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# The Diaphanous Translation: Fabrizio De André sings Edgar Lee Masters.\*

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‘Translation is the art of failure’.

Umberto Eco, *Dire quasi la stessa cosa*  
(2003)

## 1. Introduction: transposition, adaptation, and translation.

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The intuition that inspires and guides the present article is that the famous Italian songwriter Fabrizio De André <sup>\* 1</sup> has, in a certain sense that we will try to clarify, composed the last musical epitaph of the *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters <sup>\* 2</sup> (Masters 1963 [1915]). The corollary of this intuition is that the album *Non al denaro, non all'amore né al cielo* <sup>\* 3</sup> [‘neither to money, nor to love, nor to heaven’] (1971)

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\* I dedicate this essay to my dear friend and revered colleague OKADA Atsushi, with whom I reminisced about Italian songs on several train journeys across Japan.

\* 1 Fabrizio De André is one of most famous and beloved Italian songwriters and singers. He was born in Genoa in 1940 and died in Milan in 1999.

\* 2 Garnett, Kansas, 1868 - Mellrose, Pennsylvania, 1950.

\* 3 It cannot be ignored that other artists collaborated with De André in this venture. Apart from references to specific contributions, however, in the present article the name of De André will be used according to the usual authorial conventions: as an umbrella reference to the person who assumes the artistic responsibility of the work.

manages to establish a virtuous circle thanks to which the composer reaches a place where not even the poet had arrived; the point where the genre of the epitaph turns into its paradoxical reflective version: the self-epitaph.

In order to grasp this passage it is necessary to study in detail and depth the complex and often evasive relation between the poet's word and the songwriter's music. The difficulty in thoroughly delving into this relation is already hidden in the inadequacy of the two labels: 'word' and 'music'; they are too generic, impressionistic, and univocal to give a concrete sense of the multiplicity, the similarities, but also the differences that unite and divide Edgar Lee Masters and Fabrizio De André.

There are numerous ways to approach this network of relations. One of the most profitable ones, at least on the basis of the modest skills of the present author, seems that of using the concept of transposition as cornerstone. Fabrizio De André transposes Edgar Lee Masters. We prefer this rather abstract and general term, 'transposition', to the more usual word 'adaptation'. The latter, in fact, evokes the idea of an adjustment of the written word to music (or vice versa), an effort implying constraints, additions, subtractions, and smoothing that together channel poetry into music as in a sort of irregular and twisted funnel.

In other cases, 'adaptation' is a word that stirs in one's imagination the idea of an opposite but symmetrical attempt, that of bending the malleable metal of sounds on the immovable anvil of the poetic text. Instead, the term 'transposition' is preferred because it avoids the image of a mechanical and static operation and reminds one, on the contrary, that in the meeting of the poet and the musician, the transformation affects both simultaneously and touches not only the text of the poetic word and the fabric of the musical plot, but the same idea of the making of a poetic text, as well as the same idea of music making.

In reality, there would be some learned and, perhaps, more precise and pertinent alternatives to the term 'transposition'. Semiotics, for example, would certainly speak of 'inter-semiotic translation' (Dusi and Nergaard 2000). But since in this circumstance it is the general theme of the analysis that interests us most, and not so much the method or the theory, it is better to adopt an ecumenical language, and to ensure that the jargon of semiotics is the point of arrival of the explanation, more than its technical starting point.

There are at least two ways of studying transpositions. One of them is that of the historian, of the philologist. This way presupposes the idea of time, of time as history, and never ignores it. There is a before, a process, and an after of transposition. There is the text before the transposing activity, and there is the text that results from it. The task

of identifying continuities and relating them to differences pertains to the watchful eye of the philologist. The second way is that of the semiotician, or the analyst of structures, to use a broader definition. In this second way, the idea of time as history vanishes and what remains is only an abstract but intelligible web of correspondences, differences, and values. Finding a before and an after of transposition is not always necessary and sometimes can be even misleading. The concept of source, moreover, dissolves into that of text, thus losing its traditional philological meaning. These two ways, though, according to the present author, are not mutually exclusive. They are, indeed, complementary. They are even inseparable from each other if not thanks to the academic gesture that divides academic disciplines.

## 2. From the epitaph to the song.

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If Fabrizio De André's album is placed within the flow of history, then this conjunct of both verbal and musical texts (without forgetting the other signifying aspects of the musical paratext, such as the album cover, etc. ) finds a precise location. At the beginning, there is the poet, Edgar Lee Masters. The etiology that he wishes to pass on to his readers and to posterity about his anthology is simple: the poetic text stems from the epitaph through the creative filter of verbal invention. In fact – as Masters' specialists have now made it clear – the stimuli that influenced the genesis of his anthology were sundry and had in the image of the funeral epitaphs no more than a sort of foundation myth.

The words engraved on the marble of tombstones are an almost mythological starting point on which Edgar Lee Masters himself wished to base his own fantasy (with all the rhetorical effects that this entails: such marble is the concrete and material metaphor of the final judgment that death writes on the lives of human beings but also of the brutality with which it rips the mask of those who once lived; the corollary of this impossible point of view – that of death over life – is that the judgment of the living is, on the contrary, always intrinsically deceptive).

At the beginning there are, therefore, these gravestones, then a curious and bizarre American poet, and then an Italian scholar, a deep connoisseur of the US literature and a skilled translator, who adds a new tile to the domino of philological filiations: Fernanda Pivano translates the *Spoon River Anthology* from English into Italian (1943). It is not enough to point out that every link in this long chain of transpositions involves a further transformation of texts. To this evident observation, in fact, one should add that the

very nature of the transposition changes at each stage; not only the painting changes, therefore, but also the frame. At this point, semiotics and its subtleties come in handy. Edgar Lee Masters, if one must believe the mythology of his inspiration, transforms epitaphs into poetic texts. We move from a type of verbal sign system to a different type of verbal sign system. In the next step, again the written text of Masters is transposed into that of Pivano's. The semantic content is roughly the same, with all the imperfections that this kind of operation inevitably entails, but the adopted natural language is different: no longer that of the small rural towns of America but Italian. These two first steps deserve deeper reflection; we have already noted similarities: in both cases, the written word is transformed into another written word. But there are also differences: an epitaph is not just verbal, it is also visual. It also includes the typography of the message, the material on which it is inscribed, the place of inhumation, the congeries of visual, architectural, sculptural, pictorial, and photographic codes that surround a tomb and deeply influence its perception.

