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The Prisoner and the Warden. Erri De Luca, Jonah, and the Hebrew Bible

Erri De Luca (1950-) is a prolific writer of contemporary Italian literature. Besides his fictional work, De Luca has authored a significant number of translations from the Hebrew Bible. This article focuses on his 1995 translation of *Jonah* where De Luca inserts two introductions, two translations, one rich apparatus of notes, and a brief theatrical adaptation of Jonah's story. The article highlights the gap between the strict hyperliteralism of the translation (which De Luca himself describes as "calque") and the copious commentary that accompanies it, which is characterized by a densely idiosyncratic voice. The difference between the two moments is indicative of De Luca's ambivalent approach to the Scriptures: secular and philological, but at the same time meditative and very personal. A final look at the author's later rewritings of Jonah proves that for De Luca translator and writer cannot be fully severed, as both are essential in the dialogue with the source text.

Keywords: translation studies; paratext: translator's notes; Erri De Luca; Bible translation

Ταῦτα δὲ ἐγένετο μὲν οὐδέποτε ἔστι δὲ ἀεί
These things never happened, but always are.

Erri De Luca is an erratic figure on the Italian literary scene. Born in Naples in 1950, De Luca has authored a vast body of work that includes novels, short stories, poetry, and theatre pieces, as well as a significant number of translations from Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian.¹ He is

¹ A complete list of his works is available on the website of his foundation, where De Luca pens his own biographical profile: <https://fondazionerrideluca.com/web/>.

also known as a long-time political activist: in the 1970s, he became a member of the Communist organization *Lotta Continua*; over the last decade, he was involved in the protests against the controversial Lyon-Turin high speed railway line. For his alleged role, De Luca went to trial in 2013 and was acquitted two years later.

Although a critical assessment of De Luca's work lies beyond the objectives of this essay, the author's tight bond with the Judeo-Christian tradition is a convenient point of entry into his world, as biblical stories and characters recursively appear in his books. This article focuses on Jonah, the reluctant prophet who tried to run away from God's call. An infamous sea monster would bring him back, ironically to prophesy the destruction of Nineveh which God would in the end abort, much to Jonah's frustration. De Luca's version of the biblical booklet (*Giona/Ionà*) consists of: a chart presenting the Hebrew alphabet and the numerical value of each letter; a first introduction to the text in general, where De Luca also reflects on his own strategy of translation; a second foreword providing a sketch of the history and the geography of Nineveh; a first running translation accompanied by a massive footnote apparatus; a second, interlinear translation alongside the Hebrew text; and finally, a dialogue in which Jonah becomes a fictional character of De Luca's own writing.² The story of Jonah is worth exploring in its inter- and intratextual entanglements, in translation as well as in creative writing. In fact, the two levels are hard to tell apart.³

² As we shall see in the last paragraph, Jonah also features in the collection of essays *Una nuvola come tappeto*, in the long poem *Opera sull'acqua*, and in the theater piece *L'ultimo viaggio di Sinbad*. In this article we will give only scant remarks on the two forewords that introduce the translation. Most of the information there is also presented in the commentary and in the final rewriting of Jonah. As we know, forewords, postfaces, and notes are part of what we call paratext. Although Gérard Genette's groundbreaking work yields interesting results for the study of these narrative thresholds, Elefante reminds us that pre- and post-faces did not feature in his analysis (*Traduzione e paratesto*, 88-91). More in general, Tahir Gürçaglar also points out that the French critic never tackled translation in his work. For a general introduction on the role of paratext in translation studies and the field of "paratranslation", see Elefante, *Traduzione e paratesto*, 19-21.

³ See also the title of Montel-Hurlin's excellent monograph: *Erri De Luca: lecteur, traducteur, auteur*, to which this article is indebted. Looking at a limited pool of

1. Translating the Bible

The sheer number of translations of the Bible is astronomical, with multiple versions available in the same language.⁴ That is also the case for the relatively small Italian market, where numerous editions are distinguished by their religious affiliation or lack thereof. If we factor in all the translations produced over the centuries, it soon becomes obvious that no one ever really translates the Bible *ex nihilo* or *ex novo*: the translator is only doomed to re-translate. The weight of the text and the reach of its presence is so vast that De Launay⁵ compares the prospect of biblical translation to the paralyzing gaze of a gorgon.

