THE JOY OF TRANSLATION

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Last year, when I had the pleasure of translating Cuban writer Abilio Estévez's first novel *Tuyo es el reino* (*Thine Is the Kingdom*) from Spanish into English, it occurred to me that much has been written about the difficulties of translation but little about its joys.[1] The 300-plus pages of this luminously written work allowed me to tackle one of the great challenges of literary translation: how to find a balance among the various registers of an author's voice, capturing the musicality of the words as sounds (their meter and alliteration) while making accessible the cultural and historical allusions of the text. Working on *Thine Is the Kingdom*, written in a Baroque style and replete with images from Cuban and European art, literature, and history, in many ways was like solving an enormous crossword puzzle. The solution I offered in one place limited the solutions I was able to use in half-a-dozen others.

There is also the crucial task of maintaining consistency across 300 dense pages of artful prose. For example, the reader soon learns that one of the book's key characters, La Condesa Descalza (The Barefoot Countess), is about to appear when any one of a set of motifs occurs in the text — the jingling of her silver bracelets, the perfume of her sandalwood fan, the knocking of her cane on the gallery floor, or the simple use of the words *loca* (crazy) or *de burla* (mocking). Juggling the variations on these motifs, I was halfway through the book before I settled on my final translation of her appearance in the novel's opening sentence:

> So many stories have been told and are still told about the Island that if you decide to believe them all you'll end up going crazy, so says the Barefoot Countess, who is crazy, and she says it with a mocking smile, which isn't a bit surprising because she always wears a mocking smile, and as she says it she jingles her silver bracelets and perfumes the air with her sandalwood fan, on and on and on, sure that everyone is listening to her, and strolls through the gallery with her bare feet and her cane, on which she unnecessarily leans.
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> Se han contado y se cuentan tantas cosas de la Isla que si uno se decide a creerlas termina por enloquecer, así dice la Condesa Descalza que está loca, y lo dice sonriendo y con cara de burla, cosa nada sorprendente porque ella siempre tiene cara de burla, y lo dice haciendo sonar los pulsos de plata y perfumando el aire con el abanico de sándalo, sin

1. Tusquets Editores, 1997; English translation, Arcade Publishing, 1999.

detenerse, segura de que todos la escuchan, paseando por la galería con los pies descalzos
y el bastón en que se apoya sin necesidad.

My goal in this passage was to maintain the informal, conversational tone of the Spanish, which nevertheless conveys, in its almost breathless pace and jangling alliterations, a sound portrait of the Countess, gazing sardonically at a world that regards her as insane. In the process, a scattering of words escape their most directly literal translations: "so many things" become "so many stories," "if one decides" becomes "if you decide," "without ceasing" becomes "on and on and on."

Translators tend to split into two camps, advocates of literal translations versus those supporting looser versions. My own sympathies have always been with the literalists; I am a secret admirer of the ascetic ideal notoriously espoused by Nabokov, who brilliantly lampooned "paraphrasistic" translation as "offering a free version of the original, with omissions and additions prompted by the exigencies of form, the conventions attributed to the consumer, and the translator's ignorance." In his translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*s, Nabokov boasted that he had "sacrificed everything (elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar) that the dainty mimic prizes higher than the truth."[2]

Yet in my translation of poetry I have long been aware that the rhythm and musicality of the words form part of their "literal" sense, so I strive to match meter as much as any other aspect of meaning. Indeed, English is such a naturally rhythmic language that to ignore meter — even in translating the most prosaic prose — strikes me as almost criminal. Rhyme, on the other hand, comes far less naturally to English, and I readily ignore it — or transmute it into alliteration or strong meter, the musical reportoire of this language. Yet retaining the precise meter of the original at the expense of the subtler rhythms of meaning can also be false to the original.

In a famous poem by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, "Sátira filosófica" (Philosophical Satire), the 17th century Mexican poet questions why women should be held guilty for the sins provoked by men, as in this verse:

¿O cuál es más de culpar,
aunque cualquiera mal haga:

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2. Vladimir Nabokov, foreward to his translation of *Eugene Onegin* (Princeton University Press, 1964): v. 1, vii-viii.

la que peca por la paga,
o el que paga por pecar?

