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Translator's Preface, by Asa Zatz. HIEROPHANCY IN THE CLOUD FOREST by Efraín Bartolomé

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Translator's Preface

Asa Zatz

Preamble: Paraphrasing Somerset Maugham's dictum on writing the novel: "There are three rules for translating poetry. Unfortunately, nobody knows what they are." (Cf. Zatz's *Primer for Literary Translators*.)

Rule 1. Always keep in mind that you are not the author of the text, nor, except in special cases, a plastic surgeon). Despite not being an academic, having been called upon to problematize on the subject of poetry translation and despite the many treatises on the subject, mostly very good, I felt an uncontrollable urge to produce a mini-dissertation. Accordingly, without further ado, I launch, into a series of quotes:

1) The painter Barnett Newman once said: "Aesthetics is of about as much interest to artists as ornithology is to birds."

2) The painter Degas is supposed to have said to the poet Mallarmé: "Mallarmé, I don't understand it. I have lots of ideas but I simply cannot write a sonnet." To which the artist replied, "Ce n'est point avec des idées qu'on fait des sonnets, Degas, c'est avec des mots."

3) The best minimalist definition of poetry I have found in the broad literature on the subject is: "Poetry is all the best words in the best possible order." (Cannot recall who is responsible for it.)

The same definition holds for translation. The problem is that the words are all different and mostly, of course, have their own peculiar linguistic dynamics, but they are supposed to say the exact same thing. An irresolvable paradox. Translation, then, must, at least, consist of equally good choices. Ground zero for translators. Finally, a friend, Stanley Burnshaw, a poet and not-as-well-known-as-he-should-be theoretician on the subject of translation says, "But words are biology." (A can of worms I will not open here but which, I feel, must, at least, be alluded to.) Some years ago, I gave a workshop at which I wrote a short essay for the students entitled "Never Translate Poetry Unless You Absolutely Have To," an intentionally ambiguous statement. That is: if a poem occurs incidentally in a novel, you cannot say "Sorry, I only translate prose." Or, you have read a poem which so captivates you that you must have at it.

(Cf. Words are biology.) I had always been too respectful of poetry to lay hands on the stuff.

Conclusion: Poetry is untranslatable, but... I problematize at the very outset with this poem's very title: Hierophancias en la Selva de Niebla. Right off the bat, there is a dilemma. Characteristically, I start by copping out: Shall I make it easy for the reader (and myself, of course)? Hierophancia exists only in my 10 vol. Salvat and "hierophancy" in my OED., the 20-vols. in one with the magnifying glass. Most readers in either language are not going to know what the word means. So, I lit, for starters, on: "Sacred Mysteries of the Rain Forest." Sounded catchy enough and more or less conveyed a feeling. But I was wrong. This brings me to my next cardinal point: LOVE (in caps, a word I cannot problematize) must be the driving force in embarking on the translation of a poem. The OED rendered the following: "Hierophancy: function of a hierophant; capacity of expounding sacred mysteries." It then provides a quote from an 1871 source that is astonishingly apposite: "the hierophancy of all needs only to be awakened." Further investigation revealed that a hierophant is not just any old Greek priest but a priest of Demeter. Demeter is no less than the goddess aka Mother Earth. That is the big deal here. So, I went with the cognate (note: not in the plural!). Bartolomé is, above all, a great ecological poet. When I sent him a draft of the translation, he corrected me: "No, not 'rain' but 'cloud' forest." I had opted for "rain forest" again because it was more familiar to me and would be for the reader. Small difference? There we are, translators! Translation of poetry is all about small differences. Vive les différences! And overtones, my dears, overtones is also what it's all about. A forest almost always shrouded in mist gives off different vibes than those where it rains like hell most of the time. In conclusion: The quetzal is a magical, mystical and, almost mythical creature, elusive and of strange and exquisite beauty. Also, it cannot survive captivity. The few that are left are rarely seen except, oddly enough, on Guatemalan banknotes and coins, having given its name to the national currency. The cloud forest is also an endangered species and these are issues that engage this poet. Every poem has translation problems; individualized and multiple. The translator tries his best to solve them. In conclusion, I offer one general, over-riding observation. Experienced translators know that the final arbiter in making the best (or better) choices is the ear.

Poemas / Poems

HIEROFANÍAS EN LA SELVA DE NIEBLA

Para Alba y Asa Zatz

En el reino animal
 en el phylum de los cordados
 en el subphylum de los vertebrados
 en la clase de las aves
 en el orden de los trogoniformes
 en la familia de los trogonídeos
 hay una especie que bendijo las retinas de mi alma
 con una pincelada cuyos fosfenos de esmeralda
 aún esplenden en mi vaga memoria

Pharomacros mocinno mocinno es su nombre científico
 según dice mi amigo el ornitólogo
 Yo lo acepto a regañadientes en un intento pálido de precisión
 pero nada le agrega el latín a su nombre de siempre
 y a veces hasta creo que lo rebaja a criatura posible
 aunque el milagro esté a punto de volar para siempre
 hacia un mundo que lo merezca más

Es el quetzal
 y de él escribo con esta tinta verde
 que es verde sí pero no tiene el resplandor metálico
 que refulge en las plumas de esa criatura cuyas ráfagas ígneas
 han pasado otra vez frente a mis ojos
 en los que ya no cabe el esplendor

HIEROPHANCY IN THE CLOUD FOREST by Efraín Bartolomé

Translated by Asa Zatz

For Alba and Asa Zatz

Within the animal kingdom
 in the phylum Chordata
 the subphylum Vertebrata
 the class Aves
 the order Trogoniform
 and the family Trogonidae
 there exists a species that
 blessed the retinas of my soul
 with a brush stroke whose emerald phosphenes
 still dazzle my indistinct memory.

