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Calderón in England

I feel I stand before you at something of a disadvantage.

A little as Cervantes claimed to feel at the beginning of the *Quijote*: unable to emulate his colleagues in erudition, and so tempted to remain silent.

Unlike Cervantes, however, I do not feel the urge to mock or attack my colleagues' erudition. On the contrary, I have the greatest respect for it. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to listen to Professor Barjau, and while I share his utter respect for the classics I have to confess that almost certainly in his terms I am among the barbarians.

I revere Calderón as a great master of the theatre; but I do not translate his texts. I translate his works for the theatre. There is a very great difference.

Obviously I translate his words; but more than his words. I try to translate theatrical moments[1]. And I have to say that unless my translation works on the stage, however great its literary accuracy, it has no value at all. Unless actors can speak my translation and make of it a play that will entertain, enthral, move and stimulate their audience, I have utterly failed in my task.

The title of this conference refers to perspectives on the task of translating the classic. As a theatre professional, I have to tell you that my perspective is severely practical.

The question of *Calderón de la Barca en inglés* is one that I simply cannot understand from an abstract point of view. For me, it is a very concrete and very practical question. Indeed, to a certain extent my livelihood depends upon it. I want to understand why the work of Calderón is so rarely performed in my country. It is as if in attempting to diffuse his work in Great Britain I continually encounter resistance, a kind of stone wall; it is as if actors and directors and theatre management in general were afraid of Calderón and what he has to offer.

And this occurs in spite of the success with which his work has been staged. Perhaps because it happens so rarely, when it happens it makes a very great impact. I am thinking in particular of a famous production of *El Alcalde de Zalamea* staged by the National Theatre in the seventies[2]; of my translation of *La cisma de Inglaterra,* again produced by the National Theatre and the Edinburgh International Festival in the eighties[3]; of an excellent translation of *El pintor de su deshonra* produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the nineties[4]; and in particular of my translation of *La vida es sueño* coproduced by the

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[1] See: CLIFFORD, J., "Translating the Spirit of the Play", in: JOHNSTON, D., *Stages of Translation.* London: Absolute Press, 1996.

[2] CALDERóN, *The Mayor of Zalamea,* translated by Adrian Mitchell, in: ibid*: Three Plays.* Absolute Classics. London, 1991.

[3] *Schism in England.* A co-production by the Royal National Theatre and the Edinburgh International Festival. Opened in Edinburgh in August 1989. Unpublished.

[4] CALDERóN, *The Painter of Dishonour,* translated by Laurence Boswell and David Johnston. Absolute Classics. London, 1992.

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Edinburgh International Festival and the Barbican Theatre in 1998[5]. This particular production was hailed by the critics as the most significant, and in many respects the most modern, play produced during that Festival[6]. In the following year, it toured to London and New York. A combination of excellent word of mouth and an ecstatic review in the *New York Times* meant that the demand for tickets was so huge that the theatre management had to call the police to control the queue at the box office.

Yet in spite of this record of success, all subsequent attempts to interest British theatre managements in the work of Calderón seem to have met with failure. My hope is that a few moments' reflection on my country's resistance to the works of one of the greatest dramatists in the world will teach us something about Calderón, something about the state of the current British theatre, and indeed perhaps even something about ourselves.

Allow me to give you a clearer sense of the kind of perspective I bring to this. Earlier this week, I was in the London studios of the BBC, supervising the recording of my new radio play[7]. This work, as always when preparing for performance, is of necessity severely practical. And this holds true whether we are talking of an original piece of work or the translation of a stage play. It is a question of trying to see clearly through the myriad problems the process of preparing for performance throws up; of trying to determine which of these problems stems from the writing; and then taking the appropriate action to change the words. To change the words, or perhaps sometimes just a single word, to ensure that the lines work as the actor speaks them, whether on stage or into the microphone.

Above all to cut. In a very concrete sense, my play's slot has a duration of 57 minutes and 45 seconds. By the end of the first day of recording, it became clear that my script was going to last approximately 63 minutes. So six pages of script, approximately, had to be lost.

These kinds of decisions are not taken in the abstract; they are not taken in an intellectual or a reasoned manner. They are the product of instinct, intuition, and hunch. And they need to be taken very rapidly.

