In translation, as I.A. Richards famously asserted, “we have here indeed what may very probably be the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos.”1 His claim about translation is hardly an exaggeration. Two thousand years of translation theory, running from Marcus Tullius Cicero to Lawrence Venuti, have not settled the issues at stake. In this chapter, I will offer a brief summary of Western translation theory relevant to the following chapters on poet-translators, dealing with some crucial philosophers and theorists, writers and poets. I will not trace this history in depth, but rather focus on four underlying concepts: untranslatability, compensation, foreignization, and poetics.

The notion of untranslatability, widespread from German romanticism onwards, thanks to the notion of linguistic and cultural differences, became less dominant with the rise of polysystem theory and Descriptive Translation Studies in the 1970s and 1980s. The methodological impasse of untranslatability was overcome through a shift of focus from the source text and culture to the target text and culture operated by these systems theories. In addition, the notion of “compensation,” which makes up for what is lost through substitution; the concept of “foreignization,” which bypasses the emphasis on equivalence, and the phenomenological approach to translation based on the poetic (or “poietic”) encounter, offer alternative models to untranslatability.

Untranslatability

There is perhaps no other concept like untranslatability that has so exercised modern theorists of translation. This notion is, as Andrew
Chesterman called it, one of the “memes” (or “supermemes”) of translation studies. The concept of “meme” (on analogy to gene), was originated by the scientist Richard Dawkins, in *The Selfish Gene*, who describes it as

a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation … Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.

The concept of untranslatability, for our purposes, dates back to the German romantics. From the Romans until the late eighteenth century, writers on translation generally spoke of methods of translation. The major question was not whether a text is by nature translatable, considering the source and target languages and cultures, but how best to render the source text in the target language. The basic dichotomy – word for word and sense for sense – had initially been expressed by Cicero, who prescribed translating freely, “as an orator” (*ut orator*), not word-for-word, “like an interpreter” (*ut interpres*). For St. Jerome, too, literary texts should be translated “sense for sense” (*nec verbum de verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu*); only when translating the Bible should word-for-word translation be practised, since “the very order of the words is a mystery.” The dichotomy – word for word, sense for sense – would be opened up by John Dryden’s formulation of three types of translation: “metaphrase,” namely, “turning an Author word by word, and Line by Line, from one Language into another”; “paraphrase,” or “translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense”; and “imitation, where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion; and taking only some general hints from the original, to run division on the ground-work, as he pleases.”

In general, language was not assumed to be an irrevocable stumbling block: cultural differences, which would lead scholars like Eugene Nida to defend translating “lamb of god” as “seal of God” for cultures without experience with sheep, were not yet on the horizon. It is true there were exceptions, like the thirteenth-century philosopher
Roger Bacon who argued that “it is impossible that the peculiar quality of one language should be preserved in another.” But this was a decidedly minority viewpoint: when pressed, writers might speak of the differences in languages, but not in such a pessimistic manner. For example, Joachim du Bellay, in his 1549 *La deffence, et illustration de la langue françoyse* (The defence and illustration of the French language) writes “it is impossible to translate [the text] with the same grace used by the author, since each language has something intangible [je ne sais quoi] specific only to itself.” But this doesn’t get at the heart of the problem: we are still dealing with a framework in which language is conceived of as a mirror of thought. As Theo Hermans notes, “Renaissance and Enlightenment ideas” conceive of the “differences of languages” as “surface phenomena compared with the universal nature of all human speech and thought.” But for the Romantics, for whom “theories of translation stress the bond between language and thought, and language and nation,” the question of translatability came to the fore.

The dominant viewpoint of German romantics, as well as others following them in the twentieth century, held that individual languages, and therefore texts, are unable to be perfectly translated. A major exponent of this thought was Wilhelm von Humboldt, whose words in a 1796 letter to A.W. Schlegel eloquently state this new view:

> All translation seems to me simply an attempt to solve an impossible task. Every translator is doomed to be done in by one of two stumbling blocks: he will either stay too close to the original, at the cost of taste and the language of his nation, or he will adhere too closely to the characteristics peculiar to his nation, at the cost of the original. The medium between the two is not only difficult, but downright impossible.

What differentiates Humboldt’s thought from his predecessors is that translation is judged to be “impossible.” The question no longer is about the translator’s method (word for word, sense for sense, or imitation). No correct translation is possible. Moreover, as Humboldt says in his preface to his translation of Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*,

> It has often been said, and confirmed by both experience and research, that, if one excepts those expressions which designate purely physical objects, no word in one language is completely equivalent to a word in another. Different languages are, in this respect, but collections of synonyms.
This notion – that there are no real equivalent words between languages – would later be expounded on by Roman Jakobson. And yet, as Peter Newmark notes, “A translation is always closer to the original than any intralingual rendering or paraphrase.” To support Newmark’s claim, one can think of scientific discourse, for instance a sentence drawn from a recent issue of *Nature* magazine: “In mice, transfer between fertilized eggs (zygotes) is effective in preventing the transmission of pathogenic mtDNA7 and in rhesus monkeys, genome exchange between unfertilized oocytes gave rise to live births.” How could we rephrase that, translate it “intralingually” in Roman Jakobson’s terminology? Perhaps, “in rodents, exchange among inseminated ova is useful in hindering the spread of infectious maternal genetic material and in Macaca mulattas, DNA transfer among non-inseminated immature ova generated non-dead parturitions.” Surely an Italian interlingual translation, however, would be closer than the English intralingual translation: “Nei topi, il transferimento fra le uova fecondate (zigoti) è efficace nel prevenire la trasmissione di patogeni mtDNA7 e lo scambio di genoma tra ovociti non fecondati nelle scimmie rhesus ha originato nascite.” Using synonyms forces an unhelpful and inexact generalization of terms – rodents, genetic material – that are unnecessary in the Italian, first because Italian favours “borrowing” from English in scientific areas, and second, because *mice* and *topi* refer to the same denotational referent. The translation is surely more semantically accurate than the English paraphrase.

Humboldt’s original assertion, meanwhile, occurs in the preface to his own translation of a drama he labels “untranslatable.” Untranslatable, yes, but, as Humboldt goes on, “this should not deter us from translating. On the contrary, translation, and especially the translation of poets, is one of the most necessary tasks in a literature.” The contradiction – poetry is “untranslatable,” and yet “one of the most necessary tasks” – is readily apparent.

