

Translation and Relevance: The Appraisal of Poetry

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In this article I argue for a critique of poetry and poetic prose in translation which takes into account the degree of pragmatic relevance attained by the translator. In a translation, the aim should be to attain full relevance on the levels of phonetics/phonology, syntax and semantics and pragmatics. Poetry presents extreme difficulties in translation, mainly due to the fact that poetry depends for effect on phonetic elements. Many translators focus on syntactic and semantic elements and produce paraphrases and explications. Very few produce translations that are poems in their own right. Some translations become unintelligible due to deviance in pragmatic meaning. In order to illustrate this, a critique of a selection of Emily Dickinson's poetry translated into Spanish is presented with special reference to the translation of ambiguity and point of view.

En este artículo presento una crítica de la traducción de la poesía y prosa poética que tiene en cuenta el grado de relevancia (pertinencia) pragmática conseguido por el traductor. En una traducción, la meta debe ser la consecución de relevancia plena en los niveles de fonética/fonología, sintaxis y semántica, y pragmática. La traducción poética es de una dificultad extrema, debida sobre todo al hecho de que la poesía depende para su efecto de elementos fonéticos. Muchos traductores tienen en cuenta únicamente los elementos sintácticos y semánticos y producen paráfrasis y resúmenes explícitos. Muy pocas traducciones son poemas por derecho propio. Algunas traducciones son imposibles de entender por las desviaciones en el significado pragmático. Como ilustración presento una crítica de una selección de la poesía de Emily Dickinson traducida al español, con especial referencia a la traducción de la ambigüedad y el punto de vista.

Keywords: translation, poetry, literary pragmatics, relevance, Emily Dickinson

Palabras clave: traducción, poesía, pragmática literaria, pertinencia, relevancia, Emily Dickinson

POETRY IN TRANSLATION

Poetry presents extreme difficulties in translation. It is generally supposed that critique of poetry translations is an even more difficult task and that there is no way of telling what is acceptable and unacceptable in translated poetry. This is partly true and it is to a large extent due to the fact that poetry depends for effect on phonetic elements. Very few translators aim for imitation of the prosodic elements in the source text: meaning dependent on such elements is simply not taken into account. What is generally considered as ‘meaning’ is thought to be based only on syntactic and semantic elements. When the phonological level of a poem is obviated, the translation tends to become a simple paraphrase and cannot be considered a poem in its own right. The other extreme occurs when poets translate poetry. In this case, rhythm and sound effects are very often preserved, but deviations in lexical and syntactic meaning tend to abound. Poets translating poets often present highly subjective interpretations — the famous *belles infidèles*.

With regard to the much-discussed issue of translatability, I part from the view that translation of poetry is possible and that success in this endeavour is just as much a question of degree as in any other kind of translation. Translatability of poetry is intimately related to what is commonly called “poetic essence”. It is true that poetry has been defined as “what is untranslatable” (allegedly by Robert Frost. I quote Benn 1951 as cited in Holmes, 1994). It has also been described as what is left after rhythm, rhyme and the words have been taken away (allegedly by Federico García Lorca), which comes to the same thing, and presumably points at some lyrical essence that floats around and impresses conveniently sensitive souls. As this essence is not bound to any linguistic element in particular, the conclusion has been drawn that poetry is impossible to translate.

What, then, is this ineffable poetic essence? I have argued elsewhere (Dahlgren, 2000; 2002; 2005) that, for the purpose of analysis, a division of poetic discourse into the levels of phonology and phonetics, syntax and semantics, and pragmatics, is convenient. Pragmatics is a useful tool in analysing poetry translations, as pragmatics deals with inference and implicature. Actually, the mysterious free-floating essence (lyrical or not) can be traced in linguistic elements in the poem (inference triggers) and/or attributed to implicature. The latter is a notion similar to that of connotation in poetry, but it can appear without any connection to a specific word or expression (Sperber and Wilson, 1986 (2000), Blakemore, 1989; 1993, Carston, 2001), while connotation is bound to a certain lexical element or utterance. Implicatures have been analysed mainly as they appear in spoken dialogue and in literary dialogues and lately also in narrative discourse. Literary pragmatics is, according to Jacob Mey the kinds of effects that authors, as text producers, set out to obtain, using the resources of language in their efforts to establish a 'working cooperation' with their audiences, the consumers of the texts. Such efforts rely on a precise understanding of the conditions of use of those resources, when directed at a particular audience among the consumers of the literary work.

These pragmatic effects cannot rely on the linguistic elements involved alone. [...] What is required beyond those linguistic techniques is a thorough exploitation of all the contextual factors determining the use of those linguistic items (Mey, 1999: 12).

It is generally accepted that spoken dialogue can be translated by means of consecutive or simultaneous interpreting, and dialogues within literary works are not treated as different from the rest of the discourse for translation purposes. The inferences that occur in such discourse are perfectly translatable. Inference and implicature also appear in poetry, just as in any other type of discourse. It is of vital importance that inference lines and implicature in the source text are carried over into the translated text.