I cannot believe that any dramatist that ever lived has been immune to such pressures. No play script, however great a classic it has subsequently become, fell fully formed from the sky into its author's mind. It will have undergone revision, generally in collaboration with its actors, under conditions of great haste and pressure. If we follow the fascinating theories of J.M. Ruano de la Haza[8], some of the various published versions of *La vida es sueño* are records of Calderón's revisions of the script in between its early performances.

A week ago today I was in Bristol. One of my plays is on tour just now[9], and I wanted to catch up with it and check out its general state of health. The script has its faults, but the actor is excellent; in general audiences were enthusiastic. But they were tiny; and I have to tell you that from a certain point of view the Bristol performances were a failure, largely due to catastrophically incompetent publicity and marketing.

Of course I understand that in this learned context such considerations may seem utterly trivial; but I have to assure you that they matter now, as much as they always have. It used to be said that in Lope's time there was an expression "Es de Lope!" which meant that

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[5] CALDERÓN, *Life is a Dream,* translated by John Clifford, Nick Hern Books. London, 1998.

[6] In particular by Michael Billington in *The Guardian.*

[7] *The Chimes,* based on the *Christmas Tale* of Charles Dickens. Date of broadcast: Saturday 27th December 2003, 1430-1530, BBC Radio 4.

[8] RUANO DE LA HAZA, J. M., *La primera versión de La vida es sueño, de Calderón.* Liverpool University Press, 1992.

[9] *Charles Dickens: The Haunted Man.* Produced by Pitlochry Festival Theatre, directed by Ian Grieve, with Jimmy Chisholm as Charles Dickens.

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something was absolutely excellent. Clearly, Lope had achieved a level of brand recognition that a modern marketing manager would envy; and we must suspect that, among many other things, Lope was an early genius in the art of publicity.

Indeed, publicity is a crucial factor in the current difficulty of having Calderón staged in Britain. Theatres tend to see themselves as being in direct competition with the cinema; and, at a time when a single Hollywood film can have spent upon its publicity more than a country's whole industry can receive in government support, theatre managements in both the subsidised and commercial sectors are keen to restrict their repertoire to titles and authors that are already well known. Calderón, unfortunately is not; and because his plays are not well known they will tend to remain so.

In the end, of course, publicity does remain a fairly trivial affair that can be quite easily remedied. Let's examine Calderón's words in more detail to see if they can provide us with a more profound and interesting set of insights.

I have chosen the beginning of Calderón's *La Vida es Sueño.* As I know from bitter experience, it is very difficult to begin a play. It confronts the author with some difficult technical questions. How the author chooses to solve these problems reveal a great deal about the author and the kind of play he or she has written.

I would strongly recommend, by the way, that even as you read these lines from the printed text that you take a moment to pause and read them aloud. For these astoundingly beautiful lines were not intended to be read, but to be heard. They were not intended to be communicated through the eyes, but through the ears:

Sale en lo alto de un monte ROSAURA en hábito de hombre, de camino, y en representando los primeros versos va bajando.

ROSAURA:

Hipógrifo violento
Que corriste parejas con el viento,
Donde, rayo sin llama
Pájaro sin matiz, pez sin escama,
Y bruto sin instinto
Natural, al confuse laberinto
Destas desnudas peñas
Te desbocas, te arrastras y te despeñas?
Quédate en este monte
Donde tengan sus brutos su Faetonte;
Que yo, sin mas camino
Que el que me dan las leyes del destino
Ciega y desesperada
Bajaré la aspereza enmarañada
Deste monte eminente
Que arruga al sol el ceño de su frente.
Mal, Polonia, recibes
A un extranjero, pues con sangre escribes
Su entrada en tus arenas,
Y apenas llega, cuando llega a penas.
Bien mi suerte lo dice;
Mas donde halló piedad un infelice?

As you listen to this in English, you'll immediately perceive the profound difference in the music of the two languages:

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ROSAURA

Call yourself a horse! Hippogriff!
Violently running, fast as the wind,
Then falling like a meteor crashing
Into the labyrinth, into the maze
Of these naked mountain crags.
You're a thunderbolt with a limp!
A bird without wings. A fish without scales.
Stay in this mountain. You be its Phaeton
You be so foolish and fall from the sky!
Abandon me! Leave me here, desperate, alone
With no map or path to guide me
Nothing but the working of blind chance
As I struggle randomly through the tangled hair
On the head of this giant mountain
Whose furrowed ridges frown at the sun.
And this is Poland! You vile country!
Viciously greeting this stranger
Writing your greeting in letters of blood.
I've hardly arrived. Such a hard arrival.
Where can I find pity in my pitiless fate
Arriving in anguish. Greeted with hate.