The linguistic arguments for untranslatability found currency in the twentieth century as well, but even more so when applied to cultural differences. Émile Benveniste, a noted French linguist, in his essay entitled “Catégories de pensée et catégories de langue” (Categories of thought and categories of language) claimed that the Greeks developed such an elaborate metaphysics on account of the nature of their language, specifically the verbal intricacies of “εἰμί” (to be): “the linguistic structure of Greek predisposed the concept of ‘being’ for a philosophical vocation.” In a language such as Ewe, spoken in Ghana and Togo,
One has practically speaking five distinct verbs which correspond approxi-
matively to the functions of our verb “to be” ... We would not be able to
say what place “being” holds in Ewe metaphysics, but a priori the concept
must be articulated completely differently.17

The more general notion of this is found in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,
which exists in a “strong” version and a “weak” version. The “strong”
version, or theory of linguistic determinism, alleges that “not only does
our perception of the world influence our language, but that the lan-
guage we use profoundly affects how we think. Language can be said to
provide a framework for our thoughts.”18 This is the underlying concept
behind Benveniste’s argument. The “weak” version, or the theory of lin-
guistic relativity, states that “different cultures interpret the world in dif-
ferent ways, and that languages encode these differences. Some cultures
will perceive all water as being the same, while others will see important
differences between different kinds of water.”19

Against these claims Roman Jakobson responds by positing that ev-
erything expressible in one text can be expressed in another even if ex-
act synonyms do not exist: “all cognitive experience and its classification
is conveyable in any existing language.”20 David Bellos, professor of
comparative literature at Princeton and practising translator, goes so
far as to affirm in his engaging book Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation
and the Meaning of Everything, that “translation presupposes not the loss
of the ineffable in any given act of interlingual mediation such as the
translation of poetry but the irrelevance of the ineffable to acts of com-

This is certainly one way of turning the argument for untranslatability
on its head.
Douglas Robinson has elegantly stated the differences in translation theory by framing the argument around the translation of a single sentence: “A mí me no gustan moles.” Robinson chose this sentence because it contains a culturally specific food: mole is a Mexican spicy chocolate-based sauce. The following are the thirteen possible translations he provides, which increasingly bring the text towards the reader:

1. For me, me not please moles.
2. Me, me not please moles.
3. Me, I not like moles.
4. Me, I don’t like moles.
5. Me, I don’t like mole.
6. Me, I don’t like mole dishes.
7. Me, I don’t like mole dishes.
8. I don’t like mole dishes.
9. I personally don’t like mole dishes.
10. I personally don’t like curry dishes.
11. I personally don’t like Mexican curry dishes.
12. I personally don’t like Mexican chocolate curry dishes.
13. I personally don’t like Mexican chocolate candy dishes.

As Robinson notes,

In order to define or “place” the limits of translation (the absolute border-line between “translation” and “non-translation”) in any kind of fixed or essentializing way – the central project of traditional translation theory – we must select a single gap in the sorites series and draw the dividing line there: say, between [9] and [10], or perhaps between [12] and [13].

Where does one draw the line? Certainly some of these translations are what Venuti would describe as “foreignizing”: where the source text leeches into the target text, through calqued syntax (“me, I don’t like”) or moles, remaining invariant. Other versions are more examples of “domesticated” translations, such as “I personally don’t like Mexican chocolate curry dishes,” where the source-specific moles has disappeared, along with the particular Spanish syntax. If this ambiguity exists in a translation of a single sentence, it would be best to acknowledge, along with Lawrence Venuti, that “the same source-language
poem can support multiple translations which are extremely different yet equally acceptable as poems or translations." It is this fact, continues Venuti, which suggests that "no invariant exists." Therefore, "the practice of translation is fundamentally variation."

While many have agreed with the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (himself influenced by the German romantics), who suggested that translation is "a utopian operation and an impossible proposition," it is hard to discount the reality noted by George Steiner, namely, "we do speak of the world and to one another. We do translate intra- and interlingually and have done so since the beginning of human history. The defense of translation has the immense advantage of abundant, vulgar fact." As the poet-translator W.S. Merwin said, "They say translation is impossible; sure it is. We do it because it’s necessary, not because it’s possible."

Yet another sustained argument for untranslatability, however, comes from the twentieth-century American analytic philosopher Willard Quine, in his indeterminacy theory, which is among the most contentious and provocative theories of modern linguistic thought. Translation studies, on the whole, haven’t much dealt with it, at times preferring to ignore the problem at stake. In an influential symposium, which would result in the 1964 collection *Craft and Context of Translation*, the editors, William Arrowsmith and Roger Shattuck, both eminent translators, prefaced the volume by stating that “for the sake of good conversation and self-confidence, we deliberately excluded from the panel all machine-translators, logicians, metalinguists, and literal minded scholars. Our conference was a closed shop, or nearly so.” Naturally, Quine wasn’t invited. While this conference took place before the formalization of the Translation Studies discipline, it is still quite indicative of a mentality that has changed comparatively little.

Quine describes his argument as follows: “the thesis is then this: manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another.” Quine asks us to imagine a case of “radical translation”: a “jungle linguist” goes out to do field work in a community of unknown speakers. In the presence of a native speaker, he sees a rabbit run by and the native says “gavagai.” How does the linguist know that “gavagai” means rabbit(s)? For Quine, it could equally mean “rabbits, stages of rabbits, integral parts of rabbits, the rabbit fusion, and rabbithood.” There is no exact translation possible, so
The infinite totality of sentences of any given speaker’s language can be so permuted, or mapped onto itself, that (a) the totality of the speaker’s dispositions to verbal behavior remains invariant, and yet (b) the mapping is no mere correlation of sentences with equivalent sentences ...34

Many philosophers have weighed in on this argument, from Richard Rorty to Donald Davidson,35 but perhaps the most effective rebuttal is provided by P.M.S. Hacker, who writes:

From the point of view of a normative conception of meaning such as Wittgenstein defends, a behavioristic conception like Quine’s is simply no conception of meaning at all, not even an ersatz one. Indeed it is no conception of language, for a language stripped of normativity is no more language than chess stripped of its rules is a game.36

Yet, if we move from the viewpoint of an analytic philosopher to hermeneutics and deconstructionism – as evident in the writings of Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida – we come to a series of intractable conclusions (nicely encapsulated by S.C. Chau): “There is no truly ‘objective’ understanding”; “There is no final or definitive reading”; “The translator cannot but change the meaning of the source text”; and “no translation can represent its source text fully.”37 Agreeing with the above four statements does not imply, however, “untranslatability.” It simply means that no perfect equivalence exists between two different texts. Let us call again on George Steiner, who recapitulated the arguments of philosophers against translation:

