

## INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND POETIC TRANSLATION

*Paula Ramalho Almeida*

No one will deny the challenges of translating poetry. But it is not as clear why we should consider, in general terms, the translation of any prose easier than the translation of verse. Good prose does not differ substantially from good verse, as Wordsworth insisted in his 1802 “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”. Of course, there are often more elements to consider in verse composition: the expression-form is indeed of more significance in verse than in prose, for the creation of meaning in the former is usually concentrated into smaller units or, in essence, depends on the expression-form itself. The pleasure of reading and writing poetry derives from precisely this dependence on the signifier, on words rather than ideas, as Mallarmé would put it. We may conclude that the translative process is the same in both modes of literary translation, due to the poetic function’s manifest prevalence in literary texts, even if the type of effort varies, as we will see, according to the level of abstraction the poem presents. And this is where the concept of intersubjectivity – as well as the consciousness thereof – takes on a whole new outlook. Despite what it may seem at first glance, the presence of intersubjectivity is far from being a given truth, and it is likely that many translators would benefit from integrating it into their work.

Our analysis of the role intersubjectivity plays in poetic translation is based on the poetry of Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997). Ginsberg, along with Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs, led a generation of American writers, artists and professional rebels called the “Beat Generation” which came to light during the 1950’s, a period known for its puritan outlook and moralizing attitudes as well as for the infamous *House Un-American Activities Committee*. McCarthyism, however horrible and incomprehensible its persecutions and witch-hunts were, gave rise to political and social struggles which would change both the course of American history and the face of American letters. Ginsberg, while still a student at Columbia University, New York, realized American society was built upon hypocrisy, and in fact, by the time he graduated, the “tupperware” culture – as Norman Mailer would say – was taking over, with the post-war economy and optimism at its highest, moral righteousness at its worst,

and political transparency at its lowest. The world of which he is witness and his long poem “Howl” testimony seemed clearly to need either a transmutation or a transgression of values, and Ginsberg’s poetry, as his life, set out to accomplish both. It is in this context that Ginsberg’s literary works must foremost be understood, and it is against this background that the task of translating his poetry must be undertaken.

Consequently, just as with the romantic movement and modernisms of the beginning of this century, here the aesthetics of poetry is inseparable from an ethic, erotic and political bearing. From this standpoint, we can do nothing but agree with Henri Meschonnic’s assertion that we translate not from a language but from a *language-culture*, and even more so when he claims that “what is untranslatable is social and historic, not metaphysical”<sup>1</sup>. The implications of this statement come down to a most significant issue, which is not, as one would suppose, subjectivity, but the very heart of where subjectivities meet, or *intersubjectivity*, a concept developed by Edmund Husserl which resolves the dichotomy “objective” / “subjective” by securing the appearance of one singular spatiotemporal reality for each and every separate *ego-subject*. Because he experiences Others as human beings, as similar to himself, the subject also perceives them as co-subjects, and can only infer that the world which surrounds him also surrounds them. Therefore, despite the fact that “fields of memory and perception” will vary according to the structure of consciousness, intersubjectivity offers us “an objective spatiotemporal fact-world as *the world about us that is there for us all, and to which we ourselves none the less belong*”<sup>2</sup>. So the question is not whether the translator exposes his own personality, or whether or not he should obliterate any manifestations of his personality from his translation; instead, these idiosyncrasies should be encouraged, as an integral part of the translative process and intersubjective relation author/translator – translation/reader. Both the author’s and the translator’s literary, cultural and historical background intervene in the creative process, for though the text’s components are essential, so is the tradition where it is embedded. As João Almeida Flor so rightly puts it, “the translator’s reading is genetic as well as structural, diachronic as well as synchronic, vertical as well as horizontal”<sup>3</sup>.

Translation is an interlinguistic and intercultural act, all the more so when the poetry to be translated is rooted in a profoundly analogical vision, a *Weltanschauung* whose impulse is directed toward intropathy, or *Einfühlung*, as

opposed to abstraction<sup>4</sup>. The difference between these two visions is not a simple matter of referentiality, for then translation would pose little problems. In either poetic vision, the referents do not exist outside a specific reality conceived by the poem. What the impulse toward intropathy means is that the world is brought inside the poem and that language adheres to the world, as if its many crevices were filled with some kind of liquid adhesive.

