TRANSLATING *THE INFINITIES* BY JOHN BANVILLE

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Abstract – John Banville's talent as a prose stylist is widely recognized. The polished elegance of his phrases constitutes a continuing and fascinating challenge for his translator, due to the intricacies of the source text, its manifold registers and lexical choices. In his novel *The Infinities*, in Italian *Teoria degli Infiniti*, John Banville takes cue from Kleist's *Amphytrion* to devise a novel where classicality interweaves with science and science fiction through the invention of a world where the ancient gods intermingle with the humans while waiting for the death of Adam Godley, a famous mathematician who explained how an infinity of worlds exist and interact with each other. To translate this book I had not only to work extensively on lexis and style, but also to do considerable research to render the many literary and non literary references. Some examples of these struggles with the source text during the translation process are given in the present paper.

Keywords: Banville, Infinities, challenge, equivalent, lexical choices.

When the parcel with a brand new book by John Banville arrives from the publisher and I read the first paragraphs thinking of the new translation-to-be, what always strikes me at first is the stylish smoothness of Banville's sentences, where every single word is carefully chosen and nothing is left to chance:

> Of the things we fashioned for them that they might be comforted, dawn is the one that works. When darkness sifts from the air like fine soft soot and light spreads slowly out of the east then all but the most wretched of humankind rally. It is a spectacle we immortals enjoy, this minor daily resurrection, often we will gather at the ramparts of the clouds and gaze down upon them, our little ones, as they bestir themselves to welcome the new day. What a silence falls upon us then, the sad silence of our envy. Many of them sleep on, of course, careless of our cousin Aurora's charming matutinal trick, but there are always the insomniacs, the restless ill, the lovelorn tossing on their solitary beds, or just the early-risers, the busy ones, with their knee-bends and their cold showers and their fussy little cups of black ambrosia. Yes, all who witness it greet the dawn with joy, more or less, except of course the condemned man, for whom first light will be the last, on earth. (Banville 2009, p. 3)

While reading, I immediately start some sort of tentative translation as I go, but I stumble right away on: *Delle cose che abbiamo...* [Of the things we…]. Out of instinct, I'd be tempted to go on by thinking *Delle cose che abbiamo concepito affinché ne avessero conforto*, or *Delle cose che abbiamo creato affinché ne avessero conforto*, but that would be very wrong, since "to fashion" means neither *concepire*, nor *creare*. In English, "to fashion" means the following, as the Oxford Dictionary of English[1] reminds us:

> *make into a particular form*:
> the bottles were fashioned from green glass
> *(fashion something into) use materials to produce (something)*:
> the skins were fashioned into boots and shoes.

Accordingly, the Picchi Dictionary (Hoepli) translates "to fashion" with *modellare*, *foggiare*; or *forgiare*, *plasmare*. Likewise, the Ragazzini Dictionary (Zanichelli) translates "to fashion" with *foggiare*, *fabbricare*; or *formare*, *forgiare*, *plasmare*.

The English verb "to fashion" has nothing to do with the *creatio ex nihilo* of the Biblical god, and in fact we discover pretty soon that the narrator of the novel is Hermes, a Greek god: now everything makes sense, since Greek deities don't create the world, they fashion it.

The problem is now to find the right Italian words. Lamentably,

> *Delle cose che abbiamo plasmato affinché ne avessero conforto*

is unsatisfactory, as is,

> *Delle cose che abbiamo forgiato affinché ne avessero conforto.*

It's not a question of meaning, but of elegance and smoothness: something of the immediate grace of the original incipit is lost here. If I can't find a satisfactory translation for a word or a sentence after thinking about it for a while, I prefer to leave the question open and come back to it later on. It is usually pointless to insist on a certain term or expression when I can't immediately find a good Italian equivalent; the right word may come to me later, while I am revising the previous day's translation before starting the new daily portion or just doing something else, buying groceries or even during the washing up. Whenever I translate a book by Banville I need to do a lot of rethinking and revising, looking for perfect Italian equivalents that do not exist. But it is a task I highly enjoy, this endless battle I engage with my mother tongue to provide a satisfactory translation of the source text.

