Artists on Art

Poetic Form and the Translator

Reginald Gibbons

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What I offer here is already common knowledge among most translators and many who have thought about translation. My own practice is so long-standing, and I have had so voracious an appetite for the labor of translating as well as for reading the reflections of others on the subject, that I am not sure a single thought which follows is entirely original. I do think it useful, however, to consider poetic form from a translator's point of view, in order to speak not only of the elements of form but also of the transformations these must undergo in the process of translation. Considering such transformations eventually involves, in addition, a consideration of the psychology of form: given, say, the translator's strong impression that a certain formal element *must* be preserved, what can be concluded from this necessity about the meaning of the formal element itself, its gestural significance? I do not enter very far into this line of inquiry, but it lies behind most of the very practical reflections that make up this essay.

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The task of translating a poem should be the most practical exercise in reading it. The translator, following an emotional and intellectual response to the original poem, must also feel an impulse toward the genius of his or her own language if the translation is to have life. The

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exercises of reading and writing are twinned, then, in the art of translation. As Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote in the preface to his *Early Italian Poets*, "The only true motive for putting poetry into a fresh language must be to endow a fresh nation, as far as possible, with one more possession of beauty."[1]

Even allowing for the division of poetic translation into two groups (those translations, like Vladimir Nabokov's of Aleksandr Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, whose primary purpose is to annotate the original, but in "a fresh language," and those whose purpose is primarily to produce a new poem that, "as far as possible," corresponds to the original), it must be true of both groups that good translations can proceed only from a translator whose understanding of the formal qualities of the original permit him or her to exercise a refined judgment in all the hundreds of small aesthetic decisions that arise in translating. But is the translator's understanding then in any way peculiar? There may be readings of the poem that are more sensitive and less partisan, such as the best readers are capable of; there are also the readings done by poets, who are more often engaged with the poem for whatever it may say to them as poets themselves rather than for what it says to an imaginary ideal reader who brings less aesthetic partisanship to the act of reading. I do not wish to defend either sort of reading to the exclusion of the other but only to point out that the translator, poet or not, embarks on his or her work with perhaps a keener impression of the relative importance of the poem's constituent parts, of what has been called the poem's hierarchy of poetic values. Such keen impressions arise simply out of the translator's one inalienable sensitivity: the sensitivity to technical aspects of poetry. These aspects may not be of primary interest to an ideal reader, though they *must* shape the ideal reader's equally responsive reaction to the poem. It is *consciousness* of formal aspects, not responsiveness to them, that separates the translator from the ideal reader.

The hierarchy of values of every poem, far from being a pyramid of devices and accomplishments with clear rankings, is a rough grouping of objective aspects of the poem, aspects which have arisen out of the complex and mysterious processes of composition. The original poet weighs alternatives of various sorts—of sound, rhythm, connotation, allusion, superficial meaning, concrete specificity and discursive statement, wordplay, sentence shape and line shape—in arriving at that moment when, as Paul Valéry said, the poet can do no more with the poem, for

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whatever reason, and at last abandons it. In translating poems, I have often found it helpful to approach this hierarchy by recalling Ezra Pound's three categories of the poetic use of words, that use of words which seeks to "charge language with meaning to the utmost possible degree." In "How to Read" (1927 or 1928), Pound describes melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia:

> MELOPOEIA, wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning.
>
> PHANOPOEIA, which is a casting of images upon the visual imagination.
>
> LOGOPOEIA, 'the dance of the intellect among words,' that is to say, it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we *expect* to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play. It holds the aesthetic content which is peculiarly the domain of verbal manifestation, and cannot possibly be contained in plastic or in music. It is the latest come, and perhaps most tricky and undependable mode.
>
> The *melopoeia* can be appreciated by a foreigner with a sensitive ear, even though he be ignorant of the language in which the poem is written. It is practically impossible to transfer or translate it from one language to another, save perhaps by divine accident, and for half a line at a time.
>
> *Phanopoeia* can, on the other hand, be translated almost, or wholly, intact. When it is good enough, it is practically impossible for the translator to destroy it save by very crass bungling, and the neglect of perfectly well-known and formulative rules.
>
> *Logopoeia* does not translate; though the attitude of mind it expresses may pass through a paraphrase. Or one might say, you can *not* translate it 'locally,' but having determined the original author's state of mind, you may or may not be able to find a derivative or an equivalent.[2]

Pound provides these distinctions under the heading of "Language," and it should be most interesting to translators that he skips without warning from his lecture on reading into comments on the possibility of *translating* the poetry that falls predominantly into one or another of these modes. This is extremely sketchy, but Pound does amplify a bit under the next heading, "Prose":

> In *Phanopoeia* we find the greatest drive toward utter precision of word; this art exists almost exclusively by it.
>
> In *melopoeia* we find a contrary current, a force tending often to lull, or to distract the reader from the exact sense of the language.[3]

Pound says only that phanopoeia is the strategy with which the poet wishes first of all to put a picture in the reader's mind. But we need to explore this further: of greatest importance may be the concreteness and detail of the poet's descriptive language or, as in surrealist poetry, it may not be "realistic" language which is the issue but rather the suggestion of a visual image which has no likeness in the tangible world, an impossible or contradictory picture such as the one Wallace Stevens used to parody surrealist poetry—a clam playing the accordion.

