Different Worlds

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A bilingual student of mine recently made the following observation. During a period of study in England, she had become an admirer of Milan Kundera, reading his work in English. Later, back in Italy, she had picked up an early novel of his, in Italian this time, that she didn't know. She remarked: 'It was only when I was three quarters of the way through that I realized it was the same novel I had read first of all in England. I knew the plot was the same of course, but the book was so completely, so utterly different I was convinced it couldn't be the one I had already read.'

Checking recently through the Italian translation of an early novel of my own, a noir I suppose you would call it, scribbled in my second year in Italy, I was disturbed to find the following remark. The hero, a young Englishman in Italy who is about to turn to a life of crime, recognizes that this has something to do with the change of language. H says: 'the only thing he had truly gained these last two years was the ability to speak a foreign language near perfectly and the curious freedom that ability now appeared to give him in the way he thought. As if he had shifted off rails. His mind seemed to roam free over any and every possibility. He must make a big effort always to think in Italian as well as to speak it (certainly he had been thinking in Italian when he stole the document case). It could be a way out of himself, he thought, and out of the trap they had all and always wanted him to fall into.'[1]

I wrote this, and promptly forgot it, in my late twenties, some years before I started translating anything with literary pretensions and many years before I began to read more seriously about language and linguistics. In the meantime, however, I have discovered the Italian proverb: 'Inglese italianizzato, inglese indemonizzato,' which would have been such an appropriate quotation to have placed on the title page. Just as that proverb translates poorly into English, so my comment on the hero's sense of moral liberty in a foreign language, which seemed convincing enough in the original English, appears much less so in the Italian translation, where the reader is doubtless all too aware that his language is drenched in Catholic morality. The liberty Italian gave my hero had to do with its novelty, his unawareness of its implications, his being uninitiated into the culture it supports.

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1 T. Parks, *Cara Massimina*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1990, p. 11.

What.1 want to do in this paper is to ask if there is any useful connection to be made between my bilingual student's surprise on reading Kundera in a different language, and my hero's perception that his appropriation of the Italian language would open the way to his appropriation of other people's property. And again whether there is a connection between these two events – one real, one fictional – and my own growing conviction that a very great deal of literature, poetry and prose, can only be truly exciting and efficacious in its original language, a conviction that goes hand in hand with my decision not to write any more in Italian, never to translate into Italian, and never to translate poetry in any direction at all. This is a personal decision I should stress, not a prescription...

It is amusing, of course, that my student should have discovered the shock of the difference between the same text in different languages, with, of all people, Milan Kundera. For perhaps no other contemporary writer has been so ferociously attentive to the translations of his own work, nor dedicated himself to such scathing polemics at the expense of lazy and 'unfaithful' translation, polemics underwritten, it sometimes seems, by a belief in the possibility of a near identity between original and translation. Kundera speaks of having left a publisher because he changed semi-colons into full-stops. He speaks of a natural tendency of translators to reject repetition, to use richer and more literary vocabulary where the original text was lean and simple, and above all to return 'stylistic transgression' to convention.[2]

Kundera is not alone, of course, in finding such shortcomings – I think most of us will have made the same observations – nor in identifying an author's stylistic transgression with his originality and indeed the raison d'etre of his work. Explaining his own habitual use of repetition, D.H. Lawrence remarked: 'the only answer is that it is natural to the author.'[3] Less defensively, Proust spoke of style as 'the transformation that the author's thought imposes on reality,'[4] suggesting an essential equivalence of style and vision. In this regard, I suspect we would all agree that the mark of a 'poetic prose' is its consistent and internally coherent distance both from what is recognizably conventional and indeed from the creative styles of other authors. It has its meaning, that is, within a matrix of texts from each of which it establishes its distance. We would thus tend to accept Kundera's claim that: 'For a translator, the supreme authority should be the author's personal style.'[5] And presumably then his complaint that:

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2 These and other remarks are to be found in, M. Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, trans. L. Asher, Harper Collins, New York, 1995. See in particular the essay on Kafka.

3 D.H. Lawrence, Foreword to *Women in Love*, Thomas Seltzer, 1920.

4 M. Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Gallimard, Paris, 1978, p. 225.

5 M. Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed, cit.*, p. 110.

'But most translators obey another authority, that of the conventional version of "good French"'[6] (French being the specific case he is referring to). We might then go on to suspect, as Kundera clearly does, that if we find a work so radically different in different languages, it is because the translator has let us down.

