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The Poem-Translating Game: Jaime Gil de Biedma through the Looking-Glass of English

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*El juego de hacer versos
—que no es un juego—es algo
parecido en principio
al placer solitario.
-Gil de Biedma,
“El juego de hacer versos”*

After all of the lines from other poets that Jaime Gil de Biedma has ironically rewritten in his poems, I doubt that he would object if I steal a stanza of his to reinterpret:

The poem-translating game—
this is no game—starts out
seeming something like
writing in a mirror.

Here I refer to literary translation as “writing in a mirror” because these bilingual editions—such as my translation of Gil de Biedma is (*Longing: Selected Poems*, City Lights Books, 1993)—make me think of a poem and its reflection through the looking-glass of another language. On one side of the book, in flesh and blood, is the original, vigorous but one-dimensional, like some one who has always lived in the same house in the same city. On the twin-page is its reflection, similar but somehow different, with a larger nose or deeper eyes, the scar on the left cheek now on the right. And the strangest part is that readers normally look at the reflection, not at the original. Imagine having friends that you only know through their images in mirrors: I have several, such as Rilke, Pasolini, and Li Po.

Every once in a while this reflection breaks away from its Siamese-twin to start a life of its own. We have only to think, for instance, of Edgar Allan Poe and his French translators, Mallarmé and Baudelaire. Through their translations, the French poets transformed this half-forgotten North American into the muse and idol of *symbolisme* and in his poetry they discovered a *maudite* music that his compatriot readers couldn't hear. Or the Whitman of the Latin American poets, that bearded nationalistic prophet who has so little to do with the sensualist mystic who scandalized 19th century readers in the United States. The French Poe and the Latin American Whitman are new creatures, reflections

that have escaped from the mirrors of their bilingual translations to have lives even more influential than their originals.

And then come reflections of the reflections, such as the modernist poet Wallace Stevens, a translator of Mallarmé, who in his own poetry returned to American English the lost music of Poe through the French of his beloved symbolistes. Or Pound's Imagism, based from the start on faulty translations into English of Chinese poets. Or more recently, the North American poets of my generation. Many of us have translated Neruda and his contemporaries, who translated Whitman. In this way we have returned to our own work, through the Spanish of Latin American poets, the boundless energy of Whitman's forgotten voice.

It is in this context of reflections of reflections—the imaginary country, without flags or passports, of modern poetry—that I would like to discuss my experience translating Gil de Biedma's poetry into English. I imagine that poets do translations because we catch our own reflections in the mirror of another language, another nationality. Or, in any case, that's what happened with me and Gil de Biedma's poetry. At first, frankly, I didn't like his poems because they didn't seem very "Spanish." I went to live in Barcelona for the first time in 1979 with the Losada edition of Garcia Lorca under my arm. I was seeking the voice of *el duende* and the mystical caverns of *España negra*, which were transplanted during that era, through pints and hashish, to the cafes of the Plaza Real. What I learned is that the Spanish greet the foreigner looking for Garcia Lorca's country with the same arched eyebrow that we reserve for those who come to the United States searching for the infinite, innocent horizons of Whitman's lost landscape.

In Gil de Biedma's poetry, on the other hand, I found a reality closer to my own. No, I didn't hear that hoarse, southern voice surging from the well of the subconscious but, instead, I saw the face of J. Alfred Prufrock waking up with a hangover, examining his face in the bathroom mirror. And, of course, I immediately recognized the ironic, conversational voice already familiar from Anglo-American poetry; Eliot's distancing and allusion, Auden's political commitment and ironic tenderness, and Williams' intimate speech—just you and I reader, face to face.

These were already old friends, yet at the time I didn't know much about the Anglo-American influence on this new Spanish poet. But something odd happened when I began to read his poems: Although I read the words in Spanish, the voice spoke to me in English, spoke directly to me, without any folkloric fetishism getting in the way. It was the voice of Auden talking to his lover during a bombing-raid in London, or the voice of Robert Lowell visiting the tarnished monuments of his family's past glory with the same ambivalent nostalgia.

