

THE TRANSLATOR AS HERO By Ian Barnett

“There is no muse of philosophy, nor is there one of translation.”
Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator* (trans. Harry Zohn)

In *After Babel*, George Steiner’s riotously erudite treatise on the art and ideology of translation, the author politely declines to take on that most famous of dicta attributed to Robert Frost which flippantly claims that “poetry is what gets lost in translation”. Steiner’s discreet silence eloquently pronounces a deserved contempt for this piece of botched nonsense.

Firstly, Frost’s remark does remarkable injustice to poetry: it reifies the creative act by implying that poetry is an object that one can misplace rather than a fluid, ongoing exchange between poet and reader. For him *poesis* is a teleology; and as such it privileges the author above the reader (or translator) and deprives them both of the right to exegesis. Communication closes with the finished poem. Secondly, it implies a crassly mistaken belief that prose is easier to translate than poetry, being a kind of written version of speech. In fact, in its horizontality, prose writing bears only very slightly more resemblance to speech than does poetry, and the presupposition that prose lacks rhythm, and in some cases rhyme, is simply philistine. Thirdly, his remark is symptomatic of the centuries old distrust and vilification of the translator, the product of a nagging post-renaissance hangover. To imply that translation is all loss and no gain is fatuously one-sided. Robert Lowell and a hundred others would rightly have laughed in Robert Frost’s face. The unease reflected in the all too commonly cited “*traduttore traditore*” continues to impede the translator in their professed task. (The phrase probably dates back to Machiavellian Italy and the birth of modern politics: language is power and to entrust your power of language to another is to lay yourself open to betrayal.) And lastly, it sets up a false antagonism between a sublimely immanent creativity and the merely linguistic act; the idea that literary or any other creation is beyond or independent of its medium.

The modern notion that linguistics is an impoverished cousin of literature is, mercifully, on its last legs. But that of translation as linguistics’ crippled sister still prevails. The *Oxford Companion to Literature* contains no entry at all on translation, which is instead reserved for the *Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Translation and translators are tactfully but systematically turned away from the doors of their rich cousin with, at best, an offer to come back later. You’d be hard put to find the name of the translator in a review of a new foreign novel in a British or American periodical, despite the fact that they have often spent longer working on their text than the author did on the original. Steiner’s own definition of translation is much more generous and comprehensive: “‘Translation’, properly understood, is a special case of the arc of communication which every successful speech-act closes within a given language. On the inter-lingual level, translation will pose concentrated, visibly intractable problems; but these same problems abound, at a more covert or conventionally neglected level, intra-

lingually.” Frost’s oblique, off-the-cuff swipe is tantamount to kicking a man when he is down and is not worthy of the poet.

The twentieth century has been called “the age of translation”, so perhaps it comes as no surprise to learn that three of the novels to appear in Argentina in 1998 have all had as their focus translators or interpreters. In fact, this is actually quite surprising. I, for one, can think of practically no precedents in any language for this sudden spate of interest in the workings of translators’ minds.

There is of course Carlos Fuentes’ tragic but deliciously ironic story from *El naranjo* (*The Orange Tree*), *Las dos orillas* (*The Two Shores*) in which the shade of Jerónimo de Aguilar, a Spanish soldier captured by the Maya and rescued eight years later by Cortés, repents from the grave of his role as a ‘translator traitor’ in the duping of the last Aztec emperor, Guatemuz. Instead of ‘faithfully’ translating Cortés’s magnanimous offer of lands and continued status, he translates “*a mi antojo*” (just how I liked) and conveys a threat of imprisonment and torture to Guatemuz. The idea that the fate of a people or nation may hinge on the whim of a translator conjures up terrible vistas of cruelty. Aguilar’s betrayal is compounded by the fact that his ultimate act of wilful mistranslation is partly due to his having been spurned by La Malinche, later Cortés’s lover and interpreter with whom he hoped to find some kind of linguistic paradise. He has been ousted by her from his post as the only Spanish interpreter of the Mayan and Aztec tongues and by lying to both Guatemuz and Cortés he takes his revenge on his rival in love thus betraying ‘both shores’ (perhaps a better translation of the title), the Mexican and the Iberian. Shades of Nagasaki, without the element of human error.

Fuentes story is a remarkable fusion of history and psychology, but it is nonetheless just that: a story. The late Salvador Benesdra, Pablo De Santis and Néstor Ponce, however, have taken the whole process a stage further and made the figure of the translator/interpreter the subject of their three very considerable novels. All three novels are written in the first person and, not surprisingly if you’re a translator, their narrators all manifest an acute *Weltschmerz*. All three, however, are written in widely varying styles and genres.

