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Translator's Preface

KEBishop

In 1938, two years after the violent outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Sevillian poet Luis Cernuda left Spain for Great Britain to participate in a series of conferences, not knowing he would not return. Cernuda's trip to England unwittingly marked the beginning of a long exile, which in turn produced a decided shift in his poetic subject matter and register. He increasingly began to deal with the difficulties of exile in his poetry, including the complexities of living abroad, understanding what it meant to be Spanish beyond the borders of Spain and also during a time of war, and a chronic solitude that would burden him throughout his life. "Cementerio en la ciudad" forms part of *Las Nubes* (1940), the first collection of poetry that Cernuda published after going into exile. While the poem does not expressly address a thematics of exile, it reflects the profound loneliness Cernuda suffered during his first years in Britain and his preoccupation with place and the passage of time. It also hints, by way of what he would have us read as the ravages of oblivion, at the poet's concern with being remembered by his literary peers even though abroad. Cernuda here strikes a careful balance between his poetry's subtle romantic tendencies and a modernist metaphysics—the likely result of his assiduous study of T.S. Eliot at the time—that serves as a meditation on memory via a brief circumscription of place.

I always come up against the same challenge when translating Cernuda: how to render in English the equilibrium he manages between an innately baroque Spanish and his markedly trenchant poetic language. He uses stark verbs to describe a series of simple images, but Spanish also permits him to use Latinate nouns and extended metaphors that weigh more heavily in English translation. My aim, then, was to achieve a similar kind of balance between simplicity of language and scope of meaning without falling into the pitfalls of abstraction that words like "dolor," "olvido," and "miseria" become in their English equivalents of "pain," "forgetting," and "misery." I attempted to reign in some of their vagueness in English by, perhaps paradoxically, presenting them without translating the verb *hay* [there is] that Cernuda uses to describe the scene.

For the omission of action allows the abstractions both to reflect the weight of the graveyard and Cernuda's perception of time and to stand on their own in a kind of metaphysical detachment the poet seeks to communicate here. I also spent a fair amount of time deciding on a verb in English that would most faithfully describe the sound the train makes as it passes. The trick here is that Cernuda leaves us with a perception of sound via an image of movement. "Agitar" is to "shake," "stir," or to "stir up," in the sense of instigating something. But what the train instigates here is an echo, a sound once-removed or detached. I tried a number of verbs to replicate the inseparability of sound and movement that Cernuda achieves, and ended up deciding on the phrasal verb "shakes off." Its compound construction offers up the benefit of a kind of multiplied movement which illustrates the passing, inevitably shaking, motion of the train and the sound it leaves behind as it travels into the distance.

A translation is always a process whose movement is captured at some point or another on a page. I hope that this one, like the train that skirts "City Cemetery," produces enough echoes to make its reader want to read more of Luis Cernuda's work.

Poema / Poem

CEMENTERIO EN LA CIUDAD

Tras de la reja abierta entre los muros,
 La tierra negra sin árboles ni hierba,
 Con bancos de madera donde allá a la tarde
 Se sientan silenciosos unos viejos.
 En torno están las casas, cerca hay tiendas,
 Calles por las que juegan niños, y los trenes
 Pasan al lado de las tumbas. Es un barrio pobre.

Como remiendos de las fachadas grises,
 Cuelgan en las ventanas trapos húmedos de lluvia.
 Borradas están ya las inscripciones
 De las losas con muertos de dos siglos,
 Sin amigos que les olviden, muertos
 Clandestinos. Mas cuando el sol despierta,
 Porque el sol brilla algunos días hacia junio,
 En lo hondo algo deben sentir los huesos viejos.

Ni una hoja ni un pájaro. La piedra nada más. La tierra.
 ¿Es el infierno así? Hay dolor sin olvido,
 Con ruido y miseria, frío largo y sin esperanza.
 Aquí no existe el sueño silencioso
 De la muerte, que todavía la vida
 Se agita entre estas tumbas, como una prostituta
 Prosigue su negocio bajo la noche inmóvil.

Cuando la sombra cae desde el cielo nublado
 Y el humo de las fábricas se aquieta
 En polvo gris, vienen de la taberna voces,
 Y luego un tren que pasa
 Agita largos ecos como bronce iracundo.
 No es el juicio aún, muertos anónimos.
 Sosegaos, dormid; dormid si es que podéis.
 Acaso Dios también se olvida de vosotros.

CITY CEMETERY

Translated by KEBishop

Behind the gate open between the walls,
 Black earth void of tree or grass,
 Wooden benches where in the afternoon
 Some old folks sit silently.
 All around are houses, nearby are shops,
 Streets where children play, and the trains
 Run alongside the tombs. It's a poor neighborhood.

Like patches torn from the gray walls,
 Rags wet with rain hang in windows.
 Names are already worn off
 The gravestones of the dead two centuries old,
 Without friends to forget them, the hidden
 Dead. But when the sun comes out,
 For it shines bright as June nears,
 Those old bones must feel something deep down.

Not a leaf nor a bird. Only stone. Earth.
 Is hell like this? Pain without forgetting,
 Noise and misery, long cold without hope.
 Here the silent sleep of death
 Does not exist, for still life
 Stirs between these tombs, like a prostitute
 Carries on with business beneath the unmoving night.

When shadows fall from the cloudy sky
 And smoke from the factories settles
 Into gray dust, voices spill from the bar,
 And later a passing train
 Shakes off long echoes like angry brass.
 It's not judgement yet, anonymous dead.
 Be still, sleep. Sleep if you can.
 Maybe God has also forgotten about you.