Setting Foot Where You've Never Stepped Before

By *Douglas Pompeu*

Translated from Brasilian Portuguese by *Jennifer Alexander*

After three months' journeying through space to the Chrono-Synclastic Infundibulum dimension, poet-astronaut Stony Stevenson makes his first contact with Mission Control. Sent to that strange dimension where everything becomes one in time and space, the poet's mission is to find the words to adequately describe his experience in this celestial "aleph." On board the spaceship Prometeus-5, when he is asked what his first poem will be, the poet replies: "Well, my first poem will be a sestina."

I believe there are many people who recognise or have read a sestina. A poem that presents one of the most difficult verse forms in Western lyric poetry. It consists of six sestets and a final tercet, the envoi. Made up of decasyllabic verses, the final words (or rhymes) are repeated in all of the verses, following a prescribed spiral pattern. In this way, the words (or rhymes) that appear sequentially in the first stanza, in lines 1,2,3,4,5,6, repeat in the following stanza in the order 6,1,5,2,4,3. The next stanza then follows the order 3,6,4,1,2,5, in relation to the previous one. So it goes, until the sixth stanza, which concludes the sestets. Every line of the final tercet, or envoi, contains, in the middle or at the end, on the accented syllables, those words (or rhymes) used in the whole poem, in the same order they followed in the first stanza.

After explaining what a sestina is, the poet-astronaut reveals that for his composition he has chosen six words from the phrase Neil Armstrong uttered upon landing on the moon: "one," "long", "step", "for", "man," "kind". And there ends the first part of the film "Between Time and Timbuktu," based on a work by Kurt Vonnegut, aired on North American television in 1972. Vonnegut himself collaborated on the script and is said to have written that sestina, which sadly was not referenced again in the film. The author does confirm in one of his letters that he is working on a sestina for the film and admits that the poetic form is very difficult. "But in the end, what isn't difficult?" he asks.

The sestina was invented in the 12th Century. The form gained in popularity and has been practiced by the most famous of Western poets throughout the modern age and up to the present time. At the simple mention of a sestina, you'd quickly expect me to start a lecture on the fears and anxieties around translating a sestina. But no. Don't worry: that's not what this is about. The difficulties and frustrations involved in translating a sestina are huge, but no greater than with any kind of literary translation. The difference is that in translating sestinas I've always been drawn to the impact that such a form - both interchangeable and flexible - is capable of having on the reader. In seeing traditionally fixed forms not as an objective in themselves but as a means or material for composition, what the sestina allows us is to always arrive at unexpected results through a limited collection of words. It is a paradox of the form that although it may seem daunting, in practice, it can liberate the imagination.

But why am I still talking about sestinas? Besides sharing my interest in the sestina, I

would like to put it to the test as a metonymy for the work of a translator. I would like to draw attention to the sestina's form, because it may be possible, through this example of an extremely formal poetic composition, to deal with questions of not only sensitivity, or rather empathy and otherness, but also questions of affection and contamination in translation.

There is a fairly well-known image, conjured by poet John Ashbury when he said writing a sestina was like going downhill on a bike, leaving the pedals to turn the cyclist's legs. It seems to me an inspired image, in the way it evokes the pleasure of letting yourself get carried away by the work involved in translation. We have six words in front of us. From the start, we know them well, an elegant sestina must be made from accessible words; but soon they become curious, funny, strange - they make us insecure. What happens when we enter the realm of combination and permutation, when we grapple with arrangement itself, firstly as readers and then as translators? When translating a sestina, to what point is the translator carried, by their reading, research, solutions, lists and pieces of evidence by the pedals of the text, to the point of setting foot somewhere they've never been before?

We are always hearing how translation is much more than the simple transference of original meaning into another language. But I would like to add something to Judith Zander's comment, in her text "A New Song, a Better Song - Translating Poetry," which beautifully likens translation to ice-skating: not only does the ice beneath our feet appear to have got thinner and more slippery in the context of the debate over Amanda Gorman's poetry translations, but in truth, it was always super thin. Interesting, though, is that today's increased awareness of the thinness of this ice, on which translators have long skated, also leaves the act of translation itself in more urgent need of debate and visibility.