The language of our source-texts can therefore be described as *intropathic*, a concept which goes beyond empathy, and which stems directly from intersubjectivity: through intropathy the Other is seen as both similar and different. In fact, Ginsberg's poetic language thrives on this difference and on this similarity, ranging from erudite to radically vernacular, incorporating countless voices and visions, fictional characters, cultural and political references, and even the intimate ramblings of drug-induced (or not) hallucinations. The tendency to homogenize his discourse must be abated, lest it annihilate the work's poetic essence, especially when translating a number of his poems with the intent of publishing them back to back.

We may say about Ginsberg's life work, as Walt Whitman did about his own: "this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man"<sup>5</sup>. And thus we set our premises for the translation of his poetry. But this is not to say that we, as translators, assume a biographical stance, or that his life story per se is of any significance to the process of translation. It merely means that each of his poems is a body of language, a body created out of the poet's breath of life, as theorized by the contemporary poet Charles Olson in his essay "Projective Verse": "Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of essential use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings"<sup>6</sup>. For all this we should not consider taking Nabokov's stance regarding footnotes<sup>7</sup>, which would inevitably annihilate any possibility of putting into practice Ginsberg's own theory of the breath. "A verbal body does not let itself be translated into another language"<sup>8</sup>, not unless there is a transubstantiation before there is translation. And this, in accordance with Ginsberg's poetics, is the only way to "metaphorize" him into the Portuguese language, thus his "spirit", his breath, will live forever, as he envisioned.

We should also keep in mind Ginsberg's fascination with Eastern thought, particularly with respect to the positive effects of meditation. It was his belief that the West had given way to abstract thought, tending, in his words, "to abstract communication and thin it out, give it less body, less meaning"<sup>9</sup>. In Ginsberg's view, spirit and body are one, for he takes spirit to be in direct relation to inspiration, as he writes in "Improvisation in Beijing"<sup>10</sup>: "I write poetry because the English word Inspiration comes from Latin *Spiritus*, breath, I want to breathe freely". Language, in its remote beginnings, as José Gil so masterfully points out, was born out of bodily behavior – out of pure kinetics – but it is in the East that the body retains its fundamental presence as signifier. Thus the oral dimension of poetry is a central point of his poetics, and no poem was complete before its oral rendering and presentation to an audience, in its etymological sense. And this is one of the reasons why Ginsberg rarely uses punctuation, making it a unique trait of his poetic discourse. Because it is not uncommon in the English language, many translators would be prone to use punctuation signs, thus affecting the discourse's rhythm, virtually destroying it. If we look at a poem like "Howl", for example, we can immediately tell that its life – or its body – is maintained by the almost total absence of punctuation. In this case, Walter Benjamin's theory that translations should be transparent readily applies, and so does Hjemslev's, in which expression-form and content-form go hand in hand<sup>11</sup>.

"Howl" is most likely the quintessential Ginsberg poem, along with its more mature and intimate long poem "Kaddish", written as the Jewish prayer for his mother, which at the time still had not been said, under the influence of amphetamines, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and others. And it is the first poem composed from the body and the breath, from energy and desire. Ginsberg defended what he called the practice of spontaneous writing, which in his own words is "the possibility of simply articulating that movement, in other words, observing your mind, remembering maybe one or two thoughts back and laying it out"<sup>12</sup>. So translation is *experience*, "experience of the works and of the being-work, of the language and of the being-language"<sup>13</sup>, experience of the Other as similar and as different. But it must also be *experiment*, creation by trial and error. The translator is artifice by nature, he will never describe the creative process as spontaneous or a simple act of genius. The romantic view of the poet as someone gifted with divine or

innate powers can mean nothing to translators. They must rely on the powers of pure intellect and on very small but controlled doses of inspiration. They cannot disappear into the depths of their beings, they remain on the surface of language, as much as they are at their most profound depths. If the end result is true to the original poetry, then we can only conclude that the creative process is of much more cerebral origin than many poets, both romantic and contemporary, care to admit.

