

DISTANTLY READING DANTE TRANSLATIONS

Jacob Blakesley

*Centre for Translation Studies
University of Leeds, UK
j.blakesley@leeds.ac.uk*

This paper outlines a new research project that aims to catalogue and investigate all book-length translations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in 100 countries. This will be, in fact, the first project to map the circulation and translation of Dante's *Commedia* across the globe using statistics and analysis. Despite 700 years of Dante Studies, there still exists no comprehensive bibliography of translations; and critical studies still focus primarily on major languages, neglecting less-translated languages. The theoretical background of this project draws on Franco Moretti's 'distant reading', David Damrosch's theories of world literature, and Johan Heilbron's world system of translations.

This project will include three strands, which it aims to carry out with a team of scholars. The first will examine the empirical data about the translations of the *Commedia* and their circulation abroad. The second strand will study the formal aspects of the translations, seeing where the *Commedia* was translated into *terza rima*, and discovering the predominant metrical forms of translations across the world. The third strand will investigate how the *Commedia* was translated under censorship, in fascist regimes, theocracies, military dictatorships, constitutional monarchies, the Eastern Bloc and Communist dictatorships.

As the project is still in the early stages of research I will not be giving conclusions, but rather suggesting new pathways for future development.¹

1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of the project under discussion is to map the circulation and translation of Dante's *Commedia* across the globe using statistics. By choosing thus to concentrate on poetry translation, within the framework of a sociological approach to world literature, I intend to affirm Lawrence Venuti's claim that poetry should be 'move[d] closer to the centre of translation studies' (Venuti 2013, 173). This project, which I envision completing with a team of scholars, will compile a bibliography of all translations of the *Commedia*, published in about 100 countries across the world. We will then

¹ I should note that this project is currently under development with other scholars, and therefore the exact project outline may change.

analyse and position these translations within the field of world literature, as defined by David Damrosch (2003), which I will address later in this essay. In doing so, we will draw on a sociological approach to literary translation, adopting a distant-reading, quantitative methodology, inspired by Franco Moretti, Abram de Swaan, Johan Heilbron, Pascale Casanova, and David Damrosch. Before introducing more fully the theoretical background, and subsequently moving on to the main research questions of the project, I would like to address the question of why this project, and why now.

In the 700 years of Dante Studies, there have been only three books that have explored the reception of Dante in a broad comparative manner: two edited collections, the first, *Dante nel mondo: raccolta di studi promossa dall'Associazione Internazionale per gli studi di lingua e letteratura italiana*, published in 1965 (Branca and Caccia 1965); the second, *L'opera di Dante nel mondo: edizioni e traduzioni nel Novecento*, published in 1992 (Esposito 1992); and the third, a special journal issue of *Critica del Testo*, entitled *Dante nel mondo*, published in 2011 (Dante nel mondo 2011). Yet none of these studies addresses the translations of the *Divine Comedy* in a systematic fashion as I propose to do. However, the resources to do so are available, thanks to ongoing digitalization of the bibliographic records. The corpus of translations will draw on several resources: national libraries with online catalogues, including the Italian national library (opac.sbn.it 2017); wide-ranging catalogues like Worldcat.org (worldcat.org 2017); the online European library (europeanlibrary.org 2017); UNESCO's online database of literary translations (www.unesco.com/xtrans 2017), and print resources.

Now, if all reading is fundamentally translation, as philosophers argue, then we are clearly translating Dante for ourselves in whatever language we think in. After all, Dante's *Commedia* was written seven centuries ago, and also poses numerous problems of comprehension because of this: besides mere linguistic evolution over 700 years, even Italian readers will often be unfamiliar with certain theological and mythological figures Dante refers to. But I would go beyond this to say that the importance of studying translations of Dante's *Commedia* extends to interpretations of the source text itself. Indeed, there is a fundamental distinction to be made between the commentary on a text and a translation of a text. A translation of a text is the apotheosis of an interpretation: no commentary can ever reach the creative apex of a translation. And the translator is the ideal reader, because he or she must re-create the source text in another language in another era. In this sense, translations of Dante can reflect back on the original, illuminating passages and emphasizing others in innovative ways. But this project is not aiming at a close reading analysis of translations as much as a more

