

Joachim Du Bellay: Antiquités III:

A Translation and Commentary

by [David Solway](#) (September 2020)



Saint Jerome Writing, Caravaggio, 1607-08

Joachim Du Bellay

Les Antiquités de Rome III (1558)

Nouveau venu, qui cherches Rome en Rome
Et rien de Rome en Rome n'aperçois,
Ces vieux palais, ces vieux arcs que tu vois,
Et ces vieux murs, c'est ce que Rome on nomme.

Vois quel orgueil, quelle ruine, et comme
Celle qui mit le monde sous ses lois,
Pour dompter tout, se dompta quelquefois,
Et devint proie au temps, qui tout consomme.

Rome de Rome est le seul monument,
Et Rome Rome a vaincu seulement.
Le Tibre seul, qui vers la mer s'enfuit,

Reste de Rome. O mondaine inconstance!
Ce qui est ferme, est par le temps détruit,
Et ce qui fuit, au temps fait résistance.

Joachin Du Bellay

The Antiquities of Rome III

You, the newcomer, seeking Rome in Rome,
well, there is no Rome there that you can see,
some walls and arches, mere antiquity,
crumbling palaces—that's what we call Rome.

Just look! What pride, what ruin, what dusty blooms
of reminiscent grandeur yet remain
of she who tamed the world, and all in vain?
Not much, I'm afraid. Rome's what Rome consumes.

Let's say that Rome's the only monument
and only Rome has conquered Rome at last.
As tributary to the future's past

the Tiber's all that's left of all that's spent.
For what is firm the years will soon erase
while that which roams still, somehow, keeps its place.

A Preamble on Translation

The original is unfaithful to the translation

—Jorge Luis Borges

Approaching a poem written in another time and/or place, the translator faces a literal *dilemma*, a double problem of conflicting loyalties. He is always in two minds about what he is doing. He must obviously strive to remain faithful to the author's intent and sensibility as exemplified in their lexical reification while simultaneously reflecting the cultural atmospherics and the language customs of the time or place in which he himself lives.

The rule was laid down long ago by Cicero in his *De optimo genere oratorum* (The Best Kind of Orator). Cicero was not a poet but among the greatest of orators, sharing with the poet the *conatus* toward rhetorical power. A master of apt words, phrasal sweep and the rhythms of persuasion, he is an authority worth attending to. Commenting on his translation of Greek authors, Cicero tells us that his practice involved "keeping the same ideas and the forms, one might say, the 'figures' of thought, but in language that conforms to our usage." The translator must, as it were, be in two different regions at once, in particular when he is straddling two historical periods which may have little in common with one another. A certain balletic suppleness is required, a "doing the splits" with grace and apparent effortlessness, so that the performance moves seamlessly, avoiding the twin perils of awkwardness and rigidity.

In his well-known essay "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin asserts, in typical homiletic fashion, that the essential quality of a work of art "is not statement or the imparting of information" but a kind of penumbra of irreducible meaning consisting of "the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic'." This leaves us precisely nowhere, which does not prevent Benjamin from proclaiming that the translator must give voice "to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony." Through the miasma of his annunciations, it is evident that Benjamin is not in sympathy

with Cicero's retention of the "ideas and forms" of the original production.

Benjamin's contention that poetry is not a declarative medium, however, is true as far as it goes. A poem is intended to elicit a feeling, sensation or belief comparable to that experienced by its author; however, it is often rich with information as well, with what we call a "message." A sonnet like Shakespeare's "Let me not to the marriage of true minds" or Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "How do I love thee," not to mention Du Bellay's "Antiquities III," is not only indirectly evocative of a prior state of being but also directly communicative of a specific content. This is something the translator cannot afford to ignore without expurgating his subject. When Benjamin goes on to say that "any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information—hence, something inessential," he shows that he is far more of a philosopher than a poet—or, for that matter, more of an arcane speculator than a responsible translator. As Yahia Lababidi writes in his book of aphorisms, *Signposts to Elsewhere*, "Philosophers, like roadmaps, are not to be consulted when driving." The same caveat may apply to theorists of translation.

I spend some time with Walter Benjamin since his essay on translation has exerted a profound influence on the practice. For him, the "intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic, that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational." Moreover, according to this expert, translation represents "the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language." Both claims are instances of sheer metaphysics at work and can neither be verified nor falsified. When we learn that "the tremendous and the only capacity of the translator" is "to regain pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux," we may be forgiven for concluding that so ineffable a mandate can pertain only to the Son of God but must necessarily escape the ministrations of

any baptismal precursor or apostolic successor.

If translation were the effort to attain to the one, true, pure language which is "the expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages," no translator with a sense of saving humility would deign to put pen to paper to achieve so exalted a purpose. And if translation were merely "derivative," something divorced from the creative impulse and deaf to the call of originality, no translator worth his dignity would undertake so diminished an enterprise.

