19. BAD TRANSLATION

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Paraguay is the only Latin American country where most of the population speaks one Indigenous language. Macaronic literature burgeoned there in the nineties amid Alfredo Stroessner's dictatorship ending in 1989 and Guaraní becoming an official language in 1992. Contemporary proponents range from Jopara (Spanish and Guaraní hybrid) poet Susy Delgado to Portunhol Selvagem (Portuguese and Jopara hybrid) lyric essayist Damián Cabrera. However, Guaraní culture has been subverting mestizaje, which defines the aesthetic of Latin American nationalisms and colonization, since the sixteenth century Spanish conquest of what is now Paraguay.

The Guaraní linguistic world is preserved through its rendition in and alteration of the Spanish linguistic world. Literarily untranslated words communicate the incompatibility between languages, and footnoted cultural translations bridge Indigenous and colonial cosmologies. A historical outcome of rendering Guaraní myths legible in Spanish is that they capture settler colonialists' imaginations. These settlers make mythical world-making real by creating dystopias that displace Indigenous communities. The Land-without-Evil made Paraguay the site of multiple settler colonies. This Guaraní myth refers to "a privileged, indestructible place where the earth itself provides fruit and where one does not die" (Clastres 1995). It inspired the Garden of Eden founded by Russian Mennonites, which I describe in my fiction collection *An Archipelago in a Landlocked Country*.

Paraguayan **authors turn into translators** to write in Spanish. However, they refuse to translate some Guaraní words. These ñe'ẽs, or **"word-souls,"** are untranslatable because they conjure ancient mythical beings. For example, the Pombero is summoned by a tuñe, or

whistle. Therefore, Guaraní word-souls are woven into their Spanish prose. I understand texts and cultures as webs of significance spun by human beings. The macaronic literary form is inspired by ñandutí, or **"spider's web,"** a Spanish lace whose weblike pattern represents Guaraní symbols. This textile technique illustrates how Guaraní culture exemplifies and subverts the mestizaje concept of mutually cannibalizing cultural codes and the baroque notion of decorazione assoluta in conjunction (Echeverría 1998; Adorno 1997). It is emancipated from its purpose, to decorate, and the colonial cultural forms are transfigured with remnants of the pre-Hispanic world.

The subversion of mestizaje defines **"bad" translation**: Indigenous linguistic and cultural codes are untranslatable into colonial ones, but not vice versa. Thus, Guaraní word-souls are incorporated into a Spanish vocabulary and possess readers of the latter language if they catch the mythical references. These **writers/translators turn into anthropologists** to culturally translate the literarily untranslatable terms in footnotes. They describe these mythical spirits in the context of a Guaraní cosmology. I call this **mythopoetizaje**, the recreation of myths (mythopoesis) born out of mestizaje. Unlike poesis, a creative force, mythopoesis is recreative, it offers a different way of being (ontology) within the existing world. Guaraní recreated myths are not facts from the past nor utopias for the future but serve as an imaginary and conceptual beyond from which to critique the present: this is true fiction.

Word-souls are "mythemes" (Lévi-Strauss 1963) or differential, relational, and plural constituent units of myth. The double vision required to recognize the soul in a badly translated word evinces another way of being in and understanding the world. This dual communication hinges on attunement, which I understand as speaking in order to listen to others, rather than eloquence, listening to yourself. The inclination of baroque mestizo writing to the act of listening can be traced to its origin in orality. The poet Elicura Chihuailaf (1999) describes oralitura (oral literature) in relation to the Mapuche concept of nüxam, as a conversation with one's deceased elders as well as a depiction of contemporary life, partly oral and partly written. The other whom you attune to can be your interlocutor or a word-soul. The latter

weave a recreated mythical beyond which transcends "the willing suspension of disbelief" (Coleridge 1907). Thus, mythopoetizaje not only leads readers to imagine an alternate reality, but also to think differently and alter their behavior.

Inspired by Paraguayan bilingual authors, I propose a writing/translation/ethnography practice for conversing between other Indigenous and colonial linguistic worlds. The concept clusters I coined—**writer/translator/anthropologist**—and lyric terms—**webs of word-souls**, **"bad" translation**, and **mythopoetizaje**—constitute a model that others can practice. My concepts invert valuations and expand, not delimit, the identity and practice of my ethnographic interlocutors (contemporary Paraguayan writers), which I partly share as a Paraguayan-born writer and translator. Like them, I know to carefully handle webs of word-souls that gesture to ancient worlds because they are as fragile as they are complex.