Among the levels of discourse (phonetics and phonology, syntax and semantics, and pragmatics), the level of phonetics and phonology plays an important part in all genres and discourse types. In poetry it is vital. The phonological meaning of poetic discourse depends on the distribution of stress and pitch, recurrence, rhythm, assonance and alliteration.

Prosody is of extreme importance for the effect of the poem on the reader, and it is the first element to be lost in translation. As translation of prosody is a tricky matter, most translators simply do not even make an effort at imitation, and concentrate on syntactic and lexical meaning. With regard to the imitation of rhythm produced by a certain type of stanza, this can be illustrated by the evident difficulties in transferring the iambic stanza favoured in English poetry into Romance languages. To this we must add the problematic issue of the imitation of end-rhyme. The Spanish language rhymes easily, but rhyming words mostly come in the shape of verb endings (-ar, -ía, -ido) and adjective endings (-oso, -osa). There is a scarcity of convenient monosyllabic words to use for rhyming. Translators into Spanish therefore take recourse to assonance and alliteration. In the case of Emily Dickinson, whose poetry is analysed in this article, the hymn-like rhythm present in much of her poetry is extremely difficult to imitate, and none of her translators has managed to produce versions which come in any way close to the prosody of the original.

THE PITFALLS

When discussing poetry translation with poets who translate other poets, the objection is often raised against the expression ‘howler’ when used by scholars in analyses which are part of general faultfinding. Searching for howlers is admittedly an activity that adds little to the appraisal of poetry. This being so, it has to be pointed out that howlers are serious lexical mistranslations, due to lack of knowledge of the source language or simply to sheer laziness: the translator has not thought it worth while to look a certain word or expression up in a dictionary. Silvina Ocampo’s translation of Emily Dickinson is a case in point: the lexical mismatches are so serious that they alter the context of the poem or simply make the translation incomprehensible.

Another pitfall which is especially prominent in the translation of poetry is the reproduction of the source text syntax, which produces unacceptable or inappropriate target texts. The result of such reproduction is “foreignising” (Venuti 1995). Unacceptable target language is often due to a lack of understanding of the poem, something that has to do with the fact that poetry is a form of literary art where redundancy is not present and ambiguity is a not a flaw but an asset.

The preservation of source text ambiguity is one of the most difficult matters in poetry translation. In Emily Dickinson's poetry, ambiguity, or rather lack of definition, is one of the hallmarks. What some translators seem to have done is to add ambiguity in places where the original has none, in order to make up for the failure in preservation of ambiguity elsewhere in the poem. The point is whether implicit or inferred information can be made explicit. In translation, implicit information that was shared by the original authors and their audience will also have to be made accessible to the target language audience. Gutt (1991: 79-94) argues that the difference between implicit information and absent information can depend on the speaker's intention to convey it. However, Gutt says, since the audience has no way of knowing the communicator's intention, it cannot tell which interpretation is the valid one. Misconceptions abound in such cases. In a spoken non-fictional dialogue immediate feedback clears up such misconceptions, but in fiction this is not possible. This is exemplified in metaphors and in ambiguous expressions. The problem in translation is how to preserve the range of ideas present in the original. Ambiguities should be preserved in translation whenever this is possible. However, pragmatically, it is just as inadequate to create an ambiguity where the source text had none (Dahlgren, 1998: 26-27). In poetic discourse, there is not only explicit information, but also information that is not given but derived from some specific linguistic expression, i.e. inferred from it. If I say "it is cold out there" this is a statement that informs the hearer about certain facts. But it can mean more than this:

- I do not want to go out
- Put on your warm coat
- Stay in bed and forget about the jogging
- Etc.

When inference is based on an utterance such as the one mentioned above, inference is language-based, and in this case, the range of inferences that can be drawn are limited. Inference can also be based on attitudes, in which case the range of possible interpretations is enormous. In poetry we have a type of inference based on imagery and emotions, which is difficult to pin down, and which has therefore not been seriously studied.

Another pitfall that is extremely common in poetry translation and especially in the translation of Emily Dickinson's poems is change in point of view. Change in point of view, alteration of the narrating persona, mistakes regarding who sees and who speaks in the poem, are all extremely dangerous as these mistakes produce in-depth changes in meaning. To this we must add the elements of deficient knowledge of the source language, deviance in interpretation, and the elimination of inference triggers. This, often with a failed effort to produce what is commonly thought to be 'poetry', produces translations that come close to nonsense. An adequate interpretation of the original and a version that does not cause the reader to give up reading because the effort is too great produce relevant translation.

TRANSLATION STRATEGIES AND RELEVANCE

Generalising heavily, it can be said that the effects of translation depend on a limited number of strategies followed by translators. I would classify these strategies broadly into three categories, which are

- paraphrases (explicating, trivialising, 'de-poetising')
- 'poetising': introducing additions of 'poetic' elements from target language poetic tradition

- relevant translations, as close as possible to the source text on all levels: phonetic, syntactic-semantic and pragmatic. Relevant translation is an appropriate balance of all these elements.

