

TRANSLATING WILFRED OWEN IN ARGENTINA

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This paper assesses to what extent changes of an aesthetic nature affect the decision-making process in translation. Ezra Pound's trichotomy, *phanopoeia*, *melopoeia* and *logopoeia*,¹ is clarifying when making decisions in texts where the message is the outstanding feature. Briefly explained, the first type emphasizes the visual elements in a poem, the second highlights the melody and the third stresses its notional components. However, one must bear in mind that the three components operate as feedback, so much so that 'meaning' is significantly determined by visual and aural associations.

I shall discuss three features arising from the translation of some of Wilfred Owen's poems. These are: i) Sound, ii) Pattern, iii) Register. This paper is an the exposition of problems which became apparent after many revisions.

i) Sound

The view that rhymed translations in Spanish do not imply relevant merit is based on the fact that Spanish is extremely rich in rhymes. Abundance of devices, however, can result in a double-edged blade in translation since the extraordinary liberty of Spanish syntax places the translator in a complex situation.

I shall first consider the use of pararhyme. Whereas in the early stages of Owen's brief poetic career, pararhyme is ornamental, in the mature war poems pararhyme is an unavoidable ingredient of the poetic effect.² The main feature of pararhyme is that consonantal sounds of two different words are identical not only after the stressed vowel sound but also before it. Thus, pararhyme is a type of imperfect rhyme, consisting of the repetition of the final consonant sound, and sometimes of the initial sounds, while varying the vowels. English being a predominantly consonantal language and Spanish a predominantly vocalic one, no equivalence through consonant variation could be achieved. My resource was in some cases assonance. Assonance occurs in English when vowels are echoed within the same line. It is basically the same thing in Spanish but occurs at the end of lines. Lacking the rotundity of perfect rhyme, assonance is used in Spanish to suggest something slightly unachieved or evocative. In the case of Owen's use of pararhyme the translator's problems are the following: *i)* establishing which TL device is bound to produce effects similar to those provoked by the endings in SL poem; *ii)* establishing when the device is not in fact the main component and consequently can be put aside favouring phanopoeia or logopoeia; *iii)* establishing when pararhyme is an unavoidable component and in that case determining which its function in the original poem is.

The first example is taken from 'From My Diary, July 1914', a poem which describes an ecstatic natural environment and mentions an amorous encounter. The lines 'Birds / Cheerly chirping in the early day', were at first translated as 'Pájaros / que *chispeantes chirrían* en el día temprano'; and afterwards changed into 'Pájaros / que *chispeantes pían* en el día temprano'. Both versions attempt effects like those of the 'birds' - 'bards' pararhyme using the assonance 'pájaros' - 'bardos'. But they differ in the choice 'chirrían' - 'pían'. The Spanish verb 'chirriar' suggests

something rough, such as the noise produced by a rusty chain. 'Chispeante' means 'sparkly', which corresponds to the optimistic attitude given in the couplet. 'Chispeantes chirrían' was not a bad solution for the alliterative 'cheerly chirping'. The onomatopoeia became less evident when substituting 'píán'. Something was gained, though, because the 'p' sound can be traced back to 'pájaros' and reproduced in 'chispeantes', 'píán' and 'temprano'. The sequence 'pájaros'- 'bardos' also introduces a modulation from the voiced to the voiceless.

Considering a later poem, 'Strange Meeting', Michael Roberts's remark must be recalled: in using pararhyme 'Owen's characteristic progression from a vowel of high to one of low pitch conveys a sensation of frustration, weariness and hopelessness in the later poems'.³ Some attempt to reproduce sound effects in 'Strange Meeting' is necessary to give an idea of the development of Owen's technique as regards pararhyme. Some examples of the rhyming words which form the couplets are 'escaped' / 'scooped', 'groined' / 'groaned', 'moan' / 'mourn'.

