FORM AND ANXIETY IN TRANSLATION: TWO CASE STUDIES

DENNIS DUNCAN

In this article I shall look at two accounts of specific translation instances — John Crombie's account of his own English translation of Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, and Philo of Alexandria's description of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into the Greek Septuagint — both of which seek to make an exception of their particular case, placing it outside the category of translation. Both have a marked concern for formal aspects of the text under consideration, and in both cases there is a suggestion that this preoccupation makes for a special case, an activity which is somehow different from what we understand by 'translation'. Both accounts are marked by a curiously non–committal use of language, indicating an anxiety which destablises their apparent arguments. However, these anxieties run directly contrary to one another: while Crombie fears that his text may not be a translation, Philo's fear is that the Septuagint is nothing more.

Oulipo and Talmud: The Prioritisation of Form

The French literary coterie, the Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle), was founded in 1960 as a subcommittee of the Collège de 'Pataphysique. The group is dedicated to devising and cataloguing constraints which may be used to produce literary works. These constraints may be what the group call *syntactic*, where 'the creative effort…is principally brought to bear on the formal aspects of literature: vocalic, syllabic, phonetic, graphic, prosodic, rhymic, rhythmic, and numerical constraints, structures, and programs', or *semantic*, constraining the author's use of 'concepts, ideas, images, feelings, and emotions' (Le Lionnais 29). It is the former, the syntactic constraints, which concern us here, and examples of this type of device include anagrams, palindromes and lipograms (texts which exclude one or more letters of the alphabet). Although the actual production of literary material falls beyond the group's remit — they maintain that they are concerned exclusively with *potential* literature: the devices which *could* be used to construct literary texts — their reputation is inevitably bound up with the output of some of its eminent members, including Italo

Calvino, Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec. Perhaps the most notorious, if not the most famous Oulipian work is Perec's *La Disparition* — a full–length novel which does not contain the letter *e*. A number of English translations have been made, although only Gilbert Adair's *A Void* has made it into print. All, however, have followed Perec in avoiding the letter *e*. Meanwhile, *El secuestro*, the Spanish translation by Mariso Arbués et al, contains no *a*, while *Istchezanie*, Valéry Kislov's Russian translation, contains no *o*, these, rather than *e*, being the most common letters in their respective languages. What these translations illustrate quite neatly is that the *invariant* in translation — the aspect of the original which is carried over into the target text — is very often a *complex* of features, including, but not limited to, the nominal sense. This is nothing new — one needs only to think of how poetry is handled in verse translations to be reminded that some formal aspect of the source is often preserved. Nevertheless, there is a question of degree — a formally constrained Oulipian text forces the translator to *reprioritise* the invariants, to retain the formal element, if necessary at the expense of the meaning. As François Le Lionnais, one of the Oulipo's founder members, argues, in formally constrained literature, 'the emotion that derives from its semantic aspect constitutes a value which should certainly not be overlooked, but which remains nonetheless secondary' (Le Lionnais 30).

This central importance of form in much Oulipian work carries an echo of Talmudic hermeneutics in which, as Joseph Dan argues, there are 'countless ways other than ideonic content and meaning by which the scriptures transmit a semiotic message' (Dan 128). In the Jewish tradition, he continues,

> preachers could use a total text, hermeneutically discussing not only the meaning of terms and words, but also their sound, the shape of the letters, the vocalization points and their shapes and sounds, the *te'amim* (the musical signs added to the Hebrew words), the *tagin* (the small decorative additions to the letters), the frequency with which words and letters appear in a verse or a chapter, the absence of one of the letters from a biblical portion, the variety and number of divine names included in the text, the numerical value of letters, words and whole verses, the possible changes of letters (*etbash*, *temurah*), the new words formed from the initial or final letters of a biblical section (*notarikon*). (Dan 128)

So, while formal elements may often be intrinsic to the status of the text in Oulipian writing, a determinant of its character, in the Talmud they are assigned interpretive value. This, of course, raises issues for the translator, since if the complex of invariants is too broad and too stringent then translation becomes impossible, and it is this problem which, as we shall see, motivates Philo to sanctify the creation of the Septuagint, raising it above the level of ordinary translation.