Nor need the visual image be presented primarily for pictorial purposes. The governing significance may be metaphorical, asking the reader to leap quickly past the image presented to the perceptions and proceed to its symbolic sense. This is often the case before the nineteenth century, when poetic description for its own sake was licensed. To take a Renaissance example, from Shakespeare's sonnet 97:

> How like a winter hath my absence been
> From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!
> What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!
> What old December's bareness everywhere!
>
> [ll. 1–4]

And if there may be such differences in the effect of visual images, there is another difference, analogous to this, which arises between languages themselves. For the translator who works between Spanish and English, in either direction (my principal competency, hence what I offer as example), there is a difficulty which I think of, perhaps too lightly, as a general philosophical difference in the poetic genius of the two tongues.

The English-language poet and reader are used to a poetic reality having, in general, great concrete reliability, in which both poet and reader place referential confidence: it is as though the language itself were a little bit Aristotelian and taxonomically scrupulous in its own right and *preferred* to state, if a bird appears in a poem, what sort of bird it is, what size and color. Perhaps the Spanish language is a little bit Platonic when compared to English. For beyond the comparative paucity in Spanish of taxonomic distinctions for fauna, or garden tools, or whatever, Spanish poems—as if independent of poet—seem more often to proceed directly to the symbolic value of the bird and very frequently not to say whether the bird was large or small or meant to be visualized at all—a sign with no concrete referent, a bird without specific size or plumage, the *idea* of a bird. Francis Ponge has mentioned a similar difficulty between English and French, and I am tempted therefore to say that English may be a more phanopoeic language, offering more precise visual detail, than Spanish, perhaps than Romance languages in general. I think this notion fits our impressions, even if it is not something we can prove.

If by "melopoeia" we understand Pound to mean simply the richest musical effects of language, we can readily assign some poets to the category of phanopoeia and others to melopoeia. Phanopoeia would include, for example, William Carlos Williams, Pound (in many passages of the *Cantos*), T. S. Eliot (in much of *The Waste Land* but not in *The Four Quartets*), Ponge, many of the French surrealists, and Jean Follain. Within melopoeia we could count Milton, Rubén Darío, Federico García Lorca (often but not always), Paul Verlaine, and so on. I am gently pushing these figures toward each category simply to suggest a dominant trait in many of their poems, not the sole poetic strategy in their work. Pound's *ear*, for instance, was second to no one's, and the *Cantos*, often in the very passages that are most beautiful visually for the images they call to mind, are also most lovely in the sounds of the words.

Defining "logopoeia" precisely is difficult. In *ABC of Reading* Pound restated, if not refined, the categories this way:

> I. Throwing the object (fixed or moving) on to the visual imagination.
>
> II. Inducing emotional correlations by the sound and rhythm of the speech.
>
> III. Inducing both of the effects by stimulating the associations (intellectual or emotional) that have remained in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the actual word or word groups employed.
>
> (phanopoeia, melopoeia, logopoeia)[4]

If logopoeia were indeed a superior category, as appears here, it is hard to believe that Pound would not have put Dante and Homer into it. He did not.

Without entering into controversies over Pound's meaning, let me return now to the translator's task and simply posit that, for our purposes, it is most useful to consider logopoeia as embracing two things in particular: a heightened intensity and importance in the utilization of (1) syntax, and (2) discursive language (not that the two are necessarily connected). We would want to say, for example, that parts of Wordsworth's *Prelude* belong to logopoeia, that *Paradise Lost* (not one of Pound's favorite poems) belongs here too, that William Butler Yeats' great poems may also be instances of logopoeia. Our purpose here is only to say that the first decision a translator makes, whether consciously or not, is to confirm a general impression of the poem that will affect his or her strategies in translating it. Knowing Pound's categories and making some—but not strict—use of them helps to raise this impression to articulate consciousness and make it a tool for translation rather than a fuzzy preliminary stage. With this tool, many technical decisions can be dealt with more deliberately. Without it, intuition can take a meandering course.