A battle all the more necessary, since Banville is regarded by critics as one of the finest prose stylists currently writing in English, one whose stated

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[1] http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/fashion?q=to+fashion

ambition is to give his prose "the kind of denseness and thickness that poetry has" (Jeffries 2012).[2] That means that nothing but the same elegance and smoothness of the original will do, nothing but the same kind of denseness and thickness that poetry has.

Think, for instance, of the second sentence: "When darkness sifts from the air like fine soft soot and light spreads slowly out of the east then all but the most wretched of humankind rally". The rhythm of the sentence, the metaphoric language and all alliterations do result in a poetic prose that requires careful attention to lexis and style to be rendered into Italian. The verb "to sift" is particularly difficult to render; I can't simply use the Italian verb *setacciare* because it has no intransitive meaning and I can't paraphrase it if I don't want to spoil the rhythm. So here I decide to allow myself a certain liberty on lexis and focus more on the music of the sentence, where the sibilant 's' and the fricative 'f' alliterate enhancing the softness and the sense of delicacy of the literary image. I thus translate "sift" with *svaporare*, a verb from the literary genre, inaccurate as it may be considered, and I then choose *soffice* for "soft" and *sottile* for "fine", because I need the sound as well as the meaning. I go on with *diffondersi* for "spread"; I prefer alliterating the 'f' sound instead of the 's' – what I could do with *espandersi* or *spandersi* – because *diffondersi* has the vowels 'i' and 'o', the same vowels as in *soffice* and *sottile*. I read my sentence aloud again and again: *Quando le tenebre svaporano nell'aria come soffice fuliggine sottile e la luce si diffonde lentamente da oriente, tutti tranne i più disgraziati del genere umano si rianimano.*

The music is there and the meaning is there too, if not in all its lexical subtleties, at least in the poetic image that it conceives; I am not wholly unsatisfied, if I may say so.

Since Banville likes writing unusually long sentences with a rather complex syntax, the ability of the translator will also require her to write equally long Italian sentences with a rather complex syntax that sound nevertheless genuine and unaffected to the Italian mother-tongue reader.

On the second page I find a beautiful example:

> He is reminded of how when he was a little boy his grandmother would dress him up for Christmas, or his birthday, or some other festival, tugging him this way and that and spitting on a finger to plaster down a stubborn curl, and how he would feel exposed, worse than naked, in those already outmoded scratchy short-trousered tweed suits the colour of porridge that the old woman made him wear, and the white shirts with starched collars and, worst of all, the tartan dicky bows that it afforded him a wan, vindictive pleasure to pull out to the limit of their elastic and let snap back with a pleasingly loud smack when someone was making a speech or singing a song or the priest was holding up the communion wafer like, he always thought, the nurse on the Hospital

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[2] http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/jun/29/john-banvill-life-in-writing

Sweepstakes tickets brandishing aloft the winning number. (Banville 2009, p. 4)

When I finished my first, preliminary translation and read it again, I stumbled and tripped in my own version every two or three words.

I must have rewritten it several times, before it became:

Gli ricorda come, quand'era piccolo, sua nonna lo vestiva per Natale o per il suo compleanno o per qualche altra ricorrenza, strattonandolo di qua e di là e sputandosi sul dito per impomatargli un ricciolo ribelle, e come si sentiva esposto, peggio che nudo, in quei completi ruvidi di tweed color porridge già fuori moda con il pantalone corto che la vecchia gli faceva indossare, e le camicie bianche con il colletto inamidato e, peggio di tutto, il farfallino di tartan che gli dava un pallido gusto vendicativo tirare al limite dell'elastico e rilasciare con uno schiocco piacevolmente rumoroso quando qualcuno teneva un discorso o cantava una canzone o il prete reggeva in alto l'ostia della comunione allo stesso modo in cui, pensava sempre, l'infermiera brandiva il biglietto con il numero vincente della lotteria dell'ospedale. (Banville 2011, p. 8)