But why are these translators so perversely obtuse? Is their conventionalizing tic, as Kundera would have it, an occupational hazard, like the gravedigger's insensitivity, the politician's ambiguity? Or could it be that the recognition and reproduction of transgression is not, as it turns out, such a simple thing at all, not merely a question of accepting some unusual punctuation and repeating a word where the author does. Kundera does not discuss the fact that since the conventions, social, moral and linguistic, of any two cultures and languages may be, and usually are, profoundly different, any transgression of them is not absolute in nature, but has meaning only in relation to the particular expectations it disappoints. It needs the context of the conventions it subverts. Notoriously, it is in those places where poetic prose deviates from standard usage, establishing a personal style and creating meaning through its distance from something else, that translation becomes tormented if not impossible. For the 'something else' in French is not the same as the 'something else' in Czech. Thus when Kundera writes: 'Partisans of flowing translation often object to my translators: "that's not the way to say it in German (in English, in Spanish, etc.)!" I reply: "It's not the way to say it in Czech either!"'[7] he is being ingenuous. Translating poetic prose, and even more so poetry, means creating the miracle of the 'same difference' from different and sometimes potentially antithetical conventions: as if the transgression of a 16th century Hindu widow in attempting to escape suttee could be made equivalent to that of a 20th century Scottish Moslem refusing to obey her husband's order not to go out to work. The rare bilingual person, the person most thoroughly grounded in two distinct conventions, is the person most likely to be struck by the utter difference of the same text in their two languages, because more keenly aware of the distinct value structures implied by the languages and the subversive force of whatever differences from convention are there established. Those who have merely learnt another language, however well, are not so easily disorientated. They are more like my cheerfully criminal protagonist who shakes off the conventions and taboos implicit in his native tongue the better to enjoy the freedom of what is experienced, at least at first, as not much more than a delightful code, a mental playground. The only thing that can be subverted for this person is the morality he was brought up with and the language that is its vehicle

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6 *Loc. cit.*

7 M. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, Faber & Faber, London 1990, pp. 129-130.

Lawrence's novel *Women in Love* is an account of the felt necessity to escape a series of conventions which have outlived their usefulness. The pressures of convention are dramatized in relationships, but Lawrence immediately recognizes language as the cement of convention. 'It depends what you mean,' remarks Ursula, on the first page, making a semantic problem of her sister's seemingly innocent question, 'don't you really want to get married?' I have long taught this book to Italian students by inviting them to compare passages of the original with the Italian translation, identifying the places where the two texts part company, and then trying to establish links between those departures. Since the translator is more than competent, these inevitably occur where the original prose is, as the title of today's session would have it, poetic: 'Birkin shut himself together,' Lawrence remarks. 'Gudrun shrank cruelly from this amorphous ugliness.' Or again: 'she was destroyed into perfect consciousness'. Or of Ursula: 'she was free, in complete ease.' 'they could forget perfectly.'[8] In each case, Lawrence distorts normal usages to suggest a complex psychology, and often to gesture to an underlying pattern of thought that is peculiarly his own.

The Italian translation shrinks from the oxymoron of 'shrank' suggesting fear and withdrawal, followed by 'cruelly' suggesting aggression; it has no answer to Lawrence's subversion of 'pulled himself together' into 'shut himself together', it does not know what to do with the aberrant 'into' after the verb 'destroy', nor does it catch the oddness of 'in ease' instead of 'at ease', or the peculiarity of 'forgetting' – but what? – 'perfectly'. (The translations, in entirely standard Italian, are: 'Birkin si chiuse in se stesso' 'Gudrun rabbrividì ferita dalla bruttezza informe' 'dilaniata, in uno stato di lucidità perfetta' 'libera e totalmente a suo agio.' 'Erano immersi in un perfetto obblio'[9]). But those who know Italian, and many who do not, will appreciate how difficult it is to recreate such a style which gains its meanings from idioms and usages only hinted at in the original and unavailable in the target language. What's more, however unusual Lawrence's English, it should be noted that, in these examples at least, it flows wonderfully. It deviates from standard English, but is always attentive to the rhythms of English prosody. The unusual locution 'destroyed into perfect consciousness', for example, draws on the syntactical pattern of 'turned into', 'changed into', 'transformed into', introducing a semantic shock with the word 'destroyed' but keeping the same structure. Likewise, the preposition 'in' is separated from 'ease' by 'complete' to avoid the jarring of 'in ease' as opposed to 'at ease', thus creating the expectation of entirely standard usages such as 'in

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8 D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, Penguin, London 1982, pp. 113, 57, 430, 396, 397.