Cureton (1997: 2) says that "to summarize what a poem relates reduces it to prose; a poem's language is its art". Paraphrasing is a strategy that is perfectly valid if used with the intention of making the gist of a poem accessible to those who lack the sufficient knowledge of the source language to appreciate it in the original. More often than not, paraphrasing is used in overt translation (House 1981): the paraphrase is a translation which is explicitly presented as such. The translator might make claims to producing a poem, but the effect on the reader is in this case very different from that produced by the original, and even if the translated poem contains poetic forms, it cannot be considered a poem in its own right. Another type of overt translation, presenting both the original and

the translation, is clearly the most common one in translations into Spanish today. It might be presupposed that in these cases the translator aims at producing a poem in its own right. If we follow House 1981, this type of translation is overt translation, as it presents a version that is meant to be compared (and comparable) to the original. In covert poetry translation, only the translated poem is presented, clearly with the intention of producing an equivalent of the source text, i.e. a poem.

Paraphrasing reduces the poem to prose, and what is more, due to the fact that an explanation of the poem is produced, it has a trivialising and ‘de-poetising’ effect. It is evident that these strategies are used by translators with the aim of facilitating the comprehension of the poem in the target language. When appraising a translation we must start out with the conviction that the strategies of explication and paraphrasing is used by the translator with a view to illuminating the reader, or to facilitating an understanding of the poem in its original version. A strategy that has the opposite effects but can be just as jarring is ‘poetising’. This occurs when the translator takes recourse to poetic elements from the target language literary tradition or from universal poetry, using a ‘poetic’ word order and lexical items that are traditionally considered ‘poetic’. In other words, poetising occurs when the translator makes use of what is traditionally considered poetic resources (change in word order, consonance, assonance, change of register etc). This is done in poetry translation even on occasions when the original does not exhibit any of these traits. This strategy more often than not produces a target text that is more difficult to interpret than the source text, at times obscuring meaning, and even to the point of producing sheer nonsense.

Schulte (2002: 1) says that “the work of a translator transcends the scholarly intensity that scholars and critics display in their interpretation of works of literature”. The translator who interprets the original adequately and uses the appropriate resources in the target language in order to facilitate the subsequent interpretation is a translator who works with this kind of scholarly intensity and such a translator aims at nothing less than achieving full relevance in interpretation.

The notion of relevant translation is based on the pragmatic principle of relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 2000). In a nutshell, the principle of relevance states that in its search for meaning, the human

mind tends to balance the effort used in interpretation and the results of such an effort. The different strategies mentioned above all tend to maximise the effort in search of an acceptable interpretation. If they are balanced, i.e. if the translator on the one hand steers clear of over-explication and on the other hand manages to avoid causing the target text to become more obscure than the source text, such a balance is achieved. Relevant translation is thus the middle way between explication and poetising. As in all efforts of understanding, there is a reward that comes after making sense of a poetic metaphor, but when the effort becomes too great and the reward is withheld for too long, the reader experiences an unpleasant feeling of impatience. Relevance is not a set, unchanging parameter: there are degrees of relevance, produced by the balance of effort and reward.

EMILY DICKINSON IN TRANSLATION

Emily Dickinson's poems have suffered severely in translation. Many translations exist of her work into Spanish (Champourcin, 1946; Jordana & Macarulla, 1980; Castillo, 1984; Manent (Dickinson, 1979); Ocampo (Dickinson, 1985 (1997); Ardanaz (Dickinson, 1992 (2000); Oliván, 2001; Pujol, 2001; Villar Raso, 2002; and many more). There are several reasons for the fact that her poetry presents such extreme difficulties in translation. Some of them she shares with the general characteristics of poetry as a concentrated form of language where much is inferred and many ambiguities can appear. Dickinson's poems have many readings, and translators have highlighted different aspects of her poems: when reading Dickinson in several different translations we also read different poems. In order to interpret Dickinson it is not absolutely necessary to be aware of her socio-cultural background and personality. It is, however, highly advisable to be so, as many clues to interpretation are to be found in her personal circumstances. The prevailing image of Dickinson, at least in Spain, has for long been that of a romantic spinster who wrote little ditties about the flowers in her garden, and then turned into a slightly odd little old lady due to deceptions in sundry love-affairs. Most of the websites on Dickinson now acknowledge the results of recent research, even if most recent findings with regard to her possible mental illness and her relationship to her sister-in-law Susan are carefully obviated (see <http://www.epdlp.com/Dickinson.html>).

TRIVIALIZATION

Examples of trivialization abound in Dickinson's translators. The examples presented here have been taken from one of the most ambitious selections and translations of Emily Dickinson in the Spanish language. Margarita Ardanaz presented the first edition of her impressive effort in 1992, and due to the success achieved, a second edition came out in 2000. Ardanaz wrote an introduction to her own translations, and indicates very clearly what her guidelines have been: not to explain the text, not to improve the poem (a statement that could have been obviated), not to try to make the language more poetic (*embellecer* (beautify)), and then she says:

Hemos procurado, siempre que ha sido posible, mantener el ritmo del verso en castellano, pero siendo siempre más fieles a su palabra que a ninguna otra consideración. (We have tried, whenever possible, to maintain the rhythm of the poem in Spanish, but more than anything else we have tried to stay faithful to its words.) (Ardanaz's foreword in Dickinson 1992: 43; my translation).

