

Poetryclass Fresh Ideas for Learning from the Poetry Society

The Art of Translation

Making New Versions of Mexican Poetry

By Don Cellini & The Poetry Society

KS3

KS4

KS5

Topics at a glance

- Translation
- Descriptive language
- Imagery
- Sound

Overview

This resource will introduce students to the process of translation, and give them the tools to become translators themselves. Literary translator Don Cellini discusses how he has translated the poem 'Luminaria' by celebrated Mexican poet Pedro Serrano, giving an insight into the different aspects of translation. Cellini then offers a literal translation of another of Serrano's poems, allowing students to create their own more imaginative versions of the poem 'Película' or 'Film'.

By focusing on the minutiae of language, this resource also explores how poetic language works, looking particularly at image-making and sounds.



Bird's eye view of Mexico City.

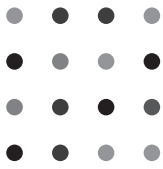
The art and craft of translation

Don Cellini reflects on the process of translation

The practice of translation seems to involve some mystery for those who are not translators. However, there is no magic potion or secret chant that changes a poem from one language into another. Mostly it involves lots of time with dictionaries, encyclopaedias, maps, and the internet. It's not magic; it's work.

As you might guess, reading a poem in one language and trying to imitate it in your native language is a difficult challenge. Since there are no two languages with a one-to-one correspondence, there may be differences of interpretation from one translator to another. In fact, if there were an exact correspondence, we would not need translators, since our computers could do it for us. Therefore translators have to constantly be making decisions: How does this word sound? Is there a better choice? Does it convey the same meaning in both languages? Is this image clear to someone reading in my culture in the 21st Century? Is the line similar in length to the original?

Don Cellini is a poet, literary translator and photographer.



Literal and creative translations

Cellini explains that there are various ways of approaching a translation:

Those people who study translations professionally have identified a range of types of translations. At one extreme is a translation which is very literal, exactly what the words say. At the opposite extreme is the translation which takes the text and creatively re-writes it so that it may not resemble the original at all. Take two famous movie titles as examples: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was re-titled in Spanish *Mr. Smith va a Washington*. Even if you don't speak Spanish, it's easy to see where this title comes from and it would be an example of a very literal translation. But *The Sound of Music* was translated as *La novicia rebelde* ('The Rebellious Novice') in Latin America and as *Sonrisas y Lágrimas* ('Laughter and Tears') in Spain. These would be examples of creative translations. Generally, translators pick one mode or style and stick with it throughout the translation.

Knowing your translation is ready

Cellini explains how to consider whether your translation is working. There are no hard and fast rules, rather several different factors working together:

In the end, the test of effectiveness is how well the new text approximates the original and how well it reads in the new language. Does it sound as if it might have been written in the second language? Does it sound stiff and "foreign"? Do the images make sense to a contemporary reader? Does it carry the same emotional impact as the original?

Perhaps the biggest compliment I ever received from a translation was when the poet told me, 'It sounds as if I wrote it in English myself.'

*"the coldness of the
bulb uncovered"*
(from 'Película')

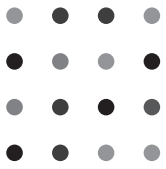


Looking closer at a translation

At the end of this resource are three versions of the same poem, 'Luminaria' by Pedro Serrano. The first version is the Spanish original. The second is a literal English translation which Cellini produces as a starting point for his work. From this he produces the third and final version, a more creative poetic version of the original poem.

Read the three versions aloud – what do your class think of the sounds, and what do they notice straight away about what Cellini has chosen to change between the literal and creative versions? Looking at each line, why do they think Cellini has made his creative choices, for example 'jingle bell' to 'a tiny bell', 'diminutive and inaudible' to 'small and soundless', 'go out' to 'fade away'? What effects in the original language (e.g. alliteration, assonance) is Cellini echoing in the English?

At the end of this resource is Cellini's own narrative of how he translated 'Luminaria'. It might be interesting to read through and see if Cellini's account chimes with some of the students' own thoughts.



The relationship between the original poem and the translation

Ask your students, do they think ‘Luminary’ is a new poem? Discuss with them how Cellini’s process of translation is similar to a poet creating completely new work. The translator has to choose the most effective poetic language and imagery to present a complex of feelings and ideas.

So how much should ‘Luminary’ be regarded as being written by Pedro Serrano, and how much as being written by Don Cellini? Assure them there is no “right” answer here – the concept of translation is a slippery, shifting thing.

Indeed, Serrano himself questions the very idea of seeing the original poem as “original” or “finished”: ‘What we call the original is already a translation, of that original behind it, which is wavering around, always unfinished.’

