

# Translation Review

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# THE POETIC VISION OF PREÇ ZOGAJ IN TRANSLATION

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## The Poet Preç Zogaj

It was in the mid 1980s that Preç Zogaj emerged as one of Albania's most promising poets. For the previous four decades, the Albanian people had suffered a great deal of repression under a disgusting totalitarian regime ruled by Enver Hoxha. People were imprisoned anywhere from 10 to 25 years for simply complaining about the poverty they lived in or for expressing any kind of resentment about the regime. Execution was the preferred mode of punishment for people like Gjin Jaku and Ndue Jaku (both were uncles of Zogaj's father), who were killed for confronting the regime.

Unlike today, when a poet in Albania earns his reputation on the quality of his poetic achievement, the reputation of a poet during the communist regime was often determined by the government that used him as an instrument to glorify the communist ideology. In the context of Albanian Socialist Realist literature, there were three categories of poets. With the exception of Ismail Kadare and Dritëro Agolli, who were then and are still today the "giants" of Albanian literature, the first category of poets consisted of those who benefited the most from the government. They were professional or hired poets and were paid to write. Many of them already resided in or moved to the capital city, Tirana, where they enjoyed virtually free housing and many other privileges provided for them by the government in exchange for their work. They were called "poetucë" by the people, "puppet poets" who had no real talent. They were hired to praise and continuously applaud the government. The only job requirement for them was that their chants and



their praise of the government had to be thunderous, frequent, and written in some kind of verse form.

A second category of poets such as Zogaj, Rudolf Marku, Bardhyl Londo, Ndoc Gjetja, Mujo Buçpapaj, Agim Spahiu, Adem Istrefi, Moikom Zeqo, and Ilirian Zhupa also appeared at that time. They were extremely talented individuals, but because they

remained absolutely passive toward politics and the politicians, most of the privileges provided to the puppet poets were unavailable to them. The majority of them were editors of major publications and newspapers. That meant that they had to have a real job: that real job was to transform the inferior works of the puppets of the first category, who could not write, into publishable format; and that they had to find free time to follow their own passion to compose new works.

If Zogaj and the entire group of poets to which he belonged did not follow the mandate of the communist regime, they could easily fall into the third category of poets, like Vilson Blloshmi and Genc Leka (both public school teachers), who, among many others, were executed simply for being uncomfortable poets for the regime. To be more specific, Blloshmi was killed because he had written a poem titled "Sahara," which alluded to the notion that Albania is like a wasteland and has no friends in the world. Leka, in contrast, was executed by a firing squad for writing pessimistic and unrealistic poems that were not in accordance with the ideology of the communist party of Albania and that of Marxism and Leninism. Both were killed and dumped somewhere into a ditch on July 17, 1977. At that time, Zogaj

was only 20 years old, and his first book-length collection of poetry had been rejected over and over again by the government-controlled publishing houses of Albania.

Getting killed by the government was only one side of the problem. It also meant that the immediate family and all their relatives would be treated as treacherous people. They were entitled only to manual work and elementary education. Since the Jaku brothers were his father's uncles, Zogaj's chances of pursuing a high school education were extremely low. But under the secret guidance of Nush Radovani, a distinguished translator who had studied physics and mathematics in Rome, Italy, Zogaj won a national literary contest and was able to continue his studies in a specialized high school in the field of Albanian Culture in Tirana. Winning the contest created a loophole for him to bypass the local authorities, who had already denied his older sister the opportunity to acquire a high-school education.

Understanding the importance of learning, Zogaj became a compulsive reader. He spent most of his free time studying Albanian and world literatures. In 1975, in the school campus library, he discovered a book by Walt Whitman titled *Leaves of Grass*, translated by Skënder Luarasi. He was so excited that when his grandmother visited him, she noticed a change in his behavior: "She asked me 'what is the matter with you?' and I cheerfully answered: I am going to be a poet!" (Zogaj). Aware of the fact that one of the most important steps in the preparation of a poet was a university education, he paid maximum attention to his high-school studies and graduated with distinction in 1976. Although his poetry does not bear a particular resemblance to Whitman's works, he was greatly inspired by him. "The role of Whitman in my early poetry was comparable to that of Rudolf Marku's in a later period in my career. Whitman pulled me from the old path. For a while I had no real direction as a poet and

merely kept trying to improvise.... Then I got to know Marku, another poet from Lezhë, and my poetry entered yet a new direction, a unique path that I still take today each time I write a poem" (Zogaj).