Even if we accept the mythology of the genesis of Masters' poems, then, we must recognize that: a) the poet had to reduce this complexity of perceptive stimuli to the exclusive forms of the written word; b) this reduction implies a high degree of interpretation, regardless of the idea of loyalty. In the next phase of translation, however, loyalty is everything and creativity goes into the background.\*<sup>4</sup>

According to semiotics, in both passages one can speak of intra-semiotic translation, that is, of transposition from one text to another, but still within the same language. The epitaphs were composed of words, exactly like the anthology. Masters' English relied on words, exactly like Pivano's Italian. Some extra-linguistic elements, however, condition the first transposition, which is, indeed, intra-semiotic, but sometimes touches on another type of transposition, that which semiotics defines inter-semiotics, that is, between two different types of language (for example, when a sonnet is transposed into a cameo).

In the following step of transposition, Fabrizio De André 'meets' the text of the *Anthology of Spoon River*, probably through the Italian translation of Pivano. His relationship with Masters is therefore already mediated by the presence of a transposition from a natural language (English) to another (Italian). But what the songwriter decides is to add to the already existing textual transformations another transformation, which is very close, due to its semiotic nature, to that completed by Edgar Lee Masters

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\*<sup>4</sup> Although translation studies speak of 'beautiful unfaithful' and 'faithful ugly' translations (Eco 2003).

himself. In both cases, in fact, an inter-semiotic translation (that of the tombstones in words, for Masters, that of words in music, for De André) is added to the intra-semiotic translation, but with one difference: if the American poet had reduced the complexity of the languages of the Spoon River hills in the bottlenecks (but how noble are they!) of the poetic discourse, De André broadens the horizons of meaning again, introducing in its transposition the rich dimension of sound.

### 3. 'Musicality' of *Spoon River*.

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Some philological data seem to indicate that this so-called 'structural' symmetry is further specified if one studies it from the historical point of view. The creative gesture of the songwriter who enriches the poetic text by transforming it and by adding sound to it corresponds, almost in a mirroring way, to that of the poet who composes his anthology of epitaphs (or pseudo-epitaphs) guided by an inspiration that we would also say it was musical.

In 1936, Georges Schreiber, illustrator and collector, included an image of Masters in a book entitled *Portraits and Self-Portraits* (Schreiber 1936: 91-4). So as to accompany the drawing, Masters himself offered an autobiographical summary of his life in which he reviewed his youth and experiences in Chicago before he settled in the East. At the conclusion of his verbal self-portrait, Masters declared that poetry had been his passion from early youth and that it was closely connected to his devotion (Masters used exactly this term) for music.

Music, therefore, was one of the sources of inspiration for the poet Masters, who translated the dimension of sound into the verses of his *Anthology*. It is difficult to establish what kind of music in particular it was: it is very likely that the reference was to folk ballads and songs. What it is important to observe, however, is the structural datum (as it was anticipated, philology and semiotics travel hand in hand): again, if Masters reduces the complexity of music into the words of the poems (as we have already noted about the analogue reduction of the complex 'tomb language'), De André's transposition once again appears as symmetrically opposite: the musical inspiration insinuates itself again within the text, however no longer hiding behind the words, their rhythm, and their prosody, but exploding in all the richness of the musical composition, in all the expressive ranges of the human voice.

It is, then, at least interesting, if not useful, to note that such multimedia dimension

marks not only the writing of the *Spoon River Anthology* (the musical inspiration of its author), but also its reception. In some of the first reviews, in fact, commentators pointed out that the language and the conceptual toolbox of the literary critic were perhaps not sufficient to evaluate the work of Masters, which was so radically new and shamelessly original. Some of these critiques, for example, brought up an art that was not yet fully established as such and that at the time was still at its onset: cinema. In one of the first reviews of the Anthology, the one that Lawrence Gilman wrote for the *North American Review* in August 1915, the critic claimed that Masters had composed 'moving-picture poetry', a label that he justified in relation to Masters' habit to choose a single event and then to represent it from different points of view (Gilman 1915). The result was, according to Lawrence, 'a series of vivid, concentrated, rapidly shifting visualizations, related and interwoven' (*ibidem*).

This review does no longer mentions the musical inspiration of Masters but highlights a revealing aspect regarding its reception: for the contemporaries of the poet, referring to the literary discourse was not sufficient to fully account for the novelty of his *Anthology*. The way in which Masters had chosen to transpose the epitaphs of Spoon River, in fact, appealed to other senses, arts, and languages. In De André's album, the multimedia dimension that was already inherent in the *Anthology* manifests itself in full breath, not only because of the introduction of the sound dimension but also and above all, as it will be seen in detail through the following structural analysis, thanks to the nature of such sound: a concrete, narrative sound that often (and especially in complex arrangements) takes on a narrative dimension. \* 5

There are, therefore, important symmetries between the transposition of Masters (from the epitaph to the poem) and that of De André (from the poem to the song) as regards both its creation and its reception. But perhaps few remember that even in the context of musical transpositions (or inter-semiotic translations) Masters' *Anthology* soon attracted great attention. Although today it is the name of De André that is inextricably linked with the pioneering attempt to transpose Masters' poems into music (to the point that the latter in Italy are even frequently read under the influence of the Italian songwriter), another Italian, Mario Peragallo, \* 6 was probably the first one to have the idea of turning

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\* 5 The author of these arrangements is Nicola Piovani, a musician today especially known for his skills as musical storyteller and soundtrack composer (he was awarded an Academy Award, among other prizes, for his soundtrack of Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella*).

