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DOSSIER: ON TRANSLATION

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HERE FAR AWAY: ON TRANSLATING *DIANA'S TREE*

If you're the child of an immigrant, even one of internal migrations, you develop a unique relationship with distance, because distance is as foundational to the nature of your love as it is foundational to the nature of your language.[1] Distance, another language, a mother tongue with which perhaps you've learned to love, a language that is not the one those around you share, are bound together within you. And in the fact that you're the child of displaced peoples, displaced loves, or an immigrant yourself, language emerges as something that consciously or unconsciously is doubly moored.

When we speak of the ethics of translation, when we speak of a text *coming into* another language, and we reveal our anxieties regarding domestication, regarding the erasure of difference, we imply that the one who is translating, along with that target language, and along with that "target" culture is a stable entity in and of itself.

When we speak of the domestication of a translated text, it's leveling or standardization within a new language, we overlook what Seamus Heaney has called the "fretwork" of that target language, the idiolects, twists, turns of the languages that push up against and over and beneath, that *sound* against the desiring centripetal force of a national tongue. Upon translating Beowulf, Heaney often included words derived from his Irish English dialect, his own "first speech" from Northern Ireland, and he admitted, "I said…that I wanted my anchor to be lodged on the Anglo-Saxon seafloor, down in the consonantal rock, but I had a second mooring down in the old soft vowel-bog of the local speech. I was honour-bound to the feel and sense of the original, but at the same time could not desert whatever it is in my ear that makes me sound convincing to myself."[2] Heaney moves between honor and desertion, the law and an abandonment of his own. The ear, moved by what is sensed before grasping an idea of what might be known, always recalls our coming into language in that you recognize the voice of your mother before you know who she is.

This past year I translated Alejandra Pizarnik's *Árbol de Diana* (1962), *Diana's Tree.* Poem 13 was particularly challenging because of its sliding rhythmic weft.

> explicar con palabras de este mundo
> que partió de mí un barco llevándome[3]

I translated the poem thus:

> explain with words of this world
> that bore of me a boat elsewhere[4]

Both lines of the original poem are *endecasílabas*, 11 syllables, what might be considered the equivalent of the English language iambic pentameter. In the first line Pizarnik includes the *endecasílaba's* most common emphasis on the sixth and tenth syllables—explicar con paLAbras de este MUndo. But in the second line, Pizarnik alters that dominant emphasis to the fifth and ninth syllables—que partió de MÍ un barco llevÁndome. Such a subtle rhythmic shift to the fifth syllable begins the uneasy rocking of that boat on "MÍ" to continue until the third to last syllable, "llevÁndome," which literally means "taking me away."

Pizarnik, the child of Russian Jewish parents, who grew up speaking Yiddish

in Buenos Aires, constantly circles around what many scholars have called an absence or emptiness. Tamara Kamenzsain likens what she describes as Pizarnik's resistance to identifying the names of things to the Jewish prohibition of naming God, an evasion which transforms God into an anonymous supreme being.[5] For Pizarnik, however, the presence of an absolute is tempered, and, what's worse, placed in doubt by another language. To accept such a prohibition would be to name an origin, a God, an original, where Pizarnik finds none. The words of this world that part her—"que partió de mí"—break her, birth her, cut her, and take her away, the words that are "elsewhere" are those of another language within her, her foundational relationship to meaning that is never grounded, never stable, never univocal or supreme, and always somewhere else. Lingering insistently behind this book in particular is the *endecha*, a Sephardic musical and poetic form of lamentation. Pizarnik lamented the loss of an idea of one language, one meaning, one god, the absolute coming together of name and form, the loss of Babel, of a proximity, a human unity, that would never be resolved. And she couldn't help but be sacrilegious in her poetic craft of recognition despite that loss.

In the English translation I used a trimeter followed by a tetrameter, an inversion of Dickinson's use of these meters, for example in "Because I could not stop for Death / He kindly stopped for me." But to account for my own elsewhere in English, so as not to abandon what sounds convincing to me, I fused these feet to a syllabic count so familiar to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Rubén Dario: the *verso alejandrino*. Then the two lines together in English make up a *verso alejandrino*, a fourteen syllable line divided by a caesura, but here sliced in half.[6]

For Antonio Prete, the translator of Baudelaire to the Italian, whose first language is the Copertino dialect of Salento, such poetic techniques recall a mother tongue that isn't necessarily a different language, although it can be, but sound, rhythm, vocalizations, what Kristeva would call the pulsations of poetic language.[7] These elements of a mother tongue are always in exile, internal or external, with regard to a dominant language.

What's striking, however, is that this is not a Benjaminian coming together of language, but a letting go of and an embrace with the opposite, with an ultimately irresoluble otherness. Emmanuel Levinas's concept of otherness is useful here to think about the ethics of such translations. What Levinas, of Lithuanian Jewish origins, writing in French, and who was also a translator, might say is

that we begin with an assumption of otherness, as opposed to an assumption of comprehension, unity, and commensurability.[8] This is a grounding in alterity, in a love for the other moored in an acceptance of the fact that you will never fully understand or have access to that other. This is what we do when we face another language, but this is also what we do when we face one another and ourselves. Because of this, translation has the capacity to speak to the incommensurability of the other because ultimately there is an incommensurability of the self.

We can't establish an ontology of translation because there's no such paradigm that allows us to be in the know when we approach a text, and there is no analogy, no universalism, or supreme identification that can sustain our relationship. So a translation reflects this pushing off. A translation reflects its deference back to the original, as it has the capacity to account for the loss of the *idea* of an original, again, for an original proximity that's now split by distance, or time, or history or power, that's now split in us. At the same time, the poetic forms of mother tongues, be they the sounds of the same languages or the words and rhythms of others, can always charge against a dominant language, affirming the wonderful sacrilege of Babel and the beauty of what is to be heard elsewhere.

NOTES

1. My mother is Puerto Rican, so I, like many children of Puerto Rican or Latin American parents who live "stateside," grew up speaking Spanish and English.

2. Seamus Heaney, "Fretwork: On Translating Beowulf," in *Translation—Theory and Practice: A Historical Reader.* Edited by Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinsson. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 603.

3. Alejandra Pizarnik, "13," in *Alejandra Pizarnik: Poesía Completa.* Edited by Ana Becciú. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Lumen, 2007), 115.

4. Pizarnik, "13," in *Pinholes in the Night: Essential Poems from Latin America*. Edited by Forrest Gander. (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2013). Forthcoming.

5. See Tamara Kamenszain, "La niña extraviada en Pizarnik," in *Feminaria Literaria*, *1996* 6 (10): 11–12.