The following can be considered an ethnography of a poetry collection. *Ita ha'eñoso/Ya no está sola la piedra Formerly and Again Known as Pyambu/Dream Pattering Soles* is a trilingual chapbook written in Guaraní by Miguelángel Meza (2021); translated into Spanish by Carlos Villagra Marsal, Jacobo Rauskin, and the author; and subsequently translated into English by me. *Pyambu* (Dream Pattering Soles), the original title, was replaced by the Spanish translators with *Ya no está sola la piedra* (The Stone Is No Longer Alone), whose literal Guaraní translation, *Naha'eñovéima ita*, was rejected by the author and replaced with *Ita ha'eñoso* (Solitude Abandons Stone). The transformation of the title, illustrated by the following diagrams and explained in the footnotes, demonstrates how my ethnographic English translation from Guaraní, via a Spanish bridge, draws out cultural references implicit in the original:

Ita ha'eñoso/Ya no está sola la piedra Formerly and Again Known as Pyambu/Dream Pattering Soles[1]

[1] The slashes between the Guaraní titles and their translations denote "and/or," and represent the resemblances and differences between the versions. Variation is due to the inequivalences between the syntax and vocabulary of the source and target languages. Similarity is due to the sequencing of the translations (i.e., the English could not exist without the Spanish bridge). They also denote line breaks and represent how each version continues where the last left off by expounding additional connotations latent in the original.

Ita ha'eñoso

Dream Pattering Soles *Ya no está sola la piedra*

Pyambu[2]

[2] This diagram illustrates how the versions relate cyclically as well as sequentially. The English differs from the Spanish because it accesses the Guaraní directly and alters it, as exemplified by the recovery of the former title (*Pyambu/Dream Pattering Soles*). Revisiting the bilingual edition, *Ita ha'eñoso/Ya no está sola la piedra* (1985), thirty-six years after publication led the author to edit the original for the 2021 trilingual edition. Inversely, the English resembles the Spanish if it is truer to the poem's intention than the Guaraní, according to Meza, the author and Spanish co-translator. There are two bridges between the original and the English translation: Meza and the Spanish translation.

Pyambu *Ita ha'eñoso*

Dream Pattering Soles *Ya no está sola la piedra*

Pombero (Solitude Abandons Stone)

Attunement[3]

[3] This diagram illustrates the literal and literary or metaphoric meanings of the titles. The metaphors stand in for practices of attunement to other ways of being and beings in the world. The oneiric auditory image (*Dream Pattering Soles*) makes you aware of menacing presences, deities turned human—including the Pombero, a character from Paraguayan mythology. The affective visual image (Solitude Abandons Stone) makes you aware of multiple comforting presences, the humanity of the nonhuman—including a mineral.

Dream Pattering Soles is a contemporary counterpart to *Ayvu Rapyta* (The Foundation of Human Language), a collection of sacred Mbyá Guaraní myths transcribed and translated into Spanish by the anthropologist León Cadogan (1959). I untranslated the Guaraní terms that reference these myths, and expounded their literal and cultural meanings in the notes that accompany the chapbook. Meza creates a lyric flow between the ancient and new word. His writing/translation/ethnography practice consists of channeling word-souls. The slashes in the names of this practice and collection represent the interdisciplinary and interlinguistic mediation between realms. Accessing the imaginary and conceptual beyond requires altering language by incorporating word-souls.

Meza's central figures of speech are metaphors and metonymies used in conjunction. One thing substitutes another which is part of a whole. The attribute of a particular god is identifiable in a human, while that of any human is identifiable in an animal or object. The anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) claims, "Animism, interpreted as human sociality projected onto the nonhuman world, would be nothing but the metaphor of a metonymy." In *Dream Pattering Soles*, metaphors for metonymies topple the nature/culture/supernature triad and are replaced by literality. Animals are human and everything is sacred, immortal, cyclical. Paraphrasing the researcher Gloria E. Chacón (2018), the cosmos and the quotidian are symbiotic. This "thought as felt and feeling as thought" (Williams 1977) is encrypted in those words in that order; it cannot be restated but shows the reader how to become attuned to other kinds of realities.