Historically, the main reason for translating the Bible has been proselytism. It seems therefore natural that an undeniable point of reference for biblical translation studies is to this day the work of Eugene Nida (1914-2011), an American linguist who collaborated with missionaries in Northern Mexico in the mid-20th century.⁶ De Luca is not interested in exporting religion. He identifies as agnostic (“I believe as someone who sees the footprints of a bear in other people’s and yet has not seen the bear”⁷) and worries in fact that his translations could hinder those who are on a sound spiritual journey.⁸ For De Luca the Bible is primarily a cultural artifact passed down through the centuries by a long chain of readers and exegetes. Thanks to them, he argues, “the inherent sacredness of the Bible has become a civilization.”⁹ His own translations are “just one more footnote at the bottom of a list of notes

Italian authors that does not include De Luca, Taverna (“Les préfaces des traducteurs comme discours sur la méthode et l’histoire”, 273) proposes a semiotic frame for the study of what she calls “translators-writers” (“traducteurs-écrivains”). In her view, translation is just another form of writing for this selected group of artists, “qui va se superposer à l’acte de parole initial déjà mis en œuvre par l’écrivain à traduire”.

⁴ For a survey of Italian Bibles and a preliminary orientation in the massive bibliography, see Gobetti, “Un cammello per la cruna di un ago”.

⁵ De Launay, “En quête de l’original”, 3.

⁶ On Nida’s legacy, see Porter and Hess, *Translating the Bible*, 18-20 and 50-55.

⁷ De Luca, *Una nuvola come tappeto*, 63. Here and throughout the article, translations are mine.

⁸ De Luca, *Libro di Rut*, 41.

⁹ De Luca, *Una nuvola come tappeto*, 10.

regarding how that specific word has been translated.”¹⁰ This civilization takes the shape of a literary masterpiece of Mediterranean literature that echoes the same characters and the same stories throughout time and that is our privilege to peruse. For De Luca, this is a personal matter. As a “citizen of the Mediterranean,” he wonders:

Chi dei miei può escludere il fenicio, l’arabo, il normanno, e soprattutto l’ebreo, dall’intrico degli antenati? Un giorno si troverà modo di risalire le generazioni e ricostruire il cespuglio degli incroci che ci hanno preceduti e, in buona parte, determinati. Scendere da molti innesti sarà allora un titolo e la nobiltà consisterà nell’aver trovato nel proprio catasto ancestrale più stirpi, più pelli, più religioni.¹¹

[Which one of my people can exclude the Phoenician, the Arab, the Norman, and especially the Jew, from the tangle of their ancestors? One day we will have a way to trace back generations and reconstruct the shrub of the intersections that have preceded us and, to a great extent, determined us. Descending from many grafts will then be a badge of honor, and having multiple lineages, multiple skins, multiple religions in one’s ancestral register will define what nobility is.]

In light of his secular and transcultural understanding of the Bible, one would expect a critical approach that favors history and material philology. Instead, De Luca surprises us, maintaining that the Bible is one whole book with a unitary structure rather than a collection of texts whose editorial misadventures have been puzzling scholars for ages. Even more dauntingly, De Luca calls the Bible “God’s autobiography,”¹² occasionally referring to it with the Hebrew name “mikrà” (lit. “reading”) or just “Bibbia,” without the definite article that normally accompanies it. This view would be germane to a person of faith: Levinas claimed that what is miraculous about the Bible is not the plurality of its authors, but rather the homogeneity of the final product.¹³ This take is more problematic in a person that presents himself as agnostic. One cannot miss the utter ambivalence in the translator-persona De Luca is creating

¹⁰ Montel-Hurlin, ““Entrare nella scrittura sacra””, 57.

¹¹ De Luca, *Una nuvola come tappeto*, 113.

¹² De Luca, *Una nuvola come tappeto*, 12.

¹³ De Launay, “En quête de l’original”, § 7.

for himself: a quasi-oxymoronic individual that bridges a proudly secular heritage with an intense spirituality he does not fully disclose or acknowledge yet. Arguably, this gives De Luca a certain degree of independence that shields him from critiques coming from both sides.¹⁴

The next two sections explore this constitutive ambiguity looking primarily at De Luca's language and style in the translation and in the commentary sections of *Giona/Ionà*; in the last part, we look at the creative and intertextual re-use of the story. Following an insight that De Luca himself shares in an interview,¹⁵ we adopt Jewish terminology to distinguish between three levels of interaction with the text (which operate in mutual reinforcement and that we here consider separately just for the sake of clarity). First comes translation as *targum*, i.e., translation *qua talis*; second comes translation as midrash, a generic term for interpretation, which we apply to the footnotes; finally, we have translation as haggadah (lit. "narration"), which we use to refer to De Luca's creative input. By surveying the three levels, we argue that for De Luca translation is a recursive practice that seamlessly engulfs the writer, the translator, and the activist. The rhetorical space that he reclaims for himself as a secular intellectual is instrumental in allowing him to become part of that Mediterranean civilization that he sees in the Bible.

2. Translation as *targum*

The most evident feature of De Luca's translations is a bare hyperliteralism that breaks the rules of the target language to model it after the Hebrew text, at times bringing the Italian to the brink of

¹⁴ Talking about Swedish literature, Ulf Norberg uses Bourdieu to read paratextual spaces as a lieu of cultural legitimation for the translated text (see Elefante, *Traduzione e paratesto*, 94-5). This interpretation seems applicable to De Luca as well: an agnostic leftist and public persona that is likely to renew and expand the readership of an ancient text beyond the circle of religious readers or those with a specific interest in biblical matters.