Whatever the primary impulse of a poem, the poetic devices utilized by the poet will modify it; conversely, at every point these devices will also participate (with the familiar dialectical movement of art) in making that impulse a reality apprehensible to the reader. A poem that seems to have few musical effects but depends on sharp images and a kind of minimalist wit, such as some recent poetry translated from Eastern European languages, requires the translator to adhere as closely as possible to accurate rendition of visual images, metaphors, and so on (for the time being, we must skip over the very real problem of translating metaphors from one culture to another). Some such poems, however, are in fact rhymed in the original; consequently, our current English-language impression of them is false, because their translators have assigned the poems too narrowly, and perhaps unconsciously, to the category of phanopoeia. This has happened a great deal, I think.[5]

Translating German Romantic lyrics into English often seems impossible, I gather, because these poems are mostly—in a word—melopoeic, and there is little compensation for the loss of that music in the visual images and the sentiments which in translation seem commonplace or undistinguished. For a modern instance of logopoeia, we might turn to César Vallejo or Paul Celan: the extensions and distortions of syntax create a meaning not apprehensible otherwise, and translating such linguistic phenomena is almost impossible. Although both poets employ visual images, word-music, and rhythmic effects, translating these without the webbing of logopoeia in which they lie cannot be successful. And to avoid narrowing this category to poets who are known most for their difficulty, we could add a very different poet indeed, Antonio Machado—provided we recall, as he himself insisted, the primacy in his poems of meaning unfolding in time. This unfolding consciousness of time stands opposed to phanopoeia; and melopoeia could be only a participant in such a poetic, aiding with the temporal effects of meter and rhyme the sense of lived time unfolding in the poem as a whole.

(I wish to dispel, if I can, the suspicion that I am assigning to the category of logopoeia only the very best poets and relegating others to the first two categories. The temptation arises only because a poet's recourse to so many aspects of language—reference, music, syntax—can create the richest response in readers. But this says nothing about the poet's range or power, which must depend as well, obviously, on the quality of perceptions and thought, the importance of occasions and preoccupations, the depth of feeling. That is, it is not the case that the most formal poems are the strongest but that the poem in which a greater number of artistic decisions appear to have been made may be more powerful. And this, in turn, does not mean that the poem whose composition is most deliberate, least spontaneous, is the most moving or powerful or intelligent but that the compositional spontaneity that arises out of great gifts and rich preparations is likely to produce the best poem.)

Now when critics of poetic translation (sometimes poets themselves) decry the absence of formal elements (usually only the most obvious,

such as rhyme and meter) in some English-language translations, the proper response is first to ask: What *are* the equivalent effects in English (of the rhyme and meter, for instance) of the original? And then: Do these elements figure highly in the poem's hierarchy of values? Are we speaking (for instance) of rhymes sloughed anyway from a poem belonging to the realm of phanopoeia?

Take rhyme. The sensitive translator from Spanish to English knows that full rhyme in English is not equivalent to full rhyme in Spanish, where rhyming is less obtrusive because it is much more readily achieved and has not been historically rejected by so many poets as a device inappropriate to contemporary poetry. In other words, rhyming is less obtrusive in Spanish for linguistic *and* historical reasons. The English equivalent to Spanish full rhyme would be half-rhyme, or slant rhyme, as it is popularly known, which is a form of consonance in which the final vowel changes but final consonants on both sides of that vowel remain the same, as in the minimal pairs used in language classes to teach phonemic differences: bad, bed, bid, bud. Or, the rhyme may preserve an initial consonant and open vowels: bay, bee, bye, boo. An equivalent of Spanish *asonancia* (in which vowel pairs are preserved while consonants change) would then be in English a rhyme even more delicate than consonance, as *asonancia* in Spanish is more delicate than full rhyme. To my mind, the best thing here is not English assonance—which is rather too difficult to hear except where it is either heavy with long vowels (boot, spew) or assisted by music (as in most popular songs)—but a consonance which preserves only the final consonant. This may be subtle, but in my experience the attentive ear hears it: bid, head, mud, sad, and so on. It has been much used by poets of our time.

Simply stated, then, given different languages, with different linguistic and literary histories, the same poetic device will not have the same effect in different tongues. To translate a rhyme scheme and a rhyme type mechanically may indeed please the superficial critic, may indeed result at times in appropriate translation, but will often displease the careful reader of both original and translation because it violates the relative weight or proportion of the rhyme as a poetic element in the original poem.

