Translation of a Selection of Poems by Caitlín Maude and Mary O’Malley into Spanish

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Introduction. On Enrique Alda’s versions

Upon reading Seamus Heaney’s early poetry collections – and this was a long time ago – I was surprised by his subtle way of offering up his own versions of poems by other authors as a way to making them his own and moulding them with exacting precision into the specific theme of each given collection. Rather than referring to them as “translations”, he used the word after as an antecedent (to works by the likes of Dante, Baudelaire, Virgil, and some Gaelic authors) with the aim of reworking them into newly inspired viewpoints a posteriori; thus, the poem’s metaphors and images, initially belonging to a different language, would be born again, this time to a different voice and melody – his own – in such a way that his harmonious yet elusive “music of events” was crafted into something visible and audible. I owe this great Captain the sudden epiphany of conceiving translation as creation, as an opportunity of feeding foreign sounds to a symphony of musical inimitability. As time went on, I had the chance to be present at some of his poetry readings, attended by audiences of varying sizes, where – to put it this way – “the yellow bittern”, otherwise known as the seventeenth-century “An Bunnán Bui”, would take flight in yet another twentieth-century poem by Heaney.

The Irish tradition is fortunate enough to host poet-translators whose bilingual output has been fostered by the co-existence of two languages: these authors write in what they feel to be their mother tongue, and then harken back to their second language. While those of us who live under different linguistic circumstances come across this realization in alternative ways, considering this background there is no room for doubt that the person wishing to render a poem into a different language must necessarily be a poet, or else should have experienced first-hand the implications of writing without colliding against semantic plurality. This poet-translator may have never published their poems; however, he or she has written them into existence, even if privately and far from the gaze of discerning eyes, or will do so in the future. Deep down, nevertheless, this poet must firmly believe that “translating” poetry is far from being a mere task of chancing upon perfect equivalents. It is precisely in this light that renowned poet Anne Carson defines as synonymy the realtionship between poetry and translation, even if one is faced with muttering or complete silence. After all, absolute ownership of a poem has grown to matter less and less now that we have come to understand Homer as a conglomerate of poets rather than an individual entity.

Enrique Alda’s translations of Caitlín Maude (1941-1982) and Mary O’Malley – the former being an excellent example of the Gaelic-English-Spanish triangle and the latter’s poetry in English likewise dancing to vibrant Gaelic rhythms – are Greek in their approach:
that is, they see language as the veil under which the truth of all things shines away, and poetry as the revealing rip in the fabric elaborated by the individual language in question. The intense flow of his versions immediately catches the eye, in a way which recalls the literary compulsion of the naturally risk-taking poet, rather than the careful craftsman. His achievements remind one of Borges’s perceptions on translation: “Translations are far from being inferior to the original, but we must necessarily perceive a difference between them … which is not within the reach of the translator; rather, it lies in the way poetry is read”.

Both poets owe themselves to Connemara, by which I mean that each utilizes her own style to replicate the deep rhythms and tonalities of the regional voice. While Maude’s poetry stems from the Gaelic language, O’Malley’s poetry is in English, which bridges both poets with Enrique Alda’s language.

Caitlín Maude’s versions (not the originals) have been put forth by a variety of authors intent on paying tribute to her genuine way of singing in the dark (in the corner of a room, or the darkness underneath the speaker’s closed eyes) and the quiet summoning of readers or listeners willing to participate. Translators into English such as Trodden Keefe, Fitzmaurice, Hartnett and Ní Chonchúir show the necessity to emulate the brief and mostly nasal pauses, the long syllables at the end of sentences, the glissandos, and even the endings struggling to be spoken rather than sung – in itself a trait of ancient a cappella singing. Enrique is aware of the incapacity of the Spanish language to achieve that effect. He decides, therefore, to bestow his poetic enterprise with precise originality through the use of careful repetitions and impeccably flawless Castilian cadences; he never loses sight of the translator’s task of contributing something beyond the original version, an outcome in turn to be desired from an artistic point of view, as Walter Benjamin and George Steiner have noted. The titles he chooses exceed mere literalism (“Tangled” is “Maraña”; “Interval” becomes “Arrebato”; “Entreaty” is translated into “Súplica”, to mentioned but a few), thus instating a rigorous identification between meaning and content which he later sends to multiple directions and ends with his own personal touch in the form of a risky addendum. Let me briefly sample the poem “Maraña”, which might as well have been composed in our own language.