With Whitman in mind, he became a poet who effectively articulates the core concept of his whole Albanian culture in his poetry. Accordingly, there was a kind of progression in his works. His first and second poetry collections "Your names" (*Emrat tuaj*), 1985, and "Unfinished" (*E pakryer*), 1987, indicate that Zogaj started his poetic journey by writing all kinds of lyrics, mostly autobiographical poems and poems closely related to his childhood and youth experiences.

## WHY

The words I write  
I have gathered on the streets.  
Why then when the door opens  
do I get anxious  
As if kissing the one I love (Zogaj).

He then moved to longer poems that had a narrative and an argumentative structure, a logical structure made of different parts related to each other in a coherent way. The poem "The new house" (*Shtëpia e re*) is one of his best-known longer poems.

His third collection of poems, "Will you come smiling" (*Athua do të vish duke qeshur*), published in 1998, is considered, because of its cheerfulness, to be one of the most delightful poetic works of contemporary Albanian literature. Merely two years later, however, he authored another collection of poetry titled "Everyone's Sky" (*Qielli i gjithkujt*). Both were of a quality that would make two of the leaders of Albanian literature, Dritëro Agolli and Llazar Siliqi, proud that in 1979 they had helped Zogaj to get out of a three-year period of farming work and to be accepted at the University of Tirana,

where he graduated in Albanian Language and Literature in 1983. Agolli, at the time, was also the head of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists and claims that “helping Zogaj to become a student at the University of Tirana with his family’s political background was like making the impossible possible. But above all, it was my duty as a poet and my pleasure as a man. The results are obviously amazing and that makes me really happy” (Agolli).

After graduating from the University, Zogaj won a national contest for an open journalist’s position organized by *Zëri i Rinisë*, a major newspaper of that time. But knowledge and talent without strong connections were equivalent to a man’s life without his thick prescription glasses. According to Zogaj, if it had not been for the help of the First Secretary of the Albanian Youth, Mehmet Elezi, who insisted on getting him the job and ignored the relentless local resistance against the poet in 1984, Zogaj would have never become a reporter at the national newspaper *Zëri i Rinisë* (The Voice of the Youth). More importantly, he would not have been in a position to promote works by poets of the younger generation.

By 1990, Zogaj had established himself as a well-known journalist and a respected literary figure. By then he had been a farmer, a schoolteacher, and the author of four books of poetry and one book of short stories, “One of them” (*Njëri nga ata*), 1986, and one book of novellas, “The delay” (*Vonesa*), 1989. He was the kind of poet and leader Albanian people needed and could fully trust. In early December of that year, Zogaj became deeply involved in politics, helping to overthrow the communist government, to establish a pluralistic system, and to start the first free elections ever held in Albania. Within a matter of just a few weeks, he became one of the founders of the Democratic Party of Albania and was appointed to direct the operations of the Party’s new newspaper

*RD* or “The Rebirth of Democracy” (*Rilindja Demokratike*), starting with its first number on January 5, 1991. Less than three months later, on March 31, Zogaj became a representative of his party in the Albanian parliament, a step that would lead to his becoming the Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sports of Albania in June of that same year.

Since 1990, he has maintained his full-time job as a politician and has published fourteen books. These include four collections of poetry: “Pedestrian in the sky” (*Këmbësor në qiell*), 1995; “The Passing” (*Kalimi*), 1999, which won the Argent Pen, the highest literary prize awarded by the Ministry of Culture of Albania for the best book by a living author; “After a New Wind” (*Pas erës së re*), 2004; and “Alive I saw” (*Gjallë unë pashë*), 2008, and seven other books of artistic and political prose. His novels include “Grandfather’s Agent” (*Agjenti i gjyshit*), 1993; “Without History” (*Pa history*), 1994; and “The Border” (*Kufiri*), 2007.

