

Stitch and Suture: Translating Emily Dickinson in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

After narrating my personal journey to becoming a translator of Emily Dickinson, I present some ways to approach poetry translation that led me to a methodology consisting of two attitudes: stitch and suture. By stitching, the translator plays an active role in the editorial choices in order to create textual stability. On the other hand, the suturing process accepts the instability of the work and provokes the creative searching for an always elusive subject (or meaning) that flickers in the discursive chain and is unattainable by its own nature. Therefore, the translator's task is to work both under aesthetic and ethical constraints, since his choices are made before the *transfer* of the original to his own language.

KEYWORDS: suture, poetry translation, Emily Dickinson, meaning, prosody, latino translation theory, ethics of translation, creativity, transplantation

* Received: May 27, 2021; Accepted: July 26, 2021. This is not an academic article. It only undergoes internal review.

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Lost in translation is the title of a dazzling film by Sophia Coppola (2003), yet it is also the title of a book by Ella Frances Sanders where one can find exquisite words such as the Inuit *iktsuarpoock* or the Farsi *tiám*, which Sanders compiles in her “compendium of untranslatable words from around the world,” as the subtitle reads. As a half-Paraguayan and half-German person raised in Brazil using English as my primary academic language, I happen to find missing in that book the English word *serendipity*, as it is also untranslatable, yet not only for cultural differences, but because it was coined by Horace Walpole from a Persian fairy tale, “The Three Princes of Serendip.” Indeed, *serendipity* seems to be a perfect word to capture the feeling and circumstances of my “subjective” experience of translating Emily Dickinson’s complete poems to Brazilian Portuguese,¹ an experience that has taken already eight years of my life, and is not yet a *fait accompli*.

In 2013, while I was spending a sabbatical year at Yale researching the history of Orson Welles’s unfinished adaptation of *Don Quijote*, I visited Emily Dickinson’s hometown in Massachusetts. As a curious reader of her poems and as anyone who reads the basics about her, I always felt enticed by the mystery surrounding that reclusive lady-in-white who wrote hundreds of puzzling poems, and rarely travelled outside of Massachusetts, only once venturing so far as Washington, D.C., to visit her father. The image I had of Dickinson from her poetry was of her being the antipode of Welles, a cosmopolitan globetrotter who embraced the taste for grandeur and extravagance. However, as with Welles, somehow she also seemed to me to be a foreigner in her own country, or someone who never really felt at ease in a land where everyone is supposed to be a winner in life and have their names engraved on some wall of fame—or else to die in the gutter of oblivion.

As my first visitor to Amherst and Dickinson’s Homestead, I had the experience of *déjà vu*. Despite the cars running on the asphalt of Main Street, you really feel something historic about that place, when you know Emily Dickinson’s poems. Every small detail of that old New England wooden house and its garden seems to be related with the images you have in mind after

¹ Emily Dickinson. *Poesia Completa. Volume 1: Os Fascículos*. Translated by Adalberto Müller, Editora da UnB/Editora da Unicamp, 2020. It is a bilingual two-volume edition that mostly follows *Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them*, edited by Cristanne Miller, Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. The second volume of *Poesia Completa* is scheduled to appear by September 2021.

reading her writings. Then you see and touch printed copies of her small booklets that she never saw published (the fascicles, as they are now called), you see the furniture, the stove; you look through her windows, and you gasp remembering the line: “I could not see to see” (F591, M270).² You feel the ambiance, something that flutters in between the past and the present.

When I came back to my room, I was reading some cheap anthology of her poems that I found in a second hand bookstore before travelling, and I decided to translate a few of them. One was “A little Madness in the Spring” (F1356, M686), which was written on the small blackboard displayed at the museum’s driveway. The other one was “Yesterday is History” (F1290, M570):

Yesterday is History,
 ’Tis so far away –
 Yesterday is Poetry – ’tis Philosophy –
 Yesterday is mystery –
 Where it is Today
 While we shrewdly speculate [we] sage . shrewd investigate
 Flutter both away

Ontem é História
 É tão distante –
 Ontem é Poesia – é Filosofia –
 Ontem é mistério –
 Onde é que o Hoje mora
 Enquanto a gente especula [a gente] investiga . [especula] sagaz
 Ambos deram o fora

This is one of the eighteen hundred poems I have been translating since that cold April day in Amherst. Two years after that visit, I decided to quit my previous research project on film and literature, and dedicate myself fully to Emily Dickinson’s exquisite poems. In July 2015, in Paris, I was presenting a paper at the meeting of the Emily Dickinson International Society, where I met

² I quote Emily Dickinson’s poems following the pattern among Dickinson’s scholarship: The first line in quotes is followed by the numbers of the two main edition of her poems: R. W. Franklin (F), 1998, and C. Miller (M), 2016.

