

Graduate Program in Translation
College of Humanities
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“Project for an Aesthetics of Thought” and “The Plenitude of Emptiness: The Thoughts
of Dōgen Zenji”
(a translation of “*El proyecto de una estética del pensamiento*” and “*La plenitud del
vacío: el pensamiento de Dōgen Zenji*” by Francisco José Ramos)

by
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Table of contents

Acknowledgments.....	v
Translator's Preface	
Introduction.....	vii
Textual Summary	x
Translation Method.....	xi
Thematic Influence and Style	xii
Lexicon and Word Usage.....	xv
Conclusion	xviii
Works Cited	xix
Bibliography	xx
“Project for an Aesthetics of Thought”	2
“The Plenitude of Emptiness: The Thoughts of Dōgen Zenji”	19

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Para Akira y Lirio, por su compañía constante.

Translator's Preface

Introduction

During the Spring semester of my second year, I began to think of possible texts for my thesis. At the time, I also started to view translation as a practice beyond the exchange of languages and ideas by questioning the ways in which it could influence or be of importance for its target audience.

Translation helps us relate to different peoples and cultures which, in turn, allows us to engage with a world outside our own. It is a matter of experiencing that which is foreign to us and reflecting the experience back to the readers. As the literary translator Philip Boehm has expressed:

Translating becomes a way to help people with limited vision. Elsewhere I have written about the necessity of imagination. Imagination is the key to empathy, and if we're not able to imagine peoples' lives, then our empathy diminishes.

Translation is a bridge that serves to enlarge imagination, to connect to the world. We're impoverished without it. (Boehm)

Even though his texts are originally written in Spanish, Francisco José Ramos believes that there is a unique philosophical experience that characterizes the human condition. This experience can be expressed in many languages, depending on the historical conditions and ways of thinking of a particular time and place, for a "genuine philosophical proposal surpasses its national character and creates its own language within the one it is written"¹ (*A propósito*, Ramos).

¹ Translation my own.

I have translated the following texts by Francisco José Ramos with the intent of bringing to light and disseminating a comprehensive philosophy that deserves as much attention and recognition as the work of any other scholar in the field. Due to the English language's status as *lingua franca* in academia—used by native and non-native speakers alike—by performing these translations, Ramos' philosophical contribution can be studied by academics on a more global scale.

As a recipient of the Formative Academic Experiences Program (PEAF, by its Spanish acronym), I have been working with the Philosophy Department, at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, from November 2019 to May 2021. My main tasks included translating articles, reviews, and conference presentations regarding the *Aesthetics of Thought*, a three-volume philosophical work by Francisco José Ramos, as well as assisting in any other elements of the translation project, which involved working hand in hand with Ramos himself to ensure the accuracy of the translations.

These translations will contribute to a larger dossier of a project called *Aesthetics of Thought: Translation of the Philosophical Trilogy of the Contemporary Latin American Philosopher Francisco José Ramos*, directed by Professor Dialitza Colón Pérez. This project emerged after Ramos gave a presentation at the XXIV World Congress of Philosophy held in Beijing, in August 2018. Ramos' presentation was highly acclaimed by various scholars from across the globe, yet it was unfortunate that his work could only be read in Spanish.

Francisco José Ramos is one of the most prominent minds in the field of contemporary Puerto Rican philosophical thought. Ramos was born in Caguas, Puerto Rico, in 1950, and subsequently completed most of his higher education abroad. In Spain,

he received a bachelor's degree (1976), as well as a Ph.D. (1982) in Philosophy at the Complutense University of Madrid. His graduate studies focused largely on the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, with a bachelor's thesis titled "*Pensamiento y metáfora en el Zarathustra de Nietzsche*" ["Thoughts and Metaphors in Nietzsche's Zarathustra"] and a doctoral dissertation titled "*El pensamiento de la transgresión en el proyecto filosófico nietzscheano*" ["Thoughts of Transgression in the Nietzschean Philosophical Project"]. While completing his Ph.D., he went to France to study at the University of Paris VIII. There, Ramos was able to deepen his understanding of philosophy by taking courses with various distinguished philosophers, such as Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou. By 1980, Ramos returned to Puerto Rico and began his prolific career as a professor at the University of Puerto Rico. Afterwards, he also co-founded the Puerto Rican Society of Philosophy in 1983 and worked as its director from 1989 to 1991.

