

UC Santa Barbara

Translation Studies Journal

Title

"Gold of Ages"

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/54r2t665>

Journal

Translation Studies Journal, 2(1)

ISSN

1555-8614

Authors

Bartolomé, Efraín
Zatz, Asa

Publication Date

2007

Copyright Information

Copyright 2007 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Translator's Preface

Asa Zatz

I believe it would be of greater interest if, instead of my embarking on an introduction to my translation that would be of dubious interest to citizens and non-citizens who translate poetry or do not, I were to dedicate the space I am being allotted, if I may, to an outstanding thinker on the subject of poetic translation; I believe it would be much more appropriate. I refer to Stanley Burnshaw, a poet of stature and an outstanding and innovative theoretician of poetic translation, who died a couple of years ago at the age of 99.

Unable to resist either the temptation to namedrop or to tell a story, I must relate that once in Mexico, Diego Rivera introduced me to some visitors, saying, "I would like you to meet my friend, the poet Asa Zatz." This was not off the wall, but based on the fact that I had written a somewhat florid narration for a documentary on his great mural in the chapel of the agricultural school often referred to as the Mexican Sistine Chapel. Appropriately, I told him I wasn't a poet. "Oh," he said, or the Mexican equivalent thereof. Some time later the occasion arose for him to do the honors again, this time saying, in his inimitable Diego way, "I want you to meet my friend, the great poet Asa Zatz." Not a poet, then, but a translator who has the temerity to do poetry, which can have its positive side.

Specifically, I would like my dedication to consist of the recommendation of two of Burnshaw's books: *The Seamless Web* (Braziller, 1970) and *The Poem Itself* (Schoken, 1960). Of the former, a treatise on poetics and craftsmanship of translation, of which the substantial critic, John Leonard, said: "The man has written an important, challenging, exciting book, without asking us to admire him..." On mentioning this, I herewith break into my leitmotif of "Never translate poetry unless you absolutely have to," the title of a duly ambiguous little memorandum I put out for a workshop I was giving. In a perfect world poetry should never be translated. In this remarkable book of his, Burnshaw offers a way of circumventing normal translation by numbering the lines, foot-noting and doing literal translations, plus commentary and explanation as to the music lost, for example, insofar as necessary and plausible, thereby creating what

for one commentator was "a do-it-yourself translation kit." A distinguished critic of the time, Lionel Trilling, called it "...a remarkable enterprise and a strikingly successful one."

Poema / Poem

ORO DE SIGLOS

He vuelto: tengo otra vez once años y el mundo es tan inmenso, mi espejo tan confuso, el martes tan azul.

Y yo he vuelto rompiendo entre los días cerrados, rajando una vereda en el carrizo tupido de los días, entre la lluvia y contra el viento, bajo el calor y contra el frío, bajo la hermosa Luna, abriendo surco entre las llamas del mundo.

El viento frío de la madrugada pintó mi cara: amarató mis labios, coloreó mis mejillas, puso un toque de escarcha sobre mi barba negra.

La ciudad huele igual.
Puebla de sombras el herido horizonte.

Por los tejados donde los gatos beben agua lunar van rebotando campanadas solemnes: oro de siglos.

De Guadalupe a San Cristóbal, del Cerrillo a la cumbre del verde Santa Cruz con una herida como un precipicio, está vagando un niño que me mira tres décadas después contemplándolo, viéndolo caminar por la ciudad con un balón de cuero mientras ensaya versos elementales.

Yo lo miro mirándome bajo el martes azul. Él quisiera ser yo. No imagina que el pecho se me achica y que un puño brutal me aplasta el plexo despiadadamente. No sabe.

GOLD OF AGES by Efraín Bartolomé

Translated by Asa Zatz

I've come back: I'm eleven years old once more and the world is so immense, my looking glass so blurry, Tuesday so blue.

I'm back having forced my way between overcast days, cutting a path through the dense canebrake of days, in the rain and against the wind, in the heat and the cold, under the splendid Moon, opening a furrow through the flames of the world.

The cold dawn wind colored my face: purple my lips, reddened my cheeks, frosted my black beard.

The city smells the same. It peoples the wounded horizon with shadows.

From the roof tiles where cats lap lunar water, the solemn bell tones rebound: gold of ages.

There is a boy wandering from Guadalupe to San Cristóbal, from Cerrillo to the summit of green Santa Cruz, a scar on it looking at him, watching him stroll about the city, a soccer ball under his arm, composing elementary verses.