Cristanne Miller and two important translators of her work: Claire Malroux and Gunhild Kübler.³

History, philosophy, mystery, poetry. These are essential terms to define translation as well. First of all, because every translation is produced within the framework of an historical time and is marked by it, in the same sense that Karl Marx states that labor and society relations, as well as economic categories “bear the traces of history.”⁴ What escapes that time, and perhaps remains beyond it, is the mystery of poetry.

As for the philosophy of my Dickinson translation, I developed a twofold conceptual framework, which I named stitch and suture. On one hand, the stitching task forces the translator to adopt an “editorial” position that gives coherence and harmony to each piece and to the set of poems. Besides following Cristanne Miller’s edition, I had to read the manuscripts, other editions, the critical debate, and several translations into the languages I know better (Portuguese, French, Spanish, and German). By stitching, the translator plays an active role in the editorial choices in order to create textual stability in a translated edition (considering that a bilingual edition contains the original).

On the other hand, displacing Lacanian film theory by Jean-Pierre Oudart to my own translation theory, the suturing process accepts the instability of the work including ellipsis, variants, alternatives, erasures, interpretative disagreements, and provokes the translator to search for an always elusive subject (or meaning) that flickers in the discursive chain and is unattainable by its own nature. Moreover, if the stitching process takes into account the context and the co-text of a poem in order to (re)construct meaning from the manifest content of the work, suturing operates at the level of its latent content, considering that the ellipsis, alternatives, variants, suppressions, and other features disclose an indeterminacy that the translator should accept and play with. Working within the folds and mutability of suture means to accept that something is always lost in translation, because we receive a text in its various modalities of *undecidability* or “mystery,” as Emily Dickinson’s poem defines it.

³ In 2016, I decided to follow Cristanne Miller’s edition of *Emily Dickinson’s Poems: As She Preserved Them*. While working on my own translation since then, I always kept in mind the delicateness of Madame Malroux’s translations and a sage advice of Frau Kübler (“always care for the last line!”), who was also never afraid to care for the rhymes in her own translation.

⁴ “Auch die ökonomischen Kategorien, die wir früher betrachtet, tragen ihre geschichtliche Spur” (Marx 182; ch. 4, sec. 3).

This philosophy led to some choices that go beyond the “meaning” of each individual poem. For example, I opted for a type of verse and rhyme in Portuguese that could come closer to the use of the common meter in Emily Dickinson’s poems. In 2018, during another sabbatical year in Buffalo, where I was finishing the translation of Dickinson, I attended the Unitarian Universalist Church, and was able to follow closely the living energy of the common meter in the Protestant hymnal. But I always kept in mind that although Dickinson uses the hymn prosody, she constantly subverts the logics of puritanism related to American Protestantism, as she does in a poem from around 1879, “Forbidden Fruit a flavor has” (F1482, M615):

Forbidden Fruit a flavor has
 That lawful Orchards mocks –
 How luscious lies within the Pod
 The Pea that Duty locks –

O sabor do Fruto Proibido
 O Pomar da lei alicia –
 Dentro da Vagem do Dever
 A Ervilha é uma delícia –

There is some taste for the “forbidden fruit” in the translator’s work, and it is not by chance that he is accused of infidelity or treason. In most of my translations, I have chosen to alternate verses of eight syllables with ones of six syllables, caring as much as possible to retain words that are essential to the poem’s meaning. At the same time, I kept a rhyme that is almost “slant,” due to the change of the accent position in a homogenous ending (*alicla*: entice; *delícia*: delicious). It is up to the translator to observe that, in the *passage* across English and Portuguese, not only words, but rhythm also changes, which requires taking for granted the huge differences between the systems of versification of the English language and the Portuguese language, which have a distinct history and tradition. Contrarily to the versification in English poetry, which is accentual-syllabic, the Portuguese language uses the syllabic system. Thus, the preference, in translation, fell on the verses of six and eight syllables, sometimes alternated or replaced by the verses of five and seven called *redondilhas*, a very popular form of verse. Although being closer to

Dickinson's common meter, the use of *redondilhas* only would entail cutting several words in each poem, due to the polysyllabic feature of most Portuguese words.