wide-optic analysis of Dante in the world. The innovation of my project is, I believe, in studying one of the greatest poets in history with the tools and techniques belonging to the disciplines of translation studies and world literature. To see this more clearly, the next section of this paper will focus on the theoretical background behind this project.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The literary theorist Franco Moretti has advocated the concept of ‘distant reading’ (Moretti 2013), analysing large databases of paratextual information, for example, in contrast to close reading. Using quantitative methods, statistical approaches, and interpretative schema, Moretti studies the 99.5% of forgotten books that have not entered the canon, what he calls, along with Margaret Cohen, ‘the great unread’ (Moretti 2013, 88). Moretti’s study of world literature is multi-disciplinary, and focuses not on close readings of texts, but wider panoramas based on corpora of data. His approach is premised on Immanuel Wallerstein’s unequal world-literary system, where the core, the semi-periphery, and the periphery do not share the same amount of economic and symbolic capital, in terms of source languages and target languages as well as genre. The perspective of ‘distant reading’ offers us a method of viewing literary production within a vast field, and examining hundreds and thousands of translations across the world, instead of isolated examples.

Meanwhile an explicit theorisation of the hegemony of world languages was developed by sociologist Abram de Swaan in 2001, in what he termed ‘the global language system’ (de Swaan 2001). Borrowing Swann’s four levels, sociologist Johan Heilbron went on to categorize the world’s 7,000 languages as either hyper-central, central, semi-central, or peripheral in the world system of translations, ranging from the most hegemonic to the least hegemonic (Heilbron 2009). This classification is not static, but is a ‘dynamic constellation’: ‘central languages can lose their centrality, peripheral languages can progress in the international ranking’ (Heilbron 2009, 263).² For instance, French was once the dominant source language in literature, roughly until World War II, as Casanova (Casanova 1999) has shown, but English has now taken over. In the same way, Russian was once a source language for numerous translations worldwide during the Cold War; however, after the fall of the USSR, it dramatically declined in importance. We will determine the variations in symbolic capital of Dante’s *Commedia* and through this, the prestige of Italian poetry in foreign languages

² Translated from the French by the author.

throughout the centuries. Italian is nowadays considered a semi-central language, less prestigious and central than English and French, but more central than languages like Finnish and Hungarian.

The overall definition of world literature followed in this project is that provided by David Damrosch, who argues that ‘world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading’ (Damrosch 2003, 5). According to Damrosch, works become part of world literature ‘by a double process: first by being read *as* literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond [their] linguistic and cultural point of origin’ (Damrosch 2003, 6). In short, it is through translation that a work such as the *Divine Comedy* becomes part of world literature.

3. THE STAGES OF THE PROJECT

This project as a whole will be divided into two stages: the first stage will be cataloguing all the translations of the *Commedia*, and the second longer stage concerns the analysis of such data.

In the first stage, we will catalogue all of the published book-length translations, which will be placed into a free online searchable database, tagged according to obvious features like target language, translator, publisher, year of publication, form of translation (e.g., in prose or verse), and pivot language used for translation, if known.

4. THREE RESEARCH STRANDS

After this data has been collected, there will be three research strands to this project: very briefly, the first will examine the empirical data about the translations of the *Commedia* and their circulation abroad. The second strand will study the formal aspects of the translations – which were the most used poetic meters, and which were the most used rhyme schemes to translate the *Commedia*. The third strand will investigate how the *Commedia* was translated under censorship among various political regimes.

4.1. With the three strands now clearly distinguished, we will delineate more specifically each strand, one by one. The first strand will investigate whether the translations were evenly spread out in time and space and language. Were certain canticles preferred – *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*? Where was the *Commedia* translated the most and the least, and during which periods? When did Dante start being translated in various languages, and what does this say about the symbolic capital of Dante’s masterpiece

and Italian literature in general? We know, as scholars have demonstrated, that Dante's fame did not follow a linear pattern. As John A. Scott writes, 'with the triumph of Petrarchism and the Pléiade school of poets, Dante's influence waned'. The 'high noon of Dante's reputation' began only in the 19th century, as Scott notes, 'sparked by the movement of Romanticism with its interest in the Middle Ages, the myth of the Romantic hero, and the idealized beloved' (Scott 2000, 260).