When translating this poem for the first time the Dantesque vision was so overwhelming that I paid attention exclusively to concepts and images. When revising the translation I discovered that I had unconsciously kept slight assonances using the commonest TL pattern: paroxytone words with dark vowels such as 'escapaba', 'excavado', 'abovedado', 'angustiosos', etc. In the second draft I tried to reproduce a not too strict pattern of couplets. Yet I favoured natural expression and neither rejected consonance when it occurred at the end of the verse, nor changed assonance when more than two lines ended with the same vowels, e.g. 'alegría', 'todavía', 'dicha', 'vía'. I found that in such way the litany tempo of the original poem was better reproduced. An illustration of a longer passage becomes necessary. Consider lines 11-14,

With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan
"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn"

These were rendered in Spanish as follows:

La visión de esa cara estaba graneada de mil sufrimientos;
sin embargo no llegaba a ese lugar la sangre desde el suelo
ni tableteaban las armas ni gemían los morteros.
«Extraño amigo», dije, «aquí no hay razón para el lamento».

Keeping strict assonances in the translation of 'From My Diary' implied giving hints of a rather external device in this early poem; I tried to suggest the impression that opaque vowels spring from the sad atmosphere in the later one, *i. e.* 'Strange Meeting'.

In one case the choice of metrical regularity and assonance resulted in an interesting stylistic phenomenon. This happened in the last lines of 'The Show', a vision in which caterpillars stand for soldiers. Personifying death, Owen says: 'Showed me its feet, the feet of many men, / And the fresh-severed head of it, my head.' The first draft was: 'me mostró sus pies, los pies de muchos hombres, / y su cabeza recién cortada, mi cabeza.' The second, following the pattern of the fourteen-syllable line, reads: 'los pies de muchos hombres y también su cabeza / recién decapitada. La cabeza era mía.' The concise group 'my head', had to be extended to four words: 'la cabeza era mía'. This utterance, however, occurs after strong punctuation and a run-on line. Thus it contributes to the image of decapitation, since the clause itself is sharply separated from the rest.

ii) Pattern

I am dealing specifically with the sonnet. D. Hibberd says that this rigorous structure helped Owen to organize his images and his thought.⁴ Although following the pattern of consonantal rhymes entails the risk of adopting unsurmountable constraints, I thought one must try to transfer Owen's sonnets into a sonnet-like pattern in Spanish. Owen's sonnets usually follow neither the Petrarchan nor the Shakespearean mould. It is not to be thought that transgression of form goes necessarily with rejection of accepted religious values or ideologies, but as a matter of fact both things occur in Owen's poetic career. The first case I shall consider is the sonnet 'To Eros', written in the traditional way of an octet and a sestet. The first quatrain of the English poem goes as follows:

In that I loved you, Love, I worshipped you.
In that I worshipped well, I sacrificed
All of most worth. I bound and burnt and slew
Old peaceful lives, frail-flowers, firm friends; and Christ.

There are three verbs in the polysyndeton of the third line and four objects in the fourth. Every noun except 'Christ' has one modifier. 'Christ' is left in a detached position to signal the climax. One of the solutions was to make the hyperonym 'sacrificed' comprise all the previous verbs. The first Spanish version read as follows:

Porque te amaba, Amor, te veneraba
y al venerarte te hice el sacrificio
de todo lo valioso. Te he adorado,
te ofrecí amigo y flor y vida y Cristo.

Some variation was kept in these verbs, though neither 'adorar' nor 'ofrecer' reproduce exactly the idea of a sacrifice. The polysyndeton was transferred from English verbs to Spanish nouns, a device enhancing the importance of 'Christ' at the end of the series. Meter demanded the exclusion of all adjectives; the singular form 'vida' suggests that only the poet's life is concerned.

The second draft (part of line 3 and line 4) runs: 'Yo he quemado / vidas en paz, la flor, yo maté a Cristo.' The triple actions of 'bound', 'burn', 'slew', have been synthesized into the second; polysyndeton disappeared. The series of nouns, could have been kept in the following version: 'Vidas en paz, y flor y amigos, Cristo'. However, this entailed softening the emphasis laid upon the final item, 'Christ', which is kept and strengthened in 'yo maté a Cristo'. Though overemphatic, this utterance detaches the decisive element in the series.

