

The fractured surface of poetry and the translator's task

Donald Wellman

Received 27.08.2012 - Accepted 21.04.2013

Resumen / Résumé / Abstract

Toda traducción es parcial. Capta a lo sumo contenidos inherentes al texto original. Esto es especialmente así en la traducción de poesía. La traducción fractura ese vínculo entre forma de expresión y contenido que distingue a la poesía de otros usos del lenguaje. Aplico este principio a varios ejemplos extraídos de mis traducciones de las obras de Antonio Gamoneda y Emilio Prados. Mis traducciones aproximan quizá algunas cualidades del original, pero no pueden competir con la integridad de los textos fuente. Argumento también que la traducción ofrece una posición única para la 'close reading', lo que tiene también su paralelismo en el estudio de poesía experimental o de vanguardia como la de John Ashbery o Charles Bernstein. Esta dinámica de «close reading» ve duplicados su fuerza y valor cuando traducimos textos innovadores llevándolos así de la lengua en que se crearon a la lengua que los hospeda.

Toute traduction est partielle. Elle saisit, au mieux, les contenus inhérents au texte original. Cela est particulièrement vrai dans la traduction de poésie. La traduction rompt ce lien entre forme de l'expression et contenu qui distingue la poésie d'autres usages de la langue. Ce principe est illustré dans quelques exemples de mes traductions des œuvres d'Antonio Gamoneda et d'Emilio Prados. Mes traductions approchent parfois les qualités de l'original, mais elles ne peuvent pas rivaliser avec l'intégrité des textes source. On peut soutenir que la traduction offre aussi une position unique pour la «close reading», ce qui a son parallèle dans l'étude de poésie expérimentale ou d'avant-garde comme celle de John Ashbery ou Charles Bernstein. Cette dynamique de la «close reading» double en force et en valeur lorsqu'on traduit des textes innovateurs, en les menant de la langue dans laquelle ils ont été créés vers la nouvelle langue qui les accueille.

Every translation is partial. At its best a translation captures only elements that inhere in the original. This is especially true of the translation of poetry. Translation fractures the bond between language and content that distinguishes poetry from other uses of language. I apply

this lesson to examples drawn from my translations of the works of Antonio Gamoneda and Emilio Prados. My translations may approach some qualities found in the original but fail to rival the integrity of the source texts. I also argue that translation provides a uniquely situated form of close reading and that similar processes of close reading are useful in working with experimental or avant-garde poetry like that of John Ashbery or Charles Bernstein. This dynamic of close reading is doubled again in its force and value when translating innovative texts from a home language to a host language.

Palabras clave / Mots-clés / Key Words

Traducción, poesía, «close reading», expresión fracturada.

Traduction, poésie, «close reading», expression fracturée.

Translation, poetry, close reading, fractured expression.

As fruit is to skin, Walter Benjamin argues, in his essay, «The Translator's Task», a quality of translatability is necessary for poetry. He theorizes, what might be called, the apotheosis of the poem, wherein words reach the highest ends that destiny allows. «In the original, content and language constitute a certain unity, like that between a fruit and its skin, whereas a translation surrounds its content as if with the broad folds of a royal mantle». By this Benjamin indicates his sense of how it is that a translation enfolds some spiritual potential inherent in the original. He also writes that every translation necessarily fractures «the unity of language and

content» that is inherent in the original (158)¹. Let us be less messianic² and say that translation elevates a core meaning, or even isolates an aspect of that core meaning. It is my argument that such encounters with meaning drive the poetic process. Benjamin's figure, take a plum as an example, suggests a volume that is a product of folding. One of my guiding influences, Giles Deleuze would appreciate that disjunctive synthesis³ of discrete layers folded within layers, but the plum, like the peach, also contains a stone, an unyielding interior that houses a future seed. Can translation harvest such futures or must it always remain a fractured artifact with respect to the original? Perhaps the original is also a fractured artifact? The translation of poetry, like the writing of poetry, is a process that puts forms and resonances in play. Translation involves opacities and is mistaken if it imagines itself to be a method of achieving translucency with respect to contents or semantics.