The writer and researcher Mario Castells (2013) says of *Dream Pattering Soles*, "many words in avañe'ẽ [Guaraní] are micro-units of mythic narratives, ancient bridges that link Paraguayan society to their Guaraní ancestors." The phrase "Jasy ra'ýnteko ojovahéi hína" is a mytheme that references "The Myth of the Twins: Genesis of the Sun and the Moon." Its literal translation is "the new moon is washing its face" and literary translation, "torrential rain." It signifies that heavy rainfall and the first lunar phase are coinciding. The relationship between the moon and rain renders them parts of a whole, the natural world and Mbyá Guaraní cosmology. In *Dream Pattering Soles*, literality

ultimately replaces metaphor, as attunement leads from being *with* to becoming yourself *in* an other: the lyric voice, the Pombero, or a stone freed from solitude.

Ayvu Rapyta begins with the myth of "The Customs of the Hummingbird." Ñamandú, the first being on the still barren earth, appears out of the shadows and is nursed by the primordial hummingbird. He then gains sight, literally translated as "divine wisdom," and hearing, literally, the ability to "hear-everything." The translated title of the collection, *The Foundation of Human Language*, implies that this being is animated by the word-souls that allow him to describe birth and name the original elements, the same words that compose this myth. *Dream Pattering Soles* begins with the poem "Apu/ Aparezco/Appear," which thematically (though not stylistically) responds to the aforementioned myth. A disembodied lyric voice awakes in the shadows of what might be a womb or a lightless primeval world. This awakening resembles birth:

> Asẽ.
> Ajupi.
> Añakãrapu'ãsapy'a.
>
> Salgo,
> subo.
> Súbitamente levanto la cabeza.
>
> Emerge,
> ascend.
> Suddenly I raise my head.[4]

The lyric voice becomes cognizant of its body. Action is abstract and consists of single-verb lines. Darkness conceals the body that the voice describes in movement. This interconnected whole speaks for itself as well as for everything by morphing into different beings. The author is not veiled in the lyric voice and the chapbook itself is not fully autonomous, as it contains references to *Ayvu Rapyta*.

[4] The trilingual block quotes from *Dream Pattering Soles* intentionally interrupt the flow of the essay. They formally gesture to the absent presence of the Guaraní original and the Spanish bridge. In addition, they illustrate how the versions resemble or differ from each other.

The setting, which is as unimaginable as the body that the voice belongs to, is conveyed by single-adjective lines describing nothing but themselves, including the first line, "Dark…" This inhospitable landscape blurs the difference between origin and end-times. In this world, the *I* keeps vigil, guarding against an other's presence. However, the latter is denied by the final lines:

> Cheño gueteri.
> Cheño gueteri.
>
> Pero aún estoy solo.
> Aún estoy solo.
>
> But I am still alone.
> Truly alone.

The penultimate line in English follows the Spanish "Pero aún estoy solo" (But I am still alone). The English chorus literally translates the Guaraní, "Cheño gueteri" (I am truly alone), and differs from the Spanish, "Aún estoy solo" (I am still alone). The last line in English varies from the bridge, the original, and its own chorus, by omitting the pronoun "I" and the verb "to be." This omission gestures to the lack of distinction between the body of the lyric voice and the enveloping darkness, life and death, one and an other. Sometimes what rings wrong in translation is an invitation to think otherwise. The channel that the poem traverses must make itself felt in metatextual form through difference from the original. These instances in which the translator briefly transforms into an author will convey to the reader that they are reading a version; so these interventions do not damage but rather protect the original.

What is utterable and visible does not need to be interpreted as it constitutes the central metaphor, the poet's principal device. The creative linguistic function in relation to lines of light is explored in the poem "Ñe'ẽ reñói/Brota el lenguaje/Language Sprouts," which mirrors the myth of "The Foundation of Human Language," as they both analyze poesis. In *Ayvu Rapyta*, Ñamandú creates and is created by human

language before the earth itself, amid primordial shadows, and before knowledge of things existed. In some versions, Ñamandú is not only kept alive by the bird, aforementioned in "The Customs of the Hummingbird" myth, but also becomes him. Then solitude leads Ñamandú to form the other gods, who together create the earth: Ñanderu py'a guasu, Father of Words; Karaí, Owner of Fire; Yakairá, Owner of Dew, Fog, and Smoke; and Tupã, Owner of Water, Rain, and Thunder. In "Language Sprouts," these four gods are conjured by invoking the elements they symbolize:

Ha …
ojahúvo pytũre,
ohypýi tatatĩna pererĩmi.
Hendy ha tatatĩna pererĩmi.
Oñekũmberéi tatarendy
ha hyapúvo,
Oñe'ẽ tatatĩna.