La Estética del pensamiento [The Aesthetics of Thought] is Ramos' main philosophical project, which seeks to expound upon the author's understanding of thinking, and consequently writing, as a philosophical practice that cannot be separated from the perceptions of the body. In this context, aesthetics is not an allusion to questions of beauty, but what is perceptible by the senses. Its original Greek etymology of *aisthēsis* ("perception, sensation") must be kept in mind. This study can thus be depicted as "the science of the rules of sensibility" as Kant expressed (194).

Francisco José Ramos' main interests lie in the philosophies of Heraclitus, Buddha, Dōgen Zenji, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lacan, and Deleuze. In addition to his treatise of the *Aesthetics of Thought*, Ramos is also more broadly interested in the

subject of Buddhism. He is the cofounding member of the *Centro de Meditación y estudios Buddhistas del Caribe* [Caribbean Center for Meditation and Buddhist Studies], as well as an associate professor at the *Instituto de Estudios Buddhistas Hispano* [Hispanic Institute of Buddhist Studies]. During his time as a professor at the University of Puerto Rico, Ramos has given courses such as *Buddhism and Philosophy*, in which the students examine the convergence between Eastern and Western disciplines. Other prominent writings by Ramos include *La significación del lenguaje poético* (2012), as well as his poetry collection in *Cronografías* (1982) and *Erothema* (2017).

Textual Summary

The first text I have translated—titled “El proyecto de una estética del pensamiento” [“Project for an Aesthetics of Thought”]—was published in 1998 in *Tiempo de estética* by Ana María Leyra, a collection of ten philosophical essays regarding aesthetics and its importance in the development of human values. This essay reveals the beginnings of Ramos’ philosophical project of how, through thinking and its different manifestations (such as in the arts, science, and philosophy itself), individuals produce an endless multitude of images and concepts. According to the author, thoughts are a conglomeration of fixed images and configurations that constitute the act of thinking itself. This approach encourages the reader to consider concepts—as well as their “conceptualization”—as a reflection of the never-ending process of thinking.

Ramos believes philosophy is a literary experiment: “Writing as a kind of thinking,” (15) as he suggests in the introduction of the *Aesthetics of Thought: The*

Drama of Philosophical Writing; and, consequently, he regards the written word as a necessary condition for philosophy to emerge.

One of the main topics in this first translation is recognizing impermanence as a quality that surpasses any configuration or conceptual framework. Parmenides and Heraclitus are the two major influences here. According to Madsen Pirie, president of the Adam Smith Institute, “Parmenides took the view that nothing changes in reality; only our senses convey the appearance of change. Heraclitus, by contrast, thought that everything changes all the time” (Heraclitus). Although it may seem like a paradox, Ramos’ philosophy embodies both ideals by asserting that “things are at the very moment they cease to be what they are—we are, and we are not,” as this first translation reads.

The other text that I worked with— titled “La plenitud del vacío: El pensamiento de Dōgen Zenji” [“The Plenitude of Emptiness: Thoughts of Dōgen Zenji”]—was published in *Diálogos* in 2015. *Diálogos* is a journal published by the Department of Philosophy and the College of Humanities of the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, the goal of which is to disseminate innovative texts focusing on the main areas of knowledge and research relevant to philosophy. As stated in its preface, this second essay examines the concepts of plenitude and emptiness as a way of understanding the philosopher and poet Eihein Dōgen, as well as an analysis of Spinoza’s philosophy and its convergence with Zen Buddhism, to establish philosophy as a “vital experiment on the limits of human condition.”

Translation Method

In this section, I will discuss the overall process of translation, beginning with the more general issues and narrowing them down to the more specific elements of the translation. I have organized the challenges into two main categories: (1) thematic influence and style, and (2) lexicon and word usage. Some of the solutions employed at the beginning of the process of translation were based on the corrections done by the Philosophy Department during my work as a PEAFF recipient. Further along in the process, however—particularly after discussing the issues with my thesis advisor David Auerbach—I settled on other solutions (which I will elaborate on below). I also inquired Francisco José Ramos to clarify some questions and comments.

Thematic Influences and Style

After collaborating with the Philosophy Department, and continuing to work on philosophical translations for the thesis, I believe that one of the main difficulties in working with contemporary philosophy relates to the references and allusions to so many scholars and their plethora of thoughts and theories. Having to study other philosophers, such as Nietzsche, Spinoza, Deleuze, Plato, Heraclitus, etc.—in order to comprehend Francisco José Ramos' ideas more fully—was one of my biggest challenges because of my lack of philosophical experience prior to this project. I tried my best to find a single source for the citations taken from the same text (such as the *Shōbōgenzō*). I will begin by mentioning the ones referenced most throughout both texts, as well an explanation of how I arrived at my decision, i.e., the process of choosing certain translations over others.

