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The Translation's Visibility¹: David B.'s *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* in Italy

1. Translating comics: a cultural problem

Translation is generally considered an intellectual activity; however, there are many other aspects involved in this process. Here, translation will be considered in its broader sense, a sense which also includes the process of adaptation, i.e. the process of transformation of a "cultural product" in order to bring it from one culture to another.



Figure 1

Many articles have been dedicated to the translation of comics; yet, it is deceiving to verify that these works mainly deal with the translation of the text in comics and, in particular, with the translation of puns²; as if puns were the main characteristics of this form of art. Translating a comic obviously means to translate the text contained in balloons; however, there are other priorities which need to be taken into consideration. Every kind of translation implies an adaptation and a "rewriting" of the work to be translated³; this problem is more evident in translated comics because of their pictorial element. Actually, even the text in comics is an integral part of the picture, as it has to fill a determinate physical space in the page. Before being something to be read (i.e. a text), it is something to be seen: a picture itself, which contributes to the visual equilibrium of the page. In fact, its graphic peculiarity comes before its textual quality. That is, words in comics are first of all employed to represent and evoke feelings through the modulation of elements like their size, shape, colour, and disposition in space. Even the colour and shape of balloons, which are the physical containers of words, contribute to the creation of particular effects. All these elements pave the way for the effect of the text itself; that is, words as such play their role only in a second time, when their graphic quality has already created a certain atmosphere in the mind of the reader⁴. In comics, then, text is subordinated to images; an evidence of this is the existence of comics without words: Masashi Tanaka's *Gon in Japan*, for instance, or Lewis Trondheim's *La Mouche* in France.

Each culture produces different kinds of comics: the size and contents of publications, for historical and practical reasons, vary from nation to nation, accommodating to the tastes and expectations of the different reading public. Cultural differences emerge not only in the different way of conceiving comics, in the disposition of pages, strips and panels, and in the way of employing the graphic and narrative techniques available, but also in the preference for black-and-white or colour stories, in their length, in the size of publications, and even in their price and their periodicity. These are all signals of a different attitude and expectation

towards this form of art. For example, American readers are used to *comic books*, monthly 32-page colour publications containing a 22-page episode, usually to be continued in the following issue; Italian readers prefer *Bonelli Comics*⁶, small black-and-white books of one hundred pages, publishing a long, self-contained story. In France, comics are mainly published in *albums*, giant-sized hardcover volumes costing, on average, 12 Euros each; Italian readers, on the contrary, would hesitate in spending so much money on a single comic, not only because of the different reputation that comics have in the two countries (which is higher in France than in Italy), but also because the Italian comic industry offers good stories in cheaper publications.

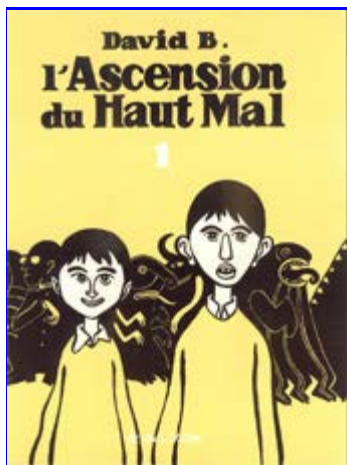


Figure 2

A publishing house has to face some important choices in the phase of adaptation of foreign comics to the target culture. These choices clash with the need and will to respect the original work. For instance, if the reading public of a given country prefers colour stories, the publisher can decide to colour a comic which was originally in black and white, in order to render it more appealing; or, on the contrary, he can decide to leave the comic as it is.⁷

Translating a comic is then a much more complex operation than merely transposing the text contained in balloons from a language into another: because of their complex structure resulting from the interweaving of texts and pictures, comics have to be presented to the target culture after a process of adaptation which has to take into consideration the expectations and tastes of the new cultural context, and at the same time has also to avoid the corruption of the work to be translated.

2. Translated comics

European comic readers generally prefer long and self-contained stories; in France, as well as in Italy, long and self-contained stories are produced and published with great success. However, despite these common features, both France and Italy prefer translated stories from such countries as Japan and USA (where comics are published in short episodes) instead of "exchanging" their own comics: in fact, the different way in which comic stories are published in France and Italy constitutes a problematic cultural barrier for their translation. Although they both contain a long and complete story, the French *album* and the Italian *bonelliano* have widely different characteristics; therefore, adaptation to other formats than the original one is very difficult: the stories are expressly conceived for their original format, and their quality would suffer too much from a drastic adaptation. As a consequence, despite the similar features of the stories, few Italian comics are published in France, and vice versa.

