Reception studies and the material text transfer

Comparative literary studies now concur on the importance and role of translation in promoting literary reception. In the English tradition, characterised by the translator’s ‘invisibility’, that is to say, by the preference for domestication of foreign texts, literary translations have often become a metonymy for the source text; references to Harington’s ‘Ariosto’, Dryden’s ‘Virgil’, Chapman’s or Pope’s ‘Homer’, far from foregrounding the translator’s role, were received as the very voice of the author. Henry Francis Cary’s translation performed a similar role for Dante in British Romanticism: not only did he choose to foreground his domesticating strategy by changing the title of the translation, *The Vision* instead of *The Divine Comedy*, but he also consistently adopted translating strategies that could make the poem acceptable to the received norms of his readership. While doing so, Cary also intended to reject Henry Boyd’s freer complete translation of the poem. His approach is therefore extremely interesting as an example of the changing expectations and norms of translation in the Romantic period. As Lawrence Venuti points out, ‘by the end of the 18th century, the theories and practices of English-language translation were thus riddled with the contradictory values that characterised modernity’. The ambiguities of Cary’s translating practice are characteristic of his belonging to a period of transition in which aesthetic norms were in the process of being challenged without being completely abolished. As Marshall Brown points out, ‘no longer the inspired representatives of divine order, and not yet Arnoldian pedagogues, Romantic authors have their own, multiple versions of authority’.

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With Cary’s translation, the *Divine Comedy* becomes one of the texts Romantic poets and critics can rewrite or, rather write upon. As the second section of this book argues, *The Vision* becomes a palimpsest erased and recomposed by English poets and critics for their own ends; Keats, Shelley and Blake used it as a replacement of the *Divine Comedy*, inscribed it, but also erased it to rediscover Dante’s own text and his language.

This chapter aims to understand the role that *The Vision* played in the Romantic reception of Dante. Following the approach outlined by the descriptive study of literary translations, the focus is on the translation itself and its effects on the receiving culture. This clarification cannot ignore the fact that any approach to translations involves a comparative and therefore an interdisciplinary approach. A translation mediates between two cultures and two languages as well as between two or more historical periods. Furthermore, this process of mediation is only partly the translator’s responsibility: publishers, reviewers and critics play an essential role in the promoting or discrediting of the translated text. This complexity explains perhaps why the reception of Dante in Britain has already been approached from a variety of perspectives, without completely exhausting the subject. The recent development of descriptive translation studies explains why the first comprehensive study of *The Vision* has only just appeared: Crisafulli’s monograph is a multifaceted, interdisciplinary study of Cary’s translation, its poetic and translation strategies and, more importantly, the translator’s ideological interventions. It goes without saying that Crisafulli’s study has influenced my approach to *The Vision*, as will be acknowledged throughout this chapter. However, my approach to Cary’s translation is different and to some extent complementary to Crisafulli: my focus is more exclusively on the stylistic and linguistic aspects of *The Vision* foregrounded by the English Romantic poets and critics. How did *The Vision* influence the Romantics’ understanding of Dante? What literary processes did it influence? Why did Cary decide to translate the *Divine Comedy*? Trying to answer these questions, our approach intends to understand and foreground Cary’s intervention in the Romantic reception of Dante.

**Literary translation and its theory: Cary and his contemporaries**

In order to understand Cary’s translating practice it is important to comprehend the late eighteenth-century approach to translating poetry.