TRANSLATOR'S COMMENTARY

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Ronaldo Cagiano's "Sombras sobre o rio" is a beautifully written and moving account of a tragic event, the death of a brother during the narrator's childhood. The narrative is structured as a recollection and as such is permeated with the protagonist's adult reflections on the day as events unfolded.

On an initial reading of the text, I was struck by its complexity and by the lyrical nature of the writing, the expressive turns of phrase, at times more akin to poetry than prose. Unsurprisingly, I discovered Cagiano is also a poet and the beauty of his text presented real challenges for translation. Throughout the process there was a constant pull between the desire to remain faithful to the imagery created by the author and to attempt to deliver it in English passages of similar poetic grace, whilst ensuring they were idiomatic and true to the language. An example of this internal dialogue was the passage "em meio à fita de cetim da sapatilha que, desamarrada, bailarinava ao vento, num balé confuso," (paragraph 5) where Cagiano exquisitely depicts the movement of the laces in the wind by inventing a verb "bailarinar". I considered creating an equivalent in the Target Language (TL) but could not find a satisfactory version. Another option would have been to use the verb "dance", "the loose satin ties dancing in the wind". This had an idiomatic appeal, however "bailarinava" is a much more special way of describing the movement than "dancing" (after all the author could have used "dançar" but chose not to) and so "dancing in the wind", whilst accurate, seemed to lose something of the unusual beauty of the image in the Source Language (SL). The reference to ballet in the line led me to consider ballet terms, and I settled on "pirouetting in the wind" which I felt had the dynamism of the SL and conveyed the sense of the ribbons twirling in the wind. Having already referenced ballet with the word "pirouetting", I went with "bewildering dance" for "balé confuso"; "bewildering" seeming a more apt alternative to "confused" to reflect the child's puzzlement at being unexpectedly called back. The resulting passage, "the loose satin ties of my pumps pirouetting in the wind, in a bewildering dance", hopefully captures the essence of the Source Text (ST) with a similarly evocative use of language in the Translated Text (TT). Numerous other instances could be cited – another particularly tricky passage, for example, was "buscando no entretempo de suas convicções todos os tempos de uma vida" (paragraph 9). "Entretempo" can be interpreted/translated in many different ways, a pause, an interval, a break, a period of time, interim. In all cases, "entretempo de suas convições" suggested to me an underlying tension, an idea of inner conflict. The image of the push and pull of "tides" seemed appropriate here and linked well into the concept of time, strongly present in both "entretempo" and "tempos".

Poetry pervades the prose not just in the writing style but also through explicit and implicit references to other works. This raised two considerations as regards the translation: a need to research the poems themselves in order to correctly translate the quotes, and to explore intertextuality, investigating possible additional layers of meaning that might impact the translation of Cagiano's text. In paragraph 3, Cagiano quotes from "O Cão Sem Plumas" a well-known poem by João Cabral de Melo Neto. Having studied the poem and arrived at my own translation for the quote, I found it interesting to compare alternative translations by Richard Zenith and Thomas Colchie, particularly the line "está na memória" which I translated as "lies in the memory", Colchie as "is in the memory" and Zenith as "exists in memory". I liked Zenith's approach, particularly the lack of the article before the word "memory", but in the end decided to use my own version, as I wanted to convey the physicality of both the river and the dog, which seemed pertinent to both Cagiano's text as well as Cabral's poem. In paragraph 9, Cagiano includes a quote "Uma vida que poderia ter sido e não foi" ascribing it to an unnamed poet; perhaps because he is in fact paraphrasing Manuel Bandeira's "Pneumotórax" (the correct line would be "a vida inteira que podia ter sido e que não foi"), adapting it to better fit within the context of the story. Not a particularly tricky quote to translate but looking at other translations, I was reminded to avoid the contraction at the end, using "and was not" rather than "and wasn't", which does not work well either in the poem or with the erudite tone of the ST. Later in the same paragraph, the section "a lógica de não ser visto, de ser o silêncio, o nada e a invisibilidade após a curva" implicitly alludes to Fernando Pessoa's poem "A Morte é a Curva da Estrada": "A morte é a curva da estrada/Morrer é só não ser visto" (Death is the bend in the road/ Dying is just not being seen) and a reading of the poem was helpful in shaping meaning for the translation.

In addition to the intertextual references, the epigraph, a quote from Luis Quintais's poem "Panorama", appears at the start before the main body of text, perhaps in order to set the tone, to prepare the reader for what is to come; it also establishes the image of the river as a tangible presence. Significantly, it introduces the word "equívoco" which reappears twice in the text:

1. Epigraph: "Este é o teu rio, a tua casa, o teu equívoco, a tua morte, o que te esquecerá"

2. Paragraph 9: "porque maior equívoco não há que drenar um sonho mancebo"

3. Paragraph 11: "onde navegam equívocos de mãos dadas com Carontes"

The word has many possible interpretations, and since the author chose to repeat it in the text, an ideal solution for the TT would be a word or word combination that worked for all occurrences. I considered "misfortune" (for 1 and 2) and "misfortunate souls" (for 3) as that seemed to work well in the quote. However, when used within the text, the word "equívoco" carries a certain implied criticism which is not present in "misfortune". I considered instead "error"/"erring souls" and "mistake"/"mistaken souls"; the latter reads better in the quote and carries a more personal load in 2, so it seemed the better option in the end.

A further consideration as regards the quoted passages was whether to footnote them, providing the name of the poems and poets. Although the author has not done so, one needs to consider if the average native reader would have prior knowledge of the poems and if this would be relevant to an understanding of the passage. Having lived abroad many years, I needed to research this and whilst Bandeira's and Pessoa's poems are well known, they are not part of the common vernacular. Therefore, footnoting did not seem essential and potentially offered a distraction from the flow of the text, which seemed more of a hindrance than a help.

The text is not an easy read and initially I found myself "explaining" the ST by selecting words in common usage in the TL. However, on reflection it struck me that this was a purposeful approach on the author's part. The sophisticated vocabulary and intricate sentence structures and imagery, as well as the references to Greek mythology, suggest that a modicum of erudition is expected from the reader. I felt it was therefore important to respect the author's elegant style and intentions and tried as far as possible to reflect this in the TT, opting for less usual word choices, such as "casket" for "féretro" (as opposed to the more common "coffin") and "cortège" for "séquito" (rather than "procession"). I also considered adding footnotes to the references to Greek mythology but since the average native reader would not be familiar with this, the lack of such information in the ST seemed to dictate the same approach for the TT.

A significant area of doubt was around the issue of punctuation, as very long sentences, broken only by commas, abound in the text. This is by no means an unheard of literary device in English (James Joyce's Ulysses comes to mind), but it is not the norm and I considered playing with the structure and breaking some of the longer passages into smaller sentences to make for a more comfortable read, particularly in the single-sentence paragraph 11 "Aquelas sombras ainda… que habita todas as perdas." However, Cagiano's approach personally struck me as a stream of consciousness outpouring of thoughts and impressions that felt very deliberate, integral to the flow of the prose and key to the text's elegiac quality. I decided to largely keep the same punctuation in the TT - the long sentences are complex but no more so than they are in the SL.

Translating "Sombras sobre o rio" was an immensely stimulating and deeply enriching undertaking, both as a reader and as a translator. Every sentence posed a challenge and each time I revisit the text I find myself considering alternatives and making changes. It's a creative process and perhaps will never truly be "finished"! As a colleague mentioned in the group discussion session on this text, "every translation is a reading, a personal interpretation of a text" and I hope my interpretation has gone some way to capturing the lyrical intensity of Cagiano's prose.

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