

**A theoretical and practical approach to literary translation: the case of poetry**

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It is very important to emphasise that everything, that is, everything worthwhile, everything truly human, is difficult, very difficult; so much so, that it is impossible.

*José Ortega y Gasset*

*This paper gives a brief and general account of theories of translation, addressing frequent problems such as the differences between the systems of signifiers and signifieds of two languages or the difficulty in reproducing the authorial style of a poem. The theories developed by Nabokov (“absolute fidelity to the original”) and Bonnefoy (“enriching the language”) will be discussed. As a practical example, translations of the American poet Thomas Merton into Spanish will be presented, together with a comparative analysis of some of the versions by the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal, paying attention to usual errors in the practice of translation.*

*Este artículo incluye un breve compendio de diferentes teorías sobre traducción y aborda algunos de los problemas más frecuentes, entre ellos, las diferencias entre los sistemas de significados y significantes de dos lenguas distintas o la dificultad en reproducir el estilo de un autor determinado. El estudio se concentra en las reflexiones de Nabokov y su teoría de la “absoluta fidelidad al original”, y de Bonnefoy y su énfasis en la importancia del “enriquecimiento de la lengua”. Como ejemplos prácticos, se ofrecen varias*

*traducciones al español del poeta norteamericano Thomas Merton, junto con un análisis comparativo de algunas versiones realizadas por el escritor nicaragüense Ernesto Cardenal, prestando especial atención a errores comunes en la práctica de la traducción.*

*Key words:* translation theory, Nabokov, Bonnefoy, fidelity, recreation, usual errors.

*Palabras clave:* teorías de traducción, Nabokov, Bonnefoy, fidelidad, recreación, errores comunes.

Throughout the history of linguistic and literary thought, literary texts (a category itself notoriously hard to define) have been described by many linguists as being particularly untranslatable, with poetic texts being the most resistant of all. The purpose of this paper is to show that this is not the case, that poetic translation is not only possible but also one of the most powerful means to transgress political, social, and linguistic boundaries and to say “no” to the apparently insurmountable but only illusory differences between cultures and individuals.

The idea about the impossibility of translation was central to the Romantic conception of language and was maintained in Saussure’s model of linguistic sign. According to romantic authors such as Schleiermacher or Humboldt, poetic texts resist translation insofar as the authorial style they embody is not determined by the language, but exists in a personal relationship to the language, which it would be the translator’s impossible goal to replicate. As Schleiermacher has clearly pointed out,

if one looks at a master’s word formations in their totality, at his use of related words and word-roots in a multitude of interrelated writings, how can the translator succeed here, since the system of concepts and their signs in the translator’s language is entirely different from that in the original language, and the word-roots, instead of being synchronically identical, cut across each other in

the strangest directions? It is impossible, therefore, for the translator's use of language to be as coherent as that of his author (Schleiermacher 1992:45-46).

This is to locate the crux of the problem of translating literary texts at the division between what is socially shared and individually creative in language –the interface between Saussure's langue and parole.

The question of authorial style and the differences between the systems of signifiers and signifieds of two languages was also studied by Humboldt. In fact, he wrote about the difficulty in finding an exact equivalent for metaphors in poetical texts:

it has repeatedly been observed and verified by both experience and research that no word in one language is completely equivalent to a word in another, if one disregards those expressions that designate purely physical objects [...] then, could a word, whose meaning is not transmitted directly through the senses, ever be the perfect equivalent of a word in another language? (Humboldt 1992:55-56)

This romantic view was also shared by linguists such as Ferdinand Saussure. Saussure thought that meaning cannot exist independently from the language system and that it derives from the place a word occupies in relation to other words and in opposition with them. Therefore, his theory of linguistic signs was shaped by the view that no word in one language is completely equivalent to a word in another language, and, consequently, it follows that translating is also, if not impossible, at least a risky task, as it involves the confrontation of two completely different systems of signs. He wrote that not only the signifier but the signified as well is particular to a given language, and that not only words but their meanings are language-specific (see Saussure 1922:158-162).

Moreover, the French linguist goes beyond Humboldt's thought and says that this is as much the case for "purely physical objects" as for abstract concepts, because in his view the physical object does not determine the meaning of the sign. Rather the meaning or value of the signified is only determined by the relations between this particular

signified and all the other signifieds in the language. Consequently, it could be said that Saussure liberated the linguistic sign from its attachment to the objects of the world, a common belief in traditional semiotic theory.

Jakobson and other semioticians in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have followed Saussure's view on translation as the confrontation of two completely different systems of signs (both at the level of signifiers and signifieds). The interesting problems from this point of view are: a) how translation overcomes the differences in the systems of signifieds, and b) how translation recreates effects which operate at the level of signifiers in the original text.

One of the possible answers to all these problems concerning translation might be to consider it under the perspective of translation-as-reading. There are theories, such as those of Jauss, Iser or Gadamer which firmly state that any translation is, before anything else, a reading, an individual creative act performed upon a text. Gadamer explicitly wrote that "every translator is an interpreter" (Gadamer 1975:349).

In other words, what the translator renders into another language is his or her particular reading of the text, even though he or she is the author of the original text. That reading is not the only possible reading: the translation generates a new text, which will itself undergo multiple readings. And this is precisely the reason why translation might seem impossible: because "true", definitive reading is impossible.

This is more evident in the case of poetic texts. A poetic text is, in Saussurean terms, one which creates signification not simply between signifier and signified in chains of signs, but among the signifiers of different signs, to create such effects as rhythm, rhyme and alliteration; among the signifieds of different signs, to create for example metaphor and metonymy, as well as symbolism; and among signs in a way that extends beyond the linear chaining of words, to create textual cohesion (see Halliday & Hasan: 1976). All these significant effects exist in the poetic text. But, according to hermeneutic theory, not all readers and translators of the poetic text will achieve the same significant effects. There will be different readings, some richer (to the point of becoming rococo), some sparer (to the point of being an impoverished reading), but even if the translator had supreme skill for recreating the poetic effects

of the original in the target language, his or her reading cannot be the text. It will be the effects contained in the reading which are being reproduced.