Ardanaz goes on to say:

El concepto de la traducción correcta bordea, con frecuencia, los límites de la incorrección gramatical y se aproxima, a veces, en su vano intento de trasladar todo lo trasladable [...] a un nuevo tipo de entendimiento y de creación... (The concept of correct translation frequently borders on the limits of incorrect grammar and sometimes comes close, in its vain attempts at transferring what is not transferable [...] to a new kind of understanding and creation [...]) (Ardanaz's foreword in Dickinson 1992: 43; my translation).

Ardanaz states in her foreword that she aims at preserving the rhythm of the original, and in personal communications she has repeatedly stressed the importance of prosody in poetry translation. However, a simple scansion of source and target texts shows that this is not the case.

As for “staying faithful to its words” we might ask ourselves what Ardanaz means by this. She certainly follows the original very closely, preserving syntactic structures and lexical meaning. She imitates the original to the point of sacrificing what Toury (1995) calls “appropriateness” in the target language. If a translation violates target language syntax, and demands a greater effort from the reader, there must be a relevant reason for it, such as an attempt to imitate metre, or to preserve internal rhymes or end rhymes.

Compared to earlier versions of Emily Dickinson’s poems, Ardanaz’s translations are gratifyingly howler-free. She possesses a proficiency in the English language which makes her steer clear of language-based mistakes. However, she now and then produces paraphrases that are more difficult to understand than the original. Her translations therefore often fall into the category of trivialization by over-explication. An example of this is “She bore it till the simple veins...”, below in the original and translated by Marià Manent and Margarita Ardanaz.

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She bore it till the simple veins

Traced azure on her hand—

till pleading, round her quiet eyes
The purple Crayons stand.

The Daffodils had come and gone
I cannot tell the sum
And then she ceased to bear it—
And with the Saints sat down.

No more her patient figure

At twilight soft to meet—
No more her timid bonnet
Upon the village street

But Crowns instead, and Courtiers

And in the midst so fair
Whose but her shy-immortal face
Of whom we're whispering here?

(Dickinson, 1992: 86-87)

Llevó aquel sombrerito hasta que las sencillas

Venas se dibujaron, azules en su mano;
Hasta que, suplicantes, en torno de los ojos

Tranquilos le dejó la púrpura sus trazos;

Hasta que los narcisos llegaron y se fueron
yo no sé cuántas veces; y dejando de llevarlo ya, entonces
se sentó con los santos.

Su paciente figura en el crepúsculo
Nunca ha de sernos delicado encuentro;
y nunca más el sombrerito tímido
por la calle del pueblo;

coronas, cortesanos, en cambio, allí veremos,

y en medio, tan hermosa, ¿de quién es esa cara
esquiva y ya inmortal, sino de quien ahora
hablamos en voz baja?

(Dickinson, 1979: 48-49: translation by Marià Manent)

Lo llevó hasta que las sencillas venas

Trazaron el azul sobre su mano—
Hasta que, suplicantes, en torno a sus callados ojos
Los Lápices de púrpura se alzaron.

Hasta que los narcisos, llegaron y se fueron
 No sé decir las veces,
 Y dejó luego de llevarlo—
 Y se sentó junto a los Santos.

Ya nunca más su paciente figura
 Delicada encontrar en el crepúsculo
 Ya nunca más su tímido gorrito
 En la calle del pueblo—

En su lugar, Acompañantes y Coronas

Y en medio, tan hermosa,

¿De Quién sino de ella tímida- inmortal cara
 De quien hablamos en voz baja ahora?
 (Dickinson, 1992: 86-87, translation by Margarita Ardanaz)

The first line of the third stanza has, in the source text a deviating word-order because “meet” has to rhyme with “street”. In the target text there is no need for deviation.

No more her patient figure/at twilight soft to meet
Ya nunca más su paciente figura /Delicada encontrar en el crepúsculo
 Never more her patient figure / Delicate find in the dusk

The third line in the fourth stanza is an example of a ‘resistant’, ‘restive’ or ‘foreignizing’ translation method (Venuti, 1992: 100). Here, the slightly deviating syntax in the ST might justify a *certain* deviation in the TT. Ardanaz’s version, however, demands a far greater attention on the part of the reader as it exhibits a syntactic construction that is impossible in Spanish.

Whose but her shy-immortal face...
 ¿De Quién sino de ella tímida -inmortal cara...?
 Of Whom if not of hers timid-immortal face?.