Thus the translator can defend unexpected poetic devices in his or her translation if he or she understands what importance the rhyme and meter have in the original and seeks a faithfulness after his or her own fashion. Let me quote the original and my translation of Jorge Guillén's well-known poem "Desnudo" and expose my own failings as a translator, in order to illustrate how equivalent effects may be sought in utilizing rhyme in translation. (I will leave aside the question of meter in this poem and say only that in English it threatened to become more obtrusive than it is in Spanish; I abandoned it in favor of lines as rhythmically forceful as I could make them, though irregular in stress count.) Had

the translation been rhymed to match the rhyme pattern of the original (and taking into account the notable similarities in some of the rhymes employed, with vowels crossing over in stanza 1 and repeated *ls* in stanza 3), the overall effect in English could have been musically cloying. A better translator than I might have managed it—and will, I hope. But the function of the rhyme in this poem does not appear to be semantic, to *create* meaning, as when Guillén rhymes these two lines from "Amor a una mañana"—"Se pierde quien so lo pierde. / ¡Qué mío el campo tan verde!"—in order to state, *by means of the rhyme*, that it is green life that is lost to that person who chooses not to seize the beauty of the day: *pierde, verde*.[6] Instead, the rhyme in "Desnudo" appears to give greater cohesiveness to the stanzas, and this in turn appears to be necessary for the suggestion, in the poetic progress (rather than in the isolable meanings of the individual words) of emotional movement as the poem deliberately, slowly, deliciously, reveals a visual image of the nude by approaching it gradually and then refines or even cancels the visual image (the effect of phanopoeia) by shifting the poem immediately to the level of absolute type or abstraction.

Rather than allowing the nude female figure to suggest itself as its own meaning (fleshly beauty, mortality, the present moment), the poem explicitly forces the reader to consider the more philosophical category of the Present, for which fleshly Beauty stands as an Example. The rhymes suggest an intensifying feeling—they do intensify feeling—so that in this poem, rhyme is supremely important as a formal element, but toward an end which does not necessitate slavish adherence by the translator to the same rhyme *scheme*. Rather, it demands an understanding of, and an adherence to, the *function* of the rhyme throughout the poem. Rhyme, rich though it is, seems to be subordinated to the curious mixture of phanopoeia and an almost fastidiously distanced generality of diction.

Desnudo

Blancos, rosas. Azules casi en veta,
Retraídos, mentales.
Puntos de luz latente dan señales
De una sombra secreta.

Pero el color, infiel a la penumbra,
Se consolida en masa.
Yacente en el verano de la casa,
Una forma se alumbra.

Claridad aguzada entre perfiles,
De tan puros tranquilos,
Que cortan y aniquilan con sus filos
Las confusiones viles.

Desnuda está la carne. Su evidencia
Se resuelve en reposo.
Monotonía justa, prodigioso
Colmo de la presencia.

Plenitud inmediata, sin ambiente,
Del cuerpo femenino.
Ningún primor: ni voz ni flor. ¿Destino?
¡Oh absoluto Presente!

Nude

Whites, pinks. A pale blue swash,
Withdrawn, imagined.
Points of light flash a hint
Of secret shadow.

But color, unfaithful to the gloom,
Consolidates.
Lying in the summer of the room
A shape takes light.

And the sharp clarity of silhouettes—
Out of purity, a hush—
Whose edges can abolish
The confusion through which they cut.

The flesh is nude, its evidence
Resolved at rest.
A just monotony, prodigious
Hoard of presence.

The full sufficiency, immediate and complete,
Of a woman's body. Not beauty.
Not voice nor bloom, however pleasant,
Her destiny? Oh absolute present!

[Pp. 56–57]

To avoid phonemic claustrophobia in the translation, I employed only a few full rhymes; the musical thread most important to the translation, standing in for the original poem's rich music, is the repeated sounding of the *sh*. From the captious, perhaps irritated, critic's point of view, this is undoubtedly a liberty. What I sought, however, was the proper effect of the poem as a whole. If this translation fails, it is not for lack of adhering to Guillén's rhyme scheme, I think, but because of the difficulty of producing in English a conclusion as resounding as his in Spanish, given the poem's paucity of concrete detail and the shift we have already noted to the plane of the type or the abstract (effects due both to Guillén's

manner as a poet and to the conflict between Aristotelian and Platonic languages, as I have called them).

Meter seems at first glance to belong to melopoeia, and in considering it, the translator must again determine what place it has in the poem. Translating Keats into Spanish seems to me to require the use of meter, but translating John Clare's iambic lines does not raise the issue in the same way. Although both Keats and Clare are poets of melopoeia, it is perhaps not Clare's dominant poetic mode, while it can be for Keats, whose meter is more supple and eventful than Clare's. Translating García Lorca's gypsy ballads into English seems fruitless without meter, though nearly impossible with it; the phanopoeia of even his most striking metaphoric images should not be cut as if with a scalpel out of the rhythmic body of the poem, since that rhythm is precisely what carries the vital energy of his lines to the reader. On the other hand, translating Antonio Machado's frequent lines of mixed but conventional lengths seems to allow the use of free verse in English or, perhaps, for the more scrupulous translator, of iambic lines but varying in length.

