

## **CORRECTING THE MASTER: ERIN MOURÉ, ALBERTO CAEIRO, AND THE POLITICS OF “TRANSELATION”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the “transelation” of Alberto Caeiro’s *O guardador de rebanhos* by Erin Mouré (Eirin Moure). Since Mouré takes considerable liberties with the poems by the Fernando Pessoa heteronym, she problematizes the extent to which a text can be an independent creation and still be a translation.

**KEY WORDS:** translation, transelation, transculturation, Fernando Pessoa, heteronym.

### **RESUMO**

Este artigo analisa a “transelação” de Erin Mouré (Eirin Moure) *d’O guardador de rebanhos* de Alberto Caeiro. Considerando que Mouré tira imensas liberdades com os poemas do heterônimo de Fernando Pessoa, ela problematiza até que ponto um texto pode ser uma criação autônoma e ainda ser uma tradução.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** tradução, transelação, transculturação, Fernando Pessoa, heterônimo.

Translation has changed radically in the last fifty years, to the point that it has become widely accepted that “anything to do with human communication can be related to translation” (WEISSBORT, 2006, p. 614). Nevertheless, two distinct ideas remain central to the discourse on translation. The first is that, despite our awareness that the full transposition of a text from one language and culture to another is impossible, translations continue to be done. After all, our intellectual universe would be much reduced without an infusion of texts initially produced in other languages. The second idea is that translation requires some kind of fidelity to the prior text. This persistent focus on fidelity is paradoxical, since translation is so often equated with treason. For many scholars and writers, to translate a text is necessarily to betray it, and the translator is still largely perceived not just as “an unfortunate bungler,” but as “a treacherous knave” (RABASSA, 2005, p. 3). Yet, while there is no general agreement on what constitutes fidelity, it seems evident that translation requires it. In fact, when the prior text is disregarded as it is being rendered into another language, no translation can occur, something that is illustrated by Erin Mouré’s “transelation” of Alberto Caeiro’s *O guardador de rebanhos*.

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Written under the name Eirin Mouré, Mouré's *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person: A Transelation of Alberto Caeiro/ Fernando Pessoa's O Guardador de Rebanhos* is an unusual text, particularly given its producer. Mouré, who was born in Calgary but has long resided in Montreal, is one of Canada's most prominent poets. She is the author of over a dozen collections of poems, starting with *Empire, York Street*, first published in 1979. More germane in terms of this article, Mouré is an avowed champion of translation. She has confessed that she is "attracted to the impossibility of translating poetry," even though she is fully aware that languages are never "equivalent" (qtd. in ADAMS, 2008). Thus, in addition to helping render into English the poetry of the Québécoise author Nicole Brossard (BROSSARD, 2000, 2003, 2007), she has translated poems by such diverse foreign writers as Andrés Ajens (Chile), Chus Pato (Galicia-Spain), and of course Caeiro. Furthermore, Mouré argues that translation is an intrinsic part of her "poetic practice" and that "a national literature needs to welcome works into it from afar," something that supposedly "Canadian literature does to little of" (McCANCE, 2003, p. 7). Canadian "political structures," she elaborates, "fund only translations from French into English and vice versa, or translation of Canadian works into other national literatures. As a result, literary presses here so seldom publish Canadian translations of other works" (McCANCE, 2003, p. 10). To counter their culture's tendency to look inward, Mouré counsels other Canadian poets to translate "other poetries into your own literature. Cross borders. Listen. Pay attention to other languages, other modes of being in the world" (da COSTA, 2003). As she concludes, Canadian poets must "engage in more dialogues and polylogues with others, with other poetries and languages [. . .]. We need to let ourselves be entered and affected and disturbed by other histories of language" (da COSTA, 2003). In short, in order to reach their potential as artists and thinkers, Canadian poets must begin dialogues with poets from other countries by translating their work.

