Playing on Words: Challenges in Translating Umberto Eco’s *Numero zero*

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IN MEMORIAM: UMBERTO ECO

Playing on Words: Challenges in Translating
Umberto Eco’s *Numero zero*

Richard Dixon
*Translator*

The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterward you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless.

Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose.*

This was my third book-length translation of a work by Umberto Eco¹ and, though shorter than the previous two, my task was more complex for reasons I hope to illustrate. As always I could rely on Eco’s amiability and enthusiasm in the translation process, though we met to discuss the book only twice—first, before the Italian edition had been published, and then, after I had completed the translation, to resolve outstanding problems before I submitted the finished manuscript to the publishers.

The first of these meetings took place at Eco’s summer home in the Apennines, just over an hour’s drive from where I live. Mario Andreose and Drenka Willen, his Italian and American editors, were there for a few days in summer 2014, and I was invited across one afternoon. Work on the novel was almost complete and Eco’s main concern seemed to be the title.

“How do you say *numero zero* in English?” he asked. I hadn’t a clue. We sat at a table under the line of cypress trees in his garden as he described the new novel. It was the same table where we’d discussed *The Prague Cemetery* on our first encounter four years before.

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¹. *The Prague Cemetery* was published by Harvill Secker (London) and Houghton Mifflin (New York) in 2011; *Inventing the Enemy* was published by the same publishers in 2012.
A *numero zero* is the dummy issue of a new publication, the trial issue, put together to see how it might look. But in Eco’s novel there were going to be twelve issues—twelve dummy issues of a newspaper that would never be published.

The action takes place over three months in 1992. The narrator, Colonna, is a hack journalist, now in his fifties, and a loser. Amusingly (from my point of view, at least) he had begun his career as a translator. His South Tyrolean grandmother had made him speak German as a child, and from his first year of university he took to translating books to pay for his studies. But he soon grew tired of the baroque ways of the Italian academic system, and equally tired of rendering three-volume works on the *Zollverein*, the German customs system, in *dolce stil novo*. He dropped out of university, gave up translating and turned to journalism, proof-reading and ghost-writing, moving from city to city, wherever he could find work.

He is hired by Simei to work on *Domani* (Tomorrow), a newspaper that will never be published. The venture is financed by Commendator Vimercate, who owns a television channel, a dozen magazines, and a chain of hotels and rest homes. The declared aim of the newspaper is to reveal the truth about everything, to publish all the news that’s fit to print “plus a little more,” but Commendator Vimercate’s true interest lies elsewhere. His “zero issues” will be seen by powerful figures in the financial and political world who won’t want the truth to be revealed. They’ll put pressure on Vimercate to close down the newspaper and, in return, will allow him into the inner sanctum of power.

Colonna meets the other members of the editorial staff: Braggadocio used to work for a scandal magazine called *What They Never Tell Us*; Cambria spent his nights as a hack reporter hanging around police stations; Lucidi is elusive about his past and probably still works for the secret service; Palatino has spent his career working on puzzle and crossword magazines; Costanza was a sub-editor for various newspapers until they grew so large that no one bothered any longer to check what was being printed; lastly, Maia Fresia worked on a celebrity romance magazine.

Colonna is befriended by the paranoid Braggadocio, who sees conspiracies everywhere. He tells Colonna he is investigating a story about Mussolini that would sell a hundred thousand copies of *Domani*. He has a theory that Mussolini managed to avoid being killed during the last days of World War II—the corpse strung up in Milan was a double, the real Mussolini was smuggled away by Church authorities, and spent his final years in Argentina (or perhaps behind the walls of the Vatican) waiting for a Fascist coup to restore him to power.

