

Note. Translating Gabriela Mistral's poems to English

Gabriela Mistral was the first author from Latin America to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Considering she was not very well known by an English reading audience fond of poetry, Dr. Michael Predmore from the Hispanics Department at Stanford University and myself decided to translate her first book of poems, *Desolación*, which was first published in Spanish in New York in 1922 by the Association of Teachers of Spanish at Columbia University.

Only some poems from that foundational book have been translated into English by Doris Dana (1961), Langston Hughes (1957) and Steven Tapscott (2002), among others. *Desolation, A Bilingual Edition* comprises the whole book and was published in the United States in 2014 with an introduction and afterword by Michael P. Predmore and myself.

When fifty boxes that Gabriela Mistral had labelled "to be sent to Chile" were donated to the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile by Doris Atkinson, the niece of Doris Dana who was executor and guardian of Mistral's magnificent collection of poems, essays, letters and personal items, we decided to translate a few of them. Dr. Predmore was no longer available for translation since he was severely ill. However, we were able to find other colleagues who would accept the challenge. About two hundred and fifty of the four hundred recovered poems were first published by Luis Vargas Saavedra in Chile in 2008, with a second and a third edition in 2015 in *Almácigo, Poemas inéditos* (Mistral, 2015).

The English versions of all the poems included in this note belong to us. Only the ones from *Desolación* were published in our bilingual edition of 2014. The recovered poems included in *Almácigo* with a prologue by Doris Atkinson, are still in the process of revision for publication.

The purpose of this note is to examine the many difficulties that appeared in the translation of both editions. Mistral poses some challenges to the translation with her use of unusual, playful words. Sometimes the words chosen are typical of the language of Chilean country people; others are tongue twisters or common in children's games. In this text we present some examples of the obstacles concerning Mistral's use of words and clashes in culture encountered in the translation of the poems included in *Almácigo* and *Desolación*.

The fifty boxes donated to Chile by Doris Atkinson, besides an important amount of literary material also contained personal items. Ms. Atkinson told us that in one of them she found the brooch Gabriela wore at the ceremony of the Nobel Prize in December 1945. Ms. Atkinson also asked us, "Why were these poems kept in boxes?" We have also wondered why they were hidden and never published. Are these stray thoughts fleeting poems that came in a moment and then evaporated with the passing of time, lying forgotten in dusty boxes? Poems she thought worthy yet incidental to her oeuvre? Poems to rework again and again, to continually tune and refine the poet's voice?

These poems are as powerful and intense as her first poems included in *Desolación*. Actually, many of them belong to the same period: 1914-1922. They cannot be considered as work in progress as some critics have suggested. In this selection for instance, we have included *Madre de héroe / Mother of a Hero*, a poem that distills sadness and abandonment, which we could definitely not classify as work in progress. Here, Gabriela Mistral once again magnificently develops two of her recurrent themes: motherhood and war. The poem

dramatically closes with a mother's lament on the loss of the child she once treasured as her own.

Perhaps, as years went by, she focused on other poems, specifically *The Poem of Chile* that required extra work for the research and writing. Whatever the motive might be, the boxed poems remained lost to the public eye for half a century. All of her poems have been translated with joy, admiration and plenty of mixed emotions. We, the translators, wish the English-speaking audience experience similar feelings.

Translating poetry is a pleasure. It is as if we built a bridge between two distinct cultures and eras: that of the poet and that of the readers we intend to reach. Sometimes construction is quite rough; others, very smooth. But it always is a joy and challenge to search for and encounter the words that best communicate the poet's tone and intention.

Our aim has been to re-write Gabriela's poems in English while maintaining the poetic beauty of the original as well as her tough and energetic way of expression. We attempt to produce in the English-speaking reader the same feelings that the original in Spanish produced for us.

Since we do not have or ascribe to a specific theory of translation of poetry, we have followed our instincts to express the beauty, pain, wonder and contemplation of nature as strongly as our poet. The same has been done for correlation of meaning, agreement or coherence. In other words, we agree with Nida (1975, 1981) and Newark (1981, 1988) and have tried to be as faithful to the original as possible, preserving the impact of each line. Quite a hard task if you consider we often dealt with feelings of abandonment, despair, compassion, anger, and delusion. We struggled to find just the right words to describe her pain and suffering in the saddest moments of her life.