In general, translating some meters is troublesome no matter whose lines they are—whether belonging to a poet of phanopoeia, melopoeia, or logopoeia—so the translator is well advised to ascertain the importance of the meter before he or she completes the translation. The Spanish eight-syllable line is particularly difficult; my own stratagem has often been to utilize in English an accentual line of two or three beats and, when the poem allows it, to take special care to shape the English sentences so that the syntax will help fulfill the function partly performed by the meter in Spanish—to drive the poem forward rhythmically, so that the argument of the poem is carried sensuously as well as pictorially and discursively. I can illustrate this best by quoting Guillén's "Mar con luna" and my translation.

Mar con luna

Un cielo poco estrellado
Da a esta luna de sí llena
Fondo oscuro de contraste
Para el rayo que riela
Sobre un camino de mar
Medio acero, medio perla,
Grises blancos donde flotan
Barquichuelas, casi negras
Sobra la banda muy clara
De un agua que es luna extensa,
Luna derretida abajo
Frente a la que redondea
Su esbozo de faz viviente,
Nos preside, nos gobierna

Según hábitos serenos,
Y como hallándose cerca
Nos otorga una atención
De luz siempre dulce a fuerza
De gran familiaridad
Antigua con su planeta.

Sea with Moon

A nearly starless sky
Provides the full moon filled
With itself depths of darkness
In which the glistening ray
May ride on a sea-road,
Half-steel, half-pearl, gray-white
Ocean where tiny boats
Are bobbing, almost black
Against water that is
A clear band of bright moon
Pulled forth and melted down
Beneath the one that rounds
Itself out as a living
Face, and presides above,
And governs us according
To tranquil habits and
As if finding itself
Nearby, concedes to us
An attention of that light
Always sweet, out of great
Familiarity
With its planet of old.

[Pp. 90–91]

Given that the rhythmic force of the poem dominates the hierarchy of poetic values, I sought an equivalent for that value first, even though it meant in this case producing a poem of greater length than the original. In English, the irregular but generally short accentual lines, the breaking of those lines over syntactical points that push the poem forward rather than yielding to the hesitations suggested by grammatical clauses, the use of consonance and assonance (at line endings: sky/ray, filled/road, road/boats, moon/down, down/rounds, and many more, inside the lines as well as at line endings, such as ray/may, ride/road, steel/pearl, above/governs, and so on)—these devices all form part of my attempt to make the translation feel and move something like the original poem. Most important, the poem is only one sentence. In this case, I had to reject my first impression, that the poem was phanopoeic (the visual images *are* forceful), and translate it with greater attention to aspects of melopoeia—

rhythm and rhyme—while at the same time sacrificing a metrical translation of the *octosílabo*. That this poem represents melopoeia and not logopoeia (generally speaking, of course) seems to me clear from the poem's reluctance until the final phrases to draw the reader into " 'the dance of the intellect among words.' " It is content to excite in the reader the sensations of the spectacle; but this is to draw a fine line, and I would not wish to stand entirely to one side of it for very long. For it is difficult to assign such a poem with certainty to one mode or the other. Nor is there any need to do so; the categories are heuristic. Assignment of a poem to them is a provisional tool of translation, not a final judgment of the poem, and is useful only so far as it moves the translation toward success. (That melopoeia and logopoeia *can* be distinguished, however, I do not doubt, for I find the distinction drawn not only by Pound but also by Eliot. If in fact logopoeia is the more ambitious of the two modes, then Eliot's reflections do seem appropriate. He took the step from melopoeia to logopoeia, I would say, when he wrote: "A 'musical poem' is a poem which has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it, and . . . these two patterns are indissoluble and one.")[7]

Let me cite a poem of Luis Cernuda which also raises the problem of this distinction and offers another form of the metrical quandary that faces the translator. Here the difficulty arises not out of the necessity to transpose the meter of the Spanish into an analogous English meter but in the curious fact that while Cernuda's poem is composed of irregular lines—the shortest of twelve or thirteen syllables, the longest of eighteen—it nonetheless has the stately authority of a regular metrical line, perhaps of fourteen syllables.

