

# Reflections on a trio of poetry transfers

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## Abstract

This reflection provides a brief commentary on the translator's reading of the dialogue on the translator and the creative process of translation established by the three poems that form the mural installation in the Japanese garden of the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting. It also highlights some of the analytical and creative means harnessed in the translation of poetry. It concludes with the original poems by Francesc Parcerisas, Jordi Mas López and Joaquim Sala-Sanahuja and their respective versions in English.

**Keywords:** Jordi Mas; Francesc Parcerisas; Joaquim Sala-Sanahuja; mural installation; translator; translation; poetry translation; intertextuality.

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## Resum. Reflexions sobre tres trasllats poètics

L'objectiu d'aquesta reflexió és oferir un breu comentari referit a la lectura del diàleg sobre la figura del traductor i el procés creatiu de la traducció que entaulen els tres poemes que formen la instal·lació mural del Jardí Kokoro de la Facultat de Traducció i d'Interpretació de la UAB, des del punt de vista de la seva traductora a l'anglès. També explora alguns dels ressorts analítics i creatius que abasten la traducció poètica. Finalment, es reproduïxen els textos originals dels poetes Francesc Parcerisas, Jordi Mas López i Joaquim Sala-Sanahuja amb les versions respectives en anglès.

**Paraules clau:** Jordi Mas; Francesc Parcerisas; Joaquim Sala-Sanahuja; instal·lació mural; traductor; traducció; traducció poètica; intertextualitat.

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By the time I retired from the FTI last year, there were three poems gracing the walls at the eastern end of the partially enclosed garden at the heart of the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting. The first to appear, in 2013, was Francesc Parcerisas's *Torsimany*, followed in the spring of 2016 by Jordi Mas's *Turjiman*, and, in December of 2017, Joaquim Sala-Sanahuja's *andreu nin retorna a catalunya*. Unusually, all three were conceived as wall poems for the space they now occupy, standing face to face with their readers. No pages close on these poems, and

they are only hidden from view by the darkness of night and the emptiness of the garden. They are the work of poets who are translators and teachers of translation at this Faculty, friends and colleagues whose work I have had the great pleasure of attempting to interpret and translate into English in an expression of fellowship with them and all the translators and interpreters who have studied and taught here.

Seeing words written not on paper or a computer screen, but on the solid support of concrete reminds us of the origins of written language scratched onto stone, or cut into wood, bone or clay. It also reminds us of the original meaning of the word “poetry”, which is derived from the Greek *ποίησις*, or *creation*, the act of bringing into material being something that did not previously exist. The poems painted on the walls of the Faculty’s garden, which is dedicated to the dialogue between East and West, illustrate the permanence and resilience of the written word and its translation, in contrast with the fleeting, mercurial nature of the spoken – and interpreted – word. They articulate an unending conversation that echoes back and forth between poets, between texts left in trust for posterity, “penyores” created at different times in different languages and cultures, and they invite each of us to read, to explore and construct meaning through a unique act of interpretation, which is also mercurial and hermeneutic.

Two of the poems have as titles the words *torsimany* and *turjiman*, archaic and, for most people, unfamiliar terms, which have their counterparts in the equally ancient and esoteric English words *dragoman* and *truchman*. They all derive from the late Middle Ages along tortuous paths from the Arabic *ن ا م ج ر ت* (*tarjumān*) and earlier Semitic sources and refer to the interpreters, translators, negotiators and diplomats who mediated between the Eastern Islamic world and the European West. All three poems evoke and enact the creative purpose and effort of the translator as wordsmith.

Francesc Parcerisas’s poem *Torsimany* combines with a design by the engraver and illustrator Lluïsa Jover to produce an artwork in which the use of colour in the lettering creates a visual metaphor of the alchemy of translation.

Lines 1-5 of the poem are reproduced in red. Lines 6-13 begin in blue but progressively give way to red, concluding with the mingling of red and blue in individual words and syllables. Finally, lines 14 and 15 of the poem are reproduced entirely in blue. The effect is one of a gradual, deliberate suffusion until the essence of the poem, like speech or text conveyed from one language to another, is fully preserved at the same time that its outer shell or casing is transformed.

