

ECHO

COLLANA DI TRADUTTOLOGIA  
E DISCIPLINE DELLA MEDIAZIONE LINGUISTICA

7

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# ECHO

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*Senza la traduzione abiteremmo province confinanti con il silenzio*  
(George Steiner)

La collana “Echo” prende il nome dalla ninfa oreade, che personificava l’omonimo fenomeno fisico, rievocando così il contatto tra voci, culture e tradizioni diverse e al contempo la ricezione, la ripetizione e la variazione. Nasce col proposito di accogliere al suo interno una serie di monografie e di studi riferiti agli ambiti della traduzione e della mediazione linguistica in senso più ampio.

Caratterizzata da un approccio accademico, la collana si presenta come un funzionale veicolo per la diffusione dei risultati delle ricerche condotte nell’esteso dominio della Teoria e della prassi della traduzione e delle discipline della Mediazione linguistica.

Nella collana si intendono affiancare ai risultati della ricerca anche dei testi che possano rappresentare degli strumenti utili alla didattica della traduzione e dell’interpretariato.

Internazionale per vocazione, “Echo” si propone di ospitare al suo interno testi in lingua italiana, inglese e francese, con l’auspicio di apportare un importante contributo all’attuale indagine internazionale inerente alle discipline in questione.

A garanzia della rilevanza scientifica, della significatività del tema trattato e dell’originalità delle opere pubblicate, la collana adotta un sistema di doppio referaggio anonimo (*double blind peer reviewing*).

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# Translation and Creativity

Readers, Writers, Processes

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## *Eternity, Same Old*

Inevitably, a few of the gods grew bored with eternity. Same old thing, day after day, year after year, century after century, aeon after aeon, etcetera after etcetera.

Of course, there were fun times. When not cavorting and carousing, devising new ways of keeping the humans anxious and fearful. Like whipping up thunder storms, spinning tornadoes, burping volcanoes, spewing tsunamis, cooking up new recipes for plagues. And the old favourites, the tried and trusted famine and war. Happy days.

But the days seemed to be endless. Which they were. Melt a few more ice caps? Yawn. Give some ethnics another cleansing? Yawn, yawn. Up to here. The gods had had it up to here. Until one yawny boring morning, one of them had a brainwave. 'Just for a change', he said, 'Just for a giggle,

Let's make the poor sods happy. For one day only. We'll call it Happy Humans Day', The other gods looked up from their carousing and cavorting. 'For instance, volcanoes could spout wisdom'. 'Plagues could eat themselves', suggested another, 'Gentle tsunamis deliver gifts of gold', said another.

'No more killing or cruelty, famine or disease'. Excited now, the gods competed to think up clever ways of bringing instant happiness to 7.7 billion people. Some ideas were ingenious, as you'd expect, while others were just silly, but the brain-storming sessions were great fun while they lasted.

Of course, they never got around to actually *doing* anything just thinking about it, but it took their minds off things for a few centuries or so. By which time the gods had grown bored again and completely forgotten the point of the exercise. One whistled up an avalanche, another crashed a train.

One brought down the internet, another a plane. One hawked and spat a deadly virus. One yawned, and so did another. And so on, and so on. Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.





They have forbidden me to go at large in a city, a mere speck, and have left open to me the whole universe, in which immensity and eternity obey me.

Xavier DE MAISTRE, *A Journey Around My Room*  
(translated by Henry Atwell)



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## Foreword

Molière et Moi. On Translating Classic Comedy

ROGER MCGOUGH\*

I will begin with a short poem entitled: *Another Brick in the Wall*.

«Ah sure, it's like bashing your head against a brick wall».  
Said Brother O'Shea, bashing my head against a brick wall.

Brother O'Shea from County Clare taught me French, or rather, failed to teach me French at St Mary's College in Liverpool, where most of the staff were Irish Christian Brothers. As well as a blackboard and a box of chalks, his principal teaching aid was the strap. The strap was about 12 inches long, 2 inches wide and half an inch thick and consisted of four lengths of black leather stitched together. It was rumoured that they were lovingly crafted by an order of nuns known as the Little Sisters of the Good Hiding.

It is break-time and everybody is in the playground. You can tell which class is about to have a French lesson with Brother O'Shea. We are *not* the ones running around playing tick. We are *not* the ones heading the tennis ball. We are the ones huddled against the wall in the corner by the milk crates, pale-faced and shivering, eyes closed to heaven, lisping French declensions.

O'Shea's teaching method was so simple and effective that to this day I don't know why his name isn't up there with all the great educationalists: Piaget, Montessori, A.S. Neill. We are told in the previous lesson which thirty nouns we must learn by heart, paying particular attention to something called gender, or which six verbs we must decline in the future tense.

«Morning, boys».  
«Morning, sir».

\* Afferent.

