

Tradurre: un viaggio nel tempo

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Translating Medieval Texts Common Issues and Specific Challenges

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Abstract Through a number of examples from medieval Germanic texts, this paper aims to highlight some theoretical and practical issues inherent in the process of presenting modern readers with works conceived in a culturally and historically distant past, and to re-evaluate the role of translations that have the specific function to make ancient texts accessible to a new generation of readers whose knowledge of old stages of modern languages is rapidly decreasing.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Problems specific to the first phase of the translation process. – 3 Problems specific to the second phase of the translation process. – 4 Conclusion.

Keywords Translation Studies. Intertemporal Translation. Old English. Old and Middle High German.

1 Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, Germanic philologists in Italy have increasingly engaged with the question of translation, not only within the Middle Ages, but from the Middle Ages into modern languages as well. In 1999 Professor Maria Vittoria Molinari (University of Bergamo) promoted and supervised a Research Programme (PRIN) on *Modernizzazione del testo medievale. Problemi di ricezione e di traduzione* (Actualization of Medieval Texts. Aspects of Reception and Translation). The team that worked on this field of research tried to combine the historical-philological methodology with the most relevant results of literary criticism and Translation Studies. We were convinced that the study of a medieval text, which is traditionally based on the investigation of its sources, would also profit from the examination of the new meanings that a work exhibits in the course of time through translations and other forms of reception. And we also agreed that one of the philologist's task is the investigation of the impact of translation in the receiving culture, as well as the analysis of the image of the Middle Ages that such rewrites create and deliver to the present day. We held

These reflections are in honour of Professor Maria Vittoria Molinari.

two Conferences at the University of Bergamo to discuss these issues with scholars of Romance philology, Middle Latin philology, and with scholars of other disciplines: *Testo medievale e traduzione* in 2000, and *Tradurre testi medievali: obiettivi, pubblico, strategie* in 2001.¹ The following Research Programme (PRIN 2002-2004), coordinated by Professor Maria Grazia Saibene, expanded the research field to include rewriting and intertextuality: *Riscrittura e intertestualità: metamorfosi, interferenze e reinterpretazioni del testo medievale* (Rewriting and Intertextuality: Metamorphosis, Interference and Reinterpretation of Medieval Texts). Since then, new conferences were organised and new collections of essays were published on particular aspects of the different ways a work from the past can be presented to a new type of audience using different media forms.²

Over time ideas about translation have considerably changed, especially since the appearance of Translation Studies in the '70s and, more recently, of Post-Translation Studies.³ Traditional definitions have been overhauled, so that the very concept of translation has expanded to include any text that somehow stems from a previous one. Especially with Post-Translation Studies, translation has become an interpretive category that has the capacity to represent the multilingual and multicultural society in which we live, where 'home' and 'foreign' are no longer separate concepts. Among the several achievements of translation theory, a major one is the awareness that translation is an act of critical interpretation, and is never neutral: indeed, a text always undergoes a number of transformations as it is reshaped into a new language and culture.⁴ In a series of important works André Lefevere put forward the concept of translation as a form of rewriting and manipulation of the source text, and he used the term 'refraction' to mean

1 Cf. the proceedings by Cammarota, Molinari 2001, 2002.

2 The Research Programme gave rise to three collections of papers: Saibene, Francini 2004; Cammarota 2005; Buzzoni, Bampi 2005. Later books developing those themes are: Banchelli, Cammarota 2008; Buzzoni, Cammarota, Francini 2013; and the latest is Cammarota, Bassi 2017.

3 The term "Post-Translation Studies" was coined by Siri Nergaard and Stefano Arduini in the inaugural issue of the journal *Translation*: "We imagine a sort of new era that could be termed **post-translation studies**, where translation is viewed as fundamentally transdisciplinary, mobile, and open ended. The 'post' here recognizes a fact and a conviction: new and enriching thinking on translation must take place outside the traditional discipline of translation studies" (Nergaard, Arduini 2011, 8-9; emphases in the original).