I look at him looking at me on the blue Tuesday. He would like to be me. He has no idea how my heart shrinks and a fist pummels me brutally in the pit of the stomach. He doesn't know. Has no notion of the bloom that burned me:

No conoce la flor que me ha quemado: la llama florecida desde el pecho y los ojos con que lo estoy mirando. ¿Quería ese niño ser el hombre memoria mirándome? ¿Soy el niño que miro en mi memoria mirándome? ¿Somos los dos el mismo?

No.

Sí.

Tal vez.

Lo cierto es el recuerdo.

La espuma. La niebla que sepulta Cuxtitali, los huertos de duraznos, las avionetas contra el martes azul. San Cristóbal con sueño. El estallido sordo contra el cielo pequeño de San Antonio. La destrucción, el gris, la sucia mancha de concreto creciendo en dirección de La Albarrada, por María Auxiliadora, pasando el viejo campo de aviación, en los prados y lomas donde con Tomás Vásquez localizamos nidos de zenzontles.

Ahí estoy.

Me miro entre las casas, ejerzo los oficios cotidianos. Ahí estoy: viene nadando la memoria con la mirada clara.

Mis manos se pintaron de negro tiñendo telas en una casa textil de Mexicanos.

Preparé mezcla, medí con precisión, tiré cordeles largos como el día, puse los plomos, coloqué vigas, armé cimientos de piedra y poderío, levanté muros rojos, encendí los tejados de iglesias y de casas. Repellé las paredes y pinté.

the flame that blossoms from my breast and from these eyes that look at him. Did this boy want to be the man I am? Am I looking at the boy who looks at me in my memory? Are we two the same?

No.

Yes.

Maybe.

What's true is the memory.

The foam. The fog that cloaks Cuxtitali, the peach orchards, the small aircraft against the Tuesday blue. San Cristóbal, sleepy. The muffled explosion against San Antonio's little sky. The Destruction, the grayness, the dirty along María Auxiliadora, across the old airfield, over the meadows and the hills where Tomás Vásquez and I discovered zenzontle nests.

There I am.

I look at myself among the houses, a worker at the common trades. There I am: memory comes swimming in, vision clear.

My hands were stained black from dyeing cloth in a Mexican's textile plant.

I

mixed mortar, made careful measurements, stretched lines long as the day, set plumb bobs, installed beams, laid foundations of stone and power, raised red walls, roofed churches and houses. I plastered and I painted.

Recogí el polvo.

Después me fui
silbando entre las callejuelas rumbo a Santa
Lucía.

Ahora lo recuerdo: lo veo con claridad:
moví los fuelles en un taller herrero de Cerrillo.
Preparé lanzas, candados, cerraduras y llaves,
balcones exquisitos. Y cruces, muchas cruces.
Ahora lo recuerdo: pongo mi mano bajo el
clavo y descargo el primer martillazo
enceguecido y rojo.

Mas no todo fue así.

En la
Almolonga vi brotar el agua, toqué su
transparencia. La transparencia existe: me vi en
ella.

Cacé ranas en el canal del Cubo.

Tuve altas
ilusiones de fama deportiva en el Campo
Benigno.

Miré salir el sol quemando el Zontehuitz
y lo vi hundirse incendiando el Huitepec. Al día
siguiente los dos eran intactos, frescos, recién
nacidos a los ojos amantes de al mañana.

Devuélveme
la Maravilla ahora, Campo Maligno. No bajes tus
impuros ojos, hipócrita progreso. No me mires
ya más, niño en la sombra. No me quemes ya
más.

Ya no me duelas, espléndido veneno.

Ahora
sube a la fronda de mi memoria un mico de
juguete: trépate mico hasta las altas ramas: yo
acciono el mecanismo que dispara tu voltereta

I carted

away rubble.

And then, I set off through the alleys,
whistling, on my way to Santa Lucía.

Now I remember, can
see it clearly: I'm working the bellows in a Cerillo
blacksmith shop. I forged iron rods, made door latches,
locks and keys, elegant balconies. And crosses, many
crosses. Now, I remember: I'm holding my hand under the
nail and striking the first blind, red hammer blow.

But

that's not all there was to it.

I saw the water gushing up
into the Almolonga, touched its transparency. Transparency
exists: I saw myself in it.

I chased after frogs in the
Cubo canal.

I dreamed of myself as a famous athlete on
Benevolence Field.

I saw the sun come up burning the Zontehuitz
and watched it go down setting the Huitepec on fire. The
next day, both were intact, fresh newborn under morning's
loving eyes.