Paradoxically enough, today "popular"⁸ French stories have less chances to be published in Italy than more sophisticated



Figure 3

products: their deluxe *album* format makes them too expensive for those Italian readers who like popular stories, and their contents are not "intellectual" enough to arise the interest of more exigent readers. Publishers, then, tend to choose those series which assure quality: they cannot risk to disappoint readers by publishing poor stories in a deluxe and expensive format. The alteration of their size and characteristics to make them fit the Italian *Bonelli* popular format is out of question: reassembling panels and pages to adapt them to a different format, or shrinking the pages, would be disrespectful of the original work. It is then easy to understand how popular series, being generally more subject to variations in quality, are often excluded from publishers' choices, who prefer good products and mature stories to justify the high cover price of their volumes of translated French comics. Moreover, a French series cannot be published on a regular basis like a classic Italian comic, as there would soon be no more stories available for publication; and the care required to produce a French *album* does not match the exigencies of a periodical publication, usually subject to deadlines. The Italian reader is used to a story every month: a longer wait between two episodes would easily lead him to disaffection. As a consequence, it is really difficult to transform a French popular comic into an Italian popular publication.

3. Translated comics and alterity

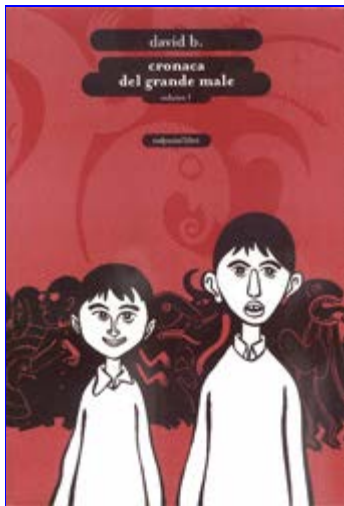


Figure 4

In such a peculiar form of art as comics, the alterity of a foreign work emerges in an extremely evident way. The graphic styles of the different "schools" (European, American, and Japanese, just to mention the most important and the most exported), the layout of pages, the formats of publication which characterize each geographic area, clearly appear before the eye of the reader, who is able to detect without difficulty the origin of a comic publication. Translated comics seem to be the tangible proof of Antoine Berman's "épreuve de l'étranger"⁹; in fact, in European comic shops, publications are not ranged by narrative genres, like in book stores, but by nation. *Album*, *Bonelli Comic*, comic book, *tankobon*: each country has its own format, by which even the most inattentive reader can immediately recognize the origin of the comic he/she is going to take in his/her hands. In short, the translation is *visible*.

Berman opposes literal translation and translation *ad sensum*, ethnocentric translation and ethic translation. He defines as *ethnocentric* that translation in which "on doit traduire l'oeuvre étrangère de façon que l'on ne "sente" pas la traduction"¹⁰, so as "la traduction doit se faire oublier"¹¹. This vision of translation,

based on the restitution of mere meaning, implies a hierarchy between the languages and cultures involved in the process, and a submission of the source language to the target language. Berman proposes an *ethic* translation, as "l'acte éthique consiste à reconnaître et à recevoir l'Autre en tant qu'Autre"¹². These theories find an evidence in the translation of comics: it is impossible to "domesticate" the original work in order to adapt it to other formats of publication without altering its essence, and it is likewise impossible to disguise it in order to hide its foreign origin.¹³

4. David B.'s *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* in Italy

Japanese and American comics, with their peculiar narrative structure in episodes, are substantially different from European comics, both in format and in contents. Therefore, European comic readers recognize the radical differences in stories coming from these countries and are ready to accept them. On the contrary, popular French and Italian comics are similar in structure and narrative rhythm but very different in format; therefore, Italian readers judge the *album* format too expensive for popular stories, and prefer the cheaper *Bonelli Comics*, while French readers are often upset by the oscillating quality of *Bonelli Comics*.

This situation recently led some Italian publishers to prefer those French comics which differ from the classic *album* format. Baru's *L'autoroute du soleil* has been published in Italy by Coconino Press; Chabouté's black-and-white stories have been translated by Kappa Edizioni; Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* appeared in Italy thanks to Lizard Edizioni; and some black-and-white stories by David B., Baudoin, Lewis Trondheim, have been presented by Rasputin!Libri. Publishers have of course been led to choose these titles because of their high quality; however, their anomalous original format also gave publishers the possibility to offer a new product, trying to meet the tastes of the Italian reading public.

Notwithstanding its size which resembles the *album* format, David B.'s *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* can be ranged among these "anomalous" *bandes dessinées*. It is of course an independent production, published in France by L'Association in black-and-white softcover volumes. The Italian edition of *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* was published by Rasputin!Libri in 1999; the

Italian publisher, however, playing on the "anomalous" format of the original edition, decided to shrink the original format in order to uniform it to the size of the other volumes published in the same Italian series, and to collect two original volumes in one (in fact, the Italian volume contains the first two parts of David B.'s work). The original edition, however, had other particularities which have not been reproduced in the Italian version. First of all, the cover of the second volume has disappeared from the Italian edition, although it can be considered an integral feature of the work (in fact, the covers of the six volumes show the evolution in age of the two protagonists, and the progressive "rise" of epilepsy, represented as a crowd of demons in the background); secondly, the ordinary paper used in the Italian version is whiter than the very good paper of the original edition, which on the contrary enhances David B.'s style of drawing and the good quality of the



Figure 5


original printing; finally, the proportions of pictures are altered, as there is too much blank space around the pages, and even the narrative rhythm seems affected: for instance, the modulated line employed by David B. nearly disappears in the translated edition.


