

Translating Nerval

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IN 1990 I translated the twenty sonnets that make up the complete series of Nerval's *Les Chimères*, that is, the twelve sonnets of the same name, together with the other eight comprising the *Autres chimères*, a set of a clear unity, a whole to be maintained.

The translation stemmed from an invitation from my friend Marco Lucchesi, who wanted to publish a bilingual edition through Numen, a publishing house from Rio de Janeiro. To my surprise, the translation flowed very quickly, and the twenty sonnets were translated into our language between March 12th and 16th of that year. In addition to the first 1990 edition, the translation had a Portuguese edition in 1995, published by Hiena, from Lisbon, and a second Brazilian edition published by Topbooks, from Rio de Janeiro, in 1996 – a testament to the good reception of the work. Still this year the series will reappear in my book *Cinco séculos de poesia: poemas traduzidos*, to be published by Record.

With respect to my personal interest in Gérard de Nerval, and especially in *Les chimères*, I believe that the best possible illustration is found in the following excerpt from the preface to the book:

The first Nerval to be known was the translator of Goethe. The second was the kind of poet of “*Odelettes*”, the author of German *lieder* in French, the delicate lyric writer of *Petits châteaux de Bohème*. The third, and the largest and definitive, is the visionary, the real and not just literary madman, the creator of mythologies, of Aurelia and “The Chimeras”. As with the Hölderlin of the last phase, the price for crossing the gateway to the invisible world was madness, as with William Blake or Swedenborg, except for the fact that the insane might be us. In none of these cases we had yet reached the rational and pre-surrealist decision to become a “clairvoyant” as did Rimbaud through a theorized and pursued general derangement of all the senses.

We thus fall into the controversial relationship between genius and madness. Few poetic works in all French literature have given rise to such vast bibliography like these two dozen sonnets, actually less than that, if we consider those that are, virtually, strangely exchanged variations and parts of others. In a vain attempt to find a definitive interpretation, all doctrines and schools of thought were called in, from Alchemy to Psychoanalysis, from Cabbala to Orphism, from Theosophy to Numerology, without a totally convincing result ever being reached. In fact, the pan-religiosity of “The Chimeras”, its anti-orthodoxy in relation to any system are the infallible indications of the failure of any attempt to absolute interpretation. For more than the assertion of the existence of a given hidden truth, this highly original poetry is the hidden truth itself, which materializes but does not reveal itself. Through it we enter

a world of sensitivity that is unknown to us. After it, even though we know that we have been there, it remains unknown. This is a miracle typical of art, the possibility of penetrating the mystery without unveiling it, as that would mean destroying it. And how not to realize that the great intrinsic meaning of the mystery is its own permanence, such as it is, on the potential verge of an unveiling, which is its most authentic predicate.

A gentle and discreet figure from the great moment of Romanticism, biographically tending to a state of *reverie* very common even in rather secondary individualities from that period, Nerval little by little – nurtured by all personal frustrations and unfulfilled dreams that accompany any man, in addition to a continued reading of all the great initiation texts – opened the gap in the great wall of concrete and indivisible reality, through which, in the last years of his life, he would conceive the strange climax of his work. In “The Chimeras”, more than the aestheticization of any doctrine, we find a pure and untouched yearning for the sacred, indiscriminately fueled by all its external manifestations, including the antagonistic ones. An identical yearning for the sacred is what we find, for example, in Ângelo de Lima’s beautiful and hieratic Egyptian poems published in the first issue of *Orfeu*, in 1915.

Nerval, nourished for long by occultist, gnostic, Pythagorean and Cabalistic readings, besides the romantic atmosphere conducive to all fantasies, experienced personally the dive into the forest of archetypal analogies, of delusional symbols. Years later, in a similar experience Strindberg would wander the same streets of Paris seeking, in the smallest incidents, a sigh escaped from the true occult order of the world, the authentic face of the tapestry of which we see only the back, and which is the true origin and determination of everything that happens to us.

Entering like an archaeologist in the amphitheater of the dead sciences, driven there by his love, biographical frustrations or other more obscure and deeper needs, Nerval finds himself in the midst of the ruins of all religions, destroyed temples, overthrown statues, mutilated inscriptions, strange sacred architectures of unknown or even irreconcilable cults, which, however, intertwine in the deafening and dark thunder of his concomitant falls, before the alleged invasion of the reason of a century of enlightenment.

On that ground covered with humanity there are Christian symbols clothing Egyptian gods, sacred Greek trees growing on foundations of Babylonian zigurats, strings of Orphic lyres wound around the rosaries of peninsular saints, and the eternal night of the soul, as a single indescribable cathedral growing on everything.

He then, already the creator of hallucinated genealogies, a descendent of Persians and Crusaders, of Napoleonic and Norman lineages, like a great enlightened, one who in his life really went through the experience of spiritual projection, the vision that this whole universe is but one side of the coin, penetrates there, like a new architect, to reconstruct in two dozen sonnets, in two dozen “Chimeras”, his Orphic-Celtic-Egyptian-Pythagorean-Cabalistic-Christian temple, where he, with the mythologically noble blood that runs in his veins, is the neophyte and the master, the executioner and the victim, the priest and the occult idol.