Some translators argue that their interpretation of a poem in a different language should be a shadow of the original poem. Others think the new version could be an entirely new poem.

This Herculean task, we think, must be carried out by at least two bilingual individuals; one a native speaker of Spanish, the other a native speaker of English and of course both must have a solid background in literature, poetry and translation. Besides, both should be aware of the differences between the two cultures, a positive aspect that all the translators in our partnerships shared.

When translating *Las Parvas* (Mistral, 2015, p. 115) */Haystacks* my colleague had serious doubts about this stanza:

*"Parecen viejas de faldas profundas,
encucilladas por dar sorpresa,
las parvas, las moñudas parvas."*

...which we translated as:

*"They look like old women in full skirts
crouching so as to surprise us
the haystacks, the hair-bunned haystacks."*

If you have never seen stacks of hay tied up this way, as it is done in Mexico and other Latin American countries - standing on their end and tied up at the top- you would not understand why they would look like old women with their hair in a bun on top of their heads.

Gabriela loved to play with words. In *Nombre Azteca*, (Mistral, 2015, p.116)/*Aztec Name* she plays with the word *Tlaquepaque*, a city located in the south Mexico. The name of the town sounds like a tongue twister. We have simply included a footnote to clarify its origin:

Nombre Azteca

*Nombre de pueblo, iba a decirte
y se me fue por filo de aire.
La historia queda avergonzada
si no me vuelve su nombre,
truco de lengua y duende de aire.
Me cosquillea como un agua,
niño jugando de pillarme.
Es nombre lindo como espejo
y es nombre azteca que yo reía.*

*Trae y se lleva lo que trae,
si me lo creo escurridizo
y me lo cojo como un jade.
Me cosquillea por la boca,
Y me resbala su donaire.*

*Casi lo tengo; tapa mi boca
y me lo tomas como el aire.
Pichón cogido, albricias más:
¡Tlaquepaque, Tlaquepaque!*

Aztec name

*The name of a town I was going to tell
you
but it disappeared in the air.
History will remain ashamed
If its name, does not come back to me
trick of the tongue, sprite in the air.
It tickles me like water,
a child playing tag.
It's a name as pretty as a mirror,
an Aztec name, that made me laugh.*

*Brings in and pulls out what it brings.
If I think it is slippery,
I snatch it as if jade.
It tickles round my mouth;
its charm slips from me.*

*I almost have it; fills my mouth
and you take it from me in like air.
Trapped bird, my joy;
Tlaquepaque, Tlaquepaque!*

In *Cuento Perdido* (Mistral, 2015, p. 101) /*Lost Story* she says “burla-burlando”. Another example of fun language or expressions used by children. We translated that expression as: taunting-teasing. An expression my colleague Jeanne Salis remembered from her childhood.

Cuento perdido

*Búscame el cuento perdido
que me contaron a los cinco años.
Contaban la madre y la hermana
y lo he perdido caminando...
Cuando lo llamo a mi boca
se asoma **burla-burlando**,
y se me sume al mismo tiempo
en liebre escondida en pasto.*

Lost story

*Find me the lost story
told when I was five
by mother and my sister,
and lost while wandering...
When summoned to my mouth
it appears, taunting-teasing,
and at the same time, plunges
like a hare hidden in grass.*

A different kind of challenge was faced when translating Gabriela Mistral's neologisms and expressions used by country people. In the next three poems we are going to examine folk expressions such as “y ahora yo corro que vuelo” that as our best option was translated as “and now I rush flying”, in *Ritmo de venado/ At a Stag's Pace*, published only in the first edition of *Almácigo* (p.57, 2009.)

Then in *Madre de Héroe* (Mistral, 2015, p.131) *Mother of a Hero*, she uses a common saying: “anda que anda y nunca le alcanzo”. In children stories, we used to read “y el pastor anda que anda tras sus ovejas”. Our translation for that would be: “and the

shepherd walks and walks and walks...” since the meaning is the repetition of an action many, many times until one gets tired of doing it. However, in this poem, we wanted to respect the original voice of the poet and we only said:

“I walk and walk and never reach him”.

