# (Re-)Accenting Dante
## A Theoretical Excursus and Case Study

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1. What is an 'Accented' Translation?

In his linguistic memoir *Accent: A Phantom Language*, French filmmaker and writer Alain Fleischer recounts his experience as the son of a Hungarian father and a Spanish mother growing up in a household where languages and accents ceaselessly crossed. In one particularly telling passage, he describes the experience of having an accent in terms of a linguistic haunting:

> Two syllables suffice – or even one – and the presence of a single word can reveal, behind the language that is being spoken, the presence of another. That is what we call an accent. From my first memories of my father's voice expressing himself in French within the family circle […] to his last words, I heard in every syllable he pronounced the memory, the trace, the phantom, not only of a language besides French, but of an another world and another time. (3, translation mine)

Yet if an accent can be conceived of as this "trace" that a native language leaves upon a foreign one, it is because it is the result of a linguistic translation, or mistranslation. Said another way, translation itself may be conceived of as an accented form of speaking, one which different translators strive, with different degrees of success, to reduce or eliminate. Such an analogy may remind one of the longstanding debate between domestication and foreignization in translation studies according to which a translator must choose between bringing the text closer to the reader or bringing the reader closer to the text. Yet it little matters which option one picks: there will

always be an accent: it is rather a question of the *degree* to which one wishes the accent to be heard.

At the same time, the term "accent" has a range of other meanings which it would behoove translation studies to explore. As James Jasinky observes in his *Sourcebook on Rhetoric*, "[a] more general sense of the term accent […] is being recovered in various spheres of criticism" (3). For Michael Bakhtin, for instance, "all language use involves inflections and accentuations because of the very nature of language itself as a public and social phenomenon" (3); or, in the Russian literary critic's own words, "the word in language is [always] half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own *accent*, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (in Jasinky, 3, italics mine). Similarly, Bakhtin's compatriot Valentin Voloshinov developed a theory of "accentuality" that distinguishes between "the *multiaccentuality* of signs and words that result from class struggle" and the attempt on the part of "dominant groups within a society to contain the possibilities of multiaccentuality [and] give words a single ['uniaccentual'] meaning that serves their interest and helps to perpetuate their social position" (4). Here, the question of what to do with one's accent becomes an immanently *political* one.

The implications of these insights for translation theory and practice are significant and worth exploring. For the French translation scholar Antoine Berman, for instance, "accentuation" consists precisely in this "*highlighting* in the original that which is already there in a latent manner" (84, italics mine, all translations mine). Of course, such an effect occurs at the risk of "intervening in" (84), or even committing "violence" (85) to, the original text. As a case in point, Berman compares two translations of Sappho: one by Édith Mora, one by Michel Deguy. Whereas "Mora's translation is, on the whole, polished and exact," something of the poetess's energy, he argues, is

lost in the very faithfulness of the translation: "Everything happens as if the translator hadn't taken into account the two thousand some years […] which weigh on the poem, hadn't asked herself, how to translate words of the morning with words of the night? (81-83). By contrast, Deguy's translation, which goes so far as to rearrange the typographical disposition of the words, "brings out, which is to say, *accentuates*" (83, italics mine), the "immediacy" and "freshness" (83) which had become buried with the passage of time.

Berman's sense of a translation that "brings out" ['fait ressortir'] elements of an original brings to mind one of the many turns Jacques Derrida gives to the word "relevant" in his essay, "What is a 'Relevant' Translation'" ("Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction 'relevante'?"). On the one hand, the word "relevant" is meant to recall Derrida's recourse to the French word "relève" to translate Hegel's *Aufhebung* (or "synthesis") some years prior. He redeploys it here to translate the word "seasons" in the line "When mercy seasons justice," uttered by Portia in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. In his commentary on the essay, English translator Lawrence Venuti argues that the point of this word choice is to "indicate the assimilative force involved in [Portia's] translation of Shylock's demands for justice into the Christian discourse of mercy" (70), alluding as it does to that modern "cognitive approach to translation […] known as 'relevance theory,'" which argues for a source language's assimilation into a target one. What Venuti's gloss leaves out, however, is that the word "relève" quite literally translates the culinary associations of the word "seasons" in Shakespeare. "A seasoned dish," as Derrida observes, is, in French, "*un plat relevé*" (Derrida, 43). Characteristically, Derrida quips that even as his translation of Hegel's term has become canonical in academic circles, its deconstructionist origins may not be to everyone's "taste" (44): "The fact is that [this translation] has become irreplaceable and almost consecrated by now, even in the university, sometimes in other languages […] and even in cases where one no

longer knows where it comes from, even when one doesn't like the place it comes from – I mean 'me', even when one doesn't like its *taste*" (44, translation mine, italics mine).

Derrida's ironic use of the word may be seen to allude to the way in which deconstruction (and theory in general) is seen as adding unnecessary "spice" to a text. For instance, in *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul De Mann*, poet and scholar David Lehman refers to the practice as just so much "French's yellow mustard" (75) squiggled over a work. Yet I would myself *add* that one thing that Derrida's deployment of the word "relève" leaves out is the way taste is related to accent – and accent, in turn, to translation. I am thinking of the rhythmic notational system "ta'am" in the Hebrew Old Testament, which French translator Henri Meschonnic is credited for having rediscovered and which he translates precisely as "taste," or "what comes from the mouth" (71). For Meschonnic, it is these rhythmic accents that a translation must render, to the point of producing an "effect" of "generalized *taamicization*" (71). Meschonnic even goes so far as to argue that rhythm might be the closest thing we have in translation to a *general equivalent*, to use Marx's term, opposing as it does the "continuity" of "discourse" to the "discontinuity" of the "sign" (66): "Because it is not a language system that we have to translate, but what a poem does to its language, thus we must invent discourse equivalences in the target language: prosody for prosody, metaphor for metaphor, pun for pun, rhythm for rhythm" (71).

