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Some Reflections on Translating a Fragment of Derek Walcott's *Omeros*

There may be a myriad of reasons why we approach a poem with a view to translating it. Some of these are related to one's profession; sometimes, they are determined by a creative impulse, or a necessity imposed on us by dynamics we cannot wholly apprehend. A poet may approach this task playfully, as a way of paying homage to a master, or honing his own poetic skills. As Derek Walcott once asserted, there may be "a kind of instinct that says 'here is the mirror of what I would like to have written.'"¹ Indeed, poets have translated both in order to diffuse the work of writers whose project and sensibility they find to be kindred to their own, and in order to introduce new elements into the literary polysystem to which they belong and which they may wish to defy. Sometimes, poets are said to be the least trustworthy of translators while on other occasions it is affirmed that only a true poet can translate poetry. The crucial, yet ambivalent, position of translators as creative writers has been commented upon at large, particularly in the last decades following the consolidation of the discipline of Translation Studies, but an exhaustive overview of diverse opinions and approaches, or a stable criterion by which to judge the validity of a translated poem, have not been presented. Mario Luzi, a renowned Italian poet and translator, once said: "[S]fido chiunque a spiegare, o a tentare soltanto di farlo, perché una traduzione è viva e un'altra non lo è."² Yet, poetic translation seems to be the only field where the debate between "translation as science" and "translation as art" seems to be decided in favour of the latter.

For those of us who master language with more difficulty than poets do, translation may be an overwhelming and frustrating process which makes manifest the notorious incompatibility between languages. One of many reasons why the translation of poetry is so complex and demanding is the fact that both experiences—that of writing poetry and that of translating—represent an extreme engagement with language, which reveals an inadequacy at the heart of our desire for expressing what might only be an intimation. In this sense, a translator might be compared to a poet, as indeed William Wordsworth indirectly suggested in his famous preface to *Lyrical Ballads* from 1800,³ not without a reference to the inferior position of the former. Translation is considered a subversive force in a literary polysystem; it burdens the target language with foreign elements and unusual rhythms; it stretches its conceptual horizons and occupies almost a space of its own, outside both systems, while being necessarily a part of them. Poetry, too, displays some of these characteristics. In fact, Ortega y Gasset has asserted in relation to writing: “Es un acto de rebeldía permanente contra el contorno social, una subversion.”⁴ If on the one hand this condition encourages creativity, on the other it complicates significantly the task of the translator. According to the unwritten rule, the TT (Target Text) should not normalise, let alone ignore, the grammatical and linguistic challenges of the ST (Source Text), especially where the specificities of a text seem to reside in its uncommon and innovative use of language. However, when a poem does not read fluently, when its vocabulary becomes too exotic, its syntax broken, the tropes too daring, a suspicious eye is likely to be cast first and foremost on the translator. That is why he/she always walks the tight rope between the flattening of the ST and an unnatural, sometimes unacceptable employment of his/her mother tongue.

In the light of these facts, an attempt to translate a fragment of Derek Walcott’s long poem *Omeros*⁵ by someone who is neither a poet nor a professional translator might appear at best an optimistic feat, at worst an impudence. A research student and an enthusiastic reader of Walcott’s work might well be surprised and intrigued by the fact that a translation of Walcott’s masterpiece into Serbo-Croatian⁶ (which implies Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin) has not been

published so far. What prompted me, in particular, to approach *Omeros* as translator, to try and fix its elaborate images and tangled syntax—always teeming with literary and historical references and verbal play—was a return to my own language. Akin to the experience whereby one’s home can only be identified when confronted with the outside world, immersion in other literatures and languages transforms one’s mother tongue into an external object, and the degree to which it may become alien is often the degree to which it excites curiosity and appears as a “target,” in both its common and linguistic senses. In my case the comparative readings of the original text and the Italian translation by Professor Andrea Molesini⁷ have both been important incentives. They have revealed that which is in fact the commonly accepted wisdom of translation scholars—namely that perfection and equivalence are not to be expected. Rather than lamenting the impossibility of saying the same thing in the same way, one should draw as much as possible on the resources of his/her own idiom which can be moulded in order to express something new and relevant, which is also, paradoxically, something particular and already said. The last observation touches on the (unpopular) issue of universal values, which will not be examined at the moment. Suffice it to say that a specific “translation” of images from European literature, which Walcott has assimilated and used to his own purposes, can be (and insists on being) “re-translated,” and it is perfectly natural that his poems—though organically linked to the Caribbean landscape and the related historical experience—may in their turn modify the perceptions, and sometimes allegiances, of a reader from the Adriatic coast, for instance. From this point of view, translation might be considered an essential contribution to poetic transnationalism, which in Jahan Ramazani’s words helps us “read ourselves as imaginative citizens not of one or another hermetically sealed national or civilizational bloc, but of intercultural worlds that ceaselessly overlap, intersect, and converge.”⁸