LEXICAL MISTRANSLATIONS AND NONSENSE

The same poem, translated by Manent, is an example of paraphrase in the nonsense category. I would say that Manent follows the original very closely in his paraphrasing, but that in spite of this—or, I would say, precisely because of this—the TT reader is incapable of making sense of the poem due to a lexical mistranslation in the very first line. Manent confuses the verb “bear” with “wear”, and produces a strange poem about the inconvenience of wearing bonnets. Ardanaz opts for ambiguity, as *lo llevó* can mean both “she endured it” and “she wore it”, even if a Spanish speaker’s first option is the latter. In the original, “her timid bonnet was no more seen on the street” does not mean that the poem is about the inconvenience of wearing a certain kind of headgear. Manent proposes the following line of inference: *llevó aquel sombrero... y dejando de llevarlo ... nunca más el sombrero tímido* she wore that little hat ... and not wearing it any more ... never more the timid little hat, which implies that the bonnet (Manent’s “sombrero” [little hat]) is the cause of suffering. When the bonnet is taken off, suffering ends, and we see only a face where there was, previously, a face and a bonnet. This face is surrounded by *cortesanos*, who are the members of a royal court. The cause-effect relationship in the original is the opposite, as Dickinson uses the rhetorical figure of metonymy: the person wearing a bonnet is alive and when the bonnet is not to be seen anymore, she is dead.

Marià Manent has a reputation for being an excellent translator, mainly of English poetry into Catalan and Spanish. Pascual Garrido (1999: 169) praises his responsible and respectful attitude. It seems that, in poetry translation, the idea of following the original slavishly word for word, irrespective of the outcome in the target language, is equated with respect for the source. In any type of discourse, poetic or otherwise, to focus on words in isolation for any other purpose than that of morphological analysis brings very few rewards. It is the combination of lexical and syntactic elements that gives an utterance its (basic) meaning. When analysing discourse, this is taken more or less for granted. Why, then, do we still find translators who believe in equivalence on word level? In the poems analysed, it is sometimes painfully evident that the translators have been staring themselves blind at a certain word and forgotten about the fact that it fills a certain slot for reasons of rhythm, rhyme or, for example, because of the need for a parallel syntactic structure in the trope called epizeuxis.

An example from Silvina Ocampo's translation of the poem "I felt a funeral, in my brain" will illustrate this. The selection of the word **numb** in the line "my mind was going numb" is justified —apart from semantic reasons—by the fact that it rhymes with **drum**. Ocampo translates *mi mente se volvía muda* in a clear attempt at repetition of the consonant m, but *muda* means "speechless" and Ocampo makes one of her frequent language mistakes. In this instance, the result is quite acceptable, and one howler per poem is not too detrimental for interpretation. However, as Fiona Mackintosh has shown (Mackintosh, forthcoming), when howlers come in series, they add significantly to the impossibility of making sense of a poem. Ocampo excels in this kind of lexical mistranslations, as in "Like Eyes that looked on Wastes", where the choice of *basuras* (trash) for "wastes", *quieta soledad* (quiet solitude) for "wilderness", *miseria* (poverty) for "misery" and *se absolvería* (this verb is not used reflexively in Spanish) produce a poem that is practically impossible to understand. I add my own tentative version.

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Like Eyes that looked on Wastes—
 Incredulous of Oght
 But Blank — and steady Wilderness—
 Diversified by Night—

Just Infinites of Nought—
 As far as it could see—
 So looked the face I looked upon—
 So looked itself —on Me.

I offered it no Help—

Because the Cause was Mine—
 The Misery as Compact

As hopeless — as divine—

Neither — would be absolved—
 Neither would be a Queen
 Without the Other — Therefore—
 We perish — tho' We reign

Dickinson (1975)

Como ojos que miran las **basuras**—
Incrédulos de todo—
Salvo del vacío—y **quieta soledad**—
Diversificada por la noche

Sólo **infinitos de la nada**—
tan lejos como podía ver—
así era la cara que yo miré—
así miró ella misma—a la mía—

no le ofrecí ninguna ayuda—
porque la causa era mía—

la **miseria densa** tan compacta
tan desesperanzada—como divina

ninguna—**se absolvería**

ninguna sería una reina
sin la otra—de modo que—
aunque reinemos—pereceremos

Dickinson (1997: 118) translated by Silvina Ocampo

Como ojos que miran los desiertos—
Y no se creen Nada
Sino el Vacío — y la Espesura—
Que varían cada Noche —

Infinitas Nadas—
Hasta donde abarcaba—
Así era la cara que contemplaba —
Así la cara me — miraba.

No ofrecí ayuda—

Por ser la Causa Mía—

La Tristeza tan Compacta

Tan sin esperanza como divina—

Ninguna de las dos tendría absolución—

ninguna reinaría—

Sin la otra —por eso

Morimos—aunque reinamos—

Dahlgren (2002) (unpublished)

What this poem describes is the despair produced by introspection: the narrator looks into her own soul and finds nothing there. This is a disquieting poem, but the original is perfectly comprehensible. Ocampo's version is extremely difficult to understand.

In "A Dying Tiger", Ocampo gives a stranger image still of Emily Dickinson's poetic persona.