It is possible to discuss at great length rhythm and metric considerations, but it is also clear that the worth of a verse cannot be fully determined with objective arguments. One fact, however, cannot be denied: the translation quoted above is composed of measured lines which pursue equivalences with the original, insofar as the prosody of the two languages is different. What interests me is that this line sounds like a verse in a poem, and that a set of verses from the poem and the poems between them follow a certain logic of prosody and rhythm, and are coherent with each other in aesthetic terms. When one thinks of this not in ten, twenty or two hundred, but in one thousand eight hundred poems, then one can have the dimension of the translator's task in my Dickinson project. For it is one thing to translate a number of selected poems (to make an anthology, which means how to choose the best flowers in a garden, or the flowers to choose) according to personal aesthetic criteria, which can be good or bad. Another is translating everything, and trying to maintain a balance in the whole. Or rather, as Emily Dickinson would say, "A Weight with the Needles on the pounds –" (F294, M138).

Besides the use of ellipsis, which only accentuates the already elliptical nature of the English language (in contrast to the analytical character of the Portuguese language), a further challenge in translating Emily Dickinson's poetry comes from the very rich vocabulary of English, particularly because while writing in English it is possible to make choices between words of Latin and Anglo-Saxon origin. A trained Dickinson scholar knows to what extent Dickinson was aware of etymology, generally using Latin words to express abstraction, and Anglo-Saxon words to express things concrete. That is what happens in "The Mind lives on the Heart" (F1384, M523)—(my italics for Latin words):

The Mind lives on the Heart
 Like any *Parasite* –
 If that is full of Meat
 The Mind is fat –

But if the Heart omit –
Emaciate the Wit –
 The *Aliment* of it
 So *absolute*.

A Cabeça mora no Coração
 Como qualquer Parasita –
 Ela até engorda
 Se tiver a sua Marmita –

Mas se o Coração é enxuto –
 Emagrece o Cocuruto –
 Do Engenho o Alimento
 Tão absoluto –

Aside from the contrast between abstract and concrete words, and the issues on rhythm, the translation has to deal with this baroque profusion of words ending in -rt, -ite, -eat, -at; -it, wit, it, -ute! In this case, the translator may very much look like a juggler having to spin many plates at the same time. Here I preferred to invest in the contrast between a more literary-philosophical vocabulary equivalent to the original (*Alimento*, *absoluto*) and more popular/family terms like *marmita* (packed lunch) and *cocuruto* (popular word for head). Of course, as I do in many translations, the work with the rhymes and sound effects leads me to shift the terms of the poem and the original syntax (“lives *on* the Heart” becomes “in the Heart” but the “on” is evoked by the following phrase). But I tried to do so without losing sight of the most important words (such as “Wit,” a word from the literary and philosophical universe, and “absolute,” which can in no way be suppressed). Likewise, I try to keep the syntactical ellipses as the probable conjunction “since” before the last sentence, which could also be replaced by a “being” after “it”: “since the Aliment of it is so absolute” or “the Aliment of it being so absolute.” Most of all, what is not lost here is this idea that our thoughts feed on the heart (that is, on life), and when it stops beating (when sensitivity is lost), the thought loses its wit (*engenho*, ingenuity, cleverness).

A similar problem arises when I translate a poem such as “A Weight with Needles on the pounds –” (F294, M138). Eventually, my translation expands

the meaning of a “Weight . . . Needle,” because in Portuguese we have “o fiel da balança” which is the equivalent to balance wheel, both as regulation mechanism of a scale or a stabilizing force in a situation of imbalance (e.g. in a political dispute). In analog scales (or balances), the needle in the display reflects the amount of weight transmitted by the spring mechanism, or wheel. In Portuguese language, however, it happens that the needle is more important semantically than the wheel, therefore we say “fiel da balança” instead of balance wheel. Besides, “fiel” is technically the needle, but it means literally “faithful” (it is etymologically related to fidelity):

A Weight with Needles on the pounds –
To push, and pierce, besides –
That if the Flesh resist the Heft –
The puncture – coolly tries –

That not a pore be overlooked
Of all this Compound Frame –
As manifold for Anguish –
As Species – be – for name –

O Fiel da Balança, nos quilos –
Além disso, aberta e fura –
Se a Carne resistir ao Peso –
A punção – Fria tortura –

Não desconsidera um poro
Dessa Composta Estrutura –
Tão diversa para a Angústia –
Como a Espécie – é – para o nome.

