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JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

25

JOYS IN TRANSITION

Edited by
Fabio Luppi and Serenella Zanotti





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IRA TORRESI

SPAWNING ULISSE: (RE)TRANSLATION AND
CONTINUITY OF *ULYSSES* IN THE ITALIAN POLYSYSTEM

Abstract: If translation can be conceptualized as a generative force that causes the original text to be born (again) in a different polysystem and to build its own life and relations there (Bollettieri Bosinelli and Torresi 2016), then the expiry of copyright on *Ulysses* in 2012 paved the way for a particularly fertile wave of (re)translation, which spawned a rather large family. After decades of a single full translation available on the book market (De Angelis, Mondadori 1960, revised 1988 after the Gabler edition), with the brief exception of Bona Flecchia's attempt (Shakespeare&Co. 1995) stifled at birth for copyright violation, Italy now sports the largest number of Ulyssean translations in the world (D'Erme 2021). As usually happens among siblings, all such translations and republications may share some similarities – the time span and broader context of reception, for example – but each of them bears unique traits. Such uniqueness arguably does not lie only in the texts themselves (due to the translators' different voices, Venuti 1995), but also in the different publishers' policies and positioning within the Italian book production scene, which may lead to different readerships. This paper focusses on the latter exogenous aspects and frames them in polysystem theory (Even-Zohar 1990) to highlight the importance of institutional factors such as the economic factors linked to copyright law for literary producers and consequently for the modulation of the centrality of *Ulysses* in the Italian literary polysystem.

Keywords: *Ulysses*, Italian Retranslations, Polysystem Theory, Copyright Expiry, Self-publishing, E-commerce, 'Black Book'

1. Introduction: consequences of (re)translation

The act of literary translation is not without consequences. It changes the system of literary texts and readers that its product is released into, leaving

a mark that may be fleeting or permanent, large or small; a mark that interacts with other traces, left by other works, in its very own ways, tracing new paths that were not possible before. To a certain extent, in a semiotic view this is simply inevitable, because every reader necessarily contributes his or her own meaning to the text and no interpretation of any text can be based on authorial intention alone (Barthes 1968; Eco 1979).

The translator, however, is a special kind of reader (Senn 1984: 2). Like all readers of the original text, a translator too offers his/her own interpretation and thus contributes his/her own meanings to the original (which, as I have just argued, is merely an inevitable consequence of reading and making sense of the text, and is therefore no scandal or “betrayal” of the author’s intentions). Unlike other readers’ interpretations, however, the product of the translator’s interpretation (the translation itself) *functions as* the original text in the target (i.e., recipient) literary system. After the translation is published, the very meanings that can be contributed by the readers of the translated text will be inevitably influenced by the choices made by the translator. They will also be influenced by the possibilities opened up by the structural constraints of the target language as well as by the target cultural, social and educational systems, and ultimately by the readers’ personal background.

Thus, the translator makes it possible for the original work to tread paths that would most probably just lie off any map, even for readers of the original work in the original language. It can therefore be argued that “translation [...] can introduce new forms, new ideas, new ways of thinking and writing” (Bassnett 2011: 101), not only in the target literary and cultural systems, but also vis-a-vis the original work, which “grows” as it is carried to diverse readerships and into new forms with partially new meanings (Nord 2011). In terms of text semiotics, this, too, is an inevitable effect of translation and meaning-making, and should therefore not be regarded as an act of “betraying” or straying from the original authorial intention. Metaphorically speaking, each translation opens up a new space where the work being translated can meet new readers – or old readers in new ways – with the translator “occup[ying] the liminal space that others step over” (Bassnett and Pizarnik 2002: 29).