No two speakers mean exactly the same thing when they use the same terms; or if they do, there is no conceivable way of demonstrating perfect homology. No complete, verifiable act of communication is, therefore, possible. All discourse is fundamentally monadic or idiolectic.38

Steiner is correct that these statements on the untranslatability of language have not been “formally refuted.” But the fact remains, as he states, that these statements would themselves be meaningless “if speech did not have a relationship of content to the real world (however oblique the relationship may be).”39 The French linguist Jean-René Ladmiral calls the whole question of untranslatability “the problem of the preliminary objection,” writing as follows:
Can one imagine another human activity, comparable in importance, extent and continuity, see its existence denied in law, despite the facts observable daily? Will it be demonstrated that it is impossible for us to walk?40

In the 1970s, a new stage of translation theory developed: rather than dealing head-on with the intractable problem of untranslatability, translation scholars began focusing on translation from the perspective of the target text and culture and the communicative process as a whole.41 As the translation studies scholar Jeremy Munday synthesizes the contributions of two of the main contributors, Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury,

Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory moves the study of translations out of a purely linguistic analysis of shifts and a one-to-one notion of equivalence to an investigation of the position of translated literature as a whole in the historical and literary systems of the target culture. Toury then focuses attention on finding a methodology for descriptive translation studies.42

Israeli theorist Itamar Even-Zohar, influenced by Russian formalists (such as Yury Tynjanov, whom we will discuss in chapter 4), developed a theory of translation based on a conception of literature as a system. He showed how translations can occupy a primary or a secondary position in the literary system. Working with Even-Zohar, and then systematizing and going beyond his theory, was Gideon Toury, whose 1980 book, *In Search of a Translation Theory*, promoted Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS). This new approach “embod[ied] the aim of establishing translation research as an empirical and historically oriented scholarly discipline.”43 Toury argued that “translational phenomena could ultimately be explained by their systemic position and role in the target culture.”44 As Theo Hermans, another one of its leading practitioners states, this method is based on “an interest in translation as it actually occurs, now and in the past, as part of cultural history.”45 The idea of untranslatability has been put aside and shelved.

**The Presumed Untranslatability of Poetry**

Three proponents of the view that poetry is untranslatable are the linguist Roman Jakobson, poets such as Dante, and the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce. Both Dante and Croce are frequently called upon
by modern Italian poet-translators. Croce, in particular, will feature explicitly in chapters 2 and 3: Montale and Caproni draw on his claims that one cannot faithfully translate poetry, and that the best aim of poetic translation is to create an independent work of art that contains vibrations of the original. But let us begin with Jakobson, whose argument for the untranslatability of poetry remains one of the most cited, even today.

Jakobson considers prose translatable, but claims that poetry “by definition is untranslatable.” His argument is as follows:

In poetry, verbal equations become a constructive principle of the text. Syntactic and morphological categories, roots, and affixes, phonemes and their components (distinctive features) – in short, any constituents of the verbal code – are confronted, juxtaposed, brought into contiguous relation according to the principle of similarity and contrast and carry their own autonomous signification. Phonemic similarity is sensed as semantic relationship. The pun, or to use a more erudite, and perhaps more precise term – paronomasia, reigns over poetic art, and whether its rule is absolute or limited, poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible.

Jakobson goes on to define “creative transposition” as either “intra-lingual transposition,” “interlingual transposition,” or “intersemiotic transposition,” without explaining the nature of “transposition.”

The argument for poetic untranslatability has been a favourite among poets themselves, such as Dante, who maintained that poetic translation was impossible, since he wrote, “may everyone know that nothing harmonized according to the rules of poetry can be translated from its language into another without destroying all its sweetness and harmony” (E però sappia ciascuno che nulla cosa per legame musaico armonizzata si può de la sua loquela in altra transmutare sanza rompere tutta sua dolcezza e armonia).

In addition, philosophers like Benedetto Croce argued for the impossibility of poetic translation (although, like Jakobson, he held that “prose can be translated”). Since Croce was such a dominant figure for twentieth-century Italian cultural life and the poets in our study, I will now consider him more in depth. As Federico M. Federici notes, Croce “persisted in the Dantean tradition of asserting that translation is an illogical task.” If Croce’s arguments for the untranslatability of poetry
were different from that of the medieval Italian poet, they nonetheless remained unchanging throughout his career,\(^5\) beginning in the *Tesi fondamentali di un’Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica generale* (Fundamental theses of an aesthetic as a science of expression and general linguistics, 1900),\(^5\) then the *Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica generale* (The aesthetic as science of expression and general linguistics, 1902),\(^5\) and continuing through *La poesia: introduzione alla critica e storia della poesia e della letteratura* (Poetry: Introduction to the criticism and history of poetry and literature, 1936).\(^5\) His rationale for untranslatability is based on the nature of language itself. For Croce, “Every word [parola] that we hear is a new and foreign language [lingua], because it was never said before.”\(^5\) The Saussurian distinction between *langue* and *parole* doesn’t exist for the Italian philosopher, since each word is a monad and unconnected to every other one. Therefore, “the impossibility of translation is the very reality [realtà] of poetry in its creation and its re-creation.”\(^5\) Every expression is unique and individual, owing both to its form and its content: “each content is different from any other, because nothing is repeated in life and the irreducible variety of expressive facts, aesthetic synthesis of impressions follows the various continuation of content.”\(^5\) Thus, as Norbert Matyus writes, for Croce, translation is impossible “because two works will never be equivalent.”\(^5\)

While Croce gradually came to value unaesthetic translations (*traduzioni inestetiche*), for their help in understanding the originals, he remained solid in his conviction that faithful translations of poetry are impossible. As the Italian philosopher writes, literal translations, *brutte fedeli* (ugly faithful [translations]), whether *ad verbum* or interlinear, are not true translations, but rather “simple commentaries on the originals.” Not works of art, they are instead “instruments for learning about the original works.”