9 *Donne Innamorate*, trans. A. dell'Orto, Rizzoli, Milan, 1989, pp. 94. 24, 499, 455, *loc. cit.*

complete liberty,' 'in complete harmony', only to surprise us with 'ease'. Hence Kundera's suggestion that it is the 'partisans of flowing translation' who are hostile to creative and original writing is again ingenuous. Lawrence's prose flows well enough and presumably one would wish to be faithful to that fluency. It is part of his style. It is natural to the author. The problem is that the author is deviating from English in a manner, we have seen, that English allows, perhaps even suggests. In the same way, his characters find unconventional solutions which society, though not sanctioning, may well have hinted at. They are the solutions of people escaping from these particular conventions, not some notional idea of convention in general. Indeed, by living on its margins, Lawrence's characters define the society they wish to escape, as his own work defines the conventional novel he no longer wishes to write. To put it another way, when writing in English, there is no way of being entirely outside Englishness. At the end of *Women in Love*, when one of the protagonists chooses the most drastic form of escape by walking out into the Alpine snows to die, Lawrence remarks on how close he was to a path that led over the Alps into Italy. 'Would that have been a way out?' he asks. 'No, it would only have been a way in again.'[10] My contention is, that translation itself is always 'a way in again': anything we write in a translation will always be understood in terms of the world, the conventions, the general literary context of our target language, usually our native tongue. To imagine one can transport transgressions or deviations from other conventions and reproduce them in the same way and in the same place in the translation, thus generating the same meaning, is to be dangerously naive. So it happens that, rather than embarking on a transgression that in their own language would come across as no more than an oddity, many translators feel obliged to revert to the conventional. This hardly seems perverse. It does, however, have serious repercussions for our understanding of the status of a translated text.

I came to Italy at twenty-five, translated commercial and technical material for many years, then moved on to translating novels and I suppose we could say poetic prose in my early thirties. In those days, when choosing whether to accept a translation or not, I went very much on the question of what I call voice. If I felt I could mimic the voice of this prose in English, I would accept the book. If not, not. Since money was an important factor at that time, I should stress that these decisions did not always coincide with taste. I sometimes felt that, alas, I could not mimic a book I liked and would have to turn it down, or that I could manage a book I didn't like and, to make ends meet, would do well to translate it. Only years later, reading Humboldt, did I come across the expression, 'elective affinity'. One can have an affinity with something one

10 D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love, cit.*, p. 579.

doesn't like, just as one can find areas of one's own personality less than desirable. At that time, when it came to faithfulness, it seemed enough to me to shadow in English, so far as I could understand it, the text's relationship with its own language. Later, however, as my knowledge of Italian and above all Italian literature broadened and deepened, I became aware that my understanding of texts I had translated in the past was being altered by my growing appreciation of the context in which they had been written. My translation, while attractive, could not, within an English context, transmit many of the book's gestures. On the contrary, the books would be understood in relation to an English literary matrix, perhaps suggesting meanings not apparent or even remotely intended in the original. This does not mean I would now translate these books very differently, only that I would be more aware of the various areas of loss. On the one hand, then, long immersion in another culture brings empowerment - we understand things better - on the other it becomes a handicap - we begin to doubt whether some texts are translatable at all. Perhaps I am approaching my bilingual student's perception of absolute difference.

