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Gilberto Owen: Between Translation and Creation

Juan Carlos Calvillo[*]

ABSTRACT

Throughout history, literary translators have sought to make texts accessible to readers who would otherwise be prevented from understanding them because of language barriers. However, there are cases in which the process of translation is undertaken by writers whose purpose in rendering certain texts into their native language is to incorporate the themes, techniques, and interests of the source into their own creative processes. Such, I venture, is the case of Mexican avant-garde poet Gilberto Owen, whose translations can be seen as a core component of his work, both in terms of output, but also, and more importantly, of aesthetic exploration. This paper examines the themes of journey and homecoming, as well as the quest for identity and the encounter with the other, that are found in Owen's translations, as well as the way they eventually impacted the creation of his signature poem "Sindbad Stranded."

KEYWORDS: the poet as translator, translator's subjectivity, translation as creation, Gilberto Owen, Mexican poetry, Contemporáneos

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Juan Carlos Calvillo, Associate Professor, Center for Literature and Linguistics, The College of Mexico, Mexico (jcalvillo@colmex.mx).

> No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.
> ——T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

Documenting creative processes is not easy, not only because evidence is lost with time, but also due to the invisible nature of many of their components, their causes and consequences, their developments and interconnections. Literary translation—a form of creation in its own right—is a core element of many authors' creative processes and can often be understood as an extension of or complement to their personal influences, interests, and aesthetic explorations.[1] This article proposes the practice of literary translation as an essential component of the poetic works of the Mexican writer Gilberto Owen (1904-52), insofar as it furthered his exploration of recurring topics found in his poetry, such as the theme of journey and return, as well as the quest for identity and encounters with alterity. These interests are reflected in the works he chose to translate, as well as in the motifs and the style of his most iconic poem, "Sindbad el Varado" ("Sindbad Stranded"), a key section of his signature book of poems, *Perseo vencido* (*Defeated Perseus*).[2]

For an author such as Owen, translation is yet another component of the topography of texts, influences, aspirations, and curiosities that form the comprehensive *corpus* of his creative work. His translations are eclectic, though: there is no clear project, focus, or set of translation criteria, either implicit or explicit. Much like every other member of the *Contemporáneos* (Contemporaneous) generation, Owen turned to foreign literature (in English, French, and occasionally Italian) primarily as a way to access new, contemporary, and varied ideas within a cultural context they deemed oppressive. Their privileged education allowed them to read recently published literature in its original language, without having to wait for a translation into Spanish.

The fact that all members of this group of writers were also translators—although some members were more systematic and assiduous than others—is in itself a declaration of principles and a distinctive feature of the so-called

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[1] Consider, e.g., this assertion by Jiří Levý: "A translation as a work of art is artistic reproduction, translation as a process is original creation and translation as an art form is a borderline case at the interface between reproductive art and original creative art" (57-58). See also Ballard and O'Sullivan.

[2] All translations into English are mine. Titles are included in Spanish the first time they appear; subsequently, only the English titles are used for convenience.

"*grupo sin grupo*" (groupless group). Contemporáneos is recognized as the first intellectual and artistic gathering of writers interested in creating a modern Mexican literary tradition that purposefully avoided the nationalist discourse that had emerged following the Mexican revolution and strongly influenced the art and literature at the beginning of the twentieth century. This patriotic narrative was commonly seen in novels published during this era, but is perhaps best known to the world beyond Mexico thanks to the murals of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. One of the main concerns of the Contemporáneos was creating a "contemporary" Mexico, one that was able to interact and engage with artists that were developing new aesthetics in other countries, mainly—but not exclusively—in Europe, and that allowed them to participate in what they perceived as an international *Zeitgeist*. Thus, translation became a fundamental component of this endeavor, this "countercultural nationalism," so to speak. Translations into Spanish of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, translated by Enrique Munguía and published in *Contemporáneos*, no. 26-27, July to August 1930, under the title *El páramo*, and Saint-John Perse's *Anabase*, translated by Octavio G. Barreda and published in *Contemporáneos*, no. 32, January 1931, under the title *Anábasis*—not to mention the prolific translation of French and American writers by Xavier Villaurrutia and Salvador Novo—are clear examples of the group's interest in establishing a personal legacy, as well as making this innovative literature available in their native language. These are precisely the kinds of authors/translators who, according to Peter Flynn, produce a body of work thanks to which "various literary forms and movements and poetics [move] across languages and cultures" (16). The conflict between the Contemporáneos and the dominant nationalist narrative is too long and convoluted to cover here, but suffice it to say that many writers and intellectuals have oversimplified this group's commitment to cosmopolitanism, incorrectly reducing it to conservatism and elitism.[3]

Unfortunately, few of Owen's translations have survived, and some of the ones he claimed to have done were probably left unfinished. For Owen, translation seems to have been a way of earning a living (for example, translating cables for Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo*, an activity that he went so far as to complain about in the same publication); a byproduct of his feverish

[3] See Sheridan, "México"; and Sheridan, *México*.

creative energy that was often left unfinished and unpublished; [4] and occasionally, a true expression of a personal and aesthetic exploration, which developed alongside his creative writing and is available to us today. It is only to the last two cases that this essay is devoted, since it is this translator work that forms "an often hidden and formative part of individual writers' careers" and is understood as a mode of "appropriation or identity play" (Flynn 17) in which the boundaries between translatorship and authorship become indistinct.

I believe that the context in which these translations were created and the cultural implications of this enterprise cannot be overstated. As Antonio Cajero Vázquez writes: "Owenian mediation acquires an irrefutable relevance, as it lies at the core of the ideological and literary disputes of the 1920s, as well as subsequent decades, which shaped the evolution of modern Mexican literature" ("Traducción" 45-46). Nevertheless, careful as Cajero is in using the term "mediation," the precise nature of Owen's involvement does not fail to raise questions—that is, whether his labor should be called "translation" or, somewhat more loosely, "adaptation," in view of the varying degrees of closeness to the source language text and, above all, of his willingness to seize all material at hand in order to produce works of art in their own right. Owen himself labeled some of his paraphrases (in Dryden's sense of the word) "translations," others "versions," and others still "rough versions," let alone those he did not mind calling his own.[5] No doubt he would have agreed with Leena Laiho: "All texts being tissues of quotations, the quality of 'being truly an original' disappears; 'literary echoes' are present in every work" (127).

