

Articoli/8:

«From Translation All Science Had It's Of-spring»: John Florio and the Monstrous Birth of Knowledge

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Abstract: This paper looks at John Florio's comments on translation — especially in the *Epistle Dedicatorie* and *To the Curteous Reader* of his 1603 translation of Montaigne's *Essayes* — and examines the extent to which Florio conceived of translation as a monstrous birth of knowledge. Crucial to this exploration are a remark of Florio's friend Giordano Bruno that claimed science, or knowledge, was the offspring of translation; Florio's definition of *móstro* from his 1598 Italian-English dictionary *A Worlde of Wordes*; and some of Montaigne's remarks about the multiplicity and hybridity of both the essay form and the self. What emerges is a compelling nexus coming out of Bruno's idea of translation, enacted by Florio: a monstrous birth of words, worlds, and selves — multiple languages, multiple sciences, multiple offspring.

John Florio's translation of Montaigne was published in London by Edward Blount in 1603. The remarkable Florio (1553-1625), in addition to being a translator, was a language tutor to powerful nobles, especially Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, and Queen Anne of Denmark, James I's wife, whom he also served as Groom of the Privy Chamber from 1604 until her death in 1619.¹ His conversation and grammar books — *Florio His firste Frutes* (1578) and *Florios Second Frutes* (1591) — provided the English-speaking world access to the Italian language, and he was the compiler of the first lengthy Italian-English dictionaries, *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598) and *Queen Anna's New World of Words* (1611). Less well known is that he translated King James's *Basilikon Doron* into Italian² and probably was the first to translate Boccaccio's *Decameron* into English³. He was almost certainly

¹ See F. Yates, *John Florio: The Life of an Italian in Shakespeare's England*, 1934; rpt. New York 1968, pp. 246-64.

² See F. Yates, *John Florio*, cit., pp. 248-345.

³ See H.G. Wright, *The First English Translation of the "Decameron"* (1620) Cambridge, Mass. 1953, esp. pp. 257-63. See also M. Wyatt, *The Italian Encounter with Tudor England: A Cultural Politics of Translation*, Cambridge 2005: «Florio's 1620 English translation of the *Decameron* was made with the 1582 revisionist edition

the English poet Samuel Daniel's brother in law, and he befriended Giordano Bruno when «the Nolan» visited England to lecture on Copernicanism and his theory of multiple worlds at Oxford in the 1580s⁴. In fact, in the second dialogue of Bruno's *Cena de le ceneri* (*The Ash Wednesday Supper*, 1584), Bruno tells the story of exchanging songs from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* with Florio as they rode on a boat towards a dinner party at the house of the Elizabethan intellectual Fulke Greville⁵.

Florio's was indeed «a world of words», and his comments about translation at the beginning of his Montaigne edition's «To the curteous Reader» address anxieties about the very act of verbal «conversion»:

Shall I apologize translation? Why but some holde (as for their freehold) that such conversion is the subversion of Universities. God holde with them, and withholde them from impeach or empaire. It were an ill turne, the turning of Bookes should be the overturning of Libraries⁶.

Universities and Libraries might be subverted and overturned, the arguments ran, because vernacular translations could undermine humanist classical education; because the translators were largely Protestant and thus a threat to the medieval scholasticism of the universities; and because of the fear that pagan writings, spread through the vernacular, would undermine Christian teachings.⁷

Florio's immediate response to these arguments was to invoke his friend Bruno — who recently had been executed in Rome for heresy — in defense of *traduttione*: «*Yea but my olde fellow Nolano tolde me, and*

of Boccaccio's *novelle* issued by Leonard Salviati and a committee of Florentine editors under his supervision in one hand, and Antoine de Maçon's French translation for Marguerite de Navarre in the other» (p. 221).

⁴ Nolan, or «the Nolan», was Giordano Bruno's nickname for himself. The philosopher and polymath came from the town of Nola, near Naples. He and Florio spent time together at the French ambassador's house in London from 1583-85. For important accounts of Bruno's time in England, most of which include references to Florio, see W. Boulting, *Giordano Bruno: His Life, Thought, and Martyrdom*, New York 1916, pp. 81-180; Yates, *John Florio*, pp. 61-123; F. Yates, *Giordano Bruno's Conflict with Oxford*, in «Journal of the Warburg Institute», 1939 (2.3), pp. 227-42; Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Chicago 1964, 205-56; M. Feingold, *Giordano Bruno in England, Revisited*, in «Huntington Library Quarterly», 67.3, 2004, pp. 329-46; I. D. Rowland, *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic*, New York 2008, pp. 132-87; and H. Gatti, *Essays on Giordano Bruno*, Princeton 2011, pp. 115-200.

⁵ See G. Bruno, *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, edited and translated by S. L. Jaki, The Hague and Paris 1975, p. 76. Florio's song comes from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, VIII. 76; Bruno's response from the same poem, XXVII. 117. Florio may also be the character Elitropio in Bruno's *Cause, Principle, and Unity* [*De la causa, principio, et uno*, 1584]. Bruno (Nolano) is named as one of the participants of the first dialogue in Florio's *Second Frutes*, and Bruno's ideas are everywhere in this book's twelfth and final dialogue, usually seen an extended meditation on and explication of the anti-Petrarchanism that Bruno revealed in the dedication of *The Heroic Frenzies* (*De gli eroici furori*, 1585), which in typically iconoclastic fashion contained a critique of Sir Philip Sidney's idealizing sonnets.