*Torsimany* unfolds as a monologue addressed to a silent listener (the translator?), in which the unnamed “you” is evoked four times through the verbs “Duus”, “tries”, “Mires” and “aprens”, while the shared identity of “us” is stated five times (*ens tries; ens sigui ombra; la llum obstinada / que és la nostra; ens fa designi; ens és una*). The expressed separateness between the self and the other (*from the you to the I*), and between one language and another (*words that were the refuge of another tongue*), is resolved in the confident parallelism of the last two lines: “La raó compartida,/la llengua que ens és una” (*the reason that is shared,/ the language that for us is one*).

At the beginning of the poem, the translator takes the raw material of the “roca dura que va ser el fonament” (the original utterance or text) and sets it down in a garden – a planned, cultivated space apart where nature is wrought into a human artefact. The garden of the poem, like the mythical garden planted “eastward, in Eden”, where the first human was created, is the *locus amoenus* of a different kind of amorous encounter, one in which clay is kneaded and crafted into new likenesses, always the same in substance but differing in form, like the distinct languages which ultimately communicate through the translator to express universal human concepts and emotions.

The poem has a predominantly end-stopped line structure, characterized by one breath and proposition per line, although this standard pattern is replaced by a series of run-on lines in the central section of the poem (lines 7-10), where the enjambment reflects the steady work in progress of the translator’s raw material being reworked into a new guise. The sense and the prosody of the poem embody the purposeful negotiation of difference, equivalence and meaning through the common unifying language of reason. Mission accomplished.

From the order and clarity of the “hort ufanós” in *Torsimany*, we venture into the feral, nocturnal atmosphere of *Turjiman* and the very different experience of translation that it describes and, in turn, requires of the translator.

Never having visited Japan, I knew nothing of Kasuga and Mount Mikasa, which are mentioned at the end of the poem, but I did know from my general reading that the moon is often used in Oriental poetry and painting as a symbol of nostalgia and longing for a distant beloved person or place. It is, of course, a universal symbol of fertility and renewal through its never-ending cycle of waxing and waning. My research led me to the historical figure of Abe no Nakamaro (c. 698 - c. 770 C.E.), a Japanese scholar who at the age of 16 was sent as part of the Japanese mission to Tang China, became a high-ranking official there, and never succeeded in returning to his native land. It is said that while looking at the moon in China, he composed a well-known poem evoking the vision of the moon rising over Mount Mikasa at the shrine of Kasuga, near Nara, which at that time was the capital of Japan. It is this literary reference to which the final four lines of *Turjiman* allude, conjuring up the Japanese aesthetic that inspired the Faculty’s *Jardí Kokoro*, the physical space of the garden for which the poem was created:

When I gaze far out  
 Across the plain of heaven,  
 I see the same moon  
 That came up over the hill  
 Of Mikasa at Kasuga.  
 Abe no Nakamaro, *Kokinshū* IX, p. 406. (Translated by Helen Craig McCollough)

Like the first poem, *Turjiman* begins with a fertile patch of land – not the lush, cultivated garden of *Torsimany*, but a primitive, scent-marked circle in the wilder context of the forest. Here, the focus of the translator’s effort is to seek, unearth, extract and absorb the essence (of experience, of meaning, of the text to

be translated?), rather than to chisel, sculpt and reconfigure it on the basis of a firm foundation.

*Turjiman* emphasizes instinct and the senses, rather than reason, as a means of exploration and knowledge. From the very first line, the canine sense of smell is summoned to delve for the buried bone – a metaphor, perhaps, for the meaning and certainty that are the object of the poet/translator’s search. The other senses of touch, hearing, taste and sight are also invoked in the scratching at the silence, the gnawing and sucking of the marrow from the bone, the singing, roaring and howling of wild beasts and, finally, the contemplation of the full moon as night hovers on the brink of dawn. In the last line, the identity of the voice that insistently interrogates us in the second and third stanzas of the poem is finally glimpsed, albeit indirectly, in the words “a l’alba dels meus aspres”.

