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Huidobro's Auto-translations and the Kinship of Languages

Se debe escribir en una lengua que no sea maternal.

Huidobro, Preface to *Altazor*

*...all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms
with the foreignness of languages.*

Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator"

In 1917 the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro published his first collection of poetry in French. Although the poet had already published several collections in Spanish, *Horizon Carré* represented a pivotal new phase for the poet who would be credited with introducing principles of the European avant-garde into Latin American poetry. Huidobro chose to include in *Horizon Carré* seven of his earlier Spanish poems that he translated into French with Juan Gris' assistance. These poems were first published in 1916 in Chile in the collection *El Espejo de Agua*, and upon his arrival in Paris in December of 1916, Huidobro began publishing their French versions in Pierre Reverdy's review *Nord-Sud*. The poems thus find themselves in a unique position: on the one hand they represent the final remnants of Huidobro's juvenilia in Chile, the last mementos, one might say, of the period before his self-imposed exile; on the other hand, the poems initiate Huidobro's attempt to fashion himself as a French poet and to participate in the European avant-garde. The double-sidedness of these poems is intensified by their interlinguisticity—that is, by the relationship they establish between Huidobro's literary languages, between the French of cosmopolitan Europe and the

Chilean Spanish of the Americas. It is my argument that the paradoxical manner in which this interlinguisticity establishes both relationships and disjunctions between Huidobro's two languages should inform the translation of these poems into English by providing a framework for rethinking the relationship between the original and target languages.

The fact that Huidobro should begin his European enterprise with the translation of his own work is significant, for not only does the very act of translation signal Huidobro's trans-cultural movement from Latin America to Europe, it also presents an important testing ground for Huidobro's nascent theory of poetry, "Creacionismo," or Creacionism. Creacionismo is, at least at face value, a romantic theory of the poet's radical originality. In the manifesto "Creacionismo," Huidobro proclaims that a poem should be an "hecho nuevo," a "new fact that" the poet establishes "independent of the external world" (42) ("sin relación con el mundo externo" (738)). Huidobro rejects models of poetry that would reduce it to a descriptive role. His theory insists upon a non-mimetic poetry: "[Man] no longer imitates. He invents. He adds to the facts of the world..." ("Epoch of Creation" 98) ("El hombre ya no imita. Inventa, agrega a los hechos del mundo..." ("Epoca de Creacion" 750)). Rather than imitating the objects of the natural world, Huidobro imagines the act of writing a poem as akin to an act of nature: "Make a poem the way nature makes a tree" (64) ("Hacer un poema como la naturaleza hace un árbol" ("El Creacionismo" 739)).

Huidobro's Creacionismo above all asserts the originality of the poetic act. In this context, the translation of a poem, which is neither an original act nor the addition of a "new fact," might seem to be doomed as a substantial failure. However, Huidobro uses the problem of translation to test the boundaries of the "hecho nuevo" and its supposed universality. Huidobro readily admits that the commonly identified "poetic" elements of a text will be inevitably lost in translation:

It's difficult if not impossible to translate a poetry in which the importance of other elements dominates. You cannot translate the music of words, the rhythms of the verses which vary from one language to another... (51)

Es difícil y hasta imposible traducir una poesía en la que domina la importancia de otros elementos. No podéis traducir la música de las palabras, los ritmos de los versos que varían de una lengua a otra... ("El Creacionismo" 736)

However, Huidobro is quick to point out that, because his model of poetry shifts the focus from these aesthetic elements—that is, these sensual effects of the language, its music, rhythm, etc.—to a more “essential” value, to the “created object,” translation remains a possibility: “...but when the importance of the poem adheres above all to the created object it loses in translation none of its essential meaning” (“...pero cuando la importancia del poema reside ante todo en el objeto creado, aquél no pierde en la traducción nada de su valor esencial” (“El Creacionismo” 736)). For Huidobro, translation has little to do with the imitation of aesthetic effects. Rather, the task demands a recasting of “the created object” in a different language.

Whatever might be said of the nature of Huidobro’s “created object,” one thing is clear: it is brought forth solely through an act of language and remains to the end an object of language. As such, a brief glance at Huidobro’s concept of poetic language will help clarify the way this object stands in relationship to the process of translation. In the polemical essay “La Poesía,” Huidobro proposes a division between magical and utilitarian uses of language that echoes the same distinction Mallarmé had made in “Crise de Vers”:

Apart from the grammatical meanings of language, there is another magical meaning, which is the only one of interest to us. The former is an objective lan-

guage, which is used to name the things of the world without taking them out of their rank in the inventory; the latter breaks this conventional norm and in it words lose their strict representation to take on other more profound meanings as if surrounded by a luminous aura which should elevate the reader from the everyday plane and wrap him in an enchanted atmosphere. (my translation)

Aparte de la significación gramatical del lenguaje, hay otra, una significación mágica, que es la única que nos interesa. Uno es el lenguaje objetivo que sirve para nombrar las cosas del mundo sin sacarlas fuera de su calidad de inventario; el otro rompe esa norma convencional y en él las palabras pierden su representación estricta para adquirir otra más profunda y como rodeada de un aura luminosa que debe elevar al lector del plano habitual y envolverlo en una atmósfera encantada. (716)