\* 6 Rome, 1910-1996.

the epitaphs 'collected' by the American poet into a musical show. Peragallo composed a madrigal entitled *La Collina*, inspired by six poems of the Anthology, performed for the first time in Venice in 1947 (Gatti 1948).<sup>\* 7</sup>

Sixteen years later, in 1963, Joseph Cates<sup>\* 8</sup> produced a reading program entitled *Spoon River* at the Booth Theater in New York, adapting Masters' book. About seventy of the epitaphs, mixed with songs written by Charles Aidman<sup>\* 9</sup> and music by Naomi Herhhorn, were read by a troupe of six actors. The sketches chosen were those of Harry Wilmans, Scholfield Huxley, Reuben Pantier, Emily Sparks, and then the famous Fiddler Jones, who '[...] ended up with a broken fiddle / And a broken laugh, and a thousand memories, / And not a single regret'.

We shall return on this epitaph, whose musical transposition also closes the album of De André and certainly plays an important role in the relation that the musician had with Masters' anthology. But for the sake of completeness, it should be remembered that, in 1964, David Greene<sup>\* 10</sup> organized another theatrical and musical transposition of the *Anthology* in London. Again, it counted on the participation of six actors accompanied by folk songs sung by Rick Jones and Isla Cameron (Flanagan 1974: 22).

If we list these historical precedents of the De André's endeavour, it is not for a mere display of scholarship, but because all of these attempts, considered together, constitute a textual series. They indicate, that there is something in Masters' work, in his way of 'translating' the epitaphs into poetry, which then pushed musicians and composers to attempt a further transposition, that from the written word to song.

This hypothesis is nothing but a different version of the affirmation with which the present text was opened: with De André, a structural distancing is produced from the *Anthology* of Masters, meaning that the text of the poem is profoundly transformed by contact with the musical language; but, at the same time, there is also a return, a paradoxical one: with *Non al denaro, non all'amore né al cielo*, which is perhaps the highest attempt to put Masters into music, the genre of folk poetry – literally: the poetry of people – the people in their life and unquenchable concreteness, that which hides behind the coldness of marble but also behind the aseptic communication (lapidary, one

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<sup>\* 7</sup> It would be very interesting, in another study, to identify philological and structural correspondences between Peragallo's and De André's attempts.

<sup>\* 8</sup> New York, 1924-1998.

<sup>\* 9</sup> Frankfort, Indiana, 1925 – Beverly Hills, California, 1993.

<sup>\* 10</sup> Manchester, 1921 – Ojai, California, 2003.

could say on this occasion) of the epitaph, already so lively reinterpreted by the American poet, return to live in all the human complexity of the folk music genre.

In De André, therefore, the paradox cultivated by Masters reaches its highest peak: that of a point of view of death over life, as well as of life over death. In this sense, transposition is completion, neither subtraction, nor simple modification. The songwriter rediscovers the poet and completes his work by lending to it his voice, instruments, and sound.

## 4. Poetry and Music.

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This last observation leads to the general terrain of the relationship between poetry and music. It is a slippery ground, wherein concrete analyses are often more illuminating than general theories. But it is a terrain that must be at least surveyed, before embarking in the structural analysis of De André's album.

According to Susanne Langer, music 'swallows' poetry, mortifying its original auratic beauty (Langer 1953: 152):

When words and music are together in songs, music swallows words; not only words and literal sentences, but even literary word-structures, poetry. Song is not a compromise between poetry and music, but the text taken by itself is a great poem; song is music. \*<sup>11</sup>

But it is sufficient to pass from Langer's general statements to the concrete observation of the aesthetic functioning of the De André's album to immediately realize that the word in all the songs remains central not only in its relative fidelity to the poetic text of departure but also in the deepening of the prosody already present in the *Spoon River Anthology*. De André recovers both the meaning and the musicality of words by giving them a rhythm – a prosody indeed – that the epitaphs recreated by Masters contained only in embryonic form. In this regard, it is not possible to overlook the large number of reviews of this literary work that, right from its first appearance, highlighted precisely this 'flaw': the adhesion to the creed of free verse, the deconstruction of traditional prosodic structures, and the adoption of a style very close to that of prose,

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\*<sup>11</sup> For a discussion on the semiotic value of Langer's theories, see Calabrese 2002: 15-21.



or at least of prose poems. The necessities of musical transposition, the need to 'write verses' induce De André, in a certain sense, to 'goad' Lee Masters, to caricature its poetic vocation.

But this increase in the prosodic level is accompanied by a semantic deepening: De André, thanks to the mastery of the literary transposition (from the verses of the poems to those of the songs), and especially by virtue of the expanded expressive possibilities of sound, interprets Lee Masters in a very similar way to that suggested by the esthetologist Edward T. Cone: "Ultimately there is only one justification for the serious composition of a song; it must be an attempt to increase our understanding of the poem." \* <sup>12</sup> Other scholars, also in the name of composers in vein of claiming the autonomy of their creativity, counter-argue to this normative setting that it is not right to 'enslave' music into word and turn it into a mere exegetical tool. Thus, Joseph Coroniti, for example (Coroniti 1992: 3):

But why should we be satisfied with the function of the musical explicators of another medium? After all, if the poet does not want to share his art with a composer, then it should come as no surprise that a composer would assert his own artistic rights.

Ultimately, when the aesthetic debate on the transposition of poetry into music and words into musical sounds takes this normative fold, it resolves into a diatribe between poets jealous of the virginity of their art and musicians eager to conquer it. Thus, on the one hand, the composer Charles Ives argues that:

A song has a few rights, the same as other ordinary citizens. If you feel like walking along the left side of the street, passing the door of the physiology or sitting on the curb, why not let it? If you feel like kicking over an ash can, a poet's castle, or the prosodic law, will you stop it? Must be always a polite triad, a 'breve gaudium', a ribbon to match the voice? [...] Should it not be a chance to sing itself, if it can sing? \* <sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, there are poets like Rilke. Averse to any form of accompaniment of his poetic, musical, as well as iconic works, the author of the *Duino Elegies* believed

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\* <sup>12</sup> Quoted in Kramer 1984: 126.

\* <sup>13</sup> Ives, Charles, "Postface to 114 Songs", quoted in Coroniti 1992: 4.

that, after all, it is the task of the poet alone to fill with his/her own creative energy the whole artistic space that he/she offers to an idea of the mind; it is, for the poet, an odious thought that there may be space left to a different art, which, therefore, would only be interpretative and complementary.