Both rhythm and taste are, in Meschonnic, in turn related to the body, or more specifically, to what he calls a "sense of the body-in-language" (66). In contradistinction with the spirit-tualized dimension of meaning, accent and rhythm are the poem's body, or better, the trace that the body leaves in a text: its ghost.

At the same time, it is important to underscore that accent is not only an individual phenomenon, but a collective one as well, related to the way in which the 'accents' of a language

are organized into distinctive prosodic systems ('accentual' in the case of 'stress-timed' languages like English, 'syllabic' in the case of 'syllable-timed' ones like Italian and French, and so on). It is thus that Jadinsky recalls Bakhtin's appropriation of the term "accentual systems" to refer to the ways "particular forms of discourse, or genres […] exhibit certain regularized patterns for making words mean certain things" (3). Relatedly, one would do well to consider accent in terms of those diacritic marks that work in tandem with prosody to register voice and dictate pronunciation. Clearly, this sense of accent as both individual and collective rhythm poses a problem for translation on the top of the lexical one, even as it might in some cases, as Meschonnic suggests, provide a creative workaround to it.

## 2. The Case of Dialectal Translations of Dante

Motivating my interest in this tangled web of meanings is the material that informs my current dissertation work. Between 1823 and 1921, some forty-nine dialectal translations of the early Renaissance poet Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* saw the light of day in Italy. These range from translations of single or select cantos to integral translations of the long narrative poem, and represent tongues from virtually every corner of the peninsula as well as from the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. What, I ask, are we to make of this phenomenon in the context of the Italian unification period known as the Risorgimento? Are we to see it as an attempt to familiarize a linguistically diverse population with the national language, ostensibly modeled on Dante's? Or is a more surreptitious gesture afoot such that, in recalling the parallel between their struggle with the hegemony of Italian and Dante's struggle with the hegemony of Latin, these translators could be seen as leveraging the poet for their own dialectal cause?

To make sense of these questions, it has indeed proven useful to consider the phenomenon through the kaleidoscopic lens of accentuation, beginning with the sense put forth by Bakhtin of accent as appropriation, which I shall explore in this paper. For if the grand narrative of the Risorgimento reads as a moment of appropriation of Dante's vernacular project for the purposes of political unity, it is also true that there were, as Audeh and Halvey put it in their study of the poet's popularity in the period, "marginalized voices seeking to recover lost identities or carve out new ones for themselves: imagined communities, constructing a sort of 'subaltern Dante'" (6).

In so doing, I argue, these translators also brought out or accentuated in Dante the very dialectal element that scholarly treatments of his work of the period had tended to suppress. For instance, in his 1856 *Vita di Dante*, statesman Cesare Balbo, who in the book's opening pages refers to Dante as the "most Italian Italian that ever lived" ("l'italiano più italiano che sia stato mai") (3), repeatedly finds himself having to excuse the poet for his linguistic openness:

> Did Dante, then, err in not acknowledging the primacy, observed by him and assumed by his contemporaries, of his own dialect? Certainly yes, in my opinion; but he might have been induced in error by the novelty of such a fact, not yet universally acknowledged, if not, indeed, after him, and as a consequence of him; and he might also have been induced by his generous, and let us say eclectic, nature, which led him to embrace all the sciences, accept all the dialects, and gather from these, and even from foreign languages, all the words that seemed fitting. (265, translation mine)

It is in a similarly backhanded way that Balbo defends the writer of the linguistic treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* for his treatment of other dialects in a work ostensibly aimed at the discovery of the "volgare illustre" ("illustrious vernacular"), writing that "[s]ome despise, others fear this argument," ("Disprezzano gli uni e temono gli altri questo argomento") (262). Such a discussion, the biographer counters, must be excused on account of its philological utility, Italy having been and still being a mosaic of languages.

Of course, the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is a highly conflicted work, vacillating as it does between a general defense of the vulgar languages and the hunt for a single, "illustrious" vernacular (the "*volgare illustre*"), "whose scent is left everywhere but which is nowhere to be found" (10). And it is precisely the search for this scent (or ac-scent), which, despite not being limited to a single city, nevertheless "may be stronger in one city than another" (10), leads Dante to inveigh against the various dialects of the peninsula as "so many convoluted constructions, so many defective formations, and so many barbarous pronunciations" (10).

