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Translators' Preface

Steve Sadow

Jim Kates and I have been co-translating for so long that we can often finish each other's lines. We translate from Spanish, a language Jim reads only with difficulty. (Jim also translates from French and Russian.) I provide a rough translation of the poem; Jim, the poet, finds ways of turning my approximations into poetry in English. Over the years, my original versions have come closer to Jim's style; and he is now more likely to accept my English choices.

I first came to appreciate Angelina Muñiz-Huberman's work when I was editing my 1995 book *King David's Harp*, a collection of autobiographical essays by Jewish Latin American writers. Later, we met at a conference held at Wellesley College. She has graciously sent me a copy of each her books as it appeared.

Angelina Muñiz-Huberman is one of Mexico's most profound and most accomplished living poets, though her work is insufficiently known north outside of Mexico. Her favored themes are creation and destruction, the union of opposites, the perception of existence, and more recently, exile as a state of being. She writes with great care, measuring every word for meaning, sound and effect. Her images are suggestive and at times allusive. To create her poetry, she draws upon her vast knowledge of diverse literary traditions. The Jewish mystical traditions of the Cabbala and the *Zohar* (*Book of Splendor*) infuse her work. Yet she is able to convey her complex messages without frustrating her reader.

Jim and I decided that this was poetry that required translation. Translating it, however, posed problems that we had not encountered elsewhere. For one, her insistence on finding precise words to express an idea made us more stringent than usual in our choice of words. Proper translation of these poems calls for not only an academic knowledge of mysticism but personal experience with it. I had to draw on my readings of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan and Rabbi Laurence Kushner and my experiments with Jewish meditation. Jim could depend on his wide readings of mystical literature from various places.

One poem was so forceful that it had a surprise side effect on both of us: Jim and I both felt compelled to read the Polish count Jan Potocki's strange, mysterious, and very long eighteenth century French (or is it Polish or Spanish?) novel *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, cited in her poem "Manuscript Trouvé." Moreover, I am moved every time I consult my inscribed copy of *El ojo de la creación* (*The Eye of Creation*), the 1992 collection from which these translations were done.

Poemas / Poems

LOS CABALISTAS

Recibieron de lo alto la voz divina
la chispa que incendia el corazón.

La palabra sólo la tradujeron de boca a oído.
Nada quedó escrito.
Sobre el agua o sobre el río sí.

Con los nueve atributos del innombrable
Más la esfera sin fin
dibujaron el árbol de la sabiduría.

La escala de la luz
El entorno en exégesis
Fuego negro en fuego blanco:
la página no dice lo que dice
sino lo que hay más allá de lo que dice.

Detenidos frente al lago,
las altas espigas en la orilla,
lanzan una piedra al punto equidistante
y los círculos concéntricos
van expurgando las vías del conocimiento.

Cada uno acoge la enseñanza que cuidadosamente bruñe
entre diamantes tallados
para el iniciado que quiera adiestrar su sonido y su memoria

y el sueño de todas las cosas.

Selected Poems by Angelina Muñiz-Huberman

Translated by Steve Sadow & Jim Kates

THE CABALISTS

From on high they received the divine voice
the spark that kindles the heart.

They interpreted the word only from mouth to ear.
Nothing was kept in writing.
On water or on the river yes.

With the nine attributes of the unspeakable
added to the boundless sphere
they sketched the tree of knowledge.

The stair of light
the setting in exegesis
Black fire in white fire:
the page does not say what it says
but says far more than it says.

Stopped on the shore of the lake,
high reeds all along the bank
they throw a stone to the point equidistant
and concentric circles
expand, purifying the paths of knowledge.

Each one absorbs the lore that cautiously burnishes
between cut diamonds
for the novice who desires to refine his sound and memory

and the dream of all things.

MANUSCRITO HALLADO

A Ludwik Margules

Quién retumba los cascos del campo de batalla
 Quién fustiga la chispa de la espada

El conde Jan Potacki pisa sueños y revierte alucinaciones
 Zaragosa Palermo Alejandría Beijing

Lobos aúllan cada amanecer
 ahorcados comparten su lecho
 Con los jacobinos mandó a la guillotina
 y buscó en la noche el claustro reparador
 para solo entrechocar los huesos

Vacío

El Zohar se abre en la página blanca
 La vela ha consumido el brillo del cuchillo
 La Sulamita ha roto el espejo y su piel es
 [una arruga herida

El cuerpo desnudo es piedad y es fuente de locura
 No hay movimiento lascivo ni velo que lo trasluzca

La ermita se desmorona
 la claridad se cuarteja

Por la sierra divagan los lejanos caballeros

El conde Jan Potacki acaba de recibir las pruebas de imprenta
 que aseguran que el breve mundo ya está preso

MANUSCRIT TROUVÉ

For Ludwik Margules

Who resounds on the hoofs of the battlefield
 Who lashes the spark of the sword

Count Jan Potocki tramples dreams and overturns hallucinations
 Saragossa Palermo Alexandria Beijing

Wolves howl every day at dawn
 hanged men lie down in their bed
 With the Jacobins he sent to the guillotine
 and at night he sought the redemptive chapel
 to clack his bones together all alone

Emptiness

The Zohar opens to a blank page
 The candle has consumed the glint of the knife
 The Shulamite has shattered the mirror and her skin is a
 [wounded wrinkle

The naked body is piety and the wellspring of madness
 There is no lascivious movement nor translucent veil

The hermitage crumbles
 clarity cracks

Distant horsemen roam the sierra

Count Jan Potocki has just received page proofs
 assuring him that the brief world is under arrest

Manuscrito hallado

Esperará unos años
los suficientes
para pulir la bolita de plata
de la tapa de su tetera
introducirla en su pistola
y con lujo
trazar el último
signo no revelado.