Between these two extremes, the one that claims the completely unbridled character of the musical transposition and the one that defends the inviolability of the poetic text, there are intermediate positions that perhaps bring the aesthetic debate closer to the musical (and poetic) creation of De André. These are usually the theories of those who, like the Ligurian composer, have ventured into this difficult genre of the transposition of poetry into music. The composer Ned Rorem, for example, states (1970: 26):

Song is the reincarnation of a poem which was destroyed in order to live again in music. The composer, no matter how respectful, must treat poetry as a skeleton on which to bestow flesh, breaking a few bones in the process. He does not render a poem more musical (poetry is not music, it's poetry); he weds it to sound, creating a third entity of different and sometimes great magnitude that either parent.

This string of metaphors, sometimes brutal, sometimes more suited to the work of a taxidermist than to that of a singer and songwriter (the skeleton, the flesh, and the broken bones), is, however, from a certain point of view, liberating. Fruit of the reflection of an artist but also of a craftsman of sound, it extricates the debate on 'poetry and music' out of the immobile sands of the abstract and normative discourse. It reveals, instead, that there is another way of looking at such transpositions: no longer as mere instances of a clash between two titans (on the one hand, 'Poetry'; on the other, 'Music'), but as a series of operations; as a combination of practices, strategies, and textual mechanisms.

This perspective is vivifying, especially from an analytical point of view: after all, what interests us is not to know whether De André was a good composer, a respectful musician, or an irreverent poet. It would be excessive presumption to arrogate us the task of answering this question, to which, in a sense, posterity has already given a flattering response. On the contrary, what is important is to understand what was the skeleton chosen by De André, the flesh with which he chose to fill it, and, above all, (basically there is always something traumatic in transpositions), which bones he allowed himself to break into Lee Masters' poems.

## 5. Reincarnations.

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In this regard, the analytical approach of semiotics is very useful. An essentially morphological discourse, in a sense opposed to the ethical one of aesthetics, semiotics provides a meta-language to talk about skeletons, flesh, and broken bones. A good starting point is the definition of adaptation (in the lexicon of this essay: transposition) provided by Gérard-Denis Farcy (1993: 388):

Adaptation is defined by its objects, terms, operations, and plans. More specifically, there is adaptation when an object goes from one term to another through a plan (or several plans) and undergoes certain operations [...]. The object can vary in scale: at most the work, at least the musical theme, the pictorial subject, and the story in the figurative genres. The terms (of departure or arrival) can be: semiotics, codes (generic, aesthetic, cultural), diegeses, and problems (affective, ideological). Operations with variable geometry are: transposing, constraining, transforming, and preserving [...]. As for the plans, they are those of Hjelt (substance and form of the content and the expression) that, before structuring the adaptation-product, provide to the adaptation-production lines of conduct and specific tasks. Finally, adaptation is defined by its relation to what it adapts; in other words, it is anything but the dissolution of the adapted.\*<sup>14</sup>

Although this definition is rather abstract, since it tries to describe adaptation in all its forms, regardless of the nature of the texts or textual phenomena involved, it is nevertheless more functional and operational (at least for the purposes of the present

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\* 14 'L'adaptation se définit par ses objets, ses termes, ses opérations et ses plans. Plus précisément, il y a de l'adaptation lorsqu'un objet va d'un terme à un autre en passant par un plan (ou plusieurs) et en subissant certaines opérations [...]. L'objet peut varier d'échelle : au maximum l'œuvre, au minimum le thème musical, le sujet pictural, l'histoire dans les genres figuratifs. Les termes (de départ ou d'arrivée) peuvent être : des sémiologies, des codes (générique, esthétique, culturel), des diégèses, des problématiques (affective, idéologique). Les opérations à géométrie variable sont les suivantes : transposer, astreindre, transformer et préserver [...]. Quant aux plans, ce sont ceux de Hjelt (substance et forme du contenu et de l'expression), qui, avant de structurer l'adaptation-produit, fournissent à l'adaptation-production des lignes des conduites et des tâches spécifiques. Enfin, l'adaptation se définit par sa relation avec ce qu'elle adapte ; autrement dit, elle est tout sauf la dissolution de l'adaptée.'

essay) than the aesthetic disquisitions mentioned above.

First of all, it is necessary to clear the field from a possible source of confusion. The term 'transposition' appears in the definition of Farcy to designate one of the adaptation operations. In the theoretical discourse proposed by the present article, 'transposition' is used as an alternative to 'adaptation', for the reasons already explained. That said, it is perhaps appropriate to start from the end of Farcy's proposal, that is, from the last of his statements: adaptation (read: transposition) is anything but the dissolution of the adapted (transposed) text.

On the contrary, the operations that make up a transposition cannot be analysed and evaluated if not considering the tension and the omnipresent dialectic between the source and the arrival text. In this regard, Farcy's theoretical conception approaches the metaphor of reincarnation evoked by Rorem: there is a new body, but its nature would completely escape comprehension if it were not 'read' as revivification, within a new flesh, of a pre-existing body.

As regards the concerns of structural analysis, then, the definition of Farcy is appreciable for it provides a sort of abstract grid, that is, an empty system of possibilities, in which it will then be possible to identify what are the objects of the transposition carried out by De André, what the terms of departure and arrival, what the operations, and what the plans. Before putting the theoretical intuition to the test of concrete study and analysis, it is perhaps useful to remember that Farcy's definition was further clarified by Stéphane Malfettes, who precisely applied it to the case of the musical transposition of poetic texts (2000: 73): \*<sup>15</sup>

The discs that we are studying propose adaptations that ignore the stakes of expression and make a change of semiology; we will say that these adaptations are 'transsubstantial' and, more precisely, 'semi-literary' insofar as literature is present at (at least) one of their terms. Since a song is usually composed of words and music, rock [music] has a priori the means to preserve, as such, the concerned literary text; the operation that transforms a written 'hypotext' into a musical 'hypertext', however, forces the author of this operation to practice a certain number of choices

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\* 15 The author borrows his terminology from Genette 1982.

at different levels. \* 16

So what are De André's choices? We will now examine the last song of the album *Non al denaro, non all'amore né al cielo*: 'Il suonatore Jones' [litt., 'Jones the player'].

