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**Translating a Poem into a Poem:
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I want to start with a couple of disclaimers. The words “poetry” and “translation” are seriously ambiguous. “Poetry” can mean a highly concentrated art form where all the dimensions of language – sound, rhythm, emotion, imagery, tone and meaning – work together to offer us a fresh experience of reality. Henri Michaux described poetry as “a sudden enlargement of the World” (qtd. in Ball xiii), something that deliberately shakes “the congealed and established” (qtd. in Ball xiv). But the word “poetry” can also refer to any of the thousands of poems written everyday all around the world that are fundamentally self-expression with line breaks, mostly quite conventional in sentiments and language. Translating such poems need be no more difficult and is often far easier, than translating a letter, short story or essay. We sometimes call something a poem just by looking at the form it takes on the page. If that's all we mean by a poem, its translation need pose no great difficulty.

My interest is in translating poems that lift far beyond outward form. A poem in the strong sense of the word involves a journey through a musical structure where emotion and thought unite in a way that strikes us as both true and new, irreducible to what we have heard before. Poetry is also strongly performative – its sound dimension comes to the foreground, enacting or inflecting whatever its contents may be. Though there are many kinds of translation, a good translation of such a poem, a poem that really is a “sudden enlargement of the World” (qtd. in Ball xiii), should offer the reader a comparably strong poem in the reader's language. It should give a frisson of artistic pleasure similar to what the original produces in a native speaker. It is quite different from paraphrasing the meaning of the words, which is how the word “translation” is often used.

Over the past twenty-six years I have translated three poets extensively: the Venezuelan Eugenio Montejo, the Cuban José Kozler and French poet René Char. Each of them writes quite different types of poetry, presenting different challenges to a translator. I first encountered Eugenio Montejo's poetry when I met him at the Medellín Poetry Festival in Colombia in 1997. I was struck by his aura as a human being, a profound sense of human goodness, and by what I intuited of his poetry. Back then, apart from five poems translated by Alasdair Reid, Montejo was completely untranslated. I bought his book *El azul de la tierra* in Medellín and, over the next six years, translated some sixty of his poems that became the book *The Trees*. The difficulty with Montejo's poetry is that it can seem extremely flat in English – there is little imagery, the adjectives and metaphors seem to work towards the expected, so it can seem too obvious, old fashioned, romantic. But I believe there is something in the tone and rhythm of the language, a direct simplicity that elevates the best of his poems beyond this. Here is one of the first poems I translated, “The trees”:

"Los Árboles"

Hablan poco los árboles, se sabe.
Pasan la vida entera meditando
y moviendo sus ramas.
Basta mirarlos en otoño
cuando se juntan en los parques:
sólo conversan los más viejos,
los que reparten las nubes y los pájaros,

"The trees"

The trees speak so little, you know.
They spend their entire life meditating
and moving their branches.
Just look at them closely in autumn
as they seek each other out in public places:
only the oldest attempt some conversation,
the ones that share clouds and birds,

pero su voz se pierde entre las hojas
y muy poco nos llega, casi nada.

but their voice gets lost in the leaves
and so little filters down to us, nothing
really.

Es difícil llenar un breve libro
con pensamientos de árboles.
Todo en ellos es vago, fragmentario.
Hoy, por ejemplo, al escuchar el grito
de un tordo negro, ya en camino a casa,
grito final de quien no aguarda otro
/ verano,
comprendí que en su voz hablaba un
/ árbol,
uno de tantos,
pero no sé que hacer con ese grito,
no sé como anotarlo.

It's difficult to fill the shortest book
with the thoughts of trees.
Everything in them is vague, fragmented.
Today, for instance, on the way to my house
hearing a black thrush shriek,
the last cry of one who won't reach another
/ summer,
I realized that in his voice a tree was
/ speaking,
one of so many,
but I don't know what to do with this sharp
/ deep sound,
I don't know in what type of script
I could set it down.

(Montejo 22; my translation)

Maintaining a strong rhythmic feel seemed to me vital in this poem. I could have written in the first stanza:

it's enough to look at them in autumn
when they get together in parks,
only the oldest converse,
those who share clouds and birds,
but their voice is lost among the leaves
and very little reaches us, almost nothing.

But, to me, such an approach kills the poem. Montejo's individual voice, his stance towards the world, is intimately bound up with the rhythm, a distinct mix of familiarity and elevation. With Montejo the challenge was not so much understanding what the poem says but getting the tone right.