Despite the evidence that there might be some obstacles to translation in general, and most particularly, to the translation of poetical texts, everyday experience suggests that

translation is really possible, even if it does project an utopian idea. Let us move on and examine two theories of literary translation, which may help us in our own practice as translators. We will concentrate on the thought of Nabokov and Bonnefoy as they are the exponents of two quite divergent attitudes towards translation.

Nabokov wants absolute fidelity to the text and, as the romantics Humboldt and Schleiermacher, he tries to bring the reader to the writer. In his view, the term “literal translation” is tautological since anything but that is not truly a translation but an imitation, an adaptation of a parody. He believed in literality and in the fact that it is possible to find exact equivalents between the systems of signifiers and signifieds of two different languages. Moreover, he saw the need to add footnotes which might help the reader understand the “real meaning” of the text, as if the text had only got one true meaning: “I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers [...] I want such footnotes and the absolutely literal sense, with no emasculation and no padding” (Nabokov as quoted in Schulte & Biguenet 1992:134; 143).

Although Nabokov tries to get rid of the problem of translation as textual interpretation and the problem of authorial style by means of complete fidelity to the original text, he does not take into account several relevant issues:

1) That literal translation is not free from interpretation as it keeps considering poetry as a mere text conformed by a system of signifiers and signifieds and, therefore, it continues dealing with the meaning of text.

2) That it cannot boast of being endowed with universal truth because many times what we can find on the surface of a text where a translator thinks he has made a true reading of a work is just a partial and

subjective interpretation full of canonic vocation, a reflection as in a mirror of its reader, a kind of portrait of the translator himself.

3) That translation of poetry cannot be reduced to finding the equivalents both at the level of lexical content and at the level of grammatical relations. We can all feel the evidence that meaning is not what makes a poem be what it is. What really seduces us in a poem is not what it says, its content, but its capacity to make us feel something new beyond the habitual way of seeing and knowing.

4) That very often a literal translation does not convey the “sense” of the original, but distorts it to a great extent and obscures its understanding.

5) That literal translation can spoil the poetical expression not only of the original poem but of the language into which this poem is going to be translated.

Opposing Nabokov’s theory, the French writer Yves Bonnefoy does not consider “literal translation” as something realistic, as it has been proved that many times the verbal matter of a language (its morphology, phonology, prosody) has not got a close equivalent in another language. Moreover, he thinks that the particularities of the concepts are untranslatable and also that these concepts are influenced by their use throughout the many centuries in which the language has been spoken. Similarly, Walter Benjamin, writing a few decades before Nabokov or Bonnefoy, believes that

Fidelity in the translation of individual words can almost never fully reproduce the meaning they have in the original. For sense in its poetic significance is not limited to meaning, but derives from the connotations conveyed by the word chosen to express it (Benjamin as cited in Schulte & Biguenet 1992: 78-79).

Therefore, Bonnefoy is going to be less concerned with fidelity than with enriching the language, with poetry rather than the poem: “You must realize that the poem is nothing and that translation is possible which is not to say that it is easy; it is merely poetry rebegun”. This idea of enriching the language can also be found in authors such as Walter

Benjamin or Ortega y Gasset who thought that the task of the translator is to find the “intention” of the original text as an effect upon the language, and to echo that intended effect in the target language, so as to be able to develop its potential virtues and get to know its own silences. Besides that, Bonnefoy points out that the same difficulties arise in translating a poem as in writing one:

[...] as in the original, the language (langue) of translation paralyses the actual, tentative utterances (parole). For the difficulty of poetry is that language (langue) is a system, while the specific utterance (parole) is presence. But to understand this is to find oneself back with the author when translating [...] (Bonnefoy as cited in Schulte & Biguenet 1992:188-89)

What will be essential for the French thinker is the transmutation of the translator to the original moment of creation, this “hic et nunc” of the poetic experience during which the individual self disappears and merges into the rumour of language, the speaking of the non-historical presence beyond signifiers and signifieds.

Consequently, his thought is relevant to our study, as it seems to tackle the two main problems of poetry translation we have previously mentioned: the problem of translation considered as a mere textual interpretation and the problem of authorial style. He criticizes the understanding of the poem just as text, as relations of words on the blank page, of signs in perpetual movement, and not as the result of an experience of presence: “si queremos descifrar verdaderamente la poesía como poesía, hay que olvidar, al menos en un primer momento, todos esos trabajos del análisis parcial y todos esos juegos sobre el texto: porque es el decir lo que en el plano de lo específicamente poético importa e importa únicamente” (Bonnefoy 2002:31).

Bonnefoy leaves behind the world of which one can speak, the world of meanings, and enters the realm where language or common reason speaks by itself and where there is not a distinction between author and translator. He believes that there is a truth in the poem, a “shared truth” which cannot be grasped by any subjective textual analysis, a speaking that both the poet and the translator need to listen to and give

shape within the poem. What will be important for the latter is not the semantic confusion of the textual material but rhythm, that music of the verses which helped the author transgress the sphere where words are just concepts and which allowed him to bring language and life experience together. Through his reading of the original poems he should be able to let himself be drawn by this rhythm, so as to achieve the same "singing state or mood" as the author's and be one single voice.