## 6. From the fiddle to the violin.

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We shall never know to the fullest extent what epitaph, or what other perceptual and semiotic experience, inspired Masters in the composition of *Fiddler Jones*. The starting point of the chain of transpositions that we are about to study is this: the poem *Fiddler Jones*, inserted in the *Anthology of Spoon River* between the one dedicated to Coney Potter and the one entitled *Nellie Clark*. Below, it is compared with the Italian translation by Fernanda Pivano, the one that, in all probability, acted as a link between the verbal text of *Spoon River Anthology* and the musical one composed by Fabrizio De André:

The earth keeps some vibration going  
There is your heart, and that is you.  
And if the people find you can fiddle,  
Why, fiddle you must, for all your life.  
What do you see, a harvest of clover?  
Or a meadow to walk through the river?  
The wind's in the corn; you rub your hands  
For beeves hereafter ready for market;  
Or else you hear the rustle of skirts  
Like the girls when dancing at Little Grove.  
To Cooney Potter a pillar of dust

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\* 16 'Les disques que nous étudions proposent des adaptations qui font fi des enjeux de l'expression et qui procèdent à un changement de sémiologie; on dira donc que ces adaptations sont «transsubstantielles» et plus précisément «hémilitéraires» dans la mesure où la littérature est présente à (au moins) un de leurs termes. Parce qu'une chanson est généralement constituée de paroles et de musique, le rock possède a priori les moyens de préserver, en tant que tel, le texte littéraire sollicité; toutefois l'opération qui permet de transformer un «hypotexte» écrit dans un «hypertexte» musical contraint l'auteur de cette opération à pratiquer un certain nombre de choix à différents niveaux'.

Or whirling leaves meant ruinous drouth;  
They looked to me like Red-Head Sammy  
Stepping it off, to "Toor-a-Loor."  
How could I till my forty acres  
Not to speak of getting more,  
With a medley of horns, bassoons and piccolos  
Stirred in my brain by crows and robins  
And the creak of a wind-mill - only these?  
And I never started to plough in my life  
That one did not stop in the road  
And take me away to a dance or picnic.  
I ended up with forty acres;  
I ended up with a broken fiddle  
And a broken laugh, and a thousand memories,  
And not a single regret.

La terra ti suscita  
vibrazioni nel cuore: sei tu.  
E se la gente sa che sai suonare,  
suonare ti tocca, per tutta la vita.  
Che cosa vedi, una messe di trifoglio?  
O un largo prato tra te e il fiume?  
Nella meliga è il vento; ti fregghi le mani  
perché i buoi saran pronti al mercato;  
o ti accade di udire un fruscio di gonnelle  
come al Boschetto quando ballano le ragazze.  
Per Cooney Potter una pila di polvere  
o un vortice di foglie volevan dire siccità;  
a me pareva fosse Sammy Testa-rossa  
quando fa il passo sul motivo di Toor-a-Loor.  
Come potevo coltivare le mie terre,  
- non parliamo di ingrandirle -  
con la ridda di corni, fagotti e ottavini  
che cornacchie e pettirossi mi muovevano in testa,  
e il cigolìo di un molino a vento - solo questo?

Mai una volta diedi mani all'aratro,  
che qualcuno non si fermasse nella strada  
e mi chiedesse per un ballo o una merenda.  
Finii con le stesse terre,  
finii con un violino spaccato –  
e un ridere rauco e ricordi,  
e nemmeno un rimpianto.

Needless to say, the translation of Fernanda Pivano is excellent. It is difficult to contemplate an amendment, a chance to improve it. It is in fact a 'beautiful faithful', a real rarity in the world of translations. As translators learn from the labours of their practice and how semioticians evoke in the folds of their theory, however, even the best translator comes across structural limitations that concern the very nature of translation. When one chooses to transpose a text from a natural language X to a natural language Y one has to submit to the need of inhabiting these languages as they are, just as the social practice of language has slowly made them sediment. There are not two natural languages in the world, however, whose 'sedimentation' has given rise to the same linguistic and semantic structure. In more technical and familiar terms to semiotics, there are no two natural languages in the world that segment the continuum of the content plane (all that can be expressed, the virtualities of a semantic universe) in exactly the same way. In translation, therefore, as the title of an essay by Umberto Eco states, we always end up 'saying almost the same thing' (Eco 2003). And it is precisely on this 'almost' that we will now dwell.

First, there are approximations that depend to a large extent on the personal choices of the translator, the imperfections in the semantic transposition that the translator (in this case, Fernanda Pivano) deliberately decides to introduce in the target text (the one in natural language Y) for explanatory, stylistic, or even merely metric-prosodic purposes. Thus, for example, the dynamic image of the earth that 'keeps some vibration going' turns into the most static one of the earth that 'ti suscita vibrazioni nel cuore' ['arouses vibrations in your heart'].

The general sense of the verse is almost the same (again, 'almost'), but semiotics would say that, in the relationship between earth and heart, the temporal aspect has changed (that is, the point of view of a hypothetical observer with respect to the time of the story): the 'iterative' temporality of the original English text ('keeps some vibration going') yields to the 'inchoative' one of the Italian translation ('arouses vibrations in your heart'). This nuance may seem insignificant, but it is not so if the chain of transpositions

that lead from Masters to De André is adopted as the pertinence of the analysis. After all, isn't temporality everything, or almost everything, in the poet's discourse, in that of the musician?

Second, there is another difference, already in the first lines, between the text of Masters and that of Pivano. That is, once again, a semantic imprecision (in the sense of *'différance'*) concerning the conceptual universe of music. In this second case, however, the distance between the departure and the arrival text does not depend on a deliberate choice of the translator but on a structural narrowness, intrinsic to the natural language of the original text as well as to the one in which it was decided to translate it. Pivano translates the verb 'fiddle', which appears in the third line of Masters' poem, with the verb 'suonare' ['to play']. But this translation is both too general and too vague. It is too general because 'to fiddle' in English does not mean playing in general, but rather playing an instrument in particular, that is to say, the violin. Pivano could therefore translate it as 'sviolinare', or simply 'suonare il violino', but the first option would have evoked other semantic associations ('sviolinare' in Italian also means 'to flatter'), while the second would have weighed down the translation. The Italian text, however, retrieves the specificity of this 'playing' in the translation of the third last line, where 'fiddle' no longer appears as a verb but as a noun. Pivano translates it then, rightly, with 'violino'.