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A Dying Tiger —moaned for Drink—

I hunted all the Sand—

I caught the Dripping of a Rock

And bore it in my Hand—

His mighty Balls—in death were thick—

But searching—I could see

A vision on the Retina

Of Water—and of me—

ˆTwas not my blame—who sped too slow—

ˆTwas not his blame—who died

While I was reaching him—

But ˆtwas —the fact that He was dead—

Dickinson (1975)

Un moribundo tigre—lloraba por beber—

Yo busqué por toda la arena—

Y conseguí el agua de una roca

La llevé en mi mano—

sus tremendos testículos—enhiestos en la muerte

pero buscando—yo podía ver

una visión en la retina

de agua—y de mí

no fue mi culpa—si acudí despacio—

no fue su culpa—si murió

cuando lo estaba alcanzando—

pero era—el hecho de que estuviera muerto—

Dickinson (1997) translated by Silvina Ocampo

Tiger balls, indeed! The very presence of the word “retina” in the third line in the second stanza should have alerted the translator to the fact that the original “balls” are eye-balls, which would have avoided the surreal idea of the narrating persona focusing on the genitals of the dying tiger. A dictionary along historical principles would also have helped the translator to avoid this breach of register, and to the fact that “balls” was not used in the Spanish sense of *cojones/pelotas* (never *testículos*) until D.H. Lawrence published the then offensive *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in the 1920’s. To imagine that Emily Dickinson might have used it in this sense defies logic.

This poem, according to Vivian Pollak (1996: 73) is “a brilliant vision of the frustration of generous nurturing impulses in a dreamlike setting charged with anxious sexuality” where the tiger is a threatening masculine symbol. This interpretation of the poem should, however, not be taken as a license for translators to shock their readers by augmenting sexual innuendo or, even worse, being explicit where the original simply presents hints. No excuse exists for making a comprehensible poem incomprehensible. Dickinson, when read with attention and background knowledge, always makes sense.

Villar Raso’s (2001) version of “A Dying Tiger moaned for Drink” is more surreal still: the narrator hunts the sand for water, and finds a rock, which (s)he takes to the poor animal, which, in view of this, quite

logically bites the dust. The verb-form *podía* can take “I” or “he/she/it” as a subject and in case of doubt, the closest subject is presupposed. This would mean that the tiger, already dead, can see “a vision of water and of me”, supposedly in “my” eyes. This, to put it mildly, hampers interpretation. Silvina Ocampo (see above) solved this problem introducing the personal pronoun, habitually left out in Spanish, but vital in this context. At least, in this version, when looking for the expected water, the tiger uses his eyeballs, not the other ones.

Un Tigre Moribundo—gemía de Sed—
 [A Dying Tiger—moaned from Thirst]
 Rebusqué por toda la Arena—
 [I searched all over the Sand—]
 Descubrí una roca que Goteaba
 [I discovered a rock that Dripped]
 Y la llevé en mi Mano—
 [and brought it in my Hand—]

Sus Poderosos Ojos—ensanchados por la muerte—
 [His powerful eyes—widened by death—]
 Seguían buscando— podía ver
 [Went on looking—he could see]
 Una Visión en la Retina
 [a vision in the Retina]
 De Agua—y de mí
 [of Water —and of me]

No fue culpa mía —si acudí despacio—
 No fue culpa suya—que se muriera
 Mientras lo alcanzaba—
 Pero el hecho fue—que estaba muerto—
 [this stanza is a word-for-word translation]
 (Villar Raso, 2001: 245)

Point of view and nonsense

An extremely common source of misunderstanding of Dickinson’s poems stems from the altering of the point of view. This is particularly jarring in the translation of Dickinson’s adagios, or mini-poems, presented

by Lorenzo Oliván (2001), Pujol (2001) and Villar Raso (2001). The more concentrated the “poetic essence”, the harder it becomes to retain it in translation. An example is the following:

730

Defrauded I a Butterfly—
The lawful Heir—for Thee—

It is possible to paraphrase this short poem as “I defrauded a Butterfly/Did I defraud a Butterfly? /What if I defrauded a Butterfly?—

My/our lawful heir —and gave it [the legacy] to you/ because of you”.

This poem is rendered by Pujol (2001: 136) as:

Sé que desposeí a una mariposa
de su herencia legítima. Por ti.
[I know that I dispossessed a butterfly
of her legitimate legacy. For you.]

Rhythm and rhyme play a vital role in the original, as does the wavering between assertion and question. Pujol’s translation is prosaic, and the introduction of *sé que...* [I know that...] adds an element of certainty that is absent in the original. However, as can be seen in the back-translation, the overall meaning has not been substantially altered. Villar Raso (2001: 307) translated:

Defraudé a una Mariposa—
Tu—legítima Heredera—
[I defrauded a butterfly
your—legitimate heir]

In the original there is a narrator in the first person (I), and there are two other ‘persons’ mentioned: the butterfly, present in many of Dickinson’s poems, and a human being (you) that is directly addressed. The butterfly is to inherit the narrator but another ‘person’ appears on the scene, and the legacy is bestowed on her/him. In Villar Raso’s version, and due to the absence of the accent marking the second person pronoun *tú* [you], the butterfly becomes the addressee’s heir: *tu legítima heredera* [your lawful heir]. This brings about a total change in point of view. It

makes this poem, which is already concentrated enough, exceedingly difficult to interpret, to a point where the reader gives up, as the translation does not furnish sufficient information to make sense of the poem. I grant that Dickinson's poems can be cryptic to the extreme, and that certain context-less poems present close to insurmountable difficulties in translation. In such cases the translator will have to take the trouble to do a little research on Dickinson's imagery.

