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## Trying to Catch a Wave in Bucket: Notes on Translating Poetry

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## *Trying To Catch A Wave In A Bucket:* *Notes on Translating Poetry*

Under the best of circumstances, the practice of translation begins with the approximation of paraphrase and then aspires towards equivalence. True equivalence is impossible insofar as the original succeeded as poetry, the devices of which are deeply rooted in the original and in the poet's and reader's familiarity with the history of particular usages and associations of specific terms, images and phrases.

Each language has functional resources no other tongue can duplicate. The delayed verb so effective in German feels stilted and artificially dramatic in English; the rhyme-rich mellifluous characteristic of Spanish in English sounds too lushly ornamental; the ambiguities Mallarmé could tease out of his native French, when attempted in English, appear anemic, academic; the elaborate tonal textures available to the Greek poet employing the literary and demotic Greek have no true equivalents in English. If there can be no equivalence in means, one must try for equivalence in effect.

My interest in translation began when I cross-checked some well-known translations of Federico García Lorca with some Spanish dictionaries and noticed numerous discrepancies. I decided to try some "versions" of my own, using the published translations as my "pony." It was a piecemeal effort since so many of Lorca's usages could not be unravelled with any dictionary. Later, I tried again with Neruda, choosing various "Odas Elementales" to work with because they were relatively simple. I blundered through several, showing them to various friends who knew Spanish, eliciting suggestions, corrections, explanations, slowly improving my grasp of Spanish and learning some of the common pitfalls of translations. Eventually I tried translating odes which hadn't been previously done so I had no "trots." I completed a number of them which I then checked and cross-checked with a variety of Spanish-speaking readers until I felt reasonably secure about their accuracy. From that point on, revisions were directed at improving their fluidity in English.

I next decided to collaborate in translating the poetry of Heinrich Böll, better known as a German novelist. I worked with Hannelore Quander-Rattee, who was born and raised in Germany. She knew German and English well enough to have worked professionally in the translation of each but her grasp of English poetic technique and idiom was not sufficient to make translations with which she felt satisfied.

That we met for this project was sheer luck for us both. She knew Böll's prose but not his poetry. I knew a couple of his shorter poems through translation and had liked them. I learned that he had, indeed, published a single slender volume which we obtained. Hannelore provided me with originals, transcriptions and notes; I worked up English versions to which she responded with suggestions and advice. I would re-work the English versions and send them back to her, again and again, until we had gone as far as we could. Certain idioms resisted our best efforts, so we set out to find other readers to check our work. We were fortunate enough to find two readers eager to go through the German and the English, filling in the gaps and offering invaluable suggestions for further fine-tuning.

The best translations should be done by bilingual (or multilingual) poets. It is clear that more and more often, in practice, many poets who aspire to translate are following the example of Robert Lowell's *IMITATIONS* which established that translated poetry could be popular and that fidelity to the original text might be sacrificed to personal tastes *as long as the result was a powerful work in English*. Few critics objected to Lowell's deviations from original texts. Fewer still objected to his method, which was to work from trots provided by scholars.

That this method went uncondemned and that the results could enjoy such high praise opened the way for many other poets to collaborate in like manner for their translations. Auden, Kunitz and Merwin have all done translations from Russian, relying entirely upon English trots provided by scholars. More significantly, Bly's example has raised an awkwardly yoked pair of precedents; while he has successfully proselytized for certain poets — not only through his own third-hand translations, but through his publication of the more reliable translations by James Wright, Hardie St. Martin and others — he has produced many of his own versions which are either inadvertently sloppy or are bent to illustrate various points Bly wishes to make about the nature of poetry.

Question of accuracy aside, the influence of Bly's translations has been considerable enough to affect many young poets. That influence has been to direct poets to consider the importance of image, especially the "deep" or "leaping" image, as being of primary importance, more important, for instance, than formal lyric qualities. The tendency of much American poetry during the late 60's and 70's to become musically two-dimensional while trying to find a fourth dimension through imagery quite possibly owes much to Bly's efforts and limitations. More recently, as the importance of image has come once again to be an article of faith, an interest in a more complex lyricism is slowly developing.

Insofar as that returning interest is a way of restoring balance to the notion of what a poem is, it is probably healthy. Image is important, just as having a knock-out punch is important to a boxer, but no more important than footwork which, while less dramatic, serves the purpose of letting a fighter make a moving target of himself and letting him set up to deliver his punch with the best chance of connecting. To fully utilize an image, the poet must create in the poem (or translation) a dynamic of bobbing and weaving, feigning and jabbing, such that the punch, the image, will be most effective. Image without context is showboating.

For the translator, image is more readily translated than are the dynamic webs of syllable, sound and cross-associations, more readily than the accelerations and pauses, the innuendo and irony. It's not hard to see why image is emphasized.

In the end, the notion of making an "equivalent" to the original is merely a goal. Equivalents don't exist. Music offers what, for me, is the clearest parallel to the translator's insoluble dilemma. In music, it is not uncommon to rewrite a composition originally intended for the piano to, say, the guitar. It will be as nearly the same music as possible, yet it will be different as the sound boards for the piano and the guitar are different in frequency, in quality of resonance and in effect.

Whitman once wrote that anyone wishing to learn to write poetry would do well to study the dynamics of a wave before setting pen to paper. For the translator, that difficulty is compounded by the need to remove that wave from its living ocean of language and to cart it in a bucket to a foreign shore where one is expected to resurrect it, glistening arc and spindrift mantle intact.

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