Pablo De Santis is an author who is refreshingly lacking in the Anglo-Saxon phobia of the intellectual world. In *La traducción* (*The Translation*), Miguel De Blast, the translator of a Russian neurologist named Kabliz, is called on to speak at a translators’ conference. The novel takes place in the claustrophobically hermetic world of a crumbling, half-finished conference hotel in a windswept resort on the coast of Argentina which has been reduced by an economic downturn to a virtual ghost-town and where a strange epidemic is leaving sea-lions dead on the beach. Here, De Blast runs into an old flame, Ana Despina, and an old colleague and rival in translation, Silvio Naum, a brilliant linguist who has since had a fling with his ex. An atmosphere of things being suggestively familiar yet at the same time unsettlingly strange pervades the book. Even the characters’ names are disquietingly allusive as if nobody really is quite who they seem to be: Kuhn, Naum, Agri, Blanes, Zúñiga, Kabliz, Rauach, Blanes. (I’ll leave you to play games with them.) Puerto Esfinge holds the Argentine record for incidences of suicide and psychosis and its name announces a riddle around which the plot revolves: three victims of

mysterious murders all found with coins under their tongues. (The Russian verbs for 'to translate', by the way, can also be used meaning 'to destroy' or 'exterminate'.) What could possibly drive translators to kill each other? A passion for language? Professional rivalry? Or something more sinister?

At one level, De Santis's novel is a masterfully written detective story with all the ludic invention you come to expect from the genre. But its subject matter is so strikingly off-beat, it casts its web of allusion so wide that it leaves you feeling that something else is on trial here; and that something is language itself. De Blast is a translator who as the novel progresses turns detective. The various lectures given at the conference are linguistic *tours de force* to be deciphered by the reader; they are pregnant with unfulfilled meanings. Language itself is dramatised here: the charismatic Naum gives a disquisition on the untranslatability of silence in various languages; De Blast on one of Kabliz's patients who loses her thread in the middle of an interpretation and afterwards is afflicted by a form of echolalia in which she feels herself compelled to translate every word she hears (with variants!); Valner starts a question and answer session on the subject of the Enochian language handed down to the Elizabethan hermetic philosopher, John Dee, by celestial creatures; the mysterious Dr. Blanes presents one of his patients who after a car accident has demonstrated an ability to translate from any language whatever but who takes fright when a member of the audience asks him to translate a sentence from a language nobody has heard before. The ensuing language mystery is beyond the grasp of Comisario Guimar.

For all the wry detachment and wistfulness of its protagonist, for all the obsessiveness and neurosis that being a translator implies, De Santis's book paints translators in a very positive light: they are highly skilled professionals capable of navigating the swamps of language, of staring into the misty chaos of Babel. (One of the key images in the book is that of the boatman Charon ferrying the dead across the Acheron: trans-lation.) In *El intérprete* (*The Interpreter*) Néstor Ponce takes up this positive image again. The unnamed interpreter of the title inhabits a Buenos Aires stricken with the yellow fever epidemic of the 1870's. The similarities with Camus' *La Peste* and a whole series of grouches aimed at the appalling conditions of life in the capital, however, moor the meanings of the work very firmly to the present. The work charts the interpreter's progress from decadent *ennui* to a living nightmare. In the face of the ancient Unzué de Álzaga, who is married to a young French woman, he first glimpses the death's-head which comes to haunt him throughout the novel in the faces of the sick out of which leers the Parca. The daily interpretation sessions between the old *estanciero* and the red-haired beauty, Aude d'Alençon, are an ordeal of jealousy at the old man, and the suppression of his burning desire for Álzaga's wife ironically mimics the suppression of his own robust, vital language. The threat of disease eventually wipes out the younger man's advantages over his elder. The subsequent strains on the personality of the interpreter are harped on throughout: "Since I have been translating...I have not been alive. Or I have been alive in another way. I am living another life while my former one slips through my fingers like water flowing under a bridge...To translate, to speak using somebody else's words, not to have your own voice...This old wretch has taken

possession of my will and turned me into his slave.” His exquisite baroque language provides a bitterly ironic contrast with the squalor and suffering he sees around him as fever begins to grip the city by its throat. But whereas De Santis’s translator succeeds in his bid to unravel the mysteries of death through language, Ponce’s interpreter fails miserably in his efforts to fight the plague as he does in gaining the love of Aude d’Alençon. He is reduced to finding an outlet for his love in visiting a French whore, an parodic act of love. Language in this novel provides no barrier to the deathwards rush of nature. Rather, it is a desperate carnival dance on the brink of the abyss. Death is the absence of language, the end of the novel, and the interpreter is acutely aware that his interpretations are a form of death in life, a suicidal relinquishing of one’s own personality, of one’s own voice. Nevertheless, the interpreter does wage war on death through the language of the novel. Language for him is a form of action even if it is ultimately ineffectual. He has more faith in the transforming power of language than does Camus’ Rieux and this is enacted in his commitment to the commission set up to combat the fever.

