

# Bruno Palma, a careful chooser of words

MARCUS FABIANO GONÇALVES

**B**RUNO PALMA studied in France from 1950 to 1956 and from 1972 to 1976. Still at an early age he was introduced at home to the reading of classical poetry. The son of a Portuguese immigrant living in São Paulo, at the age of 21 Palma converted to Catholicism and joined the Dominican Order. Before he was ordained priest in 1957 by Archbishop Dom Helder Câmara (with whom he worked for a few years), Palma had already studied philosophy and theology for six years at the convent of Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume. After holding several ecclesiastical positions in Brazil, Palma returned to France under the guidance of the Russian-Lithuanian linguist Algirdas Greimas, at the former *École Pratique de Hautes Etudes*, where he developed research on the translation of the meaning of liturgical gestures in different cultures. Dedicated to translating the work of Saint-John Perse since 1958, Palma won the Jabuti Award in 1980. His translations include, among others, *Marcas marinhas* (*Amers*), by Saint-John Perse, and *Duplo canto e outros poemas* (*Double Chant*), by François Cheng, both published in Brazil by Ateliê Editorial in bilingual editions.

**Marcus Fabiano Gonçalves** - *The idea of poetic tone, to Émilie Noulet, is related to the pitch of the song, something that transcends the mere understanding of the style and worldview of an author to be translated. What tone did you seek to create in Saint-John Perse and François Cheng in Portuguese?*

**Bruno Palma** - It was not me who “sought to create” the poetic tone in my translation of the poetic works of Saint-John Perse and François Cheng, as the poetic tone, according to Noulet Émilie (1971), is a unique and unmistakable trait of an author or a of poetic work. That tone was imposed on me when I immersed myself in those works. But for my translation to be faithful to it, I had to discover and take into account the syntactic, semantic and prosodic procedures used by the authors to give their works that very special tone.

So my translation of Saint-John Perse went through stages of understanding and maturing the deepest intentions of his work and the processes that were (also gradually) used by the poet to find or acquire HIS personal tone.

In fact, the poetic tone in Saint-John Perse is expressed differently in his various works. And to understand the end result of that path (I avoid the term *evolution*) – which, as we see, was admirably achieved in *Amers* - I had to “frequent” for years Perse’s entire poetry. Thus, when facing the translation of his

most complex work - which is the climax of all of them - *Amers* – I was already familiar with that poetic tone, which we could characterize by is hieratic, solemn, serious, authoritative and even grandiloquent aspect. And all of it, in *Amers*, is symphonically orchestrated as a great “oratorio”. Thus, this relationship between sound and meaning (which specifies poetry, according to Valéry) gains stupendous strength and requires from the translator a fine ear, so that nothing will be lost of this fascinating music of the verses – or versicles, rather – of Perse’s poetry in *Amers*.

François Cheng, in turn, is a different poetic universe and therefore a different poetic tone. I had, here too, to *cordially* frequent, for years, the poetry of this remarkable Sino-French poet, in order to be in keeping with his poetic tone which is characterized by restraint, minimalism, simplicity (while preserving the density of the poetic content), discreet musicality, with other rhythms and other instruments, which adds sound even to his silences.

**MFG** - *You devoted thirty years to the translation of Amers. Perse’s universe may seem highly erudite and even hermetic to those who are not willing to reach its sources. How did you search for them? And when did you decide to incorporate the rhymic and rhythmic elements to the translation?*

**BP** - *Perse’s poetic universe* seeks to embrace all the immense wealth of human life and life on Earth, in the world where the drama of existence unfolds. Roger Caillois (1972), in his famous book *Poétique de Saint-John Perse*, refers to Perse’s poetry as “encyclopedic”. I prefer, like Albert Henry, to call it “ecumenical,” that is, etymologically “universal”, as it encompasses the whole world and all human problems.

Therefore, the terms *erudite* and *hermetic* do not express all that the poet is and all that he wanted his work to be. And he is right to, whenever necessary, resort to *precise terms* to name exactly an element of *nature or an instrument* used in a craft, in a human activity. For Saint-John Perse these terms are objects of the regular and everyday knowledge of the people who are in direct contact with nature or dedicated to these activities and crafts. It is *to us*, who have a distant and indirect knowledge of them, that they may seem erudite and, because of that, give his poetry a “hermetic” aspect. Moreover, for Perse even these technical or scientific terms have poetic value. He quotes Novalis’ famous statement: “The more poetic, the more real.”

To your question - “Where did I search for the sources” or elements that helped me understand these “erudite” terms? - or to authentically interpret this poetry that seems “hermetic”?, my answer is, It was by reading the major works about it and resorting to their excellent translations in other languages.