Versus this uniaccentual Dante, it is of course the other, more diverse and welcoming Dante, which these dialectal translations accentuate. As the poet writes in the celebrated opening pages of the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*:

> For whoever is so misguided as to think that the place of his birth is the most delightful spot under the sun may also believe that his own language – his mother tongue, that is – is pre-eminent among all others; and, as a result, he may believe that his language was also Adam's. To me, however, the whole world is a homeland, like the sea to fish – though I drank from the Arno before cutting my teeth, and love Florence so much that, because I loved her, I suffer exile unjustly – and I will weigh the balance of my judgement more with reason than with sentiment. And although for my own enjoyment (or rather for the satisfaction of my own desire), there is no more agreeable place on earth than Florence, yet when I turn the pages of the volumes of poets and other writers, by whom the world is described as a whole and in its constituent parts, and when I reflect inwardly on the various locations of places in the world, and their relations to the two poles and the circle at the equator, I am convinced, and firmly maintain, that there are many regions and cities more noble and more delightful than Tuscany and Florence, where I was born and of which I am a citizen, and many nations and peoples who speak a more elegant and practical language than do the Italians. (trans. Steven Botterill, 13)

## 3. Accent and Vulgarity

Another aspect of Dante's work that these translations accentuate is his *vulgarity:* that is, his *volgare*. One must of course be careful when navigating through the different meanings of this

term. For, as Bertrand Buffon recalls in *Vulgarité et Modernité*, it is only after the French Revolution, that the word acquires the pejorative connotation it has now. *Vulgar*, he recalls, derives from the Latin *vulgus,* meaning not only the crowd or the masses, but also the common good, that which men hold in common ("le commun des hommes"): "the vulgar language was the language spoken by all or almost all, in contradistinction to the high language, Latin; a *vulgar* opinion was an opinion what was communally shared" (12, all translations mine, italics mine). As such, its connotative range was, up until the nineteenth century, not only neutral, but even positive. There was even a sense of political legitimacy attached to the term, where it "constituted one of the 'orders' of society – the Third Estate in France – next to the Clergy and the Nobility" (13). It is only with Madame de Staël's *De la littérature* – where she coins the substantive "vulgarity" ("*vulgarité*") (13) to denounce a range of habits particular to modernity and democracy – that its connotations start to sour.

Yet I would argue that something is lost if we read in the word *volgare* nothing more than a neutral or even positive attribute for the masses, which is to say that there is something to be gained by the anachronism proscribed by Buffon. It might prove useful, in this regard, to bring the phenomenon of dialectal translations of Dante into conversation with the phenomenon of vernacular translations from Latin into Tuscan that took place in Dante's own time and that went by the name of *volgarizzamenti*. In her book-length study of this phenomenon, Alison Cornish argues that what the Italian term loses in translation is not only its relationship to the word *vulgus*, but its very "*scent* of vulgarity" (34, italics mine). Although she herself does not pursue this reflection, we may find it fruitful here to ask: Is there something *vulgar* – in the modern, bodily sense of the term – about the *volgare*?

Although instances of vulgarity in Dante are not wanting – one need only recall *Inferno 21,* where the devils signal to each other with "trumpet" (21, 139) blasts from their asses*, or Inferno 18,* where the sinners are immersed in "shit" ("merda") (18, 116) – one would do well to take a detour into the work of his contemporary Boccaccio – whom in his late letters Petrarch criticizes for both his use of the vulgar *language* and for the vulgar *content* of his texts – to explore this nexus. Writing in Latin to his incorrigibly frivolous friend – "But while [my scribe] was writing I began to wonder, 'What is my Giovanni going to say now? This fellow addresses pointless things and does not reply to the important ones' (643)," – Petrarch looks back on what he regards as his misguided ambitions to develop the vernacular as a youth, deeming that "it was a waste of effort to build on soft mud and shifting sand" (162): "Thus, like the runner who stumbles upon a serpent in the middle of the path, I halted and changed my mind, taking another pathway that I hope will be straighter and higher" (162-163). This path, of course, is that of Latin, which he now prefers to the vernacular.

Repentance turns into insolence in a subsequent letter, as Petrarch sends to Boccaccio a Latin translation of his Griselda story, one of the only tales from the *Decameron* he admits to having admired or even read:

> I have seen the book you produced in our mother tongue long ago, I believe, as a young man; it was delivered to me – from where or how I do not know. If I were to say I have read it, I would be lying, since it is very big, having been written for the common herd and in prose, and I was too busy and time was short […] I did enjoy leafing through it; and if anything met my eye that was too frankly lewd, your age at the time of writing excused it – also the style, the idiom, the very levity of the subject matter and of those who seemed likely to read such things. (655)

Petrarch's excuse for doing so is that the story "would appeal also to those who do not know our language" (656). He explains that in no way is he trying to one-up the author, even though he

admits to taking liberties in "changing or adding a few words in the narrative because I believed that you not only would allow it to be done, but would approve it" (656). Of course, when he writes, "Whether I have deformed it or, perhaps, beautified it by changing its garment, you be the judge" (656), it appears he has tried to do precisely that.

Petrarch's "regressive *translatio*," as Teolinda Barolini calls it, bears significantly not only on the story's thematics but on the very fate of the *volgare*. For, in Petrarch's hands, the disturbing story of Griselda's transformation from a poor girl to the abused spouse of the nobleman Gualtieri becomes *disturbingly less disturbing*. Thus, what in Boccaccio is a moment of humiliation and shame, as Gualtieri comes to take Griselda from her father's home and has her strip naked before all so as to adorn her in new clothes, becomes in Petrarch a discreet, almost chivalrous gesture, bearing no trace of violence:

> Whereupon Gualtieri, having taken her by the hand, led her out of the house, *and in the presence of his whole company and of all the other people there he caused her to be stripped naked*. Then he called for the clothes and shoes which he had had specially made, and quickly got her to put them on, after which he caused a crown to be placed upon the disheveled hair of her head. And just as everyone was wondering what this might signify, he said: 'Gentlemen, this is the woman I intend to marry, provided she will have me as her husband.' Then , turning to Griselda, who was so ashamed [*vergognosa*] and astonished [*sospesa*] that she hardly knew where to look, he said: Griselda, will you have me as your wedded husband?' To which she replied : 'I will, my lord.' 'And I will have you as my wedded wife, ' said Gualtieri, and he married her then and there before all the people present. He then helped her mount a palfrey, and led her back, honorably attended, to his house […] (Boccaccio, trans. McWilliam, G.H., translation amended, italics mine, 786-787)

> Then, lest she bring into her new home any trace of her former condition, he ordered her to be undressed, and to be clothed from head to foot in new garments. This was carried out *discreetly* and speedily by the ladies in waiting, who vied in cuddling her in their bosom and on their lap. Thus this girl was dressed; her disheveled hair was combed and braided by their hands, and she was adorned for the occasion with jewels and a crown, and, as it were, suddenly transformed so that the people could hardly recognized her. Gualtieri solemnly betrothed her with a precious ring that he had brought for this purpose, and he

had her mounted on a snow-white horse and led to the palace, as the people accompanied them and rejoiced. (660, Petrarch, trans. Bernardo, Aldo S., et. al., italics mine)

Bearing in mind the context of this translation, it is difficult not to see Griselda as representing the poor, underdeveloped *volgare* and Gualtieri as representing the authority of Latin to which it ought to conform. Moreover, as Barolini observes, there is very much a *patriarchal* element to Petrarch's translational violence. For, "[w]hen Petrarch turns Boccaccio's programmatically ambiguous Griselda story […] into an exemplum of exceptional wifely obedience with the prefatory words *De insigni obedeientia et fide uxoria*, he also translates it into Latin, indicating that his target audience is not female. He is not trying to be useful to women, but to participate in a cultural discussion over the heads of women – not *sotto benda* but *sopra benda*" (377).

4. Accent in the Question of Language

In this sense, Boccaccio's use of the *volgare* brings him closer to Dante than to Petrarch. Nevertheless, posterity would choose to align him with the latter when it came to the so-called "questione della lingua," which debated which authors the still-young vernacular ought to be modeled after. Thus in his linguistic treatise *Prose della volgar lingua*, Renaissance humanist Pietro Bembo constantly refers to the works of Petrarch and Boccaccio, while conspicuously omitting those of Dante. "Note […] that the great development of our language can only be attributed to these two, Petrarch and Boccaccio," he writes at a critical moment in the discussion. (131, all translations mine). The reasons for this omission becomes apparent when Bembo cursorily discusses the work of Dante, castigating it for its use of "vile," "rough," and "rude" words

("voci […] vili […] dure […] [e] dispettose"), as in the case of "biscazza" in *Inferno 6* (objected to, presumably, on the basis of its phallic homophony). Dante, Bembo argues, would have done better either to substitute these words with more euphonious (and less equivocal) ones, or, where the case necessitated them, omit mention of these matters altogether. Like an unironic Wittgenstein, who in his preface to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* writes that "what can be said at all can be said clearly; and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" (3), Bembo suggests that Dante "would have done better to keep quiet about those things which could not be said properly […] since no necessity bound him to write about them rather than not to write about them" ("Il quale poeta non solamente se taciuto avesse quello che dire acconciamente non si potea, meglio avrebbe fatto […] che nessuna necessità lo stringea più a scriverle che a non scriverle") (138).

At the same time, Boccaccio himself is only elevated to the status of role model under certain terms and conditions. Enumerating the long line of writers – from Piero delle Vigne, to Forese Donati, to Guido Cavalcante, to Dante – that contributed to the rise of the vernacular, Bembo writes: "But each of them was won and surpassed by Boccaccio, as Boccaccio himself was won and surpassed by himself, there being among his compositions some that are better than others […] ("Ma ciascun di loro vinto e superato fu dal Boccaccio, e questo medesimo da sé stesso; con ciò sia cosa tra molte composizioni sue tanto ciascuna fu migliore […]" (131). In other words, it is only a certain Boccaccio that is admitted into the canon.

Indeed, for all its knockabout vulgarity, Boccaccio's language is ultimately more polished and homogeneous than Dante's. It is this aspect that appeals to Bembo and that he *accentuates*. In a sense, Boccaccio is pardoned his *volgare* for the unvulgar way in which it is couched.

## 5. Castiglione's Alternative

It is on this point of not only which authors but which aspects of these authors to accentuate, that Baldassare Castiglione would question him in the *Courtier*. Castiglione's "courtly thesis" of language, according to which Italian ought to be composed of a variety of dialects, instead of being drawn from a single Florentine source, is predicated on a rejection of the notion that a language ought to be modeled after any one set of literary figures. As he writes in the introduction to the *Courtier*: "Therefore if in my writing I have refused to use words found in Boccaccio which are no longer current in Tuscan, or to accept the rules imposed by those who believe it is impermissible to use words not found in modern Tuscan, I believe I have every excuse. So both in the subject matter of my book and in my linguistic style […] I think I have followed writers who are at least as praiseworthy as Boccaccio" (35).