The third section of the second chapter of *Omeros*, the translation of which is proposed here, contains the crucial lines where the name “Omeros” is explained, and might be said to contain the key for an interpretation of the poem as a whole. In the words of the author: “And what this poem is

doing, in part, is trying to hear the names of things and people in their own context, meaning everything named in a noun, and everything around a name. You see maybe the whole West Indian experience is not itself—it is translated.”⁹ For the first time, the narrator enters the plot, and the narration takes on an accentuated lyrical tone. Quite apart from the obvious structural function of this fragment, it was first chosen almost at random, but after translating the initial stanzas it became immediately clear that the Serbo-Croatian language (or its Montenegrin variety) is particularly well adapted to rendering its sonorous and visual effects. This might be related to the onomatopoeic charge of the terms from the ST transposed into the TT. Even if one is not familiar with the language, the words *huk*, *šuštav*, *šum* might remind him/her of water lapping in the cave or the rustling of silk. The phoneme *š* (the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative), in particular, has a surprisingly high number of occurrences in the TT and has proved an unexpected blessing in its contribution to the overall sound symbolism of the excerpt. It recalls waves washing ashore and surf hissing, and may be said to represent appropriately the described subject. Another detail worth pointing out is the repetition of the vocal *o* in the sixth stanza where five consecutive words begin with this letter. The readers of Walcott cannot but notice its frequent iconic use, especially in *Omeros*. Antigone’s eyes defined with the outline of an almond may even be associated obliquely with the shape of the letter *o*, and if this is the case then the translation might be said to do justice, at least partially, to the author’s penchant for playful analogies between typography and the physical world.¹⁰

The precision of the expressions used by Walcott is especially difficult to reproduce. Admittedly, it might be the case of the translator’s modest vocabulary, or the fact that the semantic fields of different languages never wholly coincide. An excellent example might be the word *surf*, frequently employed in Walcott’s work, and quite common in the English language. Its precise meaning has been rendered by way of periphrasis. Rather than *talas* (wave) or *pjena* (foam), both already present in the text, “white foam of the waves as they crash” has been used, a decision

facilitated by the ST (“white surf as it crashes”), while in the eighth stanza *talas* and *pjena* are employed alternately.

In keeping with the microstylistic level of the translation analysis, it may be interesting to notice how the clause “and shook out the black gust of hair” proved extremely difficult to transpose. The equivalents of *gust* in bilingual dictionaries proved inadequate; all expressions relating to winds and currents of air (not to mention the metaphorical uses of the word referred to the surge of emotions) sounded extremely awkward when applied to the girl’s hair. Yet, it appeared essential that some sort of unusual combination should be produced and, after some consideration, the expression “slap crne kose” was opted for, *slap* meaning “cascade, overflow”. Initially, it was chosen as the vehicle of a metaphor which, if it did not reproduce the figure from the ST, at least pertained to the same semantic field of natural elements in motion (such as water and wind). The mutual influence between different languages that may put each other in perspective has already been mentioned, and the term *slap* discloses the unexpected trajectories of the development and use of an idiom. While looking into the definitions of the lexeme it was found that some historical, local uses of the word actually correspond to the English *surf*, which had previously presented some difficulty for the translator. Furthermore, a careful perusal of the dictionary revealed alternative, lesser-known uses of the word which actually overlap with the ST expression *gust*, and surprisingly, with the solution applied in the Italian translation (*raffica* meaning both “a gust of wind,” and “a volley”).