Arguably, once we envision translation as an act of opening new paths of meaning-making and new possibilities for readers to relate with a

work of literature, the relevance and function of retranslation becomes immediately apparent. Each retranslation is a new reading of the original, and selects different possibilities of interpretation. This holds particularly true for open works that purposefully lend themselves to multiple different interpretations (Eco 1962) as is the case with *Ulysses*. The original *Ulysses* is one of the world's "grandi opere aperte sfuggenti" ("great elusive open works", Terrinoni 2021: XV), famously fraught with "enigmas and puzzles" specifically devised to "keep the professors busy for centuries" (Ellman 1982: 521). While Joyce sought to achieve immortality for his *opus magnus* in the original through such enigmas and puzzles, what made *Ulysses* a global literary classic over the following decades were primarily its translations into other languages. Nor could Joyce foresee that over one century after the publication of his *romanzaccione* (Joyce 2016: 398), its fame and canonization across the globe would be revamped by a translation revival whose very possibility is rooted in an exquisitely legal matter – the expiry of exclusive copyright in the EU starting from January 1, 2012 (Saint-Amour *et al.* 2012; Spoo 2013; Golden 2017).

This paper focuses on the Italian retranslations of *Ulysses* – currently the most numerous group of retranslations of the novel worldwide – as a case study to explore some of the consequences of this legal issue on the circulation of Joyce's work. After an overview of the various translations currently on the Italian book market (§2), the Italian retranslation wave will be framed in Polysystem Theory (Even-Zohar 1979, 1990), illustrated briefly in §3, to highlight the role of relatively new institutional factors such the onset of e-publishers and social media in the modulation of the centrality of *Ulysses* in the Italian literary polysystem (§4), before offering conclusions in §5.

2. Meet the Ulissi

It has been argued elsewhere that translation can be conceptualized as a generative force that causes the original text to be born (again) in a different literary system and to build its own life and relations there (Bollettieri Bosinelli and Torresi 2016). Following this metaphor of translation as generation or filiation, then the expiry of copyright on Joyce's works after

2011 paved the way for a particularly fertile wave of (re)translation in Italy, which spawned a rather large “Ulissi” family. After decades of a single full translation available on the book market (De Angelis, Mondadori 1960, revised 1988 after the Gabler edition), with the brief exception of Bona Flecchia’s attempt (Shakespeare&Co. 1995) stifled shortly after birth precisely for copyright violation, Italy now sports the largest number of Ulyssean translations in the world (D’Erme 2021). The complete list of Italian translations (plus one republication with added paratext) as of June 2023 is, in chronological order¹:

- 1960 – Giulio De Angelis, Milan: Mondadori (1988 new edition post-Gabler revision);
- 1995 – Bona Flecchia, Florence: Shakespeare&Co.;
- 2012 – Enrico Terrinoni with Carlo Bigazzi, Rome: Newton Compton;
- 2013 – Gianni Celati, Turin: Einaudi;
- 2014 – Giulio De Angelis 1988, with additional paratext by Giorgio Melchiori, Hans W. Gabler, Franca Ruggieri, Milan: Mondadori;
- 2020 – Mario Biondi, Milan: La nave di Teseo;
- 2021 – Alessandro Ceni, Milan: Feltrinelli;
- 2021 – Bilingual edition with new translation by Enrico Terrinoni and new paratext (Terrinoni, Kiberd, Ó Giolláin, Bigazzi, Pedone), Milan: Bompiani;
- 2021 – Livio Crescenzi, Tonina Giuliani and Marta Viazzoli, Fidenza: Mattioli 1885;
- 2021 – Marco Marzagalli, independently published (Amazon), edition with endnotes (2022 edition with footnotes);
- 2022 – Anonymous, independently published (Amazon).

As usually happens among siblings, all such translations and republications may share some similarities – the broader context of reception, for example, and for post-2011 editions, the same time span – but each of them bears unique traits. Such uniqueness arguably does not lie only in the texts themselves (due to the translators’ different voices, Hermans 1996; 2014),

¹ This list builds on and expands the ones provided by Federici (2022) and Gambetti (2022: 106-109). All translations go under the same title, *Ulisse*.

but also in the different publishers' policies and collocation within the Italian book production scene, which may lead to different readerships. In this paper, I voluntarily refrain from analysing the contents of the translations in any way, but choose to focus instead on the role of publishers and on how the different translations are positioned in the book market. Such apparently marginal, accidental, and/or material aspects are actually important factors in Polysystem Theory, a frame within Translation Studies that is particularly apt for analysing the reception and canonization of works that, like *Ulysses*, have had – and continue to have, apparently – rather complicated publishing histories. A brief introduction to Polysystem Theory itself, then, seems in order before continuing our discussion of the Italian retranslations of *Ulysses*.