It amazed me to discover these ironic tones together with a decadent persona in Spanish poetry, because I had always assumed that these qualities belonged more to English and French poetry, respectively. And it was the French decadent element—the Baudelairean echoes and even more so, of that "lunar dandy" Jules Laforgue—that aroused in me what Spaniards call a *morbo* or twisted passion for Gil de Biedma's poetry.

The Poem-Translating Game

This may be because I'm from a New Orleans family in which the grandparents still spoke French, and the French Symbolists were my starting point with poetry. It's curious what you learn traveling or living abroad: We leave to escape from ourselves yet there I was, having coffee with myself in a mirror of Barcelona's Café de la Opera, reading Gil de Biedma's *Las personas del verbo*.

I began to translate the poems in 1985, during a period of nostalgia for Spain while temporarily living back in San Francisco. As I had imagined, many of the poems fell into English as if they were written in the language. I always assumed that the romantic, declamatory voice of Spanish poetry couldn't make fun of itself because, unlike English, Spanish is a language in which it's more difficult to be ironic. But in Gil de Biedma's poems there's often an ironic click at the end of the poem, like a door closing, which is a British trait. This is so different from how the poets of the Generation of '27 end their poems, with an airy, evocative space, I also noticed the enjambment, an Anglo-American device with which I wasn't familiar in Spanish poetry. And I became aware of a voice as colloquial as the neighbor's, stuttering between feeling and philosophy, between everyday objects and classical verse forms, with a self-deprecating tone that I always suspected only Anglo-Saxon poets were confident enough to permit in themselves.

The most fascinating poets of this century often have been those trying to write their own language as though it were another, to capture a foreign musc, quarreling with their language and struggling against the limitations of its syntax and tradition, forging a kind of "foreignness": the Word made other. It's always a revelation to translate one of these poems into the language it intends to imitate: Imagine Stevens translated into French, Pound into Chinese or—as I've done—Gil de Biedma into English.

At worst, the poem loses its *je ne sais quois* of startling foreignness. In English translation, for instance, Gil de Biedma's titles and phrases originally in English disappear just as any other blonde would on the streets of Stockholm. What his poetry definitely loses in English is the careful ambiguity of its wording, especially in the political and sexual contexts, elaborated quite deliberately to escape state censorship. The never-explicit homosexuality in his poetry, for example, is "outed" in a poem like "Pandemic and Geleste," in which the translator is obligated to choose between "his" or "her" to refer to the speaker's lover, because the gender-neutral *su* doesn't exist in English for human beings, especially beloved ones. Gil de Biedma's poetry is perhaps less subtle and exotic, more direct in its English reflection.

Although in these translations I intend a reflection of a reflection of the Anglo-American poetry that inspired the poet, Gil de Biedma's Spanish version of Eliot and Auden strikes me as somewhat of his own making, like Baudelaire's Poe and Neruda's Whitman. Gil de Biedma was, of course, a well-known translator of Eliot. But I have always read Eliot as a deeply spiritual poet, in spite of his modern urban situations. Gil de Biedma seems oblivious to Eliot's questing mysticism, a characteristic that I associate little with the stereotypical Englishman with his ascot and tea cup, that British intellectual bourgeois so admired by the 50s Generation of Spanish poets. Auden, even farther from this

cliché, was the most ruffled bohemian ever to walk the streets of New York. The Spanish version of Eliot and his generation—a bit snobbish and quite wrong, I think, in their icon of the “proper English gentleman” against which poets like Auden were rebelling—is perhaps another reflection escaped from the mirror of translation, which went on to have its own life and loves.