But it is precisely at this juncture that the different segmentation of the semantic continuum (that of Masters' US English on the one side, that of Pivano's Italian on the other) turns out to be crucial and, probably, insurmountable: the Italian language translates the two English words 'violin' and 'fiddle' with the same word, namely, 'violin'. This exiguity of the Italian language compared to the English one (an exiguity that is linked to a complex network of historical and cultural facts, and mainly to the evolution of musical instruments and their use and role in the American culture on the one hand, in the Italian culture on the other) introduces, however, a semantic imperfection in the translation, an 'almost'.

Translating 'fiddle' with 'violin' (indeed, there was no other plausible alternative) the Italian text eliminated from the poem all the connotations that the English language, exactly thanks to this difference, manages to evoke in a mother tongue reader (or in someone having a linguistic competence close to that of a native speaker). The fiddle, in fact, is the poor relative of the violin, just as the fiddler is the lower class, informal, and non-professional version of the violinist. From the violin, one expects precise, delicate, and harmonious sounds; from the fiddle, instead, a laughter of notes that barely remind one of the sound of the violin. In Italian, therefore, it is perhaps only the verb 'strimpellare'



['to strum'] that succeeds in giving the sense of approximation, simplicity, but also freedom inherent in the music produced by the fiddler. Once again, however, 'strumming' fails to translate the specificity of the instrument through which these generous but vaguely ungraceful and discordant notes are produced.

Beyond this first difference between 'fiddle' and 'violin', then, there are others related to the secondary connotations of the word 'fiddle'. In English, in fact, the verb 'fiddle' has at least four main meanings: 1) 'to fidget', for example in the sense of those who play with objects arranged on a table, often in a nervous and automatic way; 2) 'to tinker', for example in the sense of those who fiddle with the controls of a boiler; 3) 'to traffic', for example in the sense of those who alter documents, data, etc. for dishonest purposes; 4) 'to loiter', in the sense of those who waste their time in unproductive activities. All these meanings are traversed by a single 'isotopy', as semiotics would say, that is to say, by a more or less common semantic nucleus, which in turn is closely linked to the musical meaning of the term 'fiddle': all four meanings are characterized by the imprecision, the amateurism, the roughness, the empiricism, and the simplicity that distinguish the musical style of the 'fiddler', the strummer.

When, instead, 'fiddle' is translated as 'violin', all this world of human improvisation is lost behind a word that rather evokes the prolonged exercises of a musician and the impeccable performances of an orchestra. Instead, keeping all the connotations of the verb 'fiddle' would be necessary in this case (if only one could find an exactly corresponding word in Italian), for Jones, in the evocation of Masters, is not just a 'fiddler' in the sense of 'violin strummer', but also a 'fiddler' in the sense of 'loafer', 'idle', 'layabout', etc. All the more since these two aspects, the musical activity or pseudo-that and the mood that accompanies it, are inextricably linked: Jones could never cultivate his forty acres of land because he was too intent on enjoying the musicality of life: what others interpreted according to the logic of agriculture and the parameters of an economic activity (like Cooney Potter, for whom 'a pillar of dust / Or whirling leaves meant ruinous drouth'), he, Jones, would transfigure into the epiphany of a nature prodigal of Bacchic suggestions ('They looked to me like Red-Head Sammy / Stepping it off, to "Toor-a-Loor"'). Not to mention the other sounds offered by the countryside, which Jones was unable to listen to as all other farmers would, that is to say, as a mere accompaniment of the hard work of the land, and that, in his imagination of time-wasting shirker devout to the muses of sounds, were transformed, instead, into the voices of as many musical instruments (even the squeaking of the windmill, a true symbol of man's domination over nature and agricultural productivity, is transformed into an occasion of musical fantasy!).

That of the fiddler is, therefore, a destiny that, however, must be clearly distinguished from that of the violinist. The fiddler Jones is, indeed, forced to abandon his fields and his plough because he is called to offer his musical skills; this festive activity, however, never turns into a profession (that of the violinist, for example) but appears as a contradiction, and not simply as an alternative, to the productive activity of those who plough the fields and increase their possessions. The sweet-bitter irony of the poem's ending can be fully grasped only in the awareness of this distinction between 'fiddle' and 'violin': it is precisely because Jones is unable to turn his musical inspiration into a profession that he eventually finds himself with a broken laugh, but also with a smashed violin; smashed by the superhuman energy that is expressed through the strummer, and to which he cannot oppose any resistance (this energy will continue to transmit vibrations from the bowels of the earth even after his death), but also smashed by the absolute vacuity of the musical effort: a gratuitous effort, a *dépense* without any monetary reward, a primitive and reckless generosity that produces as its final effect that of not being able to even repair the instrument with which this effort was proffered.

The fiddle remains smashed, but its destruction is not the humiliating one of old age, or death, but the destruction of the flame that burns and devours itself, and that, in fact, thanks to its inconsiderate prodigality, continues to burn even beyond death. The shameful gift of music, a metaphor for the gift of every art — even that of Masters' poetry, to which he (it must not be forgotten), essentially sacrificed his 'professional' career — is the only paradoxical way to project oneself beyond the barrier between life and death. It is only those who do not weigh on precision scales the ratio between enthusiasm and reward, the poet seems to suggest, that, wasting life, will end up triumphing over it and over death, accumulating only memories and never a regret.