I needn’t go much further into detail, save to say that Eco’s plot is woven around a progression of events that take us from the final days of the World War II to the terrorist attacks of the 1970s, with an impressive line-up of figures from some forty years of Italian history: fascists and partisans, presidents and prime ministers (Aldo Moro, Francesco Cossiga, Giulio Andreotti), popes (John Paul I and II), bankers (Michele Sindona, Roberto Calvi, Cardinal Marcinkus) and secret organizations (Special Operations Executive, CIA, Gladio and the Red Brigades).
It was therefore vital to make sure the historical information was accurately translated. I would like to concentrate here on particular problems that arose while translating *Numero Zero*, hoping to provide some insight into the challenges involved in translating a book of this kind. I have gathered my points under the following headings:

1. **Rewriting**—certain passages lose their meaning and effect if they are translated literally, so an entirely different formula of words has to be found;
2. **Explaining**—some references will be clear to most Italians but not to English readers, who will need a little extra help;
3. **Cutting**—in a few cases, passing references will mean nothing to non-Italians, they seem to get in the way, are of no direct relevance to the plot, and any attempt to explain them is likely to slow down the story;
4. **Unusual words**—certain words seemed to defy translation: here I give some examples.

### 1. Rewriting

The task of the translator—to use Eco’s own formula—is to “create the same effect in the mind of the reader (obviously according to the translator’s interpretation) as the original text wanted to create.”

The words in parenthesis are significant, particularly in the following cases, where the translator, in order to create the same effect, had to depart from the strict letter of the original text. And, of course, working with a living writer—Eco himself—I could seek his help and agreement in establishing what “the original text wanted to create.” Here are a few examples:

a) In chapter 5, the journalists are given a lesson in handling denials and, since this is a dummy issue and there are still no readers, they are given a fictional example of a letter which, Colonna admits, is an extreme example. It is a surreal letter purporting to be written by a certain Preciso Smentuccia (rendered in the English translation as Preciso Perniketti), complaining about an article by a journalist called Aleteo Verità (rendered as Veruccio Veriti). The journalist claimed in his article that Signor Smentuccia/Perniketti had told him, in a telephone interview, that he had been involved in the assassination of Julius Caesar which, of course, Smentuccia/Perniketti denies. The journalist made the following note of the interviewee’s words in his notebook: “Sto in...giando assass eliminare tr pazz Giulio Cesare,” which the journalist interpreted as meaning “sto ingaggiando degli assassini per eliminare quel pazzo traditore di Giulio Cesare,” whereas Smentuccia...

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2. Eco (2003a, p. 56); see also Eco (2003b, p. 79).
says he told the journalist: “sto incoraggiando l’assessore a eliminare il traffico in piazza Giulio Cesare”. The notes could therefore be interpreted in two ways.

Clearly, any attempt at literal translation was impossible. The translation had to produce the same ambiguity, using an entirely different formula of words that was open to two opposite interpretations. This was my solution:

Notebook: “appt ass. t. o. get rid of tr. bl. Julius Caesar”.

Journalist’s version: “appointment with assassins to get rid of that traitorous bully Julius Caesar”

Perniketti’s version: “appointment with the assistant traffic officer to get rid of traffic in Boulevard Julius Caesar”

So this is how it appears in the translation:

“Dear Editor, with reference to your article ‘Ides Murder Suspect Denies All’ by Veruccio Veriti which appeared in the last issue of your magazine, please allow me to correct the following matters. It is not true that I was present at the assassination of Julius Caesar. Please kindly note from the enclosed birth certificate that I was born at Molfetta on 15 March 1944 many centuries after the regrettable event, which moreover I have always deplored. Signor Veriti must have misunderstood me when I told him I invariably celebrate 15 March of ’44 with a few friends. It is likewise incorrect that I later told a certain Brutus: ‘We will meet again at Philippi.’ I wish to state that I have never had any dealings with anyone called Brutus, whose name I heard for the first time yesterday. During the course of our brief telephone interview, I did indeed tell Signor Veriti that I would soon be meeting the city’s assistant traffic officer, Signor Philippi, but the statement was made in the context of a conversation about the circulation of automobile traffic. In this context, I never said that I had appointed assassins to get rid of that traitorous bully Julius Caesar, but rather ‘I had an appointment with the assistant traffic officer to get rid of traffic in Boulevard Julius Caesar.’

Yours faithfully, Preciso Perniketti.

“How [continues Colonna] do you deal with such a clear denial without losing face? Here’s a good way of replying.”

