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Vallejo and the Trials of Translation:

The Erasure of Logopoeia

What would happen if I approached César Vallejo in a way parallel to my treatment of Lorca in my 2009 book *Apocryphal Lorca: Translation, Parody, Kitsch*—using similar analytical and theoretical tools but adjusting them to the case at hand? That is the question I would like to pose in my talk today. Like Lorca, the Peruvian poet had a strong presence in US poetry in the 1960s and ‘70s, and has continued to be studied and translated by eminent poets and scholars in the years since. A certain boom for “Latin American surrealism,” often neither Latin American nor surrealist, made both poets famous (at least among readers of poetry) in the English-speaking world, along with a handful of others like Borges, Neruda, Machado, Jiménez, and Aleixandre. This boom in poetry translation begins in the late ‘50s, a few years before the “boom” in the Spanish American novel began to produce abundant translations of García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Cortázar, and others. The idea of Latin American surrealism, in fact, closely parallels understandings (or misunderstandings) of “magical realism,” which remains a prevalent cultural cliché in the reception of Latin American literature in the Anglosphere.

The most influential mode of verse translation in the United States at the moment when translations of Spanish-language began to proliferate (the 1960s) emphasized visual imagery over both sound and verbal play. The name for the school of American poetry inspired by these translations is the “deep image.” The idea was to link the ordinary language of William Carlos Williams and other imagist poets to the depth of Lorca’s “deep song” and of Neruda’s surrealism, supposedly less cold and superficial than orthodox French surrealism. It was Robert Bly who popularized the idea that both the Anglo-American modernism of imagism and the “Pound-Williams” school, and its immediate offshoot, the Black Mountain school, were excessively concerned with the technique of verse and, as a corollary, somewhat lacking in inwardness or psychological depth.

It is easy to see why translation—or, rather, a certain understanding of translation—is key to the deep image school. Bly’s translations, like his original poetry, did employ free verse and “the American idiom,” but without the obsession with “breath” and “measure” that Creeley and Levertov brought to the table. In fact, the emphasis falls completely on those aspects of poetry that are easiest to translate: visual imagery and semantic meaning. Unless the translator makes a conscious and strenuous effort, at least two main aspects of the original text will be invisible to the reader: sound (prosody), and the actual *language* of the original, its purely verbal textures.

Bly’s notorious argument that American modernism, along with its successors, lacked the full range of imagination of the European and Latin American avant-gardes would have been a valid one, except for one paradox: the way in which he proposed an alternative tradition was so oversimplified that it resulted in a less, rather than a more complex variety of modernism. Speaking of his own early poetry, Charles Simic, a figure associated with the deep image, says that “the idea was to make poems entirely of images, not caring too much about sound, using the simplest possible vocabulary” (Simic). Indeed, in the work of poets like Simic, the modernist heritage was reduced to a single movement—surrealism—and a single aspect of poetic technique, the visual image—whether deep or shallow. My thesis here, simply stated, is that it has taken quite a while for the poets who were championed by the deep image school, poets like Lorca and Vallejo, to emerge fully as avant-garde / modernist poets in the American consciousness, and that one of the major stumbling blocks has been translation itself.

Although Vallejo was quickly recognized in the US as a major figure of 20th century Latin American poetry, he did not fit, very well, into the dominant paradigm of Spanish-language “surrealism,” despite being translated by Bly and his confederates. For one thing, he is not a surrealist. *Trilce* (1922) precedes Breton’s surrealist manifesto by two years, and Vallejo became overtly hostile to surrealism while living in Paris and writing the poetry of his third phase. Secondly, his poetry—I would argue—is pre-eminently verbal, characterized by what Ezra Pound called “logopoeia,” or the “dance of the intellect among words.” Quevedo, too, is a strong influence on Vallejo. The particular kind of verbal wit found in Baroque poetry is strong in Vallejo, long before the rise of the Spanish American neo-baroque, and finds its parallel in T.S. Eliot’s admiration for John Donne, or Pound’s intrest in Laforgue.

Pound himself stated explicity that logopoeia was the hardest kind of poetry to translate, but instead of simply ignoring it he developed modes of translation specifically designed to address its inherent difficulties. To simplify greatly, his translation of Chinese poetry in *Cathay* is oriented toward phanopoeia, or visual imagery; his work on Troubador poetry is oriented toward melopoeia; an example of his interest in logopeia would be his *Homage to Sextus Propertius*. Lawrence Venuti argues that Pound’s translation practice is modernist, oriented toward making the translator visible again, unlike what Venuti takes to be the standard practice of translation in the English speaking world: the creation of a new text that reads smoothly and unproblematically in the target language.