Croce’s favoured metaphor for speaking of the impossibility of translation is the image of a *vaso* (vase), insofar as translations claim to effect the transfer [*travasamento*] from one expression into another, like a liquid from a vase into another of a different form. One can logically elaborate what was first elaborated in aesthetic form, but not reduce what has already had its aesthetic form to another form also aesthetic.\(^5\)

Since every expression is irremediably unique, “every translation, in fact, either diminishes and spoils, or else creates a new expression,
placing the first again into the crucible and mixing it with the personal impressions of the person called a translator.” In other words, the translator infuses the translation with his own personal impressions and forms a new work of art. The most he can do, to try to reproduce the original text’s content and style, is to attempt to imitate its expressions:

In such similarities the relative possibility of translations is founded; not as reproductions [riproduzioni] (which it would be vain to attempt) of the same original expressions, but productions of similar expressions and more or less near to those. The translation, which is called good, is an approximation [approssimazione], which has original value [valore originale] of a work of art and can exist by itself.59

The key word here is approssimazione. Translations of poetic texts cannot be riproduzioni, but approssimazion(i) that are true separate works of art. The original text is inevitably altered by the personal attributes of the translator. As Croce says,

Poetic translations … moving from the re-creation of original poetry, accompany it with other feelings that are in the person who receives it, who, because of a different historical condition [diversa condizionalità storica] and different individual personality [diversa personalità individuale], is different from the author; and on this new sentimental situation rises that so-called translating, which is writing poetry from an ancient [antica] into a new soul [nuova anima].60

Besides the linguistic elements that defy perfect translations (the individuality of each word and expression), the different historical circumstances (the diversa condizionalità storica, the diversa personalità individuale) of the translator irrevocably change the substance of the original. Thus, poetic translations are transformed in the voyage from the antica (the original poet) to the nuova anima.

Croce’s hegemony in Italian cultural life61 meant that generations of Italian writers were influenced by his pronouncements. As Giulio Lepschy notes, “The reflection on translation was dominated in Italy, in our [twentieth] century, by the judgment of Benedetto Croce on the ‘impossibility of translations.’”62 We will see more of this in the following chapters.

I will now discuss two currents of thought – Marxist and phenomenological in origin – which reacted against Croce, namely, the theories
of the Marxist philosopher Galvano della Volpe (1895–1968) and the phenomenological literary scholars Luciano Anceschi (1911–95) and Emilio Mattioli (1933–2007).

Galvano della Volpe’s major work is *Critica del gusto* (Critique of taste). Here he expounds a theory based on the polysemic nature of poetry, and strenuously argues for the translatability of poetry. Indeed, for della Volpe, “poetry worthy of the name is always translatable” (*poesia degna del nome è sempre traducibile*). This is in contrast with the symbolist and modern notion that poetry is worthy of its name precisely because it is untranslatable. According to della Volpe, the “euphony” (*eufonia*) of the poem (viz., its “external-instrumental elements”) cannot be translated, but that is not the essential characteristic of the poem. Rather, a poem’s fundamental quality is “its polysemic (*polisenso*) nature.” Translation is “facilitated in the final analysis by the *arbitrariousness* [arbitrarietà] and therefore *indifference* of the linguistic sign in respect of the signified.” What della Volpe recommends then is a prose translation based on the “criterion of *literal fidelity*, which is simultaneously *fidelity to the spirit* of the original text.”

Another anti-Crocean position was held by Luciano Anceschi and Emilio Mattioli. Anceschi, who studied under the noted phenomenological philosopher Antonio Banfi, was the *maestro* of both Mattioli and Franco Buffoni. Anceschi was a philosopher of aesthetics at the University of Bologna, and he spearheaded key anthologies in twentieth-century Italian literary history as we have seen, and he promoted the neo-avant-garde (he was instrumental in having Edoardo Sanguineti’s first book published). He also famously introduced Quasimodo’s controversial translation of the *Lirici greci*. According to Anceschi, “infinite ways of translation” are possible. Yet he didn’t concentrate on theorizing the process of translation. Mattioli took this up: he writes, “Following Anceschi’s method, I tried to resolve the knotty problem of poetic translation.” As Mattioli indicated, “[Italian] idealistic philosophy [e.g., Croce], with a firm gesture, established the impossibility of translating poetry at the beginning of the [twentieth] century and by many, still today [1965], translation is considered an activity founded on a misunderstanding.” As he then suggested,

To the traditional question: “can one translate” we propose to substitute other questions: “How does one translate” and “What meaning does translating have”? Again, we propose to substitute a phenomenological question for a metaphysical question. This way we will avoid all of the aporias by responding to the latter question.
Mattioli thus sidesteps the issue of translatability, just like translation theorists like Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury. What becomes of prime importance then is examining the process of translation by those translators who, in our case, are bona fide poets.

**Only Poets Can Translate Poetry**

Poets from John Dryden onwards upheld that a poet must translate a poet: “No man is capable of translating poetry who besides a genius to that art, is not a master both of his author’s language, and of his own.” In brief, “to be a thorough translator, he must be a thorough poet.” Likewise, Giacomo Leopardi maintained, with experience backed up by translating, that “having found out by trial, I can tell you that without being a poet one cannot translate a true poet.” This theory depends on the cultural norms of what signifies a good translation: certainly, poetry translations done by writers into English are differently received, for instance, than poetry translations into other languages that place more prestige on the poetic genre. But a prescriptive rule such as Dryden’s does not necessarily apply, since, for example, verse translations are acclaimed in various languages even if the translator is not a poet; in the Italian context, one might think of Leone Traverso’s translations as a symptomatic case. Even today Traverso is revered for his versions of German, French, and English poems, though he was by no means a canonical poet. Luciano Anceschi, in fact, wrote that “it’s not the case that a poet necessarily translates better than a scholar.” And Emilio Mattioli avers that “a priori rules” about whether a poet must translate a poet “cannot be established,” but rather how the “variety of relationships” between author and translator can be distinguished. This frame of thought is repeated by Fortini as well, who decidedly turned against translations by poet-translators in the last period of his life. As he wrote,

> above all as regards the so-called classics, I militate for scientific and non-subjective translations as much as possible, to be conducted with verifiable, explicit and systematic criteria, while the versions that I publish here [in his *quaderno di traduzioni*] are my writings, constructed according to an entirely other method, or, better, with no method.

In any case, our study doesn’t have to deal with this particular issue, since all five of our translators are widely anthologized and critically recognized poets.
Treatises on Poetry Translation

In the scholarly history of poetry translation, there have been rather few theoretical texts. In this section, I will summarize the methods of four recent and not-so-recent books that deal with this subject: Robert de Beaugrande’s *Factors in a Theory of Poetic Translation* (1978), Cees Koster’s *From World to World: An Armamentarium for the Study of Poetic Discourse in Translation* (2000), Francis Jones’s *Poetry Translating as Expert Action* (2011), and Barbara Folkart’s *Second Finding: A Poetics of Translation* (2007).

