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Tuning In: On Retranslating Quotations

Geoffrey Brock

When I went to the London Review Bookshop recently to look for a book by Walter Benjamin, I found instead, side by side, near where the Benjamin book wasn't, two editions I'd never seen before of two of my own translations: Roberto Calasso's *K.* and Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (*Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*), both in Penguin UK's handsome Modern Classics series. Naturally I wanted copies of my own, so I contacted an editor at Penguin, who kindly put some in the mail.

I had planned simply to add them to the shelf with their sibling editions, but when they arrived I instead found myself sitting down and perusing them, nostalgically, for the first time in years. Their marvelous contents were of course intimately familiar, but seeing them with unfamiliar covers produced an odd sense of estrangement; it was disorienting to open them and find them composed entirely of words that I myself strung together, long ago. Even without new covers, it can sometimes feel unsettling, almost vertiginous, to read through old translations after time has passed and to think that, on the one hand, I made them what they are, and yet on the other they originated wholly outside of me and their most perfect form has nothing to do with me. As Benjamin wrote, "eine Übersetzung niemals, so gut sie auch sei, etwas für das Original zu bedeuten vermag" (Benjamin 1972, 10; "a translation, however good it may be, can never mean anything to the original").[1]

But as I paged through the Calasso and the Calvino, I was soon struck by something less metaphysical: something particular that these two books share and that takes me back to what was in both cases an exhilarating translation process—and that might be worth considering and writing about now. I'm thinking of the differing ways in which both books are deeply, intrinsically intertextual, and of the particular challenges and pleasures such intertextuality can offer translators.

Everything of course is "intertextual" in some way; as Kirby Ferguson (or Goethe) would say: it's all a remix. Since Julia Kristeva coined the term in the mid-1960s, it has become nearly ubiquitous; one wonders how we ever talked about books without it. But the kind of intertextuality I mean here is quite simple, even old-fashioned: I mean simply that both *K.* and *Lezioni americane* explicitly cite and discuss other literary texts, a lot. This fact should not be surprising as both are, in their different ways, works of criticism that cast their gaze on classic literature, even if they are now rightly regarded, to apply Penguin's label, as "modern classics" in their own right.

Lezioni americane is a deservedly beloved book about literary craft. One of my favorite features of it, as a reader and as a translator, is the wealth of quotations of both poetry and prose that Calvino deploys to build his arguments and illustrate his ideas. Many pages contain more citation than original matter, and yet the whole amounts to a strikingly original meditation on certain literary virtues that the author wished, back in 1985, to recommend to our current millennium. Though he was a fiction writer, the qualities he focuses on in his "memos"—*lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility*, and *multiplicity* (he died before writing the sixth, which was to have addressed *consistency*)—are as relevant to poets, and, I would argue, to translators, as they are to fiction writers.

[1] Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

In the opening chapter on "Leggerezza" ("Lightness") for instance, Calvino quotes the octave of a sonnet by Guido Cavalcanti, which offers a catalog of beautiful images (destined of course to be surpassed, in the sestet, by the beauties of his beloved). Calvino describes that passage as "una fuga di immagini, che è come un campionario delle bellezze del mondo" (Calvino 1995a, 1:641; "a cascade of images, like a sample book of the world's beauties" [Calvino 2016, 17]), and rereading that last phrase today, it strikes me that the rich collection of passages quoted in *Six Memos* (including these lines from Cavalcanti) could itself be described as a sample book of beauties, one that Calvino assembled as a gift to us, his readers.

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When translating a text that quotes a second text, translators may be faced with a choice: to retranslate the quoted passage, or to paste in an existing translation (crediting, of course, the translator). Either approach can be justified, and particular circumstances may constrain the translator to do one or the other. With *Six Memos*,[2] I decided early on to retranslate as many of the quoted passages as I could. In some cases, I found the existing translations wanting; those were easy decisions. But sometimes I found them to be perfectly good, and in such cases it certainly would have been much easier and less time-consuming for me simply to paste them in. Yet with two exceptions I chose to produce my own versions. (The exceptions were Eithne Wilkins' and Ernst Kaiser's translation of passages from *A Man Without Qualities*, because I have little German, and Jackson Mathews' translation of a passage from *Monsieur Teste*, because—well, I don't remember why; perhaps I ran out of time?)