Born in Havana in 1940, José Kozer is an extremely different poet. His poetry is rich in specific details, often complex, employing a very wide idiosyncratic vocabulary. Many of his poems concern his childhood in a Cuban Jewish family. Here is one of his earlier poems. In it I hear a distinct personality speaking without poetic frills yet with a delightful sense of irony and humour, a tone of voice that lets the implicit sadnesses peek out. I think you will hear how very different it is from Montejo's style and tone (Sylvia is the name of Kozer's sister):

“Te Acuerdas, Sylvia”

Te acuerdas, Sylvia, cómo trabajaban
las mujeres en casa.

Parecía que papá no hacía nada.

“Remember Sylvia”

Remember, Sylvia, how much the
women at home worked.

It seemed that Papa did nothing.

Llevaba las manos a la espalda inclinándose como un rabino fumando una cachimba corta de abedul, las volutas de humo le daban un aire misterioso,	He would put his hands behind his back and lean forward like a rabbi smoking a short birchwood pipe, the curls of smoke giving him an air of mystery,
comienzo a sospechar que papá tendría algo de asiático.	I began to suspect Papa had something of the Asiatic in him.
Quizás fuera un señor de Besarabia que redimió a sus siervos en épocas del Zar,	Maybe he was a lord of Bessarabia who freed his serfs in the time of the Tsar,
o quizás acostumbrara a reposar en los campos de avena y somnoliento a la hora de la criba se sentara encorvado bondadosamente en un sitio húmedo entre los helechos con su antigua casaca algo deshilachada.	or maybe he was used to resting in the barley fields and sleepy at the hour for winnowing sat bent over filled with kindness in a moist place between ferns his ancient coat somewhat frayed.
Es probable que quedara absorto al descubrir en la estepa una manzana.	It's probable he was absorbed in discovering an apple on the steppes.
Nada sabía del mar.	He knew nothing of the sea.
Seguro se afanaba con la imagen de la espuma y confundía las anémonas y el cielo.	Maybe he was struggling with the image of foam and confused anemones with the sky.
Creo que la llorosa muchedumbre de las hojas de los eucaliptos lo asustaba.	I think the weeping crowd of eucalyptus leaves terrified him.
Figúrate qué sintió cuando Rosa Luxemburgo se presentó con un opúsculo entre las manos ante los jueces del Zar.	Imagine what he felt when Rosa Luxemburg appeared with a tract in her hands before the judges of the Tsar.
Tendría que emigrar pobre papá de Odesa a Viena,	He had to emigrate poor Papa from Odessa to Vienna,

Roma, Estambul, Quebec,
Ottawa, Nueva York.

Rome, Istanbul, Quebec,
Ottawa, New York.

Llegaría a La Habana como un
documento y cinco
pasaportes, me lo imagino
algo maltrecho del viaje.

He arrived in Havana as a document
with five
passports, I imagine him
rather battered by his journey.

Recuerdas, Sylvia, cuando papá llegaba
de los almacenes
de la calle Muralla y todas
las mujeres de la casa Uds.
se alborotaban.

Remember, Sylvia, when Papa would
come home from the stores
on Muralla street
and all of you
women of the house
bustled about.

Juro que entraba por la puerta de la sala,
zapatos de dos
tonos, el traje azul a rayas,
la corbata de óvalos finita

I swear he would come in the lounge
room door, two-tone
shoes, blue striped suit,
a very fine
polka-dot tie

y parecía que papá no hacía nunca nada. and it seemed Papa never did anything.

(Kozer, *Stet* 34, my translation³)

What felt important here was not to get in the way of the poem, to let the English flow naturally.

Most of José Kozer's poems are long and complex, understanding what they mean at various points is not easy. One of my favourites is "Anima for George Oppen". The narrator is travelling by train to Munich while reading a poem by the American George Oppen, a poem that is itself a loose translation of a poem by Buddhadeva Bose, a mystic poem about an apple. Kozer's poem spirals through a range of associations, from apples to Cezanne to Japanese landscapes, while also keeping pace with the train trip of a Jewish poet travelling across Germany. The poem has to link all these things without losing momentum or becoming confusing. The ending, such an important moment in any poem, posed a special problem. In the original "y tras los rieles/ a su encuentro, donde/ las vacas pastan, gran/ novedad" literally "and across the tracks/ at their (or its or his or her) meeting, where the cows graze, great/ newness". How to express that?

