

EIGHT

The Great Leap

César and the Caesura

FORREST GANDER

In 1972, Robert Bly published an issue of his *Seventies Press* journal that interspersed several short essays on what he called “leaping poetry” with translations of Lorca, Vallejo, Takahashi, de Otero, and other poets, including Rilke. In a final section, Bly included “Home Grown Poems” that he felt continued or extended the quick-associative, “leaping” spirit of his international exemplars. In some ways, the essays served to critique what Charles Bernstein would later come to call Official Verse Culture. Bly’s main prescription for change was a good dose of Latin American surrealism. The translations he showcased were lively, and the effect of anthologizing a small, handpicked group of terrific poets from Latin America, Spain, Germany, Sweden, Japan, and China was exhilarating and popular. The whole shebang, retitled *Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations*, was reprinted as a hardback three years later.

Heap on thirty-plus years and here we are, in time to revisit *Leaping Poetry* to see how Bly’s “idea with poems and translations” resonates in the current milieu. Might Marjorie Perloff’s characterization of poetic indeterminacy or Stephen Burt’s notion of “elliptical poetry” or Kamau Brathwaite’s “sycorax typography” be developments of “leaping poetry”? Are translations of Spanish and Latin American poets still leading the way for us? And what exactly *was* leaping poetry, anyway?

Whatever else it was, Bly’s leaping poetry was a guy thing. The single woman represented in his anthology, Marguerite Young, was once Bly’s

—1
—0
—+1

professor. The poems in English (by Jerome Rothenberg, Bill Knott, Allen Ginsberg, John Wieners, and others) and the translations are still great to read . . . if only they weren't contextualized by Bly's preposterous prose.

To be fair to the time, it's true that in the 1970s, Ezra Pound's proclamations ("Go in fear of abstraction," etc.) were still swooping through the air like Valkyries, and (mostly male) writers were looking to jack their reputations by packing together pseudo-authoritative pronouncements on all of human history, art, and literature and lobbing them into the cloud of a "new idea" that would inevitably happen to validate each writer's own personal style. In fact, what Bly's "leaping poetry" boils down to—"leaping is the ability to associate fast"—is a diffusion of Ezra Pound's translation of Aristotle: "Swift perception of relations, hallmark of genius." So there was some precedence for Bly's presumption that he could single-handedly explain the excitement in "'modern poetry' in all European countries" or sweepingly declare that due to the leap-blocking efforts of Christianity, there were "eighteen hundred years of no-leaping" poetry prior to William Blake. There was precedence too for the wacky language Bly uses to make his case. His references to "blocked love-energy," "Great Mother mysteries," and to a spark that can rocket (evidently like a pachinko ball) from one side of the brain to the other and then down through three layers of brain—"When the new brain is receiving energy from the other brains, then leaping poetry is possible"—are cartoonish. And how do you respond to someone who claims that "Poems of steady light always imply a unity in the brain that is not there" if the term "Poems of steady light," like "hopping poems" or "tame association," drifts off like a vitreous floater every time you try to focus on it?

But Bly at least was reading international poetry, translating it, and championing it to others. *Leaping Poetry* was enormously influential; many young poets in the seventies who had not been reading work in translation began to do so. The poets introduced in Bly's anthology were soon retranslated by others. *Leaping Poetry* helped ignite a Lorca craze, every poet in the '70s was longing for *duende*, and Spanish and Latin American surrealism, adopted and converted, may have helped resuscitate North American poetry for a while.

And what about now? Are translations and international literature central to North American poetry? Was surrealism curative? My own

Part II: The Translator at Work

perspective is not exactly disinterested. It seems to me that translation is more than ever a part of American literary life, but that poets are not necessarily looking to the same countries or for the same kind of leap that Bly celebrated.

Look at all the new Mexican poetry that has carried across the border. Besides anthologies such as *Reversible Monuments: Contemporary Mexican Poets*; *Connecting Lines: New Poetry from Mexico*; and *Sin Puertas Visibles*, books by important individual poets like Gloria Gervitz, Laura Solorzano, and Coral Bracho are now available in English. And this translated work has already been striking sparks of response from U.S. poets, among them poets who don't read Spanish, like Stephen Burt, C. D. Wright, and Michael Palmer.