I will show how the statistics about the translation across the world of Italian poets like Dante and Italian poetry tout court, force us to rethink our notions of literary canons, minority languages, and national literary traditions. It must be borne in mind that canons, of course, are not immutable. As W. J. T. Mitchell remarks, 'the notion of the "canon", as an exclusive body of texts whose members are absolutely fixed, is an authoritarian fantasy that no longer exists [...] a canon is not a closed, absolute system, then, but a dynamic, evolving entity that can be reopened, reinterpreted, and reshaped' (Mitchell 2005, 20). Indeed, studying the circulation in translation of Dante's masterpiece will prove this point exactly – namely, that canons change according to a variety both of internal and external factors.

Underpinning the translation and circulation is the question of the translatability of the text. Concepts familiar to us – whether theological in nature, like Jesus Christ and his resurrection, or Hell, Purgatory, Paradise, Eden – or even geographical descriptions, which, depending on historical epoch, were not universally conceived of or known – means that there is a whole baggage of specific cultural information that is unknown or unfamiliar to many other cultures.

Moreover, Dante's poem is constellated by a web of intertextual sources. As Aldo Vallone has written,

His poem reveals the imprint of the literary and philosophical texts of classical antiquity (Virgil, Ovid, Statius, Lucan, Aristotle, Plato, Cicero); Holy Scripture (Old and New Testaments); philosophical and theological commentary (Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, Bonaventure; Bernard; Dionysius the Areopagite, William Peraldus, Hugh of S. Victor); historical texts (Orosius, Augustine, Livy); philosophical allegory (Macrobius, Boethius, Jean de Meun, Brunetto Latini); and the recent vernacular literary traditions (Old French romances, Provençal and Sicilian lyrical poetry) (Vallone 2000, 181-182).

These references will naturally be problematic to translate into a foreign context. And yet, despite all of these problems, Dante has continued to be translated for many centuries in many languages.

Many years ago the translation studies scholar Itamar Even-Zohar outlined how translations play a special role in literary systems that are either ‘young’, ‘peripheral’ or ‘weak’, or ‘at turning points, crises, or literary vacuums’ (Even-Zohar 1990, 47). This can explain why translations of Dante may have flourished in non-hegemonic languages. We can think of languages in crisis, like Catalan, which was banned during Franco’s regime; or young languages, like Macedonian, standardized officially in the 20th century after the establishment of the Republic of Macedonia; or peripheral languages, like Dutch or Hungarian. For, as translation scholar Maria Tymoczko has written, translation into minority languages can be not only a ‘site of imperialism’ but also a ‘site of resistance and nation building’ (Tymoczko 2016, 21). In short, it is often through translation that postcolonial literatures construct in part their own literary traditions. We will see how this applies to the case of the *Commedia*.

4.2. The second strand will look more closely at the intricate metrical and rhyming schemes of the translations. The choices are obvious: one can either imitate it, mimetically, where possible, bringing the reader towards the Italian, and therefore foreignizing the text; or find a functional and therefore prestigious equivalent in the target language, and thus domesticate it, bringing the text towards the reader; or else translate it into prose. Of course, each of these three translation options is not discreet, since each of them is a continuum of different strategic choices.