The first two, Robert de Beaugrande’s *Factors in a Theory of Poetic Translation* and Cees Koster’s *From World to World*, approach the analysis of poetry translation from restricted points of view. De Beaugrande co-wrote a textbook on text linguistics and his approach to translation is largely indebted to it. My own methodology does not make use of this approach. Meanwhile, Koster analyses translations through textual shifts, drawing especially on the work of Kitty van Leuven-Zwart, simplifying the latter’s elaborate model, and aiming at the “text world” of the author. Koster contends that he has drawn a line between Gideon Toury’s “lack of instruction … for target text-source text comparison” and the “abundance of instruction to be found in van Leuven-Zwart’s method.” Koster’s work can certainly be illuminating, and his case study of deictics in Celan’s translation of Shakespeare is penetrating. Yet a hole lies at the centre of Koster’s “positivistic” study (as well as de Beaugrande’s volume), as Dirk Delabastita makes clear in a very balanced review of *From world to world*: “Interpretation is basically construed as something which occurs between original and translation – at the object-level – but which the competent researcher – operating at the meta-level – should know how to handle.” In other words, Koster leaves “unexplored: the potentially endless semantic productivity of intertextuality … the impact of ideology … the role of psycho-analytically based projections, and so on.” In brief, Koster’s volume ends on a coda of (and these are his very words) “theoretical and methodological desperation,” which can only be “overcome” by “sheer pragmatism.” Moreover, the notion of the “invariant,” an “unchanging essence inherent in or produced by the source text and freely acceptable to the translator, regardless of the time and place in which the translating occurs,” is certainly suspect. While de Beaugrande’s volume was written, as Francis Jones remarked, before “the late-1980s shift in translation studies towards viewing translation as not just a
textual act, but also a psychological and a social one.” Koster’s later monograph ignores any new cross-disciplinary interests, which would go on to pollinate translation studies.

Jones’s recent book, however, *Poetry Translating as Expert Action*, fills this important gap in studies on poetry translation. He bases his method on “sociological and social-network models of human agency and interaction”; “a ‘cognitive processing’ framework”; “a cognitive pragmatics approach”; and “post-structuralist terms.” Yet I have not followed his methodology because my orientation throughout has been to study the poet-translator as a translating poet, as someone individually working on a translation (or, at most, with an informant). The role of poetics in translation has formed a basis for my analyses. And it is this notion that is given short shrift in Jones’s otherwise admirable volume.

Barbara Folkart’s book, *Second Finding: A Poetics of Translation*, stems from her engagement as a poet and a translator, and from a theoretical background deeply steeped in French theory of translation (e.g., Henri Meschonnic and Antoine Berman). While definitely not systematic in any sense of the word, her method of translation aims to produce “esthetically reliable” poems in translation, and what she calls synonymously “writerly translations” and “derived poems.” She attacks the notion of a “foreignized” or “resistant” translation, considering it a sort of “translationese.” While this criticism can at times be valid, her overgeneralization hurts her study as a whole. Certainly, an approach recognizing the value of the concept of “foreignization” is essential in a study of translation. I will now talk briefly about this very concept, which I repeatedly use in subsequent chapters.

**Foreignization**

Replacing the binary opposition of literal and free, or word-for-word and sense-for-sense, a new dichotomy appeared in recent years in Translation Studies: namely, the mutual concepts of foreignization and domestication. These can be traced back to Friedrich Schleiermacher’s 1813 essay: “Either the translator leaves the writer in peace as much as possible and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible and moves the writer towards him.” In the late twentieth century, this method was first taken up by Philip E. Lewis, formerly professor of French at Cornell University, in his notion of “abusive fidelity.” Lewis derives his notion from Derrida’s claim that “a good translation must always commit abuses.” For Lewis,
“weak, servile” translations are those that are dominated by “the message, context, or concept over language texture.” This critic desires a “strong, forceful translation that values experimentation, tampers with usage, seeks to match the polyvalencies or plurivocities or expressive stresses of the original by producing its own.” Lewis wants to replicate the “abuse that occurs in the original” by “displac[ing], remobiliz[ing], and extend[ing] this abuse in another milieu.”

It was Lawrence Venuti, “one of the leading and most eloquent voices in modern translation studies,” who fashioned together an innovative approach, drawing together this concept of “abusive translation,” along with Antoine Berman’s studies of German romantics, and his own wide-ranging study of translation theory and practice. Venuti’s approach runs counter to descriptive translation studies, as Edwin Gentzler favourably remarks: “[Venuti’s] method provides a refreshing alternative to the quasi-scientific, empirical case studies favored by the translation studies scholars in Belgium and Holland or polysystem theory used by Israeli scholars.” As Venuti writes in The Translator’s Invisibility,

A translator can not only choose a foreign text that is marginal in the target-language culture, but translate it with a canonical discourse (e.g. transparency). Or a translator can choose a foreign text that is canonical in the target-language culture, but translate it with a marginal discourse (e.g. archaism). In this foreignizing practice of translation, the value of a foreign text or a discursive strategy is contingent on the cultural situation in which the translation is made.

In sum, foreignization refers both to the text selected as well as the approach. This is why the criticism levelled at Venuti’s approach, especially by Folkart, is not well-aimed. Folkart is reacting against the notion of a foreignized translation (“grainy,” in her formulation) by dint of its “marginal discourse.” What is undoubtedly true is that the border separating a “foreignized translation” that is successful from a poem in “translationese” (e.g., a “servile translation” in Lewis’s words) is not fixed in stone. The belief that poetry is by nature “inherently alien” and therefore the translation does not need to “foreignize it” can be valid in certain cases – and this is precisely, as we will see, Giovanni Giudici’s conception of the poem. Folkart’s prescriptive and rigid approach cannot account for poetics alien to her own: what she claims is “translationese” could equally be claimed by Venuti as a resistant translation. Chapters 4 and 5 will heavily draw on the concept of “foreignization.”
Translation Ideologies

The concept of “foreignization” leads us naturally to the more general concept of ideology. The term “ideology” originally came from the French word *ideologie*. It was coined at the end of the eighteenth century by the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy, referring to the “science of ideas,” which “was broadly that of Locke and the empiricist tradition.”

There are three core meanings at the root of the term, as the critic Raymond Williams has indicated:

1. a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group;
2. a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge;
3. the general process of the production of meanings and ideas.

The first and third meanings are expressed by Marx in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

The distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production ... and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological – forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.

The negative sense is clearly expressed by Engels in his 1893 *Letter to Mehring*:

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously indeed but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives. Because it is a process of thought he derives both its form and its content from pure thought, either his own or his predecessors.