"Ánima Por George Oppen"

"Anima for George Oppen"

Agreste, y pese a la desproporción de lo
agreste, rostro
diente de perro, paso la
mañana (en tránsito)
leyendo a George
Oppen.

Rugged and, despite being excessively
rugged, a face
like jagged rock, I spend
the morning (in transit)
reading George Oppen.

³ My translation "Remember Sylvia" is forthcoming in *Selected Poems of José Kozer*, Puncher and Wattmann. Also, this poem was already translated by Mark Weiss in his selection of Kozer's poems, *Stet*. For my translation, I wanted to keep much closer to the original than Weiss' version, which I recommend readers to access.

Una fruta del tamaño de Buda, no me atrevo a abrir la boca, no hay cupo, puede que de cera puede que de plomo, fruta de un Bodhisattva, el poema de George Oppen basado en un poema de Buddhadeva Bose, diente de perro asimismo el rostro de Oppen, una fruta de piel lisa, fruncir la flor el ovario para transformarse en fruto, tengo la certeza de haber visto tras el resplandor las manzanas (rojo amarillo rojo a su sombra) de Cézanne.

A piece of fruit the size of Buddha, I don't dare open my mouth, nothing is bite-size, it might be wax or lead, fruit of a Bodhisattva, the poem of George Oppen based on a poem of Buddhadeva Bose, jagged as Oppen's face, a smooth-skinned fruit, the flower's ovary wrinkles to transform into fruit, I know for certain that in the shining brilliance I've seen the apples of Cézanne (red yellow red in their darkness.)

There is this guy in the train to Munich reading my book of poems: no se oye otra voz, momento inmemorial, se puede oír el ala de una mosca rozar la roca más dura, posarse entre la ceniza negra del Fujiyama: su zumbido incrustarse en la intimidad del metal (ferroviario): carbonizarse. Se avanza, no obstante. Página 94. El tren ensañado en la velocidad para alcanzar su destino Oh Bodhisattva.

There is this guy in the train to Munich reading my book of poems: no other voice can be heard, a moment beyond memory, you can hear a fly's wing brush the hardest rock, settle among the black ash of Fujiyama: its buzzing embed itself into the intimacy of metal (railway track). We go forward, nonetheless. Page 94. The train furiously intent on the speed needed to reach its destination Oh Bodhisattva.

Invocación: George Oppen, luz concomitante, llévate a la boca una manzana de Cézanne (el cuadro permanecerá intacto: ya es de inmemorialidad): dos conos de luz, hambre unísona (omnímoda) mastica dodecaedro, escupe (en cualquier dirección) tres semillas: tres semillas, George Oppen, de tu reverso (estás muerto): ¿y qué? Apéate. Kant acaba de besar en la boca al fámulo. Y en los cielos Efraín y Esther dos

Invocation: George Oppen, concomitant light, lift one of Cézanne's apples to your mouth (the painting stays intact: already it is beyond memory): two cones of light, hunger in unison (one omnimode) chew the dodecahedron, from your other side (you are dead): (in any direction you like) spit three seeds: three seeds, George Oppen, and what then? Alight. Kant has just kissed his servant on the mouth. And in the heavens Ephraim and Esther are the gills of two fish opening on resurrection. Everything is joined together. I close the book. Next stop Marienplatz

branquias a la resurrección.
Todo se ensambla. Cierro
el libro. Próxima estación
Marienplatz (solavaya,
Dachau): y tras los rieles
a su encuentro, donde
las vacas pastan, gran
novedad.

(my fingers crossed against you,
Dachau): and beyond the tracks
as I go to meet it, where cows
graze, something extraordinarily new.

(Kozer, *Anima* 194-195, my translation)

While as translator I could ask questions directly of Montejo and Kozer, I only discovered René Char's poetry after his death. In the 1990s, when I began reading Char, only a fairly small part of his work had been translated, so I was translating largely for myself, to understand and experience the poetry. Char's poems are extremely beautiful in sound and imagery, frequently obscure, nearly always irreducible to any one meaning – something I like a lot. While they avoid obvious messages, I believe they always make an intuitive sense. I'm going to read one of Char's prose poems "Mortal Debris and Mozart". One of the challenges with this poem is its very condensed style. In English this can easily become far too abstract, blocking both emotion and meaning. At the close of the second paragraph, for example, it reads literally: "suddenly the allegro, challenge of this sacred refusal, pierces and flows back toward the living, toward the totality of men and women in mourning for the inner homeland who, wandering in order not to be similar, go through Mozart to test themselves in secret". But translating the poem that way short-changes Char: the rhythm has disappeared; little in the English is truly alive or convincing. Here is my final version:

“Débris mortels et Mozart”

Au petit jour, une seule fois, le vieux
nuage rose dépeuplé survolera les yeux
désormais distants, dans la majesté de sa
lenteur libre ; puis ce sera le froid,
l'immense occupant, puis le Temps qui
n'a pas d'endroit.