Presumably, such an intercultural dialogue is what Mouré is attempting to initiate in *Sheep's Vigil*, her "transelation" of the poetry of Fernando Pessoa's pastoral heteronym Alberto Caeiro. In a prefatory note to the book, she writes that she produced the text while living temporarily in Toronto in the spring of 2000. Mouré, who speaks Galician, had recently bought a bilingual Portuguese-English edition of *O guardador de rebanhos* and, when she "looked at the verso side," she suddenly "realized: *I can read Portuguese*" (2001, p. viii). She seems to have been possessed by Caeiro and, in "just over a week," she "translated some 30 of the 49 poems, in a sort of ecstasy. It was a form of prayer I lit each day, a vigil candle" (2001, p. viii). Her strategy was to respond to the symbolically named Pessoa "as a person." As she outlines her approach, "I just read the Pessoa poem line, then wrote my line, or read a few lines, then wrote more. It was abrupt, direct, total" (2001, p. viii). Despite her significant departures from the Portuguese texts, she insists that her work remains a translation, which is the reason that she has Caeiro's poems facing her English versions. In her words, "I see this book as a translation, as faithful, even if different. That's why it appears in a bilingual edition with the

Portuguese originals—my deflections of Pessoa’s texts are thus *visible*, even if you do not read Portuguese. I want this book to be judged not just as my poetry but as translations of Pessoa. Trans-*e*-lations. Trans-*e*irin-elations. Transcreations” (2001, ix). That is, *Sheep’s Vigil* is a translation with a difference, a translation in which the translator feels free to use the prior text as a springboard to a poetic creation of her own.

There are noticeable parallels between Mouré and Pessoa, not the least that the two poets are polyglots who earn their living as commercial translators (MOURÉ, 2004; DUARTE, 2006, p. 391). Nevertheless, Mouré’s “transelation” of Pessoa’s heteronym is not without challenges. The first of these involves the fact that Mouré is not merely conveying Caeiro’s poems from Portuguese into English but also transporting them from the Portuguese countryside to urban Toronto, a Toronto centred on Winnett Avenue, the downtown artery where she spent a year. Two other potential complications are more directly related to the status of *Sheep’s Vigil*, of whether it really constitutes a translation. To begin with, one cannot help but notice that the translator’s name is given much more prominence on the book’s cover and title page than the author’s; this is highly uncommon for a translation, such as the one that inspired Mouré’s project, which privileges the poet over his translators (CAEIRO/PESSOA, 1985). Perhaps even more critical, it is not obvious that Mouré’s “deflections” of Caeiro’s poems are always apparent to non-Portuguese speakers, which would call into question their ability to discern when she ceases to translate Caeiro and simply transelates him. Indeed, as Carmine Starnino has perceptively noted, one question that arises as one reads *Sheep’s Vigil* is “whose book is it?” (2008). More specifically, is it a translation?

There is no question that Mouré is capable of translating from the Portuguese. In fact, she can do it with considerable dexterity, as we can see in her rendition of Caeiro’s Poem XXVII:

Só a natureza é divina, e ela não é divina . . .

Se falo dela como de um ente  
É que para falar dela preciso usar da linguagem dos homens  
Que dá personalidade às coisas,  
E impõe nome às coisas.  
Mas as coisas não têm nome nem personalidade:  
Existem, e o céu é grande e a terra larga,  
E o nosso coração do tamanho de um punho fechado . . .

Bendito seja eu por tudo quanto não sei.  
Gozo tudo isso como quem sabe que há o Sol. (MOURÉ 2001, p. 72).

Only Nature is divine, and she’s not divine . . .

That I talk of her as of a being  
Just means I’m stuck with human language  
Which gives *coisas* personalities,  
and imposes names on *choses*.

But *chose* or *coisa* have no name or personality  
and no passport,  
They exist, and the sky is vast and earth rolls out forever,  
and our heart is fist-size . . .

You can bet I'm lucky for all I don't know  
I fall into happiness like one who knows there is a sun! (MOURÉ, 2001, p. 73).

Mouré's opening lines in particular are not only very close to Caeiro's but actually capture his voice. When she wishes to, Mouré clearly can transport Portuguese poetry into another language. Yet even here there are troubling signs. For instance, she exoticizes a plain word like "*coisas*," or things, into something both alien and precious, "*chose* or *coisa*," as if determined to ensure that the reader realizes she is conversant with poststructuralist theory, *en français*. However, this is a curious strategy with which to render into English the work of a poet that, as the translator Chris Daniels notes, "wrote very clearly and simply about things that have bewildered people for as long as people have been capable of bewilderment, things that tend to be hard to put into words" (2005). As well, Mouré adds the line "and no passport," which contributes nothing to the poem. Finally, by translating "*bendito*," or blessed, as "lucky," she reveals her aversion to Caeiro's religious language, even though she knows Caeiro is a pagan.