There are fairies and queens, dead dragons and vengeful gods, saints and impenetrable caves, of which only one mind has the vision and the secret. And from this confusion of all archetypes, this frantic race of all analogies, this sacred compensation of all the limitations of our miserable life, this series of Gustave Moreau's paintings, painted with words before Moreau painted them, we see emerging, for the first time and clearer than ever, Symbolism, the source of all modern poetry, and Surrealism, which has always somehow impregnated the entire literature that succeeded it. This is the priest and these are his altars. This is Nerval and "The Chimeras".

In this endeavor I followed the path that I have always pursued in the translation of poetry, i.e., to maintain the strictest form of the original, in both metrically and rhyimically, when appropriate, and rhythmically, in all of them, the same position on the subject, to use the most prestigious of all examples from Fernando Pessoa. As I stated earlier, the translation was very easy, perhaps because of the close similarity between the languages. In the various poems that I translated, mostly from English, French, Italian and Spanish - this much less than the others, since its close proximity to Portuguese often gives me the impression of the little usefulness of the translations - this level of fluency, of greater or lesser ease, has always varied considerably. In English, for example, my translation of Longfellow's poem "*Excelsior*" flowed with astounding ease, resulting in a very beautiful romantic poem in Portuguese, like its original. The translation of Tennyson's "*The Charge of the Light Brigade*," in turn, seems to have been the hardest of the many translations I have rendered to date, among other reasons because it is a poem in short verses, and in a language with words commonly shorter than ours, a language of strong monosyllabic tendency like English.

When I undertook to translate Nerval's twelve sonnets, initially I made a decision that seemed right to me, i.e., to translate them in twelve-syllable verses, but not necessarily in Alexandrines like the original. Twelve-syllable verses with the accent on the sixth and obviously twelfth syllables seemed closer to the nature of our language than Alexandrines, whose obligation to hemistich could hinder the recovery of other much more important values of the poems. An Alexandrine verse, in fact, has always been artificially transplanted into Portuguese, and is more natural, however, in a language with a lexicon of strong oxytone tendency like French.

Obviously, in many cases the twelve-syllable verses were also Alexandrine, but never intentionally. As an example I reproduce the first, and probably the most famous sonnet of the series, in both the original and its respective Portuguese translation (12/03/1990):

EL DESDICHADO ^{TN1}

*Je suis le Ténébreux, _ le Veuf, _ l'inconsolé,
Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie :
Ma seule étoile est morte, _ et mon luth constellé
Porte le soleil noir de la Mélancolie.*

*Dans la nuit du tombeau, toi qui m'as consolé,
Rends-moi le Pausilippe et la mer d'Italie,
La fleur qui plaisait tant à mon cœur désolé
et la treille où le pampre à la rose s'allie.*

*Suis-je Amour ou Phébus?... Lusignan ou Biron?
Mon front est rouge encor du baiser de la reine ;
J'ai rêvé dans la grotte où nage la sirène...*

*et j'ai deux fois vainqueur traversé l'Achéron :
Modulant tour à tour sur la lyre d'Orphée
Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la fée.*

EL DESDICHADO

*Eu sou o Tenebroso, _ o Viúvo, _ o Inconsolado,
O Senhor de Aquitânia à Torre da Abulia:
Meu único Astro é morto, e o meu alaúde iriado
Irradia o Sol negro da Melancolia.*

*Na noite Sepulcral, Tu que me háas consolado,
O Posílipo e o mar Itálico me envia,
A flor que tanto amava o meu ser desolado,
E a treliça onde a Vinha à Roseira se alia.*

*Sou Biron, Lusignan?... Febo ou Amor? Na fronte
Ainda o beijo da Rainha rubro me incendeia;
Eu sonhei na caverna onde nada a Sereia...*

E duas vezes cruzei vencedor o Aqueronte:

^{TN1} For the English version of the poem, see the “Notes” section.

*Modulando na cítara a Orfeu consagrada
Os suspiros da santa e os arquejos da Fada.*

Photo by France Press



Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855).

As we can see, nine of the fourteen verses are Alexandrine, simply because that was how they came out in the translation, and three of them, verses 4, 10 and 13, are simply twelve-syllable verses. When the second Brazilian edition was released, a critic clearly immune to poetry translation that tries to maintain the form of the original, made a big fuss about the disappearance of the word “*abolie*” in the second verse of the Portuguese version. I, on the contrary, find the solution “*Torre da Abulia*” (Tower of Apathy) to be highly satisfactory, first of all because of the strong symbolist ambience that emanates from this expression, and then because since apathy means lack of will, absence of action, and all that exists consists, in a way, of action and will, to me the word seems very appropriate to take the place of “*abolie*”. The recovery of the sound, incantatory values of the form of the poem seem to amply compensate for these small strays from the meaning, and even more in the case of Nerval.