It is so very apparent that the music of the two languages is utterly different. Their sound, their feel: each reflect a very different way of understanding and giving shape to the world. It fascinates me to reflect upon the fact that in the four hundred or so years since the death of Shakespeare English has evolved above all as a language of conquest. Of conquest in the political and imperialist sphere; conquest, too, in the sense that it has evolved as part of a gigantic effort to dominate the natural world.

In other words, we have evolved a language that is extremely good at describing the external world. What is often much harder for us to do is to describe the internal world of our feelings and our emotions.

I know that the famous English "stiff upper lip" is something of a cliché; but like many such hackneyed sayings, it also contains a truth. As the victim of a very typically English upbringing, of "une education anti-sentimentale", I know from my own experience how thoroughly we are taught to mistrust our feelings, to fear them, even, to dominate and master them.

This is reflected in many works written for the English and the American stage. There is the text, which may contain intellectual argument, or trivial remarks, but underneath the text is a generally a gigantic sub-text of feelings which remain generally unspoken but which it is the actor's job to communicate to the audience. What is left unspoken is generally as important, sometimes far more important, than what is actually spoken.

Similarly, when a character in a British play is troubled by strong emotion, then he, and this applies most particularly to a he, will become incoherent and express himself in very few words.

This is undoubtedly not the case in Calderón. Rosaura, for instance, is in the grip of a very strong emotion, and has absolutely no hesitation in expressing it. In that sense, this passage contains no sub-text at all. Indeed, generally in Calderón the stronger the emotion

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felt by the character, the greater number of passionate and eloquent and extraordinarily beautiful words he or she will use to express that feeling[10].

This poses tremendous practical problems for a conventionally trained British actor, accustomed both to finding and expressing a sub-text (which here is absent) and to forcefully expressing emotion in very few words (whereas here s/he is expected to do the opposite).

One way of understanding the task confronting a playwright at the beginning of a play is to think of it as a task requiring the organisation of vital information.

Let's place the opening of *La vida es sueño* in the context of the opening of another famous play:

Enter Francisco and Barnardo, two sentinels

BARNARDO	Who's there?
FRANCISCO	Nay answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.
BARNARDO	Long live the King!
FRANCISCO	Barnardo?
BARNARDO	He.
FRANCISCO	You come most carefully upon your hour.
BARNARDO	Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.
FRANCISCO	For this relief much thanks, 'Tis bitter cold, And I am sick at heart.
BARNARDO	have you had quiet guard?
FRANCISCO	Not a mouse stirring.
BARNARDO	Well, goodnight. If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus, The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.

Enter HORATIO and MARCELLUS.[11]

It is very obvious that here Shakespeare is choosing to give us information of a very different kind. Even in this very short scene, he has

- Identified four of the characters by name
- Used the resources of the stage to show us precisely where they are - on a castle battlements
- Shown us what are they doing
- Told us what time of day it is (midnight)
- Told us that although the guard duty is apparently quiet, there is still a lot of danger about
- Told us what the weather is like (very British: it is apparently a nasty cold night).

You'll notice that all of these pieces of information refer to the outer circumstances of the world he is describing. From a technical point of view, it is remarkably skilful of him, by the way, to convey so much information with such apparent naturalness in so short a space of time.

What is also striking is that of all this information about the outer world, only six words refer at all directly to the inner world and to the feelings of the characters:

FRANCISCO: ...And I am sick at heart.

[10] There are examples of this without number. I think particularly of the long passionate soliloquies of Gutierre in *El médico de su honra.*

[11] SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet,* act one scene i.

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And note how even here how terribly British is his companion's response: he simply passes over the remark in silence and changes the subject at once: as if to spare Francisco the embarrassment that must inevitably follow any direct expression of feeling.

There could hardly be a greater contrast with Rosaura's speech, which gives us very little information about the external circumstances of the character who speaks it, but a huge amount of information about her inner turmoil. We don't know her identity, her destination, her purpose, or where exactly she is. Nothing at present about the time of day and nothing about the weather.