The third example comes from *Palmas* (Mistral, 2015, p.87) / *Palm Trees*, a brief poem included in a group called *Criollas*. In the second stanza, she describes the palm branches as blades that move around up high, like a windmill. The original poem says: *“O frota que se frota/grandes cuchillas”* which we translated as: *“Or enormous knives/rubbing and chafing”*. Again, an instance of an action that is repeated time and time again.

In all three cases, we regret to admit our translation hardly conveys the spirit of the original in Spanish.

Here is the first one about a deer:

A ritmo de venado

*Un venadillo de México
se me quedó entre las manos,
y con él en las rodillas
y las ropas, ando y viajo.*

*Está moviéndome el aire
parado, me está mirando,
está ofreciéndome un agua
oscura bajo sus párpados.*

*Granizado, punteado,
aquí me tiene contándole
las pizcas de su nevada
y sus pestañas de espiga.*

*¡Venado cortado al aire,
a la luz tijereteado,
apenas cascos, apenas
hueso, no más sobresalto!*

*Está avivándome el ritmo
de lo que de él voy contando,
y ahora yo corro que vuelo,
voy que no puedo dejarlo.*

At A Stag's Pace

*A little deer from Mexico
remained between my hands;
with it upon my knees and
wrapped up in my clothes I amble and
roam.*

*For me it stirs the air,
standing, gazing at me,
offering me dark water
beneath its eyelids.*

*Frosted, spotted,
has me counting
the specks of its snow,*

eyelashes of wheat.

*Stag cut from air,
snipped in the light,
barely hooves, barely
bone, no longer startled!*

*It's quickening the pace
of what I say,
and now I rush flying,
go on, unable to stop.*

Mother of a Hero, as we have mentioned before constitutes a piece distilling sadness and despair. The peasant's expression comes at the very end; however, for our readers' better understanding we transcribe the complete poem.

Madre de héroe

No puedo ver a mi hijo
vuelto a los puntos cardinales.
Estuvo al Oeste, estuvo al Norte
y ahora vienen del Sur sus signos.
¿Cómo lo veo tras los metales
y la tempestad, el hierro el bronce,
el polvo negro y la humareda?
Por donde lo busco anda su nombre
que no es el nombre de su bautismo,
anda en el aleluya y en befa.
Nombre que yo no se lo amo,
sin óleo, sin sal, sin leche.

En tanto espacio que tiene
le busco el cuerpo y la cuna
o el otro en la adolescencia.
Y tanteando en las alambradas
y en minas de tierras abiertas,
hallo el infierno, no hallo a mi hijo.
Tampoco encuentro mi país
y su país. Todo ha mudado
o yo no soy alma gloriosa,
y soñé el cielo, Dios y su gloria.
Hasta el día de su marcha
yo me estaba aquí en lo divino
y conmigo juntamente.

Tenía en las manos este aire
y el puñado de sus cabellos,
y los cielos abiertos miraba
y a mismo tiempo veía
su espalda, su ruta, su huella.

De pronto ardió cuanto tocaba,
ardió en su nuca su bautismo
y ardieron todos sus caminos.
Corté mi canto en los cielos,
mi adoración rompí de golpe

Mother of A Hero

I cannot see my son because he's
turned towards the cardinal points.
He's been West, he's been North
and now his signals come from the
South.
How can I see him amidst metal
and tempests; iron, bronze,

por buscarlo y por seguirlo.
La llamarada en que corre
está forrada de tiniebla,
y así su fuego no guía
ni los pasos de su madre.
Detrás de él todo es su nombre
pero ese nombre yo no lo dije
ni al darle los alimentos
ni llamándole en el Danubio.

Dénme mi hijo,
no me den un reguero rojo
y un horizonte de tanques.

El hijo que voy buscando
cielo abajo, gloria abajo,
que trabajó, que rezaba
y cantó en coros de camaradas.