A succinct review of Owen's translations serves to show the heterogeneous nature of his *oeuvre*. Created by the youngest members of the Contemporáneos—Xavier Villaurrutia, Salvador Novo, Jorge Cuesta, and Gilberto Owen—the literary review *Ulises* (*Ulysses*) served not only to showcase samples of their recent writing, but also to shape a new poetics that was collective, experimental, and above all, playful. At one point, Owen

[4] This is the case, for instance, with Owen's translation of Arthur Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and *A Season in Hell* (*Une Saison en Enfer*) included by Esperanza Velázquez Bringas and Rafael Heliodoro Valle in page 216 of *Índice de escritores* (*Index of Writers*), Herrero Hermanos Sucesores, 1928.

[5] John Dryden's early, but decidedly significant, triadic distinction, formulated in his preface to Ovid's *Epistles* (1680), is well known in the field. There he understands "paraphrase" as "translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense," and is proposed as the golden mean, or *aurea mediocritas*, between the extremes of "metaphrase" (a literal rendition, "word by word and line by line") and "imitation" (where the translator feels free to abandon the source text as he sees fit; qtd. in Munday 26).

contributed a loosely translated fragment by Isidore Ducasse, best known by his *nom de plume* Comte de Lautréamont, which was published in "El curioso impertinente" ("The Impertinent Curious Man"), the review's experimental section that was often written anonymously and collectively by the four men. Here, Ducasse's "acute" lines, "arbitrary" and confessedly "extracted" from the original text, are less important than the reasons why Owen considered translating Lautréamont to be relevant: all four men owed a debt to the author, who, in Owen's words, "prevails as a decisive influence in contemporary poetry and prose" ("curioso impertinente" 27). Moreover, by calling them "ours," albeit questioningly, Owen was, discreetly but decisively, asking for the right to claim authorship over the translated text.

However, for the Teatro de Ulises (Ulysses' Theatre)—the side project that emerged from and eventually replaced the review—Owen translated two plays for the stage, joining friends such as Xavier Villaurrutia, Salvador Novo, Antonieta Rivas Mercado, and Clementina Otero, as an actor in a sort of *avant la lettre* happening. Both plays were originally written in French: *Simili* by Claude Roger-Marx, a comedy in three acts originally published in 1930, and *El peregrino* (*The Pilgrim*) by Charles Vildrac, a play in one act published in its original language in 1923.

In *Contemporáneos*, the eponymous review that followed the fleeting fire of *Ulises*, Owen contributed a translation of selected prose by Paul Valéry (issue 4, September 1928), which he rendered carefully, while still developing a voice all his own (Calvillo, "Gilberto Owen"); particularly, "La madre joven" ("The Young Mother") is a translation of Valéry's "La jeune Mère" (1922), but is also an experiment in style that offers the first glimpse of a later Owen, the author of *Línea* (*Line*; 1930). Later, while self-exiled in the United States, he translated poems by Emily Dickinson that were published in *El Tiempo*, the Bogotá-based newspaper where he worked; about these self-proclaimed "rough versions" more will be said further on. Back in Mexico, he translated "at full speed" (Quirarte qtd. in Cajero, "Traducción" 33) "a work of literary merit and important social content" (Rojas qtd. in Cajero, "Traducción" 34), the novel *China en armas* (*Battle Hymn of China*; 1944) by Agnes Smedley. Around this time, he also translated Roger Caillois' "Actualidad de las sectas" ("The Spirit of Sects"; 1944) and a fragment of "The Music from Behind the Moon," the first novella of *The Witch-Woman: A Trilogy About Her* (1948), by James

Branch Cabell. This latter project was Owen's last translation project and was left incomplete when he died in Philadelphia in 1952.[6]

I. The Return of the Prodigal Son and the Translation of *The Pilgrim*

The theme that stands out the most among Gilberto Owen's interests, including in many of his translation projects and the few issues of *Ulises* that were published, is that of the journey, positioned in poetic terms as a voyage of self-discovery. "Il y a un peu de Sindbad dans Ulysse" ("There's a bit of Sinbad in Ulysses") was the epigraph borrowed from André Gide and used to open the third issue of the review (*Ulises* 84). While Ulysses' journey was always rooted in his desire to return, a symbolic exercise to find the meaning of home, Sinbad's journey is the result of a constant desire to be elsewhere. Owen's own voyage seems to blend, as in Gide's assertion, both desires. His journey is a quest for his origins—impossible to attain—that leads him, paradoxically, either to flight or to immobility.

As demonstrated by Cynthia Ramírez, Owen frequently references the archetype of the prodigal son (76). However, Owen's prodigal son is not taken directly from the Bible, but is instead informed by his reading of André Gide's story "El regreso del hijo pródigo" ("The Return of the Prodigal Son"; 1907), which was translated by Owen's close friend and colleague Xavier Villaurrutia and published in *Contemporáneos*, no. 10, March 1929. Using the Gidean character as his model, Owen creates an antihero in his short text "El hermano del hijo pródigo" ("The Prodigal Son's Brother"), a prose poem from his book *Line*, in which he oneirically narrates the voyage of the character, which closely parallels that of his stranded Sindbad, both of whom are marked by defeat: while Sindbad's failure lies in his shipwreck, his immobility, the failure of the prodigal son lies in returning to where he started:

[6] The list of translations mentioned solely in Owen's correspondence or other indirect sources but that have been lost or were never completed is even more extensive. However, they are still relevant indicators of Owen's influences and aspirations and include the "Sixth Song" from Lautréaumont's *Songs of Maldoror*, *Odes and Prayers* by Jules Romains, and selected poems by a series of contemporary American poets—William Carlos Williams, Carl Sandburg, and Alfred Kreymborg, among others—in addition to Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and *A Season in Hell*, as previously mentioned.