Despite his impressive and productive past, his devotion to politics has indeed affected the overall mood of his poetry. I do not mean only the price he paid by sharing his writing time with the time-consuming responsibilities of a politician, but also about how politics changed him as a poet and as a man. Deep down, Zogaj is first of all a poet. But when democracy was established in Albania, many people questioned his continued involvement in politics. Here is his explanation: “Politics, in a way, has connected me with the people of my country. Politics has helped me to better understand the social layers, the needs and interests of my people. Now I am a better visionary man and more laconic in my articulations. For all these and other things that I am not mentioning here, I am truly grateful to politics” (Zogaj). Actually, because of his political outlook, he has become a lonelier, sadder person in his poetry, in which the speaker in most cases is the poet himself:

## I TOOK SORROW BY THE HAND

I took sorrow by the hand,  
Went to drown it in the river,  
But the stream was too shallow.

Tossed it over my shoulder like a sack,  
Went to throw it from a cliff,  
But the ground was too near.

Then I swaddled it in a cradle,  
Two days and nights I rocked it,  
But it wouldn't fall asleep.

Now I wander the streets  
With sorrow on my face:  
Forgive me, I say to all.

This is the post-1990 Zogaj, a man of different concerns, a poet of a darker and more apologetic verse than ever before. He is a poet who on April 20, 2000, precisely ten years after he had asked forgiveness for wandering around with a (suicidal) face of sorrow, goes even further into his depressive frame of mind in "Quietly at night," confessing: "To a glass like to a shrine / I asked for forgiveness / for waking up at all." The poetic "I" is deeply injected into his poems. Nevertheless, it is the "I" that can bounce back to continue speaking directly to people, meeting their every need in their day-to-day arguments, in their disagreements, in their politics, and in the ways they live their lives. The following lines are part of his poem titled "September" and exemplify the directness in his later poetry:

## SEPTEMBER

In the annex they talk elections.  
Men drink Coca-Cola,  
Women prefer cappuccino.

That girl will come to collect

her golden laughs  
previously forgotten in this area.

In ten years I shall see  
her face as more  
intimate than mine.

In dealing with his audience, Zogaj characteristically goes out of his way to facilitate the reader's needs. The fortunate experience of earning the trust of his readers in the early stages of his creative career has put the poet in a unique position. The circumstances under which he initially established himself as a trustworthy poet are no longer synonymous with the present state of political and public affairs. Then he was a poet, now he is a poet and a politician. With that "mess" in mind, I asked him for a brief poetic statement, hoping that the issue of dealing with the reader's trust would be part of what he had to say:

I have never written and I do not write without a specific purpose in mind. In the past they (the communist ideologists) used to teach us that the mission of poetry is to educate people; the peripheral poets would pretend as if they had come to attend to the unfinished creation of the world in an attempt to push it to the edge of its perfection. I found such thoughts to be violent. One evening of this past September I was sitting in my half-dark living room looking with my mind's eyes at the Adriatic Sea like looking at a huge blue theater screen. Then my imagination placed there my parents who will pass away one of these days and the unavoidable mourning scream that would come from the hallways.... At that moment, I quickly sketched the motive for a poem that I thought to be titled "The scheme." Lying down, motionless in silence, as a sufferer of the emotions that I had just experienced, I was about to get up and write

down the lines that went through my mind. But I didn't. Instead I asked myself: why should I write the poem? Why should others know about this? These are questions that I hadn't thought about in the past. I have always written based on a credo that is well stated in a poem of mine: "I walked all day with my smile, / almost for no purpose; / why should I have to know why? / Should an April day be asked / why does it crimson the roses?" My poetry, too, in a way is like the blossoming of a flower, even like a fall flower. The motive is the stem, the writing is the budding. Why should I compose the poem "The scheme"? The question has come to me late in my life, but the answer had been already given and lived without question for a long time. Every poetic motive that is verifiable as such by culture and intuition is an invention. The writing comes as a need to record or experience the invention. My writing is an extraordinary talk with myself; a very intimate talk that is articulated, given; it is a conversation spoken in the language of poetry with some rare themes and visions. In other words, my poetic statement, if I have to give one, would be uttered in two words: Sincerity and lyricism (Zogaj).

