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The Spirit and the Letter
Medico-Literary Uses of Translation (Lombroso and Nordau)

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Taking as a corpus two famous works of the late nineteenth century, Cesare Lombroso's *L'Uomo di genio* (1882)[1] and Max Nordau's *Entartung* (1892), I would like to focus on a particular type of translation which could be qualified as 'medico-literary'. This translation is based on a double phenomenon of adaptation and transposition which exemplifies what philosopher Isabelle Stengers calls a 'capture': an 'operation by which representatives of the so-called hard sciences' annex 'a notion or a problem culturally charged with meaning'.[2] The medico-literary translation indeed serves a clinical reading of literature, which supposes the passage of poetic or figurative language to be a symptomatic and often literal one.

This translation has, in itself, already been the subject of analyses, but they were essentially centred on the 'scientific ideologies' that the 'nomad concept' of degeneration has helped to constitute.[3] Translation was then only considered as an (unfaithful and biased) interpretation of the cited literature, regardless of any linguistic problem. My approach will be slightly different, as it will focus on a comparative study of the French and English translations of *L'Uomo di genio* and *Entartung*. I will not try to measure a degree of fidelity and its consequences on the reception of a theory, as it has been the case for *On the Origin of Species*, translated into French by Clémence Royer.[4] My ambition is more modest, but perhaps more revealing in the case of Nordau's and Lombroso's translations: by focusing on the status of literary quotations in these medical works, I would like to question the role played by translation in the rhetoric of these two texts written by theoreticians of degeneration.

Scientific spirit, letter of the text

A few reminders, to begin with, about the spirit that animated these two books on mental medicine. Since the work of the alienist Bénédict-Auguste Morel in 1857, degeneration had taken on the narrow meaning of 'sickly deviation from a primitive type' and quickly became part of the debates on the psychopathology of genius.[5] In *L'Uomo di genio*, the Turin forensic medicine professor Lombroso used the notion to support his theory of a direct correspondence between madness and genius, whereas his French predecessor, Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours, postulated a simple analogy in his *Psychologie morbide* (1859). Translated into French in 1889, then into English in 1891, *L'Uomo di genio* was responsible for a lasting controversy, making Lombroso the master of thought for those who conceived of literary creation as a source of inevitable physiological disorder. Despite the fact that Nordau dedicated *Entartung* to Lombroso, his own conception of genius was in fact opposed to that of the Italian scholar, since, for the Austro-Hungarian doctor, degeneration was not the stigma of genius, but the symptom of a more general deviance – a deviance expressed by the lifestyle and literature of his time, which commanded an unquestionable condemnation.[6] More in tune with the spirit of the times, Nordau's violent indictment against the fin de siècle spirit emanating from France (and in French in the original text), was translated very quickly: in 1894, in the supposed motherland of degeneration, and the following year in England.[7]

In *Entartung*, Nordau develops the technique of pathological portraiture (or 'pathography')[8] already used by Lombroso, but he inscribes it explicitly in a pamphleteering logic, to the point that his work can appear as a series of violently satirical 'characters', in the sense that La Bruyère uses this term. Quotations play a central role in these 'pathographies', insofar as they are treated as symptoms of the authors' mental state. In accordance with the 'principle' that 'writing is the living image of the mind',[9] the style, which fin-de-siècle medicine sees as a quasi-physiological expression, in fact tends to become the tangible document of a possible deviance. The medical portraits drawn by Lombroso and Nordau thus submit the metaphorical language of literature to the clinical reading they are supposed to validate. They constantly superimpose 'objective' symptoms (those

noted by doctors) and 'subjective' ones (those noted by writers, or which they constitute as such). For Nordau, for example, 'Zola's novels do not prove that things are badly managed in this world, but merely that Zola's nervous system is out of order'.[10] Even more significant is the portrait of the 'degenerate' Paul Verlaine, a portrait that stands out for its broad range: after disqualifying the poet by attacking his physical appearance in accordance with physiognomic theories, Nordau quotes Verlaine's work extensively to illustrate 'the loathsome condition of his mind'.[11] The poems 'Écrit en 1875' and 'Un conte' thus confirm, according to the doctor, that Verlaine's 'madly inordinate eroticism' is 'the special characteristic of his degeneration',[12] while the early poems of *Sagesse* demonstrate that 'religious fervour […] usually accompanies morbidly intensified eroticism'.[13]