4 Interpretation has acquired inherent theoretical relevance in Umberto Eco's works on translation. See his classification of the forms of interpretation in *Dire quasi la stessa cosa* (Eco 2003, 236).

the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work.⁵

Consequently, more attention has been paid to the reasons behind the creation of refractions, to the purposes of translations, and to the effects they produce in the receiving context. As Edwin Gentzler has recently claimed, translation is

one of the most vital forces available to introducing new ways of thinking and inducing significant cultural change. (Gentzler 2017, 3)

The following pages focus on that kind of translation that in Jakobson's taxonomy (1959) is called 'interlingual translation' or 'translation proper'.⁶ More precisely, I shall be concerned with translation across time⁷ from my point of view as a philologist. I will try to foreground some of the specific problems that arise when the lag time between the original and its translation is quite long, as is the case of modern translations of literary works belonging to old Germanic literatures. As we shall see, this form of translation is a particularly important task in the current cultural situation, and therefore it is worthy of further investigation and discussion. My contribution to the debate consists of an attempt to reconsider and re-evaluate the status of the original in the case of ancient works, whereby I cannot but express my personal viewpoint on some theoretical assumptions.

In its broad outlines, the enterprise of translating a literary text conceived in a distant past involves largely the same problems posited by any other form of translation; but, of course, like any other kind of translation, it is also underpinned by some specific issues. These regard primarily

5 The quotation is taken from an article written in 1982 (Lefevere 1982, 4), in which he calls for a study of the implications of refractions, instead of ignoring them or lamenting their existence. The term was introduced in his article "Translated Literature. Towards an Integrated Theory" ("Translation is reproduction, refraction", 1981, 71), where he defined "refracted texts" as "texts that have been processed for a certain audience (children, e.g.) or adapted to a certain poetics or a certain ideology" (72). The concept of translation as a form of rewriting (together with criticism, commentary, historiography, etc.) was developed in his article "Why waste our Time on Rewrites? The Trouble with the Role of Rewriting in an Alternative Paradigm" (which appeared in the volume bearing the telling title *The Manipulation of Literature* edited by Theo Hermans in 1985), and later in his seminal book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992).

6 This is also called 'the actual translation', 'the real translation', 'the traditional translation' in order to distinguish it from other kinds of translation and rewriting ('intra-lingual' and 'intersemiotic' translation). Cf. Jakobson 1959, 233.

7 Cf. "Intertemporal translation" by Douglas Robinson in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* [1998] (2000).

the first stage of the translation process, namely, in-depth analysis of the hypotext.⁸

2 Problems Specific to the First Phase of the Translation Process

Translators of Germanic works have to cope with all the peculiarities of a manuscript culture, in so far as they do not have an authorised and definite text from which to begin translating. The texts that we find recorded in medieval manuscripts are mainly anonymous, and there is hardly a way of drawing a dividing line between author and scribes. Moreover, texts were meant for oral performance, which places the original text and the modern printed edition in two different communicative contexts. Unlike Latin works, Germanic texts are for the most part transmitted in unique codices, frequently in a fragmentary way; but the absence of a definite hypotext is even more crucial when a text has a complex manuscript tradition.

An emblematic case is *Cædmon's Hymn*, a short song of the late 7th century that marks the beginning of English literature. Chronologically, the first record of this oral, divinely inspired composition is to be found in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (731): together with his account of the miraculous birth of poetry in the vernacular, the Venerable Bede also gives us a short Latin paraphrase of Cædmon's oral performance. Only later was the Old English text added by individual scribes to the margins of several manuscripts of Bede's historical work, as a kind of gloss or footnote. It also appears as part of the main text in the manuscripts preserving the English translation of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* prompted by King Alfred at the end of the 9th century, the so-called *Old English Bede*. The oral composition is thus handed down in different ways in manuscripts of different date, in Latin and in two Old English dialects (Northumbrian and West Saxon), and with a number of more or less significant variant readings.⁹ This particularly complicated textual history makes it impossible for us to know what the original song composed by the illiterate Cædmon was like; indeed, we must admit that we do not really have an original at

8 The terms 'hypotext' and 'hypertext' derive from *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* by the French theorist Gérard Genette (1982).

