Translating Camões: a Personal Record

Landeg White
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Acknowledgements

It was during a visit to the Universidade do Minho in Braga in 1984 that I first met the late Professor Hélio Osvaldo Alves. He was a man of such professional and personal generosity, it was impossible not to warm to him and we swiftly became friends. It was he translated the selection of my poems Superfícies e interiores, published by CEMAR in 1995, and when my version of The Lusiads appeared two years later, it was duly prefaced by thanks for the encouragement and intellectual stimulus he had provided. When, shortly before his untimely death in January 2003, I sent him the first of my attempts at Camões’s lyrics in English (Aquela Captiva), he replied he had read it with tears in his eyes. His spirit presided over the years of work that followed.

With this in mind, readers will appreciate what a pleasure it was to acknowledge a complementary debt in my preface to The Collected Lyric Poems of Luís de Camões, to Professor Hélio J.S. Alves of the Universidade de Évora. Hélio shares his father’s critical rigour and unfailing kindness, and he has brought both to bear on this present volume. As is noted on page 47, the relation between scholar and poet-translator has often been fraught, but I have benefitted in more ways than can be listed here from the erudition and sheer inspiration of his commentaries.

My friend and former colleague at Universidade Aberta, Professor Gerald Bär, is fond of proposing various works to me over bottles of wine. Both the wine and the proposals are appreciated, and this one clicked. I am grateful for the meticulous attention he brings to all manuscripts, including the various versions of this one. What errors remain, of fact or interpretation, are of course my own responsibility.
Introduction

In 1998, Edwin Gentzler and David Connolly, both experienced literary translators, contributed parallel essays to the comprehensive and authoritative *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, edited by Mona Baker. The respective titles, ‘Poetics of translation’ and ‘Poetry translation’ indicate a division of labour between theory and practice. While both invoke Roman Jakobson (on the untranslatability of poetry), there is a certain irony about the theorists trying to map out strategies of poetic translation while the practitioners, ignoring all precept, happily declare with William Trask, ‘Impossible? Of course, that’s why I do it.’

One of the difficulties about theorising literary translation is that linguistics as a discipline came very late to the discussion of metaphor, and linguistic discussion of poetry is so often plodding and wooden. When Gentzler writes ‘Some (scholars) argue convincingly that poetic aspects such as intonation, alliteration, metaphor, rhythm, parody and pun inhere in all translation’, the poet in me wants to protest at the confusion of categories (these strange things that apparently go on in poetry) while pointing out that he is using several devices himself: there is rhyme (not mentioned) in the phrase ‘intonation, alliteration’ building to that final ‘translation’, assonance (also not mentioned) in ‘metaphor, rhythm’, alliteration in ‘parody and pun’, while ‘inhere’ is an unexamined (legal) metaphor, and the whole sentence is built on a pattern of triple rhythms. By his own standards, he is writing bad poetry, bad because he seems unconscious of the fact and is hence not in control.

Connolly comments that ‘translators ... rarely keep notes about the process of translation or any record of the choices made in the process,’ adding ‘it is precisely insights into this process that are missing from most theoretical models.’ This short book, which is a personal record of my experience of translating first Camões’s epic poem *The Lusiads*, then secondly his *Collected Lyric Poems*, has no pretensions to close this gap between translation theory and translation practice, and it makes few theoretical claims. But it does reflect continually on the linguistic dimensions of the practical problems I faced, in a manner that should interest theorists. To take just one instance, described towards the end of section 3, I experienced the

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Introduction

greatest difficulty in translating canto 10, stanzas 10 – 73, where Vasco da Gama is granted a vision of future Portuguese conquests in the Indian Ocean and China Seas. My first thought was I had glimpsed the end of my task too soon, and schooled myself to be patient. My second was that the long passage describes colonial victories, which are not much to my taste. It took me some time to realise that my problem lay in the fact that the English language lacks a future tense, and that the forms for expressing future states in English involve auxiliaries (‘will’, ‘going to’) which can also double as lexical verbs. Given that poetry abhors redundant words, the management of these auxiliaries was not easy. ‘Will’ proved especially difficult, with its connotation of intentionality. When Camões writes ‘Pacheco will not only hold the fords / But burn towns, houses and temples’, is this simple prophecy or is Pacheco’s ferocious ‘will’ involved?

I should emphasise that my experience is very limited. I have translated Camões and little else, and was already in my mid-fifties when I jumped in at the deep end. Part of my earlier career had been in southern African studies, including history and oral literature along with Portuguese colonial history, and this obviously had a close bearing on The Lusiads which spends more time off the coast of Africa than in India. I had also published three volumes of my own poetry which, as I explain, was what drew me to Camões in the first place. To quote Connolly again, ‘love for the poet’s work together with some degree of inspiration are important factors usually missing from models and theories of poetry translation’. Without a strong sense of affinity, it would be impossible to take on such a long task occupying, for the two volumes, some seven and a half years. But had I spent those same years translating, say, Fernando Pessoa, it’s possible my conclusions about translation would be significantly different.