I would guess that translations of contemporary French poetry have had the greatest impact on U.S. poetry in the last twenty years, and books by younger poets like Lisa Lubasch (*Twenty-One After Days*), Marcella Durand (*Western Capital Rhapsodies*), and Laura Mullen (*Subject*), among others (Michael Palmer, Rosmarie Waldrop, Cole Swensen), make that case. But the spectrum of influence is much wider. John Ashbery lifts a Finnish form for his own "Finnish Rhapsody." Serial poems by Charles Bernstein take their cue from Louis Zukofsky's homophonic translations of Catullus. Slovenian poet Tomaz Salamun's translated work is the catalyst for John Bradley's book of poetry and invented correspondence, *War on Words*. Prageeta Sharma's new work reveals an infatuation with translations of Kim Hyesoon, and Brenda Hillman's "water" poems were nourished, in part, by Hans Favery, a Surinam-born poet who wrote in Dutch. We can see that Guy Davenport's Greek translations inspired Kent Johnson to write *The Miseries of Poetry: Traductions from the Greek*, and that Sappho translations affected the form and tone of Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's early poems. In his book *O Wheel*, Peter Sacks acknowledges the influence of translations of medieval Hebrew poet Shmuel HaNagid. Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* is strongly marked by her reading of *Alphabet*, the English translation of a seminal book by Danish writer Inger Christensen. Both Paul Hoover's recent *Poems in Spanish* and George Kalamaras's *Even the Java Sparrows Call Your Hair* are inspired by translations of Spanish-language poetry. And Gerald Stern is one of several poets to record his encounter with translations of poems by Taha Muhammad Ali, a Palestinian poet. Arabic, Spanish, Danish, Hebrew, Greek, Slovenian, Korean, Danish, Latin, Finnish,

—-1
—0
—+1

The Great Leap: César and the Caesura

French . . . I could continue, but I think the point is clear: contemporary American poets are being influenced by translations from all over the world.

Several years ago, before I was hired as the Briggs-Copeland poet at Harvard, I was interviewed by Helen Vendler, who asked me, after looking at examples of my projected syllabi, how I could teach books of translation to students who were not even thoroughly familiar with their own (by which she meant British and North American) literary tradition. It was, probably, an appropriate question to pose to someone about to be hired into something called the Department of English and American Literature and Language. And yet the notion that literary tradition might be pruned between geographic lines seems to me a constructed and unhealthy convenience, and one that runs the danger of advocating a kind of academic feudalism. I don't believe that writers care where their influences come from. They're alert for images, rhythms, forms, anything at all that will feed the burning tree. I think readers are the same. Chaucer had his ear tuned to French poetry before he shifted the rhythm of his own lines from tetrameter to pentameter. Shakespeare cribbed more than once from Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid. For George Herbert and Henry Vaughan, the translation of the Bible they read was a matter of the utmost seriousness. Keats penned an ecstatic poem to honor a translation of Homer. And Hopkins, when he wrote "Wreck of the Deutschland," had Pindar in mind.

There are, of course, political ramifications to crossing linguistic borders. Each language is a modality of life. We might go so far as to say that one form of totalitarianism is the stuffing of expression into a single, standardized language that marches the reader toward some presumptively shared goal. If our country's self-assurance, its reliance on a grammar of linearity and commerce, its obsessive valuation of measurement and scientific objectivity brackets off realms of perception, of possibility and difference, then translation offers refreshment. It shifts our perspective and realigns our relation to the world, bringing us into proximity with other modalities. With others. It can draw us across that most guarded border, the one we build around ourselves.

The big question for me, then, is: To what degree do host languages and host cultures attest to constructions of the world that are incommensurable with my own?

Part II: The Translator at Work

For instance, I wonder at the implications of the metonymic location of agency in Spanish—I don't hurt my hand, but *me duele la mano*, me it hurts the hand—and what seems (from my linguistic perspective) to be a separation or objectification of body parts. An English reader wonders how anyone can think of their own hand as “the hand,” as if it were an independent entity. (In English, we only speak of the body in this way when the body is a cadaver.)

