

The Essential Achille Mizzi, selected, translated, and introduced by Peter Serracino Inglott – a case for performative translation

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Abstract: *Delivered on the occasion of the English publication of Achille Mizzi's essential poetry in Maltese, this paper discusses the issue of the translatability of literary works. One of its key arguments concerns the translated poem as an aesthetic orientation neither capriciously free of the original, nor yet restricted to a repeatable meaning. The paper argues that the literary translator, in this case Peter Serracino Inglott, must work at the associative and inferential level, careful not to replicate the identical devices of the original text in a new poetic context where they might be rendered ineffective, but equally careful to project the connotative reach and aesthetic potential inhering in the original work. One consequence of this creative engagement with the original text is the mutual growth of translator and translated work: the translator must submit to the artistically unfolding world of the original text, but also revives its progressive insight with intuitive contributions that maintain its connotative direction. The translator finds his ordinary self previously translated, as it were, by the poetic universe he inhabits, submitting his sensibility to the very archetypal flow and figurative trends that he now extends.*

Keywords: *translation, indeterminacy, aesthetic orientation, translator, target language, resistance theorists, interpretation, anthem, myth, original text, adaptation, dialogue, poetic momentum.*

Literary translation pays 'homage to a text in one language by giving it life in another, . . . creating something new' in the process.¹ This observation by Riitta Oittinen is echoed by Clifford E. Landers: 'Of all the forms that translation takes – such as commercial, financial, technical, scientific, advertising, etc. – only *literary* translation lets one consistently share in the creative process.'² But if poetic translation must activate this creative process by working intuitively at the margins of a new language, then its aim is hardly to transfer a verbal message.

¹Riitta Oittinen, 'Teaching Translation of Fiction – A Dialogic Point of View', *Teaching Translation and Interpreting – Training, Talent and Experience*, (eds) Cay Dollerup and Anne Loddegaard, Amsterdam, Philadelphia, 1992, p. 75.

²Clifford E. Landers, *Literary Translation – A Practical Guide*, Bristol, 2001, pp. 4–5.

This begs the question whether the indeterminacy of art is translatable at all, whether there exists such a thing as translating the endless sequence of inferences emerging from one symbolic image. Peter Serracino Inglott's translation of Achille Mizzi's poetry makes a strong case for this potentially endless procedure transferred into a wider readership. I hope to illustrate this with just two translated poems: 'The Wood' and 'Ulysses'.

In Mizzi's poem 'The Wood', natural sounds emanate from a wood to invade and ultimately possess the poet, causing his maddened self to envisage the green sap of vegetation dripping from his veins. In translation, this poem betrays an additional effort by Serracino Inglott to revive the progressive flow of implications released by the original text, achieving within a new register *an aesthetic orientation* neither capriciously free of the original, nor yet restricted to a repeatable meaning.

For instance, the Maltese term '*għanġitu*', which literally translates as 'its [i.e. the wood's] song', is made more grandiose by Serracino Inglott's more specific rendition as the wood's 'anthem'. In English, 'anthem' elicits stately and ceremonial associations rather than the romantic stereotype of the wood's song. 'Anthem' evokes the image of a choral composition sung in a group on a public occasion. But the anthem is followed by the verb 'sidled,' in the verses 'Its anthem has sidled inside me / as a summer breeze sidles between trees'. Here too, the source text offers only the more generic term '*dahlet fija*', which literally translates as 'got into me' rather than 'sidled inside me'. The verb 'sidled' adds the impression of a crafty individual furtively sneaking into a place. While 'anthem' evokes the image of a company of singers publicly voicing their praise, the verb 'sidles' gives the contrastive image of a melody *insinuating itself unobtrusively into a new location*. This antithesis of conspicuous public expression and inconspicuous musical movement does not, in fact, distort the original poem's subtle contrasts. It wonderfully enhances the original poem's discrepancy between the massiveness of the wood chorus and the subtle way in which its collective sounds creep into and pervade the human soul as one self-insinuating melody. In the source text, this contrastive image of immensity and stealthiness is heightened by the simile of the summer breeze gracefully slipping its vastness amid the trees. Serracino Inglott is guided by the sublime orientation of this contrast between the vastness and the inconspicuous movement of, not just the breeze, but the wood chorus itself. But, also, he refreshes the subtle irony of this contrast by resorting to the contrastive implications that the terms 'anthem' and 'sidles' have in the English register. It is, in my view, at this associative and inferential level that the literary translator must work, not replicating the identical devices of the original text, but creatively projecting the connotative reach and aesthetic potential it holds.