I often think the translator's job is a bit like climbing a mountain, when you reach the top and enjoy the beautiful view, you forget how hard the climbing was. The problem is, when I am translating a book by John Banville, it is not just one mountain to climb, but every new sentence can be one. And how many mountains can you possibly climb every day, if you want to earn a living from it? While I like the endless battle I need to engage with my mother tongue to render Banville's books into Italian, at times it can be exhausting. The view at the top had better be beautiful indeed, for it to be a worthy exhaustion.

The Infinities is a book with little if any plot, where almost nothing happens. In a nice summer day, in a mansion somewhere in the Irish countryside, a small group of people gathers by the bedside of the dying homeowner, the mathematician Adam Godley, whose renowned theory of infinities gave him endless fame and some money. Clearly the name Adam Godley itself is a wink to the reader, and of the sort you can't possibly translate, since personal names in literary novels stay as they are. The author's wink will be lost, except for those readers who know English enough to catch it, and here there's nothing I can do: in my opinion a translator's note would be seen as a long and pedantic overreaction.

Paralysed by a stroke, motionless but alert in his bed, Adam Godley focuses on his own memories and reflections, reckoning with his own finiteness. By his bedside we find his second wife Ursula and their two children, bulky and awkward Adam (whose name is exactly the same as his father, yes) accompanied by his beautiful wife Helen, and skinny Petra, a troubled young woman. Completing the picture, we have Petra's supposed

boyfriend Roddy, some sort of dandy whose real interest is in fact Petra's famous dad, whose biography he wishes to write; and a couple of peculiar domestic helpers. There are also a handful of Greek deities, who come on stage for different reasons and interfere with human lives and affairs.

And here the expression 'on stage' is not used by accident.

The novel is set in Arden, Adam Godley's estate, and events unfold in the course of a single day, thus respecting the classical unities of Aristotle's *Poetics*, as if it were an ancient tragedy.

But this is surely not the only reference to theatre – on the contrary. We'll soon enough find out that dawn is delayed by Hermes to allow his father Zeus to seduce the beautiful Helen, disguising himself as the young Adam, her own husband. Nothing new, right?

In fact, the resemblance between *The Infinities* and the plot of *Amphitryon* is not at all coincidental, and John Banville lets us realise this very soon. Helen, Adam's wife, is an actress and, as it happens, is soon going to be Alcmena (Amphitryon's wife) on stage.

True, but which *Amphitryon* are we talking about?

Here John Banville impresses us with a master stroke. While talking to Roddy, Helen tells him about the play:

> "It could have been set here [...], here at this house, when it was first built."
> "Oh? But isn't it in Greece, in Thebes, or somewhere? I seem to remember —"
> "The version we are doing all takes place round Vinegar Hill, at the time of the Rebellion."
> "Ah." He frowns. He does not approve of the classics being tampered with, he says. "The Greeks knew what they were doing, after all."
> "Oh, but it's not Greek," she says before she can stop herself, and then to make it worse continues on. "— It was written only a hundred years ago, I think, or two, in Germany." (Banville 2009, p. 192)

With a few lines, Banville reveals to us that of the many existing versions of this classical story he is referring to the *Amphitryon* written in the early nineteenth century by German writer Heinrich von Kleist. But Kleist, in compliance with tradition, set his *Amphitryon* in classical Greece, while the *Amphitryon* Helen will be playing in is set in Ireland at the time of the Rebellion. Is this just a piece of invention? Of course not: this is the author's sly way of telling us that in fact he is not just simply referring to Kleist's *Amphitryon*, but to a reworked Irish adaptation of Kleist's text, set in Ireland in 1789 just after the Battle of Vinegar Hill. What Banville doesn't tell us (but as a translator I am expected to find this out, if I want to correctly understand the text I am translating) is that this particular version, entitled *God's Gift: A version of Amphitryon by Heinrich von Kleist*, does exist and its author is... John Banville.