“I note that Signor Perniketti does indeed not deny that Julius Caesar was assassinated on the Ides of March of ’44. I also note that Signor Perniketti always celebrates the anniversary of 15 March 1944 with friends. It was this most curious practice that I wished to report in my article. Signor Perniketti may well have personal reasons for celebrating that date with copious libations, but he will no doubt agree that the coincidence is, to say the least, strange. He will furthermore recall that, during the long and detailed telephone interview with me, he stated: “I believe one should always render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s.” A source close to Signor Perniketti—which I have no reason to doubt—has assured me that that which was rendered unto Caesar was twenty-three stab wounds. And

that Signor Perniketti is careful throughout to avoid telling us who actually inflicted those stab wounds.

“As for the pitiful denial about Philippi, I have my notebook in front of me where it is clearly recorded that Signor Perniketti did not say: “We will meet again at Philippi’s office” but “We will meet again at Philippi.”

“I can give the same assurance regarding words threatening to Julius Caesar. The notes in my notebook, which I have before me, distinctly say: “appt ass. t. o. get rid of tr. bl. Julius Caesar” These attempts to show that black is white and to play around with words are no way to avoid such weighty responsibility, or to gag the press.” Signed Veruccio Veriti

b) Sexual profanities are often difficult to translate. In Italian, *casino* (brothel) and variations on the word *cazzo* (prick, cock) are fairly common, and used more freely in Italy than in the English-speaking world. Here is the opening of Chapter 12 (Italian words discussed below are shown in Roman, English words in italics):

*Il lunedì seguente Simei ci ha convocati: “Costanza,” ha detto, “nel suo articolo sulle passeggiatrici usa delle espressioni come fare casino, incazzatura, cazzeggio e mette in scena una battona che dice vaffanculo.”

“Ma è così,” ha protestato Costanza. “Ormai tutti usano parolacce anche in televisione e dicono cazzo persino le signore.”

“Quello che fa l’alta società non c’interessa. Noi dobbiamo pensare a lettori che hanno ancora paura delle parolacce. Usare circonlocuzioni. Colonna?”

Sono intervenuto: “Si può benissimo dire gran confusione, arrabbiatura, chiacchiere a vuoto, e vada a quel paese.”

“Chissà cosa fanno a quel paese,” ha sogghignato Braggadocio.

“Che cosa fanno a quel paese noi non dobbiamo dirlo,” ha replicato Simei.

In this passage, Simei is telling them not to write *casino, incazzatura* or *cazzeggio*. Costanza protests that everyone swears nowadays, but Colonna suggests using equivalent euphemisms. References to brothels and male genitalia were not going to work in the English translation (the English seem to have far less imagination than the Italians when it comes to sexual imagery), but scatological language seemed to fit better:

Simei called us together the following Monday: “Costanza, in your article about hookers you use such expressions as cock up, crap and hot shit and describe a scene with a hooker who says fuck off.”

“But that’s how it is,” protested Costanza. “Everyone swears now, on television too, and even ladies say fuck.”

“We’re not interested in what they do in high society. We have to think about readers still upset by swear words. You have to use circumlocutions. Colonna?”

I intervened: “One can perfectly well say mishap, garbage, bees knees, and take a running jump.”

The last euphemism produced another translation problem, since it was followed by an exchanged between Braggadocio and Simei. Here is the original:
“…e vada a quel paese”
“Chissà cosa fanno a quel paese,” ha sogghignato Braggadocio.
“Che cosa fanno a quel paese noi non dobbiamo dirlo,” ha replicato Simei.

Which translated literally means:
“…and go to that country [in Italian, a euphemism for fuck off]”
“Who knows what they do in that country,” sneered Braggadocio.
“What they do in that country is not for us to say,” replied Simei.

