

Dossier on Literary Translation

Is poetry untranslatable?

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BASED ON the vast experience I gained between 1980 and 2004 from translating into our language the complete poetry of T. S. Eliot, Baudelaire and Dylan Thomas, in addition to some poems by Shakespeare and Leopardi, I would like to begin this testimony with two questions I believe to be crucial: 1) What is, exactly, the art of translating?; 2) Would poetry be translatable? Before answering them, however, I should point out some considerations which, in a way, already involve some sort of answer. The terms “translate”, “translator” and “translation” originate from the Latin words *traducere* or *transducere*, or *traductio* and *traductor*, which had a different meaning but contained the fundamental idea of “to pass; to put in another place”. These same roots are found in French, Spanish and Italian. In Portuguese, besides the terms “translate”, “translation” and “translator”, we also find “*trasladar*”, “*trasladador*” and “*trasladação*”, as in the 1813 edition of the old Moraes Dictionary, with the same meaning and identical origin as the equivalent in English: *transfere*, *transfers*, and *transtuli* and *tranfere*. These words were introduced through the archaic French *translater* into that language, in which they meant “to conduct; to take through”, i.e., “to transfer”, which is still used today to designate the transfer of a bishop from his bishopric. And notice that *translator*, *translatoris* already existed in Latin with the meaning of “one who takes (sth) to another place.” Only in German the origin is not Latin, although the essential meaning is the same: the prefix *über* (“beyond, elsewhere”) + *setzen* (“to put; to place”). As can be seen, in all these cases the seminal meaning of “to transfer, to transport”, i.e., “to take from one point to another,” and from there “to pass from one language to another” is ultimately “to translate”. Let us now answer that first question: What is, exactly, the art of translating?

Aside from the skepticism of some and the good will of others, the first thing required of a translator of poetry is to be a poet, as only then he will be able to overcome the technical challenges specific to this literary genre, such as those related to rhythm, syntactic-verbal structure, metrical and rhyme schemes, metalogic language, the play on images and metaphors, and all the other elements that make up poetic rhetoric. This does not necessarily mean that translating poetry is more difficult than translating prose, which also has specifics and pitfalls of its own. I recall here the difficulty probably faced by the translators of Joyce or Guimarães Rosa, to name just these two. But there is another requirement, which is no less important: the dual command of the language into which the content will be translated as well as of the language in which the text to be translated is written. These are called target language and source

language respectively. Perhaps the capital mistake at this point is the belief that, in general, the fact that the translator masters his own national language is duly appreciated, although it is true that no one is granted the miraculous privilege of mastering a foreign language without first mastering his own. In fact, given the lexical and syntactic opportunities and confrontations it offers, translation becomes a remarkably effective vehicle for knowing one's national language. And here it would be worth recalling Goethe's statement about the subject: "*Wer nur seine Sprache kennt, kennt nichts. Eine Sprache ist ein neuer Geist*". Or: "He who knows but one language knows none. A language is a new spirit."

Another issue to be addressed in the translation of poetry lies in the fact that, when dealing with two languages, the translator is more prone than any other intellectual to being contaminated by and to contaminate the language into which he is translating. Although this contamination, or estrangement, can undoubtedly occur between the translator's own language and any other with which he may be dealing, these days the most challenging language is English, as it is the vehicle of universal expression due to several reasons, including the fact that from the cultural, literary, economic, scientific and technological standpoint it is the national language of very powerful peoples. In addition to their intrinsic and diffuse polysemy, English words of Latin origin are more misleading than all others, precisely because of their similarity to Portuguese words from the same source and which, in general, bear no identity of meaning between them. They are known as *faux amis*. But another large family of "false friends" has nothing to do with the Latin language: they are merely words that often mislead us for their falsely Portuguese morphological aspect.

An equally sensitive issue in the translation of poetry is literalness - not to be mistaken for what we usually define as isotopic translation. Assuming that there are not - and there cannot be - strictly literal translations, since not only the form but also, and especially, the content cannot be reduced to a literal transfer to another language, we conclude that every translation is a search for equivalences between what the *homo faber* has written in the original and what the *homo ludens* has retrieved in his translation, i.e., the one who offers us "another's" poetry. Strictly speaking, translation requires a more extensive and intensive effort than creation itself, especially in the case of poetry, in which besides all the specifics already mentioned, the translator is also faced with the challenge of interpreting the author's thought. Add to these the problems of poetic atmosphere, which needs to be recreated in another language, followed closely by the choice of vocabulary, as there are words that can elicit a poetic suggestion in a particular language but not in others in the case of literal translation. And the merit of any translation lies precisely in this recovery of equivalences. And one can even say that the greatest virtue of any kind of translation is to never give the impression that it is one.

There is another issue on which I would like to dwell here. It is the historic

role played by translation in certain literatures, particularly ours, since Brazilian readers are essentially monolingual. German literature, for example, would not be what it is without Voss' Homer or Schlegel's Shakespeare. The translations of Seneca and Lucan played a key role in the development of the English and Spanish poetic languages. And Chukovsky's translations from Greek, German and English are the foundation of modern Russian literature, which owes much also to Pasternak's translations of Shakespeare. In our days, poets of all nations have competed in translating Valéry's *Le cimetière marin*, and more than a few have translated, including in our country, the complete poetry of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Leopardi, Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Montale, Ungaretti, Quasimodo, Saint-John Perse and Cavafy, plus occasional or incomplete translations of several other poets of foreign language that today form the canon of Western literature. Among us, for example, we should not forget the monumental translations, during the 1940s and 1950s, of authors as crucial as Balzac, Proust, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, Joyce, Fielding, Somerset Maugham, Dickens and so many others. One could say that in the course of those two decades, the large volume of translations gave consistency to literary life and, beyond the receptivity with regard to Brazilian books, secured the consolidation of the publishing industry. Without these translations, as well as those that would follow, especially since the 1980s, Brazilian readers would never have access to the classics of Western literature.