¹⁵ In an interview with Montel-Hurlin ("Entrare nella scrittura sacra", 62), De Luca explicitly compares his notes to *midrashim* (the plural of midrash). The parallel between De Luca's translations and the Jewish practice of *targum* is presented in Zappella, "Scrivo della materia che mi ha scritto".

unintelligibility.¹⁶ As Henri Meschonnic reminds us,¹⁷ any solid theory of translation ought to consider the idea of language that informs it, so here is a sample from the first three verses of the *Book of Jonah*, followed by a translation into English.¹⁸

1 E fu la parola di Iod a Ionà figlio di Amittai per dire:

2 “Alzati, vai a Ninive la città grande e esclama contro di lei. Perché è salito il loro male al mio volto”.

3 E si alzò Ionà per fuggire a Tarshish via dal volto di Iod. E scese a Iafò e trovò un battello che va a Tarshish e dette il suo nolo e scese in esso per andare con loro a Tarshish via dal volto di Iod.¹⁹

[1 And was the word of Iod unto Ionà son of Amittai to say:

2 “Wake up, go to Ninive the big city and say against her. Because their evil has risen to my face”.

¹⁶ De Luca has been vehemently criticized for his translations and especially for his obscure style. In September of 1996 the Italian newspapers *La Stampa* and *Il Corriere della Sera* featured a feud between De Luca himself and Hebrew professor Carlo Zaccagnini (see Swennen Ruthenberg, “From Kohelet/Ecclesiastes to Mondedidio”). Although the accusations referred to De Luca’s *Qohelet*, the same stylistic features under criticism are also present in *Giona/Ionà*, as we are about to see.

¹⁷ See Kadiu, *Reflexive Translation Studies*, 71.

¹⁸ To give a sense of the language, I adopt De Luca’s own strategy of hyper-literal translation, which comes at the expense of fluidity. In her recent *Reflexive Translation Studies*, Silvia Kadiu presents four major theorists and practitioners of translation by translating parts of their seminal studies in ways that are consistent with the theoretical stands of each author. The outcome is as daring as it is idiosyncratic: for instance, Kadiu reproduces Susan Bassnett’s dialogic take with a translation into French of her famous article “Writing and Translating” in the form of an epistle that she writes back to Bassnett herself. Kadiu locates her practice of creative engagement between translator and translated author alongside Derrida’s translation of Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator”, which is a preface to the German philosopher’s own translation of Baudelaire. *Reflexive Translation Studies* is a work on the translation of translation theory – a much understudied subject, in Kadiu’s opinion – and employs reverse translation to discuss and showcase the positionality of the translator. Although this article wields the same method on two separate occasions, our aim is simply to provide a tool for readers that are not conversant in Italian or that wish to better grasp De Luca’s very personal work.

¹⁹ De Luca, *Giona/Ionà*, 23-24.

3 And Ionà woke up to flee to Tarshish away from the face of Iod and went down to Iafò and found a boat that goes to Tarshish and he gave his fare and descended on it to go with them to Tarshish away from the face of Iod.]

De Luca's style can be thus summarized:

a. spelling: an unconventional use of proper names: "Ionà," with a correct transliteration of the original Hebrew, instead of the more common "Giona";²⁰ the same happens with the city "Tarshish," typically spelt "Tarsis," or "Iafò," instead of "Giaffa"; most notably, the name of God is replaced by the first letter of the tetragrammaton "Iod," replicating the Jewish tradition of not pronouncing the unfathomable name;

b. vocabulary and idioms: a reproduction of constructs that, albeit standard in the source language, sound either wrong or clumsy in Italian. For instance, the opening clause [verb to be + infinitive], an ordinary phrasing in narrative texts, is translated literally, in lieu of a more intelligible "and x happened." The term "face" (which the Hebrew registers three times) would be omitted in standard Italian, especially in the idiom "salire/venire fino a qualcuno", which does exist in the same sense of reaching someone, but that has no mention of "face";

c. syntax: many structures of Hebrew are mimicked, irrespective of the fact that they might be downright wrong in Italian. For instance: the preservation of the so-called dative of possession: "the word was to Ionà," instead of "Ionà received the word." In the second verse there is a change in personal pronouns, from "her" (the city, feminine both in Italian and in Hebrew) to "them" with a *concordantia ad sensum*, referring to the entire population of Nineveh. A more patent transgression of Italian grammar is the relative clause "(barca) che va," with the verb in the present tense, irrespective of the fact that the syntactic context would demand a past tense: De Luca, however, wants to keep the present participle of the Hebrew.²¹

²⁰ Interestingly enough, the book cover uses both terms, probably to help readers (and buyers) figure out the content of the book.