It is interesting to speculate what this new creature, the North American Jaime Gil de Biedma, will be like. In spite of his cult status in Spain, few American poets, writers or even professors know who he is. Spanish poetry has enjoyed great popularity in the United States, yet not many have read beyond García Lorca and Alberti. These days, of course, we have skipped a generation and are fascinated by the films of Pedro Almodóvar, curious how the Spain represented by the Generation of '27 has been transformed—on the other side of an endless silence—into the country of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. Although in the zany freedom of Almodóvar we may recognize our long-disappeared 60s, Gil de Biedma's vision of Spain under Franco is a closer match to our present social reality: police-state control, puritanical intolerance, and widespread public poverty. I imagine that North Americans will sense an echo of our besieged times in Gil de Biedma's poetry, be moved by his youth obsessed struggle with aging and, as a gay poet who died of AIDS, read him as a contemporary of our own ongoing tragedy.

Translation is betrayal, not only the inevitable betrayal of the original's purity but of the translator's tastes, envies, and assumptions. Any poet who translates—Baudelaire, Neruda, Pound, Stevens, or Gil de Biedma—says as much about himself and his own culture in the translation's style as he does about the poet of the original. As the translator, I stand naked before you in the English reflection of Gil de Biedma's poetry. This poem-translating game is no game: We choose the mirrors that we need.

El juego de hacer versos
– que no es un juego – es algo
parecido en principio
al placer solitario.

Con la primera muda,
en los años nostálgicos
de nuestra adolescencia,
a escribir empezamos.

Y son nuestros poemas
del todo imaginarios
– demasiado inexpertos
ni siquiera plagiamos –

porque la Poesía
es un ángel abstracto
y, como todos ellos,
predispuesto a halagarnos.

El arte es otra cosa
distinta. El resultado
de mucha vocación
y un poco de trabajo.

Aprender a pensar
en renglones contados
– y no en los sentimientos
con que nos exaltábamos – ,

tratar con el idioma
como si fuera mágico
es un buen ejercicio,
que llega a emborracharnos.

Luego está el instrumento
en su punto afinado:
la mejor poesía
es el Verbo hecho tango.

The poem-writing game –
it's no game – starts out
seeming something like
the solitary pleasure.

We begin to scribble
with the change of skin
in the times of longing
of our teenage years.

And our poems are
completely "poetic" –
too inept even to be
cribbed from a text –

because poetry flatters,
is an abstract angel
and like all of its feather
tends to sweet-talk us.

Art is something else
altogether. Net result
of a lot of calling
and a bit of sweat.

To learn to think
in regular lines –
and not in the feelings
that swept us along –

to deal with words
as if they were magic
is not bad practice
but leaves us reeling.

Then there's the tool
sharpened to a point:
in the very best poetry
the Word becomes a tango.

The Poem-Translating Game

Y los poemas son
un modo que adoptamos
para que nos entiendan
y que nos entendamos.

Lo que importa explicar
es la vida, los rasgos
de su filantropía,
las noches de sus sábados.

La manera que tiene
sobre todo en verano
de ser un paraíso.
Aunque, de cuando en cuando,

si alguna de esas noches
que las carga el diablo
uno piensa en la historia
de estos últimos años,

si piensa en esta vida
que nos hace pedazos
de madera podrida,
perdida en un naufragio,

la conciencia le pesa
– por estar intentando
persuadirse en secreto
de que aún es honrado.

El juego de hacer versos,
que no es un juego, es algo
que acaba pareciéndose
al vicio solitario.

And poems are how
we choose to be
understood by others
and by ourselves.

What's essential
to explain is life,
its philanthropic aspects
and its Saturday nights.

That certain way it has,
especially during summer,
of turning into paradise.
Although if anyone considers

on one of those rare nights
when all hell breaks loose
the history of what's happened
in these past few years

if he considers how life
cracks us into splinters
of water-logged timber
scattered in a shipwreck,

his conscience bogs down
with the sneaky way
he tries to delude himself
that he's still honest.

The poem-writing game,
which is no game, ends up
seeming something like
the solitary vice.