Literary translation works in both directions; it is a mutual transformation of text and translator. The translator must submit to the artistically unfolding world of

the original text, but revives its progressive insight only with intuitive contributions that maintain its connotative direction. Allan Turner argues for such a performative translation by comparing the literary translator to 'a musical arranger who rewrites a piece for a different instrument or group of instruments'.³ And even so-called 'resistance' theorists, who adhere closely to the idiosyncrasies of the original text in the hope of broadening the target language with them, regard translation as 'not simply communicative, but provocative as well'.⁴

But what is aesthetically provocative in one poetic tradition does not necessarily have the same artistic impact in another linguistic universe. It has often been observed that literary translation entails an advance of artistic validity beyond the original text, a surplus effect that leaves its poetic mark in the cultural milieu and literary standards of another language. 'Within a new language world', argues Hans-Georg Gadamer, the meaning of a translation must 'establish its validity ... *in a new way* [my emphasis]. Thus every translation is at the same time an interpretation'.⁵ Landers points out that this is how we enriched our classical heritage: for different renditions of, say, Homer afford 'every generation the opportunity to discover its own voice in a new translation. The oft-cited observation is apt: the Greeks have only one Homer; we have many.'⁶ One might add that the Homeric tradition speaks longer than the Greek Homer precisely because Homeric translation has become a cumulative institution, one that literally speaks volumes.

Another striking instance of supplementary performance in translation concerns the melodious character of the poem 'The Wood.' Of the Maltese version's five lines, three are linked by the same masculine rhyme: '*fija*', '*sajfija*', and '*dmija*'. Furthermore, the second and fifth lines are identical seven-syllable verses framing another pair of identical eleven-syllable lines. All the poem's lines have rigid conventional stresses and all but one have their end pause coinciding with a natural pause in the sentence. This whole acoustic arrangement makes for a very harmonic and balanced effect, an acoustic image of regularity suggestive of the irresistible song emanating from the wood. But such traditional singsong effects, still favoured by modern Maltese poets, might easily create an unseemly jingle in English.

Serracino Inglott's intuitive translation seems almost embarrassed of this catchy sound arrangement, and its inevitable nearness to balladry if simply replicated in English. The translation, in fact, replaces rhyme with the less conspicuous device

³ Allan Turner, 'Translation and Criticism – The Stylistic Mirror', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, No. 36, Vol. 1, p. 168.

⁴ Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation – Towards an Ethics of Difference*, London and New York, 1998, pp. 10–13, 23.

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, London, 1989, p. 384.

⁶ Landers, p. 11.

of assonance: the repetition of the vowel 'e' between the same rhyming words of the Maltese text: 'me', 'trees', and 'green'; it also supplements this device with internal rhyme and alliteration in the verse 'as a summer breeze sidles between trees'. Evidently, the acoustic richness of the original is not lost, but *conveyed by alternative techniques that keep the wood's solemn anthem apart from lower poetic forms such as the English ballad*. Here the creative use of acoustic devices from English maintains the original poem's decorum, its declamatory voice conveying the time-honoured image of an inscrutable force, a *musica mundana*, pervading the poet's soul. While re-activating the melodious character of the original poem, Serracino Inglott makes a creative effort to sustain its solemn declamatory voice in the literary standards of English.

The literary translator inevitably searches for a middle ground between the two extremes of replicating the poem's literary devices and taking matters into his own creative hands. Robert Wechsler implies this struggle when pointing out the variety of names given to the literary translator, ranging from 'a courier of the human spirit' as Pushkin admiringly called him, to a plagiarizer, a looter of other cultures, a collaborator to colonialism, a traitor, a betrayer.⁷

My second and last example, the poem 'Ulysses', illustrates the delicate balance to be struck between a distortively free translation and one that, adhering too faithfully to the original poem's devices, would fail to initiate its connotative force in another linguistic universe. In its Maltese version, the poem 'Ulysses' ends with the mythical hero exclaiming his desire to be left 'oppressed / by the potion that crazes' (my translation). Here, the figurative 'potion' that afflicts the hero's mind stands for the sirens' song, which intoxicates and torments Ulysses. But then the mythical hero breaks off in mid-sentence and another fervent desire is expressed: the desire to be afflicted not by the sirens' song but 'by the enchantment / of the myth'. Here, the speaker shifts unpredictably from being intoxicated by an irresistible melody to being transported by the myth itself that narrates the encounter between the sirens and Ulysses. Inevitably, this shift brings about a new standpoint for the reader, who must now adopt the perspective of someone positioned outside, and desiring, a mythical narrative. The reader is thus alerted to the suggestion that, after all, *it is the poet himself who is bewitched by the myth of Ulysses*, so bewitched in fact as to have assumed the mythical hero's enchanted self and voice. Ulysses' archetypal affliction by the siren song is thus incorporated into the poet's enchantment with myth. Such a technique is not foreign to readers of Mizzi's poetry, which constantly merges classical and poetic voices, archetypal and personal viewpoints.

⁷ Robert Wechsler, *Performing without a Stage – The Art of Literary Translation*, North Haven, Ct, 1998, pp. 9–10.