Manuscrit trouvé

He will wait some years
just enough
to polish the small silver ball
from the top of his teapot
insert it into his pistol
and luxuriously
trace the final
unrevealed sign.

EI CENTRO MISMO

La maraña del árbol circunscribe el espacio
 enredando equívocos
 sombreando azules.

El calor del plomo derrite con lentitud
 larvas de pensamiento
 entrañas de alquimista.

La selva medianera asfixia los sonidos
 intuye los caminos
 oculta los atajos.

Cómo llegar al centro mismo del centro mismo
 si el muro si la piel
 obstruyen la semilla.

La garza de la neblina levantará el vuelo
 cortando con el pico
 la opacidad del alma.

Salpicará la espuma
 apartará la nube.

En el centro del gran hueco.

THE CENTER ITSELF

The foliage of the tree circumscribes the space
 entangling ambiguities
 shadowing shades of blue.

The heat of lead slowly dissolves
 the larvæ of thought
 the alchemist's vitals.

The jungle in between stifles sounds
 perceives the routes
 conceals the shortcuts.

How to arrive at the very center of the center itself
 if the wall if the skin
 obstruct the seed.

The heron in the mist will rise in flight
 slicing open with its beak
 the soul's opacity.

It will splash away the foam
 part the cloud.

In the center the immense hole.

LOS ILUMINADOS

A Alberto

Pocos iban quedando, muy pocos,
Se extinguían melancólicamente.

Absortos en la flor blanca del pico de la montaña
Heridos por el aire frío de amaneceres intuidos
Consolados por la luz bendita que parte las nubes.

Al fondo de la cueva, el tabernáculo esperado:
siete brazos de velas encendidas
y el prisma de los colores en cada reflejo de llama.

Sus rostros iluminados
Su interior revertido:
sentidos que todo lo han sentido
lucidez que rota la sabiduría.

Callan los himnos extraños
Prorrumpen los silencios obstinados
Con el dedo van siguiendo la lectura de la página sagrada
para que el proceso de la creación
siga siendo el proceso del cristal inusitado.

Al fondo de la cueva, el nacimiento dibujado.

THE ILLUMINATI

For Alberto

Few remained, a very few,
Heartbroken, they vanished.

Absorbed into the white flower of the mountain peak
Hurt by the cold air of imagined dawns
Consoled by the blessed light that parts the clouds.

In the depth of the cave, the longed-for tabernacle:
seven arms with candles lit
and the prism of colors in each reflecting flame.

Their faces illuminated
Their vitals overflowed:
senses that have wholly sensed
clarity that circles wisdom.

They mute their strange hymns
They break into stubborn silences
With a finger they follow the reading of the holy page
so that the process of creation
continues to be the process of rare crystal.

In the depth of the cave, the birth revealed.

EL OJO DE LA CREACIÓN

*A la memoria de
Marcela Huberman*

Igual que corre el ibis blanco
sobre la hierba que no pisa
y tres gotas de sangre granan su plumaje
de suave curva

— tres gotas de sangre que no se ven —
y el olor salubre del agua pescadera
se confunde en el olor del semen milenario

Igual que corre la sombra al encuentro
del cuerpo olvidado
y se dobla en lo oculto del terreno quebradizo

Igual que el aire se afana entre los canales
perdidos de las dunas arrastradas

Igual que suena la hora última
— aunque el muerto no la oiga —
y suena la gota destilada del amor
— aunque subterránea no aflore —

Corre, se dobla, se afana y suena
el escondido río de las aguas plácidas
del ojo de la creación.

THE EYE OF CREATION

*In memory of
Marcela Huberman*

In the same way the white ibis runs
over grass that does not feel its weight
and three drops of blood redden its plumage
of soft curves

— three unperceived drops of blood —
and the brackish odor of fish-tainted water
blends with the odor of millennarian semen

In the same way the shadow runs to meet
the forgotten body
and doubles back into the hidden part of the fragile terrain

In the same way air labors among the lost
channels of windswept dunes

In the same way the final hour tolls
— although the dead man may not hear it —
and the distilled droplet of love rings
— although it may not surge underground —

It runs, doubles back, labors and tolls
the hidden river of quiet waters
of the eye of creation.

EL CÍRCULO DEL GÓLEM

El rabino Eleazar abrió la palma de la mano
y dejó escapar la tierra virgen prodigiosa
Tomó agua pura de la fuente de la montaña
Recitó las doscientas veintiuna combinaciones alfabéticas
y formó el gólem.

Quiso que el hombre de barro caminara
Y el hombre de barro caminó
Quiso que el hombre de barro obedeciera
y el hombre de barro obedeció
Quiso que trabajara, limpiara y ordenara
y trabajó, limpió y ordenó.

Quiso hablar con él y quiso que tuviera un alma:
silencio:
el gólem desmoronó su polvo y al polvo regresó.

El rabino Eleazar recordó
que todos los hombres son mortales.

THE CIRCLE OF THE GOLEM

Rabbi Eleazar opened the palm of his hand
and let go the miraculous virgin earth
He took pure water from a mountain spring
He recited the two hundred twenty-one alphabetic combinations
and shaped the Golem.

He willed the man of mud to walk
and the man of mud walked
He willed the man of mud to obey
and the man of mud obeyed
He willed him to work, to clean, to put things in order
and he worked, he cleaned, he put things in order.

He wanted to converse with him and willed him to have a soul:
silence:
the Golem crumbled into dust, and returned to dust.

Rabbi Eleazar remembered
that all men are mortal.