Although Bonnefoy does not deny the existence of meaning within poems, he thinks they only find their justification and reward in the transgression of the limits imposed by this meaning. In his theory, these conceptual nets, these series of metaphors, comparisons, symbols, etc... are nothing but word constructions, traps of the author in the fiction of his relation with his own ego, who is himself made up of words and meanings. I agree with him that true poetry and therefore true poetic translation (both considered by him as one and the same activity) would need to have the virtue of liberating the voice which is under the domination of this false self and penetrate a pre-grammatical field which is previous to the imposition of words with a meaning and prior to the emergence of "I" and "You" first as proper names and then as persons with a defined identity. In doing so, they might become a form of honest action against established knowledge and a way of freeing ourselves from the chains of an isolated individual "I" in favour of an "I" who is nobody, and, therefore, is everybody; an "I" who is free from the chains of personal interests and who can "speak truth."

It should not be forgotten that the etymological meaning of "poetry" is "action" (from the Greek "poiesis") and that the action of poetry is that of "speaking against". As Bonnefoy himself has pointed out, the translation of poetic texts --as long as it implies the liberation of the universal, the opening of reason-- has a redemptive function in our present society: that of choosing those great poets who strongly deny any phantom or illusion, in other words, those who criticize the lies of their society and their language and help to overcome any sort of alienation and idleness within it.

In the light of some of these theories of translation, the next part of this paper will be mainly focused on my own practice as translator. After having completed a doctoral thesis on the poetry of the American Trappist monk and social critic Thomas Merton (1915-1968) --a research

which included an initiative of translation of the poet's love poems from English into Spanish-- , in this paper I will reflect on my own process of translation, explaining the underlying theories I have followed, the linguistic strategies I have employed, the main obstacles I have found and the way I have been able to tackle them.

First of all, and as a brief introduction to the writer, it should be said that Thomas Merton was a prolific writer of many works in prose and in verse which had a great impact on the field of American Literary Studies and on the society of his time. According to Luce López-Baralt, he was "the most important mystic of the United States"(López-Baralt y Piera 1996:17). He lived twenty seven years at the Trappist Abbey of Getsemani (Kentucky), and during this time he wrote, published and translated fifty books and more than three hundred articles, reviews and poems. He composed fascinating journals and literary essays on writers such as William Faulkner, Boris Pasternak, James Joyce, Albert Camus or Louis Zukofsky and he kept a wide correspondence with well-known people from the political, religious and intellectual world such as the Pope Paul VI, the Zen master D.T. Suzuki, Boris Pasternak, the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal, Czeslaw Milosz, Abraham Heschel, Aldoux Huxley, Henry Miller or Erich Fromm. Within his religious community, he also became "master of novices" and "master of scholastics" and he gave lectures on various topics such as art, poetry, Marxism, or Sufism among others. By the end of the 50's, Merton's interest mainly focused on the study of oriental mysticism, most particularly on Buddhism Zen, and during the 60's he wrote widely about non-violence in the nuclear era. At the same time he was also concerned with monastic life and saw the need of a deep reformation of the Church and of his cistercian order under the inspiration of the II Vatican Council. As all true mystics, he was a free man. Due to the difficulty in finding solitude and peace within his community (at least the solitude he needed in order to give free rein to his contemplative and creative thrust) he retired to a hermitage in the woods of the monastery where he stayed for three years until he began a journey to Asia in order to take part in a Conference of World Religions. Unfortunately, that would be the last trip of this simurgh (a bird of high flight in Persian mythology), as he died in Bangkok, apparently electrocuted by a fan, shortly after having finished his lecture on Marxism and Monastic Perspectives.

However, Merton's voice is still alive and can be heard throughout his whole literary production which includes books of poems such as *Early Poems*, *Thirty Poems*, *A Man in the Divided Sea*, *Figures for an Apocalypse*, *The Tears of the Blind Lions*, *The Strange Islands*, *Original Child Bomb*, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, *Cables to the Ace*, or *The Geography of Lograire*, or his love poems collected under the title *Eighteen Poems*.

With regard to my own experience as translator of Merton's poetry, I should point out that, far from thinking that translation is impossible, I consider it very necessary. As Walter Benjamin has underlined, "of all literary forms, translation is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own" (Benjamin as quoted in Schulte & Biguenet 1992: 75) It is as if his poems themselves were asking for more life, a *vita post-mortem*. However, much more attention has been devoted to the translation of Merton's prose (see "Mertoniana" 2002:697-700) and there are not many translations of his poetic production yet, apart from those done by José María Valverde, Ernesto Cardenal, Luis M. Schökel, Margarita Randall y Sergei Mondragón, José Coronel Urtrecho o Miguel Grinberg. My work has concentrated on his love poems, although I have also translated other lyrical pieces from different books.

I agree with Bonnefoy that any worthy translation cannot be reduced to the level of textual interpretation. It should mainly stand as a poetic transgression. Its aspiration should be the liberation of thought, the never-ending rebirth of common reason and the direct criticism of the collective illusion of separatedness present in our societies and our languages. Moreover, I see translation as the discovery of the falsity of one's own self by means of listening to the other's voice, and also as the result of a fruitful dialogue between both the writer and the translator: a dialogue that begins early in time (when one gets to know whether or not he is going to be able to converse with an author) and that little by little becomes more intimate, so that they both become one single song, one single chorus, one action without a face.

Due to reasons of space, I will only analyse the translations I have made of two poems: "For Margie in October" and "The Harmonies of Excess". The first one is addressed to Margie, the nurse who took care

of Merton after his spine surgery in March 1966 and with whom he would keep a love relationship until the autumn of the same year (see Furlong 1980:314). In the journal of these years he describes this affair with Margie as an experience of radical change and metamorphosis: "I cannot regard this as "just an episode". It is a profound event in my life and one which will have entered deeply into my heart to alter and transform my whole climate of thought and experience: for in her I now realize I had found something, someone that I had been looking for all my life" (Bochen 1997:328). Indeed, Merton "loved greatly and was greatly loved" (Mott 1984:438), and his compositions are the highest expression of this human but also divine love which has been praised by so many other mystics from different religious traditions such as San Bernardo de Claraval, San Juan de la Cruz, Ibn' Al Arabi or Rumi. Let us listen:

**FOR M. IN OCTOBER**

If you and I could meet up there  
In that cool cloud  
Like two sun  
Beams or birds  
Going straight to South America  
Or distracted spirits  
Flying together innocent  
In midair

Or if we could be  
Together like two barges in a string  
Or tight wandering rafts  
Heading downriver to St. Louis or New Orleans

If we could come together like two parts  
Of one love song  
Two chords going hand in hand  
A perfect arrangement  
And be two parts of the same secret  
(Oh if we could recover  
And tell again  
Our midsummer secret!)