As it happens in the story told by this poem, the translator works as the balance wheel working to create accuracy and fairness. But he also works for the balance: he “punctures” the original, and he “coolly” considers the “compound structure” of a poem as “species” for a “name,” meaning something unique but similar to other species (or poems) comprising a name. Considering the original and the translated poem as two “species,” he will try to find a

“name,” something that is beyond and before, at the same time. In order to have fairness and balance, he will have to “push, pierce, and puncture” the original according to the “Heft”—the foreign words used to read and translate the poem. Thus, his work is to put a “Weight with needles on the pounds.” Or maybe become himself the “needle,” “o Fiel da balança,” which is precisely like that one from the balance described by Paul Valéry:

Think of a pendulum oscillating between two symmetrical points. Suppose that one of these extremes represents form: the concrete characteristics of the language, sound, rhythm, accent, tone, movement—in a word, the Voice in action. Then associate with the other point, the acnode of the first, all significant values, images and ideas, stimuli of feeling and memory, virtual impulses and structures of understanding—in short, everything that makes the content, the meaning of a discourse. Now observe the effect of poetry on yourselves. You will find that at each line the meaning produced within you, far from destroying the musical form communicated to you, recalls it. The living pendulum that has swung from sound to sense swings back to its felt point of departure, as though the very sense which is present to your mind can find no other outlet or expression, no other answer, than the very music which gave it birth. (64)

Like Paul Valéry, I consider that a poem lives beyond the gesture that generated it. It remains alive in the sense that everything that can reproduce, replicate, expand, or transform itself is capable of being part of the intricate dialectic that entangles Nature and History altogether. In his essay on the translator’s task, Walter Benjamin considers that translation ensures the afterlife (*Nachleben*) of an original work: it lives after (*es lebt nach*) the original. Now, if I want to relate this idea to Emily Dickinson’s poem, then I can state that a translation also transforms the “Compound Frame” of an original work, since it lives *on* the original: as a “parasite,” one can think, but also in the enlarged sense of symbiosis, which includes commensalism or mutualism.

That is also why I call translation suture. Suturing is not only stitching (as one may mend a tear or hole in a shirt by sewing it), it is stitching on the living

matter in order to keep it alive. And this supposes that the living matter is changing itself while it is being sutured: it can accept or refuse the suture depending on various conditions, as one accepts or refuses a transplantation.⁵

In other words, the translator operates with a dual needle: one for the balance between different languages; the other one for suturing what he had to submit before to a “puncture.” It follows that a good translation would be one which makes possible a form of balancing—unstable and relative—between two foreign languages, between two forms of writing and thinking. In this sense, it will be up to the reader to find, in the balance of his own language and reading, the appropriate weights, wheels and needles for every poem. After all, as it happens with any kind of literary work, the last word is always the reader’s. This does not mean that the first (the author’s) or the second (the translator’s) do not have their place of speech and their rights as well.

Lastly, translations eventually happen between the suture and the instability of any *living* balance. As Brazilian writer João Guimarães Rosa once said, in one of his sparkling glimpses of wisdom, “between satisfaction and disillusion, in the unfaithful balance, hardly anything mediates” (“entre o contentamento e a desilusão, na balança infidelíssima, quase nada medeia”; my trans.; 391). This “hardly anything” might be the heaven and the hell of every translator.

⁵ In “L’intrus,” a heartbreaking essay on his heart transplantation, Jean-Luc Nancy reflects on living with a foreigner/an intruder inside his body: “The intrus is no other than me, my self; none other than man himself. No other than the one, the same, always identical to itself and yet that is never done with altering itself. At the same time sharp and spent, stripped bare and over-equipped, intruding upon the world and upon itself: a disquieting upsurge of the strange, conatus of an infinite excrescence” (13). When I relate suture to translation, I’m not far away from the very idea of transplantation. I play with this idea in a bilingual book (English/Portuguese) called *Transplantations (from my mother’s garden)*, available on Kindle Books.

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