«Right, today we have animals. Close your books. Connor!». (Connor stands)  
 «Un lapin?».  
 «er... A rabbit, sir?».  
 «Correct, Gilligan». (Connor sits wiping brow, Gilligan stands) Un ours?  
 «Er... er... A horse, sir?».  
 «You eejit! (Gilligan bursts into tears) Remain standing. Lynch?».  
 «A bear, sir? Very good, sit down... McGough!».

And so on, all around the class. Get the answer wrong and you remain standing, get it wrong again and it's two whacks of the strap. Any hint of prompting your best mate and you get six. Throughout the whole proceedings he maintained a Bruce Forsyth kind of playfulness, prancing around in his soft Irish brogues, rarely losing his temper, because the O'Shea method was simply the quickest way to get 35 young scousers to learn a foreign language. Or rather, to *think* they are learning a foreign language.

Fast forward to Hull University some weeks before a confused 20 year old is due to sit his Finals for a Joint Honours degree in French and Geography. I had almost given up on the latter, the late adolescent poetic musings and witty asides I worked into my essays on ocean currents and seismic plates had been cruelly ignored, whereas my imagination had been fired by the poems of Rimbaud, Verlaine, Baudelaire etc. and I looked forward to letting my imagination loose on Symbolism and Existentialism in the coming exams. However... One afternoon, a keen young lecturer, new to the department, asked the group to read aloud from the Flaubert we were studying. When it was my turn I gave a gallic shrug to get me in the mood and dived in. After half a dozen lines, just as I was getting into the swing of things, he butted in, rather rudely I thought, and asked to see me at the end of the period. He led me out of the building into one of the forecourts where nobody was about. He was breathing shallowly and his face paled as he leaned towards me... He's going to kiss me, I thought. But no.

«Mr McGough, how has the department arrived at a situation where you are about to sit for your final examinations, which include a viva conducted in French, a language which you mangle and desecrate?».  
 «I don't know, sir».  
 «You don't know? Didn't you spend the required term in France during your second year?».  
 «Er... er... my grandmother was ill, sir».  
 «Didn't you speak French at school?».  
 «Er... well, it was like this, sir...».



The prospect of an external examiner discovering a third year language student who mumbled French in a Liverpool–Irish accent might prove a costly embarrassment, and so arrangements were made for my recently deceased grandmother to go ill again at the time of my viva. The cunning ploy worked, and there followed, a degree, a job teaching Catering French, some pop songs, poems and unlikeliest of all, adaptations of three Molière plays.

By two thousand and seven there were at least three dozen different translations of *Tartuffe* into English, so why the need for another? The answer lay with Gemma Bodinetz, director of the Liverpool Playhouse who wanted to celebrate the city's imminent status as Capital of Culture with a European play "with a Liverpool heart-beat". «Reading *Tartuffe*, it felt like Roger and Molière were a match made in heaven», she enthused, «the wit, the scepticism, the joy of language that they both share felt just perfect».

Of course, I was flattered by the invitation, but Molière? I didn't think so. Having skimmed through a handful of his plays as part of my course in Schoolboy French, I couldn't imagine how his seventeenth century refined sensibilities would appeal to a contemporary audience. So I posted a couple of my own scripts for plays that had yet to see the light of stage and awaited her enthusiastic response. None was forthcoming. She would not be fobbed off. So when we met at the beginning of 2008 I promised to toy with *Tartuffe* while on a cruise from Southampton to Antigua. . . Now, perhaps I should enlarge on that to protect my street cred. . . I hadn't *paid* to go on a cruise, in fact I had been signed up by Saga as an entertainer, a sort of poet-in-captivity. With only two shows a week, I would have plenty of time to think up excuses as to why I had failed to unlock the key to this three hundred and fifty year old farce. Some excuses of course, would be lame: «Sorry Gemma, I've twisted my knee», «I've sprained my ankle», «I've broken my metatarsal». Knowing that my French wasn't going to be good enough, and that the job would take me more years than I had left, I didn't take Molière's original French text with me, I would refer to that later, but a direct prose translation (Dover Press, an American edition of the eighteenth century version by Baker and Millar) plus adaptations in verse by the American poet Richard Wilbur, Ranjit Bolt, Christopher Hampton as well as Liz Lochhead's wonderful Scottish conversion. Whether it was the salty air or the gentle rocking of the ship I don't know, but once I had given voice to Mme Pernelle and her daughter-in-law Elmire in the opening scene I was hooked.

*Mme Pernelle:* Filpote! Where is that girl? Filpote!  
Fetch the bags. This place is driving one mad, Filpote.  
To stay another day we will not.

*Elmire:* But mother, why the unseemly haste?

*Mme Pernelle:* Because we feel disgraced.  
One is obviously in the way. One is bored.  
No one cares about one. One is ignored.  
Compared to this house Bedlam's an oasis.  
A mad house, that's what this place is.

I loved the energy of the writing and his ability to introduce most of the characters fully-formed in the first few pages, except Tartuffe of course, who we don't meet until the third act. Here is Damis, the son of Orgon, master of the house, and one of my favourite characters, the wise and witty maid, Dorine trying to reason with Mme Pernelle.