“America”<sup>14</sup>, a poem outwardly derisive of the American social, military and political system, undoubtedly acts as an epitome of this work’s heterogeneous surface of an otherwise homogeneous structure. Its tone is difficult to pinpoint, though in reality its principal quality, in Staiger’s terms<sup>15</sup>, is the dramatic, as is the case with the larger part of his poetic discourse. The question here is whether his tone can be interpreted as cynical, merely ironic, or, on the contrary, as one of sheer misery. Not even the poet’s own reading sheds any light on this question, for it was clearly performed “under the influence”, to use one of the titles left us by beat cinema’s guru, John Cassavetes. The beginning reads:

America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing.  
America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956.  
I can’t stand my own mind.  
America when will we end the human war?  
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.  
I don’t feel good don’t bother me.  
I won’t write my poem till I’m in my right mind.  
[...]  
I’m addressing you.  
Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?  
I’m obsessed by Time Magazine.  
I read it every week.  
[...]  
It occurs to me that I am America.  
I am talking to myself again.

The first lines are easy enough to depict in Portuguese, but the verse “America when will we end the human war?” already poses a problem: should it come out as “*América quando vamos acabar com a guerra humana?*”, a more colloquial tone, or in an epic, more serious vein? Once again, we face issues leading us

back to intersubjectivity, placing us at the margin of personal interpretation, in the dimension we call *interworld*<sup>16</sup>.

Many poems reaffirm the significance of transtextual and intersemiotic communication in regards to Allen Ginsberg's poetry<sup>17</sup>. In "Transcription of Organ Music"<sup>18</sup> the poet experiences a creative interaction between music and poetry, which we may call – as Jakobson certainly would – a *semiotic transposition*<sup>19</sup>. First of all, their modes of significance is that which distinguishes musical expression from literary expression. Verbal language involves both the semiotic and semantic modes, for signs are recognized and the enunciation is understood, while music (as well as the plastic arts) only involves the semantic mode<sup>20</sup>. Since the linguistic system is the only semiotic system which comes equipped with bidimensional significance, it is clear that there can be no synonymy between them. Therefore, the poem can only but underscore the contrast between musical and linguistic sequences by referring to words, books, texts and manuscripts, those elements which are directly related to the concreteness of verbal language, and in which the desire to put music into words is clearly reflected:

Can I bring back the words? Will thought of transcription haze my mental open  
eye?

[...]

My books piled up before me for my use  
waiting in space where I placed them, they haven't disappeared, time's left its rem-  
nants and qualities for me to use – my words piled up, my texts, my manus-  
cripts, my loves.

This interaction between a unidimensional and bidimensional semiotic system implies a decoding and recoding process, on the part of the poet, and knowledge of the musical source, on the part of the translator. It isn't that the text's integrity depends on Bach's prelude, for it clearly exists without it, it is just that the translator must make a real effort in understanding the origin of the poem. He must ask himself from whence the language derives, its point of origin, its source. It would be impossible to recreate the poet's living momentary atmosphere, as did Pierre Menard with Cervantes and his *Quixote*, in Jorge Luis Borges' short fiction<sup>21</sup>. In fact, it would be virtually impossible to listen to the same exact version of the piece, for there are many. Moreover, we

would probably ruin the translative process altogether if we suddenly decided to partake in the ingestion of hallucinatory chemicals, as Ginsberg himself admitted having done. What it actually comes down to is ethics: when we speak of fidelity and of freedom, as Walter Benjamin so rightly juxtaposes<sup>22</sup>, we are referring to our relationship with an Other. In taking this relationship seriously, we must not forgo anything that might help us better relate to the Other's discourse, taking into account each of the most prominent extralinguistic elements.

