

THE CHANGING PROFESSION

Translation in the Flesh

JOSHUA REID

But all at once it dawned on me that *this*
 Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
 Just this: not text, but texture . . .

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*

In increasing despair, Goethe's Faust seeks a momentary balm for his existential itch in a copy of the New Testament, which he proceeds to translate into German. Faust zeroes in on the unforgettable first verse of John chapter 1, Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος (*Nestle-Aland*), translating "das heilige Original" ("the sacred Original"; Goethe, line 1222) as "Im Anfang war das Wort" ("In the Beginning was the Word"; 1224), and immediately is stymied by λόγος (*logos*) and the insufficiency of the inert "Wort" to embody a concept so high. He continues with possible substitutes, "Sinn" ("Mind"; 1229) and "Kraft" ("Force"; 1233), discarding each in turn and finally settling on "Tat" ("Act"; 1237): "In the Beginning was the Act."

This scene should be a locus classicus for translation studies, because it contains many of the field's contemporary concerns and preoccupations. No mechanistic, invisible process, as it has been viewed for much of its modern history (Venuti), translation is an interpretive, creative act, here signified as Faust explicates and translates the text synergistically—as George Steiner would argue, those twin cognitive procedures are indistinguishable from each other (28). Few translators are as visible as Faust, shaping his translation to suit the desires and needs of his target audience, himself. Faust's translation repeats the rendering of John 1.1 in Martin Luther's watershed German translation of the Bible (1522), representing the shaping power that translation had on German literature and culture. The scene also enacts translation's quintessential slippage between

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languages, the lacunae of linguistic, cultural, and historical distance that leads to semantic loss and untranslatability. The term *λόγος* is—as the recent New Testament translator David Bentley Hart calls it—“an exemplary case of the untranslatable” (*New Testament* 533), earning one of the longer entries in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (581–95). And in a play that explores the relationship and distance between knowledge and actionable experience, this scene, where so much hinges on the transmutation of one word, serves as a Faustian metaphor for the special transformative magic of translation itself.

Faust seems drawn to this passage to find a way through the sterile promontory of words; in his opening soliloquy he wants to witness the secret and seminal forces of the universe and “nicht mehr in Worten kramen” (“no longer rummage in words”; Goethe, line 385). He seeks instead embodiment, the word made flesh in the world, text made texture, whether by means of the gossamer light of the moon or the touch of Gretchen. Of course, John 1.14 is the source of that linguistically and theologically freighted phrase: *λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο* (“Word became flesh”; *Nestle-Aland*), the mystery of the incarnation. Every text consumed through the sacrament of reading undergoes a ritualistic form of transubstantiation, a potent encounter with the mystery of textual incarnation.

Translation criticism, however, has been following a form of textual Docetism, implicitly denying through omission the fundamental material incarnation of the texts they study. Many of the foundational introductions to translation studies (Bassnett; Munday; Washbourne and Van Wyke) do not contain any concerted exploration of materiality in translation. The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* added a relevant entry in its most recent third edition, but the entry’s author, Guyda Armstrong, argues that “for the most part the discipline has yet to embrace the concepts of media and mediality and become as attentive to the material objects of translation as it is to other dimensions of this social practice” (“Media” 311). Karen Emmerich wonders if “the time has come” to let “explorations of the visual and material” inflect translation analysis, where “dominant modes of

thinking about translation” seem to be “focusing almost exclusively on lexical meaning” (119). The dominant lexical focus of translation, neglecting the incarnated word, leads to a disembodied, Cartesian criticism that relegates the material agency of the text, its texture, to an equally pernicious form of Venetian invisibility. Translation, however, does not exist in some ethereal lexical state but is embedded and consumed in specific material conditions. The word is its flesh.