This free verse poem makes extremely effective use of internal assonance to create an inner tension and urgency, as in line 3, where the final word “fèril” is given prominence not simply by its position at the end of the line, but chiefly through the sound association with its noun, “cercle” thanks to the repeated stressed vowel. This poetic device would have transferred quite easily into English as “fertile circle” (used in a first draft of the translation), but it was ultimately rejected in favour of “fertile round” in order to establish a cohesive visual link between the beginning and end of the poem through the echo of both fertility and the sphere in the image of the full moon. Other instances of emphatic internal assonance are found in line 7 (*terreny... empeny*), lines 8 and 9 (*l’avidesa/del rosec, la lenta*), line 11 (*a poc a poc, el moll*), line 24 (*maldant per trencar*) and line 29 (*l’alba dels meus aspres*). Clearly, such a recurrent expressive element in the original poem must be replicated in the translation, although not necessarily or exclusively in all the same places. In line 11 of both the original and the translation, there is assonance on the same vowel (“a poc a poc” and “drop by drop”). Similarly, the forceful “maldant per trencar” of line 24 is mirrored in “straining to break”, although in this case the repeated single vowel of the original Catalan is echoed by a repeated diphthong in the English version. Also in line 24, the translator’s perhaps surprising choice of “turgid egg of the moon” to render “l’ou/tan ple d’aquesta lluna” seeks to emphasize the gravity or inner plenitude of the moon as a symbol of fertility, rather than evoking the full moon perceived as a disc in the night sky.

Occasionally, as in lines 12-14, the English translation takes the liberty of using assonance within and between successive lines where it is not present in the corresponding lines of the original: “What ancient, strange/or alien creature/made its mark...?”. Elsewhere, alliteration, which is such a distinctive feature of English verse, is used to compensate for emphasis that the poet achieves by other means, as in “the bone buried” of line 2.

Each of the three stanzas alludes to the theme of fertility (*el cercle fèril*), mating (*amb quin cant o bramul s’aparellava; el llop udola*), new life (*agombolar-hi les cries; l’ou tan ple*) or the lack thereof (*lamentà el seu exili o extinció; l’alba dels meus aspres*). The poem is framed by references to the earth, the fertile ground marked with the scent of an animal in the opening lines contrasting

with the parched land at its conclusion. The struggle and the search for answers continue.

*Torsimany* and *Turjiman* offer two very different perspectives on the translator's experience, but they are linked by several motifs running through and between them: fertility; the construction of or search for meaning; separateness and difference, which in *Torsimany* are ultimately resolved, but poignantly persist at the end of *Turjiman*.

Joaquim Sala-Sanahuja's *andreu nin torna a catalunya* is the most recent of the FTI's mural poems. Unlike its companions, its focus is not so much the process of translation as the evocation of an individual translator, the political writer and activist Andreu Nin (El Vendrell, 1892 - Madrid/Alcalá de Henares?, 1937), who also translated a number of key Russian authors, including Tolstoy, whose great novel *Anna Karenina* he published in Catalan (Badalona: Edicions Proa, 1933).

In this poem the reader is drawn into a confined interior, the stuffy atmosphere of a railway carriage, in which an unnamed subject is presented in a state between sleeping and waking. A hallucinatory stream of consciousness develops, accompanied by the familiar four-beat rhythm of train wheels passing over the joints on the track suggested in the poem's opening pattern of three short or weak syllables followed by a stressed fourth (a *quartus paeon*, or "da-da-da-dum" rhythm). The disorientation inherent in the scene is expressed through the confusion of remembered fiction (what Anna sees in her railway carriage) and imagined reality (what Nin sees and hears in his semi-conscious state) and the overlapping and fusing of identities, all powerfully reinforced by the poem's prosody and typography. The eight lines of the composition take the form of a single sentence in which the definition usually afforded by a final full stop, as well as the capitalisation that is conventionally used to mark the beginning of a sentence and the initial letters of proper names, is discarded.