⁶ *To the curteous Reader, The Essayes of Montaigne*, translated by J. Florio, London 1603, sig. A5r.

⁷ See F. Yates, *John Florio*, p. 223.

taught publikely, that from translation all Science had it's of-spring»⁸. And in Florio's view the birth of Science, or knowledge, is a painful, even monstrous one. In his «Epistle Dedicatorie» to Lucy Countess of Bedford and her mother Lady Anne Harington, Florio discusses the Montaigne translation as a kind of difficult labor. His «last Birth»⁹, presumably his 1598 dictionary, was not so arduous as this one, which involved «my fainting, my labouring, my lang[u]ishing, my gasping for some breath»¹⁰. Fortunately, Florio had help from Theodore Diodati, who helped him navigate the «inextricable laberinth» of Montaigne's difficult passages, «dissolved these knottes» of text, and, «in these dark-uncouth wayes», provided «a cleare relucent light». He was also aided by Matthew Gwinne, who «so Scholler-like did...vndertake what Latine prose; Greeke, Latine, Italian or French Poesie should crosse my way» and was «in this bundle of riddles an vnderstanding *Oedipus*, in his perilous-crook't passage a monster-quelling *Theseus* or *Hercules*»¹¹.

Tom Conley has linked Florio's translation practices — these negotiations with «dark-uncouth wayes», «riddles», and «perilous-crook't» labyrinths where monsters lurk — to allegory:

Where Florio makes for a bombastic Montaigne, he still writes with the view that translation entails the problem of allegory, of turning away, of distorting, of exceeding, and not exactly of reproducing an original, or even respecting the existence of an original¹².

And Florio's own descriptions bear out this tension between the translation and the original:

What doe the best then, but gleane after others harvest? borrow their colours, inherite their possessions? What doe they but translate? perhaps, vsurpe? at least, collect? if with acknowledgement, it is well; if by stealth, it is too bad: in this, our conscience is our accuser; posteritie our iudge: in that our studie is our advocate, and you Readers our iurie¹³.

Gleaning, borrowing, even usurping, translators are potentially «bad» thieves of others' «possessions». The jury is out on whether they can be otherwise.

⁸ This remark of Bruno's was probably made in his Oxford lectures in 1583 because it is alluded to in a letter from "N.W." — who seems not to have been overly impressed by Bruno — to Samuel Daniel in Daniel's first publication, a translation of *The Worthy tract of Paulus Iouius* (1585): «You cannot forget that which *Nolanus* (that man of infinite titles among other phantasticall toyes) [t]ruely noted by chaunce in our Schooles, that by the helpe of translations, al Sciences had their offspring, and in my iudgement it is true. The *Hebrewes* hatched knowledge, *Greece* did nourish it, *Italie* clothed and beautified it, & the artes which were left as wards in their minoritie to the people of Rome, by Translators as most carefull Gardiners, are now deduced to perfect age and ripenesses» (sig. *iiii r-v).

⁹ *Epistle Dedicatorie, The Essayes*, sig. A2r.

¹⁰ *Epistle Dedicatorie, The Essayes*, sig. A2v.

¹¹ *Ivi*, sig. A3r.

¹² T. Conley, *Institutionalizing Translation: On Florio's Montaigne*, in S. Weber (ed.), *Demarcating the Disciplines: Philosophy, Literature, Art*, Minneapolis 1986, pp. 45-60: 48.

¹³ *To the curteous Reader, The Essayes*, sig. A5r-v.

This sense of wrenching away from the natural or original links translation not only to allegory but to the monstrous. And here Florio's dictionary is very helpful. In addition to the straightforward «To translate out of one tongue into another», *tradurre* includes the following definitions:

To bring, to turne, to conuert, to conuay from one place to another, to bring ouer [...] Also to bring, conuert or transport from one to another, to leade ouer, to displace and remoue from one place to another, to transpose¹⁴.

Translation can and usually does involve conversion and displacement.

The showing forth that is etymologically embedded in monstrosity shares a sense of this distortion and transposition. Florio's *móstro* is defined as

shewed, put to view, or declared. Also a monster or any deformed creature or misshapen thing that exceedeth, lacketh or is disordred in natural form, any thing done against the course of nature, a monstrous and incredible thing, a maruellous signe, a strange sight¹⁵.

Florio also linked the world of words to monstrous bodies in the «Epistle Dedicatorie» to his first dictionary:

And as *Tipocosmia* imaged by *Allesandro Cittolini*, and *Fabrica del mondo*, framed by *Francesco Alunno*, and *Piazza universale* set out by *Thomaso Garzoni* tooke their names of the universall worlde, in words to represent things of the world: as words are types of things, and euerie man by himselfe a little world in some resemblances; so thought she, she¹⁶ did see as great capacitie, and as meete method in this, as in those latter, and (as much as there might be in Italian and English) a modell of the former, and therefore as good cause so to entitle it. *If looking into it, it looke like the Sporades, or scattered Ilands, rather then one well-ioynted or close-ioyned bodie, or one coherent orbe: your Honors knowe, an armie ranged in files is fitter for muster, then in a ring; and iewels are sooner found in seuerall boxes, then all in one bagge*¹⁷.