If you and I could even start again as strangers  
Here in this forsaken field  
Where crickets rise up  
Around my feet like spray  
Out of a green ocean...

**PARA M. EN OCTUBRE**

Si tú y yo pudiésemos coincidir en lo alto  
de esa nube serena  
como dos rayos  
de sol o como aves  
que emigran a Sudamérica  
o distraídos espíritus  
que inocentemente vuelan juntos  
en el aire

O si pudiéramos estar  
unidos como dos barcas amarradas  
o como sólidas balsas errantes  
que se deslizan río abajo hacia St. Louis o  
New Orleans

Si fuera posible fundirnos como los dos versos  
de una canción de amor  
dos acordes sonando al unísono  
un acompañamiento perfecto  
y ser dos símbolos del mismo enigma  
( ¡Oh, si se nos permitiera recuperar  
y contar otra vez  
nuestro sueño de verano!)

Si incluso tú y yo pudiésemos comenzar de nuevo  
Como dos extraños en este campo abandonado  
en donde los grillos saltan  
alrededor de mis pies como la espuma  
de un verde océano...

But I am alone  
 Alone walking up and down  
 Leaning on the silly wind  
 And talking out loud like a madman

“If only you and I  
 Were possible”

Never mind:  
 Tonight the moon is full  
 And (you over buildings  
 I over trees)  
 We will watch it rise together.

Pero estoy solo  
 solo deambulando de arriba a abajo  
 reclinado en el viento absurdo  
 y gritando como un loco

“Si solamente tú y yo  
 fuésemos posibles”

No importa:  
 Esta noche es luna llena  
 y (tú cimbreándose en los edificios  
 yo sobre los árboles)  
 la veremos salir juntos.

In translating this poem, I have avoided rendering the translation of line after line. As I said before, what has been most important is to see the poem not simply as a written text but as words born out from and pointing out to the unspeakable. What has been essential is to let yourself be brought by the poem into the “hic und nunc” of its composition and, above all, to keep the same strength of denial of the original: that is to say, Merton’s denial to accept the impossibility of his love affair with the nurse just because he was a monk. It is this capacity of negation which gives both the poem and its translation their power and their strength.

From the phonological point of view, the translation of the text does not present many problems. As it is free verse, I did not need to worry about finding a proper rhyme for each line, or even a fixed number of syllables as it is the case of poems which follow a conventional metric system.

As far as the semantic level is concerned, in the first stanza I have found difficulties in translating the adjective “cool” in “cool cloud”. In Spanish it is not possible to render a literal translation “nube fresca”, so we have opted for the word “serena” whose meaning differs from the original but it is more in harmony with the use habits of our language. Another problem has been the translation of “midair” in the last line of the first stanza: once again, the literal translation would sound extremely strange in Spanish (“mitad del aire”). Therefore, I have used a more general term “aire” where the English version uses a much more specific term.

Turning to the second stanza of the poem, it can be seen that Merton repeats the word “together” twice, I have translated “together” not as “juntos” (like in the previous stanza) but as “unidos”, in order to avoid redundancy and, as Bonnefoy suggests, enrich the language of the text. Similarly, in the third stanza, I have translated “if we could come together” as “*si fuera posible fundirnos*”. From the grammatical point of view, this has implied a change of grammatical category as the adjective has been turned into a verb; nevertheless, this choice has not altered the meaning conveyed by the original.

Moreover, I have altered the significeds of several words within the poem in order to embellish it, although this can be questioned and criticized. In the second stanza, I have translated “heading downriver to St. Louis” as “*deslizándose río abajo hacia St. Louis*”. The word “deslizar” in Spanish contains the idea of movement and direction implied by “heading” in English, but it also adds the extra meaning of “flowing” and contributes to the whole internal coherence of the second stanza. Besides, in the third stanza I have translated the word “chords” (which refers to the physical object) as “*acordes*” (which refers to the effect caused by the playing of the chords). Therefore, the whole line “two chords going hand in hand” reads as “*dos acordes sonando al unísono*”, which is somehow a free translation but which definitely sounds much better than a literal one and is more in accordance with the whole corpus of metaphors of the stanza. In addition, it should be said that Merton loved music and musical images and that his whole poetic production is full of these kind of symbols. For this reason, we have also translated “arrangement” as “*acompañamiento*”, following Merton’s musical inclinations.

In the same stanza, “parts” have been rendered as “*símbolos*”, once more in order to enrich the language. Besides, an awareness of the situation in which the poem was written has led us to translate “if we could recover” as “*si se nos permitiera*”, using the impersonal form but indirectly referring to the obstacles that the Church, and most particularly, Merton’s community saw in his relation with Margie. As it may be seen from all these examples, our reading and interpretation of the poem does not consider the text as an isolated entity but considers it within a particular context and in relation with other texts. Something similar happens with the translation of “midsummer secret”. It appears in the Spanish version

as “sueño de verano” due to the influence of intertextuality, in this case of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer’s Night Dream*. Although symbolism is specific to a particular literary work, it is also true—as Ritafferre has also pointed out—that it connects this work to the symbols used in certain other literary works, together with which the first work constitutes an “intertext” (Ritafferre as quoted in Schulte & Biguenet 1992:204).