And those few clues we are given -she has fallen off a bolting horse, she is on the slopes of a wild and rocky mountain in Poland- seem to be very clearly symbolic representations of her inner state of turmoil and of loss. The Poland she speaks of is not the country of the geography books, whose capital is Warsaw, and whose principal river is the Vistula -it is a Poland of the mind, a place of inner desolation and despair.

I do not wish to draw general conclusions about the two writers from the contrast between these two scenes. It would be a mistake to caricature Shakespeare as some of kind of realist dramatist *avant la lettre* just as it would be absurd to claim that Calderón's work never takes into account his characters' external realities. I simply want to point out to you two contrasting tendencies in their dramatic art.

There is a whole story that now needs to be told of how after Shakespeare's death the Puritans came into power; of how Shakespeare's beautiful round theatres came to be destroyed. Of how Shakespeare's own work was almost lost along with his theatres, and would surely have disappeared without the devotion and admiration of his actors, who organised the publication of the first Folio.

When the theatres were reopened in the reign of Charles II, they were indoor theatres, lit by artificial light, and followed the French model. Actresses replaced boy actors; and the next two centuries saw the gradual retreat of the actor from the thrust stage of Shakespeare's theatre to the relative safety of behind the proscenium arch.

You'll notice how the stage on which I am standing pushes out in a semicircle so that as I stand on the furthest point of this semicircle you surround me on three sides. If I retreat to the curtain -even though it is only a distance of a few feet- the whole dynamic of our intercourse is transformed.

Technological advances, such as the invention first of gas lighting and then electric lighting for theatres complete the picture; and by the beginning of the twentieth century the stage is almost exclusively used for the representation of the external world.

And there, in my country, with a few honourable exceptions, it has by and large remained.

It is astonishing to think of; on the whole British theatre artists are rather like painters who are still painting in the style of the impressionists or composers still writing symphonies like Tchaikovsky.

If theatre really does represent the temper of its age, then perhaps it still represents and expresses that part of the British psyche that has never quite managed to shrug off the mantle of Empire: that still insists we keep hold of an utterly grotesque and useless "nuclear deterrent" and maintains us in absurd isolation from the rest of the continent of Europe. And also, and perhaps most importantly, from the reality of our situation.

For it is ironic that our theatre should by and large remain frozen at the stage of its development when were still at the height of the success of the British Imperial project; and that still, even now, it should commonly be believed that British theatre is "the best in the world".

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It really is time we moved on. Moved on both in terms of the way we write and present plays, and the ways in which we prepare actors to perform them.

Not least because in simply using the theatre's proscenium arch to frame representations of the external realities of our existence we are competing with the cinema in ways which show off theatre's capacities to their worst advantage. Theatre really cannot compete with cinema in the display of striking or beautiful images of the outer world. Theatre, by contrast, is best equipped to create images of the inner world.

I remember a moment in the rehearsals for my adaptation of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* in which Miss Havisham is showing Pip the grisly remains of her wedding cake:

MISS HAVISHAM: Look Pip where the cobwebs are.
It's a bride cake. Mine.
On this day, Pip, long before you were born,
They brought here this heap of decay.
It and I have worn away together.
The mice have gnawed at it, and sharper teeth than mice
Have gnawed at me.[12]

At that very moment, the designer brought into the rehearsal room the actual representation of the decayed wedding cake that she had been working on for some days. But we all understood very clearly that the image formed in our imaginations by the actress performing Dickens' words was infinitely stronger than anything the poor designer could possibly create. And so her cake was thrown out with the rubbish. We could all create much better pictures with our minds.

In the same way, it was a huge pleasure just then to perform that part of Rosaura's speech when she informs us we are in Poland:

"Mal, Polonia, recibes a un extranjero"

- because that moment so beautifully, so economically and yet so powerfully transports us to a Poland. A Poland of all of our imaginations that in each of you will be different and yet in each of you infinitely wilder and more interesting than the Poland that could be created by any stage designer behind this arch.

It as at these moments of the collective and the individual imagination that theatre shows itself at its best. No other medium can achieve them; and Calderón was a great master of creating them.

And perhaps that is why, although Calderón is still in the British theatre a marginalized and eccentric figure, the British theatre desperately needs Calderón. For he points the path to its revival.

[12] CLIFFORD, J., *Great Expectations.* In: FRY, M. (ed.), *Frontline Drama 4,* Mthuen. London, 1996, p. 200.

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