Prevalent translation practices have had a difficult time dealing with Vallejo's brand of modernism. At the same time, his poetry prods translators into taking into account these other aspects of the poetic art. Vallejo’s avant-garde poetry is heavily dependent on *logopoeia*, or to poetic effects that are purely verbal, rather than on *phanopoeia*, the evocation of visual images. These effects include punning and other forms of verbal or orthographical play, shifts in register, neologisms, scientific terms, the use of words for their etymology, the wrenching of words from their normal contexts of usage, linguistic patterning (for example, the accumulation of reflexive verbs in certain poems), the exploitation of enjambment for dramatic value, and the proliferation of rhetorical figures, including but not limited to antanaclasis, antithesis, metonymy, catachresis, and anaphora. *Rhetoric* itself might be a synonym for logopoeia, but I prefer the term *logopoeia* because it is more oriented toward a particularly modernist deployment of linguistic resources.

My partial list of logopoetic devices, most if not all of them already noted by previous scholars of Vallejo’s poetry, provides some idea of the difficulty of translating him. While Lorca and Neruda present multiple problems to the translator, Vallejo’s logopoeia tends to be even more resistant to the poetics of translation that was prevalent in the period in question. *Melopoeia*, needless to say, also suffers in translation, since many translators default to prosaic free verse or undistinguishedly loose blank verse, rather than following Pound in his careful attention to prosody. (Some merely put in line breaks that mirror those of the original, with virtually no attention to the line of verse itself as a prosodic unit.) Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper I will assume that logopoeia is the area where Vallejo’s poetry loses the most in translation. Vallejo actively avoids or disrupts mellifluousness, and puts prosodic devices to the service of rhetoric.

I am not suggesting that Vallejo’s style is the sum of his rhetorical devices, but I am suggesting that a translator ought to reproduce features of his style that make it distinctively Vallejo’s. Appiah, in “Thick Translation,” formulates a fairy obvious maxim: that the translation of literature ought reproduce the most features of a literary work that which makes it valuable. He call for “a translation that aims to be of use in literary teaching; and here it seems to me that such ‘academic’ translation, translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context, is eminently worth doing.” I would add that what makes a work valuable has to do with its fine-grained distinctiveness, what make it different from other works by other authors. Although I approve of the idea of scholarly annotations, a translation should convey what is valuable about the work not only through its explanatory apparatus, but through the quality of the translation itself.

*Trilce* is strongly logopoetic, of course, but my main examples will be drawn from the sonnet “Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca,” from *Poemas humanos*, a particularly dense compendium of logopoetic devices:

Me moriré en París con aguacero,

un día del cual tengo ya el recuerdo.

Me moriré en París —y no me corro—

tal vez un jueves, como es hoy, de otoño.

Jueves será, porque hoy, jueves, que proso

estos versos, los húmeros me he puesto

a la mala y, jamás como hoy, me he vuelto,

con todo mi camino, a verme solo.

César Vallejo ha muerto, le pegaban

todos sin que él les haga nada;

le daban duro con un palo y duro

también con una soga; son testigos

los días jueves y los huesos húmeros,

la soledad, la lluvia, los caminos...

1. Linguistic patterning: the repetition of five reflexive verbs in the first and second stanzas is poetically resonant. Even though the dictionary does not distinguish lexically or semantically between *morir* and *morirse*, there is an added personal intensity in the repetition of the reflexive pronoun *me* five time in eight lines. Antoine Berman is the only theorist I know of who has mentioned that translation effaces the subtle effects of linguistic patterning. The example he uses is the suffix *–ón* in a novel by Roberto Arlt, linking words like *callejón*, *portalón*, and ??? (Berman).

2. Verbal ambiguity: “no me corro” could mean several things, including “I don’t rush” or “I don’t reach a sexual climax.” This particular phrase has elicited a diverse range of solutions from translators. “and it does not bother me” (Merton). “and I don’t step aside” (Bly). “and that’s a promise” (Dorn and Brotherson); “and I don’t rush.” etc.. “and I don’t run” (Eshelman); “and I don’t shy away” (Seiferle). This lack of consensus indicates to me that translators are merely guessing at what definition makes the most sense, or finding some vague approximation of what they take to be the spirit of an expression they do not fully understand in context.

3. Antithesis (reinforced by neologism and enjambment): “proso / estos versos”).

4. Scientific terminology: *húmeros* is an unusual word in lyric poetry, but Vallejo often uses technical or scientific language.