> ¿Por qué llegas tan tarde?, le dirán. Y como ya todas se habrán casado, él, que es mi hermano mayor, no podrá aconsejarme la huida.
>
> Y en la oscuridad acariciaré su voz herida. Pero yo no asistiré al banquete de mañana, porque todo está a punto de partir y, arrojándose desde aquí, se llega ya muerto al cielo. (*Obras* 51)

> "Why do you arrive so late?" he'll be told. And, since every girl will be married by then, he, my older brother, will not be able to advise me to flee.
>
> And in the darkness, I will caress his wounded voice. But I won't attend tomorrow's banquet, because everything is about to leave, and leaping from here, one is already dead by the time one reaches heaven."

If for the prodigal son shame lies in his loss of material wealth, for the protagonist of "Sindbad Stranded" disgrace is embodied in his creative drought, as seen in "Día dieciséis: el patriotero" ("Day Sixteen: The Jingoist"), when he is humiliated because he "conquistó siete poemas / pero la octava vez vuelve sin nada" ("conquered seven poems / but the eighth time he comes back empty-handed"; 79). The trope of the quest to return home, of the return to the origin, permeates the lines of "Sindbad Stranded," along with another theme that is central to the quest for identity, namely the connection with his absent father, who appears throughout Owen's poems.

Owen's translation of the one-act play *El peregrino* by Charles Vildrac also informed his reworking of the archetype of the prodigal son's return. The original play premiered in 1926 at the Parisian theater La Comédie-Française. It was subsequently included as part of the third program of the Teatro de Ulises, performed alongside Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus*, translated by Corpus Barga, in 1928. *The Pilgrim* is an intimist drama that follows, with some variations, the story arc of the prodigal son, which has been transported to a domestic setting. As in Gide's version and Owen's prose poem from *Line* that imagines a sequel, Vildrac introduces a second figure in the play, a character that is meant to inherit—and potentially improve—the son's destiny: while Owen and Gide both rely on the figure of a younger brother, Vildrac invents the character of

Dionisia (Denise in the original), the fourteen-year-old niece of the prodigal son, Édouard Desavesnes.

It is important to remember that Owen not only translated the play, but also performed it on stage, taking the lead role of the pilgrim opposite Clementina Otero (with whom he fell helplessly in love) as Dionisia. This is another example of the poet's fluid metamorphosis: he becomes an actor who, in turn, is malleable enough to interpret another person who, nevertheless, shares quite a lot in common with Owen (the author and, presumably, the man). Like the prodigal son from the parable, Édouard comes home after having spent his family inheritance, and, like all the lonely figures that feed into Owen's personal mythology, he is also a man in search of his own path, a desire that his sister, Irma, understands to be the vanity of someone who "does not think like every other mortal being," to which Édouard simply responds: "I think the way I think and I do not require people to think the way I do" (Vildrac 65).

Everyone else's opinion, crystalized in the character of Irma, is grounded in two main values: devotion and profit. Nothing is more foreign to the pilgrim's mission, who looks for nothing but himself and who returns home, to the past, only to say farewell. Édouard is a writer, which amounts to a transgression in his family's circles, while Dionisia hopes to join a company of traveling players—something equally unthinkable, even more so since she is a woman. This struggle with convention resonated with the younger members of the Contemporáneos group, the ones who ventured in theater precisely because of its inclination towards the experimental, an unprecedented foray in the Mexican artistic scene. Additionally, Édouard's feelings of suffocation were also familiar to them: at this point in their career, the Contemporáneos encountered severe criticism for their poetics and their relationship to the modernist tradition—criticism that soon evolved into personal attacks regarding their sexual preferences.[7] The Stridentism movement, and all of its neighboring personalities, turned this personal inclination into a sign of weakness, a representation of the "effeminacy" of literature, which was perceived as

[7] The Contemporáneos generation is notorious in Mexican literary history for its openly gay members. While Owen was straight and was therefore not the intended target of this criticism, the corresponding backlash certainly affected him, as he was an active part of their artistic projects. Furthermore, Owen was always an outsider in his own circle of friends.

detrimental to the male virility that was considered fundamental to the national ideal.[8]

II. Journey and Return: "Sindbad Stranded"

The long poem "Sindbad Stranded" was published by Gilberto Owen as part of his *magnum opus*, *Defeated Perseus* (1948), which Owen declared he began writing as early as 1930 as "a life of Sinbad, a novel that is now over three hundred pages long" (qtd. in Cajero, "Gilberto Owen").[9] What is striking, more than the professed length—perhaps just hyperbole, since the final poem is only about thirty pages long—is Owen's own suggestion that the genre of the work is "a novel." Although the poem does not lack narrative elements, the poetic density of the text constantly and intentionally obscures both characters and plot, which from the start seems counter-productive in terms of traditional storytelling. Perhaps Owen envisioned this work as a lyrical novel, or as a series of episodes narrated in a style closer to prose-poetry, genres that struck the Contemporáneos group as interesting and which Owen himself had explored with *Novela como nube* (*Novel as a Cloud*; 1929). Nevertheless, in the end he chose to write a long poem that initially appears to be written in free verse (although the original Spanish gravitates towards hendecasyllabic rhythm) and is structured as if it were a ship's log—clearly indicated by the subtitle, "Bitácora de febrero" ("February Logbook"), which explains why the different sections of the poem are introduced by ordinal numbers, like entries in a journal. The addressee is the writer himself, which forces readers to take a kind of oblique approach to the text, out of the corner of their eye as if they were spying on someone else's life, or perhaps as if they had discovered the testimony of an absent or maybe even dead protagonist, in keeping with the literary tradition of the found manuscript.

Much like the prodigal son in his numerous reinterpretations, the lyrical subject in "Sindbad Stranded" has a complex relationship with flight and escape,

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[8] Stridentism was a Mexican avant-garde, multidisciplinary movement, founded in 1921 by poet Manuel Maples Arce, that stood opposite to the Contemporáneos group in terms both of ideals and poetics. In the aftermath of the Mexican revolution, the Stridentists' eagerness to fashion a national cultural identity was closely tied to popular art and culture, which led them to believe the Contemporáneos were "elitist" and often to condemn them in public.