Sincerity and lyricism are subjective in their nature and can be defined in various ways. Nevertheless Zogaj's poetry is consistent with everyday life; it is nearly free of artificial and "flowery" language. Every single poem published under his name does portray him as a poet who is deeply involved in people's lives. "Occurrence on earth" is an illustration of Zogaj's work as a public poet. Here is the first stanza:

To these deep gorges,  
Through snow and wind,  
come the mourning women

overflowing with prayers:  
O God, accept the best among us  
in your hereafters! (Zogaj)

These six lines alone are another perfect example of Zogaj's poetic philosophy of dealing with his audience. What distinguishes him as a poet from the politician is that as a politician he would say to his supporters "I know what you are going through." But as a poet he creates a disturbing, vivid imagery and places himself in the center of it, a platform from which he can communicate to people that "I see what we are going through," I was here when you entered "to these deep gorges, / Through snow and wind." I am here now with all of you "mourning women / overflowing with prayers," and I will be there when God accepts you in his "hereafters!" Yes, it is his poetry that plays a great physiological role on his readers, reminding them to trust the man who is embedded in the lyrics and elegies such as the "Occurrence on earth." Poems like this "require" us to trust Zogaj the poet, who is trying even to soften the idea of death for us, treating it as an internal revolution to hunt to free itself from the common ambient and the daily routine.

### The Multiple Layers of Translating Zogaj's Poetry

In the following section, I will provide the reader with insight into some of my own translation techniques.

Zogaj's poetic grammar is based on not one but three general types of grammar: (1) the traditional classroom grammar (*bie shiu i verës*), which is based strictly on the official Albanian language rules; (2) Albanian structural grammar (*I heshtu(n)r si shiu i verës*), the systematic account of the structure of the Gheg (Geg) dialect (the dialect of the northern part of Albania and the former official language of that country); and (3) the transformational-

generative grammar (a kam qenë ndonjëherë i qelibartë), which is a combination of the deep and the surface structures of the language.

The poem “Summer rain” mirrors perfectly the importance of these three types of grammar as supporting elements of the (in this case) transparency of the poem. The word “pure” (i qelibartë) in the traditional classroom grammar denotes “I pastër” and means “clean” in the hygienic sense. In Albanian structural grammar, the word can also function as the English word “net” (neto) as in “all things considered — the net result,” whereas, in the transformational-generative grammar, it is normally utilized as either one or both of the above meanings plus, in a deeper sense, as “free of sin.” In this grammatical sense, Zogaj introduces the reader to a rare equilibrium of metaphors within which the use of grammar creates a parallel imagery with that of the overall imagery of the poem. It is a parallelism that places the readers at the center of a new scenery that stimulates their emotions, challenges their imaginations, and entertains their thoughts at the same time: “My joys tour in the rain / And in a rush, strip off / Their shirts, hats … remain naked.” These lines alone were indicative of the challenges that I had to face while translating not only the rest of the poem’s figurative language and vivid imagery but the rest of the poems of this selection as well.

To get closer to the voice and tone of Zogaj’s poem, I used a digital recorder and read the poem aloud several times to recapture the overall poetic flow. As I repeatedly listened to the recording, I was able to gain a better feel for its sound and rhythm in lines such as “...Hushed like the summer rain” and their specific function in the body of each poem. The uncertainty in Zogaj’s behavior in the past is embedded in the entire structure of the poem and reaches its climax when the poet asks himself the question: “have I ever been / Pure?” The answer, of course, is: No. It is a confession that makes

him (who admits “I am the voice of the poem” [Zogaj]) feel remorseful that his former joys are outside the scope of his control and keep touring shamelessly naked. And all he can do is merely keep watching joys “hush(ed)” like the summer rain, as becomes obvious in the final draft of the poem:

### SUMMER RAIN

The summer rain falls  
Oblique, meek,  
As if sliding on a crystal window.