Voy detrás de él y voy rota
de unos aviones que me cortan
y rota de afiladas sirenas,
partiéndome y rehaciéndome
por una tierra que no es la tierra
y dicen que es la Austria, Hungría:
caldo de metal, no cebadas,
no más que explosión y metralla,
y la ruta: tiesura de muertos
y los terrones: pulpa de cuerpos.

Me detengo cuando me canso
pero sigo porque él sigue
el río que llama su gente
porque dicen que él va adelante.
Anda que anda y nunca le alcanzo,
el hijo mío que no era fuego,
que no era mina ni metralla,
que era canto y ojos azules,
que sobre mi pecho era mío.

black dust and dampness?
Wherever I search his name is
around
which is not the name of his
baptism,
he's in hallelujah and mockery.
Name that I do not love,
no oils, no salt, no milk.

*In so much space he has
I search for his cradle body
or the other one, from his
adolescence.
And groping in barbed wire fences
and in mines on open land,
I find hell, but not my son.
Neither I find my country, nor
his country. Everything has
changed
or I am not the same glorious soul
and dreamt about heaven, God and
His glory.
Until the day he parted
I was here with myself
and the divine at the same time.*

*I had this air in my hands
and a handful of his hair,
the open skies I stared
and at the same time I could see
his back, his route, his trail.*

*Suddenly, everything he touched
blazed,
blazed his baptism on his nape
and all his roads blazed
I stopped my heavens' song
my adoration I bluntly cut
to search him and follow him.
The flame where he runs
is lined in darkness
thus, his fire does not guide
not even his mother's steps.
His name is all over behind him
but I did not say that name*

*not when giving him his meals,
nor when calling him in the
Danube.*

*Give me my son,
do not give me a course of red
and a horizon of tanks.
The son I go searching for
heaven down, glory down,
who worked, who prayed
and sang in choirs with friends.*

*I go after him and go broken
from airplanes that cut me,
broken from poignant sirens,
splitting me and putting me back
together
in a land that is not land
and they say it is Austria and
Hungary:
metal broth, not oat meals,
only explosion and weapons,
and the route: rigid corpses
and the lumps of earth: bodies'
pulp.*

*I stop when I tire
but I keep on because he follows
the river that they call their own
because they say it goes up front.
**I walk and walk and I never reach
him,**
son of mine who was not fire,
who wasn't land-mines, not
weapons,
who was song and blue eyes,
who over my bosom was my own.*

Our third case appears in *Palmas*, a poem which is part of series called *Criollas*.

Palmas

*Palmas, palmitas ¿qué hacéis arriba
sonando como águilas
la plumería?
O frota que se frota
grandes cuchillas,
sin estrellas
a quien dejar heridas.*

Palm Trees

*Palms, little palms,
plumes sounding
like eagles.
What do you do up there?
Or rubbing and chafing,
enormous knives
without stars,
to wound.*

There is another poem dedicated to a palm tree, *La palmera* (Mistral, 2015, p. 227) /*The Palm Tree*. In this one, the poet uses the word “*cuelluda*”, meaning a tall neck, a neologism, a word-play that adds charm to the poem. We could not find a similar word in English so we just said “*the tall-necked one*”, which obviously does not have the same effect as “*cuelluda*” on the reader.

La Palmera

*Me hallé en Panamá la palmera
cosa tan alta yo no sabía.
A la Minerva del pagano
y a la Virgen se parecía.
Me dieron el mejor cielo.
(De verla tan digna sería).
Le regalaron solo veranos
y unos verdes de Epifanía,
y le dijeron que alimentase
al Oriente y la raza mía.
Yo la miraba embelesada
los penachos de su alegría.
Dame el agua de veras, le dije
y a miel de mi regalía,
y la cuerda más fuerte
con la cera que es pía.
El agua para mi bautismo,
la miel para malos días,
la cuerda de liar fieras,
la cera cuando mi agonía,
que me puedo morir de noche
y el alto cirio llega al día.
Yo le hablaba como a mi madre
y el corazón se me fundía,
yo me **abrazaba a la cuelluda**
y la cuelluda me cubría.
La palmera en el calor
era una isla de agua viva
y entendiéndome como una madre
sobre mi siesta se mecía.*