Benjamin's image of the fruit and its skin belongs to a family of what I will call gnostic constructs. He may well have been familiar with a text known in English as *Book Bahir* (*Book of Brightness*), where words to this effect may be found, «vowels abide in consonants like souls in bodies». My source for this reference to *Book Bahir* is Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom of Shakespeare* (421), a Spinozistic reading of Shakespeare from the point of view of Bottom, a «common person» (you or I) whose character functions in counterpoint to that of Oberon, King of the Fairies. I am drawing several gyres around the argument implicit in my title and Benjamin's simile. The curious resonance between Benjamin's image and an image to be found in the proto-kabalistic text of *Book Bahir*, translated into German by Benjamin's close associate Gershom Scholem intrigues me⁴. My intention in this essay is to exemplify both the research and the serendipity of discovery that underlie «the translator's task».

The work of Zukofsky, an American «objectivist» poet, also serves to illustrate my contention that the translation of poetry requires the mindset of a poet. Unlike a strictly literal translation of a source text, Zukofsky's homophonic translation of Catullus marks one limit or extreme of the nexus between translation and the poet's work. Here is an example of Zukofsky's work with Catullus, (assisted by his wife Cecilia):

*Pæne insularum, Sirmio, insularumque
ocelle, quascumque in liquentibus stagnis
marique vasto fert uterque Neptunus [...] (l. 1-3).*

Peninsular arm, Sirmio, insular arm, well-
ing eye, kiss come to what in liquid won't stagnate,
mark of the vast fare and tugging that Neptune is [...]
(Catullus 259).

Of this passage, Andrew Eastman writes, «by construing the peninsula of Sirmio as a welcoming arm, the lake itself as a tearful eye, the translation produces a specific way of saying which serves to bring out meaning latent in the original text». Eastman, like Lawrence Venuti, cites the crucial function of translatability in Benjamin's theory. The translator must ask how much or how little, from which of several angles, is truly translatable. The «strangeness» of the language of the translation (and that language can be identified as Louis Zukofsky's choice, Celia having provided a first-level translation) is a hallmark of modernism that Benjamin himself championed, for instance, in the case of his advocacy of Bertolt Brecht's theater and the use of the *verfremdungseffekt*, «alienation-effect» or «a-effect». In terms of modernist aesthetics then, the «strangeness» of

¹ Unless differently indicated my citations to Steven Rendell's translation of Benjamin's «The Translator's Task» in "TTR 10, no. 2 (1997): 151-165 <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037302ar> and in Lawrence Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd ed., London: Routledge.

² Benjamin uses the word «messianic» in this context: «In the individual, uncomplemented languages, the intended object is never encountered in relative independence, for instance in individual words or sentences, but is rather caught up in constant transformation, until it is able to emerge as pure language from the harmony of all these modes of intention. Until then it remains hidden in the various languages. But if languages grow in this way until they reach the messianic end of their history, then it is translation that is ignited by the eternal continuing life of the work and the endless revival of languages» (157). The most frequently cited English language translation of Benjamin's essay, «The Work of the Translator» by Harry Zohn omits the word «messianic» from this passage.

³ See Dan Smith. Introduction to *Essays Critical and Clinical* Minneapolis, 1997: xxvii.

⁴ Ian Almond has discussed the use of Neo-Platonist and Kabalistic allusions, as tropes of unity in Benjamin's work.

the translation serves to evoke the foreignness of Catullus' text⁵.