It is an undisputable fact that translation entails wider questions beyond the transposition of form and content such as, for example, ideological questions of identity, authorship and authority. But is it not exactly through questioning identity, not just affirming it, that art and literature move us and fascinate us? Reading, writing and translating literature is, for me, linked to that precisely - that movement of setting foot where you've never stepped before, with that possibility of questioning our own place and position in the world, more likely to put ourselves in another's shoes. Or rather, to constantly switch places and still, within that process, step away from ourselves. And all of this, not through similarity but, in the best hypothesis, by being contaminated by that which is different, by stepping out of the self and incorporating the other.

When I think about my work as a translator, I think not only in terms of stylistic dexterity, but also with an awareness of the political and ideological implications of every act of creation and translation. About how constituent elements of a poetic impulse can affect, move and influence me during reading, leading me to my own investigation and my accepting or rejecting the translatability of this arrangement of words into my own language. And how do we deal with those words if, as in Marion Kraft's text "Who Speaks for Whom and with Which Words?" their connotations in the source and target language are incongruous? When, between the contexts of personal and collective memory around the translator and those around the author, there is an almost unbridgeable gap?

The problem is in what lies beyond the page and what led to this selection of words, this layout, this choice, expressing its primordial meaning in the original context and

what will determine my transposition. Or even: the hidden memory in the use of those words. But when I think about congruencies, it seems that the metonymy of the sestina returns to tell me something once again. Is it not inherent in the meaning of connotation itself, a certain permutability in relation to the context and circumstances in which a word is used? The repetition and permutation of words in a sestina acts as a multiplying factor, or rather a catalyst of meanings. In the case of the more classical sestinas, repetition and permutation produce this effect. Modern and contemporary sestinas take this property to an even more radical level. I would like to mention here, as an example, two sestinas which I translated into Portuguese, in which the word pairs that structure the text consist of homonyms and dismantled compound words, creating unexpected shifts and variations in two poems with the central theme of metamorphosis.

The sestinas were written by the poet Jan Wagner. One of them deals with the metamorphosis of a child into a hare, and the other an apprentice learning to sculpt a pottery cup. In the latter, both the apprentice and the cup find themselves being transformed. Looking more closely at these two poems we are surprised by the form the poet works with. In the first poem, "Anna," Wagner chooses the following six words for his composition: "scharte" (wound), mahlen (to grind, mill), händen (hands), weichen (yield, smooth), strich (stroke), and haupt (main). In the second poem, "Die Tassen" (The Cups), the words are: tasse (cup), meister (master), schale (bowl, shell), reif (ripe), schlug (hit), and licht (light). However, it is not just that permutation creates new contexts for these words but that they themselves (with the exception of "tasse") transform as the text progresses, through the addition of prefixes or suffixes, the formation of composites or even through alterations permitted by inherent homophony and polysemy, ambiguities even. It is enough to follow one of the words - like "strich," "scharte" or "reif" - until the envoi, to notice and be dazzled by the possibilities the poet uses to create a true constellation of meanings with - and between - these two sets of six words.[1]

die tassen

die aufgabe war einfach: eine tasse
zu töpfern, die dem ehrwürdigen meister
gefiel. er war auf einer nußschale
von schiff in see gestochen, hatte reif-
lich überlegt, bis er den weg einschlug
nach asien, doch folgte seinem licht

ins dorf des meisters, schlief in zwielicht-
igen kaschemmen, bis er eine tasse
geschaffen hatte, die ihm alles schlug
oder zu schlagen schien, was selbst dem meister
gelungen war, beinahe aus dem stegreif.
es war soweit. er hatte sich in schale

[…]

as xícaras

a tarefa era simples: uma xícara,
modelar uma ao agrado do mestre

venerável. ele lançou-se em sua casca
de noz ao mar, refletiu até pronti-
ficar-se do caminho em seu batel
rumo a ásia e então seguiu sua luz

à aldeia do mestre, dormiu ao lusco-
fusco de tabernas, até que uma xícara
modelasse, uma que tudo rebatesse
ou parecia rebater, mesmo as que o mestre
bem fabricara, uma que nascesse pronta.
chegara a hora. pôs-se na ponta dos cascos,

[...]