9 In the second chapter of her volume *Visible Song. Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* ("Orality and the development of Caedmon's *Hymn*"), O'Brien O'Keefe (1990) analysed the variety of ways this poem is set out in manuscripts as evidence of the oral-based literacy of the scribes. A complete study of *Cædmon's Hymn*, with transcriptions and facsimiles of all the witnesses, is provided by O'Donnell (2005). Bassi (2013) has provided a survey of the various ways the poem is presented in anthologies and the wide variety of solutions adopted in the translations that accompany the text.

all. Furthermore, the question remains open whether the vernacular hymn is actually the first piece of the mosaic we have, since according to some scholars it might even be a back-translation of Bede's Latin text.¹⁰

Of course, variation and instability may concern modern works as well. We can think of the three different versions of *The Baron in the Trees* (*Il barone rampante*) published by Italo Calvino: the first edition (1957) was followed two years later by an abridged and expurgated adaptation for children, accompanied by illustrations (1959), and in 1965 by a third edition as a school text, with additional elements, such as an introduction and notes, designed for the new readership made up of students and teachers. Another example of authorial variation is the political poem *What must Be Said* (*Was gesagt werden muss*) by Günter Grass. The first version was published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in April 2012 and contained a criticism of "Israel's nuclear power" (die Atommacht Israel), which generated much controversy; in September of that same year, a slightly different version of that line appeared in the collection *Eintagsfliegen*, which goes: "the current government of Israel's nuclear power" (die gegenwärtige Regierung der Atommacht Israel). Outside literature, we can find situations in which instability is even greater: an interesting study on the translation of news shows that it may often be very difficult to determine what the original is.¹¹ And yet, there is a basic difference that cannot be ignored. Modern texts are normally based on documents that enable us to establish a chronology, for example, and hence to make an informed decision about the version one wants to read and translate. By way of contrast, medieval texts are 'intrinsically unstable'.¹²

A translator of a text preserved in a manuscript may be at the same time the editor of that text, but often translators base their work on existing editions, which are themselves a form of rewriting: as such they are never neutral, and vary in the quality and quantity of conjectural restorations they contain. In addition, advances in scholarship may modify a text in a significant way, so that – for example – a translation of the Old English heroic poem *Beowulf* based on the edition provided by Klaeber (1922) will necessarily be different from one based on following editions, like *Beowulf Repunctuated* by Mitchell/Irvine (2000) or the *Electronic Beowulf* by Kiernan (2015).

The analysis of Medieval works is further complicated by a number of other factors, which derive mainly from the absence of direct and reliable

10 For this matter see Kiernan 1990, 162.

11 The specific issues of news translation is discussed and commented by Susan Bassnett (2014, 125-45).

12 This phenomenon was described by the Romance philologist Paul Zumthor, who introduced the concept of *mouvance* to refer to the "mobilité essentielle du texte médiéval" (1972, 71). The point that variance is an intrinsic part of medieval texts was later made from a different viewpoint by Bernard Cerquiglini in his essay *Éloge de la variante* (1989).

sources of information. Of course, all translators have to cope with the so-called encyclopedia, or world knowledge. But in texts that are remote in time, allusions to events, habits, people and so forth may be irremediably lost. Also determining the meaning of words, phrases, sayings and proverbs is often a problem. All translators are dependent on dictionaries, which are the result of a filtering process: they provide selected meanings, which cannot correspond to all the actual uses of a term in the many contexts it may appear. But if this is valid for modern language dictionaries, it is particularly true for historical dictionaries, which provide meanings that are inferred from the texts themselves and from critical editions: therefore, in many cases meanings are but hypotheses of scholars. Translators of modern texts can seek help from a number of other sources: images, films, reference books, native speakers, personal experience. Somehow it is possible to recognise that the linguistic equivalent of a word may not match with cultural equivalence (we can easily think of coffee and coffee habits, which vary from one country to another). And it is possible to realise how one event is perceived in different cultures: if we have a look at history books, for instance, we can see that the so-called 'Barbaric Invasions' ('invasioni barbariche') of Italian historiography are referred to as 'Völkerwanderungen' ('wanderings of the Germanic peoples') in German History books. Translators of medieval texts can rely on a limited set of instruments, with little chance to check one hypothesis against other reliable sources.