[9] Throughout the article, as is common in the scholarship, I use different spellings to distinguish the name of Owen's eponymous antihero "Sindbad" from the sailor of the *Arabian Nights* ("Sinbad").

as evident from the epigraph, which is taken from "Ash Wednesday" by T. S. Eliot—a poet who, like Owen, uses intertextuality to construct his own voice—and points towards a place of no return: "Because I do not hope to turn again / because I do not hope / because I do not hope to turn" (qtd. in "Sindbad" 69). This play on repetition is based on the subtraction of elements to change the meaning of the sentence (a syntactical pun of sorts) and that presents a concept that is echoed in "Sindbad Stranded": losing hope of returning or even the acceptance that one will never return. There are several reformulations of Eliot throughout the poem, seen both in the formal composition of the poem and its subject matter. The three occurrences in which the lines quoted in the epigraph become transparent in structural terms are as follows:

> Y luché contra el mar toda la noche,
> desde Homero hasta Joseph Conrad,
> para llegar a tu rostro desierto
> *y en su arena leer que nada espere,*
> *que no espere misterio, que no espere.* (70; emphasis added)

> And I braved the sea all night long,
> from Homer to Joseph Conrad,
> only to arrive at your desert face
> *and in its sand to read that nothing should wait,*
> *that it should not wait for mystery, that it should not wait.*

Thus begins, more or less, "Día primero: el naufragio" ("Day One: The Shipwreck"), in which Sindbad addresses himself in the second person: "Esta mañana te sorprendo con el rostro tan desnudo que temblamos" ("This morning I catch you by surprise with a face so naked that we tremble") and admits that "me consume en su rescoldo la conciencia de mis llagas" ("down to the last embers, I am consumed by the awareness of my wounds"; 69). A few pages later, at the end of "Día cinco: Virgin Islands" ("Day Five: Virgin Islands"), a second intertextual reference becomes noticeable: the last line reads "ahora y en la hora de la muerte" ("now and at the hour of death"; 73), and it is quite clear by then that Owen's intention is not to cite the "Hail Mary" prayer, but rather Eliot, who, in the same "Ash Wednesday," repeatedly introduces the quotation "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death" (86). But the

most significant parallelism comes near the end of the logbook, in "Día veintiocho: final" ("Day Twenty-Eight: The End"):[10]

> Tal vez mañana el sol en mis ojos sin nadie,
> tal vez mañana el sol,
> tal vez mañana,
> tal vez. (88)
>
> Perhaps tomorrow the sun in my eyes alone,
> perhaps tomorrow the sun,
> perhaps tomorrow,
> perhaps.

The speaker ends up concentrating on the remote possibility of "perhaps," after insinuating that we face an epitaph or a farewell: the protagonist's impending death has been alluded to since "Día veintitrés: y tu poética" ("Day Twenty-Three: And Your Poetics") and henceforth the poem abounds with images evocative of the cadaver's eyes.

Although there are many poems in "Sindbad Stranded" that engage with the theme of flight and escape, including "Día catorce: primera fuga" ("Day Fourteen: First Flight") and "Día diecisiete: nombres" ("Day Seventeen: Names"), this theme dominates in "Day Sixteen: The Jingoist." Without resorting to an exclusively biographical reading of Owen's work, it is perhaps useful to remember that the poet's life was marked by voyages from which he never returned: he was born in El Rosario, Sinaloa; he then moved to Mazatlán, to Toluca, and then to Mexico City; he lived in New York, in Colombia, Perú, and Ecuador, before finally arriving in Philadelphia, where he eventually died. In fact, Mexico and its territory are omnipresent in Owen's poetry: implicitly, as a homeland to return to in his constant self-exile; explicitly, not only as a setting, but also on an emotional level, of nostalgia, following in the footsteps of Ramón López Velarde, who first paved the way towards an intimist portrait

[10] A similar formula is also found in "Day Eight: Wounded in His Hand." However, in contrast to the subtraction formula we mentioned before, here it is the verb "to remember" that is maintained, and as a result the syntax does not disintegrate: "Y la que no me atrevo a recordar, / y la que le repugna recordar, / y la que ya no puedo recordar" ("And the one I dare not remember, / and the one I am disgusted to remember, / and the one I cannot remember"; "Sindbad" 74).

of Mexico, although Owen brings a touch of sarcasm, as indicated by the subtitle of the poem.[11]

In Villaurrutia's translation of Gide's "The Return of the Prodigal Son," the main character tells his younger brother: "Yo quisiera evitarte el regreso, evitándote la partida" ("I'd like to spare you the return by preventing you from leaving"; 262); in his own version, Owen says in passing: "él, que es mi hermano mayor, no podrá aconsejarme la huida" ("he, my older brother, will not be able to advise me to leave"; *Obras* 51). It seems that this, again, is Owen talking to himself—a conversation in which he reformulates, with heart-wrenching nostalgia, in "Day Sixteen: The Jingoist," where the escape is recast as returning to the "forgetful Baghdad," a representation of a Mexico City that has changed in his absence and that denies him a satisfactory homecoming, a re-creation of days past:

> Para qué huir. Para llegar al tránsito
> heroico y ruin de una noche a la otra
> por los días sin nadie de una Bagdad olvidadiza
> en la que no encontraré ya mi calle;
> a andar, a andar por otras de un infame pregón en cada esquina,
> reedificando a tientas mansiones suplantadas. ("Perseo" 78-79)

> What's the point in escaping. To arrive to the heroic
> and despicable transit from one night to the next
> along the lonely days of a forgetful Baghdad
> in which I will no longer find my street;
> to roam, to roam others with an infamous proclamation at every corner,
> blindly rebuilding superseded mansions.

The wanderer's solution is to flee, to turn flight itself into his home and to never return at all. This is why the image of the shipwreck is so appropriate: it embodies a trajectory that leads to destruction, scattering, or stagnation, a

[11] Evodio Escalante's words are relevant here: "Owen never shied away from the so-called national 'jicarismo' [local color]. The stigma of cosmopolitanism that has always plagued the Contemporáneos is probably what has held us back from seeing the unequivocal nakedness of that nostalgia, which oftentimes verges dangerously towards nationalist tackiness."

course that never reaches the promised end—presumably, the archetype of "home" or "origin"—and which, because of its indeterminate nature, never ends. The body aground, stranded, is a depiction of that fate: "varado en alta sierra, que el diluvio / y el vagar de la huida terminaron" ("stranded high on the mountains, now that the flood / and the fugitive's wanderings are over"; 70; "Día dos: el mar viejo" ["Day Two: The Old Sea"]). And, conversely, the land, personified as an island-woman, escapes from the castaway, as in "Day Five: Virgin Islands": "pero son demasiado cautas para mi celo / y me huyen, fingiéndose ballenas" ("but they are too wary of my zeal / and run away from me, pretending to be whales"; 72).