The zinging run-on sentence that launches the marvelous César Aira's *Diario de Hepatitis*, deployed with serial prepositions, past and present participles, conditional and future tenses, mentions a number of such body parts. Here's my English translation:

If I'm found undone by disgrace, destroyed, impotent, in extreme physical or mental anguish, or both together, isolated, for example, and condemned on a steep mountain, drowned in snow, frozen to the core, after a fall of hundreds of meters, bounced from the edges of ice and rock, with both legs severed, or my ribs smashed and cracked and all their points perforating my lungs; or at the bottom of a ditch or the end of an alley, after a shootout, bleeding into a sinister dawn which, for me, would be the last; or in the ward for incurables at the hospital, losing hour to hour my last functions in between paroxysms of atrocious pain; or abandoned to the avatars of mendacity and alcoholism in the street; or with gangrene shooting up my leg; or in the phantasmal progression of a glottal spasm; or purely insane, going about my business in a straitjacket, imbecilic, opprobrious, lost . . . it's probable that, even having a little pencil and a notebook at hand, I wouldn't write. Nothing, not a line, not a word. I absolutely wouldn't write. Not because I couldn't, not on account of the circumstances, but for the same reason I don't write now: because I don't feel like it, because I'm tired, bored, fed up; because I can't see it serves any purpose.

In Spanish, it's:

Con las dos piernas arrancadas
Colloquially: with both my legs severed
Literally: with *the* two legs severed

O las costillas aplastadas y rotas y todas sus puntas perforándome los pulmones

—-1
—0
—+1

The Great Leap: César and the Caesura

Colloquially: Or my ribs smashed and cracked and all their points perforating my lungs

Literally: Or the ribs smashed and broken and all their points perforating me the lungs

O con la gangrena subiéndome por una pierna—

Colloquially: Or with gangrene shooting up my leg—

Literally: Or with the gangrene climbing me by a leg—

If we want to translate the lines so that they have an equivalent *impact* on the English-language reader, we're going to choose the colloquial translation, because in Spanish, the syntax doesn't incite the Spanish-language reader to think twice about agency or the relation of a self to its constituent parts.

But if we translate it colloquially, are we simply undermining one of the most interesting differences in the ways that the two languages negotiate experience?

And then, again, if we draw attention to differences by foregrounding the literal—"Or with the gangrene climbing me by a leg"—aren't we merely exoticizing a distinction imposed by our foreignness, by our own point of view, one that isn't discerned by the readers of the host language—as Pound and Fennellosa did in their ascription of ideograms to Chinese? (Chinese readers, it must be acknowledged, simply don't see in their characters "the horse" or "the sun in the trees" that the Americans were delightedly deciphering.)

These are the sorts of questions that interest me.

The language of the South American Aymara also interests me, and in particular because I've cotranslated two books by the Bolivian poet Jaime Saenz, whose work is notably influenced by Aymara language and culture. In Aymara, it is impossible to say something like "Joan of Arc burned at the stake in May 1431" since that statement is unqualified by anyone's experience and because every sentence must express whether an action or event was personally witnessed or not. According to Rafael Nuñez, a cognitive scientist at the University of California, San Diego, Aymara is the only studied culture for which the past is linguistically and conceptually in front of the people while the future lies behind them.

To speak of the future, he notes, elderly Aymara thumb or wave backward over their shoulder. To reference the past, they make forward sweeping motions with their hands and arms. "The main word for 'eye,'

Part II: The Translator at Work

‘front,’ and ‘sight’ in Aymara means the past, while the basic word for ‘back’ or ‘behind’ also means the future.”

It has been suggested that in a culture that places a premium on stipulating degrees of evidential investment—distinguishing the observed from the unobserved, the known from the unknown—it makes sense to metaphorically position the past in your field of vision while the future—always speculative—remains invisible behind you.

In this case, and others (like the widely publicized research by Daniel Everett on the “Cultural Constraints on Grammar and Cognition in Pirahã”), there seems to be a close relation between the particularities of language and the perceptions and conceptions of the speakers of that language.

Here’s the Bolivian poet Jaime Saenz channeling an Aymara spiritual regard for the harmony of opposites into a philosophical grammar:

What is the night?—you ask now and forever.
The night, a revelation still veiled.
Perhaps a deathform, tenacious and flexed,
perhaps a body lost to the night itself.
Truly a chasm, a space unimaginable.
A subtle, lightless realm not unlike the body dwelling in you,
which hides, surely, many clues to the night.

...

One time I came close to my body;
and realizing I had never seen it, even though I bore it with me,
I asked it who it was;
and a voice, in the silence, said to me:
I am the body who inhabits you, and I am here in the darkness, and I
suffer you, and I live you, and die you.
But I am not your body. I am the night.