As a translator, I have felt obliged to negotiate both the «strangeness» of the modernist text and the deconstructive understanding of language that characterizes «post-modern» or «post-avant» perspectives. Both poetry and the translation of poetry are the foods of an addict. I work from a basis of obsession with language. Donning my modernist mask, I cite the luminous quality of fine detail, an aesthetic inheritance derived from the poetics of Ezra Pound, whose works of translation are notably both fine and controversial, fine and strange. Benjamin suggests that poets are not always themselves the best translators of poetry; for while the object of poetry is some form of intention indistinguishable from the language of the poem, the object of translation is language itself, as understood from outside, analytically (159). In reading contemporary poetry, especially that of a postmodern or avant-garde aesthetic provenance, it can be said that language has replaced intention. Benjamin's thought situates itself, as it often has a penchant to do, on the cusp of the postmodern. With the arrival of the various deconstructive poetics in the late twentieth century and especially the development of language-centered poetry, acts of translation as a form of analytical reading have become associated with the very possibility of producing a poem. This argument deeply engages my energies at all levels of my translation practice. The postmodern face of my poetic activity has been as the editor of a series of journals in which several significant texts associated with language poetry first appeared⁶.

Language-centered poetry or language writing may be thought of as an umbrella for a variety of practices in which the linguistic material of the poem, its sounds and syntax, are isolated for purposes of composition, stripping away ideologies that bend meaning toward abstractions that can be associated with display and consumerism. In the United States language-poetry is sometimes divided into an East coast version where satire, spoof, and performance are prominent (Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews) and a West coast variety that is possibly more deeply constructivist than its cousins (Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Lyn Hejinian); however, there are also sites of language-centered poetry and poetics in Canada and Great Britain, and there are close ties with some developments in Germany and France

(in France, *écriture*, for instance, associated with Claude Royet-Jouinot and Ann Marie Albiach). In Latin America, works in the Neobarroco style have qualities similar to language-centered writing (José Kozer, Eduardo Milan, Raúl Zurrita). In the English-speaking world there are numerous practitioners of some version of a poetics that have some similarity to the list of poets who have been cited. And those poets are only some of the most prominent poets who have been influenced by a general stance that can be identified with language-centered writing. Among immediate forbearers of language-centered writing, John Ashbery and other poets of the New York School should be mentioned. Charles Olson and his associates like Robert Creeley are prominent. Ancestor poetics, as Bernstein quips, are the three «Marxes»: Chico, Karl, and Groucho; also prominent are the two «steins», Gertrude Stein and Wittgenstein. These remarks and others to the same effect may be found in Bernstein's libretto, *Shadow Time* (2004). The opera address several of Benjamin's themes, especially those found in Benjamin's *Theses on a Philosophy of History*. «The Ninth Thesis» introduces the Angel of History, a rhetorical figure derived from Paul Klee's drawing «Angelus Novus», purchased by Benjamin in 1921.⁷ This figure can be identified with melancholy and despair over the future. Wallace Stevens evokes a similar angel, one associated with both despair and salvation: «I am the angel of reality, / seen for a moment standing in the door. / ... I am the necessary angel of earth. Since, in my sight, you see the earth again» (423). For Emilio Prados, one of the poets that I translate, Solitude is figured as such a polysemous angel. Such figures, both the tragic and the comic, inhabit the mindscape that I bring to translation.

⁵ Venuti notes that *Catullus* is an «abusive» translation in that it introduces «translation effects that work only in English» (220). «For Venuti, then, the work's strangeness is itself a criterion of value; yet this strangeness is almost uniquely envisaged in lexical terms. Strangeness in itself, much less lexical strangeness, does not suffice to establish the value of the Zukofskys' translation as writing; this resides in the way it puts the lyric subject into question, in the way its translation from Latin rewrites the grammar of enunciation in English». (Eastman, n. 5).

⁶ *O.A.R.S.*, a series of anthologies exploring topics bearing on post-modern poetry (9 volumes, Cambridge MA and Weare NH, 1981-1994).

⁷ For additional commentary, see Barglow, Raymond «The Angel of History: Walter Benjamin's Vision of Hope and Despair». *Tikkun Magazine*. November, 1998. http://www.barglow.com/angel_of_history.htm.