*Damis:* Your Monsieur Tartuffe then, he can do no wrong?

*Mme Pernelle:* Certainly not, the man's a saint  
And we can't abide the way you paint  
him black. His character is beyond reproach.

*Damis:* Oh please, the man's a roach  
Who scuttles about beneath our feet.  
A spider who has spun a web of sanctimonious deceit.

*Dorine:* When not praying like a zealot to the skies  
He watches us with beady eyes.  
Breathes brimstone, a devil in disguise.

*Mme Pernelle:* Lawskysy! Calumny! What Phariseetical behaviour.  
Can't you see? Tartuffe, why, he's our saviour.

*Dorine:* A saviour? Orgon's money is the only thing he saves.  
He's on the make, why, see how he behaves.  
The man has no refinement, just look at his clothes.

*Damis:* and he speaks not in verse, but in leaden prose.

I decided early on, or perhaps Damis decided for me, that Tartuffe the imposter, (and two plays later, Alceste the misanthrope) would speak in prose rather than in verse, marking them out as outsiders. Non-conformists. There is a darker side to Tartuffe and speaking

in blank verse he could be more lascivious, a step removed from his fellow characters

Back on dry land, three scenes written and the commission accepted, I mulled over the original French text, compared it to what I was concocting, and convinced myself that the man himself would have approved.

As an occasional playwright, I have always been more interested in language than in characterisation, in imagery than in plot, but faced with a Molière text, with the characters so clearly drawn, and the plot, though often creaking, still believable within the context of the world he had created, I was free to concentrate simply on rhyme. As a self-confessed non-linguist I was less obsessed with the text and getting it right, and instead had a sense of joyous naivety that gave me greater licence to be playful.

Suddenly, all those years spent writing poems in a lonely garret paid off.

I do have a facility for rhyme, but it's a gift that has to be employed with care, as facetious rhymes can draw attention to themselves, upsetting the tone of the piece. With Molière's farces I tried to construct a form wherein rhymes are occasionally signposted, flattering the audience who can guess what is coming, with a few googlies thrown in to catch them wrong-footed, often employing French words.

Whenever I travelled around the country to watch a production of *Tartuffe* I could gauge very early on (Act One, scene three), how well it would go down, by the audience reaction to the final couplet when Cleante chides his brother-in-law:

*Cleante:* You only had ears for Tartuffe  
 Couldn't care less about Elmire... God's truth!  
 What is it about this interloper  
 That goads you into faux-pas after faux-pas?

I knew that if they were with me on that one, they would have no problem with the jokey anachronisms in this exchange between Organ who is keen to wed his daughter Marianne to the imposter Tartuffe...

*Marianne:* Your feelings for him I just don't fathom.  
 But that's your business and clearly you ave 'em.  
 And if you chose to give him money, so what?  
 In fact he's welcome to mine — the lot.

But please, not my body.  
 Than be tartouffed by that two-faced actor.  
 I'd rather remain virgo intacta.  
 I will get me to a nunnery, and remain there for life.  
 Rather poverty and silence than being his wife.

*Orgon:* Oh what sadistic games love-sick girls play.  
 Making parents suffer when they don't get their own way.  
 Rejecting the lure of suicide, they make the first enquiry.  
 To enter the nearest convent, or if daddy's rich, the Priory.

Molière's verse plays are written entirely in alexandrines, twelve-syllable rhyming couplets, a form that Richard Wilbur for one, so skillfully reproduced, but whose endless thudding rhymes I reckoned would prove soporific to the modern ear, (and not only to the modern ear, for here's a quotation from Alexander Pope «A limping Alexandrine ends the song/ Which like a wounded snake drags its slow length along») I wanted the audience to focus more on what the actor was saying rather than on the form in which it is being said. I was also extremely conscious of the assumption, even the expectation, that his work would sound like me. I didn't want any hint of irony, it was important that what I did reflected Molière, it was his story and with a nod to his portrait on my desk, I would imagine him in the room with me, and think, that's how he would have done it.

Pace is what I was after, and I sought to give each of the characters a different voice, whether elegant, bombastic or cheeky, by varying the line-lengths, rhythm and rhymes. And talking of bombastic, the most difficult characters the translator has to make believable are those who speak with the voice of reason. In *Tartuffe* it is Cleante. The play was originally banned by Louis 14<sup>th</sup> for undermining the foundations of religion and denounced by the Church as being the work of «a demon in human flesh». And so to mollify his critics and get the show back on the road, Molière entrusted his character Cleante, some would say saddled him, with long speeches about hypocrisy and devotion, about belief and posturing. Some contemporary translators I felt, found these chunks indigestible, and the results show. Molière's target however, was not religion but pretence and bigotry, and though hardly god-fearing he was a regular church-goer. Like myself in fact, so I set out to make Cleante a voice of reason rather than an outdated fundamentalist. Here he is trying to point