In a sense, Castiglione's rejection of Tuscan seems to seek to avoid the embarrassment of accent that comes with adopting a foreign language:

> Nor do I think I should be held at fault for having chosen to make myself known as a Lombard speaking the language of Lombardy rather than as someone who is not a Tuscan speaking Tuscan, and so having avoided the mistake of Theophrastus who was easily recognized as not being Athenian by a simple old woman, because he spoke Attic too much. However, since this is discussed enough in the first Book I shall say nothing more now, save that, to forestall all debate, I confess to my critics that I do not know this terribly difficult and recondite Tuscan language of theirs; and I admit that I have written in my own, just as I speak, and for those who speak in the same way. So I don't think I have done anyone any harm; for, in my view, nobody in the world is forbidden to write and speak in his own language, and still less is anyone forced to read or listen to what he does not like. (35, trans. George Bull)

Indeed, Castiglione elsewhere chastises those who do make themselves known by such shibboleths. Referring to his principle of "sprezzatura," according to which affectation ought to be rejected in favor of naturalness, howsoever feigned, he writes:

> However, affectation is a vice of which only too many people are guilty, and sometimes our Lombards more than others, who, if they have been away from home for a year, on their return immediately start speaking Roman or Spanish or French, and God knows what. And all this springs from their over-anxiety to show how much they know; so that they would put care and effort into acquiring a detestable vice. Certainly it would require a great deal of effort on my part if in these discussions of ours I wished to use those old Tuscan words which the Tuscans of today have discarded; and what's more I'm sure you would all laugh at me. (70)

Castiglione's sense of the "over-anxiety" ("*troppo desiderio*") with which Lombards change their speech recalls sociolinguist William Labov's study of the pattern of "hypercorrection" among lower-middle class New Yorkers in the 1960s. Borrowing from Labov, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu speaks of the "invisible and silent violence" of self-censorship that haunts the speech of "dominated peoples" and is "never as manifest as in all the corrections, sporadic or long-term, to which […], by a hopeless effort toward correction, [these people] submit – consciously or unconsciously – those stigmatized aspects of their pronunciation and syntax" (38, translation mine). He poignantly speaks of "the disarray which makes them 'lose their means', making them incapable of 'finding their words', as if they were suddenly dispossessed of their own language" (38). In a similar vein, Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldua refers to the stigmatization that makes people afraid of speaking in their own language as a veritable act of "linguistic terrorism":

> Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other […] Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation […] Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their censure. Their language was not outlawed in their countries. They had a whole lifetime of

being immersed in their native tongue; generations, centuries in which Spanish was a first language, taught in school, heard on the radio and TV, and read in the newspaper […] If a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me […] So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. (80-81)

The comparison may seem out of place. Yet like Castiglione Anzaldua also resists the injustice – born of a purist, monolingual society – of having to accommodate to others, but not have the gesture returned in kind: "Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex, and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate" (80-81).

Of course, one may counter that Anzaldua's attention to linguistic hybridity runs counter to Castiglione's nativism. Yet upon closer inspection his notion of a composite Italian language is very much alive to the dynamics of accent and hybridity:

> And if [this language] did not […] have the purity of old Tuscan, it would yet be Italian, universal, rich and varied, like a delightful garden full of all kinds of flowers and fruits […] This phenomenon would be nothing new, since from each of the four languages on which they could draw, the Greeks selected whatever words, expressions and figures of speech they wished, and constructed a new so-called common language; and subsequently all five of these dialects were known collectively as the Greek language. Certainly, Attic was more elegant, pure and rich than the rest, but good writers who were not Athenians did not adopt it so slavishly as to destroy the distinctiveness of their own style and, as it were, the accent and savor of their natural dialect. But they were not despised because of this; on the contrary, writers were censured when they tried to appear too Athenian. Among Latin writers also there were many from outside Rome who in their day were highly regarded, even though they were not seen to possess that purity of Latin which those speaking another language are rarely able to acquire. (79)

It is for these reasons that in spite of his aversion to classical models Castiglione points to Boccaccio as an instance of that pluri-centric vision of language he is trying to promote. He points out that not only is his theory of linguistic hybridity "proved by what happened in the ancient world, but it can also be clearly seen in the case of Boccaccio, in whom there are so many French, Spanish, and Provençal words, as well as some that are probably meaningless to Tuscans today, that it would greatly reduce the size of his book if they were all cut out" (34).

Like Bembo then, Castiglione, too, *accentuates* certain aspects of Boccaccio, albeit diametrically opposed ones. As he writes again in the introduction to the *Courtier*:

> So to those who blame me for not having imitated Boccaccio or followed current Tuscan usage I shall not hesitate to answer that although Boccaccio was a man of noble discernment by the standards of his time, he wrote far better when he let himself be guided solely by his natural genius and instinct, without care or concern to polish his writings, than when he went to great pains to correct and refine his work. For this reason his partisans declare that he greatly deceived himself when he judged his work himself, and that he put little value on what has done him honor and a great deal on what is worthless. So if I had imitated the style of his writing for which he is censured by those who praise him otherwise, I certainly could not have escaped the accusations as are levelled against him in this regard; in fact, I would have deserved them all the more in that he committed his error in the belief that he was doing right, whereas I would have done so knowing I was wrong. And if I had imitated him in the style which many people hold to be good, but which he himself thought little of, then in doing so I would have proved that I disagreed with the opinion of the author I was following, and this, in my judgement, would have been quite wrong. (33)

In other words, it is Boccaccio's vulgarity, his insouciance – his *sprezzatura* – that Castiglione appreciates, not the fussiness that led him to watch his language and hypercorrect his texts. And although he is proud to say that he has not chosen Boccaccio as a model, I would argue that it is precisely by way of a selective, "accented translation" that he has engaged with the writer.