In the fifth stanza, I have respected Merton’s choice of the expression “leaning on the silly wind”, and made quite a literal translation in order to preserve the rather ironical sense of the verse, even if this combination of words is not very usual and goes against habitual semantic rules of collocation. Finally, in the sixth stanza, our translation adds a word “cimbreadose” (referring to the moon) which is not in the original. This has been done in order to clarify syntax, which is somewhat confusing in the original as it places the adverbial phrases “over buildings” and “over trees” before the verb and the object of the main clause. Without this addition, the text would have remained obscure, or at least, quite ambiguous.

Let us move onto the next poem I have chosen to analyse and share with you. It is entitled “The Harmonies of Excess” and is about the miracle of the resurrection of love and lovers within a poem.

#### THE HARMONIES OF EXCESS

The hidden lovers in the soil  
Become green plants and the gardens tomorrow  
When they are ordered to re-appear  
In the wet sun’s poem

Then they force the delighted  
Power of buds to laugh louder  
They scatter all the cries of light  
Like shadow rain and make their bed  
Over and over in the hollow flower  
The violet bonfire

They spin the senses of the mute morning  
In an abandoned river  
Love’s wreckage is then left to lie  
All around the breathless shores  
Of my voice

#### LAS ARMONÍAS DEL EXCESO

Los amores ocultos en la tierra  
mañana serán vergeles  
cuando la lluvia y el sol  
en el poema los resucite

Ellos apremian el vigor delicioso  
de los capullos a que ría más alto  
derramando gritos de luz  
como lluvia sombría y formando su lecho  
una y otra vez en la concavidad de la flor  
la hoguera violeta

Ellos tejen el significado de la mañana silenciosa  
En un río olvidado  
Luego los restos del naufragio del amor son esparcidos  
por las orillas sin aliento  
de mi voz

Which on the coasts of larking meadows  
Invented all these children and their mischievous  
noises

que en las playas de las divertidas praderas  
imaginó a todos estos chiquillos juguetones

So the lovers teach April stars  
To riot rebel and follow faithless courses  
And it doesn't matter  
The seed is not afraid  
Of winter or the terrible sweetness  
Of spring's convivial nightmare  
Or the hot surprise and dizzy spark  
Of their electric promise

Así que los amantes enseñan a las estrellas de Abril  
a rebelarse y seguir el curso increíble de sus órbitas  
Y nada importa  
La semilla no se asusta  
del invierno o de la terrible dulzura  
del exceso alegre de la primavera  
o de la abrasadora sorpresa del rayo  
con su descarga eléctrica

For the lovers in the sleeping nerve  
Are the hope and the address  
Where I send you this burning garden  
My talkative morning-glory  
My climbing germ of poems.

Para los amantes durmientes  
son la esperanza y el destino  
al que te envío este jardín ardiente  
Mi gloriosa súplica matutina  
Germen trepador de mis poemas.

This poem is interesting from the point of view of lexis. There are some instances in which a literal translation of a word or phrase within this composition makes no sense in Spanish. For example, in the first line, I had better use the abstract noun “amores” instead of “amantes” because the metaphor “los amores ocultos en la tierra” seems to work better in Spanish as if we said “los amantes ocultos en la tierra”. In the same stanza, a literal translation of “when they are ordered to re-appear/ in the wet sun’s poem” would sound extremely awkward in Spanish. Therefore, in this case I have decided to change the syntax of the original and consider “wet sun” as the subject of the sentence. Moreover, I have also changed the grammatical category of “wet” (which is an adjective) and replace it for a noun: “la lluvia”.

In the second stanza we have translated the noun “shadow” of “shadow rain” as an adjective “lluvia sombría”, as we all know that in English many nouns function as adjectives. In the case of “hollow flower”, I have made a change in grammatical categories as I was not happy with the literal translation “flor hueca”: consequently, what was an adjective has been converted into a noun and what was a noun has been replaced by a prepositional phrase: “la concavidad de la flor”. In the third stanza, I have done a rather free translation of the last line. So, I have translated “mischievous noises” just as a single adjective: “juguetones”. Without altering the original meaning, I have tried to embellish the “form” of the verse and make it sound more poetical, although this choice might be criticized as being a matter of personal taste.

I have faced tremendous difficulties when translating the last two verses of the fourth stanza which read: “or the hot surprise and dizzy spark/ of their electric promise”. I have understood that “dizzy spark” might be alluding to “rayo” and I have slightly changed the syntax and morphology of the verses: “dizzy spark” has been converted into a complement of “hot surprise”, and the possessive adjective in the phrase “of their electric promise”, (which in the English version anaphorically points to “winter” and to “spring”), has been made to have number agreement with “dizzy spark”. Nevertheless, this line is quite ambiguous and we would have needed to ask the author about the precise meaning of these metaphors.

Finally, in the fifth stanza, I have kept the literal translation of “lovers” as “amantes” (as opposed to what I did in the first stanza), and we have substituted the adverbial phrase “in their sleeping nerve” for a present participle: “durmientes”, therefore omitting the translation of the noun “nerve”. There has also been a change in grammatical categories in the verse “my talkative morning glory” which has been rendered as “mi gloriosa súplica matutina”: the adjective “talkative” has been converted into the noun “súplica” in our translation; the noun “glory” has been changed into an adjective “gloriosa”; and the noun “morning” (which is a noun but functions as an adjective in the English version) has been replaced by an adjective “matutina”. Without altering the general meaning of the poem, all these changes in grammatical categories seem to make it sound better in the Spanish version.

To conclude, the last part of this paper will be devoted to a comparative analysis, discussion and criticism of Ernesto Cardenal’s translations of two poems by Merton in the light of my own translations. First of all, it should be said that the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal was a novice in the Abbey of Gethsemani and that he was under the spiritual guidance of Thomas Merton during the seven years he spent there. Although he had to leave the monastery due to health problems, they kept a wide correspondance which has recently been published in Spanish. He tells that Merton used to say that his poetry sound better in its Spanish translation than in English (see Cardenal:199-201).

