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Translator's Preface

Odile Cisneros

Perhaps Ramón Gómez de la Serna's most original contribution to the panorama of modern Spanish letters are the short texts he baptized as *greguerías*. These often humorous texts, which he began producing allegedly around 1910 and up until 1960, constitute more than small-scale works in themselves. Published first in newspapers and magazines and later as book-length collections, they also represent his most characteristic idiom, the basic structure of other longer texts, be it essays, short stories, biographies, autobiographies, novels or novellas. Critics have labored over the nature of these countless literary miniatures, but the variety of forms, techniques, and topics they employ make the task of classification risky and endless.

The polymorphous nature of the *greguería* poses a number of challenges to the translator, not the least of which is the conciseness of the genre. Although *greguerías* vary in length—earlier ones were as long as a half a page—in general, they exhibit an aphoristic economy that must be respected. In many cases, the *greguería* presents a striking image, so the precise choice of vocabulary, the echoes and connotations of each word are crucial. Other difficulties have to do with the rhetorical devices that the *greguería* exploits. One common device is what is known in the Spanish literary tradition as the *agudeza* a concept akin to the notion of "wit." Baltasar Gracián's 1642 *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* defined *agudeza* as an act of the "understanding that expresses the correspondence that exists between objects." In many cases this "correspondence" is a metaphor whose effectiveness is increased when the linking verb is economically supplanted by a colon: "Poplar: tree with green butterflies"; "Thunder: a trunk tumbling down the stairs of heaven." Clearly, the charm (and humor) of the *agudeza* increases in proportion to the distance between the two terms, which become indivisibly fused in the comparison.

Some of these metaphors seem to be stand-alone glimpses, revealing an arresting yet often trivial or inconsequential resemblance between two objects in the world. However, in what is known as *agudeza verbal* as Lázaro Carreter explains, the comparison "may run the shorter and more obvious route of words." The relations then do not concern the thing "in

the world" but rather its linguistic sign. Signifier and signified thus become the arena where the poet will perform his ingenious acrobatics: mere wordplay, in a word. There are many examples of this type of *greguería*. Some manipulate uncomplicated and humorous visual associations of letters and numbers ("8 is the hourglass of the digits"; "B is the wet nurse of the alphabet"; "The swan is the capital S of the lake's poem") and are relatively simple to translate. Others deploy more complex puns and alliterative word games ("*Idem* is a thrifty word"; "Wednesday: a long day by definition"; "Reminiscence: ruminating recollections"), making the challenge of rendering their variety and ingenuity in the target language at times also gratifying: "To make similes seems a simian thing"; "My only thing - I know - is the myocardium."

Overall, perhaps it is those very characteristics (the tight and delicate construction and the complexity and humor of the images) that signal, as Walter Benjamin would have it, the essential translatability of these texts.

50 Greguerías, by Ramón Gómez de la Serna

Translated by Odile Cisneros

Chopo: el árbol de las mariposas verdes.

Poplar: tree with green butterflies.

§

Un chino inventó al gato.

A Chinese man invented cats.

§

Radiador frío: merluza sin freír.

Cold radiator: a fish before it's fried.

§

Daba besos de segunda boca.

Her kisses were second-mouth.

§

De lo que se habla en la oscuridad queda copia en papel carbono.

A carbon copy always remains of words spoken in the dark.

§

La leche es siempre joven.

Milk is always young.

§

Vino vertido en el mantel: silueta del olvidado.

Wine spilled on the tablecloth: silhouette of the forgotten one.

§

Las lágrimas se deslizan en seguida como si fuesen de mercurio.

Tears roll instantly like drops of mercury.

§

Soda: agua con hipo.

Club soda: water with the hiccups.

§

Los *haikai* son telegramas poéticos.

Haikus are poetic telegrams.

§

Por los ojos del caballo se asoma la noche al día.

Through the eyes of a mare night peers into day.

§

Al caer la estrella se le corre un punto a la media de la noche.