One would be justified in asking why I decided to retranslate so many passages, many of them quite long, when in nearly every case I could have used an existing translation. The first answer that comes to mind is simple: because it was more personally rewarding to do so. To translate any text is to think and feel your way inside it, to try to understand it from within, to wrap yourself in it like a shawl—its time and place, its mind and style. Calvino himself famously called translation "il vero modo di leggere un testo" (Calvino 1995b, 2:1825; "the true way to read a text"), and when the texts at hand represent a sample book of the world's beauties, well, the chance to inhabit them in that way, to truly read them, seems irresistible. By translating them I was able to dip into scintillating snippets by writers such as Ovid, Montale, Valéry, and Queneau, and to immerse myself in longer passages of verse and prose by Boccaccio, Cavalcanti, Dante, Leonardo da Vinci, Cyrano de Bergerac, Galileo, Ignatius of Loyola, Leopardi, Balzac, Proust, and Carlo Levi, as well as three full pages of Gadda and a page from Calvino's own *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*). Many passages took me hours, and some (certainly the Gadda and the selections from Leopardi's *Zibaldone*) took days.

But I find myself wanting to offer a more theoretical justification. I want to say that one of the things that happens when writers quote substantial bits from other texts is that they introduce

[2] Some notes are perhaps in order regarding the volume's title and its text, both of which are arguably unstable, given that Calvino died before finalizing either. I saw no reason to diverge from the title used for the original Harvard edition of 1988, which still seems to me the best of the several Calvino had considered. His reported fondness for the English word "memo" shows, it seems to me, a poetic sensitivity to the subtleties of our language, as "memo" adds a contrapuntal lightness to the heaviness of the word "millennium" (as well as alliterating with it almost as nicely as "m'illumino / d'immenso").

As for the text itself: when I asked, in 2015, for access to the original manuscript, I was told that the description of it in the 1995 Meridiani edition of Calvino's complete works was "as close to the actual ms as we can get right now." Instead I worked from that 1995 edition, a slightly improved version of the text the original translator had used.

elements of tone or thought or style that are, to varying degrees depending on the context, in conversation with the main text and that become part of the overall fabric of the new work. Since I felt responsible for the overall fabric of *Six Memos*, I wanted to exercise as much control over those elements of the quoted passages as I did over Calvino's own prose.

And more specifically, I could say that Calvino quoted each passage in service of a particular argument, to illustrate a particular quality, and so it was important to ensure that the English translation of each passage be tuned to the exact frequency of that argument. If the same passage were quoted in the service of a different argument or to illustrate a different quality, I might tune its translation differently. Context, in other words, matters, as always, and different contexts can and often do justify new translations.

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Let me offer a couple of examples to illustrate what I mean. In *Lezioni americane*, Calvino was offering a "sample book" of passages that epitomized the qualities he was analyzing and promoting. In the "Leggerezza" memo, for instance, he finds the Cavalcanti passage notable for its swift cavalcade of images that, by virtue of being linked by the simple conjunction "e" ("and"), are given equal rhetorical and poetic weight. Or rather equal lightness: rather than any one image being central and dominant, and therefore presumably in some sense weightier than the others, they all float alongside each other, a constellation of sorts:

> Biltà di donna e di saccente core
> e cavalieri armati che sien genti;
> cantar d'augelli e ragionar d'amore;
> adorni legni 'n mar forte correnti;
> aria serena quand'apar l'albore
> e bianca neve scender senza venti;
> rivera d'acqua e prato d'ogni fiore;
> oro, argento, azzurro 'n ornamenti… (Calvino 2016, 16)

Further, Calvino explicitly links the lightness of this passage to its quickness (the subject of his second memo): "tutto si muove così rapidamente che non possiamo renderci conto della sua consistenza ma solo dei suoi effetti" (Calvino 1995a, 1:642; "everything moves so swiftly that we're not aware of its substance but only of its effects" [Calvino 2016, 17]). I wanted my translation of it to convey not simply the meaning of the Italian words but also at least a hint of that swiftness and lightness that made Calvino admire them and cite them in this particular context. The original translator of *Six Memos*, Patrick Creagh, though also a poet in his own right, did not attempt to render the Cavalcanti passage in verse, but rather offered readers the following prose version:

> Beauty of woman and of wise hearts, and gentle knights in armor; the song of birds and the discourse of love; bright ships moving swiftly on the sea; clear air when the dawn appears, and white snow falling without wind; stream of water and meadow with every flower; gold, silver, azure in ornaments… (Calvino 1988, 14)

We can guess from this translation, or at least from Calvino's description of it, that the passage is meant to be a catalog of lovely images, embodied in lovely language. But Anglophone readers won't be able to see it or hear it as such. They will instead encounter a choppy and occasionally clumsy ("meadow with every flower") or obscure ("azure in ornaments") series of images, with none of the poetic "ornamenti"—the cantering meter, the patterned rhyme—that, in the original, conspires with lightness and quickness to create the beautiful, elegantly balanced cascade Calvino wants to share with his audience. (Creagh's readers may also miss that "azzurro" here denotes the semi-precious stone once called *azure* in English but now called *lapis lazuli*.) Translations seldom recreate in full the stylistic beauties of their originals, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't even attempt to suggest them. Here then was my attempt:

> Beauty of woman, and a wise heart's words,
> And men-at-arms and their nobility;
> the colloquies of love, the songs of birds,
> and handsome ships on the fast-running sea;
> the calmness of the air as daybreak looms,
> and white snow falling on a windless day;
> a flowing brook, a meadow full of blooms;
> silver, and gold, and lapis in array… (Calvino 2016, 16)

In pursuit of what I hope are analogous rhythms and rhymes in my English version, I have taken minor liberties with the literal sense (most notably at the very end of that first line), but none, I think, that distort the essential meaning. Indeed I would claim that, on the whole, the rhythms and rhymes in this version reinforce and even clarify its sense, as rhythm and rhyme often do, even as they also, I hope, suggest the "music" of Cavalcanti's "little song."[3] I believe such liberties, particularly in the translation of poetry, should be regarded, in the words of contemporary Italian poet Vivian Lamarque, as "necessaria infedeltà" (personal communication, May 30, 2020; "necessary infidelity").

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[3] Critics have long argued about whether translators of poetry should attempt to transpose "musical" elements such as rhythm or rhyme—Nabokov, for example, pointedly eschewed them in his translation of *Eugene Onegin*—and even about whether poetry can be translated at all. In his 1982 talk "Tradurre è il vero modo di leggere un testo" ("Translating is the True Way to Read a Text"), Calvino, echoing Jakobson's famous 1959 pronouncement that "poetry by definition is untranslatable" (Jakobson 1959, 238) wrote "Sappiamo tutti che la poesia in versi è intraducibile per definizione" (1995b, 1826; "We all know that verse is by definition untranslatable"). Creagh's decision to render the above verses in prose might signal tacit agreement with this view (or might signal something more mundane, like a tight deadline).

In any case, both Jakobson and Calvino quickly reveal their statements as merely rhetorical, Jakobson by adding that "Only creative transposition is possible" (1959, 238) and Calvino by adding that "Il traduttore letterario è colui che mette in gioco tutto se stesso per tradurre l'intraducibile" (1995b, 1826–1827; "Literary translators are those who put their whole selves on the line to translate the untranslatable"). With regard to *Eugene Onegin*, I have yet to meet a reader who doesn't prefer James Falen's rhymed and metered "transposition"—a model of both lightness and quickness—over Nabokov's plodding and leaden "roadside prose," and as a poet, translator, and reader I am firmly in Falen's camp, which I'd argue is also Calvino's: the camp in which translators marshal their own literary skills and sensibilities ("tutto se stesso") in the service of their "creative transpositions."

When we come, in the second memo, to a passage from Calvino's own *Fiabe italiane* (*Italian Folktales*), we find that Creagh has pasted in the existing translation by George Martin—a justifiable and perhaps even obvious choice, given that Martin's translation was published during Calvino's lifetime and was thus presumably approved by Calvino himself. And yet this translation doesn't exemplify as well as it might the simplicity and quickness that Calvino is using the passage to illustrate. The author refers repeatedly to the tale's "concision" and "economy of expression," which contribute to its feeling of quickness. Folktales, like oral literature in general, tend toward terser, simpler syntax than literature that is conceived for the page, and indeed the opening sentence of this tale is notable for its extreme concision: "Un Re s'ammalò" (Calvino 1993, 270; "A King fell ill" [Calvino 1980, 185]), period. A four-word salvo, which launches us rapidly, and simply, into the story. But Martin, as if mistrusting the very simplicity Calvino clearly admires, joins that sentence with the next, creating a complex, multi-layered, twenty-seven-word opening barrage. He also combines other sentences elsewhere in the brief passage, altering its rhythms in ways that, in my view, paddle gently against the current of Calvino's argument.

I'm not saying that Martin committed some mortal translation sin. But I am saying that his version of this passage falters under the particular scrutiny that Calvino's new context brings it, because it wasn't originally translated with that context in mind. I could give other examples of such slippages between the translations Creagh quotes and the arguments Calvino is making, but my general point should now be clear: when a passage is lifted from its original context and set down, however carefully, in a new one—between what Barbara Harlow called, in her inventive translation of Derrida's *Éperons* (*Spurs*), the "tenterhooks[4] of quotation marks" (Derrida 1979, 57)—that passage is always at least subtly altered. Or to cite Derrida himself, anything that is quoted "peut rompre avec tout contexte donné, engendrer à l'infini de nouveaux contextes" (Derrida 1972, 381; "can break with any given context, endlessly engender new contexts"). One may well think here of Pierre Menard, Jorge Luis Borges' fictional novelist whose admirable ambition was to produce pages that would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Cervantes. But the idea that context fundamentally alters content is not merely post-structuralist or Borgesian cleverness; it is demonstrably true, as translators should understand better than perhaps anyone, and it means that new translations of quoted passages may often be not simply justifiable but necessary.