Among the translations Cardenal has done of the monk’s poetry, I have chosen two compositions: “The Ohio River-Louisville”, and

“Whether there is Enjoyment in Bitterness”. He sent me these translations in a letter dated 18<sup>th</sup> August 1998. They belong to a book of poems translated by the author from Merton’s work and published by Universidad Nacional de México in 1961 (nowadays this edition is out of print). The first one is from Merton’s book “A Man in a Divided Sea” (1946) and it is a good example of the poetry he wrote in his first years at the monastery, when he abandoned the hectic urban life and took refuge in the solitude of his abbey. The English version reads as follows:

**THE OHIO RIVER-LOUISVILLE**

No one can hear the loud voice of the city  
Because of the tremendous silence  
Of this slow-moving river, quiet as space.

Not the towering bridge, the crawling train,  
Not the knives of pylons  
Clashing in the sun,  
And not the sky-swung cables;  
Not the outboard boat  
Swearing in the fiery distance like a locust,  
Not the iron cries of men:  
Nothing is heard,  
Only the immense and silent movement of the river.

The trains go through the summer as quiet as paper,  
And in the powerhouse, the singing dynamos  
Make no more noise than cotton.  
All life is quieter than the weeds  
On which lies lightly sprawling,  
Like white birds shot to death,  
The bathers’ clothing.

But only where the swimmers float like alligators,  
And with their eyes as dark as creosote  
Scrutinize the murderous heat,  
Only there is anything heard:

The thin, salt voice of violence,  
That whines, like a mosquito, in their simmering blood.

Hereby I reproduce first Ernesto Cardenal’s translation and then my own translation:

**EL RÍO OHIO-(LOUISVILLE)**

No se oye el clamor de la ciudad  
Por el tremendo silencio  
De este río despacio, quieto como el espacio.

Ni el enorme puente, el serpenteante tren,  
Ni los cuchillos de los pilones  
Entrechocando en el sol,  
Ni tampoco los cables atravesando el cielo;  
Ni el bote de motor  
Con su palabrota en la ardiente lejanía como una cigarra,  
Ni los gritos férreos de los hombres:  
Nada se oye,  
Solamente el inmenso y silencioso movimiento del río.

Los trenes cruzan el verano con quietud de papel,  
Y en la central eléctrica los dínamos cantando  
Producen tanto ruido como el algodón.  
La vida toda está más quieta que la hierba,  
Donde han quedado flácidas,  
Como aves blancas que fueron tiradas,  
Las ropas de los bañistas.

Pero sólo donde los nadadores flotan como caimanes,  
Y con sus ojos oscuros como cerosota  
Escudriñan el calor asesino,  
Sólo allí se oye algo:  
La delgada, salada voz de la violencia,  
Que gime, como un mosquito, en su sangre hirviente.

*Ernesto Cardenal*

**EL RÍO OHIO-LOUISVILLE**

No es posible oír la algarabía de la ciudad  
Debido al gran silencio  
De este lento fluir del río, sereno como el aire.

Ni el puente elevado, ni el tren que avanza sigilosamente  
Ni los fillos de las torres de alta tensión  
Batiendo al sol  
Ni los cables suspendidos en el cielo  
Ni el motor fuera borda

Blasfemando en la vehemente distancia como un crustáceo  
Ni los gritos férreos de los hombres  
Nada se escucha  
Sólo el discurrir callado y majestuoso del río.

Los trenes circulan durante el verano mudos como de papel  
Y, en la central eléctrica, la canción de la dinamo  
Es tan sutil como el algodón  
Toda vida es más apacible que la hierba  
Sobre la que levemente reposan  
Como blancos pájaros yacentes  
Las ropas de los bañistas.

Únicamente donde los nadadores flotan como caimanes  
Y con ojos tan oscuros como la creosota  
Escudriñan las malvadas pasiones  
Sólo allí algo se percibe:  
La fina voz salada de la violencia  
Que se lamenta, como un mosquito, en su hirviente sangre.

*Sonia Petisco*

A general reading of both translations shows that Cardenal's version is much more literal than my own version. In the first line, Cardenal translates "loud voice" as "clamor" (and, therefore, he keeps the personification of the city), whereas I have chosen "algarabía" which refers more to the noise caused by other agents within the city but not by the city itself. In the second line, he translates "tremendous" as "tremendo", whereas I have chosen "gran" due to the influence of intertextuality (in this case, I remembered "el gran silencio solar" of which the German mystic Böehme used to talk). In the third line, he also does a literal translation of "quiet as space" as "quieto como el espacio" and makes "espacio" rhyme with "despacio". However, his translation of "slow-moving river" as "río despacio" is not (at least grammatically speaking) correct because in Spanish a noun cannot be modified by an adverb. In my version I have decided to change the grammatical category of "slow-moving" and make it a noun "lento fluir del río".

In the second stanza, Cardenal's translation of "towering bridge" as "enorme puente" does not convey the same meaning as the original. We have chosen to translate it as "puente elevado", which is closer to the

English version. In contrast, his translation of “crawling train” as “serpenteante tren” seems to be a better translation than my own version (“tren que avanza sigilosamente”) because he does not alter the grammatical category of the adjective “crawling” and at the same time he employs a well-chosen metaphor: that of the serpent. Nevertheless, I am not very happy with the translation he makes of the second verse: “ni los cuchillos de los pilones/ entrechocando en el sol”. What does this mean in Spanish? It seems to be out of context. I had better translate this verse as “los fillos de las torres de alta tensión”. In the fifth line, Cardenal translation of “outboard boat” as “bote de motor” and my translation as “motor fuera borda” show obvious differences between the Spanish spoken in Spain and the one spoken in South America; in the sixth verse Cardenal changes the grammatical category of “swearing” for a noun (“palabrota”) which is not usually found in a poem and which does not sound very poetical.