“Go to that country” wouldn’t mean much in English, nor would the exchange that follows, but by using a euphemism like “take a running jump” it was possible to create more or less the same effect (albeit somewhat lame) in a different way:
“…and take a running jump.”
“Breaking a leg in the process,” sneered Braggadocio.
“Whether they break a leg is none of our business,” replied Simei.

c) At various points in the novel, Eco uses cultural references that an English reader is not going to understand. Here are three:

i) at page 157, with the “real” Mussolini still alive and hidden away in his secret refuge (according to Braggadocio’s theory), diehard Fascist followers still wanted people to think he was dead, while preparing themselves for the day when he would re-emerge:

“Ma, dando per buono che Mussolini era morto [...] ci si doveva tener pronti all’idea che un giorno il defunto sarebbe riapparso—come prima più di prima, come diceva la canzone.”

Many Italian readers would recognize “Come prima più di prima” as the title of a hit song of 1958 by Domenico Modugno (as well as a play by Pirandello, also made into a film called Never Say Goodbye starring Rock Hudson and Cornell Borchers). To translate the title as “Like before, more than before,” would make no sense—there’s no song or film of that name, so far as I’m aware. So I chose the name of another song, a lesser hit of 1979 by Abba called “As Good as New” (whose libretto contains the words: “as new, as good as new”). My translation therefore related to another song, but it fitted the context (and bearing in mind the novel is set in 1992, the translation had to refer to a song before that year in order to give it a degree of plausibility). The translation therefore reads:5

“But, while letting it be thought that Mussolini was dead [...] they had to be prepared for the idea that one day the deceased would resurface—as new, as good as new, as the song goes.”

ii) Chapter 12 ends with the words: “Resistiamo per qualche mese, guadagniamoci quei pochi soldi, pochi maledetti e subito, e poi i mari del Sud.” The Italian reader would probably recognize this as a reference to a 1963 cult film by
Pino Zac, reused by Robert Schoepflin in 2008. I translated it as “few, filthy and fast”. Once again, it fitted the context, but the cultural reference was lost: “We’ll hold out for a few months, earn ourselves those few lire—few, filthy and fast—and then the South Seas.”

iii) On the last page of the book there’s another song reference. Colonna is pondering on the general decline around him:

> “Basta solo aspettare: una volta diventato definitivamente terzo mondo, il nostro paese sarà pienamente vivibile, come se tutto fosse Copacabana la donna è regina la donna è sovrana.”

The reference here is to a song made famous by Wanda Osiris and Raffaella Carrà but, once again, means nothing to the English reader, and a literal translation (e.g. “Where the woman is queen, the woman reigns supreme,” or some such) would lose the resonance of the original. So I used the words of a more famous hit about Copacabana by Barry Manilow. But I had to change the words. Manilow’s song is about the Copacabana Club in New York, “the hottest place north of Havana,” whereas Colonna was referring to South America. So the translation became:

> “All we have to do is wait: once this country of ours has finally joined the Third World, the living will be easy, as if it were all Copacabana, the hottest spot south of Havana.”

d) At page 76, at the end of a long discourse on fake honorary titles, Simei declares: “in ogni caso è certo che un commendatore di Santa Maria in Betlemme è come fosse il sindaco di Bengodi”.

Most Italian readers have studied Boccaccio at school and will therefore know that Bengodi is a fictitious country, described in the Third tale on the Eighth day of Decameron, “where the vines are tied up with sausages and a goose is to be had for a farthing and a gosling into the bargain, and that there was a mountain all of grated Parmesan cheese, whereon abode folk who did nothing but make macaroni and ravioli and cook them in capon-broth.”

English readers, on the other hand, are likely to be in difficulty, perhaps imagining Bengodi to be an obscure Italian town (nor would they find any help from the English pages of Wikipedia). I raised my doubt with Eco, who suggested changing Bengodi to Cockaigne. It fits perfectly: “but in any event a Commendatore of the Order of Saint Mary of Bethlehem is certainly worth about as little as that of the Mayor of Cockaigne.”

e) In Chapter 13, Colonna and Maia amuse themselves reading lonely hearts announcements and trying to work out the subtext of each message, one of which they interpret as “non faccio schifo, c’è una stangona che almeno non dica ‘vadi’, e che ci stia a fare alcune belle scopate senza pretendere troppo?... ‘non dica ‘vadi’” means, in effect, “who doesn’t get her subjunctives wrong,” a good way of separating the wheat from the chaff in Italian but not in English. So for the English translation