Version versus Translation

Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, published in 1961, is one of the foundational texts of the Oulipo, of which John Sturrock writes that it 'remains to this day the purest example of [the group's] intentions' (20). Sturrock also calls it 'a slim but potentially titanic volume', a rather neat description of the way the book operates and the vast number of poems contained within it. The work ostensibly consists of ten sonnets, each on its own recto page. However, between each line of each sonnet, the page is cut horizontally so that any line can be turned over in isolation, revealing a single line from the next poem while leaving the rest in place. It is modelled on the type of children's book where the head of, say, a fireman can be matched with the torso of a milkmaid and the legs of an iceskater. In Queneau's case, the challenge was to make each potential sonnet (there are 10^{14} of them, hence the title) consistent in terms of rhyme, syntax, gender agreement, etc. He states that one way of achieving this would have been simply to make every line an end–stopped, self–contained unit, but that he did not allow himself to adopt this approach, which would have made the whole exercise somewhat banal.

The form is childishly simple; the content is as good as infinite. Queneau notes in his introduction that if a reader were to read one of the sonnets every minute, round the clock, three hundred and sixty–five days a year, it would take nearly two hundred million years to get through the whole work. For mere mortals attempting a translation, then, it is clear that the form must take precedence. And yet, in the Foreword to his English version, *One Hundred Million Million Poems*, Crombie is strikingly cautious, writing that, 'in attempting an English version, I have…felt justified in allowing the rhyming dictionary, as much as the sense (or otherwise) of the French to prompt the content of individual lines'.[1] There are some subtle misdirections in this sentence. The phrase 'as much as' posits not a hierarchy but an equal status between strictness of form and fidelity of content, whereas, in fact, while the structure is

unfailingly maintained, there is considerable semantic divergence from the original. The suggestion of parity downplays the reprioritisation which is inevitable in translating such a work. In this passage we also find that form, like a kind of dirty word, has been metonymically made–over and genteelly reintroduced as 'the rhyming dictionary'. Words like *justified* and *allowing* belie an anxiety about rule–breaking, implying a prescriptive model of translation in which occasional exceptions may be excused in mitigating circumstances. Finally, the term *translation* is conspicuous by its absence, as it is from the entire edition: *version* is preferred throughout the Foreword and title page. This is the case even sixteen years later, when Crombie, in a letter to the *London Review of Books*, writes,

> Readers may be interested to know than an English version of Queneau's work was published in book form in 1983 by Kickshaws, in my own adaptation, under the title *One Hundred Million Million Poems*. In our edition, the sheets were cut into strips, as in the original French work, so as to allow individual lines to be recombined at will — the whole point of the exercise. (Crombie 5)

In the same letter, he writes of 'an English *translation* thereof by Stanley Chapman' (my emphasis), and yet Crombie's own text is only ever a *version*, an *adaptation* or an *edition*, never a translation. This is a renunciation peculiar to Crombie, and is not borne out within the target culture: other sources routinely refer to his 'translation', or bibliographically list him as translator when citing the work (see for example Wardrip–Fruin and Montfort 147). It signals, therefore, a personal anxiety that while a translation of Queneau's work is possible, something in Crombie's own practice disqualifies it from this status.

It goes without saying, of course, that both Crombie's and Chapman's texts work in the same way as Queneau's: ten sonnets of flippable lines which recombine sensibly with the lines of any of the other sonnets. We might note that Crombie has swapped Queneau's alexandrines for pentameters, but this is a fairly standard practice for French to English poetry translation, and Chapman has done the same. Similarly, Chapman precedes Crombie in switching from Queneau's Petrarchan rhyme scheme to Shakespearean sonnets. Each of Queneau's base sonnets, i.e. the sonnet derived by choosing lines exclusively from a single page, has a theme — a gaucho on the Argentinian pampas; the Parthenon frieze; an old sailor's reminiscences; etc. — and these too

have been retained. One area where Crombie deliberately deviates from his source is in importing certain contemporary concerns and details. The term *Argie* on page one, 'When chatting up the Argie or the Brit', for example, is tellingly specific to the British lexicon of 1983. The same occurs in the third base sonnet, where Queneau's text ends,

> on s'excuse il n'y a ni baleins ni phoques
> le mammifère est roi nous sommes son cousin.

Chapman stays very close to the original here:

> On fish–slab whale nor seal has never swum
> They're kings we're mammal–cousins hi ho hum.

Crombie, on the other hand, gives us:

> Whale hunting though we cannily eschewed
> Our quota's full: we'd not wish to be sued.

The seals have been jettisoned and the intention of the couplet has been radically changed: it is no longer about not wishing to eat one's mammal–cousins, but about EEC fishing quotas.