6. Accent and Laughter

In a similar way, many of the dialectal translations of Dante go to great lengths to isolate and *exaggerate* the comic and vulgar dimension that in Dante is always subordinated to the sacred one. Perhaps one of the best examples can be found in Carlo Porta's 1817-1821 Milanese translations of *Inferno 1*, *3*, *5*, *9*, and *11*, the first of their kind and no doubt the most well-known. A major poet in his own right, greatly admired by Stendhal, who discusses him in *Rome, Naples, and Florence*, Porta imbues these translations with the same vulgar wit as his original dialectal compositions. Specifically, he opts for an *ottava rima* rhyme scheme that allows him to follow every two rounds of Dante's *terza rima* with a couplet that parodies certain aspects of the text. For instance, his translation of the opening lines of the *Inferno* reads:

> A mitaa strada de quell gran viacc
> Che femm a vun la voeulta al mondo da là
> Me sont trovaa in d'on bosch scur scur affac,
> Senza on sentee da podè seguita:
> Domà a pensagh me sentii a vegni scacc,
> Ne l'è on bosch insci fazzel de retrà,
> Negher, vecc, pien de spin, sass, ingarbij,
> Pesc che nè quella del barillott di striji. (225)

> Halfway through the great journey that we take, one by one, to the other world, I found myself in an absolutely dark, dark forest, without a path to follow; just thinking about it gives me the chills; it's not an easy wood to paint: black, old, full of thorns, stones, knots, worse than a witch's ball. (my translation of Dante Isella's prose translation).

As we can see, it is not only the couplet, with its accumulation of details and comparison of the proverbial dark wood to a witch's ball, but the verses themselves that are contaminated by this accentuating gesture, like a snake eating its own tail. As translator and editor Dante Isella observes, "*scacc*," which translates Dante's "fear" ("*paura*"), means something like "the willies ("*fifa*"). What is more, the monosyllabic force of Milanese dialect allows Porta to accentuate – on a literal,

phonetic level – the "harsh harmony" evoked by Dante's "savage, rough, and stern forest" ("questa selva selvaggia e aspra e dura") ("*bosch scur scur affac*") (225). The effect, however, is more spooky than epic, like that of a fantastical children's tale or, indeed, of a *commedia*.

Porta also frequently refers to his hometown of Milan in his translations. Thus, *Inferno 2* begins:

> Vegneva innanz la nocc maeman
> Che el dì el ghe renunziava el sò possess.
> Tucc dormiven: ne gh'eva in tutt Milan
> Fors gnach cent lengu de donn che se movess. (677)
>
> Night came before us as day gave up its possession. Everybody slept; in all of Milan, there
> weren't even a hundred tongues of women that moved.

And, in the third stanza of the same canto, he departs from the original altogether to extemporize on the habitus of high society:

> Sul fà di donn, che innanz d'anda in tiatter
> Consulten specc, sart, serva e perucche
> Né se moeuven de cà fin che sti quatter
> No han dezis de conzert ch'hin bej assee,
> Inscì anca mì par no ris'cià on scarpattier
> Preghi el Poetta a squadramm da capp a pee
> Par dezid se da sgiunsg sont assee franch
> Fina alla prima ventalina almanch. (678)
>
> Just as women, before going to the theatre, consult the mirror, tailor, maid, and hairdresser,
> and don't move from the house until these four have decided that they are sufficiently
> beautiful, I too, so as not to blunder, beg the poet to look me up and down to decide if I am
> sturdy enough to reach at least the first restaurant sign.

In this comingling of voices and temporalities, Porta's translation recalls Bakhtin's theory of accentuality as it can be found in his analysis of Menippean satire. Just as he does with the

novel, Bakhtin generalizes the notion of Menippean satire (which he sees as a progenitor of the novel) to include any genre that bridges the incommensurable distance that divides the present from the "absolute past" (16) of the epic. "The epic past," he explains, "is called the 'absolute past' for good reason: it is both monochronic and valorized (hierarchical); it lacks any relativity, that is, any gradual temporal progressions that might connect it with the present. It is walled off absolutely from all subsequent times, and above all from those times in which the singer and his listeners are located" (16).

By contrast, the novel brings the material low and within reach. And it accomplishes this precisely by way of an *accented vulgarization* that "squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, re-formulating and re-accentuating them" (5). Thus, "[e]pic material," he writes, "is transposed into novelistic material, into precisely that zone of contact that passes through the intermediate stages of familiarization and laughter" (15).

Indeed, vulgarity, *qua* "popular laughter" (23), plays an important role in Bakhtin's understanding of the "familiarizing" force of Menippean satire:

> The familiarizing role of laughter is here considerably more powerful, sharper and coarser. The liberty to crudely degrade, to turn inside out the lofty aspects of the world and world views, might sometimes seem shocking. But to this exclusive and comic familiarity must be added an intense spirit of inquiry and a utopian fantasy. Nothing is left of the distant epic image of the absolute past; the entire world and everything sacred in it is offered to us without any distancing at all, in a zone of crude contact, where we can grab at everything with our hands. (26)

It is for these reasons that Bakhtin can claim that in the Socratic dialogues, which he considers an early form of Menippean satire, "the figure of Socrates himself is characteristic for the genre," since in his "laughter" and "irony" one finds "for the first time [a] truly free investigation of the world of man and of human thought" (25).