3. Polysystem Theory, in short

In Polysystem Theory, any “sign-governed human pattern of communication” like literature, but also language, society, culture (Even-Zohar 1990: 9) is seen as a semiotic polysystem or “a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, [...] functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent” (Even-Zohar 1990: 11). Each polysystem has one or a few centres (where the subsystems intersect), and several peripheries. Polysystem Theory has been successfully used to conceptualize the interconnections and interdependencies of the literary polysystems of different countries, which partly overlap (especially through translation) and influence each other, with hegemonic systems influencing minority systems once again through translation, with a higher number of works being translated from hegemonic systems to minority ones than the other way around.

The polysystem model, however, is scalable, from the global level down to the group or even individual one. Each one of us has his or her own literary centre of preferred or most relevant works, and peripheries of more marginal ones. So does each group of people: a family, a class, a company of friends, a club, a sports team or its supporters, the fans of a music genre or band – any community of people coalescing around some kind of interest, whether they meet in person or online (if they meet at all). Each

group inevitably intersects with others, because each person is usually part of several groups – and so do, inevitably, individual and small group literary systems when they merge into the polysystems of larger groups, with the centre(s) of hegemonic sub-groups or individuals acting as poles of attraction and the centre(s) of minority sub-groups and individuals tending to remain at the margins of larger-group polysystems.

Interestingly for a theory that has been applied mainly to (translated) literature, in Polysystem Theory what makes a literary work central or marginal lies only in part with the inherent “quality” of the work itself, but involves a number of forces or factors that interact rather closely and shape the polysystem as a whole:

- Producers (in literature: authors, translators);
- Consumers (*not necessarily* readers);²
- Institutions (publishers, the education system, libraries, literary prizes, academic journals, literary/cultural pages in newspapers and magazines, blogs, anthologies, encyclopedias; in the case of Joyce’s works, the Estate, the Joyce Foundations);
- Market (book market, copyright);
- Repertoire (“laws [...] that govern the production of texts”, Even-Zohar 1990: 17);
- Products (works).

² In Polysystem Theory, the notion of “consumption” has to do with public exposure to a given work, regardless of consumers reading it from start to end or rather studying anthologized excerpts at school, hearing it cited, seeing it in bookshops and libraries or intersemiotically translated into movies or other media, and the like (Torresi 2013). In the case of *Ulysses*, consumption may well include the bad publicity that the novel had from being banned in much of the English-speaking world in the 1920s, which in its turn may have encouraged its early translations into other European languages (an aspect of Production). In this framework, consumption is a positive force capable of moving a work or author from polysystem periphery to centre, not necessarily imbued with the negative connotation employed by John McCourt in his *Consuming Joyce*, although in some respects it may be said to share the same sense of commodification (Mc Court 2022: 2).

One might argue that in the list above, only half of the factors – producers, repertoire, and products – pertain to literary production *strictu sensu*, and can therefore be envisioned as factors that are internal to literature. The other half – consumers, institutions, and market – pertain to the reception side of literary works, and are governed by external forces such as economics (market), politics (institutions), social, educational and even psychological factors (consumers). In this paper, I will focus mainly on some of the effects that two of the latter external factors – specifically, the market and some institutions – may have played in the post-2011 Ulyssean retranslation revival in Italy. In doing so, I will need to introduce some necessary updates to the market and institutional factors originally envisioned by Even-Zohar between the 1970s and 1990, in order to make room for social media and e-commerce. While unavailable in Even-Zohar’s time, these technical innovations have now developed into institutional and market driving forces that contribute to shaping the fortunes of *Ulysses* in Italy and worldwide.

4. *Ulysses navigating the Web and social media*

It is beyond doubt that the proliferation of Italian retranslations of *Ulysses* (products) introduced in §2 would have never been possible without the goodwill and hard work of so many translators (producers). There is no doubt that by effect of this multiple rebound in different translators’ voices, the Modernist and Joycean repertoires are also reinvigorated and rejuvenated. Similarly, it can easily be argued that seeing stacks of many different translations and republications of *Ulysses* on library shelves may encourage readers to buy copies (which moves the market forward) – and persuade even non-readers of Joyce (consumers) that *Ulysses/Ulisse* is clearly in fashion today, that it is (still) at the centre of the literary polysystem. The same can be said of the advance excerpts or reviews published on some of the leading Italian newspapers for some of the *Ulissi*, which count as institutional factors that move the works towards the centre of the polysystem, as well as the literary prizes won by translators (producers) and publicized by their publishers (institutions).