Finally, I would like to consider one more aspect, which is quite interesting for the debate on equivalence in translation: the response of the primary audience. A translator of a modern text can easily realise that in Italy a hasty request for a coffee, often expressed in the imperative mood, is quite usual ('un caffè/mi dia un caffè'), whereas in Britain 'give me a coffee' would sound quite impolite, and would likely trigger an irritated reaction in the addressee. But for all the reasons mentioned above, the effect produced on the original audience by an utterance we read in medieval text is basically inaccessible. In the following example, taken from a poem by the 13th century German poet Tannhäuser describing a love encounter, we do not have difficulty in understanding the meaning of each word and the general sense of the request expressed by the woman to her lover (III, 88):¹³

si jach, si litte es gerne ·
das ich ir tæte, als man den frowen tuot dort in Palerne ·

she said she wanted me
to do with her that which one does to ladies in Palermo

13 The text is quoted from the edition of Cammarota (2006, 126).

The literal meaning of this utterance is clear, as well as its erotic allusiveness: the woman asked her lover to do with her something special, something that women in the distant town of Palermo, in Sicily, receive from their lovers. But we cannot go beyond a superficial understanding of the verbal content. We know neither what the woman exactly means by it nor how the poet intended his audience to react to this utterance. Why is an Italian town connected with a love request? Are we allowed to infer that the poet is showing off his special expertise in this subject on the basis of a real-life journey to Sicily? Was Palermo chosen as an exotic, particularly licentious place? And what about the effect on the audience? Are these lines meant to provoke surprise, or an embarrassed laughter? Or was it meant as a parody of similar sayings used by some other poets? These are all questions without answer, because we do not have access to the knowledge that the original author shared with his audience; we do not have any insight into the actual performance, which might have helped the audience to capture its latent meaning through extra-verbal signs, such as the music or certain gestures; therefore we do not have the instruments to reconstruct the chain of associations triggered by such a phrase. A philologist will always strive to illuminate a text, but this effort has its limits.

To sum up, most ancient texts contain a high degree of complexity and several levels of opacity, both linguistic and cultural. Awareness of these issues is fundamental both for the translator and for the reader intending to engage with an old text through a translation.

3 Problems Specific to the Second Phase of the Translation Process

Let us move now to the phase of the translation process in which the target text is produced. Translation Studies have developed the fundamental idea that no clear-cut distinction can be made between original writing and translation. This idea has proved useful, because it has helped to acknowledge the dignity and creativity of the translated text, and to challenge the exclusiveness of a paradigm based on faithfulness to the original, thus liberating translation from its subsidiary status. In its extreme interpretation, though, the blurring of the dividing line between original and translation has led to question the status of the original in general. Philologists are repeatedly blamed for the respect they pay to the works of the past, a respect that is often derogatorily labelled as a 'slavish' attachment to the original. Indeed, it seems to me that the term 'original' has almost become a taboo. And yet, one cannot deny that respecting a work of the past, striving to establish the original form (or the original forms) of a text and to determine its meaning is what allows scholars to have a source, as reliable

as possible, for their investigations into a past society, into its language and into its mind-set. Therefore, I think that the time has come for a more balanced way of considering the two ends of the translation process.

Translation strategies are part of that long and intricate chain of decisions a translator must make in the translation process, and each decision depends on a high number of factors. One of these is the function of the target text, which is a basic principle of the Skopos-theory. A joke, for example, can be translated into another language in order to elicit laughter; in this case, any transformation that is thought to be useful to obtain that effect in the final text will do, since the hypotext may not even exist for the listeners. On the other hand, if a joke about stinginess or stupidity is part of a study on stereotypes in the traditions of different countries, the specific target of the humorous disparagement (policemen, blonde girls, etc.) is essential: here, what matters is the hypotext in its original form and language. Similarly, literary texts may be freely and legitimately used for many different purposes, being mainly a source for new texts or mainly an object of interest, or both things at the same time. They may stimulate translations that aim to introduce new ideas or new artistic forms into a culture; they may be more or less recognisable sources for new texts in the same language or in any other language and in any other medium; they may be *per se* the main object of interest. When they are the main object of interest, when we want to read a work of an ancient culture in order to encounter its worldview and its otherness, we may need a translation that responds to this specific purpose.