## 8. Accent Between Familiarization and De-Familiarization

Yet vulgarization need not necessarily function as a familiarizing gesture. Indeed, there is an element of "de-familiarization" latent in Bakhtin's thought that itself bears bringing out or accentuating. As his compatriot Viktor Shklovsky writes in his 1917 "Art as Technique": "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar' [*ostranenie*], to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (6). Such a process of deferred recognition extends to even the most ordinary objects, which art frees from our habitual modes of perception: "And art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony" (6). As examples, Shklovsky cites Tolstoy's manner of "mak[ing] the familiar seem strange by not naming it" (6), as well as a number of popular riddles from his time. Working backward from these sources, historian Carlo Ginzburg makes the case that an embryonic form of de-familiarization may be found in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius – which Tolstoy adored – as well as in the genre of popular riddles – which he claims Aurelius drew from. For in the Stoic practice of decomposing objects into parts in order to be liberated from them – thus, a delicacy might be looked at as a "fish's or a bird's or a pig's corpse," the act of copulation as a "secretion of liquid," a mere "spasm" (20, all translations mine) – lies a sort of riddle in reverse: "In order to see things," Ginzburg argues, "one has first of all to consider them as if they were perfectly meaningless – as riddles" (20).

Now, as Bakhtin notes, it is precisely upon such a logic of "analysis, dismemberment, [and] turning things into dead objects" (24) that laughter and vulgarity depend for their effect:

> Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. (23)

> In this plane (the plane of laughter) one can disrespectfully walk around whole objects; therefore, the back and rear portion of an object (and also its innards, not normally accessible for viewing) assume a special importance. The object is broken apart, laid bare (its hierarchical ornamentation is removed): the naked object is ridiculous; its 'empty' clothing stripped and separated from its person, is also ridiculous. (24)

> One can play games with the comical […] What reigns supreme is the artistic logic of analysis, dismemberment, turning things into dead objects. (24)

In other words, it is the very fact of being familiar with an object that allows one to de-familiarize it.

## 9. The Case of Giuseppe De Dominicis

In this regard, the work of Leccese dialectal poet and translator Giuseppe de Dominicis is perhaps even more apposite. Though De Dominicis only translated one of Dante's cantos, *Inferno 33*, his parodic rendition of the *Commedia*, *Canti de l'autra Vita* (*Cantos from the Other Life*), which may also be considered a translation, attests to the singularity of his engagement with Dante. Indeed, of all the dialectal translators, De Dominicis is perhaps the most antagonistic. To begin with, his decision to place his translation of *Inferno 33* at the start of a collection entitled "Furestere" ("Foreigners") (1891), alongside translations of Baudelaire, Hugo, Heine, Pëtofi, and Balaguer, seems to indicate that with respect to his native tongue De Dominicis considered Dante on equal foreign status as these poets. Such a move is particularly significant within the context of the "internal colonization" of the South by the northern Kingdom of Piedmont that accompanied

Italian unification, suggesting as it does a rejection of the notion that a single cultural-linguistic model – "Dante's" – could be imposed on the entire country. Of course, one could also argue that, within this context, the term "foreigner" applies to De Dominicis himself. In accentuating the poet's otherness, the translator thus may also be seen as aligning himself with Dante to combat those nationalists who had domesticated him in the first place.

Yet it is in *Canti de l'autra Vita*, the work for which De Domininics is most known and which occupied him for the greater part of the 1890s, that one finds the closest embodiment of Menippean satire as described by Bakhtin:

> In this world, utterly familiarized, the subject moves with extreme and fantastic freedom; from heaven to earth, from earth to the nether world, from the present into the past, from the past into the future. In the comic afterlife visions of Menippean satire, the heroes of the absolute past, real-life figures from various eras of the historic past (for example, Alexander of Macedonia) and living contemporaries jostle one another in a most familiar way, to talk, even to brawl; this confrontation of times from the point of view of the present is extremely characteristic. (26)

A brief summary will suffice to show the way De Dominicis proceeds in like manner. The poet here rewrites the *Commedia* as a revolt of the condemned in Hell against the unjust laws of Heaven. Casting himself as a poor, modern and, most importantly, *southern* Dante, De Dominicis' alter ego Pietro Lao finds himself thrown into a circle of Hell for having stolen a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. As Antonio Marzo notes, this "implacable divine law," which "imposes the harshest punishment for even the lightest of sins," is in its "iniquity" not much different than the earthly law above (166). The protagonist thus decides to stage a rebellion, enlisting not only the inhabitants of Hell, but also those dwelling in the realms above, where he discovers that the same injustices exist. Taking on the formidable army of angels led by Saint Michael, the rebellion is successful, dethroning God himself and sending him into exile. A new order is instated, devoid of

hierarchies and based on the principle of brotherly love and equality. Yet, in what it is tempting to see as a nod to the failure of many popular insurrections of the time, this order proves short-lived and quickly degenerates into anarchy. Meanwhile, a vagabond God, accompanied by Christ and the Holy Ghost, meets Pietro Lau one day and explains to him the reasons for his present state. Together, the four head back to Paradise where they restore order and the status quo.

## 10. Accenting Hell

It is tempting to read De Dominicis "other life" as referring to the *Other life* of the south, and, by extension, to Hell itself as a toponym for the south: South as Hell, Hell as South.