## 7. From the violin to the flute.

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We shall now compare the original text of Masters, Pivano's translation, and the lyrics of the song by De André. Obviously, the transposition of the *Spoon River Anthology* into the Genoese songwriter's album does not come down uniquely to a chain of merely verbal passages. It will be necessary to consider the transformations brought about by the musical language, as well as the differences in the overall structure of the textual enunciation that this introduction entails. The verbal text of the lyrics remains, however, an effective starting point for comparison and analysis, above all because it is one of the

fundamental elements of the album (the verbal language in the songs of De André plays a key role in orienting the listener's semantic reception). Here are the lyrics of *Il suonatore Jones*:

In un vortice di polvere  
gli altri vedevan siccità,  
a me ricordava  
la gonna di Jenny  
in un ballo di tanti anni fa.  
Sentivo la mia terra  
vibrare di suoni  
era il mio cuore,  
e allora perché coltivarla ancora,  
come pensarla migliore.  
Libertà l'ho vista dormire  
nei campi coltivati  
a cielo e denaro,  
a cielo ed amore,  
protetta da un filo spinato.  
Libertà l'ho vista svegliarsi  
ogni volta che ho suonato  
per un fruscio di ragazze  
a un ballo  
per un compagno ubriaco.  
E poi se la gente sa,  
e la gente lo sa che sai suonare,  
suonare ti tocca  
per tutta la vita  
e ti piace lasciarti ascoltare.  
Finì con i campi alle ortiche  
finì con un flauto spezzato  
e un ridere rauco  
e ricordi tanti  
e nemmeno un rimpianto.

[In a vortex of dust  
others saw drought;  
it reminded me  
of Jenny's skirt  
in a dance of many years ago.  
I felt my land  
vibrate with sounds:  
it was my heart,  
so why cultivate it again,  
how to think it better?  
I saw freedom awake  
in cultivated fields  
to heaven and money,  
to heaven and love,  
protected by a barbed wire.  
I saw freedom awake  
every time I played  
for a rustle of girls  
at a dance,  
for a drunken companion.  
And then if people know,  
if people know that you can play,  
play you must  
for all your life  
and you like to let yourself be listened.  
I ended up with the fields to the nettles,  
I ended up with a broken flute,  
and a hoarse laugh,  
and so many memories,  
and not even a regret.]

At a first, quick reading (at a first, fleeting listening) we immediately realize that the leap that exists between Masters and Pivano becomes much more evident in the lyrics of the song. They begin with one of Masters' most successful images, that of the vortex of dust that the eye of the pragmatic and calculating man interprets as a sign of drought,

and that the enthusiastic look (in the etymological sense of the term) of the player reconnects to a completely different semiotic, that of the earth beaten by the frantic dances of Jenny, evoked through the rhetorical figure of her fluttering (and probably dusty) skirt.

Then follows the image of the earth that vibrates at the same pace as the musician's heart, except that, in this case, De André does not limit himself to transpose (or even translate) the poetic text of departure but profoundly alters it, interpreting it. In Masters, this telluric image is placed at the beginning, in the incipit, wherein the voice of the late strumming Jones rises from the land that imprisons him, and which still makes the febrile and powerful vibrations of his musical inspiration resonate. In De André, on the contrary, this union between the vital beat of the earth and the reverberant sound of the musician does not concern death (when the body of the player has now been absorbed by earth itself) but life: it is during life itself that the player (the strummer), enjoying a privileged relationship, an unhindered immediacy, and an almost erotic contiguity with the earth, learns and transmits its vital rhythm by transforming it into music.

But in addition to this shift from death to life – which bestows on the fiddler an almost priestly status – in the second stanza of his song, De André chooses to further enrich Masters' text of departure and succeeds in a gimmick that, in fact, is not simply that of 'the adapter' but reveals, instead, the poet that lies behind the singer and songwriter: in Masters, the free strumming of the fiddler is opposed to the work of the land, to the practice of ploughing, for instance. The genius of De André consisted in reconnecting this contraposition, perhaps even more effectively than in the original *Spoon River Anthology*, to the other initial image of the earth whose dust rises due to the twirling of the dances, but also and above all to the image of the earth as a source of sound inspiration: it is precisely because the player Jones knows how to listen to the natural beat of the earth that he does not see the need to improve it, to replace this immediate and effortless communication between man and nature through titanic fatigue and sweat.

It is not difficult to find in this contraposition between player and farmer, musical land and cultivated land, the ancestral dichotomy between a condition of harmony between man and nature and the fallen condition of those who entertain, with the earth, a mechanical and anxious exploitative relation. In De André, moreover, the metaphor of the cultivated fields opposed to the Bacchically unbridled earth of dances, sounds, and whirling bodies, is further specified: it is to heaven, love, and money that men wickedly choose to cultivate their own land instead of limiting themselves to listen to and to follow its pulsations like the fiddler Jones does. It is pursuing ambitions of glory (heaven),

money, and love, that human beings foolishly encircle the free land with barbed wire, a figure that evokes the instruments with which humanity has been subjected to slavery for thousands of years: the institution of private property (the invention of earth as land, as economic territory) and war (the defence of private property).

This line, therefore, explains not only the title of the album but also the choice of the poems transposed and put into music by De André: they are all instances of ambitious and envious people, thirsty for power, money, glory, and love, who tragically sacrificed the freedom of free dances to the illusory myth of barbed wire. It is, instead, through playing, or rather, through strumming left and right, here and there, without an engagement, without a job, but on the most improbable and less profitable occasions, on the occasions of gift and waste (very subtle is, in this regard, the evocation of the drunken companion, the one for whom one plays out of pure friendship, knowing fully well that he will never be able to repay, or perhaps even less to remember), that the player finds all the freedom of a life inspired by the beating of the earth.

The idea of the player as the priest of a musical cult of the earth returns in the next stanza, where Jones stresses, almost with a sense of exhaustion, that we cannot deny this call of the telluric beat, as we cannot deny some notes to those who request them. Knowing how to play is a gift that comes from another dimension, a gift that has not been fully deserved but that has been received for free, and that, therefore, must be returned as well. Here we can read very clearly the anarchic imprint of the player De André, his desire to escape from music as a market or as an industry, and to offer his talents, instead, with the same gratuity with which they were received. That of the player is a vocation that cannot be rejected but that, at the same time, can be embraced with the sweetness of the one who likes to 'let oneself be listened to'.