Since many of these philosophical thoughts were originally written in neither Spanish nor English, considerable research was required to ensure that the best English

version was included in the target texts. Although the first text included words in both Greek and Latin—which were verified following The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy—foreign names, quotes, and terms were particularly predominant in the second text, especially in Sanskrit, Pāli, and Japanese. Due to Buddhism’s rich historical background, I found a range of versions of many of the terms, each spelled differently. Consequently, I decided to base my corrections on Rupert Gethis’ *The Foundations of Buddhism*—to render a more uniform translation. Most of the editions made were due to the lack of appropriate didactical marks, such as *paṭiccasamuppāda* and *Cūḷasuññata* (own emphasis) in Pāli, as well as *dō* and *Dōgen* (own emphasis) in Japanese.

In this regard, the first text did not present as many challenges as the second since Francisco José Ramos was elucidating upon his own philosophical views. Following the advice of the Department of Philosophy, any Nietzschean reference should be based on Walter Kaufmann’s translations; and, whenever Heraclitus was mentioned, Charles A. Khan’s version titled *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* was used.

The second text, however, included copious influences and philosophies weaved together to elucidate two sides of the same truth: the fullness of emptiness, or the inherent emptiness of everything there is (or comes to be). Starting with Spinoza, any quote or reference is based on the translation of *Ethics* by E.M. Curley—who has published extensively on the philosopher’s work. Kazuaki Tanahasi’s version of the *Shōbōgenzō*, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, as well as his book *Moon in a Dewdrop*, served as references whenever Dōgen Zenji was cited. The only text by Dōgen that I did not manage to find in English was the following: “Que la mente [*kokoro*] es insondable,/ eso es evidente. Y el único soporte del cuerpo / es como la fauna del rocío,” since there was

no mention of neither the poem's title nor source. Francisco José Ramos explained to me that he translated the poem into Spanish himself, and sent me a copy of the English version, which is featured in *Zen Poetry of Dōgen*, a book of Dōgen's poems translated by Steven Heine.

As a result of its rich and extensive background, the scriptures of the Pāli literature had many translations available. When quoting these scriptures, the practical translations of Bhikkhu Bodhi were included in the target text because of the scholar's comprehensive background in the subject, specifically: *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* and *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*.

Some of the citations included, however, did not have English translations available. When this was the case—such as the story of the American professor visiting the Japanese monk, or Alejandra Pizarnik's diary quote (both from the second text)—my own translation was included.

Finally, I will mention some observations made regarding the second translation, “The Plenitude of Emptiness.” Toward the end of this second text, Francisco José Ramos attributes a poem to Sekito Kisen's *Sandōkai*, but it is by Yoka Daishi of The Tang Dynasty. After asking Ramos about this, he expressed that it was a mistake, and the original lines can be found in the poem titled *Shōdōka*, translated as the *Song of Enlightenment* or *Song of Freedom*. This error has been corrected in the target text.

Furthermore, Francisco José Ramos mentions that there are three fundamental marks or characteristics of the real conditions of existence: Emptiness, impermanence, and non-self. Although these characteristics do exist within the Theravāda Buddhist framework, the actual marks of existence include suffering (*duḥkha/dukkha*), and not

emptiness (*śūnyatā/ suññatā*). Through one of our conversations, Ramos explained that while Dōgen’s Zen recognizes these three fundamental marks of existence (suffering, impermanence, and non-self), special emphasis is placed on the notion of emptiness, or void, since all phenomena (*dharma/ dhamma*)—including suffering—bear the mark of emptiness. It is within this framework and interpretation that Ramos includes emptiness, instead of suffering as the three marks of existence.

To ensure the concise communication of ideas and arguments, academic writing tends to be formal, objective, and impersonal, especially concerning philosophical texts. Philosophy can often be abstract, and each term must be particularly defined and understood for a philosopher to defend his or her claims. Such writing is both lexically, as well as grammatically dense, which may result in longer sentences—and usually less “readability.” Although I tried my best to maintain the source text’s sentence structure, some sentences were divided due to their length, or simply had punctuation changes, such as comas replaced by hyphens or colons.