The seventh verse is one of the very few examples in which both translators have rendered the same version: “ni los gritos férreos de los hombres”. This shows something we have mentioned in the previous pages: that every translator is an interpreter, and that there can be endless readings of the same text which can greatly differ from one another.

Finally, in the eight verse Cardenal repeats the verb “oír” that he has already used in the first line of the first stanza, whereas we have translated it as “escuchar” in order to enrich the text and avoid redundancy. Nevertheless, I must say that Cardenal’s option is also interesting because by repeating the verb “oír” the text gains textual cohesion and rhythm. The last verse of this stanza shows that his translation continues being very literal as he translates “the immense and silent movement of the river” as “el inmenso y silencioso movimiento del río”, whereas our translation “el discurrir callado y majestuoso del río” places the adjectives after the noun and finds a more adequate term (more adequate as far as the semantic field of the word “river” is concerned) for conveying the idea of the movement of the river: “discurrir”.

Moving onto the third stanza, it must be pointed out that Cardenal’s literal translation makes the Spanish version sound rather awkward. Just to take an example, in the first line, Ernesto translates “the trains go through the summer quiet as paper” as “los trenes cruzan el verano con quietud de papel”: the use habits of Spanish do not contemplate the verb

“cruzar” accompanied by a direct object such as “el verano”. Besides, the adjective “quiet” does not mean “quieto” as Cardenal has written but “callado, silencioso, mudo”. In my version, I have translated the whole verse as “los trenes circulan durante el verano mudos como de papel”.

Within this stanza, Cardenal writes another literal translation which does not convey the meaning of the original: he translates “the singing dynamos/make no more noise than cotton” as “los dínamos cantando/producen tanto ruido como el algodón”, a comparison which would not be expressed using these terms in Spanish. In fact, we do not have a metaphor like this one in our language, and even my own version “la canción de la dínamo es tan sutil como el algodón” is still a little bit unusual for our ears. Here we can see how each language has its own metaphoric “repertoire” and how, sometimes, as Humboldt or Saussure pointed out, it is quite difficult to find perfect equivalents for these metaphors.

In the same stanza (4<sup>th</sup> line), the adjective “quiet” is repeated for the third time, both in Merton’s and in Cardenal’s versions. In order to avoid the repetition of this word, I have used the word “apacible”, which is not completely literal but which is in harmony with the general meaning and mood of the poem. In the sixth line Cardenal’s literal translation of “like white birds shot to death” as “como aves blancas que fueron tiradas” shows one more the difference between the South American Spanish and Castilian Spanish (we would never say “tiradas”, but “disparadas” or “troteadas”). In contrast, my version “como blancos pájaros yacentes” places the emphasis not on the action of “shooting” but on the result of the action.

In the last stanza, Cardenal continues translating word by word. In the second stanza, he commits a mistake which is quite common in the translation from English into Spanish. In his translation of “and with their eyes as dark as creosote”, he keeps the possessive adjective and writes: “y con sus ojos oscuros como la creosota”. We all know that English always uses the possessive when referring to parts of the body, but this is not the case in Spanish. Therefore, our translation has omitted this adjective and says “y con ojos tan oscuros como la creosota”. In the next line, Cardenal renders another literal translation of “murderous heat” as “calor asesino”, whereas I have done a more free translation and

consider “heat” as metaphor referring to “passion or desire”: “las malvadas pasiones.” However, my translation might fail to convey the strong connotation of the adjective “murderous”, which is quite relevant to the understanding of the critical nature of the poem. In the fourth verse of the same stanza, Cardenal repeats the verb “oír” for the third time. As I said before, this repetition can endowed the poem with textual cohesion and coherence, although it can also be quite redundant and poor. Once more, in order to avoid this redundancy, we have chosen the word “percibir” on this occasion.

Let us move on and analyse another translation by Ernesto Cardenal of the poem “Whether there is enjoyment in bitterness”. When Merton wrote this poem, he was undergoing a severe crisis of identity; he had a conflict between his monastic vocation which called him to solitude and silence and this other concern for the problems of the world around him which could no longer be ignored. First, I will transcribe the English version, then Cardenal’s, and, lastly, my version:

**WHETHER THERE IS ENJOYMENT  
IN BITTERNESS**

This afternoon, let me be  
A sad person. Am I not  
Permitted (like other men)  
To be sick of myself?

Am I not allowed to be hollow,  
Or fall in the hole  
Or break my bones (within me)  
In the trap set by my own  
Lie to myself? O my friend,  
I too must sin and sin.

I too must hurt other people and  
(since I am not exception)  
I must be hated by them

Do not forbid me, therefore,  
To taste the same bitter poison,  
And drink the gall that love  
(Love most of all) so easily becomes.  
Do not forbid (once again) to be  
Angry, bitter, disillusioned,  
Wishing I could die.

**SI HAY UN GOCE EN LA AMARGURA**

Esta tarde, dejadme  
Estar triste. ¿No tengo  
Derecho (como los demás)  
De estar cansado de mí?

¿No se me permite estar hueco,  
O caer en el hoyo  
O quebrarme los huesos (por dentro)  
En la trampa de mi propia mentira  
A mí mismo? Oh amigo mío,  
Yo también debo pecar y pecar.

Yo también debo herir a los otros y  
(puesto que no soy una excepción)  
También ser odiado por ellos.

No se me prohíba, por tanto,  
Probar el mismo veneno amargo,  
Y beber la hiel que el amor  
(sobre todo el amor) tan fácilmente se vuelve  
No se me prohíba (otra vez) tener  
Furia, amargura, desilusión  
Deseando morir.

While life and death  
Are killing one another in my flesh,  
Leave me in peace, I can enjoy,  
Even as other men, this agony.