My own proposal for a translation would be:

La mariposa era—mi heredera—
 La destituí—por ti—
 [The butterfly was—my heir
 I substituted you—for her]

In this translation my main aim is to maintain the internal rhymes "I-butterfly", without sacrificing the main elements that integrate the meaning, even if the possibility of interpreting the enunciation as a question is not preserved.

In Dickinson's poem 303, another complete reversal in point of view takes place:

The Soul selects her own Society—
 Then—shuts the Door—
 To her divine Majority—
 Present no more—

This poem, in Villar Raso's translation becomes:

El Alma elige su propia Compañía—
 [The Soul chooses her own company]
 Luego—cierra la Puerta—
 [Then—closes the Door]
 A su divina Mayoría—
 [to its divine Majority]
 Que ya no está presente—
 [which is not present any more]
 (Villar Raso, 2001: 143)

Whereas in Dickinson it is the soul that shuts the door and is “present no more”, in the translation it is the “divine Majority” that is shut out and ya no está presente [is not present any more].

Villar Raso’s changes of point of view might ultimately have been caused by lack of proficiency in the English language, as his frequent howlers bear witness to (see for example his translation of “A Dying Tiger moaned for Drink”). Both these poem are descriptive and also structurally and grammatically very straightforward, and, if translated with a certain common sense, readily furnish the clues for interpretation present in the original.

ELLIPSIS AND EXPLICATION

Ellipsis is, in fact, an element that is so common in poetry that it can hardly be considered deviant. When comparing English and Spanish poetry, we will find that the use of ellipsis in poetry follows similar patterns, from which we could draw the conclusion that no translation problems are likely to appear. Difficulties might appear on the level of interpretation, and are related to reference. To illustrate this point, any of Dickinson’s poems that contain ellipsis can be used for comparison with the corresponding translation. The famous “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers”, here in versions by Ocampo, Manent and Ardanaz, is an interesting example:

Original (version of 1861)
Ocampo (1859+1861)
Manent (1859+1861)
Ardanaz (1859 only)
Safe in their Alabaster Chambers
Untouched by Morning
And untouched by Noon
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection
Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone!

Protegidos en sus moradas de alabastro
[Protected in their dwellings of alabaster]
no visitados por la mañana
[not visited in the morning/by the morning]

no visitados por la noche
 [not visited at night/by the night]
 yacen los apacibles miembros de la resurrección -
 [lie the tranquil members of the resurrection]
 paredes de raso,
 [walls of satin]
 techos de piedra
 [ceilings of stone]
 Seguros, en estancias de alabastro
 [Safe, in rooms of alabaster]
 sin que les llegue el alba ni el día, mansos duermen
 [without the arrival of dawn nor of day, meek sleep]
 los cuerpos, esperando resucitar; las vigas
 [the bodies, expecting resurrection, the beams]
 son de satén, y de piedra es el techo.
 [are of satin, and of stone is the ceiling]
 A salvo en sus Alabastrinos Aposentos –
 [Saved in their alabastrine chambers]
 De la Mañana intactos
 [of the morning intact]
 Del Mediodía intactos –
 [of noon intact]
 Duermen los mansos miembros de la resurrección –
 [Sleep the meek members of the resurrection]
 Costanera de raso,
 [Rafters of satin]
 Techo de piedra.
 [ceiling of stone]
 Grand go the Years – in the Crescent –Above them –
 Worlds scoop their Arcs –
 And Firmaments – row –
 Diadems – drop – and Doges – surrender –
 Soundless as dots – on a Disc of Snow -

Espléndidos pasan los años -el creciente - allá arriba –
 [Splendid pass the years—the crescent moon up there]
 mundos vacían sus arcas –
 [worlds empty their coffers]
 firmamentos – bogan –

[firmaments sail]
 diademas caen - jefes -se rinden-
 [diadems fall—
 bosses surrender]
 mudos como puntos –
 [speechless like dots] en un disco de nieve –
 [on a disc of snow]
 Sobre el alto creciente pomposos van los años;
 [On the high crescent of the moon pompous go the years]
 Tienden arcos los mundos y el cielo boga, leve:
 [The worlds extend arcs and the sky sails, lightly]
 las diademas se caen y se rinden los príncipes
 [the diadems fall and the princes surrender]
 sin rumor, como signos en un disco de nieve
 [without a rumour, like signs on a disc of snow]
 (no second stanza in the 1859 version)

Ocampo displays her habitual lexical mistranslations: no visitados [not visited] for untouched, the sloppy translation of morning and noon as mañana [morning] and noche [night]; pared [wall] for rafter, el creciente =cuarto creciente [first quarter (of the moon)] for crescent, and vaciar las arcas [empty the coffers] (sic!) for scoop their arcs.