Up to this point, the factors that I have mentioned are rather traditional. There is, however, a new factor that may have been perhaps only marginally relevant before 2011 but now arguably plays a significant role in shaping the positioning of the more recent retranslations in the Italian polysystem. I am referring to literary blogs, grassroots blogs or even posts on social media (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook pages and the like) that usually originate from producers, but may be shared freely by consumers, even those who may not be interested in the product but wish to express appreciation or maintain their relationship with the post's author or original sharer. Such posts may contain reviews, citations, advertisements for the product, or other relevant information. For instance, I myself learnt about Enrico Terrinoni's bilingual edition winning the Premio Capalbio from Terrinoni's personal Facebook page. Due to Facebook's mechanisms, by liking his post with the piece of news, I probably made it more visible to my own Facebook "friends", Joycean or not. Social media, then, can by all means be ascribed to the institutional factors of Polysystem Theory, as they perpetuate consumers' exposure to a work and frame it as central or marginal, and in some cases they may promote sales, thus furthering its market.

Another entirely new market factor is e-commerce, which is especially relevant for two particular members of the *Ulissi* family – the two youngest siblings listed in §2, i.e. the Marzagalli retranslation and the anonymous one, both "independently published" by the translators themselves through the e-publishing facility of Amazon. This is an important novelty in the Italian editorial history of Ulysean translation. Most Italian editions of *Ulysses* have been published by major publishing houses, capable of sustaining the production costs connected with editing, printing, promotion, paying the translator, and the like. Even the Florence-based Shakespeare & Co. that published Bona Flecchia's edition in 1995, was an established although minor publisher at the time of publication, as is Mattioli 1885 that recently published Crescenzi, Giuliani and Viazzoli's translation. While all other retranslations can be found in physical bookstores as well as on Amazon and other e-bookshops, the Marzagalli and the anonymous translations are apparently sold exclusively by Amazon, presumably through a print-on-demand deal with the corporation.

Publishing a translation independently means that no publishing house commissioned the translation or paid an advance for it – royalties are (hopefully) paid on actual sales. Additionally, the translators undertook their respective endeavours without any institutional support towards the production or circulation of their translations. Indeed, the books by Marzagalli and the anonymous translator(s) cannot be found in libraries anywhere in Italy, and their potential in terms of being promoted by other institutions such as schools or universities are currently unfathomable. Their target readership (or even consumership), then, seems to be necessarily limited to Amazon customers and to whatever outreach potential that the individual translators can or are willing to undertake themselves.

Apparently, independent publishing allows for some freedom that is not normally afforded by institutional publishers – for instance, multiple editions of substantially the same text, but with different textual arrangements. Thus, to best accommodate different reading styles Marzagalli published a second version of his *Ulisse*, with footnotes instead of endnotes. This second version has, accordingly, a different ISBN number, a different publication date (13 May 2022, while the one with endnotes was published on 18 December 2021) and a partly different cover design (over the same picture), all of which is duly accounted for in the copyright page.

The other side of the coin of doing without an established publishing house is that translators are left to their own devices not only in editing and typesetting their translations, but also in liaising with other institutional players. Marzagalli actively promotes his translations using his personal blog and dedicated author's Amazon page, and also the social media. For instance, he has sought contact with the Joycean community by interacting with the Italian James Joyce Foundation's Facebook page. In this respect, then, Marzagalli seems to strive to make up for the absence of an institutional publisher through the unmediated use of newer grassroots institutions, such as e-commerce, blogs and social networks.