Certainly, one of the key problems in determining the ideology of a translator is, as Peter Fawcett and Jeremy Munday ask, “[W]hen is something ‘ideology’ rather than just ‘culture,’ and what is the difference between the two?” A potential response comes from Christina Schäffner:

Ideological aspect can ... be determined within a text itself, both at the lexical level (reflected, for example, in the deliberate choice or avoidance
of a particular word …) and the grammatical level (for example, use of passive structures to avoid an expression of agency). Ideological aspects can be more or less obvious in texts, depending on the topic of a text, its genre and communicative purposes.\textsuperscript{108}

It should be noted that often ideology can be read in assumptions, and is often only implicit in statements by poet-translators. On the other hand, sometimes it is quite evident, as in Sanguineti’s Marxist writings, or the metapoetic essays of Buffoni and Giudici. Yet Montale’s and Caproni’s ideologies are less easy to work out and more hidden within the depths of their poetics.

\textbf{Compensation}

One of the cardinal notions on which translation – and the translation of poetry – relies upon is compensation. As the scholar Keith Harvey rightly notes,

Explicit references to compensation are scattered throughout the literature on translation studies. These references often represent piecemeal, non-formalized uses of the term. Particularly in texts dating from before the mid-1980s, words such as compensation, compensatory and compensate for are usually employed in a loose, common sense way. Close examination of examples reveals that practically anything that did not involve straightforward formal correspondence was subsumed under this label.\textsuperscript{109}

The idea of “compensation” finds its first modern expression in Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet’s 1958 book, \textit{Stylistique comparée du français et de l’anglais: méthode de traduction} (Comparative stylistics of French and English: A methodology for translation).\textsuperscript{110} For these French linguists, compensation is essential to regain what is lost in translation. As they state,

\begin{quote}
[O]ne of the major concerns of translators is to ensure that the translation preserves the content of the original without losses; any loss, regardless of whether it is of meaning or tone should be recovered by the procedures of compensation.\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

They define compensation as a “gain” in contrast to the loss (“entropy”) inherent in translation. It is, in short, “the stylistic translation technique by which a nuance that cannot be put in the same place as in the
original is put at another point of the phrase, thereby keeping the overall tone.” Yet Vinay and Darbelnet do not include it among their seven procedures of translation. Likewise, it is hardly mentioned by the influential translation theorist Eugene Nida, who mentions in passing that compensation of idioms for non-idioms is acceptable in order not to weaken the “figurative force of the translation.”

With the publication of George Steiner’s 1975 *After Babel*, compensation takes a truly leading role. For Steiner, translation is a four-part process beginning with trust, passing through the second and third stages of aggression and incorporation, and ending with the final phase of “compensation.” As he says,

> The final stage or moment in the process of translation is that which I have called “compensation” or “restitution.” The translation restores the equilibrium between itself and the original, between source-language and receptor-language which had been disrupted by the translator’s interpretative attack and appropriation. The paradigm of translation stays incomplete until reciprocity has been achieved, until the original has regained as much as it has lost.

> Translation fails where it does not compensate, where there is no restoration of radical equity. The translator has grasped and/or appropriated less than is there. He traduces through diminution. Or he has chosen to embody and restate fully only one or another aspect of the original, fragmenting, distorting its vital coherence according to his own needs or myopia.

For all their differences, Peter Newmark follows Steiner in suggesting that “compensation is the procedure which in the last resort ensures that translation is possible.”

Yet compensation is defined more in detail by successive scholars. In their pedagogical volume, *Thinking French Translation*, Sándor Hervey and Ian Higgins define four types of compensation: compensation in kind (“making up for one type of textual effect in the ST by another type in the TT”); compensation in place (such as “using different sounds in different places [in the text]”), compensation by merging (e.g., translating two French terms by one combined English term), and compensation by splitting (e.g., translating one French word by two English words).

Keith Harvey, whose 1995 article in *The Translator* still remains the most up-to-date description of this procedure, critiques Hervey and Higgins’s distribution of compensation into four types, arguing that the
latter two (compensation by merging and by splitting) really relate only to systemic differences between languages. Harvey insists, instead, that compensation is “a technique for making up the loss of a source text effect by recreating a similar effect in the target text through means that are specific to the target language and/or the target text.”

In Italy, the notion of compensation was promoted by Franco Fortini, first in a 1988 speech at the important conference in Bergamo, Italy, *La traduzione del testo poetico*, organized by Franco Buffoni. In Fortini’s words, *i compensi* (compensation) and *le supplenze* refer to the fact that an increase, for example, of the density of assonance, alliteration [and] homophony compensates for the decrease in rhymes; an increase in types of discourse tends to augment the density of the text and therefore to diminish the dimension of communicative directness, combating the amount of paraphrase, and restituting, in the target text, the status of separateness and of “literariness” which is possessed by the source text.

I will return to the notion of compensation most explicitly in chapter 3, when dealing with Giorgio Caproni’s translations.

### Categories of Poetic Translation

Two of the most helpful categorizations of poetry translation have been offered by the translation scholars André Lefevere and James Holmes. For convenience’s sake, I will merge the two classifications together and discuss six categories of poetic translation. The first two types are translations in formal verse: “mimetic translation,” and “analogical translation.” The third category is “organic translation”; the fourth is “prose translation”; the fifth is “phonemic translation”; and the sixth is “imitation.”

Mimetic translation – a translation written in the same or formally similar metre as the original – is fundamentally “optimistic” as regards cross-cultural transfer, as Holmes notes. The translator has faith that the reproduction of the original form is possible and meaningful within a different language and culture. It is described by Lefevere as “a very rigorous straitjacket imposed on the target text.” While I don’t promote the Dutch translation scholar’s prescriptivism, I do agree that such an approach is indeed very challenging. This does not always lead to disastrous results, however, as we will see with Giudici’s creative version of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* in *novenari* that attempts to replicate the
Russian iambic tetrameter. One cannot deny, though, that such a method can end up badly: Giovanni Pascoli’s decision to attempt to translate Homer’s quantitative poetry into syllabic verse (“barbaric meters”) was heavily criticized, for example, by no less than Benedetto Croce.

The second category of translation is the analogical translation: in short, the translator attempts to find functionally equivalent or equally prestigious metres in the target language (e.g., iambic pentameter for dactylic hexameter; hendecasyllable for Pushkin’s iambic tetrameter). The strength of this approach lies in the prominence of the adopted form, which corresponds to target language readers’ expectations. One can think of such translations that have achieved canonical status in English and Italian: for example, Alexander Pope’s *Iliad*, rendered in heroic couplets (rhyming iambic pentameter couplets) and Vincenzo Monti’s version of the *Iliad*, translated into unrhymed hendecasyllables. On the other hand, the original rhythm is completely lost – especially flagrantly in the case of translating from non-cognate versification systems. Catullus, translated from Latin quantitative non-rhyming verse into accentual-syllabic English-rhyming verse, becomes, in Lefevere’s words, “a clumsy poetaster … the rhymer has merely succeeded in transmitting a caricature.”