And this is also the case with "The Blue Angel"<sup>23</sup>, whose title, as a hypertext, is the key element taking us back to the homonymous film directed by Josef von Sternberg and starred in by Marlene Dietrich. The text's extralinguistic background is cinematic, and the scene portrayed can clearly be identified with a scene in Josef von Sternberg's masterpiece, as can be noted from looking at the first stanza:

Marlene Dietrich is singing a lament  
for mechanical love  
She leans against a mortarboard tree  
on a plateau by the seashore.

Although the cinematic scene does not occur at the seashore but on a stage decorated in a sea-like theme, and a mortarboard tree is no tree at all but a tree stump on which the actress sits, these metaphors, together with the title's transtextual might, recreate the image which is forever embedded in both the professor's and the audience's mind: Marlene's memorable seductive performance, which entanced us all. The surrealist image gradually takes over, and a dream-like ambience pervades the verse composition:

She's a life-sized toy,  
the doll of eternity;  
her hair is shaped like an abstract hat  
made out of white steel.

Her face is powdered, whitewashed and  
immobile like a robot.  
Jutting out of her temple, by an eye,  
is a little white key.

We seem to stand before a discrepancy in poetic hues, but in fact the surreal seems so *real* that we hardly find it difficult to visualize, and the doll / robot / statue / Marlene stands before us as one. But what is strange is this: because the description is so precise and the detail so significant, the choice of words in the target language becomes not only a matter of translation but of *transfixion*, i. e., of holding the whole picture together, so as not to let it fall apart at the seams. In this respect, the film remains a strong foothold for the poetic language to rest on, especially if we take into account the very last stanza, undoubtedly a variation on the song the actress sings herself. The similarity is not in the lyrics – though the general idea depicts what we could possibly make out of her general frame of mind (and body) – but in the rhythm:

–you’d think I would have thought a plan  
to end the inner grind,  
but not till I have found a man  
to occupy my mind.

When translating Ginsberg’s poetry, it is of the essence that the vernacular remains for the most part intact. There are countless texts where “four-letter” words dominate significance, creating a certain tone and, moreover, a certain mood which would otherwise be unattainable. Let us take, for example, the poem titled “Sweet Boy, Gimme Yr Ass”<sup>24</sup>, an erotic alchemy portrayed as a referential dialogue<sup>25</sup> originating a physically tangible reality, namely with the concentrated use of deictic elements, such as the second and first person singular (the “you” and the “I”). The time in which action/dialogue takes place coincides with the reading/reception time, and thus discourse and desire fuse into one:

lemme kiss your face, lick your neck  
touch your lips, tongue tickle tongue end  
nose to nose, quiet questions  
ever slept with a man before?  
[...]

Come on boy, fingers thru my hair  
Pull my beard, kiss my eyelids, tongue my ear, lips light on my forehead  
– met you on the street you carried my package –  
[...]

Come on come on kiss me full lipped, wet tongue, eyes open –  
animal in the zoo looking out of skull cage – you  
smile, I’m here so are you, hand tracing your abdomen



It is precisely the utter crudeness of language that builds up the spirit<sup>26</sup> of the text, that literally compels the reader to penetrate the poem's mortal flesh. We are not mere voyeurs, catching a glimpse of the poet's intimacy, nor, as T. S. Eliot would put it, does our reading pleasure derive from the "enjoyment of overhearing words which are not addressed to us"<sup>27</sup>. In reality, the process is dialectic, as well as dialogic: we actively participate in the text's extralinguistic situation, although we are not in it. We are projected beyond our own realm of being, transported into another dimension, both spatial and temporal, as if we had managed to dive into a worm hole while remaining safely strapped into our spacecraft. But all this still leaves us with the task of transporting the text itself into another linguistic dimension, through a translanguistic process that will have to leave the text's cultural background intact in order for it to maintain its significance as a production of sense (and not necessarily meaning). In other words, the obscenities will have to be transported, in a literal translation, and the language-culture *difference* exposed.