This literal and biographical reading is also present in Lombroso's work, particularly in the portrait of Charles Baudelaire as 'the type of the lunatic possessed by the *Délire des grandeurs*'.[14] To support a semiology of degeneration, Lombroso converted poems such as 'Le Mauvais vitrier', from *Le Spleen de Paris* (1864), 'La Géante' and 'Une nuit que j'étais près d'une affreuse Juive…', from *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), into clinical documents. For the Italian anthropologist, their plot constitutes a collection of symptoms that allows him to turn the lyrical subject into a pathological one, thus participating in what the philosopher Frédéric Gros calls a 'clinic of expressive writing':[15]

> In childhood he was subject to hallucinations; and from that period, as he himself confessed, he experienced opposing sentiments; the horror and the ecstasy of life; he was hyperæsthetic and at the same time apathetic; he felt the necessity of freeing himself from 'an oasis of horror in a desert of *ennui*.' Before falling into dementia he committed impulsive acts; for instance, he threw pots from his house against shop windows for the pleasure of hearing them break. […] He loved ugly and horrible women, negresses, dwarfs, giantesses; to a very beautiful woman he expressed a desire that he might see her suspended by the hands to the ceiling that he might kiss her feet; and kissing the naked foot appears in one of his poems as the equivalent of the sexual act.[16]

The quotation of a line from Baudelaire's 'Le Voyage' was, in the Italian text, reproduced in the French,[17] whereas Lombroso's choices are most often towards a translation that narrativizes, as it were, Baudelaire's poetic work to make it the document of his life. In the rest of the portrait, for example, Lombroso translates 'À une heure du matin' to present Baudelaire as '[p]roud,

misanthropic, and apathetic'.[18] The English translation follows this model, and even extends it to the quotation from 'Le Voyage', which retains only one term in French: *ennui*. The English translator here is in fact faithful to Lombroso's medical-psychological approach, which favours a literal approach to the texts cited, and makes the translation necessary for an argument that in the end leaves little room for form or style.

Clinical virtues of the source text

The case of *Entartung* is much more complex. The German text generally follows the logic of systematic translation of its Italian model but uses quotations from the source texts several times. In the long portrait of Verlaine, Nordau translates the excerpts from 'La Nuit du Walpurgis classique' and 'Ariettes oubliées VIII' into prose, but he quotes in French the first stanza from 'Chevaux de bois':

> Tournez, tournez, bons chevaux de bois,
> Tournez cent tours, tournez mille tours,
> Tournez souvent et tournez toujours,
> Tournez, tournez au son des hautbois.[19]

The excerpts mentioned, however, all have the same function: to illustrate the 'rabâchage' [rehashings] (in French in the text) of a degenerate poet.[20] This is just as evident in 'Chevaux de bois' as it is in the verses of 'La Nuit du Walpurgis Classique', which Nordau chose to translate:

> Ein rhythmischer Sabbat, rhythmisch, äußerst rhythmisch.[21]
>
> Un rythmique sabbat, rythmique, extrêmement
> Rythmique…[22]

Another passage from *Entartung*, however, helps to understand what Nordau's logic might have been. When he tackles René Ghil, he also reproduces a long excerpt from the poem 'Le Meilleur devenir':

> Ouïs! ouïs aux nues haut et nues où
> Tirent-ils d'aile immense qui vire…
>
> et quand vide
> et vers les grands pétales dans l'air plus aride —

(et en le lourd venir grandi lent stridule et
Titille qui n'alentisse d'air qui dure, et!
grandie erratile et multiple d'éveils, stride
mixte, plainte et splendeur! la plénitude aride)

et vers les grands pétales d'agitations
lors évanouissait un vol ardent qui stride…