²¹ One may wonder why De Luca did not opt for the Italian present participle, which would have the advantage of being perfectly literal and archaic at the same time in

As we can see, De Luca favors a foreignizing approach to translation, which he in fact describes as a calque.²² His admitted goal is to uphold as much as possible of the lexical and syntactic fabric of the original at the expense of the target language. As a consequence, the Italian is thoroughly bent or, if we prefer, Hebraicized: “[T]he translation of this little book is extremist out of obstinacy to be subservient to the Hebrew language, the mother tongue of our sacred history.”²³

Other editorial choices confirm that De Luca regards translation as an approximation to the original. The interlinear translation with the Hebrew text in bigger font size literally makes space on the page for the Otherness represented by the original language and its script.²⁴

contemporary language. The oddity of the relative clause is regrettably lost in the English gerund.

²² See Montel-Hurlin, “Entrare nella scrittura sacra”, 61. A preliminary comparison with other translators that like De Luca opt for a rigorous transposition of Hebrew structures and idioms yields interesting results. Especially at the syntactic level, De Luca is probably the most radical in twisting the target language. For instance, he translates literally the construct [infinitive absolute + conjugated form of the same verb] by simply repeating the verb twice, as opposed to the practice of adding adverbs such as “certainly” to signal a specificity that lacks an equivalent in many Indo-European languages. In French, Henri Meschonnic (*Les Cinq Rouleaux*) inserts the same awkward repetition; in German, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig (*Die Schrift*) find their way around by mimicking the false starts and repetitions common in spoken language. Things would be more straightforward with the so-called transferred/turned pronoun, i.e., a repetition of pronouns that, when subject to a calque, is downright incorrect in either French, German, or Italian (e.g., *the guy whom I love him is Indonesian). In this case only De Luca does not shy away from endorsing it in his translation. Meschonnic, Buber and Rosenzweig do not. These two examples are taken respectively from *Ruth* 2:8 and 2:2. In one instance *Giona/Ionà* gives up the practice of calquing (4:3): here De Luca intervenes on the comparative form of adjective to make it intelligible for his reader. In biblical Hebrew only the second term of comparison signals the comparison, with no adverb or modifier (e.g., *more* interesting). Dutifully, De Luca admits this breach in the note (*Giona/Ionà*, 39).

²³ De Luca, *Giona/Ionà*, 8.

²⁴ The two texts are practically identical, with minor differences in the use of definite articles. As is often the case with books that juxtapose languages with different conventions of writing (in our case, from left to right or from right to left), the page sequence becomes an issue. The *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, for instance,

On a very practical level, the addition of a second translation thickens the otherwise very flimsy booklet, approximately counting for one third of the ninety pages of *Giona/Ionà*. However, although printing necessities should not be dismissed, we can safely assume that only a very select number of readers can actually read the Hebrew text. This suggests that the choice is aesthetic more than linguistic, a transparent reminder that what we are reading is only a reflection of an unobtainable Urtext that can be summoned but not directly enjoyed.²⁵ And yet, the interlinear format is indicative of something else. Translations that visually juxtapose source text and translation are still popular in Italy for language instruction, especially for Latin and ancient Greek (or at least used to be before online tools began to offer alternatives). De Luca is trying to reproduce for his reader the stages and the methods of a learning experience, one that requires a recursive perusal of the original text. In doing so, De Luca is inserting both himself and his audience in the chain of transmission that stretches through centuries and that results in the establishment of the Bible as a form of civilization in textual shape.

In several interviews and statements on his work – the so-called epitexts of translation studies²⁶ – De Luca presents his *modus translandi*, which is as austere as the bare hyperliteralism he offers to his readers. Talking about the tools of his work, he claims to employ only the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), the monolingual edition of the Hebrew Bible that only registers variants in manuscript tradition.²⁷ Allegedly,

reads from right to left even in the introductory pages in English, German, French, Spanish, and Latin; instead, De Luca's *Giona/Ionà* preserves the left to right structure in the entire book.

²⁵ Looking at De Luca's overall production as a translator, Montel-Hurlin posits a "diffraction of readers" ("Entrare nella scrittura sacra", 62) that entails a specialist as well as a non-specialist reader. Montel-Hurlin aptly highlights the change in publishing houses: sometimes major ones (e.g., *Giona/Ionà*, with Feltrinelli), sometimes minor (e.g., Psalm 2, with Filema). As for his readers, De Luca acknowledges that he generally overestimates the acquaintance people have with biblical narratives (*Giona/Ionà*, 9).

²⁶ Toledano Buendía, "Listening to the Voice of the Translator", 149.