Translation, so far as a non-professional like myself can see, is neither a mystical and portentous activity that broaches the realm of the Benjaminian sublime nor a mere proletarian engagement with verbal homologies and locutional replications. I understand the act of translation as a hybrid and diametric process which, manifestly, does not enjoy *primary* creative status since a given text must precede it to be worked upon. Nevertheless, translation at its best represents an entirely *original* endeavour. Translation is not mimicry or duplication. It is the strenuous and laudable attempt to *remake* a pioneer document in such a way that it is both old and new at the same instant, hewing close to the spirit of the predecessor via idea, form and message—both Cicero's " 'figures' of thought" and the thought itself—but assuming the lexical and syntactical mantle, the speech habits, of the contemporary moment. Ezra Pound's famous dictum, "make it new," is valid not only for the poet but the translator, too.

The text which the translator addresses is also an object-in-the-world and consequently implies a pristine subject *materially* equipollent with whatever the poet has chosen as subject. It signifies a correlative independence. This does not change the fact that translation comes afterward, as afterword. Translation is a secondary event. But in breaking new ground, it is no less innovative and novel for all that, no less seminal and unprecedented—hence, original.

Thus translation may be provisionally defined as both formative and informative or, in short, as the literary act of serial inventiveness.

A Note on the Translation of "*Antiquities III*"

In this particular instance, my fealty to the author and his poem can be expressed only by adhering to what we share across the centuries and across the dimensions which separate us, namely, the two factors of theme and form. With respect to his theme, the paradox of flow and stasis in the current of time, this is an experience which transcends the ages, for all human beings are susceptible to the feeling of wonder and anguish it evokes. With respect to poetic form, the sonnet has survived the dispersions of time and fashion and remains firmly embedded in the tradition of the craft, right down to the appropriate rhyme schemes, stanzaic divisions and the decasyllabic line.

The translator's allegiance to the original, then, requires that he does justice to the poet's message and that he reproduces, so far as possible, the technical armature in which it is negotiated and diffused. Clearly, the translator, like the poet, [*] may ring his changes upon the basic pattern bequeathed by the canon, but these are more like grace notes which vary or embellish the underlying melody.

At the same time, the translator must avoid the error of misplaced fidelity, that is, he cannot betray the gradients of his own time and culture without appearing clumsy, unresponsive and, in the pejorative sense, artificial. True artifice must always seem natural. The way in which the translator ensures and maintains the authenticity of his translation is by producing not a literal rendition of the verbal object but by adapting it to the linguistic norms of his own day, locale and practice. Continuity is preserved in difference.

Regarding this particular poem, I have tried to remain true to my subject by labouring to express his theme as unequivocally as possible and by approximately preserving the sonnet form he employs, though I have slightly modified the latter to conform to the rules of the English (or “Shakespearian”) sonnet mode. After all, this is an English translation.

But I have also tried to “free up” the diction in the direction of colloquial usage—in effect, the poetic vernacular of our time—in order to refresh the archive by giving the impression of contemporaneity. In other words, in other words. This is how, as the translator would like to believe, Du Bellay might have composed his poem if he were visiting Rome not, say, in 1554 but in 2020. Du Bellay spoke truly when he suggested in his *Deffence et Illustration de la langue françoys* (1549), commenting on the translation process, that what you cannot render in one place you must compensate for in another: translation is not imitation. Mimesis has its uses but, to cite Du Bellay, it is “odious to imitate within one’s own language.”

As a result, the language I deploy in my version of the poem needs to align itself differently, closer to the measures of idiomatic or demotic speech, thus affecting a more conversational and informal tone, even at the level of line breaks and lower case line beginnings. One is not trying to clone the instrumentalities of the sixteenth century in the twenty-first but, at the risk of an arrant hybris punishable by the gods, to re-write the poem along a set of contours limning, and so befitting, the present moment. Translation is always, to an extent, re-writing.

Of course, Edmund Spenser’s translation of “Antiquities III” in *Complaints: Ruines of Rome* reads very much like a strict correlative of Du Bellay’s original, reprising the “poetic diction” common to the era. This is to be expected. The two poets were near coetanians, Spenser having been born

at about the time Du Bellay made his Roman sojourn, and they were separated only by a channel. And Spenser, an educated European, knew French language and literature well. Poetic artifice was as natural to Spenser as it was to Du Bellay.

We can see the transition toward the linguistic meridians of the modern in Yvor Winters' translation of Du Bellay's "Rome." Winters was a rigorous classicist and constructed a close verbal and formal equivalent; yet he permits himself certain modern liberties, as, for example, the insertion of the dash to conjure implication and a hint of phrasal currency in the use of prepositives.

My own attempt moves further toward the terminus of colloquial speech, which consorts with the language now spoken and written by poets. For the diction of the past, like Du Bellay's Rome, has decayed, leaving only the occasional word-artifact and metric trace behind. But the perennials of human experience and the principles of the tradition, like Du Bellay's Tiber, resist the erosions of time.