While I was doing my first literary translations and immediately before my first novel in English was accepted for publication, I wrote a novel in Italian with the odd title, *I nani di domani*, which, literally translated, means 'Tomorrow's Dwarves.' Unlike any of my other novels, this was a straightforwardly rumbustious comedy – an innocuous version of the evasion that characterizes the English teacher turned criminal I mentioned earlier on. For both of us, the escape from English was an escape from moral seriousness. I was pleased with what I'd done, proud of having managed to write in Italian, albeit with a great deal of help from my wife, and began to send the typescript around, but although an agent took the book on, it wasn't published. I hazarded a translation into English, but with every sentence the book shed its charm. Indeed, it seemed infinitely more difficult to translate than the work of other writers. The reason, perhaps, was that the driving energy of the book was the evasion of writing in Italian. I could not be interested in this material in English. Fifteen years on, a reputable house offered to publish the novel. They declared it charming, even hilarious. I went back and read it. What charm it had lay entirely in its naivete. Its frequent deviations from standard Italian were as innocuous and random as its satire of provincial life was superficial and caricatured. I felt it would be best not to publish it since it represented neither what I feel now nor even what I truly felt then. Its real meaning was its escape from something else, something the Italian reader wouldn't be able to understand because it wasn't available in the text: Englishness. Ironically, at about the same time, the early noir describing a character's move into crime sparked off by his transplantation into another culture was also accepted. This book, I am more or

less happy with. It presents that evasion of a new language within the moral framework of the old.

I mention this episode because it offers the opportunity to make two reflections: first that, aside from economic reasons, a writer chooses to change language successfully when the particular aesthetic he has drives him to it. Not otherwise. One can see how, obsessed as he was by the compulsive nature of language, our lack of individual control over it and its distance from our experience of reality, a writer like Beckett would choose to work in a second language where any alienation he might feel, or lack of expertise he might fear, would play to his poetic. Joyce, on the contrary, whose project was exactly the opposite of Beckett's, an attempt to use all the resources of language to recover our experience of place of time, to make the text, as Beckett described it, 'not about something, but that something itself,'[11] remained anchored, despite all his experiments and all his years abroad, to Dublin and to English.

The second reflection that arises out of the otherwise trivial episode of my Italian novel, is that the very notion of 'stylistic transgression' may have a very different value in different cultures. My Italian novel was accepted because, even when intended and aimed at some particular target, its transgressions could nevertheless be seen as the amusing shortcomings of the learner, of one seeking to become an initiate on the same level as the reader. In this sense, far from being subversive, it was reinforcing convention. And Italian is a language where there has been very little seriously transgressive prose of the Lawrence or Beckett variety, and much extremely attractive writing within generally accepted and in the end by no means despicable conventions. This, after all, is a country where one of the leading satirical magazines will still reject an article because it too aggressively attacks Catholic sensibilities, a country where a famous writer/translator like Elio Vittorini could openly defend the radical cuts and changes he made to Lawrence's work on the grounds that not to make them would damage the beauty of the prose.[12] Certainly – for example – there is nothing transgressive that I can see in the Italian translations of Kundera's work. Italy is thus a country with very different sensibilities from England where these days a novel with even the mildest of pretensions is obliged to be openly transgressive at the linguistic level – something that has led to the tedious multiplication of demotic voices and the wholehearted often uncomprehending acceptance of different forms of English from all over the world. The quirky is at a premium. Thus, in a sense, to write in a rigidly 'conventional' prose becomes itself a form of transgression. Shortly after winning the Booker Prize, Kazuo Ishiguro, the

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11 S. Beckett, *Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce*. In *I can't go on, I'll go on*, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1976, p. 117.

12 See *Fondi Alberto Mondadori, Arnaldo Mondadori, Autori, Fascicolo Vittorini.* Available for consultation at the Mondadori publishing house, Milan.

Anglo-Japanese writer, gave an interview to *Time* magazine in which he criticized his British contemporaries for writing in ways that made translation difficult. His rigidly austere prose, which so effectively expresses the emotional limitations of his protagonist in *The Remains of the Day,* was, he claimed, partly the result of his attentiveness to eventual translations. He pared his English down to what a translator in any language could easily handle. What Ishiguro could not have appreciated is that the underlying menace of that precise conventional voice disappears entirely in Italian where such a controlled form of expression is common in prose fiction. The distance Ishiguro establishes from other writers in English thus disappears. What is disturbing, if one wishes to be disturbed by such things, is with what appetite the public laps up translated literary works whose essential cohesion has all too often, though by no means always, been lost in translation. Might it be, I sometimes fear, precisely that loss of depth that makes translations attractive? I live in a country where a good 70% of prose fiction is translated. Is this yet another of the many negative aspects of globalization?