The focus shifts back and forth between Nin's train journey and the scene that he or the narrator recalls from Chapter 29 of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, in which the eponymous heroine dozes in the dimly-lit compartment of a train travelling from Moscow to St. Petersburg: "She came to her senses for a moment, and knew that the lean peasant in the long nankin coat with a button missing who had come into the compartment was the carriage stoker [...] The voice of a man wrapped up and covered with snow shouted something..." (translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1912); "What's that on the arm of the chair, a fur cloak or some beast?" (translated by Constance Garnett, London, Heinemann, 1901). The boundaries between the various characters and passengers, both historical and fictional – Andreu Nin and Anna Karenina, the bear wrestler and the stove-stoker, the groaning beast and the locomotive – are blurred, with the result that the reader's experience replicates the third-person subject's confused perception of his surroundings. Who exactly is prevented from getting off to sleep? Who is the man with snow on his back? Who wields the knife and who stokes the fire? Who hears the screaming of the beast? What is the beast?

Andreu Nin's rendering of the scene which provides the inspiration for the poem is as follows:

Anna somrigué amb menyspreu i tornà a agafar el llibre; però decididament ja no podia comprendre res d'allò que llegia. Passà el tallapapers pel vidre. Després s'aplicà a la galta aquella superfície llisa i freda [...] A cada instant tenia un moment de dubte: «És que el tren va endavant, endarrera o està aturat? És Annuixka o una altra la qui hi ha al costat meu? Què és allò que hi ha al penja-robes, un abric o una fera? I jo mateixa, sóc jo o una altra?» (*Anna Karenina*, translated by Andreu Nin, Badalona/Barcelona, 1933/1985, Edicions Proa, Part I, Chapter 29, p. 118-119.)

In line 3 of the translation, my use of the unnaturally jerky rhythm of the dactyls (with the stressed first syllables followed by two or three unstressed syllables) and the parallel structures (“tackling the bear with his knife, stabbing at the wound” attempts to recreate the relentless physical violence evoked in the original poem by means of parallel syntactical structures and repeated metrical patterns: “que abat a coltellades l’ós, que burxa en la ferida”).

The reader’s grasp of the unnamed identity referred to in the initial “li impedeix agafar el son” (only decipherable thanks to the title of the poem) and, indeed, of the whole narrative, is faltering throughout – until the conclusion. Finally, the poet presents us with the absolute, stark certainty uttered in the lines: “la lluita a mort és un estat natural dels homes,/del qual ha de sorgir la vida”. The dramatically shortened final line of the original is rendered by the monosyllables of the English line, “from which life must spring”.

Three poets drawing from first-hand knowledge and experience to create poems about translation and translators. Three works of art that constantly ask questions of the modern-day *torsimanys* and *turjimans* whose eyes and minds are engaged by the mural poems in the Faculty’s Japanese garden. In translating them, I have used many of the resources on which all translators, and particularly literary translators, must rely: an in-depth reading of the text, awareness of the poem’s intertextuality, close attention to the imagery and prosody of the original, documentation, experience, reason and instinct.

The rare privilege of translating living poets is that you can ask them questions, check that your understanding and interpretation of their work has not strayed too far from their intentions, and so avoid the dreaded “*traduttore, traditore*” syndrome which can be caused by insufficient linguistic or background knowledge and misinterpretation of the original text. Unlike contracts and other legal documents, for example, in which ambiguity is to be avoided at all cost, poetry – as commentators from Aristotle to Empson have pointed out – has ambiguity and interpretation at its very roots. A poem’s distillation of language, allusion, symbolism and metaphor, and its forging of meaning beyond the semantic content of the words it uses through the associations suggested by metre, rhythm and other musical effects, create a rich seam from which multiple interpretations may be extracted, not all of them obvious even to the poet. Like any other reader, the translator will interact with the poem and arrive at an interpretation. As far as possible, however (particularly in the case of a living author who is willing to be consulted), the translator’s golden rule must be to detect and preserve any inherent ambiguity and never to preclude any of the possible interpretations open to the reader of the original text.

I would like to thank Francesc, Joaquim and Jordi for their helpful comments on the drafts of these translations and hope that they will not feel betrayed by my English versions! Needless to say, any errant interpretations of the poems expressed in this brief essay are entirely my own.

