

PROBLEMS IN POETIC TRANSLATION

THOMAS LABORIE BURNS*

RESUMO

Este trabalho visa levantar alguns problemas na tradução da poesia, tais como a ambigüidade, a concisão e a qualidade sonora no poema original. Discutem-se também as maneiras como a tradução se apresenta e os tipos gerais de tradução poética (fiel, livre e criativa) e as vantagens de cada uma. Exemplos ilustrativos de Yeats, Baudelaire, Catullus, Parris e um poema completo de Drummond para que o autor apresente sua versão em inglês com comentário.

ABSTRACT

Without going into formalistic problems or theories, this paper discusses some of the problems peculiar to a poetic text, such as purposeful ambiguity, metaphorical language and sound qualities in the original that pose problems for translators. The methods of presenting translations of poetry in the English-speaking world are presented with their respective advantages. As illustrations of particular problems, poets such as Yeats, Catullus, Baudelaire, etc. are given in representative translation fragments. Finally, a complete poem of Carlos Drummond de Andrade is translated by the author, with commentary, to show the kinds of choices the translator faces in attacking a poem.

* Professor de Literatura Anglo-Americana do FALC/UFMG.

Poetry was once defined by the American poet Robert Frost as everything that is left over from translation, an observation that does not leave the would-be translator of poetry much room for action. Frost's definition, of course, contains an important truth, namely, that there is something irreducible in the special language of poetry that resists transference to another tongue or even to a prose paraphrase in the same language as the poem. What are some of the special difficulties that make the translation or paraphrase of poetry problematic? First, the language tends to be more condensed and concise than in prose. Figures of speech abound. Puns, plays on words, and other translator's nightmares are a matter of course. A word is deliberately used to express several ideas at once, so that it is fair to say that ambiguity is pursued rather than avoided. Second, there are the problems arising from the nature of poetic language. Sound is more closely associated with meaning than in prose, so that there is often a tension between the two, either in imitation (onomatopoeia) or opposition. Rhythm and meter, which are different in different languages, are essential to both the meaning and the feeling of a poem. Finally, connotation may be even more important than denotation. All these considerations make one suspect that it is probably impossible to convincingly translate a poem into another language.

Faced with this impossibility the translator can either give up or make an heroic attempt. If he chooses the second alternative, he might be heartened to know that some attempts have been very good indeed. Homer may be the most translated poet in the world and has so been enjoyed in many languages as well as the original Greek, but the success of his translations (at least in English, where the versions of Chasman, Pope, and, more recently, Richmond Lattimore and Robert Fitzgerald all have their proper charm) may owe something to the Homeric poems being epic narratives where to a certain extent the story tells itself. More complex - to stick for the moment only to the ancient Greek language - is Attic tragedy, whose translations (again, I can speak only for English versions) are far less convincing. The metrical complexities and lexical punning of the original contain too much of the meaning for it to be effectively turned, so that a great deal of the subtlety of the Greek is lost. Lyric poetry is another problematic genre, since there needn't be a story, a conflict or an argument as a foundation for understanding a lyric

and, in the genre of lyric poetry, language, we might say, tends to celebrate itself. A striking example of the loss entailed in translating lyrics is what one feels when one reads a translation into a European language of a poem from the Chinese Book of Songs. What (we may suppose) is an exquisite lyric in Chinese turns out in translation to be a string of adjectives that may be somewhat banal or, at best, only faintly charming.

There seem to be two approaches to the problem of presenting foreign poets in book form. The first, which is surely better from the point of view of the reader, is printing the original poem and its translation on opposite pages. Even when one understands nothing of the original language, there is something comforting about having the poem there in its pristine state. For the reader with some, though imperfect, knowledge of the original language, to work through the original poem using the translation as a crib helps him to possess some of its delights. To be helpful in this sense, the translation must be fairly "close" to the original: not necessarily literal, which might make the original unintelligible, but not so "free" that the reader would not be able to work back and forth from one text to the other with profit. It is also difficult to avoid the suspicion that having the original text so close in space to his own version keeps the translator from flying too far off on his own.