Serrano also quotes Paul Valéry, the French poet, essayist and philosopher: ‘A poem is never finished, only abandoned.’ Discuss with your students how they know when their own work is ready – it might be a poem, song or essay.



*A film reel
without the
film.*

Becoming a translator

Even if your students don’t speak Spanish, they will still be able to become literary translators, using Cellini’s literal version of Serrano’s poem ‘Película’ as a jumping-off point for their own creative versions.

Getting to know the poem

Give your students the original and literal versions of ‘Película’, which means ‘film’. Read the literal translation together. Ask your class what they think about the tone and atmosphere of the poem – what words would they use to describe it and why? Menacing, violent, sinister, cold, distant, robotic, helpless, depressing, ambiguous, shocking?

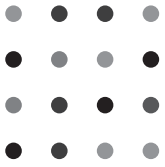
What do they think is happening in the poem? Do we start in a cinema? What do they think is meant by ‘Extended’ in line 7? Are we still looking at and talking about film, or is Serrano exploring a different situation? What are the ‘sheets and judgments’ that are being burnt? Discuss the issue of censorship with your students, and how many historical and contemporary governments have tried to control film-makers, artists, writers, journalists and others so they couldn’t promote a different point of view. Do your students think this theme may lurk behind the poem?

Translating the poem

Now that the students have an overview of the poem, they are ready to start creating their own translations. It’s their turn to choose which elements of the literal translation are working, and which parts could be presented in a more impactful, musical way.

You might like to work through the first two or three lines with them, modelling the questions they should ask themselves as they translate.

- What do they think Serrano means by ‘the decisive screen’?
- Is ‘crazy’ the best way to describe the stain? Note that later the poem says ‘hallucinating stain’ – will they try and link these two images as Serrano does?
- In the Spanish, ‘extendió’ has a long ‘o’ at the end



that mimics the movement. ‘Extended’ in the English doesn’t have this effect – is there a more interesting way they could present this movement? Remember how Cellini changed the ending of ‘Luminaria’ – they can choose to capture the sense without using the exact words.

- ‘Twisted’ is not a hugely impactful word – you can dance the twist or twist your hair. Is there a better word to describe the plastic totally bent out of shape?
- Remind them to keep looking at the Spanish – is there alliteration or assonance that they can try to echo in English?

Redrafting

Once they have gone through line by line creating their new translations, each student will have the first draft of their poem. Ask them to read it through and listen to how it sounds. Are there any words or phrases which are tripping them up? Do any parts seem less fresh and impactful than others? Does anything sound stiff? Consider Cellini’s comments:

In the end, the test of effectiveness is how well the new text approximates the original and how well it reads in the new language. Does it sound as if it might have been written in the second language? Does it sound stiff and “foreign”? Do the images make sense to a contemporary reader? Does it carry the same emotional impact as the original?

Ask them to think back to the class discussion about the mood and content of the literal translation. Does their new poem capture this?

Students will need to think about a title too. They might want to keep the one-word literal translation ‘Film’, or they might want something more creative, like ‘The Rebellious Novice’ instead of ‘The Sound of Music’.

Sharing the translations

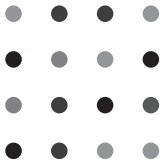
As a class or in small groups, get your students to share their new pieces, which are both translations and poems in their own right. How does each translation differ? How has each student dealt with some of the more open and ambiguous lines?

Further reading

The Poetry Translation Centre (<http://www.poetrytranslation.org/>) is a fantastic online resource for contemporary poems from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Each entry includes a biography of the poet, the poem in the original language, a literal translation and a final translation.

If your students enjoy translating, encourage them to enter the Stephen Spender Prize for poetry in translation (http://www.stephen-spender.org/spender_prize.html). There is a separate, free-to-enter category for those aged 18 and under.

This resource was created to accompany the Poetry Society’s 2015 translation prize, in collaboration with the British Council, exploring Mexican poetry to mark Mexico-United Kingdom 2015. The prize was hosted on the Poetry Society’s Young Poets Network: www.youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk



Luminaria / Luminary

by Pedro Serrano. Translations by Don Cellini

Spanish original

Luminaria

Como una luciérnaga en medio de un campo
hecho solo de ruidos,
con el brillo, latente, luz adentro,
cascabel, diminuto e inaudito.
Me apago hacia mí mismo para que tú te pierdas,
me apago.

Literal translation

Luminary

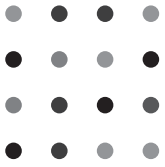
Like a firefly in the middle of a field
made only of noises,
with the bright, latent light inside,
jingle bell, diminutive and inaudible.
I go out so that you may get lost,
I go out.