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6. Trans: John Payne.
I suggested “who doesn’t drop her aitches.” But this didn’t work for the American edition, where we agreed “who doesn’t pop her gum and say ‘dese’ and ‘dose’”. So the UK edition reads:

“I’m not a complete jerk, so isn’t there some sex bomb who doesn’t drop her aitches who’s up for a good fuck without expecting much else?”,

and the US edition:

“I’m not a complete jerk, so isn’t there some sex bomb who doesn’t pop her gum and say ‘dese’ and ‘dose,’ who’s up for a good fuck without expecting much else?”

2. Explaining

When it comes to cultural and historical references, English readers need to be placed, so far as possible, in the same position as Italian readers when it comes to understanding the various references in the text. But how far should the translator go? English readers will not be so familiar with the world in which this story is set, but it is also true that Eco enjoys putting in references that many Italian readers aren’t going to understand. Sometimes these references are there to create a certain atmosphere and their exact meaning may not be that important.

On the first page of the novel, Colonna recalls lying awake at night listening to the drip from the bathroom shower, and comments: “pare di essere a Valldemossa” (“like being at Valldemossa”). But how many Italian readers (with no further assistance from Eco) are going to recognize this as a reference to Chopin’s stay at the old Carthusian monastery at Valldemossa in Majorca, where he lay in bed listening to the sound of dripping rain which inspired his Prelude op. 28 no.15 (The Raindrop Prelude)? I asked Eco whether I could add one extra clue for English readers, so the translation reads: “like Chopin at Valldemossa.”

And how many readers will realize that “the stolen letter ” on page 3 is a reference to Poe, or will pick up the oblique references to Poe’s short story The Murders of Rue Morgue, or Thornton Wilder’s The Bridge of San Luis Rey? Here the Italian and English readers were in the same position, so the references had to be left as they were and no further help given to the English reader.

When it came to following the thread of the plot itself, the reader needed to be given enough information to know who the historical figures were, but without interrupting the flow of the story. So, generally speaking, it was necessary to give a person’s full name when a surname had been enough in the Italian text. Lombroso became Cesare Lombroso, and likewise with Craxi, Barracu, Falcone, Leccisi,

Casson, and many figures of recent history who are household names in Italy but not in the English-speaking world.

Elsewhere, a few words of explanation were added. For example (indicated here, once again, in italics): “It’s even rumoured that Mussolini’s real executioner was Matteotti’s son, *there to avenge his father’s assassination*”;10 “fond memories of … attackers holding a flower in their mouth (*as the Fascist song went*);11 discovery of a letter ‘from Garibaldi’ insulting *his lieutenant* Nino Bixio”12; “Aldo Moro, *foreign minister at the time and soon to be prime minister*”,13 and “an article along the lines of the Banca Romana *collapse*”.14

When it comes to Latin, Italians have an advantage over most English readers, and so—once again with Eco’s agreement—a little help was given, especially where the reader needed to understand the meaning, for example, of *parce sepulto* (to spare the corpse)15 or *de minimis non curat praetor* (the law doesn’t concern itself with trifles).16

Geographical references were a particular problem. The novel is set in northern Italy, where feelings toward those from the south are often ungenerous, if not outright racist. Readers had to understand this.

In Chapter 5, for example, where the journalists are discussing what to print and what stories are going to interest northern Italian newspaper readers, words were added to the English translation so that it was understood, for example, that Bergamo is in the north and Messina in the south:

“*ma perché si deve dire che c’è stato un incidente a Bergamo e ignorare che ce n’è stato un altro a Messina?*”

“But why report an accident *up here in the north*, in Bergamo, and ignore another that’s taken place *down south* in Messina?”17

An alternative approach was to replace the name of the city with the more generic words, so references to Calabria and Cuneo in the following passage:

“*Lo so che si è sdottorato sul fatto che i giornali scrivono sempre operaio calabrese assale il compagno di lavoro e mai operaio cuneese assale il compagno di lavoro.*”18

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became:

“I know it’s commonly said that if a labourer attacks a fellow worker then the newspapers report where he comes from if he’s a southerner but not if he comes from the north.”