Beyond the pioneering work of Karin Littau, who has been staging important interventions in this subject to the translation community (see Littau), the main thrust of a nascent “material turn” in translation studies has been with early modern scholars such as A. E. B. Coldiron, Armstrong, Brenda M. Hosington, and Marie-Alice Belle. They have been steadily fusing book history with translation studies to examine the “co-process” of translation and printing technologies, tracing “material-textual” mediation alongside the traditional “verbal-linguistic” (Coldiron, *Printers* 7). Because the history of printing is tied inextricably with the history of translation—the first printed book in English was a translation—the study of both yields mutual illumination. Accordingly, analysis focuses on material features such as the paratexts framing the translation—title pages, dedicatory materials, marginalia—and the design elements of the text: the overall *mise-en-page*, as well as bibliographic code like typeface, illustration, and ornamentation. The entire visual-spatial matrix of the book, the “uniquely embodied” page, becomes open and replete for the translation scholar (Mak 3). Paratexts are “places of authorial, social, and cultural negotiation,” and they serve a particularly salient function for intercultural consumption (Belle and Hosington, Introduction 3). Paratexts and bibliographic code are not inert conduits for the “main” text’s meaning; as Coldiron argues, they “shape and construct that meaning, and *mean in themselves*” (“Response” 97). They enact sophisticated established scripts of informational coding systems that relay a translation’s form and function: from genre to the presentation of foreign alterity through an italic typeface (Armstrong, “Coding

Continental”). They are transformative sites of generative—and often unstable—possibility.

In his *Orlando Furioso in English Heroical Verse* (1591), the early modern translator John Harington practiced what translation scholars are just now preaching in their criticism about the interconnectedness of translation with its material-textual features, its bristling textures. Harington insisted on shaping the materiality of the text through all phases of production, including giving design direction to Thomas Coxon for the copperplate engravings; providing explicit guidance to his printer Richard Field on typefaces, ornamentation, and layout; making stop-press corrections during printing; and providing postprinting adjustments by hand, such as specialized gift bindings and inscriptions (Kilroy; Scott-Warren; Cauchi; Reid). Harington explicitly requested that Field use the same pica roman typeface for his humanistic paratexts that George Puttenham used in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), wishing to replicate material coding strategies from one text to another (Kilroy 64). His infamous title page (fig. 1) is a visual translation of his Italian source edition by Francesco de’ Franceschi (1584), and his audacious shifts of the Italian title page’s delicately poised visual balance through the inclusion of his portrait and his English spaniel Bungey generate a dialectic between the two editions that deconstructs humanistic framing of romance epic (Reid 151–60). His marginal commentary serves as gnomic pointers to scandalous passages that often subvert the purported moralistic glossing in the commentary (Reid 168–73). Even his typeface speaks. When Mercury catches a woman (fig. 2), Harington adds the final line of sexual innuendo, placing *la volta* in italics (a common typographical encoding of foreignness) to emphasize the otherness of the Italian phrase as untranslated foreign residue (by implication Ariosto’s), when in fact, in this case, it was his own invention. And in multiple copies of Harington’s translation, the “he” in the final line of a notoriously scandalous passage is inverted and downright, which creates a typographic pun, where the downright “he” directs attention to the “gat” (fig. 3). What was the ascender in the “h” now becomes a conspicuous phallic pointer to the

“g” in “gat,” and the downward “he” presents the reader with a typographic pictogram of the act of “gating,” or, as Randall McLeod puts it, Harington is “invoking the downright heiness of the male, by playing with his letters” (“From Tranceformations” 64). Is this Harington playing, or a typesetter participating discreetly in the fun? When is an accident not accidental?

The result is a text that mimics the bibliographic code of didactic allegory and sententiae deeply familiar to early modern readers for playful subversion. These transformations of the linguistic, material, and visual codes in the book object have been called “transmissions,” a term coined by McLeod (“Information” 246). Mediated translations are marked by the material traces of their becoming, a sedimentary accumulation of editorial transmission—we are reading “palimpsestic narratives” in the making (Washbourne 608). Attending to materiality fulfills the promise of the “cultural turn” in translation studies, as cultural pressures mark and inform each translation event’s texture. A monograph like Armstrong’s *The English Boccaccio: A History in Books* points the way forward as it analyzes each book-object iteration of the *Decameron* in English as a distillation of its cultural context. Databases like Hosington’s *Renaissance Cultural Crossroads Catalogue* and Belle and Hosington’s forthcoming *Cultural Crosscurrents Catalogue of Translations in Stuart and Commonwealth Britain (1641–1660)* provide essential handlists of translations that contain full accountings of their material substrates.