Therefore, we are in front of an attempt of "domestication" which, however, misses its target. Unfortunately, the particularities of the original edition have been destroyed by this adaptation. The general outcome of this tentative "reader-friendly" edition proves to be inappropriate, and does not do justice to David B.'s original work. Clearly, some solutions have been chosen for economical reasons, in order to reduce the cover price and to give readers a higher number of pages to read.


Keeping the original format in the Italian edition would have avoided the loss of many features which could seem secondary but which, in reality, are fundamental parts of the experience of the reading of David B.'s work. In the Italian edition, the pictorial element is spoiled by the reduced size of the pages and the poor quality of the printing.


Antoine Berman's viewpoint about translation, and the positive attitude of European readers towards Japanese and American translated comics show that the particularities of the original editions can be preserved in translated editions. Keeping the original formats is the only way to allow the comic to express itself at its best, and to leave all its peculiarities intact. A change in format is in any case deleterious to such a form of art as comics, which plays most of its power on images, i.e. a spatial element. Therefore, making the translation *visible* instead of "domesticating" the original to a local format is the best and simplest way to respect the original work.










Notes

¹  The title of this paper obviously recalls Lawrence Venuti's book *The translator's invisibility* (London, Routledge, 1995). I am much indebted to Venuti's view about translation.

²  Two examples: Alessandro Monti, "'Il senso nascosto: tradurre la lingua dei fumetti'", in *Quaderni di libri e riviste d'Italia - Saggi e documenti II: La traduzione*, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1995, p. 153-167; and Anthea Bell, "Astérix - What's in a name" (<http://www.literarytranslation.com/pdf/asterix.pdf>).

³  See, in particular, André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, London, Routledge, 1992.

⁴  For further information on the graphic quality of the text in comics, see Will Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art*, Tamarac, Poorhouse Press, 1985 (Italian translation: *Fumetto e arte sequenziale*, Torino, Vittorio Pavesio Productions, 1997, p. 12-14 and p. 28-29), and Daniele Barbieri, *I linguaggi del fumetto*, Milano, Bompiani, 1991, p. 172-178.

- 5  Although syndications, published daily in newspapers, reach a wider number of people, the most common format in USA is the comic book (17x26 cm).
- 6  Named after the publisher Sergio Bonelli Editore, which invented it in the 1950's, the *formato Bonelli* or *bonelliano* (16x21 cm) has been adopted by many other Italian publishing houses, even for foreign comics (the American Conan the Barbarian and The Punisher, and the Argentinian Dago, for instance, have been published in this format).
- 7  An example is given by Japanese comics translated in the United States during the Eighties. As in Japan nearly all comics are in black and white, publishers coloured them for the North-American market, which, on the contrary, publishes almost everything in full colour. However, Japanese comic authors usually employ cross-hatchings and chiaroscuros in a massive way to compensate the absence of colour; the mingling of these graphic techniques with colours created a disagreeable outcome, and the effect of both colours and cross-hatchings was spoiled. Soon publishers (and readers, of course) realized this inconvenience, and nowadays no Japanese comic is published in the United States in colour. Nevertheless, there are some cases in which the colouring of a black-and-white comic can produce good results, or even improve the original work: Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*, for instance, is much appreciated in the edition coloured by Steve Oliff for Marvel Comics (thanks to the graphic style of the author, less rich in cross-hatchings), and this version is well known in Western countries today.
- 8  Here, the term "popular" is not employed with a negative connotation; a "popular comic" is, generally speaking, a comic published serially, with a fixed main character, playing strongly on the identification between the protagonist of the story and the reader.
- 9  Antoine Berman, *L'épreuve de l'étranger*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984.
- 10  Antoine Berman, *La traduction et la lettre ou L'auberge du lointain*, Paris, Seuil, 1999, p. 35.
- 11  *Ibidem*. See also Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A history of translation*, London, Routledge, 1995.
- 12  *Id.*, p. 74.
- 13  Japanese comics translated in Europe offer a good example. The Oriental sense of reading, which goes from right to left, requires a specular inversion of pages in order to restore the Western sense of reading (from left to right). Some Japanese authors, considering the inversion of pages an intolerable alteration, refuse to grant the translation rights for their works. Before the enormous commercial potentiality of some Japanese titles, however, some European publishing houses pondered the opportunity to translate Japanese comics keeping their sense of reading unaltered,

in order to obtain the translation rights of these series. Notwithstanding the initial perplexities, this initiative had a great success: readers were willing to modify their own sense of reading and to learn a new one, in order to read a foreign comic. Today, many Japanese comics are published in Europe without inverting their pages; even those titles which are not subject to restrictions from their authors are often left unaltered, firstly for economical reasons (as the inversion of pages has a cost), and secondly because readers prefer this way, as it is considered a form of respect of the original work.