The Ability of Fear to Metamorphose

By *Carla Imbrogno*

Translated from the Spanish by *Ian Barnett*

“She turned her back on the mirror,
hating the mirror's vanity."
Paul Celan, *Backlight*
(trans. Rosemarie Waldrop)

I’ve managed to slip the guard, I travel as a stowaway up on the top of the train. Breasts travel crushed, arms spread-eagled, onrushing landscape strains my features, wind chops up my speech. I travel, an unutterable addict, stiffened, clinging to the roof of the train, hear someone’s praise of translation, think of the illusions of certainty, the guard, it snows on me, it’s snowing on the top of the train, as it clanks along the tracks.



The somatic dimension of translation emerges during the journey. I travel crouching, translate as I go; there’s body in that rational operation of my translating mind and mind in the last cell of my body, the deepest is the skin. The deepest is the skin, I repeat; the smallest cell senses the titanic nature of the undertaking, a failed venture in advance they warn her, don’t try to make the so-oft-murdered soul of an intruder part of your flesh; but the smallest cell shrugs off such discouragement, offers itself; there is no expectation in the smallest cell, it opens out in two and transports the intruder into an operation of subjection and dissection: how much longer can you live from this?



It must be possible to express the contradiction. Against the dejection, the sense of inadequacy, against the time, which is never the time the translation needs, *against the fear*, I morbidly repeat it has to be possible to express the contradiction. I speak inwards, speak outwards, mumble words that I translate by sheer willpower, stubborn as ever the WILL, to call things by their name, to name the world is what I want, to name things by their name, what they are. Then what happens to everything we don't name?

I venture a clinical gaze on our translating condition: a physiology, an idiopathic vicissitude, a mode of relation to a sensitive materiality. And a dialectic: our material is sometimes nothing but this it is about to be, non-objective conditions, and languages are only systems, desperate attempts at a possible order; I don't lament this apparent lack of uniformity, I look for the way out of order, I establish a template, a mode of relation that isn't quite finished, I find the way out of the labyrinth; now I have to interpret the woods.



It must be possible to express the contradiction of being an instrument, an incarnation, trans-human, post-human, the contradiction of going from cyborg to bacterium. Terror of the germ ever since a virus lodged itself in my hearing body, unleashed a sudden unilateral deafness, forever robbed me of my stereophony, forced me to look for the mid-position, the half-life I've chosen to devote to transit, because not getting anywhere, being nothing but a project all the time, allows me to express the contradiction, the half measures, to become a fold, think myself a stowaway for a minute, a deceiver, to finally have a voice: the remote possibility of having a voice, that is. And giving it. There's something of that in translating.



It’s the ruffled, muffled beat of the djembé, impervious to all pleas, it’s the hand that lightly brushes the surface of the skin, seeks a surface contact, to make the communal dimension of all this graspable, which is nothing but life in-between, which is not just about naming the world; there’s something of shared life in all this, which is ordinary life and therefore forces us to unstiffen our body, there being something of necessary unison in this, something of empathy, of communion.

And of detachment too.

It must be possible to express the contradiction, the moment of the indiscernible, the instrument that I am, the crystal image. I am a mirror and you are a mirror, object, the uncomfortable mirror of everything else that resolves itself in me, the mirror that is suspicious of my urges, my omissions, my justifications, of what I can but can’t, everything; I’m told I shouldn’t, you are the mirror that screams in my face the proportion I don’t have, my appalling habit of being over-adapted, the mirror of culture, of all that demands to be purified: you are the abusive mirror of my limitations, and between reflecting and mastering and displaying myself I grow wings, beat them to translate, I take the listening point of the germ, the phlegmatism of the whale, resonate there, vocalise the movement of the dunes, I am an instrument unplayed in the orchestra, does that make me passive then?



It must be possible to express the contradiction of reaching the place I was meant to, the place that’s always defined by the orchestral, personal and social, the contradiction of being nothing but what I was meant to be, feeling like a sister, predestined, standing on the only two little feet that might be willing to carry me, before them I kneel; not to my fingers on the keyboard, to my feet I offer myself up because they carry me, in the only way I’m capable of moving forward: hand in hand with others.
Translation isn’t a personal feat, it’s communal like disease. I read about a sensitive

translation, and I'd like to know what the insensitive in translation would be: not to feel for once the contradiction in the voice threads whose inquisitions, witch-hunts, genocides, corruptions, exclusions, miserability reeve together the ages. It isn't threads but death rattles that connect the times, it's the memory of cells, complicity, my fingers on the keys in the small hours, the moment when night or sleep brings in the mot juste, the very word that obsolesces.