The third draft (part of line 3 and line 4) reads: 'Te he inmolado / vidas y flores, amigos firmes, Cristo'. 'Inmolar' is a hyperonym comprising the three English verbs: polysyndeton was again neglected; as a consequence the image of Christ became weaker. It was not possible to keep every noun with its modifier. Only 'firm' is kept; 'frail' and 'peaceful' had to be discarded. Discarding all the adjectives seems to be fair (see the first version). Preferring one implies determining which is the most informative or pathetic. In my opinion 'peaceful' is more informative modifying 'lives' than 'frail' modifying 'flowers' and 'firm' modifying 'friends'. But to say that friends are firm highlights the notion that even Christ, the firmest friend, has been sacrificed. On the other hand, omitting ornamental adjectives would deprive the reader of the sensation that something rather artificial is happening at this stage of Owen's poetry. A free translation would permit the presence of all the elements there but at the cost of renouncing the compactness of the Spanish verse. A paradox

happens: if the translator conveys in a concise form what is somehow wordy in the source text, the reader will get a false impression of compactness. The translation of all the signifiers, on the other hand, involves renouncing a traditional form, in this case the sonnet. In the case of 'The Fates' my decision was compromise. The first draft was in prose. In the second I tried to keep both the 11-syllable Spanish pattern and rhyme, but consonant rhyme proved to be impossible to keep. Even natural syntax had to be disturbed through hyperbaton and ellipsis. I finally favoured a rhythmical pattern but without rhyme. The resulting version, though lacking the rotundity of the rhymed one, is smoother. My example comes from the third quatrain, which is separated from the octet and forms a unit with the final couplet. It reads:

Escape? There is one unwatched way: your eyes,
O Beauty! Keep me good that secret gate.
And when the cordon tightens of the spies
Let the close iris of your eyes grow great.

The translation reads:

¿Escapar? Sólo un rumbo: son tus ojos.
¡Oh, Belleza! consérvame esa puerta.
Y al estrechar su cerco los espías
el iris de tus ojos se acreciente.

iii) Register

The mixture of styles in Owen's war poems is represented in 'A Terre', a monologue of a wounded soldier addressing a bookish officer. While employing a colloquial register, the speaker is scorning poetic

diction. The problem for a translator into Spanish is that of dialectological variety. Trying to reproduce the soldier's jargon, I translated 'I tied to peg out soldierly' as 'Traté de estirar la pata como un soldado', connoting my version with a River Plate idiom. Likewise, 'buffers', has been translated as 'jovatos', which is a River Plate slangy variant for 'old man'.

Afterwards the speaker, thinking of the poetic use of an image, comments upon glorious ribbons. He says: 'My glorious ribbons? Ripped from my own back / In scarlet shreds. (That's for your poetry book.).' These have been tentatively translated as: i) '¿Y mis cintas gloriosas? De mi espalda arrancadas / (esto para tu libro de poemas): como jirones de escarlata'; ii) '¿Y mis gloriosas tiras? Sacadas de mi espalda / -jirones de escarlata-: (es para tu poema)'. The first is metrically irregular whereas the second keeps a uniform meter. 'Tiras' is more informal than 'cintas' (i.e. 'ribbons'), contributing to underscore the contrast with the statement that 'scarlet shreds' is apt for poetry. 'Jirón de escarlata' has a bookish ring in Spanish. The first version gave extra emphasis to the scorned diction using inversion: 'De mi espalda arrancadas'. In the first case the detachment of the comparison contributed to the mockery. Instead, the detachment in the second version is achieved using dashes, but verse form did not allow the inclusion of the signifier 'poetry book'.

Colloquial diction is a decisive feature in the poem 'Inspection'.⁵ The poet emphasizes the opposition between the miserable condition of the soldier and the demands of the officer: the dirt on the soldier's clothes, which the sergeant censures, is in fact blood. The sergeant commands colloquially "'Old yer mouth". "'Cierre el pico"', a severe rather than offensive equivalent in Spanish, is adequate here. The soldier's apocalyptic comment indicates a change: 'The world is washing out its stains', he says. He goes on ironically: 'When we're duly white-washed, being dead, / The race will bear Field-Marshal God's inspection.' It was translated as follows:

Pero cuando estemos bien limpitos, ya muertos
la raza tendrá que aguantar
la inspección del Mariscal de Campo, Dios.

The problem here was that of reproducing register changes originated in the characters who take part in the poem. I have used assonance and a loose metrical pattern. The perfect and obvious rhyme 'objection' - 'inspection' is easily translated into Spanish, though the endings become masculine. The ironic 'duly white-washed' was transferred using the appraising diminutive: 'cuando estemos bien *limpitos*' (instead of 'limpios') thus compensating the loss of 'white'.

