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Words and Surrender

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Panel: Translation/Writing Across Languages

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Beverly Perez Rego

Words and Surrender

I was born in 1957 in Halifax, Canada, to a Venezuelan father and British-Guyanese mother. My sole nationality is Venezuelan. I have coexisted primarily with two languages (Spanish and English) my whole life, with the exception of my childhood in Brazil, where I learned to read and write in Portuguese.

I've been very lucky: my youth was filled with many different voices and landscapes, which I was able to inhabit under the protective care of my family that travelled with the privileges of the Foreign Service. I've also been very unlucky: at best, the languages I learned were challenges that I met and sometimes "won", figuratively speaking. At worst, in each new setting, I found myself emptied of the words that made up my world, and made me who I was. I kept losing my ability to name things. And as we know, what doesn't have a name ceases to exist.

In retrospect, it seems as though the experience of constant uprooting and re-adaptation led me to take language very seriously. In addition to being a means of survival, of communicating my needs and feelings, I noticed that words took on entirely different dimensions--beyond immediate meaning--in each new environment where I settled. Even the sound of my name changed in each new place. It was like I was someone new. The consequences of any utterance on my part confused me; sometimes scared me. A seriously pondered thought uttered by a six year old became a joke. A joke became something tragic. And the feelings evoked by words that I feared, such as spider, were all the more intensified when the housekeeper at our home in Sao Paulo warned me to be careful, when playing outside, of some mysterious creature. I didn't understand her words, so she lifted her hand and, with impossibly long lacquered red fingernails, that hand crawled slowly up a white wall. Then I understood what an aranha was. She spoke too fast and it would take some months for me to understand her. She had to resort to mimicry, you see, because back then I was only learning the most basic elements of translation.

Though my family setting was protective and loving, and special pains were taken to minimize any negative effects of our travels, I was hit by my "foreignness" every time I ventured into my new worlds, and then again when I returned to my former homes, as we travelled back and forth from Canada to Venezuela to Brazil, again to Venezuela, then to Guyana. Then back again to wherever "home" was. And it turned out that everywhere I went, I was always a "foreigner".

Language became a serious matter for me; sometimes a source of great achievement, when I grasped words and phrases fast, and when I wrote my first poems in Portuguese, then English. Sometimes language was a source of distress: when I could not communicate with a new friend, when I felt I could not communicate with myself, for the new world I had just entered held new things that had no name (or reference) in my former languages. Again, I was new at translation. So new that I probably didn't know what the word meant.

It turns out that I was not only struggling with the basics of learning languages, translation, and cultural adaptation. In being forced to rethink the stark reality and many possibilities of what the world was and what I was, I was also introduced to the basics of poetic language. Unknowingly, I began to think like a poet.

We all know that language is the Mother of all metaphors--it is mediation. As translators, we are mediators of the Great Mediator. We also know that the essence of

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language is found in poetry—language cannot achieve greater tension than in a poetic text. As those who aspire to poetry, we are forever stuck in the skin of a six year old who is thrown into a strange classroom on her first day of school in a different world. She looks around her and cannot use the words she knows; she has no reference point to hold on to, and her original language suddenly has become remote and useless, as though it ceased to exist. There is only a source language, but she does not know it. Not yet. In a way, she is now stranded in the land of “absolute translation”: no reference, no origin, only the intensely desired and mysterious source.

I stole this former paragraph from Derrida, something I recalled from reading him for a class, while fighting the urge to sleep for three days, as is usual when approaching a five hundred page volume on deconstruction. What I just read is also a translation. I usually like to think that theory is a mediator of all the things that mediate the Great Mediator. Though I recognize its need and place, it sounds absurd and reiterative, like “elaborating on the elaboration”. But Derrida did touch on a place that is central to me when he spoke of this estrangement from language, the loss of your anchor, what held you firmly to your center, to your senses, to your world, and what happens when it is gone. For me, translation and poetry began then.

You may think that having a head start so early on gave me a huge advantage as a poet and translator. But you are wrong. Right now, I would love to write an intimate, unpretentious volume in English, possibly titled “Poems from Bostick House”, or something like that. First, my Spanish is overwhelmed by the English I am forced to use all the time right now—no switching back and forth, no mercy.

For this Spanish seems too “lofty”, too “rhetorical”. Then I think: “It should be in English” –but English is not the tongue of my poetry. When you begin to write in another language, no matter how proficient you sound or seem, you are inevitably right back at that remote classroom door. First day of school, again and again, and the new words are smiling and giggling incomprehensively in their little golden desks.

As a translator, everything I have learned of the craft, after twenty years, seems to have been demolished a few weeks ago when I talked to a friend about translating one of my most beloved Venezuelan poets. He is known to be a linguistic challenge, and I like challenges. I began translating some poems I wanted to bring here to Iowa, but was stopped dead on my tracks when my friend asked me about one of my favorites: “How are you going to translate ‘El Noche’?”

This poem by Ramon Palomares sounds like this:

Aquí llega el noche
 el que tiene las estrellas en las uñas,
 con caminar furioso y perros entre las piernas
 alzando los brazos como relámpago
 abriendo los cedros
 echando las ramas sobre sí,
 muy lejos.
 Entra como si fuera un hombre a caballo
 y pasa por el zaguán
 sacudiéndose la tormenta.

Y se desmonta y comienza a averiguar
y hace memoria y extiende los ojos...

Articles have no gender in English. El cannot be differentiated from La. I could say “The Man Called Night”, but that is four words where there were two. Not a good sign. It makes me rethink Spanish. Isn’t it supposed to be lofty and rhetorical? Now it seems to be even more efficiently streamlined than the light breath of air that is English. How does that apply to my future book, “Fear and Loathing in Shambaugh House”? How does it apply to everything? And, most important, what does it mean to my translation – my challenge, my honor?

I’ll try it this way:

Here comes El Noche
the one with stars in his nails,
a furious walk and dogs between his legs
raising his arms like lightning
opening the cedar trees
hurling the branches over him,
very far.
He comes in like a man on a horse
and goes through the porch
shaking off the storm.
He dismounts and starts to look about,
remembers and spreads out his eyes.
He gazes at the towns, some bent
over slopes, others bent on ravines
he goes into the houses
to check on the women
and sweeps the churches through sacristies and belfries
so frightening when he steps on the stairs.
Then he sits on the rocks
looking about with no peace.

Here, I was supposed to convey the imminence of a presence so deep and mysterious, it could only be rooted in the ancient oral traditions of the Venezuelan Andes, the traces of the Spanish Golden Century; the speech of Andean people –rough, elliptical, shamanic, magical. There are many, many other things about the poet Palomares that I would love to share with you, if only I could begin by solving the mystery of “El Noche.” Just these two words.

I have to remind myself that, as a mediator, long ago I accepted a challenge: I would play the games imposed by words, and I would win. And I really can’t complain: things turned out OK. I even managed to travel to Iowa and be here with you today.

I also now realize that the process of learning and unlearning languages, translating, and finding poetry by renaming the world, has never been about appropriation, domination, mastering or winning.

It's about giving up. Right now, here in Iowa, I am giving up a portion of my world, which is my language, to a greater end: to be understood, to communicate.

In the end, like all journeys, great and small, this is all about getting yourself out of the way, and surrendering to the moment – which is the translation, which is the poem, which is the world, which is us.