While the facing-page method has been gaining popularity in recent years, the more traditional method of presentation is for the reader to have in his hand a book of poems with an author's name and a translator's words. These versions naturally make less of attempt to be faithful than to stand as poems in their own right. The reader's problem then becomes how far he should trust the translator: traduttore or traditore? Does the striking metaphor belong to the poem or is it a product of the translator's ingenuity? When the reader is ignorant of the original, he has no recourse but to compare a number of versions to try and get at the poem. Even then, it is difficult or impossible to tell which of the versions best represents the poem. This brings us to the basic problem in choosing between translations: is the best one that which is "closer" in structure, lexis, etc. to the original, or that which is the better equivalent in its own language? The answer depends on what use you are making of the translation. If used as crib to help work through the original, the version closer in a literal sense is

probably more useful, but if, as for many people, the original poem may never be read, then one has to consider the merits of the translation as a work of art. The translation in this case must itself be a poem; it must be more than a translation, a carrying-over of meaning. It must attempt to make an impression that is similar to what the original makes on the reader.

The obvious corollary to this position is that only a poet can really translate another poet. The trouble with this is that poets often take wide liberties with other literary works. They may not care so much for representing another poet in their own language as for using him as a sort of imaginative springboard for their own purposes. The American poet Robert Lowell frankly admits that his versions of Greek or French literature are "creative". A famous example of creativity in this sense is Yeats's version of Ronsard's sonnet, beginning "When I am old and gray and full of sleep". This poem starts off fairly close to the French but veers off in its own direction and becomes something quite different. Yeats undoubtedly wants readers to be thinking of Ronsard's poem but also to recognize that he, Yeats, is writing his own poem. One cannot really call this practice translation but, more properly, imitation.

If we get down to the practical problems involved in poetic translation, it can be observed that the translator has all the problems of a translator of prose in addition to those peculiar to the genre of lyric poetry, several of which I mentioned at the beginning. Consider the well-known stanza of Baudelaire's:

"La nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisser parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'Homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observant avec des regards familiers."

J. Leclerc reproduces rather well the rhythm, rhyme, and language of the original:

"In Nature's temple, living pillars rise,
Speaking sometimes in words of abstruse sense;
Man walks through woods of symbols, dark and dense,
Which gaze at him with fond, familiar eyes."

As this is a poetic version, we can expect that certain liberties have been taken. There is nothing corresponding to the English

word "rise"; the opening phrase in English is rather different from "Nature is a temple", which is what the French says; the "fond" in the fourth line is non-existent in the French; the relationship of man and where he's going has been confused, since the French particle "y" in line three makes it clear that man walks in the temple of nature by passing through the forest of symbols. This last oversight, if that is what it is, is rather more serious since it obscures the central insight of the stanza, which is that man lives in a symbolic world and it is "through" - spatially in terms of the metaphor but also meaning "by means of" - symbols that a mysterious indecipherable world becomes familiar to him.

Improvisations may be necessary, and when inspired, come to seem indispensable. Let us take as the target poem Yeat's opening stanza from "Sailing to Byzantium":

"That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
- Those dying generations - at their song,
The salmon - falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect."

A Brazilian translator, Augusto de Campos, renders the lines thus:

"Aquela não é terra para velhos. Gente
jovem, de braços dados, pássaros nas ramas
- gerações de mortais - cantando alegremente,
sslmão no salto, stum no mar, brilho de escamss,
peixe, ave ou carne glorificam ao sol quente
tudo o que nasce e morre, semen e semente.
Ao som da música sensusl, o mundo esquece
as obras do intelecto que nunca envelhece."

Csmpos has reproduced Yeat's ababacc rhyme scheme and his uneven yet quietly lyrical rhythm. His version is also admirably close to the sense, though in line 4 he has transformed the mackerel into tuna and added an image of "flashing scales" that is missing in the original but is appropriate to the general idea of the line. In line five, he has changed "all summer long" to something like "under the hot sun", which suggests summer, but one feels that here the addition is less legitimate and it looks as if he

merely wanted to make the rhyme. In line two, the Portuguese phrase means something like "arm-in-arm" and so misses the sexual suggestion of "in one another's arms". In line seven, one feels that something has been lost by the omission of a word like "caught", but line six, which literally rendered would read "all that is born and dies, semen and seed", though it lacks the conclusion of the English line, is a brilliant improvisation on the sense.