²⁷ The *Stuttgartensia* comes with a general introduction in multiple languages, but no companion nor commentary to the individual books. De Luca speaks of BHS

De Luca does not consult dictionaries, be they mono- or bilingual. Relying on the paucity of words registered in Biblical Hebrew, he only uses concordances because they “allow to take a tour around a specific word and reproduce its biography,”²⁸ a strategy that is fully consistent with an understanding of the Bible as a unitarian product.²⁹ The strict and unwelcoming hyperliteralism of De Luca’s translation is thus supported by a similar regimen of unmediated access to the original: the unannotated, unabridged *Stuttgartensia* and the impervious concordances of Biblical Hebrew, although previous critics and former translators are occasionally given credit for some of the interpretations provided.³⁰ De Luca poses as a practitioner for whom language is an organic literary and collective institution that becomes the repository of an entire culture. The keys to the micro-text are in the macro-text and in its language: if we really want to know about Jonah, we ought to look at the whole Bible and at the entire corpus of Hebrew language. The teeming footnote apparatus that we are about to consider feeds off of this connection and constitutes the firmest *trait d’union* between the linguistic and the exegetical moment which cannot in De Luca’s mind be severed.

in affectionate terms: “Its neatly-shaped characters are dear to me, and so is the reading direction that goes from right to left, or the way pages flip backwards, if we compare to our usage. Over the years, that book has become my intimacy” (*Una nuvola come tappeto*, 11).

²⁸ Montel-Hurlin, ““Entrare nella scrittura sacra””, 61.

²⁹ De Luca makes this point in Pier Paolo Giarolo’s documentary *Tradurre* (Jolefilm, 2008), where he is interviewed with other professional translators. The connection between the scarcity of vocabulary and the use of concordances is as fascinating as it is misleading. Like other Semitic languages, Hebrew is root-based, meaning that once we know the meaning of a root (e.g., k.t.v. for “write”), we can almost always infer the meaning of cognates (e.g., dictate, i.e., make someone write; correspond, i.e., to write to each other; and even desk, i.e., the place of writing). De Luca does not disclose this very intuitive (and fundamental) feature of the language, which is all the more surprising given that he does draw back from discussing very technical issues of the Hebrew language elsewhere in his notes.

³⁰ See De Luca, *Giona/Ionà*, 28.

3. Translation as midrash

Besides being constantly reminded that what we are reading is a translation, through the cracks of the fragmented Italian of *Giona/Ionà* we can sense the Semitic origin of the text. Although hyperliteralism might well be the most prominent feature of De Luca's translation, it is hardly the most visible. As we skim through the book, we constantly see one- to two thirds of the space taken up by a thick layer of ninety-one footnotes that interrupt the flow of the mere forty-eight lines that make up the brief book. We witness a visual dichotomy between the two levels: De Luca's commentary is subservient to the main text and consonantly comes in smaller font and at the bottom of the page; and yet, the commentary clearly outweighs the text commented upon.

Before mapping the typology of interventions, we need to register the steep stylistic gap between the translation and the commentary. The sort of interlingua that De Luca creates molding his Italian against the original Hebrew is substituted by a highly poetic and ornate language. Here is the apparatus that comments only the first line of *Jonah*:

[E¹ fu la parola di Iod² a Ionà³ figlio di Amittai per dire]

¹ E: la frase ebraica inizia volentieri con la congiunzione. Anche un libro può esordire così, come parte di un discorso che lo ha preceduto e che continuerà dopo la sua ultima frase. È il residuo commosso che una tradizione di racconto a voce lascia alla scrittura, sua nipotina.

² Iod è il mio modo di pronunciare la sigla di Dio detta tetragramma perché formata da quattro lettere. La prima di esse è appunto "iod", la più piccola delle lettere dell'alfabeto ebraico, appena un apostrofo. Secondo una tradizione kabbalistica essa entra nella costruzione di tutte le altre lettere.

³ Ionà figlio di Amittai è citato nel secondo libro dei re. (14, 25)³¹

[And¹ was the word of Iod² onto Ionà³ son of Amittai to say:

¹ And: the Hebrew sentence gladly starts with a conjunction. Even a book can inaugurate this way, as a part of a conversation that came before it and that will

³¹ De Luca, *Giona/Ionà*, 23.

continue after its last sentence. It is the emotional residue of a tradition of a story telling delivered by voice passed down to writing, its little grandchild.

² Iod is my way to utter God's acronym, called the etragrammaton because it is made of four letters. The first one is precisely "iod", the tiniest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, just an apostrophe. According to one Kabalistic tradition, it is part of the formation of all other letters.

³ Ionà son of Amittai is mentioned in the second book of Kings. (14, 25)]

The metamorphosis is radical and personal: Hebrew is a living being, with a parental lineage that links its oral and its written form; it is endowed with emotions ("residuo commosso") and intentions ("inizia volentieri"). The translator does not shy away even from abruptly breaking the fourth wall, by saying that "Iod" is his own way to pronounce the unfathomable name of God.