(des saltigrades doux n'iront plus vers les mers…)[23]

Nordau then precedes this quotation with a *nota bene* justifying his choice:

> Und René Ghil […] entlodt seiner Leier diese Töne, die ich französich anführen muß, erstens weil ihr Klang in der Übersetzung verloren ginge, und dann weil ich nicht hoffen kann, daß der Leser bei einer ehrlichen Übertragung ins Deutsche noch an meinen Ernst glauben würde.[24]

Translating into German the 'sounds' that Ghil 'draws from his lyre' would mean that they would lose their characteristics but would also risk making the translator lose his 'seriousness' ('Ernst') and credibility. Beyond the difficulty linked to the neologisms (which Nordau sometimes bypasses), it is therefore the inanity of the remarks that leads him to maintain this quotation in its original form, as if he refused to *touch* it.

Such a refusal is indeed as much a matter of ethical stance as of linguistic renunciation. The medical literature on deviants is accustomed to these effects of distancing, as Jean-Paul Aron and Roger Kempf have shown with regard to the '*invertis*' or homosexual men: the use of Latin, 'a dead language that defuses and sublimates desire', made it possible to introduce the filter of a 'translation' perceived as 'a happy medium between account and occultation'.[25] Samuel Tissot, the author of a famous work on onanism first published in Latin, thus confided in the preface to the first edition in French that 'this work' had been 'much more painful' because of the absence of a linguistic filter, and he confessed his 'embarrassment to express images whose terms and expressions are declared indecent by usage'.[26] This linguistic censorship in the name of morality was still practiced by doctors at the end of the century, including Dr Laupts (pseudonym of George Saint-Paul) and Dr Tardieu, both specialists in sexual deviance. To use a foreign language and, in the case of Latin, a scholarly language, is therefore to maintain a distance between the clinical fact

and its narrative in order to preserve the reader, but also the writer whose 'pen', to use a formula from the *Dictionnaire médical*, has thus 'remained chaste'.[27]

René Ghil's quotation in French has, in *Entartung*, more or less the same ethical function, although it reverses the role played by translation. By presenting the source text as untouchable, Nordau the doctor makes it an irrefutable clinical proof, and Nordau the polemicist an unspeakable document that he rejects without compromise: the quotation, which has here the value of a condemnation, allows Nordau to pose as a censor of the delirious elucubrations that the man of science must reproduce, but that the man himself can only reprove.

The presence of this untranslated quotation also indicates the evolution of the indexical character of the literary 'document' from Lombroso to Nordau. The model of the Italian scholar was indeed essentially visual and governed by a rhetoric of the obvious. This is evidenced by the primary role played by the reproduction of Baudelaire's physical portrait, which extends the demonstrative logic already used in *L'Uomo delinquente* (first published in 1876, and constantly revised and enlarged).[28] For Lombroso, the text confirms what the image reveals; and the literary document merely illustrates, on another level, what body language can make meaningful.

Although Nordau also mentions the irregularity of Verlaine's skull (quoting his 'master' Lombroso in the same breath),[29] he is nevertheless much more sensitive to the effects of language and integrates recent work on language pathologies into his semiology of degeneration. In an article published in 1885, Georges Gilles de la Tourette had indeed distinguished the 'disease of convulsive tics' from chorea, and placed verbal tics, which had until then been considered an epiphenomenon, at the centre of his nosography.[30] These works are cited in *Entartung*, notably in the portrait of a Zola suffering from coprolalia 'to a very high degree',[31] and Nordau repeatedly uses the symptoms of echolalia and glossolalia to disqualify fin de siècle literary productions. So, for Nordau, '[t]wo points are noticeable in Verlaine's mode of expression': 'the frequent recurrence of the same word, of the same turn of phrase' (what Nordau calls 'rabâchage'[32]); and 'the combination of completely disconnected nouns and adjectives, which suggest each other'.[33] Jean

Moréas, who practices in *Le Pèlerin passionné* (1891) 'the insertion of words which have no connection with the subject', shares the same pathology, as does Gustave Kahn, whose poem 'Nuit sur la lande' is for Nordau 'pure echolalia'.[34] In *Entartung*, therefore, textual symptoms are no longer simply redundant, as in Lombroso: they can also be discriminating. The untranslated quotation takes on a hyperbolic clinical value in these conditions by illustrating, to the letter, the incomprehension of which the doctor wants to make a symptom.

