

## A HUMBLE FORM\*

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was the only work Oscar Wilde wrote and published in the last phase of his life, between his arrest in 1895 and his early death in Paris five years later (*De Profundis*, his last prose work, was posthumously published). It is also his only poem with a denunciatory intent; its forcefulness, though marred by melodramatic excesses, contrasts with the feeble tone of most of the poetry written by Wilde, who is today respected mostly for his plays and his critical and fictional prose. Much of the poem's strength derives from the form chosen by the author: the ballad.

The English ballad is a form widely used in popular narrative poetry. The first and third lines of each stanza have four feet, while the second and fourth have three; the rhyme scheme is *abcb*. Syllable count is not strict, and there may be occasional deviations from the pattern even in the counting of feet, as long as the four-to-three rhythm predominates. In ballads written by sophisticated poets — as in the masterpiece of the genre, Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" — the irregularities in the form are calculated effects, to give the poem a sort of seal of authenticity.

Wilde's ballad is now available in a translation by the late Paulo Vizioli, the São Paulo translator who gave us Portuguese renditions of a large number of major works of English-language literature. As ever, Vizioli attempts in this translation a close formal approximation to the original. But his method, which led to fine results in other works — most notably Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* — has been less than successful here. In the case of Pope, a Neoclassical poet who works with rigorously metrifed and rhymed iambic pentameters (that is, lines with five feet, each foot consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable), Vizioli's decision to use rhymed alexandrines proved a brilliant solution, but here the result is disappointing. Let us see why.

In *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* iambic feet also predominate. The alternation between four-feet and three-feet lines means, in theory, that long lines should have eight syllables and short lines six. But, as we have seen, in ballads the counting of syllables is of little relevance; what really counts is the pattern of four-stress lines alternating with three-stress lines — a rhythm that, in the ears of English speakers, is associated with popular poetry and nursery rhymes, a large body of poetry characterized by homeliness and narrative character. In his translation, Vizioli uses stanzas in which twelve-syllable lines alternate with six-syllable lines. (The choice of longer lines than in English is justified: since English words are shorter than Portuguese words, eight syllables pack a lot more meaning in English than in Portuguese.) And Vizioli reproduces quite faithfully other formal features of the original: he even reproduces the internal rhymes that are sometimes to be heard between the second and the fourth beat of the four-foot lines: thus he renders "Right in we wént, with sóul intént" (the accents indicate the stressed syllables) as "*Reentramos com calma, remoendo n'alma.*" But the stanza he uses — alexandrines alternating with hexasyllables — is simply not a standard form in Portuguese poetry, and certainly not in our popular poetry. And nothing could be more alien to the folksiness of the English ballad form than the general effect of Vizioli's ponderous lines, more strictly metered than the original.

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In addition, the translator's decision to stick closely to the original come what may forces him to resort to enjambments and inversions that make his text stray even more from the artless tone sought by Wilde. Verses as simple and straightforward as "They think a murderer's heart would taint / Each simple seed they sow" turn into a passage of Parnassian<sup>1</sup> convolution: "*Julgam que o coração de um assassino os grãos / Plantados mancha e estanca.*"

Could a better solution be found? What is to be done if the ballad — unlike the sonnet or the ottava rima, forms employed in so many European literatures — is an English form without a close Portuguese equivalent? A newspaper review is hardly the place to propose an alternative translation for a book-length poem; but it would not be difficult to think of possible solutions. There are poetic forms in Brazilian Portuguese that, although formally not equivalent to the English ballad, may be said to correspond to it functionally. One is the *redondilha maior*, the popular seven-syllable line, loosely metrified, resorting mostly to imperfect rhymes, which was dignified by João Cabral de Melo Neto in so many masterly works. Another option would be the anapestic nine-syllable line that Gonçalves Dias memorably used with hypnotic effect in many sections of his "I-Juca-Pirama," a work that by itself amounts to a whole tradition of narrative poetry. How would the lines quoted above — "They think a murderer's heart would taint / Each simple seed they sow" — sound if these two solutions were adopted? Here they are in *redondilha maior*: "*Julgam que o coração / De um assassino enterrado / Tem o poder de corromper / O grão que ali foi plantado.*" And now in the "I-Juca-Pirama" meter: "*Coração de assassino, eles pensam, / Contamina a semente plantada.*" Either solution would force the translation to take daring liberties: for instance, my *redondilha* version rewrites two lines of the original as four. But such a translation, though less faithful to the letter of the original, would certainly be closer to its spirit. For the choice of the ballad form has a special meaning here: to Wilde, a fastidious and proud dandy, prison can only have been a profoundly humiliating experience, which destroyed his literary career, his marriage and his social reputation; he even converted to Catholicism on his deathbed. Clearly, it is a significant fact that, to deal with this shattering experience in verse, Wilde should have chosen the humblest of all English poetic forms. This is precisely what is lost in Vizioli's otherwise painstaking translation, and it is by no means a negligible loss.

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to a turn-of-the-century school of Brazilian poetry characterized by highfalutin language, formal strictness and syntax strained sometimes to the point of unintelligibility.