Something different occurred in 'Smile, Smile, Smile', an ironic title which echoes a song which was popular among the soldiers. Owen is attacking the civilians' patriotic claims to continue the war. The plea is made by a newspaper. Imitation of inflated journalistic style became necessary. See for example the utterance "'The sons we offered might regret they died / If we got nothing lasting in their stead'". After some lines one may perceive the inclusive 'we', emphatic forms such as 'our very selves' or 'worthy victory' and the climatic 'Nation'. 'Foremost need' was successively translated as 'necesidad más notoria', 'necesidad más imperiosa' and eventually 'necesidad más acuciante'. 'Comienza' was preferred to 'empieza' ('begun'). 'Solidly indemnified' could have been translated as 'indemnizado generosamente'. Actually I hesitated between 'copiosamente' and 'con largueza'. Since the latter is rather bookish or archaic it should probably be preferred: archaism may characterize the ostentatious, war-like style of a foreign newspaper. 'Sitting in this ancient spot' was translated 'que estamos en este viejo lugar' in the first draft, and 'que permanecemos en esta antigua tierra' in the second, 'antigua tierra' being a 'patriotic' collocation. 'If we forgot' was first translated 'si

nos olvidáramos' and then 'si en el olvido diéramos', a rather stilted phrase.

A final remark about this sarcastic poem: the last line, 'Say: How they smile! They're happy now, poor things', was in the first draft translated: 'dicen: "¡Cómo sonríen! Ahora están felices, los pobres"', and in the second: 'dicen: "¡Cómo sonríen! ¡Qué felices están, los infelices!"' The justification rests upon both the ideological polysemy and the stylistical repetition of the linguistic roots. According to María Moliner 'infeliz' means 'desdichado, desgraciado, desventurado, pobre'; but also 'crédulo, ingenuo, inocente, incauto',⁶ corresponding to 'naive', 'credulous'. The juxtaposition 'felices' – 'infelices' reinforces the paradox of the final exclamation through derivation and internal rhyme. The same device - juxtaposition of opposing elements and cognate signifiers- has been used in one line of 'Strange Meeting', that in which the dead soldier or *Doppelgänger* identifies himself: 'I am the enemy you killed, my friend.' In this case Spanish has the possibility of derivation to form the opposite meaning, i.e. 'amigo' – 'enemigo'. I followed at first the English word order: 'Soy el enemigo que mataste, amigo mío,'. Then I changed the word order: 'Soy el enemigo, amigo, que has matado'. Deferring the relative clause stresses the suspense: the paradox 'enemigo' – 'amigo' is emphasized; the copulative initial verb is felt at the beginning as predicating two contradictory notions, 'enemigo' and 'amigo'. The latter becomes clear only after the relative clause has been uttered.

Conclusion:

The very choice of Owen implies a kind of resistancy. The subject of war has not been particularly favoured in Argentina, a nation that for a century has not been involved in any serious external conflict. Now the War of the Malvinas (or Falklands) was fought on the Argentine side in a

way similar to that of the First World War: trenches, immobility, exposure were distinctive features. The national claim for the islands became frustrated by the war, inevitably connected with military government. The local phenomenon known as 'desmalvinización', a sort of taboo erasing the topic of the isles from public memory, makes the war theme particularly provocative.

The task of facing subtle techniques and delicate sonorous devices coupled with horrid images by someone who did not mitigate the terrors of the war, entailed very peculiar exigencies in the translator's task. Translators often complain about losses involved in the transference from one language to another. What I tried to show is that linguistic constraints inherent to a language can offer interesting possibilities of compensation, even gains in some exceptional cases. We can apply to poetic translation what Shakespeare says in Sonnet 64: 'Increasing store with loss, and loss with store'.

Referências

- 1 Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading*. New York: New Directions, 1960, p. 63.
- 2 Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen*. London: Longmans, 1975, p. 87.
- 3 Quoted by Gertrude White. *Wilfred Owen*. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1969, p. 83.
- 4 D. Hibberd., *ibid.*, p.23.
- 5 Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle. The Poetry of the Great War*. London and New York: Paperbacks, 1987, p. 208.
- 6 María Moliner. *Diccionario de uso del español*. Madrid: Gredos, 1994.

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