Mouré's apparent discomfort with religion is manifest throughout *Sheep's Vigil*, and likely explains many of the transformations Mouré effects to Caeiro's poems. Thus in his Poem IV, Caeiro writes: "Sentia-me alguém que possa acreditar em Santa Bárbara . . . / Ah, poder crer em Santa Bárbara!" (MOURÉ, 2001, p. 10). Mouré, though, renders the two lines as: "There are some things that refuse translation./ Invocation of Sweet Betty Malone" (2001, p. 11). She does not specify what things refuse translation but, judging by the Portuguese text in question, their refusal does not seem to have much to do with linguistic matters. This suspicion is reinforced a couple of stanzas later when Mouré translates "Santa Bárbara" as "Sweet Barbie Salpetre" (MOURÉ, 2001, pp. 12, 13). Although it could be argued that her version is more playful than Caeiro's, it is not strikingly witty. In any case, it does not echo the Portuguese text.

The dissonance between Mouré and the work she is purportedly translating becomes especially conspicuous in her version of Caeiro's Poem VIII, one of his most celebrated but caustic works, in which Jesus Christ returns to earth as a child. As she is wont, she is close to the prior text at the beginning. For instance, Caeiro opens his poem with the statement that, in the middle of a spring day, "Tive um sonho como uma fotografia./ Vi Jesus descer à terra" (MOURÉ, 2001, p. 24.). Mouré, in turn, responds: "I had a dream like a movie, like *Ben Hur* played backwards./ I saw Jesus descend to Earth" (2001, p. 25.). The only significant change she makes, for no discernible reason, is to replace a photograph with the film "*Ben Hur* played backwards." In the next stanza, she also translates the "segunda pessoa da Trindade" as the "second gargoyle of the Trinity" (MOURÉ,

2001, pp. 24, 25). But half way through the poem, Mouré really parts company with Caeiro. The Portuguese poet says of Jesus:

Ele mora comigo na minha casa a meio do outeiro.  
 Ele é a Eterna Criança, o deus que faltava.  
 Ele é o humano que é natural,  
 Ele é o divino que sorri e que brinca.  
 E por isso é que eu sei com toda a certeza  
 Que ele é o Menino Jesus verdadeiro. (MOURÉ 2001, p. 28)

Mouré, in contrast, writes:

He’s always out in the dip of Winnett Avenue.  
 He’s the Eternal Child, a god on the lam.  
 He’s human and natural.  
 He’s the divine grin, all playfulness, racing on the sidewalk.  
 If you ask me, he’s the real Kid Carter. (2001, p. 29)

Considering that Caeiro is writing in a very conservative Catholic country, on the eve of the First World War no less, it is hard not to notice his overt critique of Christianity; at one point, he has the returned Jesus charge that God is “um velho es[t]úpido e doente” and that “Tudo no céu é estúpido como a Igreja Católica” (MOURÉ, 2001, p. 28). However, what is also difficult to ignore is Mouré’s subversion of that critique, through her postmodern playfulness, which seems to suggest that no intelligent person can any longer believe in master narratives, or deities, except for the one that rejects all master narratives. But then while Caeiro is relating the “história do meu Menino Jesus,” Mouré tells “my story of the child” (MOURÉ, 2001, pp. 35, 36), presumably any child, not the Chosen One of the Western tradition. In short, poet and translator exhibit rather different priorities.