Although beyond the circumscription of the period in question, it may be helpful in this regard to consider the way this trope is treated in Carlo Levi's 1945 *Cristo si è fermato ad Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli* )*,* Italy's so-called "southern question" perduring well into the twentieth century. Levi's biographical account of his exile by the Fascist regime to a small village in Lucania begins with a gloss of the book's title as explained by the local peasants:

> "We're not Christians," they say. "Christ stopped short of here, at Eboli. "Christian [*Cristiano*]," in their way of speaking means "human speaking," and this almost proverbial phrase that I have so often heard them repeat may be no more than the expression of a hopeless feeling of inferiority. We're not Christians, we're not human beings; we're not thought of as men but simply as beasts, beasts of burden, or even less than beasts, mere creatures of the wild. They at least live for better or for worse, like angels or demons, in a world of their own, while we have to submit to the world of Christians, beyond the horizon, to carry its weight and to stand comparison with it. But the phrase has a much deeper meaning and, as is the way of symbols, that is the literal one. Christ did stop at Eboli, where the road and the railway leave the coast of Salerno and turn into the desolate reaches of Lucania. Christ never came this far, nor did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relation of cause to effect, nor reason nor history. Christ never came, just as the Romans never came, content to garrison the highways without penetrating the mountains and forests, nor the Greeks, who flourished beside the Gulf of Taranto. None of the pioneers of

Western civilization brought here his sense of the passage of time, his deification of the State or that ceaseless activity which feeds upon itself. No one has come to this land except as an enemy, a conqueror, or a visitor devoid of understanding. The seasons pass today over the toil of the peasants, just as they did three thousand years before Christ; no message, human or divine, has reached this stubborn poverty. We speak a different language, and here our tongue is incomprehensible. The greatest travelers have not gone beyond the limits of their own world; they have trodden the paths of their own souls, of good and evil, of morality and redemption. Christ descended into the underground hell of Hebrew moral principle in order to break down its doors in time and to seal them up into eternity. But to this shadowy land, that knows neither sin nor redemption from sin, where evil is not moral but is only the pain residing forever in earthly things, Christ did not come. Christ stopped at Eboli. (trans. Francis Frenaye, 3-4)

Here, the South represents a sort of threshold for European civilization, an absolute Other that can never be known, only conquered and violated. Like Dante's Hell, towards the bottom of which one finds the giant Nimrod, it is a Babelic place, full of incomprehensible tongues and accents: ("Diverse lingue, orribili favelle, / parole di dolore, accenti d'ira, / voci alte e fioche […]"); ("Diverse languages, horrible pronouncements, words of suffering, accents of anger, voices shrill and faint") (*Inf. 3*, 25-27, translation mine). Yet, it is a hell which not even Christ deigned to visit.

Levi's text is shot through with references to Dante. Nowhere is this as clear as in the episode where his sister, who has come down to visit him from Turin, recounts her impressions of the city of Matera, whose squalor she compares to one of Dante's circles:

I set out at last to find the town. A little beyond the station I found a street with a row of houses on one side and on the other a deep gully. In the gully lay Matera. From where I was, higher up, it could hardly be seen because the drop was so sheer. All I could distinguish as I looked down were alleys and terraces, which concealed the houses from view. Straight across from me there was a barren hill of an ugly gray color, without a single tree or sign of cultivation upon it, nothing but sun-baked earth and stones. At the bottom of the gully a sickly, swampy stream, the Bradano, trickled among the rocks. The hill and the stream had a gloomy, evil appearance that caught at my heart. The gully had a strange shape: it was formed by two half-tunnels, side by side, separated by a narrow spur and meeting at the bottom, where I could see a white church, Santa Maria de Idris, which looked half-sunk in the ground. The two tunnels, I learned, were called Sasso Caveoso and Sasso

> Barisano. They were like a schoolboy's idea of Dante's *Inferno*. And, like Dante, I too began to go down from circle to circle, by a sort of mule path leading to the bottom. (84)

An averted reader is sure to recognize in the mountainous, troglodytic structure of Matera, which Levi's sister views from above – as Dante so often does before stepping down to a lower circle – a reference to the ditches of Malebolge. Yet the living conditions of this accentuated Hell seem even worse than those of his *Inferno*:

> Some of [the cave dwellings] had no entrance but a trapdoor and ladder. In these dark holes with walls cut out of the earth I saw a few pieces of miserable furniture, beds, and some ragged clothes hanging up to dry. On the floor lay dogs, sheep, goats and pigs. Most families have just one cave to live in and there they sleep all together; men, women, and animals. This is how twenty thousand people live.
>
> Of children I saw an infinite number. They appeared from everywhere, in the dust and heat, amid the flies stark naked or clothed in rags; I have never in all my life seen such a picture of poverty. My profession has brought me in daily contact with dozens of poor, sick, ill-kempt children, but I never even dreamed of seeing a sight like this. I saw children sitting on the doorsteps, in the dirt, while the sun beat down on them, with their eyes half-closed and their eyelids red and swollen; flies crawled across the lids, but the children stayed quite still, without raising a hand to brush them away. Yes, flies crawled across their eyelids, and they seemed not even to feel them. They had trachoma. I knew that it existed in the South, but to see it against this background of poverty and dirt was something else again. I saw other children with the wizened faces of old men, their heads crawling with lice and covered with scabs. Most of them had enormous, dilated stomachs and faces yellow and worn with malaria. (85)

Levi's sister is understandably dumbfounded by this: she had never been South. Neither had Christ. Neither had Dante.

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