Lexicon and Word Usage

Another challenge lay in Ramos’ choice of words, especially in the first text, due to the philosopher’s main concepts and how they are defined within this framework. Terms, such as “*confabulación*,” “*disimulo*,” and “*escenografía*,” constituted an issue because they are conceived and employed in the source text while bearing in mind the particularities and nuances of Spanish. The etymology of these words had to be taken into account throughout the translations because Ramos sometimes emphasized or separated certain morphemes.

The Spanish term *escenografía*, for example, was translated as “staging.” The reason as to why I originally opted for “scenography”—as recommended by the Philosophy Department—instead of “stage” or “staging” is because Ramos sometimes emphasizes the morphem “*grafía*” in *escenografía*. Since Ramos employs this technique with other words as well—and considering the importance of writing (*graphia*) in this philosophical theory—I believed it was an important element to include in the target text. The word “scenography,” however, is seldomly used in English and I decided to add an explanatory footnote in the target text whenever the emphasis has been placed in Spanish.

The following examples appear in the first volume of the *Aesthetics of Thought: The Drama of Philosophical Writing*. I include it in order to explain Ramos’ way of underscoring certain elements of the words: “Muy a propósito empleamos el término ‘*escenografía*’ para enfatizar que el pensamiento adquiere vigencia gracias al despliegue escénico de la palabra escrita” (13). As well as in the following passage: “Y dada la importancia *escenográfica* del poema, o la pertinencia textual de sus palabras, las *dokounta*, o ‘apariencias’ que nombra, el pasaje citado, sólo tienen sentido como aquello designado por el lenguaje” (59).

I approached “*escenografía*” the same way I approached “*disimulo*.” I would not normally translate this word as “dissimulation,” but it was the only way to be able to separate the morphemes when done so in Spanish (for example, *El di/simulo de la physis*). The concept of “*di/simulo*” (dis/simulation) entails an appearance that conceals (or dissimulates) what really “is,” which never ceases “being” what really “is” precisely because of its appearance. Thinking must be understood as the “process or activity that

writing simulates and dissimulates as thoughts,” as Francisco José Ramos states in the first volume of the *Aesthetics of Thought* (84).

Other issues related to the text’s lexicon concerns the notion of *estar siendo* (found in the second translation), which was especially difficult to translate. This term is comprised of the verbs *estar* and *ser*, which are both translated as “to be.” The term “ser,” however, can also translate as “being” when used as a noun. In his essay titled “Argentina: The Philosophical Resistance to the Conquest of the Soul,” featured in *A Post-Neoliberal Era in Latin America?: Social conflicts and cultural responses*, Enrique Del Percio proposes the translation “be-being.” Del Percio’s interpretation is based on the concept of *estar siendo* (be-being), proposed by the Argentine philosopher Rodolfo Kusch.

The other reason as to why Ramos’ philosophical terms were a challenge to translate was due to his usage of nominalization. Nominalization is the process of turning adjectives (descriptions) or verbs (actions) into nouns. This strategy—which is frequently used in academic writing—is another distinctive feature of Ramos’ writing. The prevailing use of nominalization in ontological philosophy is perhaps due to the fact that “nominalizations appear to form terms that refer to abstract objects (such as propositions, properties, or facts) or ‘minor entities’ (such as events, states, or tropes)” (Moltmann and Schnieder).

In most accounts, the nominalizing structure from the source text was kept in the target text. For example, “*la proliferación infinita de lo real*” was translated as “the infinite proliferation of the real” (own emphasis), because it alludes to an already accepted concept in philosophy of “the real.” The same issue occurs with the terms “*lo*

infinito” (the infinite), “*lo absolute*” (the absolute), and “*lo incondicionado*” (the unconditional). The prior examples are based on adjectives, but Ramos also includes the notions of “*el decir*,” “*el devenir*,” and “*el aparecer*,” which represent the infinite form of the verb in Spanish. They are translated as “telling,” “becoming,” and “appearing,” respectively, which pertain to the present participle form of the verb in English. The notion of “the thinking” is also translated as is (i.e., in its verb form), since one of the main ideas of the project is to underline the difference between the verb and its noun, “thought.”

Conclusion

My goal is to disseminate voices that have traditionally been underrepresented. I have chosen to translate these two texts in order to support and contribute to the acknowledgment of Francisco José Ramos as an author worthy of being read and discussed beyond a Spanish-speaking audience. The translated texts reflect Ramos’ main area of interest, and as such, they should be translated so that his philosophical contributions can be circulated more broadly. His prolific work and influence deem him worthy of being the first Puerto Rican author whose philosophical works will be translated into English.

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