Quoting is betrayal: paradoxes of fidelity

Auguste Dietrich, *Entartung*'s French translator, perhaps understood only too well the central role that Nordau gives to the literary text. Dietrich, a professor of German language and literature and scientific editor of *Le Page disgracié*, chose systematically to insert excerpts from the poems commented on by Nordau, even if this meant considerably lengthening the book and somewhat distorting the doctor's rhetoric.

The presence of exact quotations is thus trivialized, and the weight of literary discourse paradoxically reinforced by the addition of long autonomous excerpts. Where Nordau was translating to incorporate the literary document into his argument, the poetic extract detaches itself from the medical discourse that frames it and imposes its own rhythm. Where the quotation in the original language provoked a phenomenon of strangeness in the service of a superlative condemnation, the French edition smooths out the difference. Auguste Dietrich thus eliminates the *nota bene* that introduced, in the German edition, the reproduction of René Ghil's poem and gave it its full meaning: the refusal to translate is replaced by a banal introductory comment: 'René Ghil […] tire de sa lyre les propos que voici'.[35]

The translator's choices, which do not detract from the pamphleteering tone of the whole, can certainly be easily explained by the fact that most of the works commented on by Nordau were in French, and that it was therefore easier for Auguste Dietrich to quote the source text. The English version of *Entartung* nevertheless allows us to measure the consequences of such a choice.

Although *Degeneration* presents itself as 'Translated from the Second Edition of the German Work', it is presumably an adaptation of the French version of *Entartung*, whose long quotations in French are reproduced in the English edition. The passage on René Ghil nevertheless reintroduces the precision formulated in the German edition, but finally renders it incomprehensible, since it does not actually break with what is practiced in the rest of the work:

> René Ghil […] draws from his lyre these tones, which I also quote in French; in the first place because they would lose their ring in a translation, and, secondly, because if I were to translate them literally, it is hopeless to suppose that the reader would think I was serious.[36]

The multiplication of foreign-language quotations in *Degeneration* is thus a further step in the transformation of the original clinical rhetoric, which clearly distinguished between two cases. This massive presence of untranslated literary excerpts also raises the question of the readership of the English edition. Although the book acquired the status of a 'popular edition' in 1898, it is legitimate to ask which public is targeted by a text that was now doubly hybrid, by virtue of its subject (medical-literary) but also its linguistic choices. Given Nordau's rapidly acquired notoriety, a first hypothesis would be that the English translator considered that the potential linguistic opacity of the reproduced document was not a real obstacle to the clinical relevance of the whole, among a public that had been persuaded in advance by the medical authority. If, however, one considers this choice as an extension of the dynamic initiated by Auguste Dietrich, the interpretation can be singularly different. The French edition had indeed given literary texts their full place as texts, and not as mere documents. By choosing systematically to maintain quotations that had become allophone, the English edition would reinforce this particular status of the literary text, which a clinical translation does not seem able fully to absorb. The quotation appears, in this case, as what resists clinical discourse, detaches itself from it, and participates in an obscure seduction of the deviance it formally embodies. By quoting literally, and respecting the letter of the text, the French and English editions of *Entartung* make it possible to reintroduce a (guilty?) pleasure of the text,

absent in Nordau's work, even if it means making this clinical pamphlet the possible support of a morose pleasure.