So faultlessly does the musicality of the final lines strengthen the original meaning that the protagonist/speaker feels compelled to actively – rather than passively – descend, wander out, and be swallowed whole by the depths of sorrow and loneliness: “Pasea esta noche por la playa./mi amor,/ pasea y detén tus lágrimas,/ levántate y pasea esta noche./no te arrodilles más/ante esa tumba en la montaña,/sus flores están marchitas/y mis huesos descompuestos…/esta noche te llamo/desde las profundidades del océano….Una vez recorrí la orilla/hasta el final de la playa,/donde las olas jugaban/y la blanca espuma besaba mis pies./Inundando lentamente mi mirada/allí, en lo más profundo,/vi la soledad en tus ojos/y la pena en tu rostro”. It is likely that the spiritual direction of this song of love and lament has influenced the translator’s choice of a well-defined musicality, which is evidenced in the speaker’s desire to actually sink.
In the case of Mary O’Malley, Enrique’s approach unearths further nuances of meaning and, as I see it, seeks to identify himself with the voice of the female through the reverberation of an intimate, private, and womanly speech, one which reaches out to its echo in the world. This time, poetic music does not lead the way; instead, it is the author’s voice – whose particularly opaque elevation is painted with a religious, historical, mythological and legendary veneer and, as such, is not necessarily melodious – that weaves together landscape and word, place and syllable, home and consonants, brusque, loss-inducing, rupture-sounding silences and traditional moulds which have long lost their arbitrariness. The emotions of the natural world are brought to life in Spanish through the names of flowers and the most minute details of humans and animals, encapsulating both into a destiny which, far from being always entirely happy, is oftentimes cruel. I can earnestly say that in Alda’s versions I do not search for the leftovers of poetic English: I am captivated by his symbols in Spanish of a present time blended into a continuous past: “Lo sabe por los caballos/ parados en todas partes/en los campos, la mirada/fluida como versos,/dejados de lado durante años/junto al rosario y las oraciones/pero abundantes de nuevo/como prímulas o aulagas;/por el sucinto temblor en su piel/sabe que escuchan/las noticias que atañen/nuestro destino y el suyo”.

A distinguished translation of poetry can come exceedingly close to the original. It can let death abandon the pile of worn-out topics and come to the fore (in, as Enrique phrases it, “las voces atrapadas de los ahogados/ o el extraño grito de criaturas mudas/que anhelan algo más,/ser humanas”). It can make sure that speaking a language or not does not guarantee anything, thereby letting us prove that languages are not commanded. That poetry transcends all this.

Pura López Colomé
(Translated into English by Germán Asensio Peral)

A note by the editor

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Poems by Caitlín Maude

Aimhréidhe

Síúil, a ghrá,
Cois trá anocht –
Síúil agus cuir uait
na deora –
éirigh agus síúil anocht

ná feac do ghlúin feasta
ag uaigh sin an tsléibhe –
tá na blátha sin feoite
agus tá mo chnámhasa dreoite...

(Labhraim leat anocht
ó fochtar mara –
labhraim leat gach óíche
ó fochtar mara...)

Shiúileas lá cois trá
shiuileas go híochtar trá –
rinne tonn súgradh le tonn –
ligh an cúr bán mo chosa –
d’ardaíos mo shuíl go mall
gur ansíúd amuigh ar an domhain
in aimhréidhe cúir agus tóinn
chonaic an t-uaigneas id shuíl
‘gus an doilíos id ghunúís

Shiúileas amach ar an domhain
ó ghlúine go com
agus ó chom go guaillfé
né gor slogadh mé
sa doilíos gus san uaigneas

Wander, my love
along the shore tonight –
wander and stop
your weeping –
rise up and wander tonight
bend your knees no more
at that mountain grave –

Pasea esta noche por la playa
mi amor
pasea y detén tus lágrimas,
levántate y pasea esta noche,
no te arrodilles más
ante esa tumba en la montaña,
sus flores están marchitas

TANGLED MARAÑA
those flowers are wihtered
and my bones are mouldering...
I speak to you tonight
from sea-depth —
I speak to you every night
from sea depth...