The third category, “organic form,” is a “content-derivative” approach in which “the semantic material … take[s] on its own unique poetic shape as the translation develops.” There is no relationship between the form of the source text and the target text. So Ungaretti’s translation of Frénaud’s poem is fifteen verses, not thirteen; Buffoni’s translation of Shakespeare’s sonnets is not in an equivalent metre to the English iambic pentameter or in a regular poetic metre in Italian.

The fourth category, poetry translated in prose, is notable, as Lefevere comments, for being more “accurate” than verse translations, and for “avoiding most of the distortions … one finds in such translations.” If Lefevere speaks from the point of view of dynamic equivalence (and “communicative value”), which has come to be seen as a vague concept, it remains true that poetry translated into prose often more effectively reproduces the denotative meaning of the source text (although other connotative meanings are lost, not to mention formal aspects such as metre and rhyme). But the eighteenth-century Scottish translation theorist Alexander Tytler had already inveighed against this method, in his *Essay on the Principles of Translation*: “to attempt … a translation of a lyric poem into prose, is the most absurd of all undertakings, for the characters of the original which are essential
to it, and which constitute its highest beauties, if transferred to a prose translation, become unpardonable blemishes. Indeed, even Lefevere speaks of an “uneasy hybrid structure, forever groping towards a precarious equilibrium between verse and prose and never really achieving it.” Yet proponents of this approach include such important writers as Galvano della Volpe (as above), Vladimir Nabokov (whose translation ideology I will discuss in the fourth chapter), and Robert Browning. Browning advocated that one should “be literal at every cost save that of absolute violence to our language.” On the whole, modern Italian poets mostly eschew this approach, because of the normalcy in Italian of rendering verse into verse (with exceptions as noted by Fortini); there is no modern equivalent to the Anglo-American translations of the Greek and Latin epic poems into prose.

The fifth type, phonemic (or homophonic) translation, which is notably the path chosen by Louis and Celia Zukofsky in their translation of Catullus, is certainly the least likely to get across the semantic meaning of the poem. As Lefevere says,

[A]ll too often the much-sought equilibrium between dominance of sound and undercurrent of meaning is shattered. What remains are few blessed oases of plain sense, devoid of successful sound-imitation, between vast bewildering stretches of moderately successful sound-imitation either altogether devoid of immediate sense or running contrary to the sense of the source text.

Yet Lawrence Venuti has written strongly in favour of such a method, describing Zukofsky’s “remarkable” rendition, whose
discursive heterogeneity … mixes the archaic and the current, the literary and the technical, the elite and the popular, the professional and the working-class, the school and the street. In the recovery of marginal discourses, this translation crosses numerous linguistic and cultural boundaries …

None of our five Italian poet-translators practised such a form of translation; and among Italian poet-translators, Franco Fortini might be the sole one who carried out such a method in a poem. Yet Edoardo Sanguineti, with his interlinear approach, and his calques, does at time seemingly “transliterate” between languages for brief stretches of time.
Another category is “imitation,” which, according to Lefevere, no longer belongs to the realm of translation proper. John Dryden was the first in English to speak of imitation within the framework of translation theory, scornfully writing, as we have already seen, of “the translator [who] ... run[s] division on the groundwork as he pleases.” In France, no one in the seventeenth century was as famous for his imitations as the translator Nicolas Perrot D’Ablancourt. He wrote, “I do not always bind myself either to the words or the reasoning of this author [Lucian]; and I adjust things to our manner and style with his goal in mind. Different times demand different reasoning as well as different words ... Nonetheless, that is not translation; yet it is worth more than translation.”\(^{136}\) It was in reference to D’Ablancourt’s free translations of the classics that the term “les belles infidèles” (beautiful and unfaithful [translations]) was coined by Gilles Ménage.

Certainly, some translations done in such a manner can have (as Lefevere disparagingly notes) “only title and point of departure, if those, in common with the source text.”\(^{137}\) However, one must bear in mind that the notion of translation depends on the target culture and target poetics. In addition, the methods of translation grouped under “imitation” are astonishingly numerous, depending on which aspects of the source text are changed or eliminated, and/or whether additional material is added.

In Italy, the notion that a translation of poetry should be an imitation is widely held. Translation is often conceived as a way of composing original works. The term “imitazione” enjoys wide usage in modern Italy, thanks to the prestige of Leopardi’s own “imitazione”\(^{138}\) of Antoine-Vincent Arnault’s poem “La feuille” (The leaf). Many of the poet-translators discussed in my study, from Bertolucci,\(^{139}\) Buffoni,\(^{140}\) and Caproni\(^{141}\) to Fortini,\(^{142}\) Raboni,\(^{143}\) and Sanguineti,\(^{144}\) entitle some of their translations “imitations.”\(^{145}\)

There is one additional category I will speak of now, which isn’t specifically addressed by either Lefevere or Holmes, but is widely practised. This is the method of choosing one specific “constructive principle” and translating accordingly. This approach derives from Yury Tynjanov’s idea of literature as a system, although the Russian formalist did not apply this specifically to translation. In the Italian scene, two poet-translators have selected this method: Giovanni Giudici and Franco Buffoni. It has additionally been argued by Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo that this is the most successful method of translation:
As is known, the Russian formalists asserted that in every literary text there is a dominant that regulates the remaining components ... for translations of poetry I think this is literally true. The translator of poetry cannot be “faithful” to all the components of the original text, but only, fundamentally, to one, to whom he subordinates the others: faithful to one, unfaithful to the others, to paraphrase one of [Karl] Kraus’s witticisms about women.146

Yet for Lefevere, any translation method emphasizing “one aspect of the source text,” is naturally a “distorting” translation.147 However, in response to Lefevere, we might add that every translation is “distorting.” Following a “constructive principle” allows the translator to maintain a coherent strategy when tackling a text. It should be obvious that many poet-translators follow such a method, even if they don’t cite Tynjanov. For example, Raboni speaks of “developing a system of ‘programmed’ moments of unfaithfulness,” just as Valerio Magrelli writes that “we must decide to which of the finite, but very numerous functions of the text, we want to be faithful ... fidelity is always fidelity to one function.”148