In cases like this one, Internet resources such as Google and Wikipedia are extremely helpful to find out what lies behind the text or what is implied between the lines. Kleist's *Amphitryon* was not beyond my reach even without their helpful insights, but Banville's *God's Gift* surely was.

Now, since John Banville is also the author of this particular version of the *Amphitryon* that permeates *The Infinities*, he benefits from it.

After her divine – literally divine – intercourse with Zeus, Helen falls asleep again and wakes up when her husband Adam enters the room. Adam is puzzled by her allusions, and Helen flees to the toilet, urged by pressing physiological needs no less than by a sudden shyness. Just after she flushes the toilet, with a sudden conspicuous shift from low language to literary language, we find four lines:

> — oh, such a dream!
> We were upon some golden mountain top,
> The two of us, just we, and all around
> The air was blue, and endless, and so soft!
> (Banville 2009, p. 55)

First thing, when I find lines of a poem in a text, I need to find out whether they are from some other author. Again, the Internet is most helpful and thanks to Google and Google Books I am usually able to find out. In this particular case, since I found no reference for those lines, I assumed they were by Banville himself and, since they reminded me of the language and atmosphere of Petrarca's love sonnets, I decided to render them in Italian hendecasyllables:

> *...oh, che sogno!*
> *In vetta eravamo a una montagna d'oro*
> *Noi due, solo noi due, e tutt'intorno*
> *L'aria era azzurra e sconfinata e dolce!*
> (Banville 2011, p. 61)

But they were in fact cited lines. The idea of them being lines from a poem originally written in a different language and subsequently translated into English didn't occur to me at first. Only during a second stage, revising and editing my translation, did it occur to me that this could be the case.[3] As an e-mail by the author himself finally clarified, the lines are cited from *God's Gift*, Banville's own version of Kleist's *Amphitryon*. Being a version by Banville himself, and given that *God's Gift* is not translated into Italian, I could keep my translation – but I was reminded of a very important rule: you can never check enough when it comes to hidden quotations. Of course, we're not always lucky enough to have our questions answered by the author

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[3] Here I thank my colleague Silvia Sichel for the suggestion.

himself, and this means that we should always be as thorough as possible when it comes to fact checking.

To avoid missing a hidden reference, the translator needs to scrupulously check every single trivial detail. And hidden references can be very tricky, at times.

Old Adam Godley, as we said, is a mathematician, whose fame came from his theory of infinities, postulating the existence of endless interpenetrating worlds. He was able to write equations across those many worlds, incorporating their infinities and opening new possibilities to science. And thanks to the fictional Godley's well-known Brahma equations, cold fusion is a reality and the most of the world's energy is derived from brine.

So when is the novel set? In an invented near future?

When I read:

> Adam was able to tell her of St Ursula of Dumnonia, martyred at Cologne along with her eleven thousand virgins [...] although this Ursula was recently removed from the calendar of saints, in a fit of anti-German pique, by one of the more reform-minded English pontiffs. (Banville 2009, pp. 22-23)

I thought: English pontiffs, what English pontiffs? The first and only Englishman to ascend the papal throne was in the twelfth century. Knowledgeable readers have probably already understood what I am going to explain, but I needed a few other clues.

And when I read:

> It is said [Ivy Blount] is a direct descendant of Charles Blount, eighth Lord Mountjoy and first Earl of Devonshire, that eccentric soldier whom Mary, Queen of Scots, great Gloriana, on her accession to the English throne after the beheading of her cousin, the upstart and treasonous Elizabeth Tudor, sent over at the dawn of seventeenth century to pacify this most distressful country. (Banville 2009, pp. 38-39)

I must admit, painful as it may be, that I was highly puzzled but far from understanding what all this distorted historical account was about.