Translation practice

We were discussing issues of national security and one of my colleagues made a remark, encapsulating his perception of my biases: «Wellman does not believe in borders at all as far as I can tell». The remark seemed true enough at the time and floats again to the surface of my mind as I revise this text. I will discuss the origin of my bias, as far as I understand it. I was an American teenager in Germany, indirectly attached to the occupying forces following World War II. It was the year the Berlin Wall was constructed. On my train ride to my American High School, operated by the U.S. Department of Defense, I spoke with German girls and Czech girls, some refugees, on their way to a private academy in Stuttgart. My school, I have recently discovered, was also the high school attended by Newt Gingrich⁸. My point: I often find myself, if my adolescent memories serve as useful precedents, on the edge or boundary between cultures. Today, I may feel alienated by the ideologies espoused by many Americans. Then, I felt misplaced or unwelcome when I visited the homes of these young women, invited by the daughter but an uninvited guest to the parents' eyes. No longer an adolescent, I have come to feel comfortable and empowered by my ability to occupy intercultural or liminal spaces. Oddly living in Germany, I was obliged by my school to relearn my French pronunciation because the Quebecois variety that I had learned in rural Maine was not deemed acceptable by European standards. I had the privilege of learning some rudimentary Russian. I studied Latin, but I learned to speak German on the streets and on the trains. I travelled through a multilingual matrix. Streets and trains, figures of passage, sites of liminality, my readings are conditioned by the anthropology of Victor Turner and Michael Taussig. My discipline seems scattershot in retrospect.

At some point in my life, it may once more have been while living in Germany, a second time now, the idea crystallized for me that I wanted to know more about poetry than any of my peers. My model in this was Ezra Pound. It was the era of the War in Vietnam and I was 25 years old 28. Did poetry operate as my angel of salvation or only an adolescent fantasy? I sang to myself in the languages that I knew. I had an infant son. Using the blade of his knife, the butcher thrust a mouthful of beef tartar into my son's mouth, contorted with fear. Soon after, I entered the

Doctoral program at the University of Oregon in Eugene. I had chosen Old English as an area of academic concentration. I was enamored by the orality of the various medieval languages with which I was familiar. The architectonics of sound, the voice felt on the pulse, more so than prosody itself, was my passion then and remains my passion.

Today, I read and translate from Spanish more than other languages, and I do so, among other reasons, to improve my ear for English. This is a technical reason. I will leave my erratic biography aside. Consider the amount of French in Chaucer, the presence of Arabic in Spanish. My desire is to extend prosodic and semantic boundaries. Additionally, my poetry often takes the form of an intercultural collage. Bits borrowed from different languages give form to both the shape and substance of the text, its sounds and its allusions, an image or a phrase. Each of these bits has to meet the test of translatability as described by Benjamin. In one of my poems there are citations of both a medieval English lyric and medieval Hebrew:

Now goes the sun behind the tree
Me reweth marie thy son ond thee

...

See the sun gone red toward evening,
in its crimson dress.

Shelomo Ibn Gabriol («Medieval Exercise» in *A North Atlantic Wall*, 21).

In some fashion each bit must offer a window on a world, a depth of resonance, carrying meanings and emotions unique to the parent language and approximated, often in some degree, by the host language. And then there also has to be a degree of the «disjunctive synthesis», described by Deleuze. These disjunctive bits do not themselves rule out other forms of prosodic assemblage, but they can be understood also as monads, intersections and sums of possible perspectives. Leibniz via Giles Deleuze affects my use of images and my invocation of forces tangent to those images.

⁸ Newt Gingrich, controversial conservative candidate for the Republican nomination for President of the United States, 2012, formerly Speaker of the House of Representatives.