Oikóma ñe'ẽ.

Y al bañarse de oscuridad,
rocía neblina delgada,
resplandor y neblina delgada.
A sí misma se lame la fogata
y al crepitar
conversa la neblina.

Ya se hizo el lenguaje.

And bathed in darkness,
fog falls as dew,
radiance and fog.
Fire licks itself
and crackles,
conversing with mist.

Now ñe'ẽ exists.

The Mbyá Guaraní elements differ from the Western ones of earth, water, fire, and air. While the Spanish repeats "neblina" and the Guaraní

"tatatĩna" three times, the English alternates between "dew," "fog," and "mist." This inclination towards specificity and succinctness when naming the nonhuman is counterbalanced by the fact that all three forms of condensation are one insofar as they are Yakairá. The gods are not named but the closer the translation comes to the elements they symbolize, the more their omnipresence is rendered. What the voice and the Guaraní elements share is humanity. The world comes into existence with the appearance and transformation of the voice into stone.

"Ñe'ẽ," in the last line of the block quote above, is translated literarily or metaphorically as "language" in the title of the poem, untranslated in the body, and translated literally in an accompanying note as "word-soul." If "ñe'ẽ" had only been translated literarily as "language," the words as well as the collection as a whole would have been stripped of their anima and poesis. In addition, the references to mythical characters and the shadow text, *Ayvu Rapyta*, would have been expunged while their potential to affect and alter the conduct of readers would have been dismantled. This term can only be conveyed through cultural translation, by which I do not mean describing the skills and habits of a society, but rather introducing a concept that invites the reader to think differently about language in general. Only by understanding this term and all others as potentially animate, can this poetry collection be truly read. Beings like the lyric voice or Ñamadú always exist but are never born, and they do not die but hide temporarily. What precedes and succeeds them is not pitch dark but twilight.

After the loss of solitude and acquisition of language the speaker is conflicted between attempting and refusing to communicate. This internal tension is externalized through the emergence of light or sound so darkness or silence recede but only to reemerge. In "Mimby/Flauta/Flute," one of twenty-two poems from the original bilingual collection excluded from the trilingual chapbook, the voice becomes wind traversing underground tunnels and the perforated earth, a flute. The breath attempting to emerge through holes in the soil calls out:

che jopy, che jopy, che jopy.

me oprimen, me oprimen, me oprimen.

I am oppressed, I am oppressed, I am oppressed.

This slip of the tongue in the English and Guaraní versions, subtler in Spanish, is intentional. The odd word choice reveals that the orifices of the musical instrument are not blocked, but freedom of speech is repressed. This poem was published during Stroessner's dictatorship. Censorship is represented by and enacted on the author in this necessarily subliminal message. The socio-political context is understood and transcended by a mythical Guaraní order of being, as differences between the player, instrument, and air become blurred. The voice explains:

Chepype aikéva. Chejehegui asẽva.

Soy el que entra en sí mismo, el que de sí mismo sale.

I enter myself. I emerge from myself.

The self and context are indivisible. The voice enters itself in order not to witness but cannot cease denouncing. He is like the earth, its wind instrument, revealing the traces others leave on its surface be it litter on a sidewalk or tracks in the mud.

The promise of companionship takes the form of a deity turned human or the humanity of the nonhuman. These opposing ways of warding off solitude represent various dichotomies: the individual and society, Western and Amerindian cosmologies, and the origin and end of the world. What lies blurred between them are the concessions survival entails. The deity turned human haunting my translation is the Pombero. This character from Paraguayan-Guaraní mythology, also known as Chopombe, is described as red-haired with the body of a small man but the face of a devil. If those who enter the forest leave him tobacco and moonshine, he becomes their protector. If they do not, he becomes their enemy; he sexually assaults the women and claims their

children as his own. His victims are his only witnesses. This myth is common throughout Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil; the media still reports sightings of him in the rural Triple Frontier region.