I once wandered along the shore
I wandered to shore-end —
wave made game with wave —
white foam licked my feet —
slowly seeping into my vision
there out in the depths
in the tangle of foam and wave
I saw the loneliness in your eyes
and the sorrow in your face

I wandered out in the depths
from knees to waist
and from waist to shoulders
until I was swallowed
in sorrow and loneliness

(Trans. Joan Trodden Keefe)

Impí

A ógánaigh,
ná tar i mo dháil,
ná labhair...
is binn iad
briathra grá —
is binne aríst
an friotal
nár dúradh ariamh —
níl breith
gan smál —
breith briathar
amhlaidh atá
is ní bheadh ann
ach ’rogha an dá dhíogh’
ó tharla
an scéal mar ’tá...

ná bris
an ghloine ghlan
’tá eadrainn
(ní bristear gloine
gan fuil is pian)
óir tá Neamh
Young man,
do not come near me,
do not speak...
the words of love
are sweet —
but sweeter still
is the word
that was never uttered —
no choice
is without stain —
the choice of words
is much the same
and this would be
to choose between evils
in our present
situation...

Do not break
the clear glass
between us
(no glass is broken
without blood and pain)
for beyond is Heaven
or beyond is Hell
and what good is Heaven

Joven
no te acerques
no hablas...
dulces son
las palabras de amor
pero más dulce es aún
la palabra no pronunciada
ninguna elección carece de mácula,
ni siquiera con las palabras,
elegirlas en esta situación
sería decidir entre la espada y la pared...

no rompas
el diáfano cristal
que nos separa
(ninguno se quiebra
sin sangre y dolor)
al otro lado se hallan
el cielo o el infierno
y ¿de qué sirve el cielo
si no es eterno?
no hay peor infierno
que haber conocido el cielo...
de nuevo, te lo imploro
if it is not
for ever? —
the loss of
Heaven
is the worst Hell...

I again implore you,
don’t speak,
young man,
my "Diarmaid",
and we will be at peace —
untouchable understanding
between us
we will have no cause
to touch it
ever
as it ever
allures us —
but I implore you...
do not speak...

(Trans. Gabriel Fitzmaurice)

Lá amháin
Lá amháin
b'hí an clóscriobhán tinn —

b'hí ar stiúrthóir an chomhlachta
an clóscriobhán
a thabhairt isteach
ina oifig féin

chuir na litreacha
an oiread déistin air
gur stróic sé iad
'gus gur scriobh sé dán

tamall ina dhaide
'd'éirigh sé as a phost
'gus ina dhaide sin
a theach
a bhean
agus a chlann

agus anois
tá sé ina fhile

an fear bocht
One day the typist was sick
the company director had to take the typewriter into his office
the letters so disgusted him that he tore them up and wrote a poem
shortly after that he left his job and after that his house his wife his kids
and now he's a poet
the poor fucker.

(Trans. Michael Hartnett)

Tá sé in am dán deiridh a scríobh
Tá sé in am dán deiridh a scríobh.
dán mar 'bheadh inneall nua-aoiseach den scoth
a bhfuil chuile smaoineamh i dtaisce ina chroí.
dán mar 'bheadh leabhar
nach gá a léamh
mar 'bheadh foclóir
aon leathanaigh
aon teagan
mar 'bheadh pictiúr
Ghairdín Pharrthais th'éis pheaca Êabh'.
dán teilifise le nuacht an lae
dán a bhrísfeas do chroí
blaosc uibhe do chroí
ar an toirt
dán a bhfuil muirín fhada air
na míte dánta beaga gleoite
ar imeall an phictiúir
It's time to write a poem
a poem like the best most modern machine
every thought stored up inside it
a poem like a book
one need not read
like a dictionary
with one page
with one language
like a picture
of Paradise after Eve's sin
a telly-poem with daily news
a poem to break your heart
your eggshell heart
your egg of putty heart
on the spot
a longtailed poem
thousands of pretty poemlets
at the edge of the picture
a love poem "with true emotion"
a shop poem 29/11
a poem for tourists
that gives them tropical diseases
and money
that gives bad thoughts to the bishop
who has to write an extra sermon for the diocese
a stylish poem
a half-stylish poem
a slut of a poem

ES HORA DE ESCRIBIR UN POEMA

Es hora de escribir un poema
un poema que sea la mejor de las máquinas modernas
que almacene todos los pensamientos
un poema semejante a un libro
que no es necesario leer,
a un diccionario
de una página
y un idioma,
a una imagen
del paraíso después del pecado de Eva
un poema telediario
un poema que te rompa el corazón
la delicada cáscara de tu corazón
tu corazón maleable
al instante
un poema que traiga cola
miles de bonitos poemitas
al borde de la imagen
un poema de amor «con verdadera emoción»
un poema comercial un año y un día
un poem para turistas
que les transmita enfermedades tropicales
y dinero
que inspire malos pensamientos al obispo
y le obligue a escribir un sermón más para la diócesis
un poema elegante
un poema medio elegante
un poema puta
un poema para mujeres y niños
a poem for women and children
a totally useless poem
poem
litany
poem.