To exemplify the effects of cultural hybridity within my monadic soup, a poem that I am translating from Spanish, Emilio Prados' «Tres tiempos de soledad» has taken the form of a hymn such as those of Hölderlin. In this I recognize the difficulty of approximating the effect of *alexandrinos* in English measures. Giorgio Agamben has spoken of a stilted or staccato quality that he finds characteristic of the long-line:

[In] the broken prosody and almost aprosody of Hölderlin's late hymns ... single words –sometimes even simple conjunctions such as «aber», «but»– are isolated and jealously wrapped up in themselves; and the reading of the verse and the strophe is nothing but a succession of scansion and caesura in which all discourse and all meaning appear to break up and retract as in a sort of prosodic and semantic paralysis. In this «staccato» of rhythm and thought, the hymn exhibits the elegy –that is, the lament for taking leave of the gods, or, rather, for the impossibility of the hymn– as its only proper content. Poetry's bitter tendency to isolate words, which the Alexandrines used to call «free style», can be defined as «hymnical». (238).

In «Tres tiempos de soledad», Prados composes an extended hymn to Solitude in three parts. She is his salvation and lover. He seeks solace for his losses and the means to survive his exile in Mexico. These lines are from near the end of the first section:

Húndeme en tu bostezo: tu mudo laberinto
me enseñe lo que el viento no dejó entre mis ramas...
Los granados se mecen bajo el sol que los dora
y mi paladar virgen desconoce el lucero.

Soledad, noche a noche te elevas de mi sangre
y piedra a piedra asciende tu templo a lo infinito. (875-880).

Hide me in your yawning mouth: your mute labyrinth
may teach me what the wind failed to leave in my branches...
The pomegranates rock under the sun that gilds them
and my virgin palate does not recognize the evening star.

Solitude, night after night you rise from my blood
and stone by stone your temple ascends toward infinity.

It is a profoundly elegiac poem, nostalgic for his lost youth. His memories of Andalucía are, let's say, «gilded» or bronzed and represent a lost paradise that is being rebuilt stone by stone in the temple of the poet's body. An intense eroticism overflows the jagged leaps among images. Those images, stemming from the poet's sense of his lost youth, have that quality of staccato speech described by Agamben. Through his poetry, Prados seeks a personal transformation similar to that which is found in the work of mystical poets like Juan de la Cruz. Is it too much of a leap to say that my travels in Mexico and in Andalucía, necessarily as an outsider, sometimes accompanied by remorseful loneliness, have made me sympathetic to Prados' plea for salvation through intensification of my sense of my mortality, massaging it so as to produce therapeutic outcomes. My sympathies often announce themselves and affect my imagination with private, personal obsessions and it seems almost as if, as a result, I stumble upon or fall into those texts that I engage as translator. Such also is the case of my work with the poetry of Antonio Gamoneda.

I cannot claim to have had a childhood in any sense similar to Gamoneda's, so deeply marked by the turmoil and terror of daily life in the first years of Franco's regime. But I do have memories of an urban childhood and the reek of poverty from the cellars of tenements is still with me. I also had the opportunity to escape into nature and learn the habits of the different mosses and sedges and grasses, as well as poisonous plants. Similar experiences proved vital for Gamoneda's spiritual sustenance and are described in books like *Un armario lleno de sombras*, where he recounts memories recovered from his earliest years. Gamoneda's *Libro de los venenos*, can be used as a field guide to the plant life in the Leonese countryside, as well as that found in his poetry. A similar use of nature imagery is found in *Lápidas* or *Gravestones*, which I have translated into English. A deep sympathy for the earth and human circumstances is the bond that makes translation possible.