De Luca's notes fall into two major categories. The first one is broadly stylistic, encompassing issues of form, history of language, and vocabulary. We find observations on the sound patterns that in the original reproduce the drowning and the panting of Jonah once his fellow sailors throw him into the sea (30-31). We are also acquainted with problems of lexicography, such as the botanical *vexata quaestio* of the *kikaion*, the plant that in the last chapter provides some relief for Jonah in the sweltering heat of Nineveh but that wilts prematurely, leaving Jonah in an even darker despair;³² at times, De Luca solves a *crux desperationis* drawing from his own experience: as a man of the South, he feels entitled to settle the dispute over the qualification of the wind as *harashit*, a term that can both mean scorching or stilling/hushing (41).³³ The commentator gets even more technical, as he discusses issues of historical linguistics, hinting at the century-long stratification of the text: commenting on Jonah's cry against Adonai

³² *Kikaion* is a hapax legomenon in the Bible that leaves interpreters at a loss when it comes to the actual identification of the plant (see Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love*, 169; De Luca, *Giona/Ionà*, 39-40).

³³ De Luca endorses the latter solution, as did Rashi of Troyes (1040-1105), probably the most famous Jewish commentator that readers of the Bible to this day regularly consult. De Luca does not mention his name in the note (see also Montel-Hurlin, "Entre ré-écriture et re-présentation bibliques", § 4).

from within the sea monster – a poetic lament that is still part of the liturgy of Yom Kippur – De Luca highlights that the language of the section is significantly more archaic than the rest of the book into which it is grafted.³⁴ A specific sub-category of linguistic intervention indulges in a personification of the Hebrew language, as we could see right at the beginning, where the proclitic conjunction *vav* – again, a staple of narrative prose – is the “emotional remainder” of oral storytelling, whose “tiny grandchild” is writing. Above all, this kind of observation well captures the aestheticization of language that De Luca carries on.³⁵

The second category of intervention deals with intertextuality. At the end of chapter 2, we are reminded of an interesting coincidence: besides men and women, in the Hebrew Bible God speaks only to the snake of *Genesis* and to the whale of *Jonah* (which, in the original, is simply *dag gadol*, a big fish). Sometimes intertextuality is more disguised: for instance, the name “Jonah” literally translates as “dove.” For De Luca, this coincidence automatically puts Jonah in dialogue with Noah, the patriarch that thanks to that bird could find out that the world was safe after the deluge.³⁶ Interestingly enough, De Luca often yields to the Jewish practice of gematria, i.e., the numerical interpretation of scripture. The number corresponding to Jonah is seventy-one, which is the sum of the value of Nineveh and that of the sea (“yam”) or, alternatively, the big fish in the story. This arithmetical gymnastics typifies the clash between translation and commentary in De Luca: on the one hand, we have the quasi-scientific approach to the language (shaped by the use of the *Stuttgartensia* and biblical concordances) that resulted in a challenging hyperliteralism; on the other hand, in De

³⁴ De Luca anticipated this point earlier in the first introduction, where he very intuitively compared the stylistic hiatus of Jonah’s lament to a sudden juxtaposition of Dante Alighieri and Alessandro Manzoni, the 19th-century author of *The Betrothed*. *E contrario*, he reiterates the same point highlighting a grammatical form in Jonah 1:7 that belongs to late Biblical Hebrew. Unlike the Dante/Manzoni analogy, this remark is unexpectedly erudite. One may wonder whether De Luca is reaching out to a selected niche of his readership (e.g., advanced students of Hebrew) or instead he is trying to establish his authority as commentator.

³⁵ Here are other examples: the present participle is “the tense of compassion” (De Luca, *Giona/Ionà*, 24 and 27); the particle “na” mitigates the imperative” (38).

³⁶ De Luca, *Giona/Ionà*, 8 and 33; see also Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love*, 135-137.

Luca's hermeneutical toolbox we have a quintessential instrument of mystical exegesis: which is all the more surprising for someone who claimed to be a secular reader of Scripture.³⁷

The very different voices of the translator and the commentator leave us wondering about the relationship between the two. Sardin proposes that we go past the classification of notes based on their place on the page and the time of fruition on the part of readers; instead, she recommends a taxonomy that distinguishes between exegetical and meta-translational notes.³⁸ Exegetical notes comment and expand on the content and the cultural background; meta-translational notes bring language to the foreground and denounce the shortcomings or the *impossibilia* of translation (for instance explaining puns or, in our case, the phonic aspect of the original). Exegetical notes showcase a dialogue between translation and source text, thereby blurring the gap between the two, since we use the one to gain a better understanding of the other. Quite the opposite, meta-translational notes unveil linguistic frictions that the translator is not able to solve without the help of a footnote.