Palm Tree

*In Panama I found a palm tree
such a tall thing, I never knew.
It looked like Minerva to a pagan
and seemed like the Virgin.
I was granted the best sky.
(For being so dignified maybe.)
It was given only summers
and a few greens for Epiphany
and it was told to feed
West and my race.
Mesmerized, I looked at it
the plumes of its happiness.
Give me real water, I said
and honey as my present,
and the strongest rope,
with wax that is sacred.
Water for my baptism,
honey for my dim days
rope to tie wild beasts,
wax for my agony, when it comes
because I may die at night
and the tall candle comes at daylight.
I talked to the palm as I talked to my
mother
and my heart melted down,
I hugged the tall-necked one.*

When translating *Desolación* with Dr. Predmore we came across many examples of differences in the cultures of Latin America and the one from English-speaking countries. In the prose poems section, we encountered a beautiful poem dedicated to *El brasero* which we have translated as *The Brazier*. (2014, excerpts from *Desolation*, pages 531-534).

*¡Brasero de pedrerías, ilusión para el pobre!
¡Mirándote tenemos las piedras preciosas!
Brazier holding precious stones, illusion for the poor!
Gazing at you, we have jewels!*

*Eres la intimidad: sin ti existe la casa, pero no sentimos el hogar.
You are the intimacy: the house exists without you, but we don't feel the home.
Las manos de los míos se juntan sobre tus brasas.
The hands of my people unite over your coals.*

*Te dieron una aureola de bronce, y ella te ennoblece, ensanchando el resplandor.
They gave you a halo of bronze, and that makes you nobler, expanding your glow.*

Another translator confused the *brazier* with the *hearth* of a fireplace as shown in the example that follows:

*Stone-built hearth, illusion of the poor! Looking at you we have precious stones! ...
Intimacy is what you are: without you the house exists, but it doesn't feel like a home. ...
The hands of my children join above your coals...
They gave you a bronze aureole, and it ennobles you, showing off your splendor.*

We believe that here the translator missed the poet's central theme. "El *bracero*" or the brazier is used by poor people, even today in the XXI century in humble environments. It is made of copper or bronze; so, in the lines quoted here, where a halo of bronze is mentioned, it is evident she is talking about a *brazier*. In Gabriela's days, as well as today, a fireplace can only be found in the homes of rich people. It should also be mentioned that the poet makes a contrast between *house* and *home*. A brazier could transform a house into a home. Interestingly enough, the word *hearth* in English can also be translated into Spanish as *hogar*. However, it is clear to us that Gabriela is describing a brazier where children put their hands in a circle **over the coals**, something they could not do in a fireplace.

We found another interesting item in *Little White Clothes*, a prose poem also among the *Mother's Poems*. The poet says she knits *tiny booties* for her child. We have translated "escarpines" as booties. Other translators have said *slippers* or *socks of wool*. However, the important detail about *booties* is that they are handmade. Slippers and socks can be bought in the market. Actually, it is common for women in Chile, in Latin America, as well as in Europe for mothers, grandmothers and aunts to knit clothes for the coming child. It is part of the culture.

Perhaps at that time wishing to be a mother, as she expresses throughout the book *Ternura* - which is then included in the 1923 version of *Desolación* - our poet imagines herself knitting booties for the coming baby.

Ropitas blancas

*Tejo los escarpines minúsculos, corto el pañal suave: todo quiero hacerlo
por mis manos.*

Vendrá de mis entrañas, reconocerá mi perfume.

*Suave vellón de la oveja: en este verano te cortaron para él. Lo esponjó
la oveja ocho meses y lo emblanqueció la luna de Enero.*

*No tiene agujillas de cardo ni espigas de zarza. Así de suave ha sido el
vellón de mis carnes, donde ha dormido.*

*¡Ropitas blancas! El as mira por mis ojos y se sonría dichoso,
adivinándolas suavísimas...*

Little White Clothes

I knit the tiny little booties, I cut the soft diaper: I want to do everything with my hands.

He will come from my womb, he will recognize my perfume.

Soft sheep's fleece: this summer they sheared you for him.