Commentary

The poem that the translator visits and lives in for a time resembles, in a displaced but simulated fashion, the very city of Rome which Du Bellay peruses, envisions and reconstructs in his imagination. It appears as alien, marmoreal and rather intimidating to the "*nouveau venu*," in this case, the translator, who embarks on the process of coming to terms with its "presence" and of interpreting its meaning, however fugitive it may seem through the fragmentary glimpses he is afforded of the poet's mind and the poem's gestation.

In the course of time, through his efforts at taming and consolidating what can only be described as a monumental evasiveness, the translator produces a pale and inadequate facsimile of the original, called a "translation"—as specified

in the word's Latin etymology, *translatus*, something "transferred" or "carried over" from one place to another or, as it may also happen, from one time to another.

Gradually, in the act of transition from source language to target language, a curious phenomenon occurs in the mind of the translator. It is as if the original begins inexorably to destroy itself, slowly to disappear from view and to collapse upon its own textual structure, existing only in memory. It suffers a sort of *décrochage* and is replaced by the detritus of its own disintegrating presence, supplemented by more recent or different structures of thought and language, new additions from an ambient sensibility.

The transmutation that emerges retains a certain resemblance to its predecessor and yet constitutes a violation of the latter's prior integrity, a falling off from its perceived grandeur and wholeness, as if marking the indiscretions of time. To translate is to bear witness to the devouring agent which consumes whatever has been built to withstand, so that, regardless of how impressive and original the construction which arises may be, it remains only a simulacrum of the perfection which escapes it.

In this sense, the translator who approaches his task finds himself in precisely the same position vis à vis his object as did Du Bellay in his nostalgic confrontation with a Rome that was no longer Rome. The translation, so to speak, is a residue of palaces, arches and walls that have succumbed to the relentless weathering of time and distance: the time that elapses from the first meeting with the original to the last revision of its errant double, which may be considerable; the psychic distance that divides the newcomer from his antecedence. Whatever triumph he may claim, or others may claim for him, his re-imagining of what is only *partly there* is always a function of regret and of missing. He is, as Du Bellay himself knew when he wrote *Les Regrets*, like *le pèlerin regrettant sa maison*.

But we can go further. Since the exercise upon which we are now engaged entails the search of the “essence” of poetry, we can say, by extrapolation, that from the perspective of the poet in the act of composition, the enigmatic and tantalizing “essence” of poetry is *identical to that of translation*, that is, nostalgia, regret, contrition for the core of failure that resides in every tentative success and even in the greatest and most undoubted success. The sense of elation the poet feels in having brought his poem to term is always tempered by the sobering realization that he could have done better in rendering insight into language, but also by his recognition that the best of which he is capable is necessarily unequal to the challenge. The object always escapes his grasp, leaving only a token of its passage behind—a stone, an arch, a façade.

The attempt to transpose experience into words approximates the relation of effigy to totem, of things resembling something else to things looking what they are supposed to look like. The poet is acutely conscious that the poem he has “carried over” from his mind onto the page or, alternatively, from the world to the word, remains only an effigy, an impoverished replica, of a reality that is resolutely totemic and so only partly translatable. And this is true no matter how luminous and gratifying the final product.

In this light, every poem is in itself a species of translation, a Rome that is no longer Rome. To cite once again from Du Bellay’s sonnet XII from *Les Regrets*, the “essence” of poetry—at least for the poet, for in itself it can neither be isolated nor described—is nothing more, though nothing less, than *l’importun souci qui sans fin me tourmente*.

Finally, as I’ve written elsewhere, “both the translation and the poem are paradigms and images of all human striving, married to desire yet destined to failure, to realize the slippery and ever-elusive promise of transcendence from the given to the possible impossible, to establish

contact between indiscernibles, to work at the *rapprochement* not only between two poets, two readers, two languages and two epochs but ultimately between two aspects of the divided self, the self we negotiate daily in the market of the commonplace and the self we intuit existing *in potentia* on the other side of language.

That's what we call Rome.

[*] For Benjamin, poetry and translation are incommensurable projects. "The task of the translator," he assures us, "may be regarded as distinct and clearly differentiated from the task of the poet," since great poets may be poor translators. But the relation of competence between the poet as poet and the poet as translator is entirely contingent and may be explained by empirical factors, personal issues or other variables. Nor is Benjamin's assumption substantiated by facts. To take only one example, T.S. Eliot was undeniably a major poet and, judging from his translation of the *Anabasis* of St.-John Perse, a first-rate translator as well. Benjamin himself praises Hölderlin for his translations of Sophocles—though, it must be admitted, he characteristically tempers his applause owing not to the work's falling short in any way but to its very perfection: the gates of language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator with silence. What Benjamin giveth, Benjamin taketh away.

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David Solway's latest book is [*Notes from a Derelict Culture*](#), Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, [*Partial to Cain*](#), appeared in 2019.

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