In a rhymed translation, Robert Graves turns Sor Juana's deceptively simple verse into this ditty:

Or which deserves the sterner blame,
Though each will be a sinner:
She who becomes a whore for pay,
Or he who pays to win her?[3]

Here Graves adds and modifies words to produce a rhymed and metrical verse, but you cannot say he has *preserved* the rhyme and rhythm, for his version transforms the eight-syllable meter and *abba* rhyme scheme into four iambic feet and an *abab* scheme. He makes explicit (perhaps too explicit) the word *whore*, only hinted at in the original, in order to fill out the line. A more recent translation of the same verses pays closer attention to preserving the original meter, while ignoring the rhyme altogether:

Or which more greatly must be faulted,
though either may commit a wrong:
she who sins for need of payment,
or he who pays for his enjoyment?[4]

What both versions leave out is what we might call the rhythm of rhetoric in Sor Juana's poem, most deliciously sensed in the last two lines with the alternation of peca/paga//paga/pecar. The problem, I suspect, is that the monosyllabic English equivalents of these words, sin/pay//pay/sin, are simply too short to maintain the metric scheme without adding filler. In producing my own version, I gave up on making the lines reach eight syllables and instead concentrated on replicating the dance of meaning:

Or who deserves more blame,
though both of them do ill:
she who sins for pay,
or he who pays for sin?

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3. Translation by Robert Graves, as quoted in Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History* (Oxford University Press, 4th edition, 1991): 227.
4. Translated by Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell, in their critical edition of Sor Juana's *The Answer/La Respuesta* (The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1999): 159.

This past spring I spoke by telephone with Nancy Morejón, an acclaimed Afro-Cuban poet, critic, and intellectual. Early in the year I had translated a number of her poems, and we had just spoken to iron out a handful of questions and doubts. Nancy was now asking me to translate a new poem she had just completed. "Persona," she told me, was an update of her well-known earlier poem, "Mujer Negra" (Black Woman, 1974), which addresses her experience as a Black woman of the Caribbean. I gladly accepted the invitation. A few days later, with the fresh translations on my computer screen, we spoke again. Going over both versions of the poem line by line, together we hashed out the problems that each of us had discovered along the way.

The poem is an odyssey of images, as the narrator searches for her own identity in the images of Black women that surround her: the Olympic athlete, the object of white desire in Cuban popular culture and colonial history, the branded slave, the mother. Which of these women is me? she asks. In the end she finds her reflection not by looking in the mirror but by looking out the window into the black Cuban night to find her commonality with the real women behind the images.

Fortunately for me, Nancy's poetry is strongly rhythmic and strongly imagistic; rhyme rarely appears. I was surprised at how few lines of the translations she questioned, despite the fact that she is fluent in English. I had worried, for instance, about my paraphrase of her description of a Black woman athlete, a Florence Griffith Joiner, as running "con sus oscuras piernas celestiales/ en su espiral de lunas." A literal translation is difficult because so many words here have important secondary meanings: "with her dark (or obscure) celestial (or heavenly) legs/ in their (or her) spiral of moons (or glass windows, or large mirrors)." Worse, the construction of the phrase is unclear in its English equivalent. My paraphrase reads: "with her dark celestial legs/ spiralling her like moons." When Nancy passed this over, I specifically asked her about my choice. Yes, yes, it's fine, no problem, was her quick and gratifying response.

I worried for a moment when Nancy pointed out the lines that I had left untranslated. But she did so only to thank me for recognizing "la mujer de Antonio/ la vecinita de enfrente" as a song by Cuban balladeer Miguel Matamoros, and "la madre — negra Paula Valdés," as lines by the most renowned of Afro-Cuban poets, Nicolás Guillén. She agreed with my decision to leave them in their original.

Other choices did cause difficulties. For her metaphoric description of the reflection of the narrator's face, "como un endecasílabo importado," I had avoided the literally correct "like an imported hendecasyllable" as ungainly and inexpressive. But my first solution, "like a line of pentameter verse" was both awkward and, as Nancy pointed out, wrong: pentameter (or 5-foot) verse is simply not the same as a hendecasyllable (11-syllable) line. Worse, the point of the metaphor is that the latter is a characteristic verse form from the 17th century Golden Age of Castilian poetry. When Nancy, a poet of the postcolonial Caribbean, refers to this verse form, the key to the image is not its precise name but the fact that it has been imported, like so much of the cultural and historical baggage of Cuba, to serve as a cultured European standard for judging the products of the island. The simple solution that Nancy and I hammered out reads: "like an imported line of poetry."

Similarly, the word "señorito" in the second stanza of the poem encapsulates a whole history of complicated colonial relationships between the island and Spain. Whereas "señor" can mean a noble lord (its original sense), a "gentleman" (as on the public washrooms), or simply a man in the street, the diminutive "señorito" refers to a specific social type: the somewhat spoiled, fastidious offspring of a wealthy landlord. It is also a specifically Spanish type. Anyone described as a señorito in Cuba would necessarily be representing the colonial power, and the term is tinged with a certain distaste. Nancy rightly objected to my first solution here, "the fine young lord," as missing far too many of these overtones. Eventually I came up with the alternative, "the young Andalusian don," which preserves the nuances of señorito by placing his origins in the southern provinces of Spain and by retaining the hint of foreignness implicit in the term.