The Pombero appears throughout the collection but is only named and described physically in "Mboriahu/Pobreza/Poverty." His presence becomes conflated with one of the few human characters in the collection, an unnamed homeless man asleep next to his dog in the shade of a queen palm. The lyric voice accesses the Pombero through sounds that verge on language. First, he takes aural form in the dreamer's moans and then, in pacing footsteps, which may occur in reality, his memories, or dreams:

> ¡Oikytĩ pirĩ tuñe'ẽ!
> Heñói kerasy.
> Chopombe
>   oguata
>   okupére.
>
> Un silbo corta el calofrío.
> Aflora el quejido al sueño.
> El duende
>   trajina
>   detrás de la casa.
>
> Piercing whistle erupts goosebumps.
> Moaning nightmares surface.
> Chopombe
>   paces
>   out back.

Instead of following the Spanish version by translating Chopombe as "duende" (elf), the English leaves the Guaraní untranslated. Naming him retains his characteristics from Paraguayan-Guaraní mythology, which are described in the notes. I also refer there to his depictions in newspaper articles and oral narratives that continue to circulate. Looking briefly past the potential for cruelty, there is desperation in the astuteness of this character. In this poem, Meza denounces the experience of need bluntly but without morbid details. "Poverty" left

me asking: What kind of escape do myth and poetry provide one in material need?

The Pombero never speaks but emits unintelligible noises. These auditory images are cinematic because they are narrated in the third person, and sound is transformed through the imagination into sight. "Whistle" and "dream pattering souls," eponymous with the collection, are word-souls associated with the spirit of the Pombero. They appear in "Ñasaindy/Plenilunio/Full Moon" and "Y'ita pererĩ/Delgada piedra de agua/Pebble," and are culturally translated in the notes. The lyric voice describes the Pombero's visits to sleepers. The nearly comprehensible sounds emitted by dreamers, moans, and the mythical character, the whistle, along with their joint status as absent presences blurs the difference between them. The physicality of the sleepers and the nighttime events are indicated by miniscule or astronomical details. In "Full Moon," the reader is told that the sleeper's "Legs shrink," but it is unclear if he is curling up or transforming into the Pombero, given his short stature. As night ends, even the absent sun is implicated in what took place:

> Oipykua mbyjápe jasy
> ha oho ho'a, oguejy, oike, okañy.
> … otĩ vaicha
>   iko'ẽ hag̃ua yvy ári.
>
> La luna sujeta las estrellas
> y se va cayendo, desciende, penetra; se oculta
> como si se avergonzara
>   de amanecer sobre la tierra.
>
> Moon ties stars to sky
> and falls, penetrates, hides
> —as if ashamed
>   to dawn on earth.

The embarrassment of the dawn cements that something occurred which oversteps the oneiric threshold, even if spirit possession was involved.

The poems in sequence tell the story of gradually discovering everything is alive and then dying or dead. "Mainumby/Colibrí/

Hummingbird," the sixth of ten poems, marks the shift towards death. The bird, unlike the Pombero, does not provoke a becoming that renders events unsayable and unseeable but, instead, more sensorially available. The lyric voice maintains its distinct character while morphing into another. The name of the primordial bird, Mainumby, is untranslated in the body of this poem. This proper noun restores its humanity. As its wing almost imperceptibly grazes the lips of the embodied voice it begins to tell Mainumby's story:

> Nde juru puku mboy'úpe,
> rehasávo yvytu
> che ãhóre reje'o;
> ka'aguýpe
>   embokua.
>
> Con tu largo pico libador
> perforas el monte,
> y al cruzar el viento
> te sellas en mis suspiros.
>
> Your long sipping beak
> pierces
>   the forest,
> and traversing the wind
> you seal my sighs.

In its flightpath an "aleph" (Borges 1998) opens, a point in space that contains all others. The voice witnesses a group of men turning into a stream, and the forest collapsing into itself and immolating. The poem ends with the hummingbird growing to a supernatural size and coming to resemble a crow. In the last two lines, its wing grazes the embodied voice's cheek and the *I* falls, a reference to "The Man Who Resembled the Sun." In the myth, an owl impregnates the first woman by grazing her head with its wing. Here, the same action provokes what can be interpreted as death or loss of all-knowingness.