It is my contention that today translations that help a modern readership to encounter a culture of a distant age are increasingly necessary, probably more so than half a century ago. As a matter of fact, for a long time critical editions of Medieval texts written in a Germanic language were not accompanied by translations. Some important voices in Anglo-Saxon studies still claim that students should develop knowledge of the original language through grammars and glossaries alone; this is the policy of some series that still provide editions without translations.¹⁴ But in many countries, reforms of the Education systems have progressively marginalised philology courses, so that knowledge of ancient languages and cultures is decreasing over time.¹⁵ Today only few experts have the competence to read works in Medieval English or Medieval German; and I am afraid they are doomed to decrease in the coming years. In such circumstances,

14 See for example the editions of the Early English Text Society (EETS), which are directed at a scholarly readership.

15 The question of whether philology has any future at all has become a core problem. Basically what is at stake here, to quote Pollock (2009, 935), is the “survival of the very capacity of human beings to read their pasts and, indeed, their presents and thus to preserve a measure of their humanity”.

a large number of works might remain unknown to all but a restricted community of scholars. Therefore, for a wide readership translations are the sole access to vernacular literatures of the Middle Ages, and they in fact replace the original. For all these reasons, translations are strongly needed and bear a special responsibility. To be sure, there are some well-known works that have been translated several times, thus allowing readers to compare different translations. But for most Germanic texts only one translation is available, especially in Italy. When a text is translated for the first time, this responsibility becomes particularly heavy.

With reference to practice, we can consider some solutions adopted by translators – both poets and scholars – for one typical feature of Old English poetry: *kennings*. These are metaphorical descriptions (generally compound words) used instead of an ordinary noun. For example, ‘the candle of the sky’ (*heofon candel*) stands for ‘the sun’; ‘the whale-riding’ (*hronrad*) and ‘the whale-way’ (*hwælweg*) stand for ‘the sea’. Here are some random examples of renderings of the *kennings* for ‘the sea’ in translations of the elegy *The Seafarer* and of the heroic poem *Beowulf*:

	<i>hwælweg</i> (<i>Seafarer</i> , l. 63)	<i>hronrad</i> (<i>Beowulf</i> , l. 10)
Morris (1895)		the whale-road
Pound (1912)	the whale-path	
Morgan (1952)		the whale-fields
Whitlock (1955)	the whale’s domain	
Kennedy (1960)	the home of the whale	
Raffel (1960)	the open ocean	
Raffel (1963)		the sea
Crossley-Holland (1965)	the whale’s way	
Morgan (1976)	the whale’s kingdom	
Hamer (1985)	the whale’s roads	
Lehmann (1988)		teeming seas
Tripp (1990)		the horn-road
Heany (1999)		the whale-road
Liuzza (1999)		the whale’s-riding

As already stated, all translations transform their sources to a lesser or greater degree. Here, a general trend is the introduction of the definite article in accordance with modern usage. For the rest, we have different solutions. Some translators have reproduced the compound noun (*the whale-road*, *the whale-path*, etc.), some others have preferred to explicit the underlying grammatical relation between the two nouns, by employing different genitive constructions, with a preference for genitive followed by the noun (*the whale’s road*, *the whale’s kingdom*, *the whale’s roads*) rather than the noun followed by the genitive (*the home of the whale*). The

head of the noun (*-rad/-weg*) has been variously translated: ‘path’, ‘way’, ‘home’, ‘roads’, ‘kingdom’, ‘fields’, etc. What is interesting here, though, is the fact that most translators view the image of the whale as a fundamental feature to transmit to the modern reader. Only a small number of translators have walked different paths, for different reasons.

The American poet and translator Burton Raffel replaces these metaphorical compounds with their referent: in his version of *The Seafarer* (1960) the *kenning* is rendered as ‘the open ocean’, which is more poetically expressive than the plain referent ‘the sea’ we read in his *Beowulf* (1963). Raffel provides versions of Anglo-Saxon poems that, in his own words, aim to

re-create something roughly equivalent in the new language, something that is itself good poetry and that at the same time carries a reasonable measure of the force and flavor of the original.¹⁶

He argues that translators should write a poem that is readable, lively and interesting for the general reader. The way to reach this goal is basically simplification: he simplifies the original by leaving out all those features that in his opinion were relevant only to the author and his audience, but not to the readers of the translation (cf. Raffel 1971, 32, 127). *Kennings* are therefore simplified.