5. Deixis: insistent reference to the time and place of writing: “hoy, jueves…”

6. Metonymical displacement: the speaker puts on his *humeri* rather than the sleeves of a shirt, but the motion of putting on a shirt is implicit.

7. Grammatical tense-shifting: “sin que él les haga” instead of the expected “hiciera.”

8. Use of word for its secondary associations: *soga* is *rope*, of course, but also the word for *noose*.

9. Pleonasm, in parallel construction: “los días jueves / los huesos húmeros”

10. Shift of grammatical person. In the last six lines the speaker speaks of himself in the third person, abandoning the here and now of the opening stanzas of the sonnet: “César Vallejo ha muerto.”

11. Asyndeton, or the suppression of connective *y*, in the final line.

Most translators of this poem have not been able to reproduce the majority of these devices. Some, like the asyndeton and the Latin name of an arm-bone, might be easy to reproduce, but not even here translators have not always come up with blatantly self-evident solutions. In many cases they didn’t even try to wrestle with logopoeia: the problem itself was all but invisible to them and presumably to many early readers of Vallejo in translation. (I have found similar problems in a recent translation of Quevedo’s poetry.) Consider the play on words “mientras proso / estos versos” (as I prose / these lines [of verse]). This antithesis might work quite easily in English: “as I prose / this verse” would be an obvious solution. American translators, though, efface Vallejo’s neologism with their far blander language. Bly translates this pun with the phrase “I put down / these lines.” Ed Dorn, more vividly, translates this as “when I churn / these verses,” but this creative solution obscures Vallejo’s verbal wit rather than illuminating it. Eshelman and Seiferle come up (separately) with “I prose these lines.” (Eshelman unwisely eliminates the enjambment the reinforces this antithesis.) This formulation that still obscures Vallejo’s verbal wit, since *lines* can be lines of prose as well as of verse. It is extraordinary that nobody comes up with what is to me the obvious, and most literal solution: “as I prose / these verses.”

Some translators reduce Vallejo’s “húmeros” to “arm-bones,” ignoring his penchant for scientific diction. Almost all of them ignore the pleonasm of “los días jueves” and “los huesos húmeros” (the Thursday *days* and the humeri *bones*). Only Rebecca Seiferle attempts to reproduce the majority of Vallejo’s logopoeia:

I will die in Paris with a rainstorm,

on a day I already remember,

I will die in Paris—and I don't shy away—

perhaps on a Thursday, as today is, in autumn.

It will be Thursday, because today, Thursday, as I prose

these lines, I've put on my humeri in a bad mood,

and, today like never before, I've turned back,

with all of my road, to see myself alone.

César Vallejo has died; they kept hitting him,

everyone, even though he does nothing to them,

they gave it to him hard with a club and hard

also with a rope; witnesses are

the Thursday days and the humerus bones,

the solitude, the rain, the roads. . .

She understands the temporal dislocation of “even though he does nothing to him” and the pleonasm of “the Thursday days.” While some might see her approach as literal-minded, she appears to trust that Vallejo knew what he was doing, avoiding corrections that smooth over the deliberate roughness of Vallejo’s style. Although Vallejo’s poem reflects a mood of somber despair, it is also a rhetorical tour-de-force of verbal play.

Detailed, comparative study of translations can be somewhat tedious. It could also be objected that my critique of translations allows for only the most literal solutions. The question I would pose, then, is why we think that Vallejo’s poetry is valuable in the first place. In other words, if his deployment of logopoeia is not important to us, if we read him mainly for other reasons, then my critique will be largely beside the point. Perhaps other factors weigh more heavily and translators are correct in sacrificing the purely verbal aspects of his poetic art. I would suggest, though, that rescuing his verbal wit is a way of rescuing him as a modernist / avant-garde poet and freeing him from readings that see him “as an exemplar of Peruvian representational aesthetics and politics” (Clayton 15).

Such readings are *representational*, perhaps, in two senses: Vallejo is supposed to be a representative or typical figure of Peruvian and Latin American poetics, and he is supposedly a *mimetic* poet, using language to represent reality. I would suggest, in conclusion, that his logopoetics undercuts both sorts of representationality, leading to an engagement with language itself rather than to a straightforward vision of what this language is representing. By the same token, translation, insofar as it actively suppresses logopoeia, makes it too easy to assimilate Vallejo into more familiar modes. As in the case of Lorca, translation itself has suppressed the radical modernity of a major Spanish-language poet. Ultimately, Vallejo’s poetry might be much more productively read in relation to a Poundian poetics of translation, rather than as an example of the ill-defined “surrealist” poetics of the deep image school in its over-simplified versions.