The castaway-traveler is simultaneously static and in motion, poised between desire (of the journey, of the other, of getting lost, of arriving) and satiety:

> Al lado de la vida, equidistante
> de las hambres que no saciamos nunca
> y las que nunca saciaremos, . . . (Owen, "Sindbad" 76)
>
> To the side of life, equidistant
> from the hungers we never satisfy
> and will never satisfy, . . .

admits Sindbad in "Día once: llagado de su sueño" ("Day Eleven: Wounded in His Dream"). In a letter to Villaurrutia—in which, by the way, he mentions his Gide translation—Owen writes: "Se aficiona uno a la sed, se vuelve un vicio" ("One grows fond of thirst, so much so that it becomes a vice"; *Obras* 263). Words like "thirst" and "quench" recur in the poem both as a reference to his alcohol consumption and to a bigger, existential thirst, which at times blend together. Owen's paradoxical need to flee and to stay is evident, for example, in "Día cuatro: almanaque" ("Day Four: Almanac"), where he declares that "los Owen . . . huyen de sed en sed por su delirio" ("the Owens . . . run, from thirst to thirst, across delirium"; 71), as compared to the acknowledgement in "Día seis: el hipócrita" ("Day Six: The Hypocrite"): "Ni voy—¿a dónde iría?—, sólo ando" ("I do not go—where would I go?—I merely roam"; 73), a wink towards the now-famous "journey across the bedroom" which so attracted his contemporary Xavier Villaurrutia, or to the captain who, in "Día siete: el

compás roto" ("Day Seven: The Broken Compass"), abandons the rudder and lets the boat drift in order to surrender to a flow of memories and lose sight of the trip's purpose (namely, to arrive). This stands in contrast to the apparent peace of letting go found in "Día diez: llagado de su sonrisa" ("Day Ten: Wounded in His Smile"):

> Ya no va a dolerme el mar,
> porque conocí la fuente.
>
> ¡Qué dura herida la de su frescura
> sobre la brasa de mi frente!
> Como a la mano hecha a los espinos
> la hiere con su gracia la rosa inesperada,
> así quedó mi duelo
> crucificado en tu sonrisa.
>
> Ya no va a dolerme el viento,
> porque conocí la brisa. (75-76)
>
> The sea will hurt me no more,
> because I knew the source.
>
> What a fierce wound, its freshness
> upon the embers of my forehead!
> just like the hand accustomed to thorns
> is injured by the grace of the unexpected rose,
> thus my mourning was left
> crucified on your smile.
>
> The wind will hurt me no more,
> because I knew the breeze.

This transitory peace fails to quench the "thirst," much like the tedium in the opening line of the aforementioned "Day Sixteen" ("What's the point in escaping"; 78) shifts from renunciation into yearning at the end of the same poem: "No huir, ¿para qué? Si este dieciséis de Febrero borrascoso / volviera a

serlo de Septiembre" ("Not to escape—what for? If only this wuthering sixteenth of February / could be the sixteenth day of September"; 79).

This equidistant desire reappears, now under the guise of Penelope and clearly linked to Odysseus's journey, in the last stanza of "Día veintiuno: rescoldos de gozar" ("Day Twenty-One: The Embers of Delight"):

> Ni esos cómplices impunes
> tan lentos en tejer mis apetitos
> y en destejerlos por la noche.
> Y mi sed verdadera
> sin esperanza de llegar a Ítaca. (Owen, "Sindbad" 83)

> Not even those unpunished accomplices
> so slow in the weaving of my appetites
> and in the nightly undoing.
> And my veritable thirst
> without hope of reaching Ithaca.

Once again, the professed lack of "hope" reminds us of the epigraph: "Because I do not hope to turn again" (69). And the "veritable thirst," yet again, is the insatiable, eternal one. From this moment in "Sindbad Stranded" the voyage takes a radical turn, as we discover that the "home" the speaker yearns for is, in fact, poetry itself, though it wanders as well, since it is his constant companion ("Día veintidós: tu nombre, poesía" ["Day Twenty-Two: Your Name, Poetry"]):

> Y hallar al fin, exangüe y desolado,
> descubrir que es en mí donde tú estabas,
> porque tú estás en todas partes
> y no sólo en el cielo donde yo te he buscado,
> que eres tú, que no yo, tuya y no mía,
> la voz que se desangra por mis llagas. (84)

> And to find out at last, bloodless and desolate,
> to discover that it was inside of me where you were,
> because you are everywhere
> and not only in the sky where I searched for you—

> that it is you, not me, that it is yours and not mine,
> the voice bleeding out my wounds.

The sudden shift of the addressee to "poetry"—as well as the way the theme of creation has been treated throughout the poem—reveal that the longing for love in "Sindbad Stranded," regardless of who the interlocutor happens to be, is always suffused with distance and failure. Independently of who the "you" is, the lure of the voyage lies in distance, insatiability, and nostalgia, and yet the distance never diminishes. Owen says it best in a letter to Villaurrutia: "y nada nos paga ni nos apaga el deseo de viajar. Nada está lo suficientemente lejos, si no es un deseo horizontal, en abanico de miradas, que debe llamarse Dios" ("and nothing redeems or rewards the desire to travel. Nothing is far enough, if it is not a horizontal desire, myriad glances that must be called God"; *Obras* 259).

Owen deals with the theme of the journey in similar terms in another letter as well: "Me iré a Panamá, a Chile, a Cuba, qué sé yo. A hacer lo mismo, a pensar en México—tú, mis amigos es México—cada día más lejos, más en la fábula" ("I will go to Panama, to Chile, to Cuba, what do I know. To do exactly the same, to think about Mexico—you and my friends are Mexico—every day a little further, every day a little more fable-like"; *Obras* 269). Here, "fable" is not an innocent word. We have already seen that a similar format is dear to Owen's heart: the parable. To "fabulate" his homeland, his origins, and his identity is precisely what he does throughout "Sindbad Stranded." Through the lived experience of the theatre, as well as through translation and the development of metaphors where the face is a metonymy of the self, Owen makes use of masks, of the lives of others, to speak about himself and even to set in a text, much like religions do, his own origin myth. "Owen belongs to the lineage of poets who write for themselves—the poets who (according to Rilke) write not to make themselves understood, but to try to understand themselves," writes Guillermo Sheridan (*Tres ensayos* 25), and with good reason. The first translation Owen undertakes is in fact translating himself into a poetic language.