The other independently published translation, however, is much more baffling. First of all, the translator's name is nowhere to be found, although the fact that the volume is independently published suggests that there must be a person or a company that has a contract with Amazon to

settle the matter of royalties. Additionally, this translation does not bear any indication of the original edition on which it is based (which is relevant in the case of *Ulysses*, as only the original 1922 edition has gone out of copyright, not the ensuing corrected ones). It has no copyright page or Creative Commons attribution. Indeed, it has no paratext, with the exception of one title page (saying only “Ulisse” and “James Joyce”) and one final page stating the volume is “printed by Amazon Italia Logistica S.r.l.” and on a separate line, “Torrazza Piemonte (TO), Italy”,³ with a barcode and corresponding item number.⁴ The front cover has Joyce’s portrait by Jacques-Emile Blanche held at the National Portrait Gallery in London but again, there is no mention of the licence to reproduce it – and the picture appears to have been slightly altered when Joyce’s silhouette was cut out of the background. The almost entirely black back cover – from which the term “black book” that I will be using in the following – sports an ISBN number (although an online ISBN search did not, unfortunately, yield any results) and one possible cryptic clue to the translator’s identity in the upper left corner, a small apparently freehand drawing of a chimaera-like beast. The inner pages appear to be standard A4 printer paper and the printing quality confirms the overall impression of some sort of *samizdat*. Although in the Soviet Union self-publishing (*samizdanie*) was the only way to bypass censorship and *samizdats* were necessarily anonymous and inevitably low-quality, in the case of this “black book” the only reason for self-censorship might lie in the low quality of the translation itself, which I will not delve into here. Suffice it to say that the book does not have a content page (let alone a schema) or page numbers, and shows a general neglect for typography.

An e-mail query with Amazon Italia on December 1, 2022 did not follow through. The general post-sale Amazon service (the only contact

³ Torrazza Piemonte is the location of one of the Amazon Italia logistics warehouses which appears to host the presses of all volumes “independently published” with Amazon, since an identical page (with different, and more symmetrically positioned, barcode and item number) is also featured at the end of the volume translated by Marzagalli: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09MYRBWDR> (last visited January 14, 2023).

⁴ <https://www.amazon.it/dp/B0BCSB1NSM> (last visited January 14, 2023).

available on the book's webpage) requires users to select a reason for their seeking contact, to which I answered with the only fitting option that "my order was missing something". In the ensuing form I specified that the book was missing the translator's name and copyright information, or a Creative Commons attribution. The answer I got rather swiftly from a courteous Amazon employee was that indeed the only information available on the website about the book was that it was independently published, and that I could return my purchase if I was not satisfied with it.

Interestingly, the "black book" seems to belong to an international wave of similarly independently published annotated and/or illustrated versions of the original *Ulysses* that have appeared on Amazon mostly after the 100th anniversary in 2022 without any annotators', illustrators' or compilers' names, or even copyright pages. Some of them appear to have the same content but with different covers and ISBN numbers depending on the market they are sold in⁵, which may appear counterintuitive given the globalization of the book market (similarly to pretty much any other market), and the international vocation of the publisher/vendor, Amazon. The Italian book differs only in that, as of February 2023, it appeared to be the only full translation of the novel to be marketed independently and anonymously.

The "black book", then, appears to be an anomaly in the current book market, in the outlook of Joycean production, and also as translations generally go, with a global current that sustains translators' claim to (para)authorship, starting with Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility* in 1995 and ending with translators obtaining to feature prominently on book covers. Interestingly, Amazon even qualifies

⁵ Compare for instance https://www.amazon.fr/Ulysses-James-Joyce-Illustrated-Annotated/dp/B0B45LGQF5/ref=sr_1_13?__mk_fr_FR=%C3%85M%C3%85%C5%BD%C3%95%C3%91&crd=3NL8K3O16A2OW&keywords=Ulysses+joyce&qid=1688873514&srefix=ulysses+joyce%2Caps%2C92&sr=8-13 and https://www.amazon.de/-/en/James-Joyce/dp/B0B4SJ8XGT/ref=sr_1_20?crd=2RH5YWYJUEWL0&keywords=ulysses+james+joyce&qid=1688873699&s=books&srefix=ulysses+%2Cstripbooks%2C107&sr=1-20 (last visited June 24, 2023).

translators as “authors” (when they do have a public identity, as is usually the case).