Final translation

Luminary

Like a firefly in the middle of a field
filled with noise,
its shining, latent light within,
a tiny bell, small and soundless.
I fade away so that you may lose yourself.
I fold myself into my wings.

'Luminaria' is from Nueces by Pedro Serrano (Trilce Ediciones, 2009). An earlier version of Don Cellini's translation appeared in the Ofi Press magazine Number 32.



Película / Film

by Pedro Serrano. Translations by Don Cellini

Spanish original

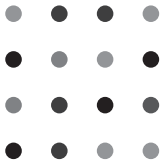
Película

En la pantalla álgida se quemaron el rollo y la película,
se extendió en el lino la mancha loca,
el olor chamuscado e insultante de plástico torcido,
papel abierto al caldo de los ácidos,
la frialdad del foco develado,
a la impotencia inútil de los ojos.
Extendida, la alucinada mancha va quemando sábanas y juicios.
'Los venadearon', dicen.
La cinta desprendida sigue dando vueltas y vueltas,
clic, clac,
automáticamente indiferente,
clic,
clac.

Literal translation

Film

On the decisive screen, the reel and the film burned,
the crazy stain extended itself on the linen,
the scorched and insulting odour of twisted plastic,
paper open to the juice of the acids,
the coldness of the bulb uncovered,
to the useless impotence of the eyes.
Extended, the hallucinating stain goes on burning sheets and judgments.
'They executed it,' they say.
The detached belt keeps turning and turning,
click, clack,
automatically indifferent,
click,
clack.



Appendix Inside the translator's mind

Don Cellini offers a narrative of his thoughts as he goes through the process of translating 'Luminaria' by Pedro Serrano, giving us an insight into the different aspects of translation. It can act as a useful model for students' own line by line translations.

Pedro Serrano's poem 'Luminaria' is a little gem of a poem and I want to recreate it in English with as much sparkle as the original. The title translates directly as 'Luminary'. I want to keep this close association with the original, so it stays 'Luminary' (which means something that gives out a natural light). If you imagine many flickering luminaries at night then there is an easy transition to the image in the following line.

The first line of the poem translates as 'Like a firefly in the middle of a field'. This is a simile that is clear in English. It would be difficult to improve the line.

Con el brillo, latente, luz adentro. Literally 'with the bright, latent light inside'. I notice the repetition of the t sound at the end of bright, latent, light. I think that there are too many repetitions for the line. There are few synonyms for 'light', so I consider 'bright' and 'latent'. My dictionary offers only one definition for *latente* and that is 'latent'. My only option is to find a synonym for *brillo*: shine, sparkle, brightness, brilliance. I decide on 'Its shining latent light', which also maintains the alliteration of *latente* and *luz* in the original. The softer sounds of 'within' appealed to me more than 'inside'.

When I see the word *cascabel* I think of a popular Christmas song named 'Cascabel' or 'Jingle Bells'. But that would take our poem about fireflies in a different direction. Fortunately, *cascabel* also means a small or tiny bell.

Diminuto and *inaudito* are easy cognates (obvious relatives) of our English 'diminutive' and 'inaudible'. Part of the effectiveness of the Spanish is the repeated ending sounds *-uto* and *-ito*, but we have no such luck in English. Further, the words sound a bit clinical to my ears. If I want to use 'tiny' to describe the bell, I can't use it again for 'diminutive'. 'Small and silent' have a nice alliteration that makes up for the missing ending sounds in Spanish. But I still hear Christmas songs with 'silent' and finally decided on 'soundless' which maintains the alliteration and is a bit unexpected.

Me apago hacia mí mismo para que tú te pierdas, me apago poses several challenges for the translator. *Me apago* appears twice. *Apagarse*, the infinitive of *me apago*, generally means 'to go out' as a candle might go out. It's further complicated by the phrase *hacia mí mismo*, 'toward myself'. And continues 'so that you get lost' and repeats 'I go out'. My best attempt at the line results in 'I extinguish myself so that you may lose yourself. I fade away.' I use 'extinguish' and 'fade away', verbs more appropriate to what fireflies might do.

Perdarse, the infinitive of *te pierdas*, 'to get lost', has many negative connotations but to get lost in a good book or in a work of art or music is a positive thing. To 'lose yourself' in the summer night sky seems like a better option than 'get lost'. However, the underlying meaning here suggests a physical turning inward on oneself and a movement toward disappearance. None of that is suggested in my version. To convey this meaning, I am forced to stray from the literal sentence and find a more poetic solution. After attempts over several days, I settle on 'I fade away so that you may lose yourself. I fold myself into my wings.' I think this keeps us thinking about fireflies, but also suggests the introspection and disappearance that was suggested in the original.