Not even the strange way used by Banville to refer to the father of the atomic bomb was enough at first:

> Whom did I resemble? Oppenheimer, say, J. Robert, who failed to build the bomb he boasted so much of. (Banville 2009, p. 171)

but when I came, on the same page, to Adam Godley's recollection:

> He says we should get out of here and go to a place he knows on the waterfront, a venerable tavern where Tycho Brahe is said to have stopped for a night on his way to Prague to take up the post of assistant to Johannes Kepler,

> the Emperor Rudolf's Imperial Mathematician, long ago. (Banville 2009, p. 171)

all pieces finally fell into place. In our world, as you might be aware of, it was Johannes Kepler who was Tycho Brahe's assistant, and not vice versa. And it was Elizabeth Tudor who was called great Gloriana and had her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots, beheaded. And J. Robert Oppenheimer did build the atomic bomb, in fact.

All these hints – and there are many more – are Banville's subtle way to tell us his novel is set in one of these many parallel worlds postulated in Godley's theory of infinities that only slightly differs from our own.

This is a clear case where knowing history helps a great deal to understand the text, but putting the pieces in the right places is necessary as well. How shameful and disgraceful it would have been for me – and how much I would have wronged the original – had I claimed the author made a couple of trivial historical mistakes and suggested to amend them in the translated book. I can just imagine how this could happen; I would have called the Italian editor and told her: "John Banville made a mistake; he mixed up Kepler and Tycho Brahe. What should I do, should I amend it?" Trusting me, the editor could have said, "Sure, amend it, thank you". I would have made a blunder and made a fool of myself.

This is not to say that mistakes or typos can't occur or never occur in the original text: in fact, the author himself wrote to his translators asking them to slightly change a sentence in the original book, because he found an inaccuracy he wished to amend. So "These are the creatures she carried inside her and gave birth to and fed from her own breast, phoenix-like" (Banville 2009, p. 25) became "These are the creatures she carried inside her and gave birth to and fed from her own breast, like that mythical bird, the phoenix, is it, or some other?", and was subsequently translated as "*Queste sono le creature che ha portato in grembo e che ha dato alla luce e nutrito dal proprio seno, come quell'uccello mitico, la fenice, giusto, o era un altro?*" (Banville 2011, p. 30). I can't be sure here, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was in fact one of his translators who pointed out that the phoenix, according to the myth, has many peculiarities but does not breastfeed.

On another page of the book, the name "Alcmene" had been mistyped as "Alceme", and that was as well duly amended. But if anything doesn't seem to make sense at first, the best thing to do is start from the assumption that the author knows what he is writing and therefore the original is right. Before questioning the author, as a translator I prefer to question myself and my own understanding. Sometimes, this is also a chance to learn something new. When I first read Hermes saying "[men] have called me Argeiphantes, he who makes clear the sky" (Banville 2009, p. 15), I was extremely puzzled.

I knew Hermes was called "Argeiphontes", traditionally interpreted as "slayer of Argus", but I couldn't think that "Argeiphantes" was a typo for "Argeiphontes", since the subsequent explanation wouldn't match. After struggling with Argeiphontes/Argeiphantes for some time, I managed to solve the enigma thanks to the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, which explains how "the myth of [Hermes] slaying Argus, later thought to explain the epithet Argeiphontes, [is] a probable deformation of Argeiphantes, he who makes the sky clear" (LEM 1959, p. 133).

Now one could wonder if it might not be possible just to translate word for word, and if that wouldn't be enough. Is this attempt to trace the whole subtle web of internal and external cross-references useful? Is it necessary? Will the final result – the final translated text – be different?