Yet while the lines may have been given a contemporary political spin, they retain at least the theme of the original — they're still about not catching whales — and this is achieved without falling back on Chapman's clumsy filler rhyme, *hi ho hum*. In the opening quatrain of the second base sonnet, we find a similar opposition between Chapman's line–by–line literalness and Crombie's target language fluency:

> Le cheval Parthénon s'énerve sur la frise
> depuis que le Lord Elgin négligea ses naseaux
> le Turc de ce temps–là pataugeait dans sa crise
> il chantait tout de même oui mais il chantait faux
> (Queneau)

> The wild horse champs the Parthenon's top frieze
> Since Elgin left his nostrils in the stone
> The Turks said just take anything you please
> And loudly sang off–key without a tone
> (Chapman)

The Parthenon horse broods upon his woes
And weeps to see Greece in the distance fade
Lord Elgin never up his nostrils blows
To end up exiled to the antiques trade! (Crombie)

Crombie still has the fairly specific detail of Lord Elgin neglecting the horse's nostrils, although this has been bumped to line three, but the Ottomans have been left out completely in favour of a couple of interpolations which reinforce the broader theme of the sonnet. Meanwhile, Chapman's 'And loudly sang off–key without a tone' is rather redundant, reproducing the lexicon of the original (*chantait*) but not its import.

In his translation practice, then, Crombie works in larger chunks than Chapman, apparently prioritising target language fluency and thematic consistency within the base sonnets over low–level lexical fidelity to the original. In the terms of translation theory, Crombie places norms of acceptability above those of adequacy. Yet this combination of Queneau's highly restrictive form and Crombie's own secondary priorities results in a text which the translator, even as he promotes it in the *LRB*, cannot bring himself to refer to as a *translation*.

Philo and the Problem of Synonymy

Philo of Alexandria, writing in the first half of the first century AD, gives the following account of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, roughly three centuries earlier.[2] The translation came to be known as the Septuagint after the seventy or, more properly, seventy–two scholars who worked on it, and as Philo tells it, in *De Vita Mosis* II.vii, they all worked separately but miraculously came up with identical texts:

they, like men inspired, prophesied, not one saying one thing and another another, but every one of them employed the self–same nouns and verbs, as if some unseen prompter had suggested all their language to them. And yet who is there who does not know that every language, and the Greek language above all others, is rich in a variety of words, and that it is possible to vary a sentence and to paraphrase the same idea, so as to set it forth in a great variety of manners, adapting many different forms of expression to it at different times.

> But this, they say, did not happen at all in the
> case of this translation of the law. (Yonge 3: 82)

There is also an earlier account of the creation of the Septuagint in the *Letter of Aristeas*, a document purporting to be written by an Alexandrian Greek directly involved in the translation, but actually composed by a Jewish writer some time, possibly centuries, later.[3] However, while Moses Hadas argues that 'the balance of probabilities seems to be rather on the side of Philo's having read [the *Letter*]', Aristeas does not mention the detail of the corroborating versions (Hadas 26). In fact, he has the translators working collaboratively, rather than in isolation, meeting up each day and 'arriving at an agreement on each point by comparing each other's work; the appropriate rendering so agreed on was then transcribed' (Thackeray 302).[4] Although Philo alludes to external authorities — 'this, *they say*, did not happen' — we have no evidence that Philo had any source other than the *Letter*, and Wasserstein and Wasserstein suggest that he 'seems not to be drawing on an external tradition but rather to be importing the detail from himself' (40).[5] The miracle, therefore, seems to have been invented by Philo to serve his own ends, viz. 'to argue that the religion and the scriptures of the Jews have a potentially universal application', and to explore 'the possibilities of proselytism created and enhanced by the availability of a translation of the Jewish scriptures in the Greek tongue' (Wasserstein and Wasserstein 39).

