

Myth Over Matter

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In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin writes, “[t]he intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational” (76-77). Writing poetry is one thing, but writing with the ekphrastic intention of translating a memory or an image is another. It means entering a hybrid space of artistic transcreation. I often enter this space when I am translating, painting, or writing about home. For *Stirred: Memories and Dreams*, I have included several translations of home, including a painting of my childhood home in Jilava and three accompanying poems in three languages (English, Spanish and Italian). The poems reflect on the experience of leaving and going back to that home and recall Valerio Magrelli’s metaphor, of a translator as a one-person moving company, constantly packing and unpacking meaning (246-247). I consider these poems translations of each other and of the painting, even if they may not be literal: poetic and artistic transcreation moves beyond the literal, surrendering to a more liberal, experimental, and spontaneous form of translation.

When I translate the memory of my childhood home in Jilava, whether through different art media or languages, I realize that memory itself is a mythical process full of mistakes: threads repeatedly unraveling to reveal a desperate, irreconcilable silence. In the process of transcreation, I had to shift, purge, tumble and leap so that each language could activate and embody that silent space of home. Each language has its tricks and verbal textures, its tones, rhythms, scansion, and imagery. To me, each poem is like a little theatre, revealing the most intimate identities of language. The English rendition “Myth over Matter” is specific, concise, and haunting. The Spanish version “Ser descubierta” is organic and elaborate, absurd yet playful. The Italian “Silenzi” is repetitive, layered and lugubrious. The poems also reveal private traces of Romanian, my mother tongue, to emphasize the idea that “I’ve made the mistake of leaving / and I always make the mistake of going back” (He cometido el error de irme / y siempre cometo el error de volver”, “Ser Descubierta”).



Photo credit: Adriana Onita

Myth over Matter

My mother said she purchased me
from a gypsy caravan
la Jilava
three km south of București

We lived two leaps away
from Jilava prison;
heard slow, shifting moans
from the muffled kitchen.

When we departed,
Jilava disassembled
carefully my fingers
my thumb, my pinkie...

Arrived in Wedgewood
(winter). My hands trembled
for hours. I feigned sleep,
to be kind.

At least, at last,
I ate some tomatoes (in winter?)
But it was quiet. Too quiet.
I left my sky singing.

There were tools, too. I sewed
everything back together,
the thumb, the middle, the
small one - pinkie?

Then I could handle it all,
learned every love language,
but ignored my own tongue.
for winter tomatoes.

Yet the moans rest inside me,
a hunger stroking my heavy labour.
I hear them at times,
Bite my thumbs in protest.

M-am întors la Jilava

To hear those moans,
to see how her
myth-dipped mind
intertwines with mine.

But the threads unraveled
as I sat and stared
into my gypsy palms.
And Jilava was silent.

como una espectadora
de mi propia vida.

Me pregunto, si con el viaje,
¿me vuelvo cada vez más invisible
o me acostumbro a todo?

La noche parece detenerse.

Me muerde el silencio.
Un volumen de maletas
ocupa el espacio
entre las sombras furtivas.
Reconozco una valija negra,
extensión de mi cuerpo.
De repente
alguien dice *la revedere* -

Es una niña
de pelo rizado
con uñas pintadas.
Sale afuera, casi oculta
y en la sombra del amanecer
la vi sorprenderse de mi presencia.

*Dile adiós al aire, nina,
dile adiós al tiempo
vas a llegar lejos, lejos
dile adiós al tiempo.*

Y allí el sueño se interrumpe -
la chica desaparece antes que la luna.

El pasado –
nada más que un postal
sobre mi estante

una foto tomada con apuro
desdibujada por la lejanía

un trance reciente
pero misteriosamente evaporado.

Silenzi

C'è il silenzio di mezzanotte
 che svanisce ogni giorno di più
C'è il silenzio dell'anima sulla terra
 che svanisce come un sogno ogni notte
C'è il silenzio del lampo e dell'amore
 che svanisce prima di pronunciarsi

Ma c'è il silenzio di una stanza
 in Jilava
nella casa verde dove sono cresciuta
 o liniște sepulcrală
che nessun potere del mondo
 può ravvivare

È il silenzio più disperato
 di tutti i silenzi

REFERENCES

Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. 76-77. Print.

Magrelli, Vittorio. "L'imballatore," in *L'anno di poesia: 1988-1989*, ed. Roberto Mussapi. Milan: Jaca Books, 1991. 246-247. Print.