

WALKING A TIGHTROPE:

THE COMPLEXITIES OF LITERARY TRANSLATION

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Imagine for a moment a hypothetical character in a work of Latin American literature, an Argentinean circus performer going by the name of “El Zurdo Absurdo.” How should this name be translated? A literal, “accurate” translation would be, “The Absurd Left-handed Man.” But would this be at all acceptable for a circus performer? Of course not. You could perhaps call it correct, but it’s clearly lacking in aesthetics. A circus performer’s name needs to be catchy and clever. And the translation above, while in a sense true to the meaning of the original, betrays everything when it comes to the original’s sound. I intentionally placed the word “accurate” above in quotation marks; none but the weakest standards of accuracy could tolerate such a translation. Moreover, there is no pressing reason why a word’s denotative meaning should outweigh its sound. In fact, in a situation like this, as with many situations a literary translator encounters, the accuracy of a translation must be judged according to its effect, and not just its strict denotation.

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When presented with this type of situation, a translator must determine what is fundamental to preserving the effect of the original text, and therefore needs to be brought across in the translation. With Spanish, the words “zurdo” and “absurdo” sound great together and are clearly conjoined in the performer’s name for that very purpose. In English, we’re not likely to be so lucky. “Absurd” and “Left-hander” just don’t have the necessary sound qualities to go together in this situation. In order to get an effect comparable to that created by the original, one of the two terms is going to have to be sacrificed along with, in all likelihood, its accompanying concept.

So, with “El Zurdo Absurdo,” which is more fundamental: the performer’s absurdity, or his left-handedness? A case could be made for either option. A translator is going to have to know or surmise something about the circus performer. Who is this Zurdo Absurdo anyway, and what does he do? Perhaps he does a series of tricks with his left hand. If that were the case, I’d keep the concept of left-handedness, probably choosing to go with the word “lefty,” joining it with an appropriately alliterative adjective. If, on the other hand, there were nothing particularly or excessively left-handed about his act, I’d opt to keep the concept of absurdity and try to build a translation around the word “absurd.” Perhaps I’d go with a rhyme and call the performer something like “The Absurd Nerd.”

As I think about my possibilities, I find myself liking “The Loony Lefty” as the translation I’d probably make. The concept of left-handedness is preserved, and the word “loony” is felicitously close in meaning to “absurd.” But, more than that, I like the sound of it: it’s clever, catchy, and easy to say. The perfect name for a circus performer. Nevertheless, there’s more to be done: I need to do some research before I’m definitively finished. Before settling on “The Loony Lefty,” I check in with a friend of mine, Ana María Shua, a widely-published author from Buenos Aires, to see if there is something uniquely Argentinean about the name that I’m missing. She tells me that “zurdo” can also mean “leftist” colloquially in Argentina. The idea of a circus performer who portrays a political leftist sounds pretty off the wall to me, so unless context strongly dictates otherwise, I’m sticking with “The Loony Lefty.”

As I hope my brief discussion above demonstrates, translation is an art of making careful, considered choices about language. As such, the process of translation has a great deal to offer students in language or literature courses. I regularly incorporate translation activities into most of the literature courses I teach, whether it’s having students do a homolingual or same-language translation of the early modern English of a Shakespeare sonnet or presenting multiple translations into English of a given piece of literature and discussing how the differences and nuances there illuminate our understanding of the text. When students approach literature through translation, they look at language up close, with all of its complexities. They are also forced to look at a text’s context, what went into its creation, and how it all fits together to create effect and meaning. Indeed, I would argue that a text is seldom if ever read as closely or as effectively as when it is translated, and all of our students, regardless of their majors, can benefit from the type of close reading experience translation affords. This experience is particularly available because of the wealth of language capabilities our students have here at BYU–Idaho.

With these ideas in mind, the following are translations I’ve done of two prose poems by Spanish poet Ángel Crespo (1926-1995) along with the originals. Crespo was the author of more than thirty books of poetry. He also published more than twenty books of translations (of authors ranging from Dante and Petrarch to Fernando Pessoa and Eugenio de Andrade) and numerous works of criticism. He was labeled a traitor under Spain’s Franco regime for signing a petition to protest the torture of miners in Asturias and was eventually driven into exile. Victor García de la Concha, professor at the University of Salamanca and Secretary General of the Royal Spanish Academy, has written that “few Spanish poets of the last forty years have achieved a voice as vital and sustained as

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Ángel Crespo.” I certainly hope that I preserve a measure of that voice’s vivid and powerful effect in my translations. ∞

Editor’s Note: According to standard translation formatting, the translations that follow appear with the original text on the left page and the translated text opposite on the right.

ÁRBOLES DE OREGÓN

Junto al río recién creado de cada día con aguas que parecen detenerse para contemplar su corriente hermosa, bajo el recuerdo del encaje flotante de las cenizas—ahora encristaladas, volanderas entonces—del volcán de nombre de diosa, salpicados por altas y rumorosas esbeltas cascadas, cuyas aguas no aprendan a reptar, los árboles de Oregón son, en su joven verdor y en sus hojas que el otoño embellece, infinitamente viejos, trasplantados del Paraíso natal.

Y sus frondas unánimes, divergentes, cambiadas, bella opulencia son por cuanto se diga y lo mucho que se omite; ya del agua que los refleja sin dejar de mentir la apariencia de ser la misma, del aire que en ella y fuera de ella los agita, de los ojos que miran con envidia y generosidad simultáneas.

Árboles de antiquísimo nombre nunca pronunciado.

UN POCO MÁS ALTO

Un poco más alto. No como el ciprés que pretende, afilado en su cima, herir camino como punta de daga, sino como ese árbol que domina los brezos y la arena, y abre sus ramas generosamente, como queriendo ayudarnos a sujetar un cielo azul y gris que amenaza caer sobre las amapolas.

Sólo un poco más alto, un poco casi apenas, pero con las ramas extendidas en todas direcciones: desde la quieta y precedera columna.

TREES OF OREGON

Next to the river created anew each day with waters that seem to pause to contemplate its beautiful current, beneath the memory of the floating mosaic of the ashes—now crystallized, then ready to fly off—from that volcano with the name of a goddess, spattered by the high and noisy and narrow waterfalls, whose waters won't learn to crawl, the trees of Oregon, in their youthful greenness and in their leaves beautified by autumn, are infinitely old, transplanted from the original Paradise.

And their branches: undivided, divergent, changing—they are beautiful opulence no matter how much is said or how much omitted; now in the water that reflects them without letting go of the lie of appearing to be the same thing, in the air that in it and around it agitates them, in the eyes that look on with both envy and generosity.

Trees of an ancient yet never pronounced name.

A LITTLE HIGHER

A little higher. Not like the cypresses that strive with their sharpened tops to cut their path as if by dagger point, but rather like those trees that dominate the heather and the sand, opening their branches generously, as if wanting to help us conquer the blue-grey sky threatening to fall upon the poppies.

Just a little higher, the smallest bit, but with branches extended in all directions: from a serene, delicate column.

