



ON TRANSLATING CLODIE VASLI'S "THE HAND THAT BLESSES US"

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This short piece by Clodie Vasli is taken from the book *Apagando um cigarro atrás do outro*, published by Confraria do Vento in 2014. It is a collection of very short, meditative, almost poetic stories, musing on themes including solitude, insomnia and love. "The Hand that Blesses Us" is a letter from the author to his father, but also a more general exploration and celebration of father-son relationships.

When I received this text, the first thing I did was read it once through. When approaching a translation, I rarely read the ST more than once, and sometimes not even once, before beginning as I like my first draft to be free from the prejudice of prior knowledge and reflect my very first impressions, thus attempting to limit the imposition of my own voice on the text. In the words of Jean Boase-Beier, "a literary translation multiplies the voices of the text, by adding the translator's voice" (BOASE-BEIER, 2011, p.57) and while any translation is, of course, "your reading of that author" (SCHWARTZ AND DE LANGE, 2006, p.11), this strategy of going in partially blind can sometimes help to keep the reins on that. This being a short text, as previously stated, I did indeed have a quick read first and was instantly struck by its rhythm, repetitions and poetic quality – features I would come to learn are typical of Vasli's short fiction. I knew immediately that recreating this rhythm would be crucial to the success of my translation.

One of the first and most important decisions of this translation concerned what to do with the word *pai*. Simply scanning the page shows us that this word appears often throughout the text. "Father" is the obvious choice, yet it felt a touch formal, especially when used so often; however, "dad" seemed too informal – the Portuguese word "pai" being more flexible and versatile than either of these options in English – as well as opening up a minefield of localisation issues and arguments over "daddy", "da", "papa" and so on. "Father", though, still felt a little cumbersome, especially when repeated so often.

In one early draft I toyed with using "father" in most instances but "dad" in certain places where it seemed appropriate. Ultimately, I felt this detracted from the deliberate repetition of the original and created an awkward discord in the register. It remained, therefore, "father" throughout. Having identified repetition as vital to the text stylistically, this seemed a satisfactory choice.

"Stylistics is frequently described metaphorically as a kind of 'tool-kit'" (WALES, 2001, p.v) and here I saw repetition as a tool for achieving rhythm. A liberal scattering of short sentences is another tool deployed



in the ST and I have therefore tried to keep the TT as syntactically similar to the original as possible. The role of syntax in style is something also acknowledged by Edith Grossman, who notes “the rhythm of the prose (long, flowing periods or short, crisp phrases)” as one of a number of “pivotal stylistic devices” (GROSSMAN, 2010, p.9).

The frequent repetition of “father”, “the father” and “our father” also elicited religious connotations in the minds of most of the group and was a keen discussion point in the Brazilian Translation Club meeting of January 2020 at UCL, at which the author was present. Vasli insisted that these were unintentional, and we discussed how perhaps it stood out more in English than in the original Portuguese. Sometimes we gain things in translation without meaning to and must evaluate the effect of this. I concluded that there was no way around this and, if anything, the paternalism of God the father added another potential layer to the reading of a text concerned with the relationship between father and son. It is for a reader to draw conclusions with regards to that and not my job as a translator to delimit the possibilities of their readings.

Another interesting dilemma was the phrase “carteira assinada”, which is a sort of employment record book issued to workers in Brazil. Having no such formal equivalent in the UK, it was more important here to maintain the flow of the piece and find a more dynamic equivalent (NIDA in VENUTI 2012, pp. 144-145). I was satisfied with my solution of: “clocking in and out” which retains that sense of working progress being recorded, while not being culturally specific or interrupting the text to explain what a “carteira” in this context is in Brazil, which is really of minor importance compared with the sense that the father of the story is motivated by and dedicates his working life to his son. My solution is also in line with the semantic fields of tiredness and relentlessness present in the same sentence.

As with terminology specific to the source culture, colloquial phrases are also often the focal point of debate and agonising for translators. One such example, offering numerous potential solutions, was “este puxou ao pai”. Options considered by myself and proposed by others included: “he looks more like this father”; “he’s the spit of his father”; “like father like son”; “he looks just like this father”. Eventually I settled on “he takes after his father”, a similarly colloquial expression implying a likeness, physical or otherwise, between father and son. I felt this option most satisfactorily covered the meanings of the original, combines well with the preceding phrase and its connotations of influence nicely set up what follows, particularly in relation to the father’s pride.

A discussion which showed the varying and shifting nuances of certain words according to the speaker and their culture surrounded the phrase “na rodoviária, de dentro do ônibus”. My instinct as a UK English speaker



was to write “at the station, from inside the bus”. In a Brazilian context, however, it was considered important to highlight that these were not buses but coaches (words to my mind more or less synonymous) – Brazil is an enormous country and ordinary people use coaches to travel long distances – and so it became “at the bus station, from inside the coach”, for clarity and to avoid creating a repetition (of “coach”) in the TT not present in the ST and which would have been untidy in English.

I was fortunate in creating this translation not only to benefit from the wisdom, expertise and suggestions of my fellow participants in the Brazilian Translation Club, but also to be able to count on the author’s collaboration, both in person at the meeting and via private correspondence. Being able to discuss the text with the author and my fellow translators was a fruitful and positive experience. As translation is often a rather solitary craft, the opportunity to come together and collaborate in something more collective has been a very rewarding, not to mention enjoyable, process. I know that my translation has been improved by workshoping it with the group and I hope that is reflected in a worthwhile reading experience.

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