For instance, in the English context, Dante has been translated into an amazing variety of poetic forms. First, we can think of rhymed translations: the translations of the *Commedia* into nine verse stanzas, eight verse stanzas, six verse stanzas, rhyming quatrains, heroic couplets. And terza rima in multiple forms, whether 12-syllable, 11-syllable, 10-syllable, or 8-syllable verse. Then there are plenty of English translations of the *Commedia* into unrhymed forms – whether unrhymed pentameter, unrhymed *terzine* (tercets), free verse; or simply prose. Using a binary definition, we can classify the English translations as either domesticating or foreignizing, to follow the terminology of the leading scholar of translation studies, Lawrence Venuti. Foreignizing here, however, can take diverse forms, depending on the target readership and target literary tradition. A translation of Dante into terza rima is foreignizing, because it is an alien poetic form in English, and therefore an English reader will not be used to such a complex poetic schema. On the other hand, a translation of Dante into unrhymed iambic pentameter would be domesticating, because this is the standard meter of prestigious poetry in the English literary tradition. In any case, these poetic forms can’t

be studied in absolute independence, since one must understand the broad context that gave rise to the translators' choosing such poetic solutions. We will see where the *Commedia* was translated into terza rima, and what were the predominant metrical forms of translations across the world.

4.3. The third strand will study the relationship between the translations of the *Commedia* and censorship, drawing on formative studies in literary translation and censorship. There were different types of such censorship, owing to the different political nature of societies. Censorship in totalitarian countries or repressive countries more generally was widely variable: we can think of cultural blockage, pre-publication censorship, self-censorship, etc. A relevant theoretical tool is the concept of 'agents of translation', which can refer to a whole range of intermediaries between the translator and the end-user, who may challenge the dominant political or cultural values operating at the time (Milton, Bandia, 2009). From a practical point of view, of course, the very publication of a translation depends on editorial agents. A translation is not produced singlehandedly, since it is implicated in a chain of production, revision, negotiation, and approval. Examples will be drawn from translations of Dante into a range of countries with different political regimes, whether fascist regimes (Germany), authoritarian para-fascist regimes (Spain, Portugal), theocracies (Iran), military dictatorships (Brazil), constitutional monarchies (Japan), the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War, and Communist dictatorships (China, Cuba, former USSR). As scholars like Christopher Rundle and Kate Sturge have pointed out, translations are 'magnets for censorship' (Rundle and Sturge 2010, 7), both in terms of the texts allowed to be translated, as well as specific translation strategies for single texts, and this will be clear whether we are examining Dante translations during the Fascist *Ventennio* or the Cold War. It is important to remember, however, that censorship doesn't occur only in repressive societies, but also in democratic societies, in what Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1991, 138) called 'structural censorship', owing to uneven symbolic capital, economic costs, and unwritten rules. Indeed, governments of all types censor literary texts, because translations can run contrary to national propaganda, as during World War II and beyond. One may indeed speculate that in countries at war with Italy, or unaligned with Italy, there might be fewer translations of the national Italian poet *par excellence*. Likewise, during the Cold War, in the countries behind the Iron Curtain, one will see whether the *Commedia* was frequently implicitly or explicitly banned, owing both to its explicit religious content, as well as its origin in a capitalist country. Some Italian

authors were able to be easily adapted to communist regimes: yet Dante, due to his highly religious content, most likely was much less easy to adapt to such literary systems and therefore more suspect to secular communist regimes. Additionally, the results will show whether there have been more translations of Dante into Christian countries than non-Christian countries. In other words, is it the case that religious difference has caused Dante to be translated less in predominantly Muslim countries, such as Albania, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran; or in predominantly Hindu countries like India and Nepal; or Buddhist countries like Cambodia, Japan, and Thailand; or in the Jewish country of Israel?

One must evaluate as well the particular religion (if known) of the translator. For instance, is it a coincidence that the first two translators of Dante's *Commedia* into Arabic were either Roman Catholics like Amin Abu Sha'r (living in the then-called Emirate of Transjordan) or Maronite Catholics like Abbud Abi Rashid who was Lebanese? How will the religious belief of the translator determine the censorship of the text?

To give an example of the impact of religious censorship, the first Arabic translation of Dante can be considered. I am drawing exclusively on secondary sources, since I do not know Arabic.