III. The Self in the Other

This fundamental concern—defining "I" with words—inevitably pushes Owen to a consideration of himself as juxtaposed against an "other." Arthur

Rimbaud's universally renowned proclamation "Je est un autre" ("I is another"; qtd. in Capt and Verselle 39) perfectly describes this aspect of "Sindbad Stranded" and, in fact, Owen's entire *oeuvre*. When it comes to themes of identity, numerous examples of the conflicting opposites can be found in Owen's poetics.

In his book entitled *Poesía y alquimia* (*Poetry and Alchemy*; 1980), Jaime García Terrés was the first to insinuate that this was the reason Owen was so drawn to the poetry of Emily Dickinson, which he became fascinated with around 1928 and which he later began to translate into Spanish. Although Owen first discovered the famous Amherst recluse thanks to Juan Ramón Jiménez's pioneering translations,[12] it is clear that the attraction was kindled by a shared loneliness, a sort of affinity between temperaments, both personal and poetic. Thus, when García Terrés seeks to identify the imprint of Dickinson in Owen's work, what he finds is that it is:

> Un poco dondequiera. Tamizada por las circunstancias peculiares y, no siempre visible, en aleación con las demás influencias. Sobre todo en el pudor expresivo, y en el aprovechamiento de la textura onírica como dramatización purificadora de la conciencia. (480)
>
> A little bit everywhere. Filtered by the peculiar circumstances and, although not always apparent, fused with the rest of his influences. Above all, in the shyness of expression and in the use of the dreamlike texture as a purifying dramatization of consciousness.

García Terrés suggests that it could have been Owen, as much as Dickinson herself, who penned the following incomparable declaration or negation of identity, despite the fact that there is no evidence of Owen having translated this famous poem:[13]

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[12] See Calvillo, "'medida exacta'"; Calvillo, "Gilberto Owen"; and Calvillo, *Emily Dickinson*.

[13] However, it is possible that he did translate it. In his "rough translations" of eight Dickinson poems published in Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo* (1934), Owen claims to have "translated a selection of two hundred of her poems" ("Emily Dickinson" 8). Although these translations have since been lost, this particular poem might have been included among them. The loss of these papers is mentioned, fictionalized and reimagined, in Valeria Luiselli's recent novel *Los ingrávidos* (*Faces in the Crowd*), in a passage written from Owen's point of view: "I proposed a collection of American poets to Professor Alfonso Reyes . . . I translated more than two hundred Dickinson poems very quickly and sent them in an envelope bound to Brazil that probably never even crossed the Suchiate River" (89).

> I'm nobody! Who are you?
> Are you nobody, too?
> Then there's a pair of us—don't tell!
> They'd banish us, you know. (Dickinson 21)[14]

Or perhaps they are talking to each other: Dickinson, dressed in white and confined to the boundaries of her country house, imagining "journeys across the bedroom," and Owen, the pariah of the moveable abodes, "another Nobody who paid the steep price of not being Someone" (García Terrés 481). And thus concludes García Terrés: "Both bashful Nobodies wrote, not because of virtuosity or ephemeral ambitions, . . . but with the purpose, at the same time salubrious and instinctual, of expiating by poetical construction the anguished toil of an emptiness that is nothing more than opening oneself to the Whole" (481).

Face to face with the vacuum of existence, with the mystery of identity, Dickinson and Owen resort to creating a personal mythology. As Alfredo Rosas notes, "[b]oth poets adopted several mythical masks. She, for instance, chose Eve; he, on the other hand, opted for Perseus, Sinbad, Boaz, and even Adam" (28). For Owen, the primary resource used to approximate an identity of his own is mythification, as any reader or scholar that has explored "Sindbad Stranded" can attest. Owen elevates his autobiography to the level of myth by way of—as characterized by Tomás Segovia—two "contrary but convergent" processes: the association of himself (or of certain moments in his own life) with mythical characters and his ability to imbue:

> esa dignidad mítica y legendaria a las gentes, los lugares, a los hechos, incluso completamente circunstanciales, de su historia privada, consagrándolos por medio de un nombre atribuido de manera consubstancial como un bautismo, o por alusiones muy personales entregadas sin ninguna clase de explicación, lo que hace de ellas algo así como . . . casi tradiciones. (26)

[14] I am using the now superseded version from *Poems: Second Series*, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1891) as this is the only edition Owen would have been able to access. Revised editions were made available to the general public only after his death.

> people, places, facts from his personal history—even entirely circumstantial ones—with a mythical, legendary dignity, consecrating them by means of a consubstantial name, like a baptism, or through extremely personal allusions that are offered without explanation of any kind, which makes them almost . . . like traditions.

The most obvious example of the first process is the identification of the lyrical subject, the poetical "I," with Sinbad, as well as the adaptation of the hero's story to fit Owen's own narrative, in which the character finds himself wandering, but on solid ground. The other intertextual references serve a similar purpose, including the biblical allusions and the interplay with the *Odyssey*, which are established both explicitly and implicitly through the seafaring atmosphere, and a plot that revolves around the possibility or impossibility of returning. What is most striking about this plentiful intertextuality, however, is the way in which it is blended together, so as to create a heterogeneous pantheon in which not only Ulysses and Sinbad, but also Alice (Lewis Carroll's, that is), the biblical Susanna, Buffalo Bill, Orpheus, and Saint Anthony the Abbot can coexist along with a plethora of angels, demons, and virgins in a mobile geography that includes Ithaca, New York, Mazatlán, Baghdad, Taxco, Yuriria, and the Nevado de Toluca as points of reference, among others. Unlike other erudite texts in which literature and metaliterary reflection become the subject of poetry itself (e.g., Eliot and Pound), Owen's text is a mythical rewriting of his own life experience. Both in his verse and in his peripheral writings (his correspondence, his reviews, and other prose), Owen is a mythologizer, a narrator who fictionalizes his own life and the life of those around him; a writer who seems to experience life as literature and not the other way around.