The clause “lowering shallows / of silk swirled at her ankles,” indicative of Walcott’s figurative proceedings and his subtle unsettling of language, was modified so that “silk” would function as a subject in a subordinate temporal clause, rather than a prepositional phrase. In the TT it is the silk that is lowered, swirling, into the shallows at the girl’s ankles, a permutation which appeared as inevitable for the sake of the fluency of the TT. Although the author’s punctuation and the syntactical layout were mostly reproduced, respecting his placement of theme and rheme, it was felt necessary that the sixth stanza should be somewhat normalised. Thus, “I saw how light was

webbed / on her Asian cheeks, defined her eyes with a black / almond's outline" has been adapted to the syntax of the TT. The Italian translator of *Omeros* remarked once (only half-jokingly) that a great literary achievement would tolerate a certain number of errors, and it is reasonable to hope that although some dimensions will necessarily be lost in translation, the reader may still enjoy the complex wor(l)d of the original, and that perhaps the translation in itself may be more than an instrument in the process.

Some consideration needs to be given to the problem of metre and rhyme. *Omeros* presents the reader with an intricate metrical scheme which is explained by the author as a homage to Homer's hexameter and Dante's *terza rima*, though this assertion should always be quoted with a grain of salt. Lance Callahan has meticulously analysed Walcott's prosody, reaching the conclusion that a "cleverly engineered uncertainty is [...] a defining feature of the metrical contract of *Omeros*, as is the process of raising expectations only to dash them."¹¹ One of the few constants is the number of syllables per line, which in the chosen excerpt is almost always twelve. The rhyme scheme is variegated and the extract actually opens with a *terza rima*. Walcott has repeatedly asserted that he does not believe in free verse, and has commented on the importance of the concept of design, including the visual aspect of the stanza on the printed page. He has, moreover, been annoyed by people showing surprise that he should write in rhyme: rhyme for Walcott being inseparable from poetry, poetry from song. In translating the passage from *Omeros*, rhyme and metre were inevitably sacrificed to other aspects of the text, but even the attempt at reproducing the highly irregular metrical scheme and variegated English rhyme would have proved a failure, for there are few correspondences between poetic forms in different languages. The number of syllables of the translated lines in most instances amounts to sixteen or seventeen, but of course, the variation is much more evident than in the ST, with the lines in the TT containing from thirteen to twenty syllables. The metrical solution adopted in the TT could be defined as Holmes's organic, content-derivative form with a predominantly dactylic rhythm, the descending intonation being typical of lines in Serbo-Croatian. Admittedly, the TT might display a slightly prosaic colour, but the attempt

to make the translated passage sound exceedingly “poetic” was avoided—hopefully the narrative thrust of the original poem, as well as Walcott’s claim that he has taken his cue primarily from writers of prose, will justify this decision.

The grammatical considerations of the translation of the English past tense into more flexible Serbo-Croatian forms might be of some interest for the reader. The speakers of Serbo-Croatian use predominantly one form of past tense—the so-called *perfekat*. *Aorist* and *imperfekat*, on the other hand, have acquired an archaic flavour, typical of literary creation, especially poetry. Contrary to the English language where the past simple and present perfect cannot be used indiscriminately, Serbo-Croatian permits the use of both *aorist* and *perfekat*, as far as the narration is concerned, without the requisite of the *consecutio temporum*. The use of tenses in the translated passage was determined by the requirements of rhythm and fluency, as well as by the necessity of rendering the narration less colloquial without making it sound overly archaic or rhetorical. When the first version of the translation was completed, it transpired that the verbal tenses had been distributed in an interesting pattern—namely, the *aorist* had been applied predominantly to the verbs introducing direct discourse, as well as the verbs of perception as used by the narrator. These are some of the examples: “I said”—“rekoh;” “I felt”—“osjetih;” “I saw”—“vidjeh;” “I heard”—“začuh.” The gestures of Antigone, on the other hand, are described in the perfect tense which interrupts the sequence of *aorist*, contributing thereby to the dynamic of the passage while also introducing a kind of counterpoint between the narrator and his object.

Names always represent a slippery slope for the translator, and perhaps even more so in the Serbian language where they are usually transcribed. The title of Walcott’s poem can cause some confusion, particularly among those who have not actually read the work or the lines here translated. However, there can be little doubt that the only exact way of translating the name is to leave it as it is in the ST. In the version put forward, the names which are adapted are those of Antigone, Virg, and Homer (as opposed to Omeros), as well as Seven Seas. The form “Antigone,” the way an English speaker would pronounce it, is already an adapted form, but since it inevitably

reminds one of Sophocles's heroine, the name was "translated" into Serbo-Croatian "Antigona." "Homer" actually corresponds in its written form to the English usage, hence there was no need to alter it, whereas "Verg" (from "Vergilije") is the Serbo-Croatian equivalent of the English abbreviation "Virg." "Seven Seas" is translated as "Sedam Mora," the concept which is universally applied, so the name could be regarded as a fair substitution.