Lehmann [1988] (2000) has opted for *teeming seas*: this solution is apparently prompted by her aim to reproduce the alliterative metre of the Old English heroic poem. The complete verse reads: *beyond teeming seas but was taught to obey* (21). Indeed, her book is entitled *Beowulf. An Imitative Translation*, with imitation focussing on the metre, as she declares at the outset of the section devoted to “Translation”.¹⁷ Thus, in her hierarchy of priorities, the alliterative metre is perceived as the textual dominant, and becomes the guideline of her translation project. This example shows the limits of the dichotomous labels traditionally assigned to a translated text as a whole. A translation can hardly ever be entirely literal or entirely free, entirely source-oriented or entirely target-oriented, etc. The idea of the juxtaposition of two opposite strategies underlying the usual dichotomies downplays the freedom of each translator in selecting textual levels (syntax, lexicon, rhetorical figures, rhythm, etc.) and deciding how to transpose them.

¹⁶ Raffel made this statement in his introduction to *Poems from the Old English* (1960, xxvi) and confirmed it in following books on translation.

¹⁷ “The translation is more or less imitative of Germanic alliterative verse” (Lehmann 2000, 16).

Finally, we shall consider Tripp's choice: *the horn-road*. Even though this compound looks like a calque of the Old English *hronrad*, it actually replaces the 'whale' (*hron* in Old English) with the 'horn' used by Germanic peoples for drinking. While all the other renderings revolve around the idea of 'sea', following the common interpretations of this *kenning*, here we find a new referent. Tripp explicitly refuses previous editorial work and turns to the manuscript itself in search for "the most accurate text possible" (1985, 10).¹⁸ His peculiar interpretation of *hronrad* derives from the conviction that "wordplay is inherent in the poet's frame of mind" (2000, 51), and that verbal humour is exploited to "laugh at pagans" (53-4). Hence, the purpose of his translation is to disclose the meaning of the presumed puns, explicating the unsaid. In so doing, he also brings out the 'actual' meaning of the opening lines of the poem, in which we do no longer read about the power of the first Danish king and his conquests 'overseas' (MS "ofer hron rade"); instead we are presented with "brawling men" (l. 4) whose main enterprise is apparently getting drunk. This unusual representation of the pagan Germanic world goes hand in hand with other idiosyncratic readings of the Old English narrative: for example, the dragon fighting against the hero is redefined as a king who was mysteriously transformed into a monster after his death. On the whole Tripp obtains, in his own words, "an entirely new 'central fable'" (1985, 10-11).¹⁹ So far, his new fable, which widens the spectrum of possible interpretations of the poem, has not found consensus among scholars. However, the point here is not whether Tripp's translation is 'right' or 'wrong', but how and why it deliberately breaks with the mainstream understanding of the poem. Interestingly, his way of engaging with *Beowulf* has much in common with the kind of creative retellings of the story to be found mainly in rewritings such as the movie *Beowulf* (2007) by Robert Zemeckis, who redraws the characters and the story to address issues perceived as relevant for the modern audience.

Without any doubt, free adaptations of the old work have their own life, and can be appreciated in themselves, both by the general audience and by those who can read the Old English poem. On the other hand, appreciation of rewritings can be enhanced by recognition of the refractions that emerge from the process of resemantization the text undergoes in its transposition into the new context, and by investigating the motives lying behind their departure from the currently accepted interpretation of the hypotexts. One may wonder why both Tripp and Zemeckis have brought

¹⁸ Tripp is convinced that "the notorious contradictions generations of editors have created and critics labored to explain away, all disappear when the poet is taken humbly at his own word" (1985, 10).

¹⁹ For a comment on this and other modern translations of *Beowulf* see the valuable book by Magennis (2011).

the drinking habits of the warriors to the fore, or why the theme of metamorphosis is added to the plot. Are these elements more captivating for a modern audience, and if so why? What image of the poem, of the Germanic ideal of heroism, of the tension between the pagan past and the Christian era is delivered to the present? What image of our own time emerges from the new themes introduced into the old story? In other words, refractions open a window onto the set of issues that are presumed to be relevant for the present day and for the new audience. But recognition of refractions implies a comparison with the original text, however problematic, fluid and undetermined this concept may be. Without such a comparison, most innovations would go unnoticed. Therefore, I can hardly agree with the now prevailing idea that the original work can or even must be ignored when reading a translation. In my opinion, the aim of 'dethroning the worshipped original' pursued by several theorists and practitioners of translation has fruitfully helped to direct attention to the after-life of translations in the target culture, to the impact they produce in the new context; but in its extreme interpretation it can have as a consequence the loss of an important gateway into the target text, the target culture, the particular agenda a translator has in mind, and the constraints that determine translation strategies in a given culture.