This comparative study of the original and translated editions of *L'Uomo di genio* and *Entartung* therefore brings to light the strategic role of quotation in the rhetoric of these two doctors and in the development of their scientific ideology. Quoting, in this perspective, is not only an act of commenting: it is also an act of translation into another language that transforms the literary text into a pathological document. The problems raised by the strictly linguistic translation nevertheless make it possible to nuance, at least in Nordau's case, the effectiveness of this initial conversion by revealing a form of resistance in the source text. The French and English translators of *Entartung* seem to be men of language who cannot help but respect the literary text, reproducing it as it is, without mediation. In their case, betrayal does not consist in committing 'belles infidèles',[37] but on the contrary in erasing themselves, even though the clinical work they are responsible for translating assumes a total hold on the literary notes.

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[1] Lombroso published *Genio e follia* in 1864. It was not until the fourth edition, in 1882, that the work took on the title that made it famous, and which served as a reference for translations.

[2] Isabelle Stengers, *D'une science à l'autre. Des concepts nomades* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 23. All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[3] See, respectively, Georges Canguilhem, *Idéologie et rationalité dans les sciences de la vie* (Paris: Vrin, 1977), p. 44, and Stengers, *D'une science à l'autre*.

[4] See, for example, Michel Prum, 'Traductrice et traducteurs français de Charles Darwin au XIX^{e} siècle: un chemin difficile, de la Suisse à la France', and Pascal Duris, 'Flourens lecteur de Darwin (ou de Clémence Royer?): à propos de son *Examen du livre de M. Darwin sur l'origine des espèces* (1864)', in *Littérature française et savoirs biologiques au XIX^{e} siècle. Traduction, transmission, transposition,* ed. by Thomas Klinkert and Gisèle Séginger (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 51–60 and 61–77, respectively.

[5] Bénédict-Auguste Morel, *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine* (Paris: Baillière, 1857), p. 5.

In French, the term *dégénérescence* first appears at the end of the eighteenth century and is synonymous with *dégénération*. It then it replaces the term *dégénération*. in the mid-nineteenth century. It is the work of Bénédict-Auguste Morel that gives it its negative meaning: *dégénérescence* designated the change that an organized body undergoes under the influence of the environment, without this change being connoted.

[6] See, for example, Max Nordau, *Psycho-physiologie du génie et du talent* (1897). The genius artist is, for Nordau, the one who is understood by his contemporaries.

[7] The symptomatic portraits that aim to support his point of view are certainly not all devoted to French writers (Oscar Wilde, Henrik Ibsen, and Friedrich Nietzsche are not spared), but the latter nonetheless takes the lion's share.

[8] At the turn of the nineteenth century, 'pathography' became a veritable 'sub-genre' of the medical thesis, particularly in Lyon, under the impetus of Alexandre Lacassagne (1843–1924), a professor at the Faculty of Medicine and one of the founders of the French school of criminal anthropology. Many medical students devoted their thesis to the 'medico-psychological studies' of men of letters. This is the case of Raoul Odinot on Alfred de Musset, while others chose Fyodor Dostoyevsky (Pierre-Gaston Loygue, 1903), Edgar Allan Poe (Georges Petit,