I am convinced that deciphering all the text's multiple layers of meaning is an essential part of the translator's job, and this requires not only a broad expertise in the source language but also a wide education and cultural background and, moreover, much specific research done while translating. This may seem a theoretical, academic statement, but when it comes to translating, for instance, "An early blackbird flies across at a slant swiftly from somewhere to somewhere else, its lacquered wing catching an angled glint of sunlight (...). [Adam] fancies he can hear faintly the fleet-winged creature's piping panic note" (Banville 2009, p. 5), I know that I must thank the Greek I studied at school. As a result I was able to make the analogy with "swift-footed Achilles", which then led me to decide to render "fleet-winged creature" with *creatura rapida d'ala*.

And when it came to translate "grey-eyed Athene", I chose *occhicerulea Atena* over *glaucopide Atena*, because Banville didn't choose to call her "glaukopis" himself. This is however a perfect case where you can't claim one version is right and the other one wrong; rather, it is a matter of translator's choices and tastes. These last two examples show how every word of the source text is not just a word *per se*, but is set in a context and it is through the context that its translation comes. Sometimes it is an easy job – words surface as if the source text was somehow magically hiding them inside – at other times it is a more laborious, painstaking, and occasionally frustrating and exhausting job. But such efforts were well rewarded later, when I happened to read a review that mentioned the "outstanding poetic efficacy" (Magris 2012, p. 28) of the translation.

Antonio Tabucchi (2012) said in an interview that translating is an act both of arrogance and humility.[4] Arrogance in taking over someone else's words, humility in respecting them. I would add that it is also an act of responsibility, the responsibility we take on by rewriting the source text in our own words:

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[4] http://www.scrittoriperunanno.rai.it/scrittori.asp?videoId=113&currentId=8

Delle cose cui abbiamo dato forma affinché ne avessero conforto, l'alba è quella che funziona. Quando le tenebre svaporano nell'aria come soffice fuliggine sottile e la luce si diffonde lentamente da oriente, tutti tranne i più disgraziati del genere umano si rianimano. È uno spettacolo che piace a noi immortali, questa piccola risurrezione quotidiana; spesso ci raduniamo sui bastioni delle nuvole e abbassiamo lo sguardo su di loro, i nostri piccoli, che si ridestano per dare il benvenuto al nuovo giorno. Che silenzio cala allora su di noi, il triste silenzio della nostra invidia. Molti continuano a dormire, certo, incuranti dell'incantevole espediente mattutino di nostra cugina Aurora, ma ci sono sempre gli insonni, i malati irrequieti, gli infelici che si struggono d'amore rigirandosi nei loro letti solitari o anche solo i mattinieri, gli indaffarati, con i loro piegamenti e le loro docce fredde e le loro elaborate tazzine di ambrosia nera. Sì, tutti coloro che la contemplano salutano l'alba con gioia, chi più chi meno, eccetto il condannato, ovvio, per il quale la prima luce sarà l'ultima, sulla terra. (Banville 2011, p. 7)

Bionote: After studying in Turin, Heidelberg and Jerusalem, Irene Abigail Piccinini obtained a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Roma-Tor Vergata. Her dissertation on Hermann Cohen's influence on Leo Strauss's thought is now published as *Una guida fedele. L'influenza di Hermann Cohen sul pensiero di Leo Strauss*, Trauben, Torino, 2007. As a literary translator from English and German into Italian, she has worked for publishers such as Guanda, Longanesi, Il Saggiatore, Marco Tropea Editore, and Cairo Editore. With more than ten years of experience, she has translated fiction and non-fiction, novels, children books, and occasionally poetry; among her authors are John Banville, Jonathan Safran Foer, Sue Miller, Curt Leviant, Iain Pears, Russell Shorto, Eric G. Wilson, and Bettany Hughes (from English); Ferdinand von Schirach, Eric Frey, and Monica Cantieni (from German). After living for several years between Turin and Glasgow, she currently resides in Lecce.

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