Have I ever been  
Pure?  
My joys tour in the rain  
And in a rush strip off  
Their shirts, hats … remain naked.

In front of the window  
With a cigarette in my mouth,  
Hushed like the summer rain,  
I see them.

While “Summer Rain” is on a superficial level (in terms of its open form, syntax simplicity, and vivid imagery act) representative of Zogaj’s poetry, it does not fully express his aesthetic philosophy. Its superficial lucidity falls short of displaying the fact that Zogaj is a great admirer of the folkloric, legendary, and historic epic songs of Northern Albania. This is relevant because a vast majority of his poems are inspired by the geography of northern Albania and are dedicated to his family and his neighbors who still live in that part of the country; he is profoundly in love with its distinctive natural beauty. As a result, a fair amount of the cultural substance of his background has been infused into his verse.

As I will illustrate below, some culture-specific words and phrases do penetrate deeply into his poetic language and aesthetic

philosophy. Being Albanian-born myself has given me some advantages during the reconstruction process of these types of poems: I am familiar with the cultural labyrinths of local languages, I have extensively studied old and contemporary Albanian literature, and I have followed Zogaj's literary works since 1983, when he published his first poems in an anthology of young Albanian poets. All of this aided me in bringing Zogaj's poems into English. For example, in the poem "Occurrence on earth," the poet dramatizes events that dealt with the subject of emigration. Using an elegant (locally based) figurative language, he directs our attention to a ceremony that takes place in Dibra (a city in North Albania), where a mother's burial takes place in the absence of her son, who resides in California.

Because of its specific language of the northern culture, Zogaj's "Occurrence on earth" is one of the poems in which cultural words made the translation process a little difficult for me, resulting in a less than "faithful" final product. The Albanian of the first stanza, juxtaposed to the first draft in its literal English, appears like this:

Në ato gryka të thella.  
In them canyons down from surface.  
Midis dëborës dhe erës,  
Among snow and wind,  
po vinë të zezat gra  
are coming the black woman  
plot e përplot me lutje:  
full and overfilled with requests:  
O Zot, më të mirën ndër ne  
O God, the best among us  
pranoje në ahiret e tua!  
admit in your heavens!

Two of the words that were in my first English draft are greatly ineffectual in achieving the sad and mournful tone of the poem: "zezat" and "ahiret." In my second draft, I translated "zezat"

(plural) literally as the color black. But it presented an immediate problem. The first three lines would have appeared as follows:

To these deep gorges,  
Through snow and wind,  
**come the black women...**

If translated as such, it would mean we have an Albanian word that could provide misleading information to the target readers, who might think the subject of the poem is a number of black women. That would be demographically incorrect as well, because no black people resided in Dibra at the time the poem was written.

The word "ahiret" presents a problem of a different nature within the general meaning of the stanza and therefore the entire poem. This Arabic-rooted word in its literal meaning is equivalent to the English word heaven. But the plural use of the noun troubled me. It would read as follows:

To these deep gorges,  
Through snow and wind,  
come the black women  
overflowing with prayers:  
O God, accept the best among us  
**in your paradeses!**

Moreover, the Albanian language has a precise word for heaven or paradise — "parrizë or parajsë" — which would have been available to the poet. He chose instead "ahiret," a word used in the Muslim religion, an Arabic word that has been naturalized into the Albanian language, which also exists in Turkish as "ahir" (the last, the final decision).

In my next draft I decided to work on these two words in terms of their linguistic properties and their intended function in the poem. First, I wrote down their functions in the Albanian culture on a separate piece of paper, and then

I verified their meaning (including how they were defined in different periods of time) in the Gheg lexicon. Both words carry an immense weight not only in the cultural sense but also as an extension of that culture in social life and religion. The word “Zeza(t),” especially in terms of how it is used in the poem, denotes much more than a lack of happiness or one experiencing the darkest side of life. It describes a deep grief or expresses sympathy for the loss of a loved one. But in more casual and relaxed surroundings it is also used like its English corresponding word “poor,” as in “Ooo, poor you...” or “leave the poor guy alone.”