To see the problems posed by diction, let us take an example from the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra:

"Ellos son viejos verdes
Nosotros somos ancianos maduros."

The contrast between the final adjectives verdes/maduros can be preserved in English (green/ripe), except that in English two words, ripe and mature, correspond to the Spanish "maduro", the first more appropriate for fruit, the second for people. Parra's verses play on both meanings and in English the translator must choose. The contrast of nouns, viejos/ancianos, cannot be effectively rendered either, since, although both words mean "old men", viejo verde is a colloquial phrase meaning something like "dirty old man". A literal translation of the lines, "They are green old men/We are ripe ones" completely misses the point on both aspects, while the paraphrase "They are lascivious codgers/We are mature elders" gets the sense accurately put misses the metaphorical contrast, the poetry, of the lines.

Another practical problem the translator of poetry has is reproducing the concision of a poem: i.e., avoiding the appearance of a paraphrase. In an irreverent poem Catullus wrote about Pompey's wife, the last verse sums up the poet's moral comment in only three words:

"Fecundum semen adulterio."

Literally, the lines mean "Fertile is the seed of adultery", but the Latin, which may, and does, omit the verb "is" (est) and which dispenses with definite articles is thereby more concise. An English translator, Peter Whigham, germinates the botanical metaphor into "Adultery spreads like a weed", but introduces a cliché. The poet James Michie's version of the line, "Adultery's

quick to breed" uses only four words, but suggests the proliferation of animals rather than plants.

Finally, one might look at a poem in its entirety to appreciate the compromises and choices a translator must make. I shall choose a poem of Carlos Drummond de Andrade's, "Festa no Brejo", a poem that is fairly simple and one that was analysed in a lecture on comparative stylistics by Prof. Ângela Vaz Leão, who compared it to a French translation. The first stanza reads:

"A saparia desesperada
coaxa coaxa coaxa.
O brejo vibra gue nem caixa
de guerra. Os sapos são danados."

I render the stanza thus:

"The frantic froggergy
croaks croaks croaks.
The bog vibrates
like a bellicose snare-drum.
The frogs are all in a fury."

There is no collective noun for frogs in English, so "froggergy" is a necessary invention. "Frantic" seems better than "desperate" for both its alliteration with "froggergy" and its connotations of furious activity. "Croaks" is accurate but inadequate for "coaxa" since the repetition suffers by the word losing one syllable. "Brejo" could perhaps be rendered by "swamp" or "bog". As the poem could have a political interpretation, Minas being the state famous for its politicians, "bog" could be given a slight preference since it suggests "getting bogged down" in words, though one could also make a case for "swamp", as in being "swamped with promises". The next sentence is inaccurate as to meaning but perhaps suggests the sense without a clumsy paraphrase the meaning demands. The military implications of "caixa de guerra" have been retained by introducing the epithet "bellicose". The final sentence is freely translated, but its poetry is more obvious than the literal "The frogs are angry". The next stanza reads:

"A lua gorda apareceu
e clareou o brejo todo.
Até a lua sabe o coro
da saparia desesperada."

"The fat moon came out
and lit up the entire bog.
The chorus of frantic frogs
rises to the moon."

This stanza presents no great difficulties, though one might remark that "fat" as applied to the moon does not perhaps suggest all the possibilities expressed by "lua gorda". English requires that the word-order, and therefore the emphasis, of the second sentence be altered. The poem ends thus:

"A saparia toda de Minas
coaxa no brejo humilde.

Hoje tem festa no brejo!

All the froggery of Minas
croaks in the humble bog.

It's party-time in the bog today!"

The last line literally means "Today there's a party in the bog", but as Professor Leão pointed out, the French "il y a" (there is) is too formal for the colloquial "tem", better rendered in French by the shorter colloquial form "y a"¹. "It's party-time", then, tries to capture the colloquial flavour in English of the line as well as the exuberance of the rhythm of the Portuguese confirmed in the exclamation point.

NOTE

¹ Prof. Ângela Vaz Leão. Oral Communication. I^o Simpósio de Literatura Comparada, Faculdade de Letras, UFMG, 1985.