On the issue of ‘untranslatability’ versus the practice of the impossible, one of my conclusions is that this argument is usually conducted in far too general terms. ‘Poetry’ is conceived of as a special category of language use, more compact and heightened than the most elaborate prose, bafflingly elusive in its multiple meanings and in its claim that form and content are indivisible. But a great deal of poetry these days is not like that at all. Much free verse is virtually indistinguishable from prose, the line endings determined by nothing more than the end of one thought and the beginning of another, and is easily translated: I have known Portuguese translators of English poetry knock off half a dozen in the course of a single evening, losing (and earning) very little in the process. At the opposite extreme, with the allusive language of poets like Verlaine, or with Rimbaud’s ambition ‘to
reach the unknown through the derangement of the senses’, one meets problems of translation that may indeed be unresolvable.

The *Lusíadas*, is different again. It is a baroque masterpiece with an elaborate architecture, a strict verse form and, in contrast, a challengingly lucid, subtly modern style or variety of styles. Yet even about The *Lusíadas*, there is much that is genuinely translatable. First, it is a long narrative poem, and narrative – events succeeding each other, causally linked - can be carried over into English without much loss of force. Camões is so skillful in the disposition and balancing of the episodes that all the translator need do is follow the action and respect his timing. You have to be a great fool to get this wrong. The two English translators who do get it wrong are Mickle (1776) with his concrete slabs of couplets, and Atkinson (1952) with his laboured prose, both imposing their own pace-makers on Camões’s heartfelt rhythms.

Similarly, *The Lusíads* contains many speeches, and speeches are composed of arguments, rational or otherwise. Intellectual content is not language specific, and with the debate in heaven in Canto 1, or in Neptune’s court in canto 6, or with the Velho do Restelo’s denunciation of the whole project, or the diplomatic exchanges between Gama and the Samorin in canto 8, one hears positions taken and rhetoric deployed that it is perfectly possible to carry across into the target language. The same applies to the various prayers, pleadings, intercessions, or accounts of Gama’s or Bacchus’s or the Samorin’s private thoughts that feature from time to time. They are cast in poetic form, but it is their prose content that has dramatic force and may be translated. As for passages of pure lyrical description, with their voluptuous celebration of the resources of the Portuguese language, it is here that the translator may fall short. But the word play in *The Lusíads* tends to take the form of paradox or antithesis (‘dry wood on the waves with a sail’), and there (I think) deliberate puns. It remains, of course, much better to read the poem in its original Portuguese, but I am confident my version carries a decent 70% of the original into English.

The main technical problem concerned the differences between English and Portuguese syntax, involving the complete reworking of Camões’s sentences. I begin part 2 of my account with an extended comparison of six different English renderings of Camões’s opening 16-line sentence, high-

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2 Lettre à Georges Izambard, 13 Mai, 1871, available at http://abardel.free.fr/petite_anthologie/lettre_du_voyant_panorama.htm#annexe

3 On “amor” and “amora” in Canto 9:58.
lighting the contrast between a syntax of inflected nouns and verbs, and a syntax where meaning depends on word order. Similar linguistic differences arose over the position of adjectives in Portuguese (normally after the noun) and in English (normally before), in two distinct ways. The first was that Camões had adjectives (along with adverbs and verbs in participle forms) available as his rhyming words, a resource largely absent in English where the rhymes tend to fall on nouns and verbs. This had profound consequences for the choice of poetic form. The second was the sheer abundance of Camões’s adjectives, compared to the economy of his nouns and verbs. The solution adopted for *The Lusiads* was the normal solution for translators from the romance languages, that is, to go for the last of a series of adjectives, and make the others earn their keep. With the lyrics, I was forced to revise this practice. So much of the verbal colour of the lyrics proved to be vested in the adjectives that they couldn’t be simply trimmed. Instead, I exploited the richness of English vocabulary, with its extraordinary range of alternative words for every situation, transferring something of that verbal colour back to the nouns and verbs.

The poetics of translation, then, in the linguistic sense, proved intimately bound up with the practice of turning poetry in the SL into poetry in the TL. For that was my aim. I was first drawn to Camões’s poetry as a young poet, and when twenty-four years later I began translating him, my hope was to give English readers with no knowledge of Portuguese a clear impression of his greatness. A similar ambition is neatly expressed by Edith Grossman, introducing her splendid new translation of *Don Quixote*.

I believe that my primary obligation as a literary translator is to recreate for the reader in English the experience of the reader in Spanish ... When Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*, his language was not archaic or quaint. He wrote in a crackling up-to-date Spanish that was an intrinsic part of his time ... a modern language that both reflected and helped to shape the way people experienced the world.4

I can’t resist adding here a comment of Ezra Pound’s, specifically about translating *The Lusiads*:

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The beauty of Camoens will never be represented in English until his translators learn to resist translating every Portuguese word by an English word derivative from the same Latin root. The translation of Camoens into words of Saxon origin would demand a care of diction equal to that of the author, and would retain the vigour of the original. A translation filled with Latinisms looks like a cheap imitation of Milton.5

Pound’s wise advice highlights the boldness of the choices the translator must make. But it also reminds us of something stressed in Gentzler’s essay, namely the cultural importance of translation. Pound’s adaptations of Chinese poets featured as key texts in the modernist movement. In my remarks on sonnets, I describe the importance of translations by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey in sixteenth century England, and the stimulus they provided to Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

At an altogether more modest level, I also touch in this short book on Camoens’s profound influence on my own poetry, both in the volumes before I began translating his work, and in the more ambitious collections I have published since. The experience of living in close contact over several years with such a rare spirit has been enormously enriching, and I hope something of this comes across.

5 Pound 1912, 227.