Another expression of this porous identity is seen throughout "Sindbad Stranded" in the use of pronouns and their changing referent. The poet often addresses a fickle "you" whose identity is unclear. At various moments throughout the logbook, the "you" is the recipient of a lover's complaint or, at times, the protagonist of a memory, also romantic in nature, but pleasant. Beginning in "Day Twenty-Two: Your Name, Poetry," however, poetry itself becomes the addressee, all the way through "Día veinticinco: yo no vi nada" ("Day Twenty-Five: I Saw Nothing"). In "Day Twenty-Eight" the speaker returns to the romantic "you," although the poem ends with a neutral tone,

precisely because a third person is recruited to narrate the romantic rupture: "los amantes se miran y se ven tan ajenos que se vuelven la espalda" ("the lovers look at each other and they appear so foreign that they turn their backs"; Owen, "Sindbad" 87), a formal echo of the distance described.[15] The "you" that is the target of the speaker's complaints, it should be noted, is only sometimes a lover: elsewhere, it is a father figure.

Throughout the text, the "I" fluctuates as well. Initially, the speaker alternately represents Owen and his father, however, from "Día trece: el martes" ("Day Thirteen") onwards, after the father's death, the speaker has an almost spectral quality. The search for a name is first referenced in "Day Three: To the Mirror" ("Día tres: al espejo"), a search that ultimately ends in erasure, which is reflected in the passage below in the use of a third person ("that preschooler") that allows Owen to articulate a painful experience:

> Y al fondo el amarillo amargo mar de Mazatlán
> por el que soplan ráfagas de nombres.
> Mas si gritan el mío responden muchos rostros que yo no conocía
> o que borró una esponja calada de minutos,
> como el de ese párvulo que esta noche se siente solo e íntimo
> y que suele llorar ante el retrato
> de un gambusino rubio que se quemó en rosales de sangre al mediodía. ("Sindbad" 71)

> And, in the background, the bitter yellow sea of Mazatlán
> through which gusts of names blow.
> And yet, if someone calls out my name, many faces unknown to me respond,
> faces erased by a sponge soaked with minutes,
> like the one of that preschooler who feels lonely and intimate tonight
> and who is accustomed to crying in front of the portrait
> of the blond gold miner who was burned in bleeding rose bushes at noon.

[15] The subtitles indicate yet another degree of distancing with their use of an inherently absent third person: "Wounded in His Hand," "Wounded in His Smile," "Wounded in His Dream," etc.

For Owen, identity is inseparable from fatherhood. The poet stubbornly looks for evidence of a connection with his absent father (that "blond gold miner"), be it in his name or in significant dates, as seen in "Day Four: Almanac": "Todos los días 4 son domingo // porque los Owen nacen ese día" ("Every fourth day of the month is a Sunday // because Owens are born that day"; 71), a piece in which the speaker takes on his role as part of a clan, the members of which share a common fate (Alcoholism? A meaningless life? An accidental death?). In this magical thinking, the father's absence (through neglect or death) implies a lack of identity, reflected here in the lack of a face.[16]

While references to the father are grounded in an emotional rift, a place of separation, references to the mother figure reflect images of unity, as clearly seen in "Día diecinueve: rescoldos de sentir" ("Day Nineteen: Embers of Feeling"): "Cuando éramos dos sin percibirlo casi" ("When we were two almost without noticing it"; Owen, "Sindbad" 81), or in the extended description of his pregnant mother in "Day Seventeen: Names":

> O en Yuriria veré la mocedad materna,
> plácida y tenue antes del Torbellino Rubio.
> Ella estará deseándome en su vientre
> frente al gran ojo insomne y bovino del lago,
> y no lo sé, pero es posible que me sienta nonato
> al recorrer en sueños algún nombre:
> "Isla de la Doncella que aún Aguarda." (80)

> Or in Yuriria I will see my mother's girlhood,
> placid and tenuous before the Blond Whirlwind.
> She will wish for me in her belly
> in front of the great, sleepless, bovine eye of the lake,
> and I don't know, but I may feel unborn
> as I dream about some name:
> "The Isle of the Still Hopeful Maiden."

[16] See Sheridan, *Tres ensayos*, particularly 31-32 and 38-39.

As with Dickinson, naming is one of Owen's favorite devices,[17] and he uses it as another mythologizing strategy, evident throughout "Day Nineteen," where the speaker not only baptizes places, but also uses these places and the names he gives them to crystallize different moments of his life, like a *conquistador* who reaches *terra incognita* and claims it with his words. Perhaps this is why Owen translates—and this time makes sure to publish—one of those Dickinsonian miniatures in which, with ecstatic natural bewilderment, the poet wonders if there is ever a way to give name to a thought. Here is Owen's translation:

> Hallele forma a todo pensamiento
> Que me mire, menos a uno;
> Y ese me burla y es por él mi boca
> Mano empeñada en dibujar el sol.
>
> Ante razas nutridas de tinieblas;
> ¿Cómo dirías tú el tuyo propio?
> ¿Podrías hacer llamas del carmín
> O del añil hacer el mediodía? ("Poemas" 6)
>
> I found the phrase to every thought
> I ever had, but one;
> And that defies me, – as a hand
> Did try to chalk the sun
>
> To races nurtured in the dark; –
> How would your own begin?
> Can blaze be done in cochineal,
> Or noon in mazarin? (Dickinson 26)

The question "How would your own begin?" is not futile, especially as Owen's version of Dickinson duplicates the possessive ("tú el tuyo propio") directed at an unidentified "you," a "you" that may very well be an "I."

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[17] See "Nombre que nada nombras" ("Name, You Name Nothing") in Sheridan's *Tres ensayos* 28-33 and "Gilberto Owen o el rescate" ("Gilberto Owen, or the Rescue") in Segovia 36-58.

In addition to Owen's signature blurring of the "you" and the "I" in a phantasmagorical exchange, he also represents the struggle to define identity and alterity in "Sindbad Stranded" (in addition to the others already identified by Segovia) through the splitting of the self, refracted through repeated metaphors using elements such as masks and mirrors.