And yet I translate and people tell me they enjoy my translations. I would like to conclude by discussing my relationship with one of the Italian authors I have translated and to look at a paragraph of his work in original and translation.

Roberto Calasso is about as different from myself as a writer could be. A meticulous scholar, admirably intellectual, he sternly avoids any autobiographical material. His creative reconstructions of Greek and now Indian mythology have the advantage, from the translator's point of view, that they contain little that is culture-specific to Italy in terms of semantic content. They are attempts to enter and regenerate different mindframes, though of course they do so from an Italian starting point and in the Italian language. If my own writing has matured and radically changed over the last few years, it is largely due to my reflections on Calasso's work and on what it has meant to translate it. Sometimes, however, it occurs to me that I have come closer to putting him into English in the echoes of his writing in my own work than in my translations. But here he is, introducing the god Apollo in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*:

> Delo era un dorso di roccia deserta, navigava seguendo la corrente come un gambo di asfodelo. Nacque li Apollo, dove neppure le serve infelici vanno a nascondersi. Su quello scoglio perduto a partorire, prima di Leto, erano state le foche. C'era però una palma, a cui si aggrappò la madre, sola, puntando le ginocchia sulla magra erba. E Apollo apparve. Allora tutto divenne d'oro sin dalle fondamenta. D'oro anche l'acqua del fiume, anche le foglie dell'ulivo. Quell'oro

> doveva espandersi nel profondo del mare, perchè ancorò Delo. Non fu più, da allora, isola errante.[13]

As I suggested, Calasso's book involves a creative recreation of Greek mythology and one is struck throughout both by the vatic authority of the tone and by the presentation of myth as real event, or at least as something that requires no apology. The voice combines certain poetic or archaic elements, particularly of diction and focusing, with the short, even terse sentences that we tend to associate with modern prose. That is, while it draws on literary resources from previous periods, it does not appear to be a pastiche, but rather uses them to acquire a peremptory authority that is all its own. Since not everyone here will understand Italian, let me try, however unsatisfactory this approach may be, to give you a brutally literal translation so that you can grasp, in however crude a form, the content offered:

> Delos was a spine of deserted rock, it sailed about following the current like a stalk of asphodel. Born here was Apollo, where not even the unhappy servant girls go to hide themselves. On that lost rock to give birth before Leda were the seals. There was, however, a palm tree to which the mother clutched, alone, bracing her knees on the sparse grass. And Apollo appeared. Then everything became gold right from the bottom. Of gold also the water of the river, also the leaves of the olive tree. That gold was to expand into the depth of the sea. Because it anchored Delos. It was no longer, from then on, a wandering island.

From the purely semantic point of view, this is a faithful translation. The Italian is not standard Italian and this likewise is very far from standard English. The focusing particularly is bizarre in both texts, most notably in the flourish, 'Born here was Apollo...' (Nacque lì Apollo ...) But one transgression is not equivalent to the other. Where the Italian elegantly and fluently - for there is rhythm and alliteration in plenty here – gestures back towards archaic forms to acquire its lofty tone, the English drifts aimlessly about the syntactical currents of the original, and if it is not incoherent semantically, it certainly is so in terms of register and thus risks drawing more attention to its own vagaries than to its content (in a way the Italian does not). So the English will have to be changed. But how? A standard modern English would be banal and inappropriate. The only solution would seem to be to draw on the resources of an older English as Calasso has drawn on those of an older Italian. But notoriously these resources are not equivalent. In short, to be faithful to Calasso's strategy and the reading experience it generates, which I so much enjoy, I shall have to appropriate – that awful word – the text into an English context. But any notion

13 R. Calasso, *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, Adelphi, Milan, 1988, p. 67.

of translation without appropriation is nonsense. The only way not to appropriate a text is to leave it in its original language. Here is the published translation:

> Delos was a hump of deserted rock, drifting about the sea like a stalk of asphodel. It was here that Apollo was born, in a place not even wretched slave girls would come to hide their shame. Before Leda, the only creatures to give birth on that godforsaken rock had been the seals. But there was a palm tree, and the mother clutched it, alone, bracing her knees in the thin grass. Then Apollo emerged, and everything turned to gold, from top to bottom. Even the water in the river turned to gold and the leaves on the olive tree likewise. And the gold must have stretched downward into the depths, because it anchored Delos to the seabed. From that day on, the island drifted no more.[14]

There is neither time nor space here to go through this translation line by line: suffice it to say that when I have invited students to compare these passages they invariably remark on the very different syntactical structuring of the two texts, and the more generous lexicon of the English. Thus 'Nacque lì Apollo' has become: 'It was here that Apollo was born...', the English retaining the focus on 'here' at the expense of a much longer and more regular locution. Or again the rhythmic, alliterative 'Su quello scoglio perduto a partorire, prima di Leto, erano state le foche' (On that lost rock to give birth before Leda were the seals) has become: 'Before Leda, the only creatures to give birth on that godforsaken rock had been the seals.' Once more the foregrounding of the place and, in this case, the focus on 'seals' at the end of the sentence, has been kept at the expense of a certain expansion. The Italian is powerfully elliptical, in a way that much poetic material in Italian gestures back to Latin ellipsis. While this is sometimes possible in English, it is rarely so when the content is determined by another language.

Meanwhile in lexical terms, one notes how 'serve infelici' (unhappy servant girls) has become 'wretched slave girls' 'perduto' (lost) has become 'godforsaken', 'nascondersi' (hide themselves), has become 'hide their shame', and the word 'seabed' has been introduced to offer an anchor to 'anchored' which in English seems to require an indirect object.

How long it would take to discuss each one of these and all the other decisions involved in the translation of this brief text! How complex it all is, not just syntactically, but in terms of the larger literary context. At first sight, it would appear that I offer the perfect example of Kundera's obtuse translator,

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14 R. Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, trans. T. Parks, Knopf, New York, 1993, p. 51.

substituting one sentence for two at one point, using more literary words, entirely reorganizing almost all the sentences. But Italian is not English and the spirit guiding these decisions is clear enough. The English is groping for a rhetorical tone, a register, comparable to that of the Italian, drawing on an archaic, perhaps biblical language with which my vicarage youth makes me all too familiar. Given the larger and more layered lexicon of English, the move away from 'unhappy' to 'wretched' is dictated by the need to gesture to the classical world through the use of a slight archaism ('infelice' in Italian sits happily with either a modern or an archaic register). In English a 'servant girl' would normally be a 'maid', which would tend to make us think of the British upper classes, hence the switch to 'slave girls'. 'Hide themselves,' is as inelegant as third person plural reflexives tend to be in English and, what's more, not immediately comprehensible here, hence the interpretative introduction of 'hide their shame'; 'lost rock' would not easily give the Italian sense of 'far away from anywhere', nor would it, as does the word 'perduto', offer alliteration ('perduto a partorire, prima...'). The choice of 'godforsaken', does give that sense and offers a rhythmic alliteration with the earlier 'gives', albeit at the risk of introducing a concept not present in the Italian. The last sentence of the translation, 'From that day on, the island drifted no more,' completely rearranges the Italian to discover a vatic register complete with alliteration that matches the original in gesture if not in exact semantics.

So the text is now in English. It is faithful in that it suggests a consistent, coherent relationship between this voice and a literary past, not unlike that of Calasso's text. It includes much of the same alliteration, rhythm and peremptory fluency. Am I happy with it? Yes and no. The main failing comes in the translation of 'E Apollo apparve. Allora tutto divenne oro fin dalle fondamenta.' This is clearly the climax the text has been working toward. And here I lost my nerve. Having already used an 'and', rather than a relative, to link the previous sentence, I chose to begin this sentence with 'Then'. This would be all very well if the next Italian sentence didn't begin with 'Allora'. Unable in the translation to start a second sentence with 'then', I thus chose to run the two sentences together. Looking at the whole thing in Italian and English we have:

> E Apollo apparve. Allora tutto divenne d'oro sin dalle fondamenta.
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> Then Apollo emerged, and everything turned to gold, from top to bottom.

