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Homage to Translation: Argentina

There is a Fra Angelico fresco of Saint Dominic meditating calmly on the open pages of a *Bible*, oblivious to the whirlwind of screaming demons that nip the air around him. Dominic composes the calm center of a circling, rapacious nightmare.

What happens to language when, disengaged from one system, it enters the sphere of another system?

In her book *Night Journey*, translated by Anne Twitty, the Argentinean poet Maria Negroni's vivid prose poems invert Fra Angelico's schematic. Surrounded by the calm white page, the poems stage themselves as inward, disturbing visions.

And the self-absorbed, those people disinterested in the world around them, will they too suffer the tragedies rendered by that disinterest? Might translation present one means of interacting with the imaginations of others?

Negroni's poems are zocalos of dream, well-trodden and bird-haunted.

Is not thy word a lamp unto my foot and a light on my path?

Throughout Night Journey words flock across deserts, gardens, seas, into historical accounts and myth, into the dominion of angels and animals. As topographies shift, paragraphs break open into paradoxes, into cycles of vanishing and appearance. Phalanxes of brutal male figures sweep through poems and call to mind a century of violence in the poet's native Argentina.

Who asked you to put your world into words and offer it to me?

Exiled from family and friends, the mercurial protagonist of *Night Journey* wanders into serial cities, although sometimes it seems as though the cities arrive at her. Restlessly shifting viewpoints generate a multi-dimensional perspective.

We were friends and have become estranged. But this was right and we do not want to conceal and obscure it from ourselves as if we had reason to feel ashamed. Our exposure to different seas and suns has changed us. Was it not Nietzsche who told us this?

In Negroni's poems, it is as though lyric subjectivity, the unitary speaking voice, were sucked into an oneiric realm, heaven's maternity ward, where being is re-birthed and re-inserted into an endless history of lives, into manifold journeys toward meaning.

From the automatism of our daily speech, can translation draw us across that most guarded border, the one we construct around ourselves?

Negroni's memories and dreams link and disconnect like mitotic chromosomes. Assertions cross themselves out and each word is clapped to its counterpart of silence. When a poem's speaker takes on the life of a soldier, it is only to suffer the malice of other soldiers.

Is it fair to say that one form of totalitarianism is the corralling of human feeling into uniform language?

Each of her prose poems is a way-station for those who are adrift, between lives but "before biography."

Who warned us that "The Poets light but Lamps-- / Themselves go out"?

The self, Negroni insists, cannot be spoken. Nor can a reader arrive at "the invisible center of the poem" except by surrender, compliance, *acatamiento*. "Everything," she asserts, "must learn to lose, to return to the realm of the unknown."

Didn't the philosopher Ortega y Gasset claim that translations are not even the same genre as the original?

Enacting the migration of souls into bodies over time, key words are seeded into sequential poems: nostalgia, red, blue, invisible, silence, shipwreck, burial, exile, light, shadow, and island.

How might translations help inoculate readers against a language of manifest destiny, the language, say, of the NY Times?

The lexicon itself seems to be traveling in search of an identity, a face. Not a specific face, not a nationalism, but the face of The Human.

Have you noticed how Americans mumble uh, the Spanish eh, and the Japanese eeto?

Throughout *Night Journey*, our sense of time is elliptical, a victim in search of its murderer, a proof swallowing its equation. The bride and her funeral cortege are coeval. In the same poem, we come across the return and the proximate flight, calm and chaos, the launch and the shipwreck. Cause and effect are nullified.

French poet Edmond Jabes writes of the girl who, looking at a photograph, asks her grandmother whom it depicts. Why, that's me when I was a child, exclaims the grandmother. Oh, says the girl, and who is it now?

When Negroni up-anchors narrative time, replacing sequence with juxtaposition, a boat of light is both a boat of light and the crib of death. The poems inhale linear time and breathe it out as the untimely. Events blow through each other like wobbling smoke rings.

Does our country's self assurance, its crisply logical, systemic approach to language, its obsessive valuation of scientific objectivity, bracket off realms of perception, of possibility and difference?

Negroni introduces unnervingly canny technical and prosodic innovations, words whose rhythm is sing-song and songs composed of sacred words. Sentence structures elaborate meaning. When she writes "Where the pelvis should be (between waist and groin), the body is missing," we can see that the shape of the parentheses, in the middle

of the sentence, duplicates the shape of pelvic bones in the middle of the body.

Do not things that before swam in the water now go upon the ground?

Or when Negroni writes, “Pasa una leve sombra temblorosa. El resto es la autopista y yo entrando en lo anónimo, el sordo susurro de un trozo de escritura mientras sube la noche, la noche sube, pálida” -- we hear *Pasa* at the beginning, *pista* in the middle, and *pálida* at the end. But these deftly placed soft vowels and plosives only leaven the deep, doughy sonority of *sombra*, *temblorosa*, *anónimo*, *sordo*, *susurro*, *trozo*, *noche*, *noche*— those low vowels darkening the emotional pitch. Chiasmus creates the lapping effect of *Sube la noche, la noche sube...* And what begins as trembling shadow, *sombra temblorosa*, ends as pallid night, *la noche pálida*.

What are the three essential translation concerns according to Ezra Pound's friend, the Harvard professor and Chinese scholar Achilles Fang? First, is there an adequate comprehension of the host text? Second, is there an adequate manipulation into the target language? Third, is there something that happens in between?

In other words, the seething thematic tensions and the ineluctable relations between contraries are rehearsed throughout Negroni's remarkable poems in sound and structure and syntax. The poems about journeys ARE journeys themselves, crossing from Spanish to English in Twitty's excellent renditions, and from the page to the reader.

But what happens in between?