“Ahiret,” on the other hand, signifies the complete opposite of the word “Zeza.” In a religious sense, “ahiret” is closer in meaning to the highest joy, the safest place, or the truest delight one can possibly have. But the pleading tone in the first stanza, followed by the mournful tone in the second, and concluded by a displacement — ironic — tone in the last stanza suggest that the word “ahiret” has a deeper, more specific semantic mission in the poem. It symbolizes, indeed, a religious word, but in contrast, the women are expressing a plea only for survival, for physical and psychological peace or calmness in a very difficult moment. In light of these considerations, in the third and final draft of the poem, I replaced the word black (zezat) with “mourning” and the word “ahiret” with “hereafter.”

## OCCURRENCE ON EARTH

To these deep gorges,  
Through snow and wind,  
come the mourning women  
overflowing with prayers:  
O God, accept the best among us  
in your hereafter!

The mountains of Dibra slumber.  
God is thinking.

Aircraft rush  
from the east and south.  
None of them brought back  
their son from California.  
The mourning women hug  
their dead friend.

The good news is.  
At least here  
God is much older,  
more merciful  
than he is far away in California.

My reasoning was that the term “mourning” would better serve the authorial intentions, seeing the women temporarily rather than permanently heartbroken. It also would serve as a foil to the somewhat sarcastic first line of the last stanza: “The good news is.” I further believe that with the last stanza in mind, in an attempt to keep a consistency between the sad and sarcastic tones of the poem, I thought that the word “hereafter” worked better for the poem than “paradise(s)” or “heaven(s).”

There are two other words that I would like to bring to the reader’s attention. They are “bohemë” and “makare,” neither of which are part of the Albanian lexicon. The first occurs in “Death comes and goes” and the second in “Occurrence on earth,” the poem already discussed. For both words, as a part of the process, I conducted thorough research in other languages as well. As I found out, in French “bohème” denotes a gypsy and means (the same thing as it means nowadays in Albanian) a homeless person or a wanderer who does not live up to his/her civil responsibilities. There are two reasons that justify Zogaj’s choice. First, the homeless phenomenon as we know it here in America, at least until the time the poem was written, did not exist in Albania. For a long time, “homelessness” was only known in anti-American communist propaganda; many Albanians believed it a myth. Second, for

similar social characteristics and given that, due to racism, gypsies were not especially admired at that time in Albania, using the word “gypsies” (ciganë or arixhnjë) would not do justice to the poem. The last line of the fourth stanza would turn into a conflicted sentence where the word “gypsies,” in this context, would be in semantic contradiction with “angels.” But there might have been a third reason that I cannot confirm: if Zogaj turned for help, for just the right word he needed, to not the French but the German language, in which “boheme” has a direct connection to bohemia as an artistic sphere, then the ambiguity we have here is the poetic move of a master. I chose to translate it in English as “wanderers:”

But I was no longer their contemporary.  
They all would know and leave  
in the yesterdays that would start over again  
without wanderers and angels.

The choice I made is indicative of the freedom I granted myself. Of course, according to Willis Barnstone, freedom in translation is permitted (Barnstone 35), but that was not the only reason that brought me to the final decision to use “wanderers.” I did it because the voice of the poem is also a wanderer who keeps traveling from life to death and back to life again and again.