The first complete translation of Dante's *Commedia* into Arabic was published in 1969 by the Egyptian translator Hasan 'Uthman, who was Muslim. Jeffrey Einboden, in studying 'Uthman's translation in detail, has noted several fundamental shifts that the Muslim translator carried out in his Arabic version (Einboden 2008). The paratextual elements of 'Uthman's translation are clearly oriented towards a Muslim readership, with numerous footnotes pointing out parallels between Dante's text and Islamic theological texts. 'Uthman meanwhile entirely excises 42 lines from the 28th canto of *Inferno*, where Muhammad and Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, are pejoratively described – but 'Uthman doesn't make the gap in line numbers evident in the translation. This means that the Arabic reader would not know that such an omission has been made, unless he or she read to the end of his footnotes. As 'Uthman writes:

I eliminated from this canto, insofar as I judged them inappropriate to translate, the verses about the prophet Muhammad in which Dante made a huge error, influenced by the common opinion in that epoch held by the educated and the masses about the great Prophet: the West couldn't then fully evaluate the authentic mission of Islam or understand its celestial

wisdom. This, however, did not prevent Dante and his contemporaries from appreciating Islamic culture and profiting from their relationships, which were a fundamental element in the Western world's passage from the Medieval era to the Renaissance era and then to the modern era (Elsheikh 2017).³

Other mini-acts of censorship can be noted, as Einboden says, in the translations of Dante's *Saraceni*, which are always negative in the Italian text, reflecting usual medieval Christian attitudes towards Muslims. 'Uthman, however, chooses an Arabic term that doesn't signify Muslims, but rather pagans and idolaters, thereby keeping the negative sense of Dante's text, but changing the religious connotation (Einboden 2008, 88–90).

Another critical alteration, as Einboden reveals, is 'Uthman's translation of the title of the third canticle: instead of entitling it *Paradiso*, like Dante, 'Uthman entitles it *Firdaws*, a term that refers explicitly and theologically to the highest state of Islamic beatitude. In other words, 'Uthman has implicitly domesticated the text for his predominant Muslim readership (Einboden 2008, 83–84). This can also be seen in his footnotes, where whenever Dante expresses Christian concepts relating to religious salvation, 'Uthman 'identif[ies] such recognition as a merely Christian interpretation', e.g., labelling it 'according to the Christians' or 'according to Christian doctrine' (Einboden 2008, 87). This doesn't mean, however, that 'Uthman elides such passages in Dante's text: he conscientiously translates these passages of doctrinal Catholic faith, while undermining them paratextually.

5. CONCLUSION

We have seen throughout this paper the grave lacuna affecting Dante studies, namely the lack of a systematic bibliography of translations of the Divine Comedy. This gap prevents us from analysing the reception, circulation, and translation of Dante across the centuries and across countries and continents in a comprehensive fashion. With these numbers at hand, we will be able to concretely see where his masterpiece has been translated, when, by whom, in what form, and how. We will be able to examine which poetic forms were used the most; how, where, and when censorship operated; and which literary fields the Divine Comedy has found the most and the least receptive.

Dante, of course, is not the only author about whom we lack such information. Up until now, scholars of both poetry translation and of Italian literature have kept big

³ Translated from the Italian into English by the author.

data rather at arm's length. Yet, using big data to study the circulation of poets, poetic movements, and poetry books can be transformative. Indeed, such an approach can reshape our understanding of literary study, by showing how literary canons are heavily constituted by translation; how poetry is published in different book markets and under censorship; how literary prizes affect the publication of poetry in translation; and how poetry, like Dante's *Commedia*, becomes world literature. Dante is relevant to the field of translation studies for many reasons, not least of which is that the translations of his *Commedia* will shed light on how the supreme multilayered religious and poetic text has been received, translated, and interpreted in innumerable literary systems around the world. After all, world literature, as Venuti justly claims, 'cannot be conceptualised apart from translation' (Venuti 2013, 193).