Pharomacros mocinno mocinno is the scientific name
 an ornithologist friend informed me
 which I accept reluctantly with a schoolboy bow to rigor
 but Latin lends nothing to the familiar name
 and rather I sometimes feel diminishes the status
 to that of ordinary creature despite
 this miracle being on the verge of flying off forever
 to a world more deserving of him.

It is the quetzal
 of which I write in this green ink
 and green it is yes but devoid of the metallic sheen
 that flashes from the creature's feathers
 whose fiery flares have once more passed
 before these eyes of mine
 able no longer to encompass such splendor

Me metí a la montaña y al pecho de la montaña
 y al corazón oscuro de la montaña
 desgarrando la niebla y desgajándola
 y apartándola con rudos manotazos y descolgándola
 como quien quita una cortina de lianas y densas enredaderas:
 por donde sólo cabíamos mi alma y yo

Y una vez en la cumbre del verdor neblinoso
 silbé y canté y emití extrañas guturaciones
 apenas logré hacer un túnel estrecho
 y le pregunté al árbol y al hueco del árbol y a los bejucos
 y a las hojas magníficas y a la hojarasca
 y todos me dijeron "por aquí pasó..."
 pero no se mostraba

Pregunté a las serpientes que trazaban una secreta caligrafía
 y a los insectos que puntuaban la sintaxis del monte
 Le pregunté a la flor boquiabierto ante el milagro del amanecer
 y a las azules mariposas que eran la envidia de ciertas campánulas
 Le pregunté a los colibríes que aleteaban más rápido que el tiempo
 y al clarín guardabarranco que hacía su minúscula labor de zapa
 en la superficie de la madrugada
 Interrogué a sus víctimas: pequeñas lagartijas atemorizadas
 y a sus predadores: ardillas inocentes
 que avanzaban con paso cauteloso
 buscando en los encinos los nidos sin protección
 Todos me respondieron "por aquí pasó..."
 pero no se mostraba

Lo invoqué con su voz y a veces respondía desde la espesura
 pero no se mostraba

Agucé la pupila hasta que fue la punta de una espina
 y la hincé sin piedad en el vientre de la maraña
 Me mostré y me oculté
 Me arrastré como la nauyaca

I went into the mountain and into the breast of the mountain
 and the mountain's dark heart
 tearing the mist aside and ripping it apart
 slapping at it and detaching it
 the way one pulls down dense curtains of lianas and vines:
 I was barely able to open a narrow tunnel
 with space enough only for myself and my soul

And once at the summit of the misty verdure
 I whistled and sang and uttered strange gutturals
 and I asked the tree and the hollow in the tree and the reeds
 and the magnificent leaves as well as the fallen ones
 and all told me "he passed by here..."
 but he didn't show himself.

I asked the snakes that were writing in secret cipher
 and the insects which punctuated the syntax of the bush
 I asked the flower open-mouthed at the miracle of the dawn
 and blue butterflies the envy of certain campanulas
 I asked the hummingbirds fluttering faster than time
 and the mockingbird that was carrying out its tiny task
 of quarrying the break of day
 I questioned their prey: frightened little lizards
 and their predators: guileless squirrels proceeding cautiously
 upon the oak trees in quest of an unguarded nest
 All of them told me "he passed by here..."
 but he didn't show himself

I summoned him in his own voice
 and he responded sometimes from within the fastness
 but he was not showing himself

I honed my sight to a needle's point
 and plunged it ruthlessly into the entrails of the thicket
 I showed myself and I hid
 I slithered like the copperhead

Me quedé quieto como el ocelote
 Me escondí tras los troncos corpulentos
 y asomé la cabeza como un lince
 y no lo pude ver
 porque no se mostraba

Cuando al fin acepté que ya no lo vería
 y mi espíritu se sentó a descansar en una piedra allá dentro de mí
 la gran hoja esmeralda voló frente a mis ojos
 como una lenta ráfaga:
 la precedía algo como un golpe de sangre
 en el cogollo fulgurante del rubí

Lo vi ascender:
 súbito como una idea y lánguido como la memoria

El quetzal fue a posarse en las ramas más altas
 y el despacioso tiempo
 lo siguió.

I froze like the ocelot
 I crouched behind massive tree trunks
 and poked out my head like a lynx
 but was unable to see him
 because he was not showing himself

Finally when I had given up hope of seeing him
 and my spirit had sat back to rest on a stone there inside me
 the huge emerald leaf flew before my very eyes
 like a slow streak:
 preceding it something that resembled a spurt of blood
 from the stunning core of a ruby

I watched the quetzal ascend
 sudden as a thought and languid as memory

To light upon a topmost branch
 while deliberate time
 followed after him.