The double, or doppelgänger, a subject which captivated the Romantic and Gothic traditions, came to be—perhaps through the filter of Surrealism—a central concern for some of the members of the Contemporáneos. Xavier Villaurrutia, Owen's closest friend and peer, devoted several of his poems to exploring duality and the splitting of the self, including its concrete forms, such as one's shadow or reflection, and its more symbolic forms, such as dreams. It is not surprising that this duality was a primary concern of a generation of avant-garde writers that was publicly plagued by the question of Mexican identity, as Mexico celebrated a century of independence and the overthrow of a dictatorship through armed insurrection.

In Owen's "Sindbad Stranded," the face and the "I" are interchangeable; therefore, the mask conceals or falsifies the true nature of the self, as already observed in "Day Three: To the Mirror": "Mas si gritan el mío responden muchos rostros que yo no conocía" ("And yet, if someone calls out my name, many faces unknown to me respond"; 70); it follows that the mask is presented in the poem as a symbol of identity (or of its falseness). The empty face, on the other hand, represents the anguished volatility of the wandering "I" that is unable to find himself. In "Día nueve: llagado de su desamor" ("Day Nine: Wounded, Heartbroken"), for instance, the face only exists if there is another, that of a lover, that is able to perceive it and verify its reality. In the first stanza, Owen masterfully intertwines body, psyche, and space:

> Hoy me quito la máscara y me miras vacío
> y ves en mis paredes los trozos de papel no desteñido
> donde habitaban tus retratos,
> y arriba ves las cicatrices de sus clavos. (75)

> Today I remove my mask and you see that I am empty
> and you see the pieces of unfaded wallpaper
> where your portraits used to hang,
> and above you see the scars of their nails.

When that "I-room" is emptied and left uninhabited, without the "you" that bestowed him an identity, existence becomes desolate, and yet it does not disappear, as demonstrated in the last few lines of the entry: "para decirme así que ya no existo, / que viste tras la máscara y me hallaste vacío" ("to tell me thus that I no longer exist, / that you saw whatever lay behind the mask and you found me empty"; 75).

The enigma of the blank or vacant face recurs throughout "Sindbad Stranded" as a leitmotif, a consequence of his unmoving quest. It is seen in the very first line of the poem: "Esta mañana te sorprendo con el rostro tan desnudo que temblamos" ("This morning I catch you by surprise with a face so naked that we tremble"; 69), where the "we" could refer to either the speaker and his reflection or the speaker and a lover. The motif of the undecipherable face is also linked with concealment: it seems that something is always on the brink of being revealed to the poetical "I," and that something is his own self.

Lastly, in poems such as "Day Seventeen: Names" and "Day Twenty-Five: I Saw Nothing," the double makes an appearance that is quite familiar in the fantasy genre (another legacy of Romanticism): a vision of one's own death. Although the specter in "Day Seventeen" is presented as a part of the established mythical system—as in "y no lo sé, pero es posible que me mire a mí mismo / al recorrer en sueños algún nombre: 'La Calle del Muerto que Canta'" ("and I don't know, but it is possible that I look at myself / as I dream of a name: 'The Street of the Singing Dead'"; Owen, "Sindbad" 80)—"Day Twenty-Five" is an account of the way the lyrical subject witnesses his own death, from outside his self, in a sort of disembodied experience:

> De llamar a mi puerta y de oír que me niegan
> y ver por la ventana que sí estaba yo adentro,
> pues no hubo, no hubo
> quien cerrara mis párpados a la hora de mi paso. (86)
>
> Knocking at my door and hearing myself denied
> and seeing through the window that I was indeed inside
> because there was no one, no one
> who would close my eyes at the hour of my passing.

As noted at the beginning of this article, it is practically impossible to produce documentary evidence that explains the creative process that led Owen to write these lines: how readings became influences, how thematic affinities took hold, the convergence of two distant and distinct souls. But I dare say, with the same conviction as García Terrés, that these lines of "Sindbad Stranded" could very well have been written by Emily Dickinson.

IV. Conclusion

Fortunately, it has become increasingly common within Translation Studies to consider translation to be a creative act, although this approach remains far less frequent elsewhere. This shift is reflected in the words of Carol O'Sullivan, "creativity is an intrinsic part of the translation process" (42) or, better yet, by Michel Ballard's assertion that "rewriting with the help of another language entails changes and transformations which are part of a creative act" (86). The purpose of this essay has been to use Gilberto Owen's work as a paradigm to demonstrate that translation is a creative act to the extent that it informs, influences, and helps define what can succinctly be understood as an author's poetics.

The beneficial impacts of literary translation have already been extensively studied in relation to the target culture, particularly in terms of the enrichment, development, and sophistication of national literatures that import foreign forms, themes, and aesthetics. From a sociological perspective, as well as from the critical perspective advanced by descriptive translation studies, especially the polysystem theory, there is more than enough evidence to show that a literary translator's agency—a mediation between two cultures that is sometimes smooth and hospitable, but in others disruptive and contentious—is able to upset the power structures and value systems of the receiving culture (Woodsworth 70-75). The translation projects undertaken by the Mexican Contemporáneos at the beginning of the twentieth century were not exempt from these dynamics, insofar as they were driven by "the initiative to renew and enrich national literature" (Calvillo, "Gilberto Owen"). However, and without necessarily implying that this remains an unresolved matter, it is clear that significantly less attention has been given to translation as a foundational element of an author's poetics, particularly when it comes to the members of the Contemporáneos.

This paper seeks to show that, in Gilberto Owen's *oeuvre*—at the very heart of his understanding of literature and creation—writing and translating are one and the same. Far more important, in his view, than a way of broadening the linguistic and cultural reach of a given literary text, Owen understood translation as a way of finding meaning, and in his representation of selected creative works he undoubtedly discovered a means of expression. In other words, translation was for Owen chiefly a mode of writing.

Added to the above, I have endeavored to argue that, in Owen's work, the journey and the return are—more than mere literary tropes—stages or moments in a cyclical process of translation, and that the quest for one's identity exists always within the context of the discovery of the other, of the reconciliation of what is one's own and what is foreign. It is within these terms that Owen understands not only literary translation, but also artistic creation and life itself.

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