That indelible tone—meditative, poised, haunting, mystical—and Saenz’s use of the full phrase as a line penetrated me and strongly affected the development of poems I wrote after finishing the Saenz translation. My own poems at the time were particularly attentive to line breaks, percussive prosody, and polyrhythms.

Soon after translating Saenz’s *La Noche*, I wrote a poem called “A Clearing” to accompany photographs by Raymond Meeks. I wasn’t

—-1
—0
—+1

The Great Leap: César and the Caesura

conscious of the Saenz effect until months after I had written the poem that begins:

Where are you going? Ghosted with dust. From where have you
come?

Dull assertiveness of the rock heap, a barren monarchy.

Wolfspider, size of a hand, encrusted with dirt at the rubble's edge.

What crosses here goes fanged or spiked and draws its color from
the ground.

Xanthic shadow at the edges.

Where are we going? Ghosted with dust. From where have we come?

This may be an obvious instance of a translation influencing my own writing. But I wasn't at all aware of it as I wrote; the influence had been absorbed and metabolized.

And it has happened the other way as well. In my last book of poems, *Eye Against Eye*, I worked a medial caesura, a wide blank space, into the lines of a number of poems. In addition to gapping pentameter rhythms, the caesura represented for me the call and response of Southern work songs and the experience of talking to my wife as we walked in ruts on either side of a hump in the dirt road where we spent a summer in Arkansas.

Last year, giving readings from *Firefly Under the Tongue*, a translation of the selected poems of Mexican poet Coral Bracho, I found my eyes sliding across the gutter of the en face edition—as though I were reading the inside margin as a caesura in one of my own poems—and plucking Spanish lines from the left page as I read the translations in English on the right. I developed a strategy for including Spanish lines as part of a performance that allows an audience to hear the original language in conversation with English. Surprisingly, rather than deforming the music of the poem, the technique seems to me to intensify and clarify the music.

Most recently, when I was translating poems from *Santa y Señá* (*Watchword* in my version), the Villarrutia Award-winning book by Mexican poet Pura López Colomé, I began to incorporate Spanish lines into the English translations “where I heard them,” sometimes preceded or followed by their English translations. Occasionally, where I meant to stress an ineluctable music in Spanish or where I thought semantic meaning would be intuited in context, I didn't translate the Spanish at all.

Part II: The Translator at Work

MERRY-GO-ROUND

Three horses came down the hill
and sumptuously entered
the river's transparency
a la diafanidad del río.

One
waded out next to me.
At times, it paused to drink.
A ratos se detenía a beber.
At times, it looked me in the eye.
A ratos me miraba fijamente.
And between us both,
y entre ambos,
an ancient murmur passed
on its sojourn.

I realize my method—which is derived first from my own poems and my development of a caesura to approximate the effect of call and response, and then from my performance of translations at public readings—complicates the translation in ways that don't represent the original. But I wonder if the goal of "representing" the original is the goal of translation at all, given that the work in translation is necessarily subjected to alteration, transformation, dislocation, and displacement. Maybe there are times when *not* "representing" the original is precisely what permits the creation of something less definitive but more ongoing, a form of translation that amplifies and renews (and even multiplies) the original poetry's meanings.

And if the point of translation, to begin with, is that one language is not enough, doesn't the interaction of two languages celebrate that apriorism by refusing to fully convert the foreign into a version of the familiar?

I'm influenced in my approach to translation both by Brechtian theater, its acknowledgment of artifice, and by Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's interpretation of translation as "another genre entire" from the original, but it is nevertheless my intention to create poems in English, poems with a comparable impact on the reader. Surprisingly, rather than disfiguring the poems or turning them into experiments in scholarship, occasional bilingualisms feathered into the translations can

—-1
—0
—+1

The Great Leap: César and the Caesura

allow English to embrace Spanish (perhaps it's more like a cheek kiss) while encouraging both languages to harmonize at key moments so the poetry is less diminished, less often "lost in translation." From even such intermittent linguistic collaborations, a whole new realm of sonorous interaction and implication becomes possible, allowing me to create a more expansive and expressive prosody and inviting readers to venture a little further across the border.

-1—
0—
+1—

Part II: The Translator at Work