When we look at this anomaly through the lens of Polysystem Theory, it seems even more of a puzzle. The “black book” appears to shun the central position that *Ulysses* has gained and maintained in the last century. Everything in this version suggests a lack of attention and care towards the finished product, including its ties with the Joycean repertoire that, however, lie outside the scope of this paper. It intentionally avoids institutional factors that could promote its centrality, does not reach out to consumers other than through the same e-commerce platform that prints out copies and sends it to customers (its sole market) and even its producers prefer to remain anonymous. All in all, it appears to be an error, a glitch in the (poly)system. However, it is nonetheless on the market – although it sells in predictably very low numbers, given that it is not advertised in any way and it does not even feature prominently among Amazon search results for *Ulisse* – and this in itself makes it a member of the *Ulissi* family by right, even with the self-selected role of the “black sheep”.

5. *Conclusions: re-marginalizing Ulysses?*

In order to make sense of the “black book”, one may need to take a step back and see it in a broader picture. First of all, we should remember that in Ulysean translation, “translators’ errors too may serve as portals of discovery” (Senn 1984: 6). Although Fritz Senn had very local translators’ errors in mind (at the word or sentence level) when he wrote this sentence, full editorial endeavours make no exception. If the 2022 anonymous translation is an error, then, what kind of discovery does it lead to?

One first dimension of such discovery is the exploration of the limitations and possibilities opened up by self-publishing, print on demand services and global e-commerce after copyright expiry. It is still probably too early to grasp the full consequences of such market forces on the fortunes of *Ulysses* and other classics, but the very emergence of the “black book” is a clear indication that the interaction between market and institutional factors (including new forms of grassroots communication) is changing rapidly and deserves close attention.

A second dimension of discovery is that the status of a work or author within a polysystem may be more granular than we may think. Just like different groups or individuals may have different centres and peripheries, different versions of the same product – such as different editions or translations of the same original work – may enjoy comparatively more central or more peripheral positions than the other “siblings”. The overall centrality or marginality of the work will not be simply averaged out of single versions’ positions, but the position of more hegemonic versions will tend to prevail.

In the case of the *Ulissi*, then, the marginality value that appears to apply to the “black book” will probably never “taint” the hegemonic centrality of other translations. Ever since the early precursors of the full De Angelis version made their appearance in Italian literary journals in the 1920s, the novel made steady way from the initial outcast status during the ban period to the very centre of the Italian polysystem, in line with what happened in other more hegemonic European literary polysystems, such as the French one (Zanotti 2004, 2007). This was made possible by significant effort made by producers (translators, but also Joyce himself while he was in life) and by institutional players such as journals, publishers and, later, libraries and the education system, where *Ulysses* is now a staple (Torresi 2013: 226-227).

Endeavours such as today’s “black book”, conversely, seem to revive the days when the novel was an outcast, even after the lift of the obscenity ban. In 1960s USA, for instance, *Ulysses* was marketed as pornography by a Collectors Publication, which advertised it quietly among “adult” circles of consumers who were presumably not much interested in its literary value – and would not probably recommend it to fellow pornographers either, after a first cursory reading (Spoo 2013: 257-258). This in itself bears testament to the variety and complexity of the polysystemic history of *Ulysses* in polysystems across the world, and simultaneously reminds us that isolated incidents (serious and extensive as they may appear, as in the case of the ban) will not single-handedly reverse an otherwise solidly centripetal journey that is sustained by other polysystemic factors, especially if these are hegemonic.

The very fact that different versions of *Ulysses* can coexist at the very same time both at the centre and at the margins of a polysystem is, in

Polysystem Theory terms, a confirmation of huge vitality and generative force. *Ulysses* is using to its own advantage, probably before any other work of literature, the polymorphic effects of copyright expiry, social media and e-publishing combined. Thanks to its central status in the polysystem it has fan translators, at the same time as official publishers line up to contract professional translators to revitalize its essence again and again, for different readerships or partly overlapping ones. Once again, the *romanzaccione* confirms its multifarious, multifaceted nature, harnessing technological possibilities (rather than the other way round), tolerating to exist in a dozen radically different translations with radically different editorial paths, which open up so many different interpretations (sometimes through trial and error) and take up so many different niches on the market. Welcome to the multiverse, Mr. Bloom – it seems you were born for it.

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