllabic verses, the working-through of an exercise, that du Bellay is refitting a shopworn Renaissance conceit, that Spenser is trying, successfully, to transform a continental sonnet into an English sonnet while retaining the sense of the original. Quevedo seems to have attempted to improve on his sources, and may well have done so, even though he is recasting material long out of fashion.

Du Bellay, Spenser, and Quevedo, all working with Vitalis' epigram as a distant source, produce new poems appropriate for their

language and culture, but none replicates *De Roma* in a vernacular language. Borges's conclusion about the many translations of Homer into English rings true here as well: "The concept of the *definitive text* belongs only to religion or fatigue." Translation means commitment to time and place and like the Tiber flows infinitely.

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