With a pun of her own making, Sardin concludes that this kind of intervention “dénote et détonne en même temps” the source text,³⁹ at the same time exposing and imploding the job of the translator. True to its Derridean inspiration, the opposition denote/detonate is illusory, as De Luca perfectly demonstrates. Once the translator has allotted the prime spot to the biblical text, the commentator can let loose and chime in profusely: in his targum of *Jonah*, De Luca keeps a low profile and hides behind his uncouth Italian calque of a Hebrew text; in his midrash of *Jonah*, he counteracts his own minimalism with a host of highly personal interventions. There is no sharp boundary between exegetical

³⁷ Gematria becomes an obsession in *Ruth*, where De Luca chases every possible instance to connect the main character of the book with her Davidic and therefore messianic lineage. This kind of numerical interpretation confirms the centrality of the original text for De Luca, since every letter, and not just every word, is conducive to a larger meaning. This is why *Ruth* (but also *Giona/Ionà*) opens with a conversion chart of letters to numbers, so that readers can see for themselves what gematria is about. For an introduction to the practice of gematria, its history and its use, see Karesh and Mitchell, *Encyclopedia of World Religions*, 169.

³⁸ Sardin, “De la note du traducteur comme commentaire”, §1-3.

³⁹ Sardin, “De la note du traducteur comme commentaire”, §17.

and meta-translational notes, just as there is no real divide between the bare translation and the overabundant commentary that goes with it: simply, one serves at the pleasure of the other; rather than a dystonic clash, what we see is a synergy between the two layers and the two personas.

Taking advantage of the phraseology of “tradurre,” De Luca crafts his own *jeu de mots* to capture the nature of his art. The Italian verb is the equivalent of “translate” but also holds the original nuance of physical movement in the expression “tradurre in carcere,” i.e., transfer someone to jail. The freedom of movement is thus collapsed onto the archetypal loss of freedom.⁴⁰ If we dwell on the legal image, we could say that the bare literalism of the translator is the alibi for the commentator and, most importantly, the suture between the austere interpreter and the ornate writer. As we know, after the first translation with its footnote apparatus comes the second, interlinear translation; after that, one of the many re-writings of the myth of Jonah, the first of several, possibly countless interactions with the Urtext. After the targum and the midrash comes the haggadah.

4. Translation as haggadah

The metaphor of incarceration resonates loud and clear in the final section of *Giona/Ionà*, which presents a dialogue between the main character and an unknown Aher, about whom nothing is said.⁴¹ Tellingly, the title reads “Indagine su un venditore di colombe. Dialogo tra Ionà e un inquisitore” [Investigation over a dove seller. Dialogue between Ionà and an inquisitor]. Aher acts as a police officer that asks pointed questions to assess the charges against Jonah and keeps the witness focused whenever he goes astray.⁴² The scene encapsulates much of

⁴⁰ That Jonah is the prisoner was already clear in *Una nuvola come tappeto*, where we read: “It is difficult to be a fugitive when one is chased by God. Jonah gives himself up to the elements that have come to put him under arrest, the waves, the sea giants. One of them takes him into custody inside his digestive tract” (104-105).

⁴¹ Swennen Ruthenberg rightly points at Leopardi’s *Operette morali* as a possible model (Swennen Ruthenberg, “Dal mare di Giona alle macerie di Babele”, 21).

⁴² The scene opens with a laconic “Let’s start with personal information: name, occupation, address” (De Luca, *Giona/Ionà*, 75). Aher warns Ionà not to beat

what De Luca told us in the translation (which he occasionally quotes verbatim), in the commentary, as well as the two introductions at the beginning of the book.

The main accusation against Jonah is his silence in the face of God's repeated question about his frustration over the thwarted destruction of Nineveh. Jonah cannot make peace with the fact that God upended his life to deliver a prophecy that would not be fulfilled. De Luca's fictional Jonah does not complain about the salvation of the city, he laments the useless upheaval of his quiet existence:

Sono uno che voleva essere nessuno nella storia del mondo, nessuno. Non è un'aspirazione di tutti, ma era la mia. Ho sempre avuto ripugnanza per la vanità delle ribalte, ogni notorietà che trascina un nome per le bocche era per me una diffamazione. [...] Volevo custodire la mia piccola reputazione, uno di cui dire con affetto che faceva pagare poco le colombe. Eccomi invece spedito a gridare il finimondo per il corpo di una città a forma di donna, bella da far perdere la testa, eccomi strillone di notizie false innanzi ai te, zimbello di una sentenza annullata, ecco finite in un libro le mie avventure involontarie e prescritte.⁴³

[I am someone who wanted to be nobody in the history of the world, just a nobody. It is not everyone's aspiration, but it was mine. I've always had a distaste for the vanity of the limelight, any form of fame that drags a name for mouth to mouth was a defamation to me. (...) I wanted to preserve my little reputation, one people could say with affection that made pay little for doves. Here I am, instead, sent to cry doomsday to the body of a city that has the shape of a woman, beautiful enough to make you lose your mind. Here I am, a banner of fake news before you, a laughingstock of a sentence that was cancelled. The adventures that were imposed on me and that I didn't want became a book.]