Mouré’s sweeping departures from the text she is translating are particularly surprising in light of the Canadian poet’s proclaimed admiration for Caeiro. In both her prefatory note to *Sheep’s Vigil* and the original poem with which she closes the volume, Mouré refers to Caeiro as “my master” and “*meu mestre*” (2001, pp. viii, 123), a gesture that echoes the sentiment by Pessoa’s classical heteronym Ricardo Reis, who reverentially called the author of *O guardador de rebanhos* “meu Mestre” (PESSOA, 1966, p. 331). Yet, judging by her proclivity to veer away from Caeiro’s poems in her translations, one suspects that the pupil’s relationship to the master is not unproblematic. On the contrary, Mouré’s treatment of Caeiro points to a serious case of “the anxiety of influence.” According to Harold Bloom, since living poets cannot avoid the influence of their major precursors, they attempt to counter that power by performing a “poetic misreading or misprision” of their work (1973, p. 14). As Bloom explains, at some stage in the creative process, contemporary poets “swerve away” from their forerunners by executing “a *clinamen*” in relation to their poetry. This deviation “appears as a corrective movement” in the new poem, “which implies that the

precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves” (1973, p. 14). This seems to be precisely what Mouré does in relation to Caeiro. She suggests that his poems are right up to a certain point, when she intervenes and “corrects” them. The problem with amending the work of earlier poets, though, is that it seems highly suspect in translation. After all, among the aims of a translation are supposedly to disseminate to audiences in other cultures the work of someone one admires. Thus, if one changes the prior text in fundamental ways, there is no translation.

Interestingly, one way in which Mouré “corrects” Caeiro, or at least modifies his work, is by personalizing her translations of his poems. More precisely, she interjects herself into what are ostensibly someone else’s creations. One striking example of Mouré’s tendency to enter the text appears early in the book. In Poem III, Caeiro writes that, at the end of the day, he likes to lean out his window and read “até me arderem os olhos/ O livro de Cesário Verde.” In the English version, the speaker still likes to read. However, it is no longer the Portuguese classic, but “that Book by Erin Mouré” (MOURÉ, 2001, pp. 8, 9). This act of personalization by Mouré seems especially dubious, given that Caeiro had asked to have his book dedicated to the “memória de Cesário Verde” (PESSOA 1996, pp. 332), who is the only modern poet to whom Caeiro refers “pelo nome nos seus versos” (ZENITH, 2004, p. 250). Thus, by swerving away from the prior text, Mouré erases a major cultural point of reference for Caeiro, in the figure of the trailblazing late nineteenth century poet who may have been his most important influence. Moreover, later Mouré (or Moure) does not merely displace a beloved poet but nature itself. In Poem XXVII, Caeiro observes that:

Por mim, escrevo a prosa dos meus versos  
E fico contente,  
Porque sei que compreendo a Natureza por fora;  
E não compreendo por dentro  
Porque a Natureza não tem dentro;  
Senão não era Natureza. (MOURÉ 2001, p. 74)

Mouré, though, writes:

As for me, I pen the prose of my poetry  
And I’m content  
Because I can understand Nature well enough from out here;  
I can’t get inside it  
Because inside/ outside is not Nature’s predicament:  
it’s Eirin Moure’s. (2001, p. 75)

That is, ultimately, Caeiro’s poem is not about the Portuguese poet’s view of nature but about his Canadian translator. Needless to say, such an approach begs the question of how translation ever leads to intercultural exchange. As Mouré writes in another of her collections, “Without locality there is no sensibility” (2002,

p. 7). Yet it is evident that, at least in parts of *Sheep's Vigil*, the prior text and the translation do not share the same locality.

As I have attempted to show in this article, self-consciously “creative” translations like *Sheep's Vigil* raise a series of issues about the nature of translation, notably when the ostensible rendering of a text into another language ceases (or fails) to be a translation. In one of his meditations on translation, Umberto Eco asks: “When is a translation no longer a translation but something else?” (2001, p. 61). Perhaps this is a question that should also be posed of *Sheep's Vigil*. Most commentators on the book acknowledge that Mouré’s translation of Caeiro’s poetry is “irreverent,” if not altogether “perverse” (SIMON, 2006, pp. 151, 119). Mouré herself has described it as “preposterous, excessive,” and “exorbitant” (2004). Yet these same critics contend that, despite all her deviations from the prior text, Mouré still “captures” Caeiro’s “spirit” and “voice” (HYLAND, 2003, p. 119; SIMON, 2006, p. 153). However, the claim that she comes to share “the same voice” as Caeiro (SIMON, 2006, p. 153) is extremely doubtful. Particularly when it comes to nature and religion, two of Caeiro’s favourite topics, Mouré can differ so much from the Portuguese poet that her version becomes almost unrecognizable. In those situations, she definitely does not evoke him.