Sur la longueur de ses deux lèvres,
en terre commune, soudain l'allégo, défi
de ce rebut sacré, perce et reflue vers les
vivants, vers la totalité des hommes et
des femmes en deuil de patrie intérieure
qui, errant pour n'être pas semblables,
vont à travers Mozart s'éprouver en
secret.

--- Bien-aimée, lorsque tu rêves à haute
voix, et d'aventure prononces mon nom,

“Mortal debris and Mozart”⁴

At daybreak, just once, the old pink-
edged cloud emptied of all things human
will drift above distanced eyes in the
majesty of its slow freedom; then the
cold sets in, an immense occupation,
then time which has no place.

Along the line of his two lips, on
common ground, suddenly the allegro,
defying divine rejection, pierces through
and flows back toward the living,
toward the totality of men and women in
mourning for the inner homeland.
Wandering at random to escape their
identity, they are on their way, through
the medium of Mozart, to probe their
own depths in secret again.

--- Beloved, when you dream out loud
and by chance pronounce my name,

⁴ The translation of this poem "Mortal Debris and Mozart" was published in *Verse*, Volume 20, Numbers 2 & 3, Department of English, University of Georgia, 2004, page 11.

tendre vainqueur de nos frayeurs
conjuguées, de mon décri solitaire, la
nuit est claire à traverser.

tender conqueror of our conjugated
fears, of my lonely abasement, the night
is clear to cross.

(Char, *Commune présence*, 224, my translation)

Last year I revisited Char's poetry. By now most of his poems have been translated and I was interested in seeing what I could do with certain poems that didn't seem to work in English – ones that seemed hopelessly obscure. I do not think any worthwhile poet sets out to be impenetrable, to create a tangle of words only to conceal emptiness. For me translating a poet involves committing to the idea that there is something worthwhile there. When I read the original and Mary Ann Caws' translation of "Envoûtement à la Renardière" (Bewitchment at La Renardière), I had an extraordinary sense of déjà vu: Char, I felt, was talking directly to me of the experience of passionate love followed by irrevocable loss. And yet Caws' translation felt like a barrier erected between this emotional reality and myself. For example, here is Caws' rendering of the poem's close:

Since memory's roads have cloaked themselves in the unfailing leprosy of monsters
I have taken refuge in an innocence where the man who dreams cannot grow old.
But am I the one to assume the task of surviving you, I who in this Song of You
find myself the most distant of my counterparts.

(Caws 45)

To me there's a stilted quality here, in contrast to the resonance and solemnity of Char's language. Also, I must admit, parts of the original, the second paragraph especially, are so abstract and contorted I can only guess at their meaning. My translation of this poem is in the spirit of Robert Lowell's *Imitations*, taking liberties in order to create a new poem that will work in English. To convey the rhythmic flow of Char's language, its rich, conscious beauty, I recast this prose poem into free verse. I also gave the poem a less obscure title. I also add a subtitle, "After René Char's Envoûtement à la Renardière", to signal that it is an adaptation not a strict translation. Here is my version:

"Envoûtement à la Renardière"

Vous qui m'avez connu, grenade
dissidente, point du jour déployant le
plaisir comme exemple, votre visage, –
tel est-il, qu'il soit toujours, –si libre qu'à
son contact le cerne infini de l'air se
plissait, s'entr'ouvant à ma rencontre, me
vêtait des beaux quartiers de votre
imagination. Je demeurais là,
entièrement inconnu de moi-même, dans
votre moulin à soleil, exultant à la
succession des richesses d'un cœur qui
avait rompu son étau. Sur notre plaisir
s'allongeait l'influente douceur de la

"Song of You"⁵

You who've known me,
an exploding pomegranate, a dissenter
in your clandestine room
where daybreak unfurls its secret tapestry
of joys,
your face, for example – as it is
right now, may life hold it forever –
its presence so radiating freedom
the air's limitless circle where it touches it
crumples, fallen open
to welcome me. I walk dressed
in the beautiful suburbs of your
/ imagination.