Clearly the English loses drama by not introducing a period after 'emerged'. Worse, it loses the now extravagant alliteration of 'Apollo apparve' (an alliteration then echoed, as it were, in 'Allora'). Why? I was worried about the semantics of 'appeared' as a description of birth, thinking that this word might be more acceptable in Italian than English. I also felt the alliteration was now

overly heavy. I thus settled for 'emerged' which, on reflection, seems no more appropriate than 'appeared', since one does not, I don't think, speak of babies as 'emerging', though technically one might see that this is a more accurate choice. But my real mistake here was not to think in terms of the relation of style and content, not to understand what Calasso was up to. Apollo is the god of 'appearance' of beauty, of art. With him appearance, as it were, appears, for the first time. And with this sentence the alliteration, the artifice of the paragraph, now comes to the surface in a way that no one can ignore. Had I been aware of all this, I would surely have had the courage to write 'And Apollo appeared.'

But even assuming I made this correction, my difficulty here does little more than suggest a deeper loss that takes place in this translation. We have noted that almost all the changes I have made to adjust register and rhythm involve a slight loss of concision, a slight expansion. But perhaps the best way I can explain my misgivings is by quoting the next paragraph from the original.

> L'Olimpo si distacca da ogni altra dimora Celeste per la presenza di tre divinità innaturali: Apollo, Artemis, Atena. Irriducibili a una funzione, imperiose custodi dell'unico, hanno stracciato quella lieve cortina opaca che la natura tesse intorno alle sue potenze. Lo smalto e il vuoto, il profilo, la freccia. Questi i loro elementi, non acqua o terra.[15]

Here Calasso begins his presentation of the Greek obsession with appearance and aesthetics, the sharp line, the fine profile, a love-affair with clarity, the territory of Apollo. And clearly it is to this that his prose is aspiring. Indeed we could compare the sharpness of Calasso's focusing with the clarity of gesture on those black-on-white designs that characterize the pictorial vases of the early Hellenic period. A literal translation will be so ugly and clumsy as to give only a vague idea of this intention. But here it is:

> Olympus detaches itself from every other celestial dwelling through the presence of three unnatural divinities: Apollo, Artemis, Athena. Irreducible to one function, imperious custodians of the unique, they tore away that flimsy, opaque screen that nature weaves around its forces. The enamel and the void, the profile, the arrow. These their elements, not water or earth.

Once again it is clear that this will not do. The intention is lost in the extravagant unusualness of the English which seems to have no point of contact with the rhythms of any known English prosody. Once again, as we shall see, the published translation seeks a rhetorical gesture similar to that of the original, but at the expense of that extraordinary concision that welds the style of the

15 R. Calasso, *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, cit. p. 67.

Italian to its subject. Note in particular what heavy weather is made of that crucial and crucially brief sentence, 'Lo smalto e il vuoto, il profilo, la freccia.'

> If Olympus differs from every other celestial home, it is thanks to the presence of three unnatural divinities: Apollo, Artemis, Athena. More than mere functions, these imperious custodians of the unique stripped away that thin, shrouding curtain which nature weaves about its forces. The bright enamelled surface and the void, the sharp outline, the arrow. These, and not water or earth, are their elements.[16]

The problem in this case is that one simply cannot translate the semantic freight of 'smalto' or 'profilo' as used here in Italian with just one word. And then of course there are questions of rhythm and balance to consider, two aesthetic qualities as dear to Apollo as clarity. Yet precisely because one appreciates how much Calasso's text is doing, one fervently wishes one could have followed the Italian more closely. Perhaps the most dangerous moments for a translator are those when he so admires the original, so understands its surrounding context, that he wishes his target language were the same as the source language, and then stubbornly tries to make it so. This is the territory of Nabokov's translation of Pushkin, which is all but unreadable; it is the experience of the bilingual person who is shocked by the idea that the same text can be so radically different in two different languages, as different indeed as those two languages are from each other. It is the starting point of all Kundera's criticism. It also explains why I have decided never to translate into Italian. And never to translate poetry. The more poetic, or transgressive, a text is, the more it departs from familiar usage, so the more it comes to be about the language it is written in, not in a narrow linguistic sense, but in the sense of all that language stands for and supports. While I feel I can manage this conundrum with prose, where content still plays its very large part, I find poetry, not being a poet, quite beyond me.

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16 R. Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, p. 51.