A falling star is a run in the stocking of the night.

§

El reloj es una bomba de tiempo, de más o menos tiempo.

A clock is a time bomb, of more or less time.

§

Las últimas patas de sátiro que quedan son las de los bancos de jardín.

The only satyr hooves left are those on park benches.

§

Trueno: caída de un baúl por las escaleras del cielo.

Thunder: a trunk tumbling down the stairs of heaven

§

La B es el ama de cría del alfabeto.

B is the wet nurse of the alphabet.

§

De pronto se echó en mis brazos como si se hubiese ladeado su bicicleta.

Suddenly she threw herself into my arms, as if her bicycle had swerved sideways.

§

Puerto: marineros en camisetas de carne.

Port: sailors in skin-fabric shirts.

§

Golpes en el colador: naranjada.

A tapping on the strainer: orange juice.

§

La ü con diéresis: dos íes siamesas.

An ü with umlaut: two Siamese i's.

§

Las flores que no huelen son flores mudas.

Flowers with no scent are mute.

§

Micrófono: oreja de todos.

Microphone: everyone's ear.

§

Cuando sentimos un pie frío y otro caliente sospechamos que uno de los dos no es nuestro.

When we feel that one foot is cold and the other warm, we suspect one is not ours.

§

Final de verano: depósito de mosquitos muertos en las lámparas de los trenes.

End of summer: deposit of dead mosquitoes in train lamps.

§

El 8 es el reloj de arena de los números.

8 is the hourglass of the digits.

§

Collar de perlas: rosario del pecado.

Pearl necklace: rosary of sin.

§

Los recuerdos encogen como las camisetas.

Memories shrink like T-shirts.

§

Prosa con asteriscos, prosa condecorada.

Prose with asterisks, prose with decorations.

§

El lápiz sólo escribe sombras de palabras.

Pencils write only shadows of words.

§

Búho: gato emplumado.

Owl: feathered cat.

§

El cisne es la S capitular del poema del estanque.

The swan is the capital S of the lake's poem.

§

Los espárragos tienen el sueño de la rosa.

The asparagus dreams of the rose.

§

Libro: hojaldre de ideas.

Book: *millefeuille* of ideas.

§

La palmera ancla la tierra al cielo.

The palm tree anchors heaven to earth.

§

Reminiscencia: rumiar recuerdos.

Reminiscence: ruminating recollections.

§

La lluvia es triste porque nos recuerda cuando fuimos peces.

Rain is sad because it reminds us of when we were fish.

§

Comidas las uvas, quedan en el plato las venas del racimo.

Once the grapes are eaten, on the plate remains a cluster of veins.

§

La violeta da perfume azul.

Violets give off blue perfume.

§

Terciopelo de silencio.

Velvet of silence.

§

Los perros buscan afanosamente al dueño que tuvieron en otra
encarnación.

Dogs anxiously search for the owner they had in another life.

§

La luna es un banco de metáforas arruinado.

The moon is a metaphor bank gone broke.

§

El sueño es un depósito de objetos extraviados.

Dreams are the Lost-and-Found Department.

§

El *whisky* es *árnica* del estómago.

Scotch is arnica for the stomach.

§

El camello lleva a cuestas el horizonte y su montañita.

The camel carries the horizon and its little hill on his back.

§

La gaita es una especie de bota de vino musical.

A bagpipe is a kind of musical wineskin.

§

El cerebro es un paquete de ideas arrugadas que llevamos en la cabeza.

The brain is a package of wrinkled ideas in our head.

§

Un tumulto es un bulto que les sale a las multitudes.

A tumult is a bulge in a multitude.

§

Vitrales: mariposas de catedral.

Stained-glass windows: cathedral butterflies.

§

Calle moderna: sopa de letras luminosas.

Modern street: neon alphabet soup.

§

Una greguería es el buscapiés del pensamiento.

The *greguería* is a firecracker of the mind.