Mouré has argued that *Sheep's Vigil* “is a translation, for it has the structure of the prior text, and could not have been created without it” (2004). Yet, again, this seems to be more a case of intertextuality than a translation proper. It is of course debatable that, as Chris Daniels posits, “Translation fights cultural narcissism” (2005). Still, if translation involves a textual exchange between two different cultures, then it requires some form of transculturation. Thus “the moment a translator becomes an author proper, in the sense of producing a domestic creation, no translation” occurs (BRAZ, 2007, p. 190). Mouré herself appears to be aware of this conundrum. She has stated that she envisaged *Sheep's Vigil* as “a way of bringing Pessoa into the Canadian arena” (2004). Yet it is hard to imagine how Pessoa/Caeiro can enter Canadian literature if his translator, at times, completely ignores his text. The reaction to the translation by Mouré’s girlfriend, Liz Kirby, is certainly telling: “That’s not Pessoa, that’s you” (MOURÉ, 2004, p. 3; MOURÉ, 2001, p. ix). In fact, the conclusion one must reach is that significant portions of *Sheep's Vigil* are not translations at all. At most, they are poetic responses to Caeiro’s poems by Mouré/ Moure. As Carmine Starnino has noted, “in terms of faithfulness,” the translator’s “independent touches” and the prior text “both can’t occupy the same space.” Consequently, in some parts, *Sheep's Vigil* “feels like a pretext for Mouré’s creative caprice” (2008), not an English version of *O guardador dos rebanhos*.

Most critically, Mouré experiments in transelation seem particularly unsuitable for a poet like Fernando Pessoa, the creator of Caeiro. The translation scholar Sherry Simon, who has written an extensive analysis of *Sheep's Vigil*, asserts that the fact Pessoa was “a writer of transformations” combined with his creation of the heteronyms “authorize Mouré to use Pessoa as a device of her own self-transformation” (2006, p. 152). However, this is a problematic reading of the

Portuguese poet. It is true that Pessoa describes himself as being “múltiplo.” At the same time, he also states that: “Não sei quem sou, que alma tenho” (1966, p. 93). Indeed, it is presumably because he feels he is “vários seres” that he is compelled to “aumentar o mundo com personalidades fictícias” (1966, pp. 94, 101), notably his main heteronyms: Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro de Campos, and Ricardo Reis. Yet these invented poets are not clones of their creator. Rather, explains Pessoa, they are all “personagens distintas entre si e de mim” (1966, p. 108), a uniqueness that is reflected in their individual styles, and thought. Or, as he writes in a famous passage in *Livro do desassossego*, “Para criar, destruí-me; tanto me exteriorizei dentro me mim, que dentro de mim não existo senão exteriormente. Sou a cena nua onde passam vários actores representando várias peças” (2005, p. 284). In short, whatever they may be, the heteronyms are not merely mouthpieces for Pessoa; they are at least as real, and autonomous, as he is.

The degree to which Pessoa respects (or, perhaps, cultivates) the individuality of his heteronyms is cogently illustrated in his discussion of Caeiro’s Poem VIII, a piece analyzed earlier in this article. As Pessoa notes, like his counterparts, Caeiro does not always echo his “autor humano” (PESSOA, 1966, p. 96). Quite the contrary, he can express view that Pessoa finds anathema:

escrevi com sobressalto e repugnância o poema oitavo do “Guardador de Rebanhos”, com a sua blasfêmia infantil e o seu antiespiritualismo absoluto. Na mina pessoa própria, e aparentemente real, com que vivo social e objectivamente, nem uso da blasfêmia, nem sou antiespiritualista. Alberto Caeiro, porém, como eu o concebi, é assim: assim tem pois ele que escrever, quer eu queira quer não, quer eu pense como ele ou não. (1966, p. 108)

That is, Mouré’s strategy of personalizing Caeiro’s poems is not merely different from but antithetical to that of Pessoa, who is so determined to efface himself in his poetry that he creates not so much poems as poets, but poets with their own styles and philosophies. To paraphrase Camões, Pessoa gives numerous poets to the world. Mouré, in contrast, reduces the number of poets in the world, by transforming Alberto Caeiro into a copy of herself.

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