It may happen that the eleven-syllable Spanish *endecasílabo* is better translated into English iambic tetrameter than pentameter, because of the compression sometimes possible in English: slavish adherence to the analogous pentameter can require the translator to pad the poem out, and this would usually not reflect an aspect of the original. Whereas the Spanish fourteen-syllable line *must* be turned into iambic pentameter, if possible, because fourteeners (and even alexandrines) have never had currency in English. In Cernuda's "Gaviotas en los parques," it seemed to me that in order to produce in English an equivalent *tone* of measured deliberation, the translation must have not only metrical lines but some rhyming as well, although there is no rhyme in the original. This I did not determine in advance but discovered in working, when I could not manage to convey the authority of Cernuda's poem without greater overt formality in the translation than Cernuda had given the original. So in addition to an iambic pentameter line (though it is often admittedly rough, for it was the pace and measure of the whole line that was the issue, not the scrupulosity of the meter), I also employed as much music as I could, short of full rhyme.

Gaviotas en los parques

Dueña de los talleres, las fábricas, los bares,
Toda piedras oscuras bajo un cielo sombrío,
Silenciosa a la noche, los domingos devota,
Es la ciudad levítica que niega sus pecados.

El verde turbio de la hierba y los árboles
Interrumpe con parques los edificios uniformes,
Y en la naturaleza sin encanto, entre la lluvia,
Mira de pronto, penacho de locura, las gaviotas.

¿Por qué, teniendo alas, son huéspedes del humo,
El sucio arroyo, los puentes de madera de estos parques?
Un viento de infortunio o una mano inconsciente,
De los puertos nativos, tierra adentro las trajo.

Lejos quedó su nido de los mares, mecido por tormentas
De invierno, en calma luminosa los veranos.
Ahora su queja va, como el grito de almas en destierro.
Quien con alas las hizo, el espacio les niega.

Gulls in the Parks

Mistress of workshops, factories and bars
Lying stone-dark beneath a gloomy sky,
Soundless at night, devout on day-bright sabbath,
The city of Pharisees denies its sins.

Through the buildings' uniform facades
Breaks the ragged green of grass and trees;
Above this charmless scene of lawns and rain
An unexpected, mad panache: the gulls.

Why, having wings, are they the guests of smoke,
The foul streams in the parks, and wooden bridges?
Treacherous winds or some unconscious hand
Cast them inland, far from their native havens.

And the sea-nest is faraway, now rocked
By icy storms or luminous summer peace.
Their cries resound like those of exiled souls.
Whoever gave them wings denies them space.[8]

The sound patterns in the translation include interior rhymes of all three types (full, consonantal, assonantal), a great deal of sibilance throughout, and some rhythmic devices such as the feminine endings of lines 10 and 12, a kind of rhythm-rhyme. The effect of closure—which Cernuda achieves partly by the end-stopped last three lines and by the syntactic pointedness, almost proverbial in tone, of the last line—I endeavored to imitate and strengthen in English by making the last two lines metrically regular and by employing the slant rhyme on "peace" and "space."

That the poem advances through images should not conceal from the reader that it is really meditative; and by explicitly shifting the poem to an emblematic level, so that the gulls are more than gulls, and in raising so many ideas and symbolic images throughout, Cernuda seems to me to be writing logopoeia. He has eschewed, characteristically, many musical effects he could have used and has described so many details of the scene that the mental picture is not a procession of images finally but an allegorical landscape. Provisional assignment of the poem to the realm of logopoeia (though at the time of translating it, I was unaware of the usefulness of Pound's categories and judged the poem less precisely) placed the poetic elements in the proper hierarchy and, in this rather odd instance, led to a translation rather more formal than the original.

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Too many English-language translators (and I speak mostly of Americans, whose work I see more frequently) have, however, decided to abandon overt formal devices altogether. I say "overt" only because it seems necessary to emphasize that rhyme and meter, formal devices of great traditional importance, are only special and obvious *types* of formal techniques among the many at work throughout the body of a poem. When translators act as if the only possibility were to have full rhyme or none, accentual-syllabic meter or free verse, they reveal a lack of understanding of the full scale of formal elements—that is to say, of the poetic effects of which language is capable—as well as a lack of acquaintance with poetry in other languages and with the poetry of this century in English.

It is no accident that in our age of mostly unrhymed and unmetrical poetry (such as my own, in large part), most translations of formal poems are neither rhymed nor metered. But many translations of poems lacking these overt formal devices are also devoid of the intermediate formal recourses available to poet and translator alike. Many translators seem to seek out original works with almost no formal devices, as if the absence of these were itself a sign of their affinity with the original, or of the original poem's intrinsic worth.