Translation Theories among Italian Poet-Translators

Among poet-translators, Franco Fortini and Franco Buffoni have dedicated the most time and writing to theoretical elaboration on translation, although others, such as Caproni, Dal Fabbro, Giudici, and Sanguineti, have written illuminating essays. We have already mentioned Fortini several times, but it’s necessary to underline the time and attention he paid to reflecting on translation. His history of twentieth-century Italian poetry, I poeti del Novecento (Twentieth-century poets), was described by Mengaldo as “the first book about twentieth-century [Italian] poetry in which a section, dense with facts and reflections, is dedicated to the problem of poetry translations.”149 We might note that Fortini’s conception of quaderni di traduzioni, authorial books of translation, explicitly contradicted, as he himself noted, his newer scientific theory of translation.150 Likewise, Franco Buffoni’s reflections on translation have accompanied his poetic and academic career that was first influenced by Anceschi and Mattioli, and then evolved independently. For Buffoni, as we will see, “there are two great diseases always necessary to try to eradicate [debellare]: the idea that the translation can be the reproduction of a text, and the idea that it is a re-creation [ricreazione].” Buffoni
will instead turn to the notion of poetics and the poietic encounter (incontro poietico) in his theorization of poetic translation.

At the opposite pole there are many Italian poets who translated without leaving critical reflections about the process, or who lamented their own critical incapacities as theorists of translation. Mario Luzi says that he “never thought to be able to theorize an object as empirical” as translation. Giovanni Raboni doesn’t consider himself a translation theorist (traduttologo). Luciano Erba allows himself “the luxury of a complete indifference regarding eventual scientific itches and an equal absolute deafness regarding possible methodological temptations.” Vittorio Sereni matter-of-factly states that “the ‘problem’ of literary translation – literal or ‘artistic,’ whether bella infedele [beautiful and unfaithful] or brutta fedele [ugly and faithful] – has no interest for me.” Alessandro Parronchi prefaces his Quaderno francese (French notebook) by stating that it would be “excessive [eccessivo] if I attempted to prefix theoretical notions to the collection of almost all that I have translated.” And Eugenio Montale, despite many reviews of translations, never wrote a real essay about translation, to the “shock” of at least one critic.

I have already spoken of the crushing influence of Croce on Italian poets. His tenet of the untranslatability of poetry is, in fact, supported by many: from Ungaretti and Montale, to Caproni, Sanguineti, and Zanzotto. Ungaretti claims, “Poetry is individual and inimitable to such a degree that it is untranslatable.” Montale frequently describes writers as “untranslatable,” such as Apollinaire, Joyce, Proust, and Yeats. Caproni states that translators “pay a very large (and often ruinous) discount rate [tasso di sconto].” Sanguineti goes so far as to state “there is no difference between a translation and a pseudo-translation,” since nothing from the original remains in the translation. Zanzotto affirms that “translation, ‘the transfer’ of poetry in a complete sense, we know is impossible.”

A common trend among Italian poets is to equate translating with composing original verse. Dal Fabbro writes, “Translating poetry ... cannot be distinguished from originally composing it.” Diego Valeri suggests that “the activity of translating poetry is, at bottom, the activity of poetry.” In the same vein, Margherita Guidacci affirms that “there is not a substantial difference between translating ... and creating original poetry.” and Montale proposes that “a good [buona] translation is that which doesn’t seem [a translation]; that which presents a text which one would call original [originale].”
Some translators, like Fortini and Montale, believe that the precise knowledge of the source language is necessary, even when they themselves do not possess that knowledge. Others, like Giudici and dal Fabbro, don’t think this is a requisite. This obviously leads to diverse conclusions; a theory that requires philological mastery does not generally demand poetic imitations. A theory that does away with language mastery does not generally expect interlinear translations, for instance. In this latter theory, domestication is preferred: translations aim to be invisible, and the poems to read as though they were written in the target language, Italian. So, for instance, Beniamino dal Fabbro freely adapts, translating from translations, just as Ungaretti translates Esenin from French and not Russian, and Sergio Solmi translates Omar Khayyam from Edward FitzGerald’s English translation.

Poet-translators often translate poets whose poetry resembles their own. This ties into the concept that Venuti calls “simpatico” the supposedly natural affinity between translators and the poems they translate. Translators like Sergio Solmi and Diego Valeri translated in this mode. As Solmi writes, he finds necessary “that participation, that complicity with the author, which to me seems indispensable for poetic translation.” This links to Solmi’s belief that a translator should be a contemporary of the translated author; in contrast, Giudici thinks that it is precisely distance in time, space and language that allows for the deepest connection between the translator and the original text. Sanguineti, on the other hand, has insisted that it is not original authors we encounter and read in translations, but rather the translators themselves. So Homer and Virgil are not our contemporaries, their translators are.

Yet many poets decide to translate poets whom they least resemble. As Vittorio Sereni writes,

One also translates, if not just for opposition, also for comparison. In translation, one doesn’t appropriate for oneself so much, nor make another’s text one’s own, as much as it is the other’s text that absorbs a zone up until now uncertain in our sensibility and illuminates it – and one learns more from someone who doesn’t resemble us.

Indeed, an important consideration for Italian poets is how translation enriches the translator. As Caproni writes, difficulty in translating dissimilar authors allows the poet-translator to experience an “enlargement in the field of one’s own experience and consciousness, of one’s
existence or being.” Sereni notes that with some texts “the only way to read them, or to read them most deeply, is to translate them.” This is not only the view of Sereni and Caproni, but that of Luzi as well as most of the other Hermetic poets associated with Florence, whose translations of Mallarmé were intimately connected with their literary criticism. This ties in to the confluence of poet-translator-critic, mentioned earlier, which is indicative of modern Italian culture. Almost all of the poet-translators mentioned in my study, from Montale and Ungaretti, to Luzi, Sereni, Caproni, Fortini, Giudici, Sanguineti, and Buffoni, produced volumes of criticism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter aimed at presenting the intractable problem of untranslatability and demonstrating different methods of resolving this issue, or simply sidestepping it. Approaches based on systems theories and concepts such as foreignization, compensation, and poetics allow us to reconfigure the notion of poetic translation. The translated poem is no longer a site for an inert theoretical dichotomy (faithful or unfaithful?). The interrelations between the author, translator, source text/culture and target text/culture acquire visibility and importance. In the following examination of the five poet-translators, certain theoretical models will be favoured, most of which I have already presented: Croce’s poetic recreation (chapters 2 and 3), Fortini’s compensi (chapter 3), Venuti’s foreignization (chapters 4 and 5), Tynjanov’s constructive principle (chapters 4 and 6), Walter Benjamin’s interlinear translation (which will be introduced in chapter 5), and Anceschi’s and Mattioli’s poietic encounter (chapter 6).