If Ponce’s interpreter falls halfway between success and failure, the translator of *El traductor* goes the whole hog. Here Benesdra paints an abject picture of neurotic estrangement and the gradual ebbing away of half-glimpsed success. Ricardo Zevi works at Turba, which translates as ‘Mob’ in English, but which gives rise to a whole series of puns in Spanish on the lines of ‘turbación’ or confusion, and ‘masturbación’ which leads to ‘más turbación’ or more confusion. Turba is a left-wing publisher’s and the only one to employ an in-house translator. In the crisis facing the left in the early 1990s with the break-up of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, he finds himself translating a far-right German thinker, Ludwig Brockner, whose analysis of the contemporary scene ineluctably draws him into its web. He is seeking promotion to the status of reader, which he briefly achieves only to have his position retracted by the faceless owner/manager, Gaitanes. Zevi gradually becomes the victim of a plot to demote him in Turba’s sinister swing to the right. At the same time the translator, an atheist and disaffected Jew, is seeing a frigid Adventist called Romina whom he is trying to steer away from her religious practises and towards the delights of sexual pleasure. Their ensuing romance is a catalogue of errors and splits. Zevi is the most highly articulate of these three narrators and a formidable intellectual. Yet he is also the one who most tragically misses the irony of his own situation: while at the outset a successful translator with an enviably steady job, he is incapable of translating the increasingly difficult circumstances of his own life to himself. His literary ambitions stem from his intuitions of his own powerlessness, which he never quite manages to articulate to himself. His quest for power in the increasingly right-wing set-up at Turba ultimately and inexplicably founders. Like Joseph K’s, his gods are nameless and inscrutable and he is powerless to resist them. He dimly perceives the synchronicity of his decline in favour at Turba and the decline of his relationship with Romina but is incapable of translating this into positive action. He remains paralysed in his life like a rabbit caught in car headlights at night. His inability to ignite Romina’s sexual instincts matches his inability to ignite his own career. Ironically, from his top-floor flat, which he jokingly calls his “Periscope”, he becomes gradually more and more submerged in isolation and self-absorption.

This is the most realistic of the three novels and presents the most detailed psychological portrait of the translator: its insistence on the ins and outs of Zevi's daily routine and economic realities, and the pressures that these place on his personal life is relentless. His inquiries into religion, politics, anti-Semitism, literature, in short his intellectualism, all form a barrier to self-discovery. He is unable to translate himself to himself. Like Ponce's interpreter the only thing Zevi has left is language, which he uses to build an unassailable wall of words around himself. *El traductor* is Benesdra's and Argentina's *Magic Mountain*, though the mountain has been replaced by the less lofty but equally rarefied atmosphere of Zevi's flat. Zevi in the end is forced to relinquish his grandiose schemes for more modest goals. Unlike Hans Castorp, who undergoes an awakening to the intellectual world, he learns to take his place among the rank and file of the little people. This quietism, personally, I find the most disturbing aspect of the novel given Argentina's recent history. But Benesdra does strike a tremulous note of hope at the end of the novel, when Zevi expresses his faith in the novel as an instrument of revelation by wishing to name his son Román, or 'novel' in French, German and Russian.

Given the millennial importance of translation in world history, one might ask why it has taken so long for the translator to appear as a figure in fiction. When Borges, in typically paradoxical fashion, said about Henley's translation of Beckford's *Vathek* that "the original is unfaithful to the translation" he was not simply redressing the balance of things in favour of the translator, but on another level was suggesting that a closer collaboration between author and translator is necessary. The temporal paradox involved in Borges' statement wryly underlines the fact that translation is more bound to its times than literature. If the author and translator are to collaborate closely and equally, they must obviously both be alive. These three novels are crying out for translation into as many languages as possible, as soon as possible. Translations are nothing if they are not urgent. It is deeply unfortunate that Salvador Benesdra is no longer here to take part in any such collaboration.

***El traductor*, Salvador Benesdra (Ediciones de la Flor, 1998)**
***La traducción*, Pablo De Santis (Planeta, 1998)**
***El intérprete*, Néstor Ponce (Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 1998)**