The sheep fluffed it up for eight months and the January moon whitened it. It does not have thistle's needles nor thorns from the bramble-bush.

Just that soft has been the fleece of my flesh, where he has slept.

Little white clothes! He looks at them through my eyes and smiles, guessing them to be the softest...

Quite a different cultural aspect appeared when we had to interpret *Little Red Riding Hood*, carrying food to her grandmother. In the third stanza the girl says:

“Abuelita ha enfermado. Le llevo aquí un pastel y un pucherito suave, que deslíe manteca...”

We had originally interpreted this as:

*Dear Grandma has fallen ill. I bring her a cake, and a mild stew **that puts the fat aside.***

Later, however, with the help of other Spanish speakers, we agreed that in those days, 1910's, fat was considered healthy and necessary for someone who was ill. So, we changed our line as follows:

*Dear Grandma has fallen ill. I bring her a cake, and a mild little stew, **juicy with fat.***

An interesting point about the significance the poet's culture may have when translating a poem appeared when Gabriela in several poems mentions “*los bronces*”. She is obviously referring to the bronze bells that toll every evening in our churches to announce an hour of prayer, generally called “*the Angelus*”. Since it is the end of the day, it also evokes the end of life. My position was to keep the original word “*bronze*” in the translation. My colleague however insisted that we had to say “*bronze bells*” so that people from other cultures – where there is no “*Angelus*”- would have no doubt about its meaning.

Here, *El pensador de Rodin*/(Mistral, 2014, p. 68-69) *Rodin's Thinker*.

El pensador de Rodin

*Con el mentón caído sobre la mano ruda,
el Pensador se acuerda que es carne de la huesa,
carne fatal, delante del destino desnuda,
carne que odia la muerte, y tembló de belleza.*

*Y tembló de amor, toda su primavera ardiente, y
ahora, al otoño, anégase de verdad y tristeza.
El “de morir tenemos” que paso sobre su frente,*

*en todo **agudo bronce**, cuando la noche empieza.*

*Y en la angustia, sus músculos se hienden, sufridores.
Cada surco en la carne se llena de terrores.
Se hiende, como la hoja de otoño, al Señor fuerte*

*que le llama **en los bronces** ... Y no hay árbol torcido
de sol en la llanura, ni león de flanco herido,
crispados como este hombre que medita la muerte.*

Rodin's Thinker

*His chin fallen on his rough hand,
the Thinker remembers he is flesh for the grave,
fatal flesh, left bare in the face of destiny
flesh that hates death, and once trembled with beauty.*

*And he trembled with love, during his ardent spring
and now in Autumn, is overwhelmed by truth ad sadness.
That "we must die" crosses through his forehead
in all **its piercing bronze**, when night begins.*

*And in anguish his muscles are ren with suffering.
Each furrow in his flesh is filled with terror.
He cleaves, like the Autumn leaf, to his Almighty Lord*

*Who calls to him with **bronze bells** ... And there's no tree twisted
under the sun in the plains, nor lion with wounded flank,
contorted as this man who meditates upon death.*

A final example of our poet's use of playful words in poems for children is this one: **La gracia**, published in *Tala* (2010, *Antología*, p.242). We are only presenting the first two stanzas. The magic of it is present on all its forty verses. The poet uses an [a,b,a,b,] type of rhyme where all lines [b] end in "ada". It is a charming poem but impossible to translate!

La Gracia

*Pájara Pinta
jaspeada
iba loca
de pintureada
por el aire
como llevada.*

*En esta misma
madrugada
pasó el río
de una lanzada.*

Here is our attempt to translation:

Grace

*The spotted she bird
went crazy over the air
with its overdone make- up*

*In the early morning
crossed the river
the sling of a spear.*

To close this note, we would like to state that translating is an art; and translating poetry, a devotion. It is imperative that the translator has wide experience in reading poetry in both languages: his native tongue and the one aimed at. Better still; be able to write poetry in one of the two languages.

Our experience has been rich and intense. We were deeply moved by Gabriela Mistral's feelings and emotions, her suffering and despair. Her poems permeate our sentiments and emotions today with the same strength she probably felt when writing them many decades ago.

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