4 Conclusion

Notwithstanding the shift from a prescriptive to a descriptive paradigm since the '80s,²⁰ normative statements still abound, and translations that tend to adhere to the hypotext are often met with disapproval, even on the part of advocates of the descriptive stance. Indeed, a sort of new dogma seems to have arisen, namely, that the so-called philological translation disregards readability, thus producing texts that are clumsy, devoid of feeling, meaningless to a new community of readers. Several theorists claim that translators of works from the past *must* use their creative powers to forge a new version for the present; that cultural-bound phenomena *should* be transformed in the target language lest they appear ridiculous, awkward or absurd; that *the only viable option* is rewriting a text so as to induce a response from the new readers which is essentially like that of the original receptors, and so on. And yet, we cannot minimise the role played by those translations that have the specific function to make a work

20 Instead of prescribing how translations should be, the descriptive approach aims to study translated texts as they actually are, to analyse the factors and the norms that govern the translation process in different socio-cultural contexts, and to recognise the function of translated texts within the target culture. See *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* by Gideon Toury (1995).

conceived in a culturally and historically distant age accessible to a new generation of readers who have no training in the dead phases of modern languages. Today this type of translation can peacefully coexist with other ways of representing a medieval work to the modern readership.

With reference to response, we have noted earlier that it is hardly possible to be certain of the effect of an ancient work on the intended receivers, and therefore it is impossible to recreate that effect in the translated text. What one can reproduce, though, is the effect on the translator.²¹ The parallelism between the reader of the original text and the reader of a translation does seem to me a particularly useful way of approaching the task of translating texts from a culture that is distant in time. The translator has to face many obstacles on the way to a satisfactory understanding of the semiotic system that the medieval author shared with his audience, and is ready to accept the limits of understanding. The reader can be guided to undertake a similar journey into a world that is different and that sometimes remains inexplicable.

This encounter with a different world can be facilitated by paratextual materials, namely introductions and notes. Most theorists view them as a defeat on the part of the translator. Footnotes, in particular, are rejected for not being reader-friendly and for destroying the illusion of reading a translation that does not seem to be a translation at all.²² On the contrary, I think that paratextual material can integrate a translation in a very effective way, as is the case with *Beowulf* in the Italian translation provided by Ludovica Koch (1987), who manages to balance accessibility and a sense of the otherness of the Old English epic poem. Through short and clear explanatory footnotes she can preserve *kennings* and some other interesting culture-bound elements in her text. I would like to mention another example of a successful translation into Italian accompanied by textual notes, taken from a completely different area and time: Mario Corona's translation of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1885) published in 1996, winner of the Alberobello prize for translation (1998). All in all, the fact that footnotes interrupt the flow of reading is not really a high price to pay for the help they provide.

The advantages of a translation that conveys the peculiarities of the source text have been strongly highlighted by the Ghanaian-American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. He insists on the necessity of pro-

21 In his explanation of Nida's concept of dynamic equivalence, Peter Fawcett (1997, 59) replies to the objection that even within the same language two people may respond to the same utterance in a different manner by considering the possible alternative: "according to this theory of extreme subjectivity, or solipsism, any equivalent effect a translator aims for can only be an equivalence to the effect on the translator and not on the original readers. But under this theory (if you accept it) there is no way out of the prison house, so we simply plough on regardless because that is how language works".

22 This is for example Raffel's opinion (1971, 132).

ducing what he calls *thick translations*, i.e. translations accompanied by annotations and glosses:

it seems to me that such ‘academic’ translation, translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context, is eminently worth doing. (Appiah 1993, 817)

The purpose of this form of translation is to enhance intercultural understanding. Translations can thus contribute to induce ‘informed respect’ for people belonging to other cultures and other times. Given that a translation can be used for a wide variety of purposes, I agree with Appiah’s claim that one of its most important aims today is that of facilitating the encounter of cultures. This aim has recently received significant recognition by the United Nations. On 24th May 2017, the General Assembly affirmed the valuable role of professional translation in upholding the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter. The title of the Resolution A/71/L.68 is worth quoting:

The Role of Professional Translation in Connecting Nations and Fostering Peace, Understanding and Development.

I think that respect for the literatures of the past can contribute to this fundamental aim.

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