During the reconstruction process of translating “Occurrence on earth,” while searching for the best English word to bear the functions of the Albanian word “makare,” I applied the same principles and followed procedures similar to those that I used with the word “bohemë.” The trouble with this word was of a different dimension. Serbo-Croatian is the only language in which I could find a word that had the same spelling and the same pronunciation as it does in the Albanian. But with these linguistic properties, “makare” means a “driving rig-pile,” which is not consistent

with the second line of the fourth stanza where the word is used. With the possibility of the poet’s reference to the Serbo-Croatian version of “makare” ruled out, I had nowhere to turn for help but going back to the Albanian language. Indeed, the Albanian language has an imported word, of Turkish origin, that would be the perfect fit for the line, but it differs slightly in the spelling. The word is “maker” and it means “at least.” Obviously the problem is a single missing alphabetic letter at the end of the word. But a letter can be fatally inflectional and derivational to the word and therefore to the accuracy of the translation. With all that in mind, though, I decided to proceed with the idea that the words “at least” were the best choice I could possibly make. My decision, however, was made final after I asked myself this question: if there was a blank space in the line instead of the word makare, as a poet, what would I put to fill that blank? And the answer was “at least,” which I believe works out well:

The good news is,  
At least here  
God is much older,  
more merciful  
than he is far away in California.

In Zogaj’s works, as in the rest of Albanian language and literature, there are some additional words that are perhaps untranslatable and are more effective if presented as they appear in the original. In the third stanza of “Isn’t returning,” a melancholic poem with many references to eternity and mythology, the poet deliberately uses a rare but typical Albanian word, “çetela.” This word has been used before as well, in a similar poetic situation, by another famous Albanian poet by the name of Lasgush Poradeci (1899–1987). “Çetela” is a typical Albanian word that, to the best of my knowledge, does not have an exact English corresponding word. This word, denoting

what in Albanian mythology is mentioned as a description of the honorable committee of the prominent dead people, has no other particular meaning. So under these kinds of circumstances and many considerations, I took the liberty to present the word as it is used in the Albanian version of the poem:

Çetela filled up my eyes  
with a silver grief.  
In fact any hour is the right time  
For Saint Peter to call me.

Furthermore, Zogaj loves to introduce new words and faces to his poetry and simultaneously to the Albanian language. Neologisms have played a great role in enhancing his poetic style and enriching his reputation as one of the most linguistically innovative poets of Albanian literature. I find his newly created words most fascinating, but as a translator I found them demanding. Let's take, for instance, one of the neologisms that I had a great deal of trouble with during the translation process. The word is "Erinitë," found in a poem titled "Tranquil is the sea" (I qetë është deti). I enjoyed its ambiguous appearance and how the ambiguity was utilized in the poem; separated by a comma, the poet placed "erinite" immediately after another melodious word, "era" (the wind). I started to understand the enormous importance of the word to the body of the poem. Zogaj begins the poem not with words but with three asterisks, which in the Albanian represent a punctuation mark indicating the end of a thought and the beginning of a new one without losing the background connection that they might have in common. After two stanzas, the asterisks are repeated again in the beginning of the last stanza of the poem. So the poet divides the poem visibly into three important parts. All that, however, would have little meaning in the poem if the word "Calypso" weren't used.

The first clue that Zogaj is referring directly to the Greek mythology came to me by knowing that there was a sea nymph named Calypso who pursued Odysseus for almost seven years on the island of Ogygia. Furthermore, from the tone of the poem, the word "erinitë" could be a further reference to the "Erinyes," one of the three avenging spirits (Alecto, Tisiphone, Megaera) in Greek mythology. The three parts to the poem might suggest the representation of each of the three angry spirits. Based on these considerations and the fact that the poem is about revenge and offensive pursuits by dreadful people in life, I translated the ambiguous neologism "erinitë" as "Erinyes":

How many days, months, how much time  
has passed  
since we came here for the last time,  
with someone like the nymph Calypso,  
who was  
pursued step by step by winds, Erinyes.