REFERENCES

- Bourdieu P. 1991. *Language and symbolic power* (trans. Raymond G., Adamson M.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Casanova P. 1999. *La republique mondiale des lettres*. Paris: Seuil.
- Critica del testo. 2011. Dante, oggi/3. Nel Mondo. *Critica del testo* 14 (3).
- Damrosch D. 2003. *What is world literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- de Swaan A. 2001. *Words of the world: the global language system*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Einboden J. 2008. Voicing an Islamic Dante: The Problem of Translating the *Commedia* into Arabic. *Neophilologus* 92 (1), 77–91.
- Elsheikh M. S. 2017. *Dante e il mondo arabo*. Retrieved on 15 October 2017 from <http://www.arabroma.com/letteratura/salem.htm>.
- Esposito E. 1992. *L'opera di Dante nel mondo: edizioni e traduzioni nel Novecento: atti del convegno internazionale di studi: Roma, 27–29 aprile 1989*. Ravenna: Longo.
- European Library. 2017. Retrieved on 15 October 2017 from www.europeanlibrary.org.
- Even-Zohar I. 1990. The position of translated literature within the literary polysystem. *Poetics today* 11 (1), 47–55.
- Heilbron J. 2009. Le système mondial des traductions (trans. Bokobza A.) Sapiro G. (Ed.). *Les contradictions de la globalisation éditoriale*. Paris: Nouveau Monde, 253–274.
- Milton J., Bandia P. (Eds.). 2009. *Agents of translation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Mitchell W. J. T. 2005. Canon. Bennett T., Grossberg L., Morris M. (Eds.). *New Keywords*. Oxford: Blackwell, 20–22.
- Moretti F. 2013. *Distant reading*. London: Verso.
- OPAC SBN. 2017. Retrieved on 15 October 2017 from opac.sbn.it.
- Rundle C., Sturge K. 2010. Translation and the history of Fascism. Rundle C., Sturge K. (Eds.). *Translation under fascism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 3–12.
- Scott J. A. 2000. Dante in France. Lansing R. (Ed.). *Dante Encyclopedia*. New York: Garland, 259–262.
- Tymoczko M. 2016. *Translation in a post-colonial context*. London: Routledge.

- UNESCO *Index translationum*. 2017. Retrieved on 15 October 2017 from www.unesco.org/index.
- Vallone A. 2000. *Commedia*. Lansing R. (Ed.). *Encyclopedia dantesca*. New York, 181–182.
- Venuti L. 2013. *Translation changes everything*. London: Routledge.
- Worldcat.org. 2017. Retrieved on 15 October 2017 from www.worldcat.org.

NUOTOLINIS DANTĖS VERTIMŲ SKAITYMAS

JACOB BLAKESLEY

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje aptariamas naujas mokslinis projektas, kurio tikslas – parengti šimtę šalių išleistų Dantės „Dieviškios komedijos“ (*Commedia*) vertimų katalogą ir juos išnagrinėti statistiniais ir analitiniais metodais. Nepaisant to, kad Dantės kūrinys studijuojamas jau 700 metų, vis dar néra išsamios jo vertimų bibliografijos, o pagrindiniai kritikos darbai apima tik į vadinamąsias didžiąsias kalbas išverstus kūrinius, todėl numatoma užpildyti šią spragą. Teorinis vertimų tyrimas grindžiamas Franco Moretti „nuotolinio skaitymo“ metodu, Davido Damroscho pasaulio literatūros teorija ir Johano Heilbrono pasaulinės vertimų sistemos teorija.

Projekte numatomos trys tyrimai, kuriuos vykdys tyrėjų grupės, kryptys. Pirmoji grupė tirs empirinius *Commedia* vertimų duomenis ir kūrinio paplitimą pasaulyje. Antroji grupė nagrinės formaliuosius *Commedia* vertimų aspektus, daugiausia dėmesio skirdama vertimuose taikomoms strategijoms, ypač *terza rima* ir kitoms metrinės eilėdaros rūšims, kad nustatytu vyraujančią eilėdarą vertimuose į pasaulio kalbas. Trečiosios tyrimų krypties tikslas – ištirti, kaip *Commedia* buvo verčiama cenzūros sąlygomis, fašistiniuose režimuose, teokratinėse ir Rytų bloko šalyse, karinės diktatūros, konstitucinės monarchijos ir komunistinės diktatūros sąlygomis.