Serracino Inglott gives this translated version of Ulysses' closing words:

In agony leave me,
bewitched
and drunk
with the enchantment
of myth.

This translation omits the sentence break, and thus the marker of a possible shift between two different speakers. Through this very adaptation, however, it converges into one unbroken voice the hero's and the poet's appeals: the hero's ardent desire for the siren song and the poet's equally ardent desire for the encompassing myth. The adaptation thus enhances, rather than weakens, the depiction of the poet being so bewitched by Ulysses' myth as to adopt and relive the hero's torment and desire. Only now, the unbroken syntax has two interchangeable subjects (Ulysses and the poet) and two equally interchangeable objects (the siren song and myth). Again, in Serracino Inglott's translation, the bewitching potion no longer functions as Ulysses' metaphor for the siren song. It is instead embedded in the phrase 'drunk/with the enchantment/of myth'. Like the omission of the sentence break, this re-arranged concept of a potion-like myth *is an aesthetic advance upon* the original poem's play between an intoxicating song and an enchanting myth. Serracino Inglott can *retain and extend* the original poem's play of heroic and poetic viewpoints because, in translation, he is interacting with what the poem has already projected by way of artistic method. In Turner's words, translation here becomes a *comment on the original text, offering a 'new insight' into what the author is doing*.⁸

Landers points out that 'Some [literary] texts will call for adaptation rather than straightforward translation.'⁹ But one must quickly add that adaptation follows from becoming involved in a poetically unfolding world whose orientation is too powerful to simply set aside. The translator finds his ordinary self previously translated, as it were, by the poetic universe he inhabits, submitting his sensibility to the very archetypal flow and figurative trends that he now extends. This is more or less what Gadamer implies when arguing that translation 'is necessarily a re-creation of the text *guided by the way the translator understands what it says* [my emphasis]'.¹⁰ Gadamer elaborates that the author's and the translator's worlds come together as 'a common diction', a self-expanding dialogue that encompasses both in its mutual and progressive understanding.¹¹ To lend one's intuitive faculty to the

⁸ Turner, p. 169

⁹ Landers, p. 49.

¹⁰ Gadamer, p. 386.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 387.

suggestive potential of Mizzi's poetic universe, to put one's inferential skills in the service of the poet's mythically unfolding world, is to precondition oneself by the cumulative force of his archetypal paradigms.

This evening's launch of a parallel Maltese-English text has given me some opportunity to project Achille Mizzi's world without yet dwelling upon the poet's Maltese idiom. And perhaps, there is no better way for Mizzi the poet to endure than as a literary institution that *constantly exceeds its own boundaries through literary adaptation and translation*. The dictum 'The Greeks have only one Homer, we have many' is applicable even to our modest Maltese literature. It, too, can secure its institutional future by opening itself to varying forms of aesthetic response coming from translation and performance, allowing its broadened tradition to actually speak volumes. If it is deemed worthy of translation, Mizzi's world has already transcended the plane of one linguistic medium, earning its status as a connotative potential that has outstripped the very language that first conveyed it.

In conclusion, I would like to recall first one of Mizzi's finest poems in Serracino Inglott's English rendition:

Hagar Qim

Hagar Qim never looks so good
as when the setting sun
lies in tatters
among the carob leaves,
solid stones
prick ears, whisper confessions,
pillars lift arms
longing for heaven.
And darkness descends.
And in the skein of the waves
the stars shimmer back
and rubble walls reek of dew.

And I am lured by the altar
to sacrifice an animal
when a skink drunk drowsy
the spiral-folded tongue
undoes,
in order to relish
in the dark,
the meaning of the eternal.

In this English version of 'Hagar Qim', *I know I inhabit Mizzi's poetically unfolding world*, where grandeur of style typically evokes an ancestral past, where inanimate stone can whisper ancient rituals and commune with the eternal, where sacred altars invariably combine with such mundane objects as the 'rubble walls reek[ing] of dew', and where one simply expects Mizzi's motif of a tattered sunset giving way to the approaching infinity of dense darkness. I know I am in Mizzi's poetic world because the translator has entered a dialogue with its connotative flow, which extends *as a poetic vision in progress*. And it is within this evolving vision of temple, sacrificial altar, rubble wall, and tattered sunset that I can appreciate the skink's tongue relishing dark infinity, and sense that the poet himself is dispersing, dissolving even, into the surrounding nightfall. As far as this translated poem is concerned, I can go on and on compiling subtle associations, such as the link between the skink's 'spiral-folded tongue' and the spiral engravings on some of Malta's Neolithic temples, our ancestral motif of the eternal. All this can be achieved precisely because the translator's new idiom and Mizzi's realm of archetypal associations have become *one poetic momentum*, recognisably derived and yet still creative in its connotative movement. It is this unhindered potential of poetic suggestion that marks literary translation as, not an end in itself, but the inauguration of an aesthetic experience in a new language.