So that's my theoretical justification. I'll add only that, beyond any value they may have added to my translation, my retranslations of Calvino's citations were profoundly useful to me as a reader of *Six Memos*: wrestling for as long as I did with those passages that Calvino himself had obviously pondered for years or even decades, I came to better understand and admire the thinking and judgment embodied in his memos. I hope that my versions of them will help Anglophone readers do the same.

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In the case of Calasso's *K.*, the intertextuality was of a slightly different nature, and the multilingualism was submerged rather than on the surface. As a result, *K.* presented me with

[4] I say "inventive" because, while Harlow's phrase is quintessentially Derridean—Derrida loved to describe quotation marks as tools (cranes, pliers, tweezers, teeth, etc.) used to extract things, sometimes violently, from one context and set them in another—there exists no counterpart for the word "tenterhooks" in Derrida's French; he just says "entre guillemets" (Derrida 1979, 56; "between quotation marks"). I like to think that Harlow was inspired by the striking similarity in shape between tenterhooks and guillemets.

arguably more difficult challenges. Because *K.* is essentially a meditation on Kafka's life and work anchored primarily in close readings not only of his stories and novels but also his aphorisms and letters and diaries, the book includes a large number of quotations—well over a thousand. (The list of sources in the back of the book itself runs to more than twenty pages, arranged in two columns per page.) And to complicate matters, in the original Italian edition of *K.*, these quotations generally appear not in the original German but in Italian translations by Calasso himself.

The question here: To paste in existing English translations of the original Kafka passages, which Calasso quoted using his own translations? Or to translate Calasso's Italian—i.e., his translations? (In this case, since I don't know German well enough, simply retranslating the original passages from scratch wouldn't have been an option even had I wanted to.)

The first option—pasting in existing translations—would have saved me months of work, yet it quickly became clear that such a process would not serve Calasso's book. As you might have guessed by now, Calasso's own translations were (to return to my earlier metaphor) tuned to the particular frequency of his arguments. It's not that there weren't excellent existing translations of Kafka—there certainly were, for Kafka has on the whole been well served by many translators over many decades. The problem was that pasting phrases or passages from existing translations into the flow of Calasso's prose often introduced a bit of interpretive static, as if a knob needed to be rotated a degree or two to more clearly pick up Calasso's signal. In many cases, for example, a particular word or phrase in an existing translation, while justifiable in the overall context of that translation, failed to clearly evoke some nuance that Calasso was spotlighting.

The second option—translating Calasso's Italian translations into English without worrying about existing translations or the German originals—would also have saved me months. But translating translations is frowned on for good reason: like the game of telephone, it inevitably introduces inaccuracies and moves the second translation further from the original in ways the translator can't control.

Since Calasso translated his quotations of Kafka, and since those quotations embody his reading of Kafka—which after all is the chief point of *K.*—his translations can be said to take on the primacy of an original text. It was essential, then, that my translations be at least as attuned to Calasso's Italian versions of Kafka as to Kafka's German. My approach, though fantastically inefficient, was, I think, reasonably effective. I rounded up Kafka's original texts and all the existing translations I could find, along with some good German dictionaries, and then, for each of the thousand-plus Kafka quotes I encountered, I consulted at least three sources: the original German, the existing English versions, and Calasso's Italian version. I then mediated between them to come up with new English versions that seemed faithful to Calasso's Italian and its context, on the one hand, and also to Kafka's German, as I understood it with the help of dictionaries and other translators, on the other. At times I also consulted with Kafka experts such as Breon Mitchell and, of course, with Calasso himself. (Fluency in German would no doubt have saved me a great deal of time for this project, though in the end I doubt my resulting translation would have been significantly different.)

The particular intertextuality of *K.*, embodied in Calasso's translations of Kafka, clearly required an unusual double allegiance from the translator, a kind of triangulation. Calvino, in *Six Memos*, did not generally translate his many citations into Italian; there would have been no point, as he was planning to deliver the talks in English, to a mostly American audience. Yet there too a kind of triangulation was required, between Calvino's arguments, the texts he cited, and my versions of those texts. His arguments, like Calasso's interpretations of Kafka—like the context

that comes with any text—offer the translator implicit guidelines, specific frequencies. If the translator's task is regarded in this light, then the paths to its fulfillment clarify.

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