1906), Gérard de Nerval (Gaston Barbier, 1907), Thomas de Quincey (Paul Guerrier, 1907), and E. T. A. Hoffmann (Marcel Demerliac, 1908).
[9] Louis-Victor Marcé, 'De la valeur des écrits des aliénés au point de vue de la sémiologie et de la médecine légale', *Annales d'hygiène publique* (1864), pp. 379–408, (p. 379).
[10] Max Nordau, *Degeneration* [1895], translated from the Second Edition of the German Work (London: Heinemann, 1898), p. 499.
[11] Ibid., p. 120.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., p. 121.
[14] Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius* (London: Scott, 1891), p. 70.
[15] Frédéric Gros, *Création et folie. Une histoire du jugement psychiatrique* (Paris: PUF, 1997), p. 43.
[16] Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, pp. 70–71.
[17] '[E]ra soggetto ad allucinazioni fin da bimbo, e provava, come confessò fin d'allora, due sentimenti opposti: l'orrore e l'estasi della vita; era iperestetico, e apatico: sentiva il bisogno per iscotersi di *Une oasis d'horreur dans un désert d'ennui*: e già prima della demenza commetteva atti impulsivi, come di gettare dalla sua casa dei vasi contro le invetriate delle botteghe, solo per sentirle rompersi.' Cesare Lombroso, *L'Uomo di genio in rapporto alla psichiatria, alla storia ed all'estetica*, 6th edn (Torino: Fratelli Bocca, 1894), pp. 99–100.
[18] Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, p. 71.
[19] Max Nordau, *Entartung* (Berlin: Duncker, 1896), p. 225.
[20] Ibid., p. 224.
[21] Ibid., p. 225.
[22] See Max Nordau, *Dégénérescence* (Paris: Alcan, 1894), p. 222.
[23] René Ghil, *Œuvre* (Paris: Figuière, 1889), p. 42; in Nordau, *Entartung*, p. 242.
[24] Nordau, *Entartung*, pp. 241–42.
[25] Jean-Paul Aron and Roger Kempf, *La Bourgeoisie, le sexe et l'honneur* (Brussels: Éditions complexe, 1984), p. 57. First published as *Le Pénis et la démoralisation de l'Occident* (Paris: Grasset, 1978).
[26] Samuel Tissot, *L'Onanisme. Dissertation sur les maladies produites par la masturbation* (Lausanne: Marc Chapuis, 1769), pp. iv-v.
[27] Dr Fournier-Pescay, 'Sodomie', in *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* (Paris: Panckoucke, 1819), p. 447; cited in Aron and Kempf, p. 82.
[28] Lombroso adds an 'atlas' to the French version of his *L'Uomo delinquente*. This 'atlas' is composed of a series of illustrations that he presents as the 'most important' part of his work, since it allows 'the reader […] to grasp and control, by himself, the truth of [his] assertions'. Cesare Lombroso, *L'Homme criminel: atlas* (Paris: Alcan, 1887), p. 5 (my translation). On this rhetoric of the obvious, see Bertrand Marquer, 'Lombroso et l'École de la Salpêtrière: du bon usage du cliché', in *Cesare Lombroso et la vérité des Corps*, ed. by Ida Merello and Bertrand Marquer, *Publif@rum*, 1 (2005), http://www.farum.it/ publifarumv/n/01/pdf/Marquer.pdf. In *The Man of Genius,* Lombroso also begins his analysis of Baudelaire from 'the portrait placed at the beginning of his posthumous works', in order to evidence the 'type' he identifies in the poet. Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*, p. 70.
[29] 'If we look at the portrait of the poet, by Eugène Carrière, of which a photograph serves as frontispiece in the *Select Poems* of Verlaine, and still more at that by M. Aman-Jean, exhibited in the Champs de Mars Salon in 1892, we instantly remark the great asymmetry of the head, which Lombroso has pointed out among degenerates'. Nordau, *Degeneration*, pp. 119–20.
[30] Doctor Gilles de la Tourette defined the disease in 1885, in an article that appeared in the *Archives de Neurologie*, a journal founded by Jean-Martin Charcot, known to the general public for his work on hysteria carried out at the Salpêtrière, where Gilles de la Tourette had been head of the clinic since 1884. See Georges Gilles de la Tourette, 'Étude sur une affection nerveuse caractérisée par de l'incoordination motrice accompagnée d'écholalie et de copralalie', *Archives de Neurologie*, 9 (1885), 19–42 and 158–200.
[31] 'M. Zola is affected by coprolalia to a very high degree. It is a necessity for him to employ foul expressions, and his consciousness is continually pursued by representations referring to ordure, abdominal functions, and everything connected with them.' Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 499.
[32] Ibid., p. 124.
[33] Ibid., p. 126.
[34] Ibid., pp. 133, 134.
[35] Nordau, *Dégénérescence*, p. 239.
[36] Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 135.
[37] 'Belles infidèles' are translations which are revised and corrected versions by translators who think they can improve the original text, or want to please and conform to the taste and decency of the time.