And now we come to the second question proposed at the beginning of this lecture. Would poetry be translatable? According to Manuel Bandeira, in my opinion the greatest translator of poetry among us, the answer is no. But his answer involves an ironic contradiction, since Bandeira translated poetry virtually all his life, having translated into our language poets of many different languages. Poetry is untranslatable to the extent that, as pointed out by Dante Milano (2004), an exemplary translator of Dante Alighieri, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, "a poet's language cannot be transferred to another language; one can translate what he *meant* to say, but not what he actually *said*." It is clear that what he said in his language will get lost in translation to any other language, which would be consistent with a concept of the English poet Robert Frost, whereby poetry "is what gets lost in translation." And others like Voltaire, Heine, Auden and Cavafy would agree with him. Auden, for example, very clearly distinguishes between translatable and untranslatable elements in poetry. For him, translatable would be similes and metaphors, for these are derived, "not from verbal local habits, but from sensory experiences common to all men". And untranslatable would be, for being inseparable from their verbal expression, the associations of ideas established between words of similar sound but different meaning (homophones) and, in the case of lyric poems, their own meaning, when these are inextricably linked "to the sounds and rhythmic values of the words."



Manuel Bandeira (1886-1968).

While I agree with almost all of these considerations, and perhaps with others that may be arise, I cannot join those who proclaim the sacred untranslatability of poetic texts. I even think, alluding here to a paradox, that poetry is translatable precisely because it is not. And I believe that one can always translate, as put by Dante Milano, what a poet meant. And what does that mean? It means, in general terms, getting the poet to speak in the language to which he was translated, through a warp and weft of operations that favor verbal-syntactic correlations, that recover the music of the words and ideas of the translated author, and that ultimately convey the atmosphere and, more than that, the spirit of the work that was transferred to another language. The enemies of poetry translation should remember that, unlike a reader who gives himself to dreaming about the possible meaning of a word, the translator operates not at the orthonymic but rather at the synonymic level, seeking more the relative than the absolute sameness of the words, which is why his status is not that of a creator, but of a re-creator. And recreation - or trans-creation, as claimed by Haroldo de Campos - is the formula that the linguist Roman Jakobson uses to explain the paradox of poetic translation, characterizing it in terms of interlingual transposition, i.e., from one poetic form to another. It is this sense of sameness and semantic-phonological kinship that should govern the operation of poetry translation.

Poetry translation is also, in some respects, a useful exercise in parallel critique, as all the time that *homo ludens* who is the translator - or re-creator, as we have just said - is faced with the complex and prismatic problem of choice, a choice that takes place at the level of the signified and the signifier, which involves, as already said here, semantic, phonetic, morphological, syntactic, prosodic, rhythmic, metric, rhyme, and strophic options - finally, an ambiguous and infinite spectrum comprised by the so-called figures of speech. And all that is somewhat similar to what we might term poetic equation, which reminds us of the parallel between the translation of poetry and the solution of mathematical problems proposed by Wittgenstein. He says:

Translating from one language into another is a mathematical task, and the translation of a lyrical poem, for example, into a foreign language is quite analogous to a mathematical *problem*. For one may well frame the problem "How is this joke (e.g.) to be translated (i.e. replaced) by a joke in the other language?" and this problem can be solved; but there was no systematic method of solving it.

As noted by José Paulo Paes (1990), one of the most remarkable translators of poetry in our country, the "relevance of this simile to a theory of poetry tradition lies in that the concept of equation involves the complementary notions of equivalence and correlation of values". Thus, "when the poem is conceived as a verbal equation, one is pointing, I believe, to a correlation between the semantics of the signified and the semantics of the signifier, whose algebraic sum is equivalent to the global semantics of the entire poem."

In a society like ours, currently with a mere 12 percent of learned people, one must believe in the success of poetic translation, although aware that it is only a tangential operation, as knowledge of the classics by the general population, whose overwhelming majority knows only - and poorly - their own language, will depend on that success. Sometimes we need to resort to Coleridge's concept of 'suspension of disbelief', i.e., to abandon disbelief in the impossibility of poetry being blissfully translated. It is clear that certain experiences of poets who have written in other languages cannot be reproduced in the target language. The *Four Quartets* by T. S. Eliot, for example, are inspired by mystical experiences whose roots the poet believed he had discovered in ancestral memories of his English race. And experiences like those cannot be repeated in us, who belong to another language and another culture. They are strictly *inimitable*, and a man from another strain, other historical backgrounds and other personal experiences could not succeed in *manufacturing* them, neither for him nor for others. But it is here that the *homo ludens* we have referred to intervenes, and the *ludus* he practices is the free will element of poetry. *Ludens*, the poet, imposes his poetry on us; *ludens*, the translator, imposes another's poetry on us. And it is this 'another's', fraught with strangeness and equivalences,

that will allow us to relive in our language most of what someone *meant* to say to us in another.

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