To the other question - “When did you decide to incorporate the rhymic and rhythmic elements to the translation?”, I answer, If there was, as I said, any progress in my understanding of Saint-John Perse’s poetry since my first foray into it, since my first translation of one of his poems (which was *Pluies*), I

realized how much his phonic elements were essential for the transposition of that poetry into Portuguese. However, my first translational attempts had to be reconstructed, in order to ensure greater fidelity to what the poet calls his “internal metric” – which is unnoticeable and therefore requires closer attention - and to the rhythms created by all prosodic procedures that Perse uses to orchestrate his poems.

**MFG** – *François Cheng is a Christian Taoist, a poet whose high aesthetic wealth feeds on sources somewhat alien to Western tradition. How was your approach to Taoism and Sinology and how has that influenced the translation and preparation of the notes on Double Chant?*

**BP** – I would not call François Cheng simply a “Christian Taoist”, but a true Christian - a practicing Catholic -, who believes it is possible to maintain his worldview, into which the elements of the Taoist and Zen Buddhist cosmology are integrated. He has even said publicly that he has no reason to abandon these philosophical elements, which he believes to be compatible with his Christian faith.

I will answer your question in parts:

My process of approaching Taoism occurred through the reading of works on it and on the other elements of Chinese cosmology and thought. For this I relied on the fundamental works of Anne Cheng (*Histoire de la pensée chinoise*), Marcel Granet and François Cheng himself (his books on philosophical meditation and his poetry).

I believe, however, that my translation of François Cheng’s poetry was helped by my previous experience with the translation of Saint-John Perse. It may seem strange, since Perse is very different from Cheng. However, both are “poets of being”, as says François Cheng, and converge therefore in the essence: their way of seeing the world and relating to it.

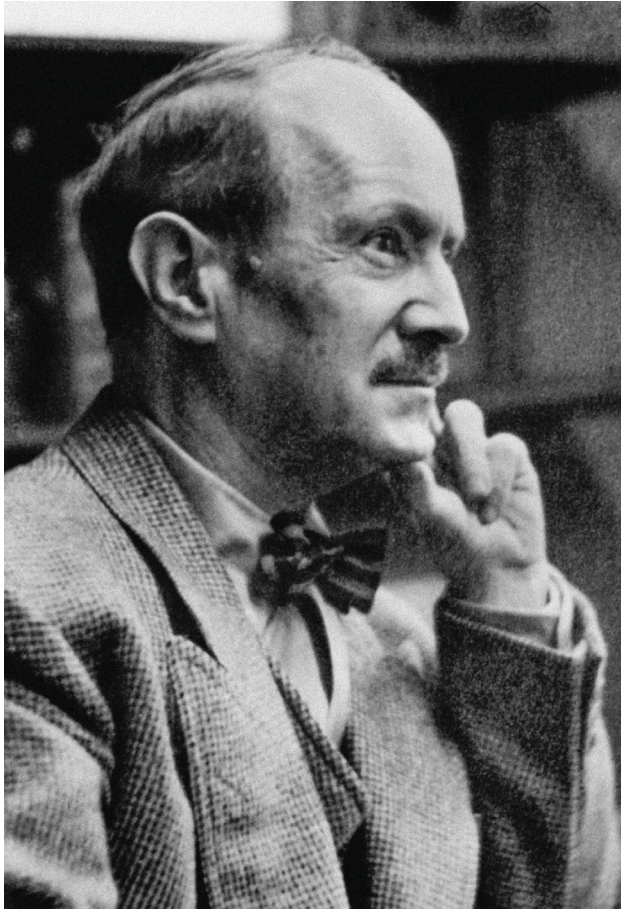
And back to the question, “How has the knowledge of Taoism, which marks the poetry of François Cheng, influenced process of translation and preparation of the notes on Double Chant? My answer is:

It was inevitable that this characteristic of François Cheng’s poetry - the remarkable presence of Taoist cosmology – would have influenced my translation process of this work, since a good translation requires taking as yours the way of thinking and expressing the world of the author whose work is being translated, in case that philosophy leaves traces in the way he develops his poetic work.

In the case of François Cheng I observed these traces in the way he structures his poems, noticing in their construction the desire to embody certain concepts of Taoist cosmology, such as *fan* (return), a fundamental concept of Taoism. And I even drew some graphs of that materialization or embodiment of this and other concepts of Taoist cosmology. These graphs are essays of that in-depth reading of François Cheng’s poems, in which the poet seeks to do, in

the phonetic writing of the French language, what the Chinese poets do using ideograms: multidimensionality, which allows the poem to be read in different directions, thus increasing its poetic density. However, in his French poems François Cheng achieves a similar effect through other procedures – use of syntactic, semantic and prosodic elements – getting the meaning to circulate through dynamic “reading paths” that intertwine and enrich one another.