Likewise, Eco suggested changing “Loano” to “the Ligurian coast” (it was enough for the reader to imagine a coastal resort south of Milan), and “Lugano” to “Switzerland” (here again, it was more important to picture a place on the other side of the Italian border than any specific locality).

Other references were left unexplained. They were there, perhaps, more for the effect—and not all Italian readers would have picked up their meaning. So, for example, the reference to the performance of Bertolazzi’s El nost Milan at the Piccolo Teatro was left without additional explanation, as were the Beast of Via San Gregorio, the Soap-Maker (though I added “of Correggio” to give her full title) and the Monster of the Via Salaria.

But what about this? When the news team first meets up, Braggadocio explains how he acquired his surname:

“My grandfather was a foundling, and you know how surnames in such cases used to be invented by a public official. If he was a sadist he could even call you Ficarotta, but in my grandfather’s case the official was only moderately sadistic...”

The surname “Ficarotta” is likely to produce amusement for Italian readers, but the English reader could be shocked to find out what it means, and perhaps less amused. So should I explain its meaning? It seemed better left in the air. A curious reader could always check it out in the dictionary.

3. Cutting

Reading through the first draft, I was conscious of particular phrases that didn’t seem to fit well into the translation. There was a problem of understanding that I couldn’t resolve.

Each of the following are comments, of passing importance, that mean something to the Italian reader but would need a great deal of explaining to the English reader:

a. The narrator describes the various tasks he had done for publishing houses as “jobs that gave me what Paolo Villaggio once called a monstrous culture”, a reference to a book written by the Italian comedian Paolo Villaggio, called *Come farsi una cultura mostruosa*.25

b. Colonna makes a comment about the Italian mispronunciation of English words: “Likewise, everyone in Italy is persuaded to talk about *soosparnse* (and it’s written *suspense* and not *suspence*) and *manargement* instead of *management*.”26

c. Simei says: “...we have to talk the language of the reader, not that of the intellectuals who talk about obliterating the travel document”,27 a reference to the bizarre bureaucratic language used on railway notices that used to tell travellers to stamp their tickets in the yellow machines on each platform, on pain of being fined—notices that amused every foreigner who travelled on an Italian train but would be incomprehensible to those foreign readers who haven’t.

d. Braggadocio, after recounting Mussolini’s meeting with Cardinal Schuster at the Archbishop’s Palace on the morning of 25 April 1945, adds: “At the end of the meeting, Sandro Pertini, having arrived late, apparently runs into Mussolini on the staircase, though perhaps it’s a legend.”28 For the Italian reader, this single mention of Pertini, who would later become a popular President of Italy, is an interesting aside but, for anyone else, it would require a miniature history lesson (or, worse still, a footnote), and would slow down the story.

e. In the final pages, Colonna and Maia watch a programme presented by Corrado Augias,29 on Italian television, showing a BBC documentary called *Operation Gladio*. Augias is a veteran journalist and television presenter, but his name is unfamiliar outside Italy.

Eco agreed that these passing references could be cut to improve the flow of the story. They added colour to the Italian text but it was difficult to find a way of incorporating them into the translation.

4. Unusual words

Eco was a magpie when it came to vocabulary, some of the magnificent words he dusted off don’t appear in Italian-English dictionaries, and it is sometimes hard to

find adequate translations. Here are some examples of words that seemed to defy translation—or where, at least, I failed to find an adequate equivalent:

a. Maia Fresia used to work on celebrity magazines but has grown tired of writing such “panzane”—the dictionary gave me “lies” or “cock-and-bull stories”, I chose “drivel”, but none of these seem to have quite the same power.\(^\text{30}\)

b. Braggadocio describes an attractive young woman as a “squinzietta”, which the dictionary defines as “ragazza smorfiosa, dai modi leziosi e civettuoli”, probably derived from Donna Squinzia, the character in a play by Carlo Maria Maggi (1639-1691), who wrote in dialect and is regarded as the father of Milanese literature: my translation is “pert little creature”.\(^\text{31}\)