The passage, therefore, seems to belie an anxiety which the author feels will be shared by his readership: the subordinate position of the translated text in relation to its original. He pre–empts his audience's concerns, stating up front what he perceives to be the main point of resistance: Everyone knows that in translation there is the potential for a variety of resultant texts: Does it not belittle the divine laws that they could be subject to synonymy and paraphrase? This is a re–organisation of the core anxiety of religious translation: Is there not something sacred in the words themselves — their form, their sound — which cannot be transplanted? Philo is diplomatically reassuring to his readership — they are sophisticated enough to have certain reservations, and he is sensitive to them — before saying *but this time it wasn't like that*. Using a curiously modern distinction between formal logic and natural languages, he aligns this translation with the former:

> In every case, exactly corresponding Greek words were
> employed to translate literally the appropriate Chaldaic
> words, being adapted with exceeding propriety to the

> matters which were to be explained; for just as I
> suppose the things which are proved in geometry and
> logic do not admit any variety of explanation, but the
> proposition which was set forth from the beginning
> remains unaltered, in like manner I conceive did these
> men find words precisely and literally corresponding to
> the things, which words were alone, or in the greatest
> possible degree, destined to explain with clearness and
> force the matters which it was desired to reveal.
> (Yonge 3: 82)

But it is the presence of the divine which truly distinguishes this from ordinary translation. Philo knows that the peer–review sessions of Aristeas's account still do not solve the problem of synonymy inherent in natural languages, and that only by presenting the Septuagint as divinely authored in its own right can he dispel the suspicion of deconsecration which attaches to translation. Philo, therefore, makes it not an accomplishment of collaborative human scholarship, but a miraculous event. The translators are not shrewd and scholarly, but 'honest and guileless', and their work is merely to act as conduits, to take dictation from a singular 'unseen prompter'.[6] As Thackeray puts it, 'the miraculous agreement of the translators proved them to be no less inspired than the original authors' (xvii).

The problem of form in translation is effectively sidestepped by arguing that the Septuagint is *not* a translation. It is the unmediated word of God, and thus its form is every bit as mysterious and overdetermined as the Hebrew original. Philo goes on to say

> there is a very evident proof of this; for if Chaldæans
> were to learn the Greek language, and if Greeks were to
> learn Chaldæan, and if each were to meet with those
> scriptures in both languages, namely, the Chaldaic and
> the translated version, they would admire and reverence
> them both as sisters, or rather as one and the same both
> in their facts and in their language; considering these
> translators not mere interpreters but hierophants and
> prophets. (Yonge 3: 82)

And yet, while the passage explicitly tries to distance the Septuagint from translation as it is commonly perceived, it is riddled with signs of a deeper anxiety. Why, for example, does Philo correct himself in the above passage: 'sisters, or rather one and the same'? To say that a

translation is a sister to its source is uncontroversial; to say that they are one and the same is another thing entirely. Philo may have created his miracle with a particular readership and a particular political goal in mind, but tensions in the text suggest that he cannot bring himself to go along whole–heartedly with his invention. He seems at pains to *suggest* the miraculous, rather than declare it. He cautiously couches his descriptions in terms of similarity rather than outright identification: '*like* men inspired', '*as if* some unseen prompter'. Similarly, the appeal to other sources — 'this, *they say,* did not happen' — has a double movement, apparently bringing in supporting witnesses, but also disowning responsibility for it ('they say it, although I don't necessarily believe it myself').

There is still the case of the verb *prophesied*, which seems more definite in its assertion of divine behaviour. Arnaldez et al., in their Greek/French parallel translation, draw attention to it in a footnote: 'Remarquer le mot que Philon emploie pour signifier le travail de traduction des Septante: c'est une œuvre inspirée, comme il le dit espressément tout de suite' (208). And yet they, like Yonge in the English translation above, use a comma to separate the verb from the phrase in which it appears: 'ils prophétisèrent, comme si Dieu avait pris possession de leur esprit'. F. H. Colson's translation for the Loeb edition is even more contorted: 'they became as it were possessed, and, under inspiration, wrote' (Colson 6: 467).The possession may be figurative, but it is separated from the inspiration which is treated as literal. In the Greek phrase, 'καθάπερ ἐνθουσιῶντες προεφήτευον', *prophesied* is more tightly bound to the transferred sense introduced by καθάπερ, *as if*, and as such can be read metaphorically as well as literally, e.g. as if carried by angels he flew round the track.

Even the miracle itself is a masterpiece of Popperian falsifiability. Unlike, say, the turning of water into wine, this miracle has a *quantitative* aspect: if two short translations of the same source were identical we would put it down to chance, but if the source is longer and the translators more numerous then at some point — but when? — we must start to suspect something other than coincidence. So how many identical texts would prove that this was the 'true' translation? The miracle is capricious, only flickeringly miraculous, part wonder, part sorites paradox, and Philo notably leaves out the detail of the number of scholars, even though it is mentioned in Aristeas. But, of course, not even seventy–two identical translations could prove the text's objective status. Philo coerces the reader to make the assumption herself: It certainly *seems* like a miracle; judge for yourself.