This brief consideration of some of the difficulties involved in the translation of Walcott's poetry will be concluded on a slightly political note. One of the main problems in the process of translation of most postcolonial texts stems from the ideological issue of language. When the narrator explains "*mer* was mother in our Antillean patois," what seems a fairly straightforward phrase proves an unexpectedly problematic translation problem. The literal rendering *antilski patoa* was immediately excluded, since the necessary declension of the words ("antilskom patoau") would have proved all but impossible to pronounce; hence what was called for was an expression which would substitute, or rather gloss, *patoa* as a noun. In other words, a substitute of "language" was required. However, choosing the latter term would have been a highly debatable solution, pointing to an ideological stance which the translator preferred to evade. As a result, terms such as "language" and "dialect" were discarded and "speech" was used instead, as a more neutral denomination. This decision might be justified to a certain extent by what seems Walcott's own viewpoint concerning the St. Lucian French-based vernacular. In "A Letter to Chamoiseau," Walcott addresses the matter of Creole orthography and touches upon the issue of the vernacular: "Creole comes from French. Forced or not, Africans spoke French in slavery, and for the Creole Academy this is an unbearable reality."¹² Perhaps this stance on the relation between Creole and French could go some way towards answering the question of how many languages the passage from *Omeros* has been translated into, in entering Serbo-Croatian.

Playing on one of Walcott's remarks, it could be said that this translation is trying to hear the names of things and people in a completely different context, where the narrator's world becomes doubly

translated. Like Walcott's characters in his own view,¹³ it is a fragment washed up on another shore, suffering a considerable sea-change. If the process of translation is a voyage, it is one that must be concluded (but only temporarily) in one's mother tongue, and it is both a premise and a conclusion of the described translation process that nothing has such a force to impel us to rediscover our own language as has poetic translation.

Notes

¹ Derek Walcott, "Honey and Alchemy" in Juliet Steyne ed., *Beautiful Translations* (London: Pluto, 1996), 17.

² "I dare anyone to explain, or even try to, why one translation comes alive and the next one does not." [my translation] Mario Luzi, "Riflessioni sulla traduzione" in Franco Buffoni, ed., *La traduzione del testo poetico* (Milan: Guerini, 1989), 148.

³ "But it may be said by those who do not object to the general spirit of these remarks, that, as it is impossible for the Poet to produce upon all occasions language as exquisitely fitted for the passion as that which the real passion itself suggests, it is proper that he should consider himself as in the situation of a translator, who does not scruple to substitute excellencies of another kind for those which are unattainable by him; and endeavours occasionally to surpass his original, in order to make some amends for the general inferiority to which he feels that he must submit." William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Second Edition of Several of the Foregoing Poems Published, with an Additional Volume, under the Title of 'Lyrical Ballads'" in Thomas Hutchinson, ed., *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 737.

⁴ "It is an act of permanent rebellion against the social environment, a subversion." [my translation] José Ortega y Gasset, "Miseria y esplendor de la traducción" in *Obras Completas*, Tomo V (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1946), 434.

⁵ Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).

⁶ The denomination of this language (or *languages* according to some) represents in itself a linguistic and political minefield. However, the author of this text has had a literary education based on the literature of all these peoples conceived as a unique, though variegated, entity. Hence, the name "Serbo-Croatian" will be used despite the possible associations with the political and cultural establishment of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

⁷ Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, trans. Andrea Molesini (Milan: Adelphi, 2003).

⁸ Jahan Ramazani, "A Transnational Poetics" (*American Literary History* 18.2, 2006), 332-359.

⁹ J. P. White, "An Interview with Derek Walcott" in William Baer, ed., *Conversations with Derek Walcott* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 173.

¹⁰ Walcott's musings on the word *palmier* are a case in point: he comments that "visually it has that extra curling of the fronds in the wind." See Derek Walcott, "The Length of a Breath" in Okwui Enwezor, et al., eds., *Creolité and Creolization: Documenta 11 Platform 3* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 244.

¹¹ Lance Callahan, *In the Shadows of Divine Perfection* (London: Routledge, 2003), 36.

¹² Derek Walcott, "A Letter to Chamoiseau" in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 228.

¹³ "I'm looking at these people as if they were fragments or shards washed up on this shore and looking at them for the first time." See Baer, 174.