There are two definitions of poetry that really please me. The first, attributed to Paul Valéry, states that poetry is a type of indecision between a sound and a meaning. The second says that poetry is the art of saying only with words what words only cannot say. In both cases, to me the poetic translation of the poems seems to be the one that is justified.

As we can also see in the sonnet provided as an example, the first verse came out in Portuguese without any effort, directly, a perfect Alexandrine with the same exact words as the original. In the second verse, in turn, the difficulty we have just discussed emerged.

To conclude this brief recollection of my experience as a translator of Gérard de Nerval, I reproduce randomly another sonnet from “The Chimeras”, in this case the first in a series of five, a cycle within another cycle, the terrible “*Le Christ aux Oliviers*”, which seems to show the great similarity with the original that the translation of poetry can achieve in both form and substance:

Le Christ Aux Oliviers ^{TN2}
(Imité de Jean-Paul)

*Dieu est mort! le ciel est vide...
Pleurez! enfants, vous n'avez plus de père!*
JEAN-PAUL

I

*Quand le Seigneur, levant au ciel ses maigres bras,
Sous les arbres sacrés, comme font les poètes
Se fut longtemps perdu dans ses douleurs muettes,
et se jugea trahi par des amis ingrats,*

*il se tourna vers ceux qui l'attendaient en bas
Rêvant d'être des rois, des sages, des prophètes...
Mais engourdis, perdus dans le sommeil des bêtes,
et se prit à crier: “non, Dieu n'existe pas!”*

*ils dormaient. “Mes amis, savez-vous la nouvelle?
J'ai touché de mon front à la voûte éternelle ;
Je suis sanglant, brisé, souffrant pour bien des jours!*

*Frères, je vous trompais : Abîme! abîme! abîme!
Le dieu manque à l'autel où je suis la victime...
Dieu n'est pas! Dieu n'est plus!” Mais ils dormaient toujours!...*

^{TN2} For the English version of the poem, see the “Notes” section.

O CRISTO NO HORTO DAS OLIVEIRAS

(Imitado de Jean-Paul)

*Dieu est mort! le ciel est vide...
Pleurez! enfants, vous n'avez plus de père!
JEAN-PAUL*

I

*Quando o Senhor, erguendo aos céus seus magros braços,
Sob as árvores santas, tal como os poetas,
Perdeu-se longamente entre dores secretas,
E traído se achou por seus amigos lassos;
Voltou-se aos que o esperavam, vindos nos seus passos,
Sonhando em serem reis, ou sábios, ou profetas...
Mas tontos a dormir, iguais a bestas quietas,
E gritou: “Não há Deus!” bem alto nos espaços.*

*Dormiam. “Meus amigos, conheceis a nova?
Toquei com minha fronte o alto da eterna cova:
Quebrado, há muito eu sofro, e o meu sangue vai fluindo!*

*Irmãos, vos enganei. Abismo! abismo! abismo!
Falta o deus a esse altar onde, vítima, eu cismo...
Não há Deus! Deus não é!” E eles sempre dormindo!*

16.3.1990

As we can see, neither the translation of poetry, at least in many cases, is an impossible task, nor does the translator have to be the traitor of the famous wordplay.

Notes

TN1 - The Disinherited

I am of darkness—widower, —unconsoled
Prince of Aquitaine & the stricken tower:
My one star is dead,—& my lute of the firmament
Bears despair’s black sun.

In night’s tomb, you consoler

Return to me Posilipo & the Italian sea,
 That bloom so pleased by my blighted heart,
 & that trellis where the vine & the rose align.
 Am I love or Phoebus?...Lusignan or Biron?
 My face still red from the queen's kiss;
 I've dreamed in the cavern where the siren swims...
 & two times crossed & won the Acheron:
 Sang by & by of the lyre of Orpheus,
 The saint's sighs & the faerie's shriek.
 (*Translated by Mark Lamoureux*)

TN2 - Christ on the Mount of Olives

I.

When the Lord, lifting his skinny arms to the sky
 Under the sacred trees as poets do,
 Longtime lost in mute dolor
 Called himself traitored by ingracious friends,
 He looked down on the ones waiting below
 Who dreamed to be kings, prophets or seers
 (But all lost to the numb sleep of beasts) &
 Started to shriek "No God doesn't exist,"
 Still they slept, "Friends have you heard the news?
 I touched the eternal vault with my face;
 I bleed, I break, I suffer days upon days
 Brothers, I conned you: Abyss! Abyss! Abyss!
 The god is gone from this altar that murders me!
 God is not! God is no more!" But forever & ever they sleep.
 (*Translated by Mark Lamoureux*)

ABSTRACT - The article describes the author's experience translating Gérard de Nerval's "Les chimères" in 1990, and sets forth his ideas on the translation of poetry.

KEYWORDS: Gérard de Nerval, Translation, Poetry.

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