

“To a man with a big nose”: a new translation

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The famous Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas (Madrid, 1580 – Villanueva de los Infantes, 1645) studied humanities at the renowned University of Alcalá and later served as a courtier, holding various positions as diplomat and adviser to several powerful men in early seventeenth century Spain.

The sonnet “A un hombre de gran nariz” is widely believed to be dedicated to his literary rival, poet Luis de Góngora, and is still regarded as one of the best examples of Quevedo’s prowess as a satirical poet. Quevedo, who, together with Gracián, led the literary movement known as *Conceptismo*, authored other sonnets attacking Góngora, although no other poems focus on a physical trait.

Apart from the profound dislike Quevedo had for Góngora’s literary style (the latter is the best-known representative of the rival stream, *Culteranismo*), he also accused Góngora of being a *converso*, that is to say, a Jew who had converted to Catholicism. While later in his life Quevedo repudiated many of his satirical poems, dismissing them as childhood games, their literary value remains undiminished, several appearing repeatedly in anthologies.

The sonnet is an elaborate series of puns, hyperboles and metaphors, a skilful combination of form and content in which a *concepto* (a conceit in the seventeenth century sense of the word) is methodically exploited for sa-

tirical effect. Quevedo wittily elaborates on the enormous size of a nose, supposedly Góngora's.

As is usually the case when translating poetry, this sonnet poses some interesting challenges to the translator, and therefore careful consideration is required. Earlier translators of the sonnet have either prioritised purely semantic aspects over rhythm and rhyme, or have simply ignored the fact that the satire is in verse. It seemed evident to me that Quevedo's sonnet merited a more ambitious rendition into English.

Any acceptable translation of poetry should at the very least suggest some of the original's musicality. In the case of a Spanish Golden Age sonnet such as this one, the closest equivalent in the English literature of the period is the Elizabethan sonnet. Quevedo used the hendecasyllabic – to be precise, the so-called emphatic hendecasyllabic metre, which has three mandatory stresses in the first, sixth and tenth syllables. I chose to make use of the iambic pentameter in my English translation, as it is the closest equivalent in the English literary tradition.

The formal aspects of the poem, such as rhyme and rhythm, pose a real challenge. Burton Raffel has posited that total, absolute translation is not possible; however, I concur with his assessment that "it is certainly possible to satisfactorily translate – that is, to translate most things and to translate them well."¹

The sonnet displays a perfect feminine rhyming scheme, not unusual in Spanish literature. As I worked my way through the translation, it gradually became evident to me that some semantic sacrifices would be necessary in order to convey the hyperbole within a poetical frame, while respecting its satirical nature.

Literary translation should always be a delightfully versatile practice, because it allows translators to put their intuitive, creative efforts into providing a potential reader with a text as pleasing as the original. As Willis Barnstone has suggested, "in poetry translation the art is what comes through ... and is found not in duplication but in approximations, equivalences, and differences."² My translation, therefore, is aimed at achieving as close as possible an approximation in both form and content; my approach was to try and harmonise the two aspects, finding such a balance between the two that an English reader who has no knowledge of Spanish may still get equal enjoyment from the poem.

As every line in the original sonnet is a hyperbole, the translation should render similar or equivalent images. Where this was not possible, approximate equivalence was sought. Thus, for instance, I used "snout" in the first line, rather than the much plainer "nose," in order to achieve a more humorous effect.

Quevedo's choice of the adjective *superlativa* in the second line was not gratuitous; rather, its use was deliberate. He was toying with the idea of "huge in size" as much as the allusion to "grandiloquence." Because of the balance I felt was needed between the demands of content and form, I developed the line around the two above concepts also by means of an adjective, "unparalleled."

Quevedo possessed a remarkable mastery of the Spanish language, as can be observed in the next line, which includes an amusing yet difficult pun. *Alquitara*, the Spanish noun for alembic, does suggest a reference to Góngora's convoluted (*alambicado*) style. Admittedly, the translation conveys this reference only remotely. The hyperbole is nevertheless further elaborated by rendering the alembic as a "lively, lengthy hose," in order to create a rhyme.

In the next line, equivalence has been sought for the beard in *mal barbado*, rendered instead as "dreadfully moustached." The rhyme is imperfect, but the line contains echoes of the original's musicality.

In the second quatrain, the limitations of content and the original rhyme scheme (ABBA) turned out to be too difficult to emulate. With my final rendering, however, I try to insinuate or point to the existence of a rhyme, even though the structure is radically different from the original one. My objective then turned to produce meaningful equivalences, where the priority was to render the author's jocular imagery.

In line seven, with the combination of two nouns, *sayón* and *escriba*, as modifiers of *nariz*, Quevedo was directing a truly cruel insult as well as an accusation of being a *converso* against Góngora. The former is an obsolete term for hangman, while the latter is another pun on *sopher*, the Hebrew term for a scholar or teacher of Jewish law and tradition, who transcribed, edited, and interpreted the Bible.

Some of the hyperbolic images used by Quevedo have been discarded or regrettably lost in translation. The *espolón* (bow) and the *galera* (galley) have been replaced with "an ominous nasal missile," thus producing an assonant rhyme with "tribes" in line eleven and "archetype" in line thirteen. In line ten, while keeping the image of an Egyptian pyramid, for hyperbolic effect "rightly monstrous nipple" is added to the translation and achieves an assonant rhyme with lines twelve and fourteen.

Quevedo manipulated language with remarkable effects, transgressing grammatical rules at will, as can be seen in the case of *naricísimo*, the superlative form of the noun *nariz* (nose), a grammatical transgression with obvious, humorous overtones.

The reference to *las doce tribus* is yet another jibe at Góngora's allegedly *converso* status. Combined with the noun *narices*, it produces a simi-

larly exaggerative effect. The unusual word order somewhat tries to replicate the hyperbaton of the original.

Amongst many other scholars, Peter Newmark has argued in favour of bringing creativity into play in literary translation.³ The alliteration in the last line brings a little flavour of creativity, of humorous play with sound that makes for an apposite ending.

A un hombre de gran nariz

Érase un hombre a una nariz pegado,
 érase una nariz superlativa,
 érase una alquitara medio viva,
 érase un peje espada mal barbado;

era un reloj de sol mal encarado,
 érase un elefante boca arriba,
 érase una nariz sayón y escriba,
 un Ovidio Nasón mal narigado.

Érase el espolón de una galera,
 érase una pirámide de Egipto,
 las doce tribus de narices era;

érase un naricísimo infinito
 frisón archinariz, caratulera,
 sabañón garrafal, morado y frito.

To a Man with a Big Nose

Once there was a man to his snout attached
 Owner of the most unparalleled nose
 He was a lively, very lengthy hose;
 He was a swordfish dreadfully moustached.

His nose was a large sundial all askew
'Twas a big elephant sitting upright;
It was a killer nose, a dangling scribe:
Was Ovid Naso with a nose most rude.

He was an ominous nasal missile;
A pyramid, a colossal nipple,
Alas, of nostrils he was the twelve tribes.

Pinnacle of noses, stated simple,
Gargantuan arch-nose, nosy archetype:
A patently purple scalded pimple.

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NOTES

¹ B Raffel, *The Art of Translating Poetry* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), p. 11.

² W Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 125.

³ P Newmark, *Paragraphs on Translation* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1993), p. 40.