Because there's the matter of time, there are the conventions across the ages, the versions, the matter of being able to grasp an interpretation, to grasp your snubs, object, there's the helplessness faced with an utter lack of any hypothesis, when you lack life, object, when you don't secure your transparency, when you lack outlines, a proper fit, there's the anguish when you utterly…

And with the anguish returns the symptom, that imperfect symbol, the other side of the coin, the inability to control everything; something of the order of orphanhood is symptomatic in translation: I wish I could cling to the surface of your words, object, the way I cling to the top of the train; I wish I could unlearn the course of your meaning, tighten my clutch on translation, the only one capable of compensating me; I follow the course of those tracks alive and dead which, you know, express me, follow the course of my translated text and become a gazelle; for a moment I unlearn you, object, I run at the speed of the fear that comes head on like a hurricane, like a chameleon, that has the ability to metamorphose, the fear crouching behind the symptom; the fear is what lies behind everything and behind everything lies the fear, so I go after the fear.

Faced with the dejection, the feeling of inadequacy, with the anvil of the pages that remain, I ask myself how much choice there has been in all this, how much design, how much daring, omnipotency or prepotency, lying, how much restriction, alibi, verbiage or sheer drive, what if not my usual disproportion, my excess, I translate this body and the other and the other and the other and one more, and my expression translates above all what I am, but also translates what I am not.

To translate is to let go of the fear, never, never, never to be tied down; translated I grow old and translating I am rejuvenated; I kneel and make an offering: to my mouth, whose babbling accompanies and translates as I kneel, translates as I recline, translates as I run and gives thanks while translating, and prays and is like a nun, a little nun from so much thanksgiving, but also deceitful, manipulative, it loses the horizon on the journey, the perspective, and so it swipes up the mirror and looks for the translation and can't find it, or finds the image that might express it better but is distorted, the mirror reflects a translation that isn't, I kneel and search uninterrupted, fourteen hours translating, I look under the rug, among the floor-cloths, in cracks, in the corners I find bugs, fluff, hair, spiders, nothing I hadn't seen before but I'm looking for the blessed word, the all-embracing image; the original demands I give it back the letter, its origin, vile bald sow, I'm losing the letter, I'm losing the language, the terror of losing language, and I lose my hair as I translate, which later I find and sweep out of the corners.

The fear lies behind everything. Behind everything lies the fear. So, I go after the fear.

Translation is the yoke and anvil of the remaining pages. But the pages that remain are missing. And yet, and yet, and yet: translation is love. Contradictory because that's what love is, illogical because that's what love is, forgettable and impossible to forget, that which could be a thousand different ways and can only be what it is; sometimes

translating is wanting to forget and to do that you have to lose your memory and losing your memory is wanting to forget the pain too. Translating is the place of parting.

It must be possible to express the contradiction, and at an angle I see a field of sown green grass, I see the guard, he's right in front of me, I count the pages left to reach the end and see myself a horde reaching the field of sown green grass and want to water it, and no sooner do I enter it than I lose my freedom again. All around are elves, monsters, lullabies, a constant murmuring. The brain becomes a sponge from wanting to forget so much, a network of disconnects, like at birth, but now untethered.

I see pigs in the grass and goats in the snow, the snow again, it snows on the guard, it snows on me, we hold our heads high, we feign composure, I see your crumpled face, object, your roots that interrupt each other, do not arboresce; your orphan words are like exposed nests, niches the winter leaves unprotected; I see the fear made fear that's transformed with each new translation, each new sown green field and the hair that grows and the breast that opens and now I'm Buddha, no longer a nun, I too shift my shape like my religion, bucolic, I sound out the guard and see you, object, there you are defiant, spiral, mirrored, and who ups the ante in this crystal confrontation? Then you, object, advance your glazed body and once again show me. And I jump from the train. And run.

Photos: From Munich to Berlin, when?



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Carla Imbrogno works as a literary translator, author and arts and culture curator. She is a graduate from the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) and completed post-graduate studies at the University of Freiburg, Germany. Her work has been published in anthologies, journals and cultural supplements. She has translated from German to Spanish plays by Alexander Kluge, Mauricio Kagel, Elfriede Jelinek, René Pollesch, Thomas Köck and Katja Brunner, as well as poems by Daniela Seel, Nora Gomringer and Rike Scheffler. For her translations for the stage, she has been honoured three times with the Premios Teatro del Mundo [World Theatre Prize]. Her translation of Katja Brunner's *La Mano es un cazador solitario* [*The Hand is a Lonely Hunter*] can be heard as sound fiction in a coproduction by the Teatro del Puente and Proyecto Prisma. Carla Imbrogno has been a jury member in the translation category of the ALIJA awards. She

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