Give Wonder back to me, now Malevolence
Field. Don't be lowering your wanton eyes, hypocrite
progress. Don't look at me anymore, child in the shadows.
Don't burn me anymore.

Hurt me no more, generous poison.

Now
a toy monkey clammers to memory's canopy. Climb, monkey,
to the topmost branches. I trigger the mechanism that
launches you into a somersault in my soul. Climb higher,

en el alma. Sube más alto mico extraviado en la hojarasca de los días, en la hojarasca de los perdidos años. Ven, con piel de verdad sobre tu delicada estructura de madera imposible. Sube, pequeño mico, alma mía, *mon semblable, mon frere*.

Atrás. Atrás. Cinco años atrás. Tengo seis años: aún no conozco esta ciudad, vivo en mi pueblo: en las garitas de los *cuxtitaleros* compré el *trepatemico*. De las mulas bajaron grandes fardos. De los fardos fue brotando el portento: dulces, *nanches*, *jocotes* encurtidos, mistelas de durazno y de membrillo, rojas cocadas, *chimbos* amarillos: colores que incendiaban mis rabiosas pupilas. Frascos de *temperante* atemperando me calor extremo: me sed de maravilla.

Remuevo
estos instantes como un rimero de confites.

La
tarde huele a pan de San Ramón.

Por los Portales
pasa la Delicia: la niña de trece años en las alturas de su maravilla. La miro en su destello sobrenatural: su rostro intacto que conmovía hasta el llanto. Su perfección y su delicadeza. Ella, que siempre vio hacia el infinito, una vez me miró. Una garra dulcísima en mi cuello: una opresión. Un batir de alas en el pecho niño. Y la mudez. Y la Poesía.

Eso:
En los Portales
iba la Poesía.

¿Era real?
No sé.

monkey lost among the dead leaves of the days, in the fallen foliage of the wasted years. Come, with real skin over your impossibly fragile wooden frame. Climb,
my little monkey, my dearest one, *mon semblable, mon frère*.

Back. Back. Five years back. I'm six years old. I'm not familiar with this city yet. I live in my village. I bought the climbing monkey at a *cuxtitalero's* stand. They were unloading great bundles from their mules. Wonders poured from those packs: *comfits, nanches, pickled jocotes, peach and quince pastes, red coconut balls, yellow egg-yolk-and-sugar candies*: colors that lit up my ravenous eyes. Flasks of soothing syrups to calm my raging fever, my thirst for wonder.

I stir
those moments around like bonbons in a bowl.

The
afternoon smells of San Ramón bread.

Delight appears at
the arcade: the thirteen-year-old beauty at the height of her wondrousness. I am transported by her unearthly radiance: the purity of that face, moving to the point of tears, its perfection, its exquisiteness. She whose eyes were ever fixed on the infinite looked at me one time. A claw of unbearable sweetness at my throat: a shortness of breath. A beating of wings in the fledgling breast. And dumb silence. and poetry.

That's right:
Poetry was in the arcade.

Was it real?

I don't know.

Lo cierto es
que aquí estoy. Viendo la escalinata de piedra
que escalé paso a paso, los vendedores de
carbón, sus caballos minúsculos entre las bellas
casas de tejados dormidos. Lo cierto es que han
crecido pinos en la ladera. Lo cierto es que hay
un tajo entre los cerros, hay un castillo feo en el
flanco del cerro Santa Cruz.

Lo cierto es este nudo
en mi garganta, esta neblina húmeda llegando
hasta los ojos.

H caído la noche. Avanza. Se
acaba. Los maitines de la Merced están
quebrando su cristalería.

La cohetería estalla.
Las campanas.

Ahora el niño se borra. Se
desvanece en la neblina.

Pero no ha muerto: acaba
de nacer. Desde hoy vagará en callejones
internos como en un laberinto. En las callejas
profundas de mí mismo.

Ciudad Real, septiembre de 1991.

That I am here is so. Looking at the stone stairway
I mounted step by step, the charcoal burners, their
tiny horses between the beautiful houses with their
roofs asleep. That pines have overgrown the slope is
so. That a chunk was carved out of the hills, that
there's an ugly castle on the side of Santa Cruz.

That
there's a lump in my throat, a wet mist rising to my
eyes, is so.

Night falls. Advances, Ends. La Merced's
call to matins shatters its crystal glassware.

Rockets
bursting.

The church bells.
Now, the boy fades away.
Disappears into the mist.

But he hasn't died: he has
just come into the world. From now on he will be
wandering inner alleys like a maze. In the deepest
passageways of my self.

Ciudad Real
September, 1991