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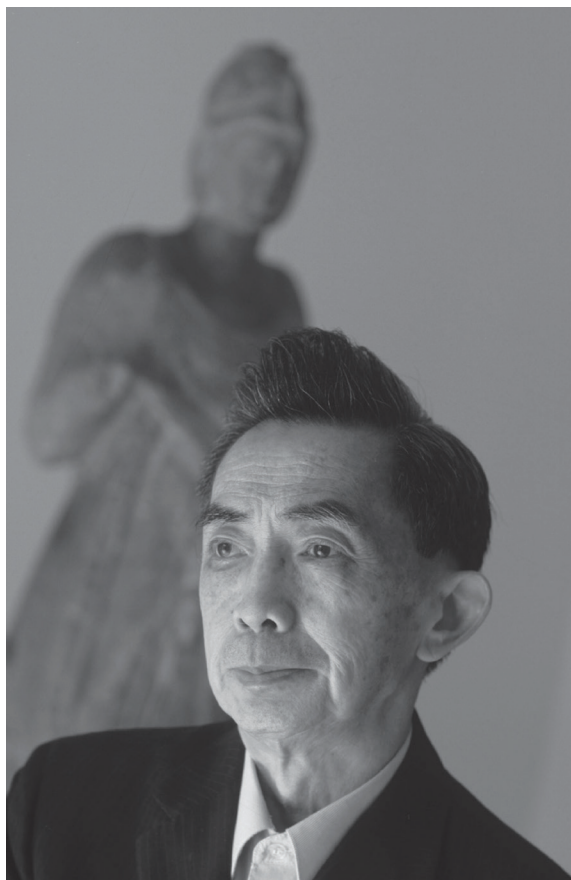


*Saint-John Perse (1887-1975).*

**MFG** – *Friar Bruno Palma, in your interviews about the translational craft I have noticed that you successively use some analogies to express this activity of passing from one language to another: a) the one about disassembling and reassembling a toy; b) the one about the work of a cook in preparing a dish; c) and the one about the transposition of a musical score written for one instrument to another instrument. Which one do you believe to be more appropriate today?*

**BP** – I would say the third one. The first comparison is imperfect, since it is not about finding, in reassembling a toy, the exact same parts, since in the passage from one language to another the “toy parts” change shape and color and the result is, as put by Per Johns, “another original.” The second is also lame because what makes a good dish is not exactly a good recipe, but the skill of the

cook, which is commonly called “a good hand”. And of course, that can also be learned, but in the hands of another cook the dish will be different. However, to render a good poetry translation there is no recipe or formula – which corresponds to the act of assembling an artifact – that can help.



*François Cheng.*

The third - the transposition to another instrument of a musical score written for a particular instrument - is undoubtedly the most suitable. I mentioned once Bach's transposition to the organ or harpsichord of concertos that Vivaldi had composed for the violin. This activity is more in keeping with that of the translator, as this transposition requires from the composer an adaptation to the instrument (to the musical form which, in literature, is the field of syntax and prosody) and to the musical language (content: in literature, the field of semantics). Of course, one cannot separate form and content, since, as noted by Octavio Paz (1956, p.70), *rhythm* in a poem is by itself meaningful. And the translator, insists Henri Meschonnic, does not translate the word, but the *discourse* - where all these fields meet and interact.

**MFG** – *Friar Bruno, if the translator does not translate the words but rather the discourse of an author, what is their importance in this transposition from one language to another? Tell us a little of this crucial problem in translation, that of*

fidelity to the original vis-à-vis the choice of words in the translation to the target language.

**BP** – You cannot limit fidelity to the original to attention to the words that shape the discourse. If they are the matter of which it is made, then they are not mere interchangeable contents. In other words, translation is not just a question of good dictionaries. In each culture – and I would agree with Meschonnic, in each time – words acquire other meanings. And it is poetry that explores this polysemic richness of each word and what it is as music. Moreover, its value depends on the context in which it is contained, in the sentence and in the entire body of the text that one wishes to transpose. And I would add: in that poem, in that work, by that poet ...

When talking about fidelity we need to take into account its homologous match in the target language. Therefore, to obtain a good result it is more important to be well acquainted with the language into which one is translating. And EVERYTHING is important to ensure fidelity to the original: even a simple phoneme or a mere sign, a hiatus, a silence. However, this does not imply *servility*, since in the “trip” from one language to another something is lost, but something is also gained. In the transposition of Vivaldi’s concertos for the violin, by submitting to the instruments to which he transposed the score, Bach won and lost something. A good translator is one who loses as little as possible.

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The interview was granted in writing by Friar Bruno Palma, translator of the works *Amers*, by Saint-John Perse, and *Double Chant*, by François Cheng, both published in Brazil by Atelier in bilingual editions.

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