The confusion of music with rhyme, and of rhythm with meter, is so thoughtless that it is hard to think any good poet or translator could be infected by it. Yet the evidence suggests that, though the intelligence of the poet or translator would quickly reject the confusion with proper sophistication, nonetheless another impulse, part of our age, accepts it as a concealed and patronizing gesture toward the reader, who is to be reassured that there is nothing too stuffy or too learned about the translation (and original poem) at hand. Poets whose formal talents are great, even

if sensuous effect (which is one result of formal elements, while thinking itself is the other—that special thinking through metaphor and form that characterizes poetry) is concealed or not often raised to prominence in their work (that is, poets like Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, James Wright), sometimes make the best translators, because they are conscious of aesthetic possibilities and alternatives that lesser translators do not notice and cannot achieve. As Valéry said, a poet is one to whom the difficulty of verse *gives* ideas, not one from whom it takes them away. This applies to translators as well: overly mechanical translators, and strictly phanopoeic ones, proclaim a deficiency of talent and an ignorance of the way poems work, especially great poems.

All the poetic possibilities at the disposal of the poet, then (and these are governed both by the conventions of his or her age and by the poet's decisions to alter or defy those conventions), may be roughly ordered into a hierarchy in each poem. This hierarchy assigns importance to some elements with relative ease; it is in assigning lesser value to others that the more difficult judgments arise. For a device or element may have little importance for two reasons: (1) the poet did not care for it and did not much employ it, or (2) however much employed, it was required by the conventions of the age rather than the exigencies of the poem and was thus rendered unobtrusive, because it is an element which the poet shares with most other poets of the day. Consider the thoroughly conventional—even padded—meter of Thomas Gray's elegy. I suspect I am only echoing many theorists of poetic language here, especially Jan Mukařovský, but in aiming my remarks at translation, I hope to indicate that the very practical problems of the art require a kind of practical specialty in such theorizing as well. The translator's judgments have an effect on the work he or she will accomplish for readers. Irrational decisions have concrete consequences; a translator can foolishly adhere to such and such a stanza pattern in the original, for instance, after having completely eliminated the *raison d'être* of that stanza by eliminating rhymes and fixed line lengths. It would make more sense for the translator to determine the importance of that stanza pattern in the poem and to balance it against the importance of its own constituent elements (the varying lines, the rhymes). Perhaps the stanza *should* be preserved—and justified—in a different way. And in such instances, translation into free verse should not mean the absence in the translation of formal values, not if the translator's concept of the formal elements in the poem is broad enough and informed by assessments like Pound's of the way poetic language works.

Free verse itself, *in general*, need not imply the absence of all formal values; these may be many, subtle, and vital. But free verse too can exhibit very conventional, and not very expressive, formal elements—formal in the sense that willy-nilly they involve the use of words *in poems*, with ends beyond prose sense. To cite an unlikely but appropriate analogy, heroic

couplets have mostly conventional value in the English eighteenth century. But most inferior poets of any age are less aware than good poets of the proportion of the purely conventional in their work. And when a translator mistakenly overrates conventional elements in drawing up the hierarchy of values, then mistakes in translation are on the way. Conversely, when the translator temporarily places the conventional values of the poem at the bottom of the hierarchy, the emptiness of the poem, if it is weak, may make a forceful impression. It is an easy experiment: remove, if this is at all possible, the power of meter in apparently similar poems by Arthur Rimbaud and Verlaine and compare the substance of the poems. You will separate a (mere?) melopoeia from something more substantial. I know I am suggesting a heresy, but it is only for a few moments. (I cannot use Baudelaire for this experiment, because such poems as his cannot sacrifice even one element without losing a great deal, so remarkably are they made.) Readers will be able to supply other pairs of poets for this experiment: rough or remove the meter in Gray and Johnson; put both Ginsberg and Creeley into lines that represent an average length; write poems out in prose; and so forth. The translator often must separate the conventional from the essential in apparently unlikely places.

Roman Jakobson wrote of rhyme that "phonemic similarity is sensed as semantic relationship."[9] Rhyme, that is, *makes* meaning (as I noted earlier, in quoting the couplet by Guillén). The presence of any formal element has significance and meaning as a gesture, and this is what lies behind Pound's categories. That a poem may choose to present primarily visual images to the mind, for instance, is itself meaningful. First, it reflects language. (Pound thought that the Chinese language had the greatest degree of phanopoeia possible, but it is also—I am told—a language without the semantic device of subordination.) Second, it reflects literary history and convention (as in imagist poetry in English early in this century). And, third, it reflects the poet's artistic choices (as when he or she wishes to write in a way identifiably *not* musical but pictorial, for a specific effect—descriptive passages in *Paterson*, rather than the dialogue or the newspaper clippings, for instance).