⁵ This adaptation/translation will be published in my forthcoming poetry collection *Companions, Ancestors, Inscriptions* (Vagabond Press).

grande roue consumable du mouvement,
au terme de ses classes.

À ce visage, –personne ne l'aperçut
jamais, –simplifier la beauté
n'apparaissait pas comme une atroce
économie. Nous étions exacts dans
l'exceptionnel qui seul sait se soustraire
au caractère alternatif du mystère de
vivre.

Dès lors que les routes de la
mémoire se sont couvertes de la lèpre
infaillible des monstres, je trouve refuge
dans une innocence où l'homme qui rêve
ne peut vieillir. Mais ai-je qualité pour
m'imposer de vous survivre, moi qui
dans ce Chant de Vous me considère
comme le plus éloigné de mes sosies?

And I stay there as one
quite unknown to myself,
caught in your spinning sun-mill,
exulting in the riches of a love
that's shattered the vice that held it.
Over our lovemaking stretched
the great consumable wheel of the sun,
moving in micro-inches
to mark out night's approach.

Nestling below the curve of your face –
its true inwardness till now
invisible even to you – taking in beauty
as the simplest, most everyday fact

/ of this world,

all else reduced to an afterthought. We

/ were

the privileged connoisseurs of our own
singularity, sole experts in extracting
ourselves from the drab weight of living.
And even now that the roads of memory
lie deep under the unforgiving leprosy of

/ monsters

I take refuge in that innocence
where one who dreams can't grow old.

But do I have what it takes
to live with surviving you, I who in this
Song of You think of myself as
a smudged blur at space's most remote
edge, the least likely of my
doppelgangers?

(Char, *Furor and Mystery* 44, my translation)

So now you have read a sample of poems from three very different poets, what general conclusions can I make? First I hope it struck you how they were quite different types of poetry – that I am not translating all of them into one voice, my own voice, and erasing their distinctiveness. At the same time I want to make each poem I translate as strong a poem as I can. (There is, I will admit, a certain tension between these two aims, but it may be a productive tension.) While I try to be faithful to the meaning and only rarely do a version-style translation, accuracy of meaning, or at least closeness of meaning, is only a small part of my aim. I want to bring out in the English poem what I see as the key qualities of the original: in Montejó's case a simplicity and self-exposure, a moral focus that is rhythmically elevated enough to command attention; in José Kozer's case there are so many qualities from poem to poem but surprise, humour, the ability to include the most disparate material and fuse it into an aesthetically pleasing ending; and again rhythmically these are definitely poems meant to be heard, their cadence matters. With Char there is the rich beauty of his language; there's also the intuitive sense of a meaning that is important, often linking beauty, erotic love and resistance to evil. With every Char poem I translated, it felt important to bring out that meaning as clearly as possible, to convey what the poem is pointing towards. Rather than having a message a true poem is a pointing towards what lies beyond words, it's a gesture performed through language

that opens up something about the world or the self in a sudden explosion. A good translation needs to carry across not so much the meaning of the individual words or the poem's specific stylistics but the nature of that gesture. Both Char and Kozler also tend to have wonderful endings to their poems, suddenly taking the poem somewhere new. Finding equivalents in English for these is a delightful challenge.

My main interest has been in translating contemporary poets who are either untranslated or have much of their work untranslated. I translate them because I am excited by their poetry and want to convey that excitement. I imagine my reader not as someone fairly fluent in Spanish or French who reads the original and glances across at the English to get the gist of difficult phrases, though my translations of Montejo or Kozler could be used that way. Returning for a moment to the two concepts of poetry I mentioned at the start of this talk – poetry as a revelatory art form versus poetry as any short piece of writing with line breaks – by translating a poem I am making a claim that this poem belongs in the maybe 10% of poems that qualify as enduring art, as a “sudden enlargement of the World”. I want the poem in English to convince on its own terms. I sometimes suspect that Polish and Russian poets have an advantage in that, subconsciously, their translators know their finished poem will stand alone, will be all the reader in English will have to judge the poet by, and so the new poem must pull out all stops to convince us as poetry. To some extent I see translation as advocacy of a particular poet, staking a claim on behalf of their necessity. Neither Montejo nor Kozler nor Char are household names in the English-speaking poetry world. Translating poetry into a new language also means expanding the possibilities of poetry in that language, enabling the translated poet to live on in a different guise. It keeps the poem moving, and so helps it on its journey through the world.

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