Words are broken from their everyday, referential function; and in pursuit of their new “enchanted atmosphere,” the poet works to uncover an “internal word, a latent word beneath the word it denotes. This is the word that the poet must discover” (“...palabra interna, una palabra latente y que está debajo de la palabra que las designa. Esa es la palabra que debe descubrir el poeta.” (“La Poesía,” 716)). Furthermore, Huidobro maintains that the quality of poetic language can be measured in direct relation to its distance from spoken, everyday language. The key difference between everyday language and poetic language lies in this distance, for here we see that “the poet attempts to express only the inexpressible” (“La Poesía” 717) (“el poeta trate de expresar sólo lo inexpressable” (“La Poesía” 717)). For Huidobro, part of the inexpressible that the poet tries to express involves a secret relationship between words: the poet hears “the secret voices that link together words separated by incommensurable distances” (“La Poesía” 717) (“las voces secretas que se lanza unas a otras palabras separadas por distancias incon-

mesurables”). In summary, then, Huidobro’s theory of poetic language insists first upon the pursuit of the inexpressible. This pursuit involves first finding the latent, internal word, which is arrived at only by the breakage or disjunction of the word from its everyday “meaning”; and secondly through the secret relationships that are set up between words, even over great distances.

Considering the departure from language’s everyday usage and the poet’s pursuit of the less obvious relationships between words, it is becoming clear how translation would serve as an operative model of Huidobro’s concept of language. In fact, in his auto-translations, Huidobro establishes a particular relationship between French and Spanish—the two languages link together to express the poet’s “objeto creado” and the “palabra interna” of the poem. The individual words of each poem correspond only to each other, eschewing their everyday referential usage. The relationship that Huidobro’s poems set up echoes Walter Benjamin’s argument that

Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form... As for the posited central kinship of languages, it is marked by a distinctive convergence. Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express. (72)

Just as Huidobro hears the “secret voices” that link distant words together, Benjamin conceives of the relationship between languages as a concealed connection. The “reciprocal relationship between languages” is embryonic in so far it is latent, unrealized, and in the process of becoming in the very act of translation, which Benjamin calls the “maturing process of the original” (73). Transla-

tion both opens up this “distinctive convergence” and intensifies the embryonic relationship. For Benjamin, languages are brought together in “what they want to express,” in their “intention.” When read through Benjamin, Huidobro’s “internal word,” which rests “beneath the word,” approaches an original intention in language, brought forth when words are severed from their referential function and when the links of the “secret voices” are heard.

In his model of translation, Benjamin, like Huidobro, avoids a mimetic formulation, insisting instead on “pure language,” a process of linguistic supplementation. The kinship between languages does not manifest itself “through a vague likeness between adaptation and original” (Benjamin 73-74). “Rather,” Benjamin writes,

all suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole—an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language. (74)

Benjamin shifts the focus of translation from the inevitably faulty relationship between copy and original to the question of intention and the process of linguistic supplementation. Benjamin’s non-mimetic model of translation resonates with Huidobro’s own model of poetry as expressed in “Creacionismo.” In this system of pure language, the shared intention of languages, like the “new fact” and the “palabra interna,” is revealed in the act of interlinguistic supplementation.

Paul de Man points out that the pure language Benjamin speaks of “does not exist except as a permanent disjunction which inhabits all languages as such, including and especially the language one calls one’s own” (92). The role of disjunction will be the final piece to the puzzle of Huidobro’s self-translated poems and a guiding force in my own attempt to render them in English, for above all, Hui-

dobro's self-translated poems create disjunctions between French and Spanish. De Man reads disjunction in Benjamin's essay in three ways: 1) between what is meant and "the way in which language means" (86), that is, "between the hermeneutics and poetics of literature" (88); 2) between grammar and meaning (88); and 3) between "the symbol and what is being symbolized, a disjunction of the level of tropes between the trope as such and the meaning as a totalizing power of tropological substitutions" (89). Paradoxically it is within these moments of disjunction—where language unhinges from itself, where the semantics and the rhetoric at work within a language diverge and break—that the kinship of languages is felt mostly keenly. Huidobro's auto-translations are full of such moments, which are doubled in the sense that their disjunctions occur primarily in the transition from one language to another, not simply within a singular language system.

In moving his poems from Spanish to French, Huidobro modifies grammar and syntax, alters imagistic detail, eliminates punctuations, and changes typography, ultimately opening up various disjunctive rifts between the Spanish and French versions. The beginning of "The Sad Man" ("El Hombre Triste" / "L'Homme Triste") is illustrative:

Lloran voces sobre mi corazón... (220)

Sur mon cœur
il y a des voix qui pleurent (226)

Huidobro flips the order of the sentence of the first line, placing the prepositional phrase first in the French. Likewise, the literary inversion of "Lloran voces" and the phrase's grammar is entirely recast in idiomatic French: "il y a des voix qui pleurent." The "il y a" adds a circumlocutory statement of existence to an element that, in the Spanish, reads as pure action. The "il y a" has the effect of

Voices are crying
over my heart

Furthermore, in this line I have used the continuous present, a mark of En-

glish's temporality that departs significantly from the simple present of the French and Spanish. The continuous present opens an important disjunction between the Romance languages on the one hand, and English, on the other, for while this tense is possible in both French and Spanish, it is less common. It suggests the peculiarly split sense of the time of the present in the English language—a present that is marked by the generalization of the simple tense and the particularization of the continuous. In this splitting of the present, a temporal disjunction, English splits from Huidobro's Spanish and French. The voices may be crying currently or may always be crying as though signifying an ongoing condition. The simple attempt to move the poem into English exposes this ambiguity and opens up another important convergence-disjunction among these three languages. The point in these departures is not to take liberties for the sake of liberties but to open up disjunctions that, in the manner of Huidobro's own translations, expose "the hidden relationship[s]" and "voces secretas" that run between the Spanish-French-English linguistic triangle.

Works Cited

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