I will discuss some of the difficulties that I have encountered in translating from Gamoneda's «El vigilante de la nieve»⁹. The individual who is the «watcher» in this

⁹ *Libro del frío*, Part 2 in *Esta luz*, pp. (319-331).

passage is believed to be José Pedrero, an artist and friend of the boy Antonio, a charismatic and charming man, as well as one of Gamoneda's «suicides», individuals who did not survive the depression or even schizophrenia associated with living in a police state where individuals were encouraged to spy on one another for the purpose of rooting out the opposition to Franco's government in its first years. Gamoneda's «suicides» are prominent in his poetry and figure as teachers and judges with regard to the difficult compromises that survivors sometimes feel obliged to make as they struggle with the conditions of their existence. Of course, this information enters the poem itself only indirectly. Some may be inferred from the context suggested by the language in a passage like the one that I quote here:

EN LA ebriedad le rodeaban mujeres, sombra, policía,
viento.

Ponia venas en las urces cárdenas, vértigo en la pureza: la
flor furiosa de la escarcha
era azul en su oído.

Rosas, serpientes y cucharas eran bellas mientras per-
manecían en sus manos.

IN HIS intoxication, women surrounded him, darkness,
police, wind.

He worked veins into the purple heather, vertigo into pu-
rity: the violent flower
of the frost was blue in his ear.

Roses, snakes, and spoons were beautiful while they re-
mained in his hands.

Do either «ebriedad» or «intoxication» carry any of the weight suggested by my commentary on the circumstances of life under fascism? The words chosen by the poet diminish what might otherwise be thought of as charm or heroism, and yet women are drawn to this man. The presence of «shadow» and «police» suggest the theme of watching, observation, or vigilance. «Intoxication» if that is what it is, combined with «vertigo» in the next verse, possibly relate to a dizzying insecurity, eased by alcohol and women or contrary wise caused by intoxication. My translation barely manages to catch any of this. The second and third verses testify to the actions and transformative abilities of the artist, perhaps referring to when he is absorbed in his work and not sensitive to being observed.

«Intoxication» from the first verse could indicate a comforting blindness. Of interest to me as the translator is the prosodic effect that pairs the sounds of the diphthongs in «ebriedad» and «serpientes». There is a similar slant rhyme that pairs the two /x/ sounds in the English of «intoxication» and «snakes» – a degree of slant rhyme that on this reading of my work I find to be wonderfully subtle, but of which I was not really cognizant when translating the passage five years ago. Then and today, the greatest degree of «useful» difficulty, for me, lies in the sound and meaning of «venas». I know purple heather, «urces». It is common where I live. I have no sense of how veins or even threads can be placed in it or through it. I envision a weaving together of clusters of heather. If I translate «venas» as «threads» – am I changing the image for the sake of comprehension, maybe offering a reading instead of a translation? A temptation that Gamoneda himself has cautioned me to avoid. The simple choice of «veins» for «venas», happily, leaves me with the consonance of the /v/ sounds, repeated three times in Spanish: «viento», «venas», «vertigo», as well as in English «veins», «vertigo», «violence». In Spanish, there is also a consonance of the fricative /f/ closely related to /v/ in the phrase «flor furiosa», and the English has «flower» and «frost» (but these fricatives are not as strong as those in Spanish, to my ear). For all the variations between the two languages, I have managed, I think, to keep some of the threaded quality of sounds in relation sounds in Gamoneda's work, weaving the sounds together in my stanzas differently from the way that Gamoneda composes his music. And it is true that Gamoneda often likens the writing of poetry to musical composition, but are my grace notes in any sense equivalent to his? No, not at all! Still, to a degree, my translation may support the meaning of the final verse element. Using resonances and rhyme, the musical linkage of «escarcha» and «cuchara» presents an incomparable prosodic invention. My version offers little that is equally astonishing; instead, it presents a tired and cliché resonance between »blue» and «beautiful». What I have learned from my exercise in translation, citing this example in particular, exposes multiple forms of language as it falls on the ear and how these forms give shape to composition. This is what my work with the Spanish language has done for me and for my command of English. By this means I have learned to map the space that a poem occupies, both on the page and in the ear.

You must judge for me what these words of John Ashbery, translated from English by Julio Mas Alcaraz do for Spanish:

El desgastado taburete resplandece
palomas del techo
conduciendo el tractor para aplastar
Saliendo de la estación de Atocha acero
golpes infectados los tornillos (30).