anna

wir wußten alles über ihre scharte,
doch nichts von freunden oder von gemahlen,
nichts von den briefen unter ihren händen,
nach lilien duftend und mit einer weichen
schrift bedeckt, bis sie den umschlag glattstrich,
ein angelecktes präsidentenhaupt

in eine ecke klebte. wie uns überhaupt
nur eines interessierte: ihre scharte,
der kratermund, der dünne lavastrich
hinauf zum nasenloch; uns auszumalen
wie nachts die menschliche gestalt zu weichen
begann und wie sie schrumpfte, aus den händen

[...]

anna

sabíamos tudo sobre seu corte,
mas nada de amigos ou de amores,
nada das cartas sob as suas mãos,
com perfume de lírios e a letra suave
que a encobria, até ela com um passe
alisar o envelope, lamber a testa do primeiro-

ministro e a colar no canto. primeiro
interessava-nos apenas: o seu corte,
a boca de cratera, o delgado passo
de lava até a fossa nasal; imaginar rumores
da forma humana que à noite suave-
mente se desfazia e encolhia, as mãos

| […]²

Looking at these two sestinas, how does one find equivalences for this set of words, without the part and the whole becoming distorted - saying something else, acting in a different way in a language that does not have compound words at its disposal and whose homonyms are found in a different semantic field, and used in a different kind of way?

Long debates can arise around the translation of a text from one language without genders to a language in which grammatical gender can only be expressed in binary terms by masculine and feminine. Imagine then, the translation of texts in languages which have gender indicators acting in accordance with form, texture, dimension and groupings and in relation to their social functions with the things and beings of the world, such as is the case of some indigenous Brazilian languages like Nahukwá Kalapálo? The grouping, the combination, is the result of a life story, of historical, ethnic and cultural factors. How can you translate highly poetic shamanic healing songs and avoid neglecting their social and religious context? How do you turn respect for the socio-historic-ethnic-personal ballast of an author's language into something sensitive and visible in the target language?

Thinking about it now, discussing the translation of sestinas may simply be a means to add - to the debate about sensitivity - the issue of the translator's invisibility and implicit otherness. Translation also means turning over and mixing up words in your own language, shaking them up using permutations, repetitions, and shifts in context and reading aloud, as if that way we can glean from them, or attribute to them, different meanings, and return them to or give them other uses. And that is where the metonymy of the sestina comes closest to translator's craft. Translators are familiar with arranging permutations, and with the metamorphosis of sense and meaning.

And in this point, "meaning" should also be extended to include sensitivity: translation is not done just going from a source language to a target language, but it is also in the act of meeting - of going to meet the other.

It is an awareness and respect for the place and context of the other's words - though they may not cause me to live their experiences and their history - that allow me to find in myself, in my history and experience, a way to translate that which had touched me in the beginning and led me into the translation. As translators we know our limitations and it may be our desire to commandeer the other language but we should also recognise and respect the conditions for transposing an invention or sensation from one tongue into the other, as well as the dangers and privileges of living on the threshold of contact between languages. For me, translating is renouncing the ignorance involved in the whole process of colonial appropriation.

And perhaps the most beautiful thing in all of this is, in the end, where traces of these meetings are found in the body of the text. Polyphonic traces where voices meet and overlap. Because this, yes, is my biggest fear when translating: that in the act of translation, I should turn my text, and the way it affected me and moved me as a reader, transparent and invisible. For what else motivates me to translate, if not the opportunity to be someone else while still being me, to pass on and reinvent that which an original work provoked in me. Translation that domesticates leads not only to the

translator's invisibility but also causes the emotional contours of the original to recede. The trimming of its edges blurs its essential sounds and our impressions as readers.

Yes, my *Berührungsangst.* or fears of contact in translation lie around invisibility. The erasure of difference and the contact with the other in translation. That I will no longer be able to step onto new ground and learn something. Are we moving in the direction of poetic "sensitivity translating"? Is that not also the job of the translator, and indeed that which makes us different from machines?

Endnoten

1 Editor's note: A yet these poems have not been translated into English. We have included the original German and Douglas Pompeu's Portuguese translations so the reader can follow the patterns of rhyme and repetition in both versions.

2 *variações sobre tonéis de chuva* (regentonnenvariationen), traduzido do alemão por Douglas Pompeu, Edições Jabuticaba, São Paulo, Brasilien, 2019.

#Lyrik

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