Translation's monstrosity is even more complicated when connected to the essay—a monstrous literary form of bits and pieces stitched together from multiple texts.¹⁸ Montaigne recognizes the prodigious sense of his chosen form at the beginning of «Of Friendship» (1.28; 1.27 in Florio):

And what are these my compositions in truth, other then antique workes, and monstrous bodies, patched and hudled-vp together of divers

¹⁴ J. Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes*, London 1598, p. 426.

¹⁵ J. Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes*, p. 234.

¹⁶ The “she, she” here is Florio's patron, Lucy, Countess of Bedford.

¹⁷ J. Florio, *Epistle Dedicatorie, A Worlde of Wordes*, a5r; [italic emphasis mine].

¹⁸ See *To the curteous Reader, The Essayes*: “Why but Essayes are but mens school-themes pieced together; you might as wel say, several texts.” In defense, Florio offers a judgment on Montaigne's employment of the genre: “Al is in the choise & handling” (sig. A5v).

members, without any certaine or well ordered figure, having neither order, dependencie, or proportion but casuall and framed by chaunce?¹⁹

In another essay, «Of the inconstancie of our actions» (2.1), Montaigne argues that — like the text he is piecing together — human beings are patchwork things, inevitably multiple and diverse, and Florio's language makes the connection clear:

Our matters are but parcells hudled-vp, and peeces patched together, and we endeavour to acquire honour by false meanes, and vntrue tokens.... We are all framed of flappes and patches, and of so shapelesse and diverse a contexture, that everie peece, and everie moment playeth his part. And there is as much difference found betweene vs and our selves as there is betweene ourselves and other. *Magnam rem puta, vnum hominem agere. Esteeme it a great matter, to play but one man.*²⁰

Florio's copious world of words has found the ideal literary form and subject:

If I speake diversly of my selfe it is because I looke diversly vpon my selfe. All contrarieties are found in hir, according to some turne or remooving, and in some fashion or other. Shamefast, bashfull, insolent, chaste, luxurious, peevisch, prating, silent, fond, doting, labourious, nice, delicate, ingenious, slowe, dull, froward, humorous, debonaire, wise, ignorant, false in words, true-speaking, both liberall, covetous, and prodigall. All these I perceive in some measure or other to bee in mine, according as I stirre or turne my selfe; And whosoever shall heedfully survay and consider himselfe, shall finde this volubilitie and discordance to be in himselfe, yea and in his very judgement. I haue nothing to say entirely, simply, and with soliditie of my selfe, without confusion, disorder, blending, mingling, and in one word, *Distinguo* is the most vniversall part of my logike²¹.

In a lovely paradox, Montaigne and Florio settle on «one word» that emphasizes the diversity and multiplicity of the self and the world.

While it may be folly even to attempt to link Bruno, Florio, and Montaigne under any kind of grand rubric, it is tempting nonetheless. Michael Wyatt has suggested that

One clear consequence of Florio's practice of *copia*—the layering-on of definitions which functions to provide as full a sense of a particular word's meanings as possible—is an opening-up of the potential of language to represent a multitude, we might almost say an infinity, of possible significations, a clear indication of Florio's relationship to the de-centered parameters of Bruno's philosophy²².

¹⁹ *Of Friendship* (1.28; 1.27 in Florio), *The Essayes*, pp. 89-90.

²⁰ *Of the inconstancie of our actions* (2.1), *The Essayes*, pp. 196-7. See also Seneca, *Epistulae Moralia*, CXX. 22.

²¹ *Of the inconstancie of our actions* (2.1), *The Essayes*, p. 195.

²² M. Wyatt, *The Italian Encounter*, cit., p. 243. See also his *Giordano Bruno's Infinite Worlds in John Florio's Worlds of Words*, in H. Gatti (ed.), *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher of the Renaissance*, Aldershot 2002, pp. 187-99: «it seems that a wider ambit of meaning should be posited for the 'worlds' of Florio's linguistic universe, one so importantly signed by Bruno's presence, 'worlds' that encompass the copious range

If we add to this Montaigne's de-centered sense of the self – the «dissolution of the notion of a single unified personality»²³ – we have a compelling nexus coming out of Bruno's idea of translation, enacted by Florio: a monstrous birth of words, worlds, and selves – multiple languages, multiple sciences, multiple offspring.

of words contained in *A World of Words* and *Queen Anna's New World of Words*, which in turn entail the political and cultural spaces of Italy and England, the demotic specificity of Bruno's Nola and the unbounded parameters of the cosmos he sought to delineate» (p. 199).

²³ R. A. Sayce, *The Essays of Montaigne: A Critical Exploration*, London 1972, p. 318.