### Torsimany

Duus fins a l'hort ufanós  
la roca dura que va ser fonament,  
i ens tries mots que foren  
aixopluc d'una altra llengua.  
Que l'ombra ens sigui ombra,  
i sigui tensa la llum obstinada  
que és la nostra. Mires  
com cada bri de fang humil  
és pastat lentament de nou  
i ens fa designi els uns dels altres.  
Així aprens a créixer,  
del tu al jo, i a sostenir,  
—tronc verd que es vincla—  
la raó compartida,  
la llengua que ens és una.

Francesc Parcerisas

### Turjiman

A partir de *Torsimany*, de Francesc Parcerisas

Cal el finíssim olfacte del gos  
per a trobar l'os enterrat  
a dins del cercle fèrtil  
demarcat amb orins,  
la fretura de les urpes  
que escarboten el silenci  
del terreny, la fam que empeny  
a persistir en l'avidesa  
del rosec, la lenta  
digestió que n'assimila,  
a poc a poc, el moll.

Quina bèstia inusitada,  
pretèrita o bé estrangera,  
deixà aquí aquesta penyora  
en temps immemorials?  
Amb quin gest corria o caminava,  
o feia el cau per agombolar-hi les cries,  
o estenia les ales al cel d'aquest paratge?  
Amb quin cant o bramul s'aparellava,  
o lamentà el seu exili o extinció?

### Dragoman

You carry to the fertile garden  
the hard rock that was the cornerstone,  
and choose for us words that were  
the refuge of another tongue.  
Let the shade be our shade,  
and the light be our own  
tense, stubborn light. You see  
how each scrap of humble clay  
is slowly kneaded once again,  
shaping us into each other's likeness.  
And so you learn to grow  
from the you to the I, and sustain  
—pliant green sapling—  
the reason that is shared,  
the language that for us is one.

### Truchman

After *Torsimany*, by Francesc Parcerisas

You need a dog's keen sense of smell  
to find the bone buried  
within the fertile round  
staked out with urine,  
the urgency of its claws  
scratching the silence  
of the earth, the hunger that drives  
the persistent, stubborn  
gnawing, the slow  
digestion absorbing  
the marrow, drop by drop.

What ancient, strange  
or alien creature  
left this pledge  
in a time beyond recall?  
How did it move as it ran or walked,  
or built a lair to protect its young,  
or spread its wings in the sky above this  
place?  
With what song or roar did it mate,  
or lament its exile or extinction?

Per què, la melangia  
 amb què el llop udola  
 aquesta nit al cor del bosc,  
 maldant per trencar l'ou  
 tan ple d'aquesta lluna  
 que sorgia, a Kasuga,  
 del cim del mont Mikasa,  
 i ara ha vingut a pondre's  
 a l'alba dels meus aspres?

Jordi Mas López

**andreu nin retorna a catalunya**

Tot aquell tràfec, dins el vagó, li impedeix  
 d'agafar el son,  
 però en la torpor entreveu l'home amb neu  
 a l'espatlla  
 que abat a coltellades l'ós, que burxa en la  
 ferida  
 com un fogoner, són els mots exactes de  
 tolstoi en el llibre,  
 i sent els esgarips monstruosos de la bèstia,  
 els planys,  
 observa les brases esparses pel terra del  
 vagó,  
 la lluita a mort és un estat natural dels  
 homes,  
 del qual ha de sorgir la vida

Joaquim Sala-Sanahuja

What prompts the melancholy  
 howling of the wolf  
 this night in the heart of the forest,  
 straining to break  
 the turgid egg of the moon  
 that rose at Kasuga  
 over Mount Mikasa,  
 and has now come to set  
 in the dawn of my parched land?

**andreu nin returns to catalonia**

All the toing and froing in the carriage  
 stops him falling asleep,  
 but in his torpor he glimpses the man with  
 snow on his back,  
 tackling the bear with his knife, stabbing at  
 the wound  
 like a stoker, those are tolstoy's exact  
 words in the book,  
 and he hears the monstrous screams, the  
 moaning of the beast,  
 he observes the embers strewn on the  
 carriage floor,  
 a struggle to the death is a natural human  
 condition,  
 from which life must spring