The English does several things.

The worn stool blazing
pigeons from the roof
driving tractor to squash
Leaving the Atocha Station steel
infected bumps the screws (31).

There is a lot of uncanny assonance: «stool» and «roof», «worn» and «pigeon». «Pigeon from» also seems to work as a verb phrase in English, as in «dives from», transforming a noun into a verb. Such grammatical ambiguity is a pronounced feature of language-centered writing. Also a new word, a distinctive row of phonemes, is introduced into English, «Atocha». As the passage taken from Agamben above suggests, poetry often isolates words. Here the phrase. «leaving the Atocha Station» (also the title of the poem) contrasts with respect to its phrasal length with other elements that are clipped and isolated from one another in this passage from what is a long and sustained effort putting multiple compositional irregularities into play. Indeed, the phrase, «leaving the Atocha Station», has an identifiable meaning where other words and phrases seem intentionally opaque. It presents a context in which fragmentary observations are rooted, or maybe it is simply a longer phrase than the others among which it is juxtaposed, a rhythmical variant. This passage is indelibly one written in Ashbery's style, a style that has made the impossible possible, constructing the verse line by eliminating the usual signs of the «art» of composition. The lines illustrate what Roland Barthes meant by readerly writing. The translation likewise seeks to be a matrix open to multiple levels of envisagement.

I am at home among discontinuous fragments. Indeed discontinuity is the norm in many areas of modern life.

Consider the barrage of jarring images that constitutes the viewing experience in much film and television. The need is to absorb reflected energies and respond, not become traumatized and passive. My knowledge of different landscapes and different cultures informs my ability to ingest both images and words as substances, perhaps as an earthworm, tunneling through that peach or plum, evoked on my first page. The worm in the apple that will be born as a butterfly is a favorite figure of Henry David Thoreau's. Yet recently in my unbounded enthusiasm for poetry, I have once more felt the need to confront the impossibility of translation. Perhaps that is why I began this essay with a summary of theory that for many will appear a strange shorthand with wandering and unhelpful intentions. But reflexivity, even if unforgivable, is surely an aspect of the aesthetic at work in my process! My difficulties are both linguistic and experiential. Aligning these two spheres, language and experience, has through an encounter with the impossibility of translation, improved my ability to write the poems that I write in English.

As is often the case with difficulty poetry, in Charles Bernstein's «Artifice of Absorption», the reader is faced with the task of finding meaning among the fragments of the language or languages that engage, him or her, a pure and impossible translatability.

A dense or unfamiliar vocabulary can make a poem hard to absorb, not only by calling attention to the sound qualities of its lexicon but also by preventing any immediate processing of the individual word's meaning. At some point, the appropriate reference sources may be consulted—but this is by no means the only way to hear or understand the work. (57).

Bernstein conveys the imperative of impossibility and the coordinated difficulty that makes both poetry and translation possible.

No translation is complete. Some translation will come to have the status of classics in the receiving language. That is how translations of Shakespeare by August Wilhelm Schlegel have been received in Germany and how Americans have received the poems of Li Po in Pound's *Cathay*. Other translations present themselves, so as to show different fac-

es of the original. That is why I began with Zukofsky's *Catullus*, with difficult reading. It is in difficulty that one language truly meets another and begins to reinvent itself. And that reinvention is not often or simply a matter of semantics. As Benjamin argues, the language of the translation is always inadequate or broken with respect to the content of the translation. I am willing to posit an eternal inadequacy of language with respect to content, a necessary impossibility.