It is tempting to read these lines as a confession of De Luca himself: a self-described everyman that rose to fame on the Italian scene of letters and politics. For our purposes, though, it is another level of

around the bush (78) and when the witness does not comply, he yells: "[W]hat a daydreamer! Just tell me what happened" (81).

⁴³ De Luca, *Giona/Ionà*, 82-83.

identification that is worth considering. The fictional Jonah is a seller of birds (doves, as etymology mandates) that pilgrims sacrifice at the temple. During Aher's interrogation, the humble merchant that just wants to be left alone interjects his deposition with quotations from scriptures and the Talmud, teaching us (again) the virtues of numerical interpretation, among other things. The oddity of a manual worker that talks like a philologist makes the scene stylistically uneven, unless De Luca is intentionally staging a battle that has not seen (nor perhaps ever will) a clear winner. Aher's abrupt interruptions and harsh replies to Jonah's at times verbose statements all but reiterate the stylistic and philosophical clash between the textual agencies that they stand for.

In and of itself, *Indagine* is a statement on translation. The succinct Aher parallels the dry, factual, and hyperliteral targum; the fictional Jonah reproduces the effusive midrash of the footnote apparatus, both of which are extensively quoted. The choice of the theatrical over a narrative form hypostatizes the lack of mediation between the two interlocutors: the two approaches are in dialogue and either position stands strong and irreconcilable with the other. This is the original core of De Luca's own discomfort with his work: if translation is tantamount to incarceration, he is at the same time a warden and a prisoner. In his capacity as a guard, he has control over the inmate (the text); in turn, the convict holds him hostage by never letting him go, because translation never ends. There are two ways out of this sentence: first, an incessant revision of one's work, which results in multiple introductions, translations, and apparatuses. Second, a moral commitment to storytelling. In 612 BCE Nineveh would abruptly fall: telling her story becomes a soothing consolation, as Aher himself admits at the end of the dialogue (87).⁴⁴

⁴⁴ If Swennen Ruthenberg is right in maintaining a formal lineage that connects De Luca to Leopardi (see "Dal mare di Giona alle macerie di Babele", note 23), ultimately the spirit that animates De Luca's commitment to Jonah goes back to another prominent figure of Italian literature in the same period. In 1807 Ugo Foscolo wrote a long poem, solemnly entitled *Carme dei Sepolcri*. In the closing section, he imagines Greek poet Homer wandering around the ashes of Troy interrogating the urns of those who perished: "Il sacro vate,/placando quelle afflitte alme col canto,/i Prenci Argivi eternerà per quante/abbraccia terre il gran padre Oceàno" [the sacred bard, soothing those afflicted souls with his song/will make

Indeed, for De Luca the rewriting never stops: translation yields to commentary, and commentary to new narrative and poetic reconfigurations. In the theater piece *L'ultimo viaggio di Sinbad* the Jewish prophet is evoked and merged into the figure of the famous hero of the *Arabian Nights* and that of many other men and women of sea:

Ho scritto [...] di un Sinbad di Mediterraneo, un marinaio più insonne che immortale, coetaneo del mare di Giona, il profeta inghiottito vivo dalla balena, e dal mare degli emigranti italiani del millenovecento, inghiottiti vive dalle Americhe.⁴⁵

[I wrote (...) about a Sinbad of the Mediterranean, a sailor who is more sleepless than he is immortal, who has the same age as the sea of Jonah, the prophet was swallowed alive by the whale and by the same sea of Italian migrants in the twentieth century, they too swallowed alive by the Americas.]

In this piece Sinbad/Jonah has now become – *mala tempora currunt* – a smuggler of migrants, that is nonetheless still capable of empathy. In it, the author recuperates the episode of a mother crying the death of her child at sea (41-2) that he had penned earlier in the collection of poems *Opera sull'acqua*.⁴⁶ Every story hides a crime and every character is a culprit. Just like Aher, we must interrogate them to get to the truth. *Nomen omen*, Aher is Hebrew for both “other” and “after”: a metonymy for us all, the diverse and posthumous tiles of a Mediterranean civilization.⁴⁷

the Greek princes eternal/over all the lands that Ocean, our great father, embraces] (Foscolo, *Opere. Tomo I*, 326-327).

⁴⁵ De Luca, *L'ultimo viaggio*, 3.

⁴⁶ De Luca, *Opera sull'acqua e altre poesie*, 71-75.

⁴⁷ For a different interpretation of the name Aher, see Swennen Ruthenberg, “From Kohelet/Ecclesiastes to Mondedidio”, 21.

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