Only (whoever you may be)  
Pray for my soul. Speak my name  
To Him, for in my bitterness  
I hardly speak to Him: and He  
While he is busy killing me  
Refuses to listen.

Mientras la vida y la muerte  
Se asesinan en mi carne,  
Dejadme en paz. Yo puedo gozar  
Aun como los otros, esta agonía.

Solamente (quienquiera que seas)  
Reza por mi alma. Háblale de mí  
a Él, porque en mi amargura  
Yo apenas le hablo: y Él  
Mientras está ocupado en matarme  
No me oye.

*Ernesto Cardenal*

My own translation reads as follows:

**¿EXISTE GOCE EN LA AMARGURA?**

Esta tarde, permitidme  
Estar triste. ¿Acaso  
No puedo (como otros hombres)  
Estar cansado de mí?

¿Acaso no es lícito sentirme vacío  
o caer en el abismo  
o fracturar mis huesos  
en la trampa que yo mismo  
me he tendido? Oh, amigo mío,  
yo también he de pecar y peco.

Yo también debo herir a mis semejantes y  
(puesto que no soy ninguna excepción)  
ser odiado por ellos.

Por tanto, no me prohibáis  
Probar vuestro mismo veneno amargo  
Ni beber la hiel en la que el amor  
(el amor más que cualquier otra cosa)  
tan fácilmente se transmuta.

No me neguéis (una vez más)  
Sentirme  
Colérico, resentido, desilusionado,  
Anhelar morirme.

Mientras la vida y la muerte  
 Se debaten dentro de mí,  
 Dejadme tranquilo. Puedo ser feliz,  
 Incluso más que otros hombres, en esta agonía.

Sólo (quienquiera que seáis)  
 Rogad por mi alma. Recordadle a Dios  
 Mi nombre, porque en mi amargura,  
 Apenas converso con Él; y Él  
 Mientras está ocupado en destruirme  
 No quiere escucharme.

*Sonia Petisco*

In this poem, we encounter the difficulty of translating the imperative forms which are ambiguous in English because they can be singular or plural. Ernesto Cardenal translates them differently on each occasion: in the first stanza the imperative is in its 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural form “dejadme”, in the fourth and fifth stanza he renders an impersonal form “no se me prohíba”, probably led by the fact that the addressee of the poem is unknown; in the sixth stanza, he uses again the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural imperative form, but in the last stanza, he uses the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular imperative form, which seems to be much more appropriate if we take into account that the vocative “oh, amigo mío” is singular. My version of the poem uses the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural in all the stanzas, although it is clear that the vocative is singular. However, this addressee is unknown and the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural form of the imperative seems to convey this impersonality better than if we used the second person singular form.

Another case of ambiguity is found in the last verse of the second stanza: “I too must sin and sin”. Ernesto translates as “yo también he de pecar y pecar”, whereas I have translated the same sentence as “yo también he de pecar y peco”.

With regard to the semantic level, Ernesto repeats several words as the verb “prohibir” in the fourth and fifth stanza or the noun “amargura” in the fifth and seventh stanza, while we have looked for other words to enrich once more the vocabulary of the poem. In the second stanza he renders a literal translation of “to be hollow” as “estar hueco” but we have preferred to translate this expression in its metaphorical sense as “sentirme vacío”. In the fifth stanza he changes the grammatical categories

of the adjectives “angry, bitter, disillusioned” and replaces them by nouns functioning as direct objects of the verb “to have”. In this case, I have done a more literal translation and have made no change of grammatical categories at all. Besides, in the last verse of this stanza, Cardenal translates “wishing I could die” as the present participle “deseando morirme”. He does not seem to realize that in the English version “wishing” is the continuous form of the infinitive “to be wishing” and that this infinitive depends on the verb “forbid”. Therefore, grammatically speaking, his translation is not very appropriate. To conclude, in the sixth stanza, Cardenal renders a literal translation of “while life and death/ are killing one another”, whereas I have chosen to give a less literal version which, in my view, seems to be much more suitable as far as the use habits of the Spanish language are concerned.

## **CONCLUSION**

As we can see through the study of all these versions of Merton’s poems, there can be many translations or readings of a text. Even the original could be said to be a translation of the nonverbal world. As Octavio Paz has pointed out:

each text is unique, yet at the same time it is the translation on another text. No text can be completely original because language itself, in its very essence, is another translation- first from the nonverbal world, and then, because each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase. However, the inverse of this reasoning is also entirely valid. All texts are originals because each translation has its own distinctive character. Up to a point, each translation is a creation and thus constitutes a unique text (Paz as cited in Schulte & J. Biguenet 1992:153).

However, what I consider important for both a writer or a translator is to transcend the level of textual interpretation and reach the level of transgression. That is to say, either a poem or a translation should be able

to break the limits and definitions imposed by the specific vocabularies of the different languages of Babel and introduce us into the presence of the unspeakable.

If I acknowledge the possibility of translation it is because there is obviously something outside the realities conformed by words with a meaning which is common to all of them. It is not true that a “rose” consists only of its name. It is evident, that under the name of “rose”, there is something. In addition, there are many words in a language which have no meaning (deictics, pronouns such as “I” or “We”, numbers, quantifiers like “something”, “much” etc...) all of them pointing to a pre-grammatical field (see García Calvo 1991:190-225), which cannot be named (what Wittgenstein called “das Unausprechliche”). This field is the field of common reason, which speaks through the mouths of people who are nobody, no matter what particular language is used. It goes beyond signifiers and signifieds and it denounces the falsity of ourselves as isolated individuals made up of names and ideas. As Merton once wrote: “We are already One but we believe we are not. What we have to recover is our original unity.” Let us hope that poetry writing and translation creates a space of authentic communion where Logos is allowed to speak by itself, and where both writer and translator can disappear and get lost in the mystery of true life, which is always unknown.

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