c. Simei instructs Palatino to ensure his horoscopes will suit everyone, whether adolescents, office clerks or “tardone”—a less than respectful reference to women of a certain age trying to look younger than they are. The dictionary gives “mutton dressed as lamb”, I have translated it as “ageing spinsters”, but neither capture the image of this unsympathetic word.\(^\text{32}\)

d. Pre-obituaries (or pre-obits), compiled before a person dies, ready to be updated and published the day after, are called “coccodrilli”\(^\text{33}\)—no English equivalent is as exotic as “crocodiles”.

e. Fresia and Colonna become disillusioned and Colonna asks “Vuoi ... che andiamo a denunciare questa manfrina...”, which I have translated as “Why not expose this whole pathetic story...”\(^\text{34}\), but “manfrina” is rather more than simply a pathetic story: it takes its name from a Piedmontese dance, something tedious and persistent, designed to catch attention, to persuade someone about something.

f. Braggadocio describes a coup by Forestry Rangers in 1970 which failed, “but this accozzaglia was capable of some nasty things.” I translated “accozzaglia” as “motley crew”, though it doesn’t seem to me to have the resonance of the original.\(^\text{35}\)

**Conclusion**

Without the collaboration of the author in the translation process, there is a danger of the text being viewed as some kind of object in aspic. The translator and editor

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will then be tempted to make the minimum of concessions to the target reader and perhaps consign their explanations to a list of notes at the end of the book. Where, on the other hand, the author is an enthusiastic participant, it is possible to create a translation that is potentially more dynamic, readable and understandable. Umberto Eco was a model author in this respect. Having himself translated, and written about translation, he was aware of the problems, willing to join in the game, and then (at least in my experience) to step back and leave the final decisions to the translator.

Postscript

In March 2015 I sent my translation to Eco, marked up with comments and queries. He replied within a couple of days, answering most of the points and inviting me up to Milan to discuss the remainder.

Eco’s apartment, overlooking the Castello Sforzesco in the centre of the city, is a vast labyrinth of rooms. To one side of the entrance, a long corridor housing his vast book collection leads to his office. A separate room holds the most valuable books which Eco, one of Italy’s most dedicated bibliophiles, showed me with evident delight. “Feel the thickness of that paper. It’s almost like card, practically indestructible.” The volume had been printed in the 1450s and the type was as clear as the day it had first been published. He also brought out a copy of Aldus Manutius’ Hypnerotomachia Poliphili of 1499. “Not the finest example,” he conceded. “This one has been cut and rebound, but at least it’s an unexpurgated copy.” By the door were two cherished first editions of Joyce.

We settled into two comfortable armchairs in the sitting room and worked through the points on my list. Eco tackled each problem with enthusiasm, and I found myself thinking how, as a university professor, his enthusiasm must have inspired generations of students. He showed the same keenness for English as he did for his native tongue—he once declared that his two favourite English words were “flabbergasted” and “discombobulated”. So when it came to finding an improbable name for the priggish author of a parody letter of niggling complaint to a newspaper, Eco’s suggestion of Signor Perniketti seemed perfect.

We had completed the list in just over an hour and went off for lunch at a nearby restaurant: an antipasto of sliced artichokes and parmesan, followed by ossobuco with risotto alla milanese. He ordered a generous glass of whisky; for me, a glass of pinot bianco from Friuli. “I have to go carefully these days,” he said. “I’ve had a kidney removed.” And later: “I’d really prefer to be living in our place in the country. But the nearest hospital is 45 minutes away. Here in Milan they can get me there in ten minutes.”

By the time we had finished lunch it was raining. He had left his coat and umbrella at home. “Cazzo! I’m going to catch cold,” he said with a light chuckle. We arrived at the front door of his apartment block and he invited me in to rest
on the sofa for an hour before my next appointment. I thanked him but declined. As he turned to walk inside, he patted me on the shoulder: “Grazie di tutto.” And I walked away feeling he meant it.

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