It is not by chance that both in English and in Portuguese tongue stands for language. Language, and therefore translation, is a question of flesh. "To let the body fall, that is the essential energy of translation", says Derrida<sup>28</sup>. The difficulty of the translative process is enhanced by the very fact that there are three subjectivities working together with a universe of an infinite number of subjectivities, striving to reach an infinite number of Others. But by the same token it is also made clearer in the nakedness of intersubjectivity, and so there can never be an original text: both texts meet in a definite middle, an interworld, filled with a special kind of intertext. It is a dialectical process, so if by translating we suppress our cultural and individual differences, we also intensify them. Is the author a you or a he? Neither. He is an I. We may not behave as the Other in Ginsberg's poem "America" whose silence is portrayed in the performative verse "I'm addressing you".

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Meschonnic, *Pour la Poétique II – Épistémologie de l'Écriture Poétique de la Traduction*, Paris: Gallimard, 1973, p. 309.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Boyce Gibson, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1958, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup> João Almeida Flor, “Tradução e Tradição”, João Almeida Flor (ed.), *Problemas da Tradução: Escrever, Traduzindo*, Lisbon, Guelf, 1983, pp. 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> See Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie*. 1908, Dresden, Verlag der Kunst, 1996, pp. 35-37, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, London, Penguin, 1986, p. 511.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Olson, “Projective Verse”, Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (eds.), *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, 1973, New York, Grove Press, 1979, p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> See Vladimir Nabokov, “Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English”, Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (eds.), *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1967, p. 312.

<sup>9</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness*, ed. by Gordon Ball, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1974, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Cosmopolitan Greetings: Poems 1986-1992*, London, Penguin Books, 1994, p. xviii.

<sup>11</sup> See Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, trans. Francis J. Whitfield, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1969 (*Omkring Sprogteoriens Grundlæggelse*, 1943)

<sup>12</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “First Thought, Best Thought”, *Composed on the Tongue: Literary Conversations, 1967-1977*, ed. by Donald Allen, San Francisco, Grey Fox Press, 1994, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Antoine Berman, “A Tradução e a Letra ou a Pousada do Longínquo”, Guilhermina Jorge (ed.), *Tradutor Dilacerado: Reflexões de Autores Contemporâneos sobre a Tradução*, Lisbon, Edições Colibri, 1997, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems: 1947-1980*, New York, Harper & Row-Perennial Library, 1988, p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> See Emil Staiger, *Conceptos Fundamentales de Poética*, trans. Jaime Ferreira, Madrid, Ediciones Rialp, 1966 (*Grundbegriffe der Poetik*, 1946).

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988, p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La Littérature au Second Degré*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1982, p. 7. For a detailed presentation of transtextual and intersemiotic poetic communication, see Paula Ramalho Almeida, *A Intersubjectividade na Poesia de Allen Ginsberg*, diss., Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 1999, pp. 110-118.

<sup>18</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, p. 140.

<sup>19</sup> Roman Jakobson, “Aspects Linguistiques de la Traduction”, *Essais de Linguistique Générale: Les Fondations du Langage*, trans. Nicolas Ruwet, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1963, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> Émile Benveniste, “Sémiologie de la Langue”, *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale II*, Paris, Gallimard, 1981, pp. 64-65.

<sup>21</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Autor do *Quixote*”, *Ficções, Obras Completas 1923-1949*, trans. José Colaço Barreiros, Lisboa, Editorial Teorema, 1989, pp. 460-467.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”, Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (eds.), *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 78-79. For a comprehensive analysis of the philosophical concept *fidelity*, see Luís Adriano Carlos, *Fenomenologia do Discurso Poético: Ensaio sobre Jorge de Sena*, Porto, Campo das Letras, pp. 179-193.

<sup>23</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, p. 613.

<sup>25</sup> Francis Jacques, *Dialogiques: Recherches Logiques sur le Dialogue*, Paris, PUF, 1979, p. 255.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Flamand, *Écrire et Traduire: Sur la Voie de la Création*, Ontario, Les Éditions du Vermillon, 1983, p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> T. S. Eliot, “The Three Voices of Poetry”, *On Poetry and Poets*, London, Faber and Faber, 1990, p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence*, p. 312.