Belle and Hosington have adapted Robert Darnton’s 1982 “communications circuit,” which sought to present the production, circulation, and consumption of books during their “life cycle” to chart the multiple agents in the communications circuit of translation production, including printer, publisher, patron, and bookseller. Their translation circuit demonstrates how the material features of a translated book bear the impressions of multiple agents and express the polyvocal and sometimes competing forces in translation production (Belle and Hosington, “Translation”). This attention to the process of the book’s becoming means that



Fig. 1. The title page of Harington's translation of *Orlando Furioso*. Rare Books 62722, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

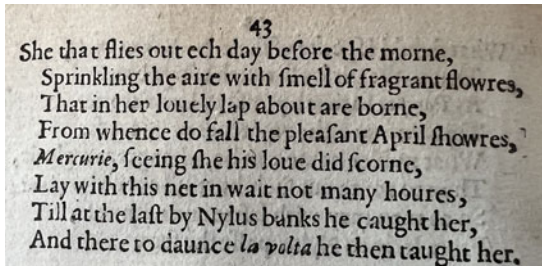


FIG. 2. Canto 15, stanza 43 of Harington's *Orlando Furioso* (116). Private copy.

“when translation scholars inquire about the material process involved at every stage between composition and reading, that post-Romantic idea of sole authorial agency is fully challenged” (Coldiron, “Translation and Transformission” 209). The translator’s sole agency in the transmission of the text is also challenged, which may point the way out of the fidelity rut in translation criticism. As Coldiron argues, “is it too much to hope that transformission may be what finally banishes the kind of criticism with which many translation scholars have lost all patience: commentary that limits itself to dualistic, proscriptive/evaluative, fidelity-based modes?” (“Translation and Transformission” 210). It may be useful to consider the book object as a complex ecosystem of meaning, an “agency of assemblages” (Bennett) that challenges critical categories and superficial linguistic, cultural, and historical boundaries (Coldiron, “Translation’s Challenge”). Not text, but texture.

It is encouraging to see other translation scholars joining this movement that originated in early modern studies. Emmerich’s recent work with

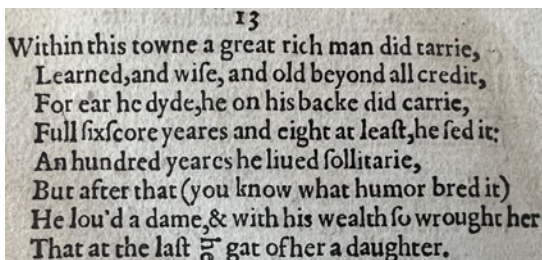


FIG. 3. Canto 43, stanza 13 of Harington's *Orlando Furioso* (360). Private copy.

Emily Dickinson and the transformission of her bewilderingly complex visual and material codes is what drives Emmerich to appeal to translation scholars to move beyond the lexical procrustean interpretive bed. Classic translations like Robert Pinsky’s *Inferno* (1994) await analysis of the seemingly innocuous *mise-en-page*. What messages are conveyed through the use of crammed foreign Italian in italics on the left side versus the domesticated roman typeface with spatial breathing room on the right? What does it say about the burgeoning industry of stunt translations of Dante by poets and about publishers’ assumptions about their readership? *Visibile parlare* (“visible speech”) indeed.

As the containers for texts have moved from the codex to virtual ones, the theoretical heresy of material Docetism in translation studies need not be repeated. Considerations of the material apply to the digital page as well, because “like their analogue counterparts, these pages communicate verbally, graphically, aurally, and tactilely, and are constructed in a material way that influences how they are read and understood” (Mak 62). And Armstrong, drawing on Littau’s work, notes that “hypertext presents a fundamental challenge to conventional categories, in that it opens up a space for more direct translatorial and readerly interventions . . . the hypertext system itself is endlessly multiple and generative, and . . . every act of online interaction reconfigures the traditional roles of author, reader, translator and text producer into a series of endlessly variable and ephemeral versionings” (“Media” 314). These are material tracings of hypertexture that demand our attention; at what has been proclaimed the waning of the codex’s dominance and the beginning of the hypertext’s, the *λόγος*—the mind, force, and act of it all—remains vibrantly incarnate in every word.

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