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Homage to Translation: Mexico

I approach the self-obliterating ecstasy of translation with trepidation. The more so because my own language derives from a Europe whose history of military and economic conquests deprived so many other cultures of their indigenous languages.

I may hope that my own translations are less colonial raids into other languages than subversions of English, injections of new poetic forms, ideas, images, and rhythms into the muscular arm of the language of power, but I know they are both.

One corollary of the fifth century “barbarian” invasions was the gradual shift from Greco-Roman to Christian art. During the Renaissance, a strong Byzantine influence helped effect the transition from Christian to European styles. And it was contact with Oceanic and African sculpture which provoked, in part, the leap from European to Modernist art.

I look to translations to refresh American English.

When I myself translate, I work to introduce into American English some of the essential and distinctive qualities of the language from which I'm translating. Not only its image repertoire and subject matter, but the sequencing of its sounds, the rhythmic pulse, the distinctive syntax, and the more subtle suggestions of resonant relations. In a good translation, the original is veiled, but it doesn't disappear.

The maverick Progressive Era writer Mary Austin became convinced that environmental rhythmic patterns are translated into the physiology of people attuned to them. So the prosody of the Gettysburg Address, as she reads it, expresses the rhythms of a man who spent many hours splitting rails.

When children die in rural pueblos in Mexico, they are sometimes buried with silk handkerchiefs over their faces. It is thought that worms, respecting silk because it is a part of them, will refrain from eating a child's face.

When I translate Mexican poet Pura López Colomé, I try to make a line that is equally flexible and propulsive, one that might accommodate the architecture of successive clauses that modify perceptions in process, actively, without dragging, so that when a sentence ends, the lineal arrangement and the syntax and the rhythm all conspire to draw the reader forward. This is part of the contour and momentum that I feel in her poems in Spanish.

I am not above inventing rhyme or wordplay in translation where there is none in the original in order to make up for wordplay or rhyme that is lost elsewhere. But a translator can justify such “recoveries” only as acts of faith, by translating not individual words, but the poem as a whole.

Chaucer's attention to the rhythm of the French alexandrine surely inspired his own shift of convention from tetrameter to pentameter verse lines.

Emily D, #842: The Fox fits the Hound—

As a translator, I try to make something equivalent, not equal.

Petrarch, himself a translator as well as a poet, observed that what the translator writes should be (in Nicholas Kilmer's version) "similar, but not the very same; and the similarity, moreover, should be not like that of a painting or statue to the person represented, but rather like that of a son to a father, where there is a shadowy something—akin to what painters call one's air—hovering about the face, and especially in the eyes, out of which there grows a likeness that immediately, upon our beholding the child, calls the father up before us."

The thoughts that are expressed to me by music that I love, wrote Felix Mendelsohn, are not too indefinite to be translated into words, but on the contrary too definite.

In an oversized notebook, Picasso translated the poems of Gongora into remarques, figural embellishments across the page and in the margins of the poems.

Even mistranslations have spurred significant developments. The supposedly newly-discovered poems of 3rd century warrior-poet Ossian—in translations forged by Scot prankster-poet James MacPherson—fueled Joseph Herder's Romantic re-conception of German identity.

And like Herder, the American poet Ezra Pound launched a new literary movement stimulated, in part, by translations based on a mistaken interpretation of the nature of the Chinese ideogram.

In contemporary Mexican poet Pura López Colomé's art, wordplay is an integral part of the intended meanings of the poems. When she writes, in "Los Cachorros" ("The Cubs"):

Siluetas que se arrastran
por el mármol,
el mar del mal,
la mía entre ellas

--the words might be translated to stress semantic meaning as:

Silhouettes that drag themselves
through the marble,
the sea of evil,
my own among others.

The colors of Giotto's painted mountains are derived from crushed stones excavated from those very mountains. Just so in translation: words are obliterated to allow for new words suggestive of more and less than the original meanings.

But what would be lost in a literal translation of Lopez-Colome's lines is essential to the poem in Spanish. In English, we lose the rich sounds in Spanish, the repeating r's, m's, and l's. Even worse, the deformation of *mármol* into its constituent near-phonemes, *mar* and *mal*, introduces a Kabbalistic inquiry, one which is central to Pura López Colomé's poetic project, one which links the sounds and spellings of words to orbits of mystical, moral, and spiritually-and-imaginatively transformative possibilities.

Friederich Holderlin rendered an entirely literal translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, word for word. And Louis Zukofsky translated classical Greek poems homophonically (and not always regardless of literal meaning).

In 1944, prior to "D Day," the BBC broadcast to French Resistance fighters a code based on a phrase from Paul Verlaine's poem, "Chanson d'Automne." The first line, translated as "The long sobs of the violins of autumn," announced that a British and U.S. invasion was imminent. On June 5th, a phrase from the second stanza, "Wound my heart with a monotonous languor" alerted the French Resistance fighters to the invasion at Normandy and allowed them to coordinate their own attacks.

In my translation of Lopez-Colome, I choose to alter the literal meaning in order to stress an equivalent degree of linguistic play and complication. I translate the lines as

Silhouettes dragged
through granite hills,
grey-nets of hell,
mine among them.

Perhaps that doesn't quite work either.

Are you aware that the glow generated by light-producing organs on the undersides of some fish acts to countershade them, erasing the shadow cast when they are viewed from below against the lighted water above?

Just so, the translator must disappear.

Plutarch's translation of an epigraph on a statue of Isis: "No mortal hath lifted my veil."

Lopez-Colome co-edits a literary magazine called *Gato por Liebre*.
Cat for Rabbit. You ask for a rabbit, but they give you a cat. How would you
translate that into English?

I asked for water, you gave me gasoline.

The translator may try to disappear that the music of the author's mind might be heard anew, and though something is heard and something does appear, it appears to and is heard by only you, reader. And only you may judge it.

Cunt: from queynte, aka bele chose, “lovely thing”.

I think John Ashbery might be referring to the meeting between author and translator when he writes, “In the presence of both, each mistook/ The other’s sincerity for an elaborate plot.”