The translator's task is to cope with the inadequacy that stems from a nonnegotiable mismatch between languages. One often cited technique has been to translate the phrase not the word; however, in the case of poetry the phrase always has important musical properties in

addition to its lexical properties. Possibly it is where the music of two or more languages intersect and affect one another that poetry makes its deepest contributions to its «mother» tongue. Translation can be said to serve «pure language», not immediate concerns of comprehension, «Translation alone possesses the mighty capacity to unbind it [language] from meaning, to turn the symbolizing element into the symbolized itself, to recuperate the pure language growing in linguistic development» (162). Languages may grow and become estranged from their roots, but languages also cross-fertilize and reinvent themselves. Hybridity no longer implies sterility as it perhaps did for the nineteenth century gardener. It stimulates survival.

Bibliography

- AGAMBIN, Giorgio, Lorenzo CHIESA and Matteo MANDARINI (2011), *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- ALMOND, Ian (2002), «Different Fragments, Different Vases: a Neoplatonic Commentary on Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'», *Heythrop Journal*, XLIII, pp. 185-198.
- ASBBERY, John (2010), *El Juramento de la pista de frontón: The tennis court oath*, bilingual edition, trans. Julio Mas Alcaraz, Barcelona: Calambur.
- BARGLOW, Raymond (1998), «The Angel of History: Walter Benjamin's Vision of Hope and Despair», *Tikkun Magazine*, November 1998, http://www.barglow.com/angel_of_history.htm.
- BENJAMIN, Walter (1968), «The Task of the Translator», in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken, pp. 69-82.
- BENJAMIN, Walter (1997), «The Translator's Task», *TTR (Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction)*, 10 (2), pp. 151-165, trans. Steven Rendall, <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037302ar>. Also available in Lawrence Venuti, ed. (2012), *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd ed., London: Routledge.
- BENJAMIN, Walter (1968), «Theses on the Philosophy of History», in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken, pp. 253-264.
- BERNSTEIN, Charles (libretto) and Brian Ferneyhough (music) (2005), *Shadowtime*, Los Angeles: Green Integer.
- BERNSTEIN, Charles (1992), «Artifice of Absorption», in *A Poetics*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 9-89.
- CATULLUS, Gaius Valerius, [*Works*,] in *Catullus, Tibullus, and Pervergillum Veneris*, F. W. Cornish, et al., translators, second edition, revised by G.P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge: Harvard University Press and London: Heinemann, [1913] 1988, 62.
- EASTMAN, Andrew (2009), «Estranging the Classic: The Zukofskys' *Catullus*», *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal* [Online], Vol. VII – n°2 | 2009, Online since 02 June 2009, connection on 20 August 2012. <http://lisa.revues.org/312>.
- GAMONEDA, Antonio (2004), *Libro del frío* in *Estaluz: poesía reunida (1947-2004)*. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg / Círculo de Lectores.
- PRADOS, Emilio (1999), *Poesías completas*. Madrid: Visor.
- SCHOLEM, Gershom (1923), *Das Buch Bahir*. Volume 1 of *Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte der jüdischen Mystik*. Editor, Robert Eisler. Druggelin.
- SMITH, Dan (1997), Introduction to Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. XI-LIII.
- STEVENS, Wallace (1997), *Collected Poetry and Prose*, New York: Library of America.
- VENUTI, Lawrence (1995), *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation*, London: Routledge.
- WELLMAN, Donald (2010), *A North Atlantic Wall*. Loveland: Dos Madres.
- ZUKOFSKY, Celia and Louis, translators (1969), *Catullus (Gai Valeri Catulli Veronensis Liber)*. London: Cap Golliard.
- ZUKOFSKY, Louis (1987), *Bottom on Shakespeare*, Berkeley: University of California Press, c1963.



Biblioteca clásica de siglo veintiuno

Los mejores libros del
pensamiento social contemporáneo



ESCRITOS 1

Jacques Lacan
496 páginas



ESCRITOS 2

Jacques Lacan
392 páginas

TEORÍA DE LA LITERATURA DE LOS FORMALISTAS RUSOS

Tzvetan Todorov
320 páginas



NOSOTROS Y LOS OTROS

Tzvetan Todorov
464 páginas

