

Translating Alexandre O'Neill's "Peru" into English

by Alexis Levitin

How to make Alexandre O'Neill sound casual and witty in colloquial English? A tough task. Here's a try. Below is the original of O'Neill's "Peru," followed by my English translation.

Peru

Do peru, está tudo dito. Elefante do aviário, o peru não aguenta mais apodos.

Podemos, no entanto, garantir que o peru rupe, que não é mau com puré e que, embora prue, morre muito com urpe.

O melhor peru é o do vale do Epru. Mas não paga a pena mandá-lo vir de lá. Chegaria a vossas casas sem aquele repu que o caracteriza. Podeis, perum, supermercá-lo: vitaminado, vacinado, pesado, congelado, embalado, carimbado, comprovado. Aproveitai, no presente Natal, este superperu, que, para o ano, vendê-lo-ão já mastigado, em bisnagas cheias de préu.

Turkey

Of turkeys, it's all been said. Elephant of the chicken coop, the turkey can't take any more mockery. We can, however, guarantee that the turkey kyrutes, that it isn't bad with sauce, and that, although it's krutey, it dies with much teyruck.

The best turkey is from the Urytek valley. But it wouldn't pay to order it from there. It would arrive at your door without that "yutrek" for which it is so famous. You can, truckely, supermarket it: vitaminized, hormonized, sanitized, plasticized, computerized, standardized, justly prized. Take advantage, this very Christmas, of this superturkey which, a year from now, will come pre-chewed, in urkety-filled tubes.

The delight of the poem comes from O'Neill's word play, of course. Having earned his living in advertising, O'Neill was deeply familiar with the ploys of language used in marketing products. Here he is marketing a Christmas turkey, while mocking the world of commerce and clever publicity.

First of all, let us look at the gymnastics he puts the turkey through. "Peru" is echoed, mirrored, and mocked by words real and imagined: "rupe," "puré," "prue," and "urpe." Later on, we are told that at its best it comes from the "vale do Epru," that it is characterized by a distinctive "repu," and that "perum" (porem?), it will be sold in a pre-chewed form filled with "preu." Eight variants created by juggling the meager four letters of "Peru." What a challenge!

The word for "peru" in English is also just two syllables, but at least it provides two more letters to play with: "turkey." So here are the English inventions, sounding, I hope, rhythmically natural, as if they were real words conveying a real meaning.

"que o peru rupe" / "that the turkey kyrutes"

Please note the discarded possibilities before I arrived at the harmonious "kyrutes": "ruketyes," "ryketus," "urkytes," "ketyrus," and "rutykes." None sounded like something a turkey would be proud of. But, yes, indeed, a worthy turkey surely "kyrutes."

"não é mau com puré" works effortlessly in Portuguese, but I was unable to find an equivalent word-play in English, so settled for the ordinary locution "it isn't bad with sauce." To be true to our tradition, I probably should have said "it isn't bad with gravy."

"embora prue, morre muito com urpe." / "although it's krutey, it dies with much teyruck."

The word "krutey" works well, since it sounds similar to "cruddy," a slangish word for something of poor quality, something that displeases the speaker. Though the word "teyruck" is an invention, it sounds like a worthy character trait, something perky, defiant, even noble.

The next two plays-on-words were resolved without complexity:

"O melhor peru é o do vale do Epru." / "The best turkey is from the Urytek valley."
"aquele 'repu' que o caracteriza." / "that 'yutrek' for which it is so famous."

But now the translator has some fun. And is aided by a grammatical piece of luck:

"Podeis, perum, supermercá-lo" / "You can, truckily, supermarket it"

In English, "truckily" of course sounds like "luckily," for which the translator is mightily grateful. The next group of words worth noting does not play with the word "peru," but with the absurdities of the commercial preparation and packaging of the poor turkey in question.

"vitaminado, vacinado, pesado, congelado, embalado, carimbado, comprovado."

And here is the English, with its tour de force conclusion:

"vitaminized, harmonized, sanitized, plasticized, computerized, standardized, justly prized."

Many of the terms are interpolated, but they all come from the dehumanized and denaturalized world of commerce, of turning a dead turkey into a safe, anonymous product. Obviously I felt that the repeated ending "ized" was more important in conveying the spirit of O'Neill's original than a literal translation of the various processes could have achieved.

The conclusion in Portuguese plays with the sounds in "mastigado and "bisnagas," before coming to the final incarnation of the man-handled "peru."

"já mastigado, em bisnagas cheias de préu."

In English, "chewed" and "tubes" creates a similar assonantal echo, while the pre-chewed turkey is ludicrously and pitifully delivered in "urkety-filled tubes."

Sound is an essential part of a poem's power. In a humorous poem like "Peru," without an energetic, joyous playfulness of sounds, the spirit of the poem would be lost. I hope this translation shows how important it is to go beyond lexical "meaning" as one strives to translate the spirit of a poem, incarnated most fully in its sounds.

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