Manent seems to have understood this poem better than usual, and perhaps this is the reason why he explains what the “meek members of the Resurrection” might refer to, and replaces the ellipsis in “rafter of satin — and roof of stone!” with the full sentence *las vigas son de satén y de piedra es el techo* [the beams are made of satin and of stone is the ceiling], including a subject/verb inversion in the second part. The original expression, albeit elliptical, leaves no doubt that the rafters and the roof are part of the “chambers”, that is, of the coffin, so no explanation is called for. The addition of the adjective *leve* [lightly] to modify *el cielo boga* [the sky sails/rows] can only obey the wish to create end-rhyme (*leve/nieve*), but at the cost of altering the original. Ardanaz has done her lexical homework as is habitual in her well-researched versions (*costanera* is, to be exact, the technical term for “rafter”, while *viga* is the “beam”), but she adds a difficulty where the original has none: “untouched by morning/untouched by noon” become

de la mañana intactos/ del mediodía intactos
 [of the morning intact/ of noon intact],

which is ungrammatical in Spanish.

It is easy to reconstruct the original as “untouched by the morning light /untouched by the light of noon”, the only problem being to decide whether it is the chambers or the members of Resurrection that are untouched by light. Ocampo and Manent have chosen to disambiguate, while Ardanaz maintains the doubt, using two masculine nouns (aposentos, miembros).

Another example of ellipsis occurs in “My life had stood — a Loaded Gun —“:

764
 My life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
 in Corners - till a Day
 the Owner passed -identified -
 and carried Me away -

The participle “identified” can be connected to four elements in the following fashion:

- the Owner passed and identified my life
- the Owner passed and identified the loaded gun (which was my life)
- the Owner passed and identified me
- an entity, which I identified as the Owner of my life, passed, and carried me away.

Manent does not translate this poem. Here I present Ocampo’s and Ardanaz’s version, followed by my own.

Mi vida fue siempre – un arma cargada -
 My life was always - a loaded weapon -
 en rincones - hasta que un día
 in corners - until one day

el dueño pasó – identificado -
 the owner passed – identified -

me llevó -
took me with him -]

Mi vida había permanecido – como un Arma Cargada
My life had remained – like a loaded weapon
En los Rincones – hasta el Día en que
in the corners – until the day on which
El Dueño pasó – se identificó
The Owner passed – identified himself
Y Me llevó muy lejos-
and took me very far away

Cual arma cargada mi vida
[Like a loaded weapon-my life-]
en Rincones siempre estuvo
[in corners-always was]

hasta que el Dueño reconocida
[until the Owner-recognised]
Pasó y Me llevó consigo-
[passed and took me with him]
Dickinson 1979 translated by Silvina Ocampo,
Dickinson, 1992: 235 translated by Margarita Ardanaz)
Dahlgren, 2002: 109

The system of noun/adjective agreement for gender in Spanish makes it impossible to connect *identificado* with any other head than *dueño* [the owner was identified by me]. Another, and more serious, problem arises due to the choice of verb in the first line: *rincones* become the place where the gun was loaded, not the place where the loaded gun stood. Ardanaz interprets “identified” as a truncated reflexive verb phrase, thereby proposing still another interpretation [the owner passed and identified himself], which has the drawback of eliminating all the other possibilities of interpretation. My own translation is an attempt at maintaining rhythm and end-rhyme. The choice of the rhyming pair *vida/reconocida* automatically produces a reference to a female narrating persona, to the “loaded weapon” (*arma cargada*) and to “my life” (*mi vida*).

CONCLUSION

An in-depth analysis of some of Emily Dickinson's translators shows that Manent and Ocampo (Dahlgren, 1998; 2000; 2005), both acknowledged poets, seem to follow the originals very closely. Both versions have received acclaim –Ocampo has been praised by Jorge Luis Borges (see Mackintosh, forthcoming) and Manent is generally considered as both a good poet and a faithful translator. However, many of their translations include howlers and the appraisal of their efforts shows the existence of a pervasive use of slightly deviating choices, producing the loss of the pragmatic meanings of the translated texts. Ocampo's translation of "Like eyes that looked on wastes" is an example of this gradual edging away from the core of the poem.

If the phonetic and phonological level has not been given prominence in the translation of a poem, the lexical and syntactic levels have to be treated with utmost care. If the original presents visual imagery, the lexicon tends to take on great importance. Visual imagery, comparisons and similes appear frequently in Dickinson and must be preserved to the greatest possible extent in translation. If phonetic imitation is not an issue, what remains to be analysed is appropriateness on the syntactical and lexical level. In many of the poems analysed here, the failures are on the pragmatic level. Syntactic complexity has been added to the poems, both where anything remotely strange appears in the original and where there is no complexity that warrants the use of deviant grammar in the translation. The narrating persona's point of view has been altered, sometimes to the degree of making interpretation impossible. All this increases reader effort to a level high above the cost/reward rate of the original.

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