The timing of these translations was fortuitous, because in Fall 1999 Nancy accepted a long-standing invitation from Ruth Behar to speak at the University of Michigan. In poetry readings at the International Institute and Shaman Drum Bookshop in early October, I followed Nancy at the podium as we read her poems, first in Spanish and then in their English versions. Listening to Nancy read, I was struck by the orality of her poetic style; hers are poems meant to be read aloud. While she read them, I quickly made adjustments in my written text, the better to echo the emphases that her performance gave her words. It was gratifying to see in the audience's

response that this appreciative group of critics approved of my efforts, proving that translation can be, like poetry itself, a celebration of the joys of the written and spoken word.

Nancy Morejón / PERSONA

¿Cuál de estas mujeres soy yo?
¿O no soy yo la que está hablando
tras los barrotes de una ventana sin estilo
que da a la plenitud de todos estos siglos?
¿Acaso seré yo la mujer negra y alta
que corre y casi vuela
y alcanza *record* astronómicos,
con sus oscuras piernas celestiales
en su espiral de lunas?
¿En cuál músculo suyo se dibuja mi rostro,
clavado alli como un endecasílabo importado
de un país de nieve prohibida?

Estoy en la ventana
y cruza la mujer de Antonio;
"la vecinita de enfrente", de una calle sin formas;
"la madre--negra Paula Valdés--".
¿Quién es el señorito que sufraga
sus ropas y sus viandas
y los olores de vetiver ya desprendidos de su andar?
¿Qué permanece en mí de esa mujer?
¿Que nos une a las dos? ¿Qué nos separa?
¿O seré yo la "vagabunda del alba",
que alquila taxis en la noche de los jaguares
como una garza tendida en el pavimento
después de haber sido cazada
        y esquilmada
        y revendida
por la Quinta de los Molinos
y los embarcaderos del puerto?
Ellas: ¿quiénes serán? ¿o soy yo misma?
¿Quiénes son éstas que se parecen tanto a mí
no sólo por los colores de sus cuerpos

Which of these women is me?
Or am I not the one who's talking
behind the thick bars of a nondescript window
that looks out on the abundance of all these eras?
Might I be the tall, black woman
who runs, who nearly flies,
who sets astronomical records,
with her dark celestial legs
spiralling her like moons?
Which of her muscles reflects my face,
fixed there like an imported line of poetry
from a land where snow is forbidden?

I'm at the window
and there goes *la mujer de Antonio,*
la vecinita de enfrente, crossing a shapeless street;
la madre--negra Paula Valdés--.
Which is the young Andalusian don who antes up for
her clothes and her vittles
and the smell of vetiver root she scatters as she walks?
What's left in me of this woman?
What holds the two of us together? What separates us?
Or might I be the "early morning wanderer"
who takes taxis on the night of jaguars
like a heron fallen to the pavement
after being hunted
        and wasted
        and resold
around the Quinta de los Molinos
and the piers of the port?
Who are they, these women? Or are they me?
Who are they, who look so much like me
not only in the color of their bodies

sino por ese humo devastador
que exhala nuestra piel de res marcada
por un extraño fuego que no cesa?
¿Por qué soy yo? ¿Por qué son ellas?

¿Quién es esa mujer
que está en todas nosotras huyendo de nosotras,
huyendo de su enigma y de su largo origen
con una incrédula plegaria entre los labios
o con un himno cantado
después de una batalla siempre renacida?

Todos mis huesos, ¿serán míos?
¿de quién serán todos mis huesos?
¿Me los habrán comprado
en aquella plaza remota de Gorée?
¿Toda mi piel será la mía
o me han devuelto a cambio
los huesos y la piel de otra mujer
cuyo vientre ha marcado otro horizonte,
otro ser, otras criaturas, otro dios?

Estoy en la ventana.
Yo sé que hay alguien.
Yo sé que una mujer ostenta mis huesos y mi carne;
que me ha buscado en su gastado seno
y que me encuentra en la vicisitud y el extravio.
La noche está enterrada en nuestra piel.
La sabia noche recompone sus huesos y los míos.
Un pájaro del cielo ha trocado su luz en nuestros ojos.

but in the devastating smoke
that rises from our animal hides, branded
by a strange, unceasing fire?
Why am I me? Why are they them?

Who is that woman,
the one in us all fleeing from us all,
fleeing her enigma and her long origin
with an incredulous prayer on her lips,
or singing a hymn
after a battle always being refought?

My bones: are they all mine?
Whose are all these bones?
Did they buy them for me
in that far-off plaza in Gorée?
Is all my skin my own,
or did they trade it to me
for the skin and bones of another woman
whose womb once marked another horizon,
another self, other beings, another god?

I'm at the window.
I know someone's there.
I know there's a woman flaunting my bones and my flesh;
know she's looked for me in her worn-out breast
and has found me, miserable and straying.
Night is rooted in our skin.
Wise night rebuilds her bones and mine.
A bird from the sky has transposed its light into our eyes.

Peñalver, February 1999