## **Conclusion: from use to wear.**

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From the point of view that most interests this essay, however, it is above all the last stanza to reserve the greatest surprise. It is here that the transposition of De André proposes itself as a truthful 'reincarnation' of Masters' poem. But, as it has already been noted, every transposition, every taxidermal transformation of the poetic text entails 'broken bones'. Specifically, it seems that, in this last stanza, the 'broken bone' is an emotional tone that is very different from that which prevails in the original poem (as well as in the Italian translation of Pivano). Firstly, whereas the fields in Masters

remained only forty acres because their owner, priest of the sound, had not found time to increase them, here, in De André, they end up infested by nettles. Not only, therefore, is there a denial of enrichment but also a clear indication of impoverishment. De André, in this sense, is more extreme than Masters. The Italian singer-songwriter not only neglects to extend his orchard. As a good anarchist player, he even goes so far as to abandon it completely.

The most relevant novelty, however, is musical in nature. Whereas if Pivano had turned the fiddle into a violin, with all the reasons and consequences that we have tried to point out, in De André the violin, as well as the fiddle, disappear completely. At the place of the violin we find a flute. In a rare interview with Fernanda Pivano, Fabrizio De André motivated this choice for metric reasons. From the semiotic point of view, however, what is important to analyse is not as much the *intentio auctoris* (De André changes the violin into a flute so as to make the metric of the verse better), as the *intentio operis* (what happens to Masters' text if, once it is transposed, contains a flute instead of a violin?).

It is necessary to ask such a question because it also allows, among other things, to expand the focus of analysis from the mere verbal language (until now we have done nothing but compare verbal and literary texts) to its synergy with the musical language. The violin, in fact, does not disappear only from the lyrics but also from the music, replaced by a velvety and melancholically sweet flute sound. And it is in this melancholy, in this nostalgic background, that one seems to be able to grasp the most important semantic contribution of De André's transposition, of his decision to dematerialise the fiddle of the strummer Jones and to rematerialize it (to make it incarnate) into the wood of a flute.

Everything in the song by De André — the initial arrangement, the overall rhythm, the melody, but above all the instrumental interludes interwoven by one or more flutes — evoke a sense of sadness, melancholy, nostalgia, a dysphoric aura, as semioticians would say, which is not present in the same measure in the original poem by Masters. Here is the ramshackle fiddle of the orgiastic dances, the one that accompanies the uncertain steps of the drunkard as well as the uninhibited twirls of the girls. The flute of De André, in comparison, is a solitary, discreet, delicate, and almost lugubrious instrument in its tenuousness. Beyond these perceptual differences, moreover, in which the peculiar timbres of the two instruments (the acidic but sarcastic shrill of the fiddle, the soft but pensive note of the flute) receive their semantic connotations from the other significant elements that compose, on the one hand, the poem of Masters and, on the other hand, the song by De André, there is also an objective fact, linked to the image of the two broken

instruments. A semantic distance could already be grasped between Masters' broken fiddle and the 'smashed violin' of Pivano: the first renders much more than the second the image of a broken laugh, of someone who has deteriorated his own voice by dint of laughing; the latter, instead (the choice of the adjective 'smashed' ['spaccato', in Italian] instead of 'broken' ['rotto', in Italian]; the choice of differentiating the adjective for the violin, 'smashed', from that which qualifies laughing, 'hoarse' [in Italian, 'rotto', which also means 'broken']) reduces the assonances and semantic echos between laughing and playing. Already in Pivano, therefore, the image of the split violin is bitterer than in Masters, and the hoarse laughter a less flattering sound.

In De André, then, in place of the broken violin, as we said, we find a broken flute. There is a fundamental difference between these two images, and it resides mainly in the actions required to produce them: a broken fiddle can be such because of too much playing, as Masters seems to suggest. The broken laugh is like a broken violin precisely for this reason: too much laughing, like too much playing, are converted into their opposite. A flute, on the other hand, is a wind and non-stringed instrument, and is subjected to much less intense mechanical stress, perhaps to the mere passage of air through its shaft holes, or to the slight tickling of the fingertips. It breaks not because it is used but because it is worn, through the inexorable wearing that time imposes on all things and that is, in a certain sense, independent also from the religion of sound and its priests. In Masters, in short, the image of the broken fiddle seems to affirm a triumph, albeit an ironic and ramshackle one, of life over death, whilst in De André the image of the smashed flute rather transmits an idea of defeat, of the inexorability of the shattering of life into death.

De André is, therefore, more ruthless than Masters; his eyes look without any veil at the fate of human beings. As a musician (or rather, as a player), the former does not reach the point of tracing for himself (as perhaps it was the latter's intention) a privileged destiny. Neither poetry nor music can dispense salvation, and yet it is precisely on the basis of this awareness (the smashed flute, rather than the broken fiddle) that the final affirmation of freedom ('not even a regret') appears even more courageous and almost heroic. It is here that the arrangement of the song proposes the only positive vibrations, with a succession of female voices that seem to raise with the last bold gesture of the poet, of the singer-songwriter, towards better skies. But this musical apotheosis is not destined to last: in the last notes of the song, a sad, gloomy, and subdued arrangement returns and concludes the song itself, and in fact the whole album, with a semantic and musical temperament that is very contradictory: the song dedicated to the triumph of the



free sound over power and its tricks ends with a smashed flute, with the negation of a definitive redemption.

But perhaps it is in this sense that De André, a superb reincarnation of Masters, has accomplished that which the poet had not. Embracing the despair of man to the utmost, knowing its ugliness, but safeguarding an ironic and almost burlesque afflatus of heroism, De André writes the paradoxical, tragic, but very sweet epitaph of his own art.

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[Abstracts]

**The Diaphanous Translation:  
Fabrizio De André sings Edgar Lee Masters.**

**Massimo LEONE**

The article deals with the semiotic transformations that take place when poetry is adapted and transposed into song. It does so through the analysis of a specific case study: Italian songwriter and singer Fabrizio De André's transposition of one of the poems of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), 'Fiddler Jones', into the last song of De André's album *Non al denaro, non all'amore né al cielo* ['neither to money, nor to love, nor to heaven'] (1971), passing through the Italian translation of the former by Fernanda Pivano. After describing its theoretical framework, the article analyses this specific transposition and dwells on the most significant transformation that it brings about: why does Masters' fiddler becomes a violin in Pivano's translation, and a flute in De André's musical adaptation?