There is a similar significance in the whole form of a poem when, by employing a set form (whether as traditional as the sonnet or as recent but strict as the short free-verse poem in short lines with line breaks at syntactic junctures—John Hollander has wittily described such recent conventions in free-verse poems) or by subverting it (as Pamela White Hadas does to the sonnet form in *Designing Women*), the poet makes a statement about a relationship between his or her poem and other poems. The literary history which the poet both receives and alters has much to do with this. Spanish poets of this century, even among the avant-garde, have not hesitated to utilize the sonnet form. Gerardo Diego, entrepreneur of several avant-garde movements, wrote sonnets whose overt form belied their modish and extraordinarily nonsensical substance. But in poetry

written in English, especially that written in America—where recent literary history, if not all literary history, is almost devoid of manifestos and movements (though rich in individual meditations on writing poetry)—the poet who wishes to advance into a poetic future has not been permitted to make much use of traditional poetic forms, for these have inevitably been associated with the traditional themes and attitudes that the poet in this century eschews. To employ the form would be to add to the poem's meaning the gesture of its vaunted reference to the tradition of verse, and some poets do not wish to suggest any such connection between their own work and that of the past. Others, more conscientious or more scrupulous, wish to suggest such connections in ways far subtler than overt use of traditional poetic forms.

The choice between metrical or free verse is a similar and obvious gesture in American poetry, though not so much in English. Would Pound's decree that first it was necessary to break the back of the pentameter, as if *it* were the tyrant, make sense translated into Spanish literary history? I think not. Even the modern avant-garde in Spain felt little need to rebel against the traditions of poetic form. I do not believe much surrealist verse in English can be found in traditional meters, while by comparison there is a fair amount in Spanish.

When the very shape of the poem is itself a part of the meaning, the translator faces a difficult problem if the literary histories of his two languages diverge. When I translated several of Cernuda's verse monologues into English, I discovered that what in Spanish was not only innovative but also an essential part of Cernuda's individual poetic manner (which he had formed partly from reading such poets as Robert Browning, Yeats, and Eliot) could not be translated effectively into English because the poetic mode he employed was one already quite familiar to English-language readers; once translated, Cernuda's work would seem not fresh and original but familiar and accepted. As a result, several of his finest poems do not appear among my translations. I think I was dealing with aspects of logopoeia, in part, but at the same time with some insuperable accidental problems that are historical and comparative in origin.

Poetic authority, that evasive but decisive quality, results, then, from the combined effects of every level of the poem: from the poem's general demeanor (Pound's categories)—if it can be ascertained—through the linguistic and poetic specificities of its lines, to its place in literary history. Even so vague but nonetheless incontrovertibly important an aspect as "tone of voice" represents decisions made at a technical level—the technical level I have preferred, throughout this inquiry, to call "formal," so as to widen the inquiry beyond what I have called "overt form." The quest for accuracy in understanding a poem and in translating it leads from the smallest formal details to questions of genre. Accordingly, the translator who sees that the *relative* hierarchical importance of a formal strategy (as bald as a stanza or as subtle as the music of the words' secondary

meanings) is itself a gesture that creates meaning is likely to achieve greater power in the translation: that translation will reproduce not only the overall aspect of the poem, and some of its particulars, but also something like its stance regarding the poetic resources of language in general and its own language especially.

Mistaken translators often err not only in failing to reproduce some aspect of overt form but in failing to carry the translation through all levels—of Pound's categories, of linguistic event, and of literary history. It is common, on this account, for translators to turn logopoeia or melopoeia falsely into a rather pale phanopoeia. There are better ways to proceed, and I hope I have suggested a few of them.

1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, preface to *Early Italian Poets* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981), p. 2.

2. Ezra Pound, "How to Read," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London, 1954), p. 25; and see p. 23.

3. Ibid., p. 26.

4. Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York, 1960), p. 63.

5. For a similar case against some translators of Spanish poetry, see my "Spanish Voices," *Chicago Review* 29 (Spring 1978): 91–100.

6. Jorge Guillén, "Amor a una mañana" [Love of a morning], *Guillén on Guillén: The Poetry and the Poet*, trans. Reginald Gibbons and Anthony L. Geist (Princeton, N.J., 1979), p. 82; all further references to Guillén's poetry and to my translations of it will be cited by page number from this edition and will be included in the text. And see Guillén, *Cántico* (Buenos Aires, 1950).

7. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," *On Poetry and Poets* (New York, 1961), p. 26.

8. Luis Cernuda, "Gaviotas en los parques" [Gulls in the parks], *Selected Poems of Luis Cernuda*, ed. and trans. Gibbons (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1977), pp. 114–15. This poem is presumably set in London, during Cernuda's exile. The translation in the Anthony Edkins and Derek Harris edition, which was done by Edward Wilson, gives "pharasaical city" in line 4. Assuming that this is one of the translations which Wilson and Cernuda worked on together, I have taken this reading for my translation also (see Cernuda, *The Poetry of Luis Cernuda*, ed. Edkins and Harris [New York, 1971], p. 87).

9. Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," in *On Translation*, ed. Reuben A. Brower (New York, 1966), p. 238.