Narrative, like ethnography, lends itself to description. The characteristic concision of poetry strips renditions of reality to their essence, akin to a ghostly presence. The visual image of an apocalypse in minia-

ture and the almost tactile image of the bird becoming part of the disembodied voice portray a world as real as the presence of the hummingbird. However, this intangible reality can only be alluded to through metaphors for metonymies, never revealed in its entirety without neutralizing its potential to affect. In the same way that possession makes a becoming visible, atmospheric poetry makes a being with, in suspension, experientially available. Such a poem renders the feeling of being nothing and everything at once; essentially, connected.

Meza's poetry collection traces a lyric arc from nothing to nothing, only the flicker of an unfulfilled promise of companionship between birth and death. The collection ends with the poem "Y'ita pererĩ/Delgada piedra de agua/Pebble." The title in English mirrors the tendency towards concision in Guaraní, which cannot be achieved in Spanish. The literal translation of the Spanish title, "Slim Water Stone," is lyrical but sacrifices specificity. Opting for naming over description may recreate the micro-unit of myth in another language through translation, a sort of summoning. The epigraph reads "End times;" not only does the voice enter the void and the collection conclude, but so does this world. He finds himself alone but with his soul. This separation between the physical and spiritual is present in all the poems, but now it is the body that speaks. As the wind razes, he becomes mineral:

> Ojehýi yvytu,
> mbegue ojepyso.
> Ipohýi ã itaky sarambi.
>
> Hormiguea el viento
> y lentamente se propaga.
> Pesa este roquedal disperso.
>
> Tingling wind
> sprawls slowly.
> Dispersed stones anchor.

Darkness reclaims the human language of the lyric voice. First, it becomes an intelligible sound: a whistle rising from a swamp that means "hear how it hurts!" Then, in the last line, it exclaims:

Ama'ẽ arasẽre ha oke,
oke … arasẽ.
¡Mamóiko ko'ẽ rekañy … !

Miro el Naciente y está dormido,
está dormido el Naciente.
¡Dónde te has perdido, amanecer!

Look East, it is asleep,
sun asleep.
You lost yourself, dawn!

The same sun that was ashamed to dawn is now lost. Losing the ability to see and ceasing to exist come as a relief to the voice, equivalent to the anguish of awakening. Earlier in the poem, the last line appears as a question, "You lost yourself, dawn?" As an exclamation, it reproaches some(thing/one) lost in a game turned serious. Not only life and death but the good and harm done to survive are staked in light and dark. The chorus, "Soul alone," which echoes that of the first poem, "I am truly alone," also feels like a question. The promise of companionship lingers behind this collection.

The opposite of being alone is having another within you or everything around you being animate. *Dream Pattering Soles* operates partly within a Western cosmology and partly within an Amerindian one, especially when in dialogue with *Ayvu Rapyta*. Viveiros de Castro explains that "the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a 'clothing') which conceals an internal human form" (Viveiros de Castro 1998). In both the threatening and consoling instances of companionship, the lyric voice acts as a medium attuned to deities turned human or the humanity of the nonhuman. A serious language game animates these spirits beyond the pages of the chapbook. It is unclear whether the collection ends with the world or whether this is a wink to the reader, as if it will now become real. *Ayvu Rapyta* creates a narrative arc from creation to apocalypse to recreation, so the cycle recurs.

Meza's *Dream Pattering Soles* is essentially untranslatable. The poems in this collection refuse to abide by the rules of the target language because they do not obey those of the source. The ungraspable essence,

embodied by the italicized words that root the book to its origin, is a personal language. The untranslated terms summon myths, but there are many more words that evoke memories for the author yet remain inaccessible to the reader. However, words pushed to the limits of becoming sounds briefly bridge not only linguistic and cultural gaps but also the distance between individuals, creating a sense of connection. When I spoke to Meza on the phone, he began describing the silence of Luque, where he lives, then stopped so I could hear a traveling salesman calling his wares and, after he passed by, a cricket. This auditory image offered a return to the sincerity encapsulated in his poems. Lyricism does not allow for distance; one feels what the words express before fully understanding them. Bad translation requires true faith to recreate the aphoristic essence of a poem, while remaining under its spell.

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