In these anxieties then, we find that the myth of a 'true' translation, peerless and objectively right, is one which even its inventor cannot believe, although later writers, e.g. Irenaeus, would crib Philo's account leaving out his conflicted, non–committal language.[7]

Both accounts are about translation activities, although at some level both are uncomfortable about this. While Philo's miracle belies a knowledge that there can be no such thing as total translation when the very letters of a text are imbued with hermeneutic potential, Crombie seems unwilling to allow Le Lionnais's suggestion that meaning may ever be subordinated to a formal aspect of the text. Both anxieties, however, rest on a strict distinction between form and content which is itself problematic, and subject to critical scrutiny in some contemporary translation theory. When Le Lionnais opposes the two, he defines 'the message' as 'what a text and its translation have in common', a rather unhelpful case of begging the question if we want to know what it is that we carry over in translation (30). It is exactly this circular argument which Lawrence Rosenwald notes when he writes,

> When we turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we find first that often 'sense' is quoted precisely in connection with the activity of translation…. 'Sense' thus used means, circularly, simply what an original passage and its translation by paraphrase have in common. This makes for a problem, of course, namely that the translator cannot learn the practice of translation form the idea of 'sense' because 'sense' is already the product, or the goal, of that practice, and cannot be understood apart from it. (Rosenwald xlii)

For Henri Meschonnic the opposition is ingrained but unsupportable, and he calls on translators to 'reject [form and sense] both together and separately, these two poles of translation, these two polarities that exist only in and by the idea of sign, with a dispensable *signifiant* and an all–encompassing *signifié*' (Rosenwald xliv). Nevertheless, the distinction persists, abetted, as Meschonnic demonstrates, by Saussure's terminology, and is, as Rosenwald points out, one which 'few will argue for but many use' (Rosenwald xliii). And as these two examples demonstrate, it is a separation supported by two millennia of anxious translation practice.

NOTES

[1] Crombie's is not the first English translation of the *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* — an earlier version by Stanley Chapman was circulated among members of the Oulipo and is reprinted in Mathews and Brotchie.

[2] For a discussion of how much of the Hebrew Bible was translated in this exercise — the Bible in its entirety, the five books of the Torah, or merely their 'legal core' — see Rajak 14–16.

[3] Rajak suggests that a 'mid–second–century date looks likely on literary grounds', i.e. about a hundred years after the events described (34).

[4] Hadas translates the same passage as 'making all details harmonize by mutual comparisons. The appropriate result of the harmonization was reduced to writing', emphasising the translators' aesthetic considerations, indicated by Aristeas's repetition of συμφωνος.

[5] Rajak, however, points out that while the detail may not have occurred in preexisting rabbinic tradition, in its invention Philo 'draws upon the Greek language of divine possession' (36). Wasserstein and Wasserstein note that in a later rabbinic version of the story, probably originating several decades after Philo, the translation contains several divinely inspired deviations from the source, which are corroborated by all the translators. This version is therefore 'more extreme: it contains in addition to the unanimous agreement, in itself sufficiently miraculous, of the individual Greek translations of the Hebrew text, the further agreement of entirely unpredictable, unpremeditated, and uncoordinated changes in these Greek translations of the original Hebrew text' (65).

[6] As with Hadas's emphasis on the *reduction* of harmonization when it becomes writing, the idea that the divine voice should precede human transcription reminds us of Derrida's claim that 'it is not by chance that the thought of being…is manifested above all in the voice…. The voice is *heard* (understood)…closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier: pure auto–affection that necessarily has the form of time and which does not borrow from outside of itself, in the world or in "reality", any accessory signifier, any substance of expression foreign to its own spontaneity' (Derrida 20).

[7] Wasserstein and Wasserstein argue that Philo is not quite as credulous as Irenaeus, Epiphanius or the other accounts which retell his story. They note that 'there is nothing in what he says that compels us to imagine that the different translators all worked on the same parts of the biblical text' (45). In other words, they might have divided up the work by breaking the source text down into separate chunks. In which case

Philo's surprise that they should use 'the self–same nouns and verbs' is only because he would have expected less uniformity of diction and a greater divergence of terminology. This seems a generous, revisionist reading, however, and other commentators, e.g. Thackeray, or Robinson, not to mention the Church Fathers of the early Christian period, have taken Philo to mean that the translators were working separately on the same text.

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