(Trans. Michael Hartnett)

Treall

Tabhair dom casúr
nó tua
go mbrisfead is
go millfead
an teach seo,
go ndéanfad tairseach
den fhardoras
‘gus urláir de na ballai,
go dtiocfaidh scrath
agus dion agus
simléir anuas
le neart mo chuid
allais…

Sín chugam anois
na cláir is na tairní
go dtóigfead
an teach eile seo…

Ach, a Dhia, táim tuirseach!

INTERVAL

Hand me a hammer
or a hatchet
to demolish and
to smash
this house,
to make a threshold
of the lintel
and floors of the walls,
so that the scraws
and roof and
chimney are razed
with the force of my
sweat…

Now hand me
the planks and the nails
so that I can build

ARREBATO

Dame un martillo
o un hacha
para derribar y
hacer pedazos
esta casa,
para crear un umbral
con el dintel
y suelos con las paredes,
para desmantelar
la techumbre de turba
y la chimenea
con el sudor de mi frente...

Ahora, dame
TABLAS Y CLAVOS
para construir
OTRA CASA...
this other house…

But, my God, I’m tired!

(Trans. Nuala Ní Chonchúir)

Na bláthá

Chuas amach an mhaidin sin
i mo pháiste
folaithe, do-ghonta –

tháinigeas isteach
i mo dhuine fásta
m’anam nocht feannta –

céadbhláthá an earraigh
– bláthá buí – sláimín,
i lár an ghairdín –

ní raibh ann
ach a la gan chomhairreamh
inar bhlaiseas
rud éicint
nár den tsaoil seo
inar cuireadh
ó aithne
orm féin mé
gur thuigeas
go rabhas leonta
le lann na háille –

lann ar a hainm
le glaine
le géire

níor bhláthá na bláthá
ach beos
áille agus céasadh.

THE FLOWERS

I went out that morning
a child
unaware, invulnerable –

I returned
an adult
my soul bared, flayed –

LAS FLORES

Aquella mañana salí
siendo una niña
inconsciente, invulnerable

Regresé
adulta
con el alma desnuda, desollada
spring’s first flowers
– tufted buttery blooms,
standing in the garden –

it was only
a passing moment
in which I tasted
something
otherworldly
in which I
was pulled
out of myself
to understand
that I’d been wounded
by beauty’s blade –

beauty’s name made
 clean
 keen

these flowers were not just flowers
but life
beauty and torment.

(Trans. Nuala Ní Chonchúir)

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Poems by Mary O’Malley

**NEWS**

He knows by the horses that are everywhere in the fields
unemployed, their gaze fluent as verses,
put aside for years with the rosary beads and prayers
but lately plentiful again as primroses or furze;
by the quick shivers of their skin he knows they are listening
to news that concerns

**NOTICIAS**

Lo sabe por los caballos parados en todas partes
en los campos, la mirada fluida como versos,
dejados de lado durante años junto al rosario y las oraciones
pero abundantes de nuevo como prímulas o aulagas;
por el sucinto temblor en su piel sabe que escuchan
las noticias que atañen

---

our fate and theirs.

**SPACE TIME CURVE**

He was my knife then.
There were flashes
Of steel in the sun.
He cut an orange into quarters
and handed me one,
the blade sweet with juice.

That’s how it was in the sun,
Strawberries for lunch and a swim
Into life itself. Life tastes
Of salt and strawberries
And the flat lick of steel
Then the sting of a thorn in your heel

When time swerves and curls
Backwards and we’re poised
at the top of a wave all unfurled
The girl, the fruit and the man
With the knife in his hand.

**GOLDFINCHES**

Who can believe that God plays dice
and make a way through life?

A foot from the window a cloud
Of goldfinches descend on the niger seed.

Nothing I have done merits this charm
their cat faces yellow and red, as if
exotic flowers had taken to the air
transformed and came here
to Seanbhaile, Maigh Cuilinn, the world
our egocentric sun revolves around

as Shakespeare saw the sun spin
around the earth because we all cling
when all the Gods are banished down
to Saturn or Pandemonium
to a steady planet with a friendly sun
circling around us, even Einstein.