A discussion of the reconstruction of the translation process provides the reader with a deeper insight into the complexity of Zogaj's poetry. The transplantation of a poet's landscape from one language into another also reveals the various compromises that a translator has to make. The following selection of Zogaj's poetry reflects some of the difficult decisions I had to make in arriving at a final draft of each poem. With respect to the translation process, challenges are synonymous with uncertainty, and uncertainty is part of the definition of the art and craft of translation. At least in this sense of the word, while translating Zogaj, I agree with Rainer Schulte's statement that "The reader/translator reestablishes at every step of his or her work the inherent uncertainty of each word, both as an isolated phenomenon and as a semiotic possibility of a sentence, paragraph, or the context of the entire work." ♦

## COME NEARER, JOYFUL HOUR OF THE POET

The house sleeps and the soul suffers long:  
a thousand voices around, not a single face,  
a thousand words like bees and not a line,  
a thousand calls in glass, not a single mirror.

Come nearer, joyful hour of the poet!

\*\*\*

I certainly must write,  
but a golden strand of hair  
reflects straight onto the white paper.  
How to pass through unburned?  
How to press the pencil  
when the untainted angel  
vibrates through the fingers?

It has been some time since writing poetry  
has caused the coursing of my blood  
to suffer and become inebriated.

But the hour has arrived.  
Mend thread by thread, soul —  
red flag of triumph,  
white mantel of love,  
clear mirror of faces  
that are to the end human...

Come nearer, joyful hour of the poet!

## AFROHU, ORË E LUMTUR E POETIT

Shtëpia fle e shpirti vuan gjatë:  
një mijë zëra përqark, asnë fytyrë,  
një mijë fjalë si bletë dhe asnë varg,  
një mijë thirrje në xham, asnë pasqyrë.

Afrohu, orë e lumtur e poetit!

\*\*\*

Duhet të shkruaj patjetër,  
po deri te letra e bardhë  
zverdhon një tufë flakësh.  
Si të kalosh pa u djegur?  
Si ta shtypësh kalemin  
kur engjëlli i pazbutur  
dridhet nëpër gishta?

Ka disa kohë që shkrimi i poezisë  
më shkakton vuajtjen dhe dehjen  
e dhurimit të gjakut.

Por vjen ora.  
Endu, endu fije-fije shpirt —  
flamur i kuq triumfi,  
mandile e bardhë dashurie,  
pasqyrë e kthjellët fytyrash  
deri në fund njerëzore....

Afrohu, orë e lumtur e poetit!

## I TOOK SORROW BY THE HAND

I took sorrow by the hand,  
Went to drown it in the river,  
But the stream was too shallow.

Tossed it over my shoulder like a sack,  
Went to throw it from a cliff top,  
But the ground was too near.

Then I swaddled it in a cradle,  
Two days and nights I rocked it,  
But it wouldn't fall asleep.

Now I wander the streets  
With sorrow on my face:  
Forgive me, I say to all.

## E MORA PËR DORE TRISHTIMIN

E mora për dore trishtimin,  
Shkova ta mbys në lumë,  
Po rrjedha ishte e cekët.

E hodha ne krah si hobe,  
Shkova ta hedh nga shkëmbi  
Por toka ishte afër.

Atëherë e lidha në djep,  
Dy ditë e net e përkunda,  
Po gjumi s'e zuri.

Tani bares në rrugë  
Me trishtimin tim në fytyrë:  
Më falni u them të gjithëve.

## TO GO AND TO COME BACK

To go and to come back, that is the issue.  
To be absent and not a soul to miss you.  
To touch the other world and to return again.

Here you have forgotten to play,  
You feel sorry to eat,  
It hurts you to talk.  
You have been there and returned  
A few moments ago.

Rush, rush because the evening light  
is vanishing on the banal dusk.  
The divine meditations of the world  
get killed on today's land.

Now we are equal again.

## TË IKËSH E TË VISH

Të ikësh e të vish-kjo është çështja.  
Të mungosh dhe askush të mos vuajë për ty.  
Të prekësh botën tjetër dhe të kthehesh.

Këtu ti ke harruar të luash,  
Të vjen keq të hash,  
Të dhëmb të flasësh.  
Ti ke qenë atje dhe je kthyer  
Para pak çastesh.

Shpejt, shpejt se drita e mbrëmjes  
po shuhet në muzgun banal.  
Mendimet hyjnore të botës  
vriten në tokën e sotme.

Tani jemi prapë të barabartë!