**JILGUEROS**

¿Quién cree que Dios juega a los dados
y sigue su camino?

A un palmo de la ventana, un tropel
de jilgueros desciende sobre las semillas de Níger.

Nada de lo que he hecho merece semejante encanto,
caras de gato amarillas y rojas, como si
unas flores exóticas hubieran levantado el vuelo
transformadas y llegado

to Seanbhaile, Maigh Cuilinn, al mundo
en torno al que orbita nuestro egocéntrico sol
tal como lo vio girar Shakespeare
rodeando la Tierra, porque

cuando los dioses se destierran
a Saturno o el Pandemonio
todos nos aferramos
a un planeta inmóvil con un sol complaciente

**Espacios Tiempo Curva**

Entonces era mi cuchillo.
Destellos de acero
en el sol.
Cortó una naranja en cuatro trozos
y me ofreció uno,
la hoja empapada en dulce zumo.

Así era en el sol,
fresas para comer y un baño
en la vida misma. La vida sabe
a sal y fresas
a lamer la hoja de acero,
después, una espina en el pie.

Cuando el tiempo vira y se encrespa
hacia atrás y estamos suspendidos
en lo alto de una ola desplegada
la joven, la fruta y el hombre
con el cuchillo en la mano.
I have looked for you among the Greeks
Where hate and love are close as blood
And blood is worth so much and no more

I went down among the Greeks reluctantly
not trusting in cheap plunder but there is
no more time. Threads have been pulled
time woven, knotted, snipped. I went
to the cities and the far islands
and met statues, women with blind eyes

and no mercy. In temples and bars and houses
everywhere I saw your likeness, and everywhere
women with their bored gaze

fixed beyond me, on some blue island
with dolphins, an olive tree, the dangerous bull
in his maze, and the woman who holds the thread.

None of them spoke to me, just one more
Crazed mother searching for her daughter
They are used to that here.

I have paid the coin time has extracted
With another in my mouth for the shroud
A willing deposit for when you are found.

I will stand in the helical stream with the winds
Scorching my ankles until someone looks up
And says ‘Bargain’ and then I will go down

To meet her and bring the small red
Seeds of the sun to remind her of home.
I will stand there until the dark breaks open.

Te he buscado entre los griegos
en los que el odio y el amor son cercanos como la sangre,
y la sangre se valora, y nada más

Descendí entre los griegos a regañadientes
sin confiar en el expolio fariseo, pero ya
no hay tiempo. Se ha tirado de los hilos
el tiempo se ha tejido, anudado, cortado. Fui
a las ciudades y las islas lejanas
y encontré estatuas, mujeres con ojos ciegos

y despiadas. En templos, en bares y casas,
en todas partes vi tu semejanza, y en todas partes
mujeres con mirada cansada

fija en la lejanía, en una isla azul
con delfines y un olivo, el peligroso toro
en su laberinto, y la mujer que sujeta el hilo.

Ninguna me habló, solo era otra
madre desesperada buscando a su hija
Allí están acostumbradas.

He pagado la moneda que el tiempo me ha extraído
en mi boca hay otra para el sudario
un pago voluntario para cuando te encuentren.

Permaneceré en la corriente helicoidal y los vientos
me abrasarán los tobillos, hasta que alguien mire
y diga «trato hecho», entonces me hundiré

para reunirme con ella y llevarle las
semillas rojas del sol que le recuerden su hogar.
Permaneceré allí hasta que quiebre la oscuridad
**Pura López Colomé** is a Mexican poet, translator and literary critic. Twelve of her poetry collections have been published under the title *Poemas reunidos 1985-2012*. Her latest book of poems is *Via Corporis* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2016). She has translated several of Seamus Heaney’s works, collected in the bilingual edition *Obra Reunida* (Conaculta, 2015). Among the literary honors she has received are Premio Xavier Villaurrutia (poetry), Premio Nacional Alfonso Reyes (essay), Premio Nacional de Traducción Literaria (for her translation of Heaney’s *Station Island*). She lives in Cuernavaca, México.

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**Enrique Alda** is a Spanish translator with a degree in Translation and Interpretation from the University of Salamanca and has been translating literature for more than twenty years. In the past ten years he has focused his work on Irish literature, especially on contemporary Irish women poets. In 2016 he was awarded the Marcelo Reyes Prize for translation. He lives in Ireland and divides his time between the sunny slopes of the Moncayo in Spain and the green fields of Wicklow.

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