

JÈSSICA PUJOL DURAN

Translating Lisa Robertson: an interview

The following interview took place in February 2013, as I was translating Lisa Robertson's *The Weather* into Catalan. I first met Robertson in October 2012 in London, when she was a Visiting Fellow at Queen Mary University. I had been reading her work with enthusiasm and began to translate *The Weather*, but chatting with Lisa over coffee helped me to understand the extent of her compositional polysemy in the book. We had an interesting and suggestive talk and her thoughtful email responses to my further questions are something I wanted to share.

JP:

While talking about your poetry with Carmelo Militano you asserted that “any reading, any interpretation, adds its particular life or grain to the movement.” You were referring to the sensual movement of language in a poem, which does not determine a field of meaning but opens up a complexity of conceptual and historical textual interpretation. Translating *The Weather* (2001) into Catalan I might have contributed to that movement, although my reading/writing has been probably tainted by contextual interpretation. Do you think this contextual conveyance also adds to the movement of the poem?

LR:

I can't think of interpretation as a tainting but as a necessary and living addition, which does add to the poem's movement, yes. In a sense it initiates the poem's movement. The poem is nothing if it has no reader, no interpreter. For me one of the pleasures, and reasons, for publishing a text has to do with its exit from my own determination and intention, and its entry into the fields of always unknowable agencies and intensities of others, of readers. These agencies would include translation, or even the most fleeting reading, appropriation, rebuttal. The subjectivity of a text becomes social subjectivity.

JP:

No matter how immersed one is in the culture of origin a 'faithful' translation can always have 'unfaithful' transferences. To what extent is a translated poem a 'creator of experience' in its readers rather than a 'record' or 'copy' of that original text? Do we live in 'the golden age of untranslatability'? Is that a good thing?

LR:

I think that the fidelity of translation doesn't necessarily have to do with representation or mimesis. I'm interested in Henri Meschonnic's insistence on the meaningful vitality of rhythm as a motivator of translation. For Meschonnic, rhythm doesn't mean measure, beat, it means the living transmission of the historicity and subjectivity which speak language, which speak across languages. I think texts are translatable, where we don't view translation as being a measurable transfer of signification, but as a living distribution of semantic intensities.

JP:

In *Nilling* (2012), you wrote that "the codex acts out an inaccessibility, the failure of transparency, and it figures this inaccessibility not only as a generative aesthetics, but also as the motive agency of perception, where perception disperses identity in a movement towards unknowing." Does this inaccessibility test the generative aesthetics of translating? Would a good translator be the one who could transfer that dispersion?

LR:

I feel the need to reject the judgement "good". Maybe a disobedient translation could be more important than a good translation. The text is not a law to be obeyed and transferred in its unchanged entirety. The text is a circulation of intensities. In that sense, yes, the transfer of a dispersal would be an energetic way of thinking about what translation enacts.

JP:

Language, like weather, is geographically produced. Is the language of *The Weather* related to living in the UK? To what extent was the writing affected by the time you spent researching in Cambridge and your readings there?

LR:

The writing was entirely affected by my time in Cambridge. I had no conception of this project until after I arrived there. I tend to refer to *The Weather* as a site-specific project, in the sense that Robert Smithson's work was site-specific. The specificity of my own foreignness within English, and Cambridge culture, and my access to the rare books collection, to social conventions of conversation, as well as to specific conversations—with Jeremy Prynne, with Drew Milne, with Geoff Gilbert, with Denise Riley, with Keston Sutherland, with Andrea Brady and others—made it possible, and desirable, to do this research.

JP:

You talk about “beds of chalk”, a distinguished trait in the geological formation of this island. Do you think you soaked up the British ‘geographical weather’ in your poems?

LR:

I was soaked in texts. My site was the archive. Maybe the archive stood in for the island. The beds of chalk are specifically those noted in William Cobbett's *Rural Rides*.

JP:

For Catalans the weather is *el temps*, which, literally, means ‘the time’. Time like cirrus is in constant permutation. In the poem “Tuesday,” particularly, the caesura establishes the rhythm: short lines that are dense and imaginative; was your aim to capture ‘the time’?

LR:

Time is always a problem in writing, in the positive sense of the term problem. Language IS time. Language and weather have this in common. A structural fixing of either can only be provisional, metaphoric. I think my feeling was more towards composing time than capturing it. I was interested by the scientific paradigm called 'toy weathers'. In toy weathers a small-scale, provisional model of temporality is set into motion, in order to observe patterns of determination and indetermination or swerve.

JP:

"Our skies are inventions, durations, discoveries, quotas, forgeries, fine and grand." Space is paramount, the structure in which the weather moves. How did you arrive at that structure?

LR:

I was reading the meteorologist Luke Howard's descriptions of cloud formations, as well as the painter John Constable's written descriptions, on the back of his oil sketches of skies. I noticed that the descriptions performed real time enactments of the transitory time of skies. Writing was then (the early 19th C) the only time-based representational medium. Description took place in the real time of observation. The elliptic, prolix rhetoric of that description became my stylistic model.

JP:

In Catalonia there is an obsession with the weather. On the news they spend lots of time explaining the particular manifestation of today's weather and the scientific rationale behind it. We are weather-educated; to the extent that words like atmospheric pressure, cumulonimbus clouds, and wind names, are parts of everyday speech. Meteorology is a science that is known, perhaps one of the few scientific specialisations that approach the everyday. Do you think that your poetry wishes to approach the quotidian in a similar manner?

LR:

That's a good way to think of it. The sequestering of specialized languages is an unreal flattening of the complexity of the quotidian. The everyday life of language and communities is already maximally complex. Everything is incipient there. That's where I want to be working, paying attention.

JP:

Following on from that question, is there an element of community in your poetry that is associated with that process?

LR:

Definitely. Language is thoroughly communal, historical. Writing for me is the work of discovering and inventing formal tactics that can frame or annotate this communal nature, this collective subjectivity, in passing.

JP:

By translating your poems I feel I comment upon the weather with you, though we could be looking at very different shades of that big cumulus. Does translation necessitate intimacy? Can you comment on how you see translation working in this direction?

LR:

I think that you are right—translation is a work of intimacy. The writer and the translator are sharing a time experience. In other contexts this might be called love. In this sense, translation is a completely necessary historical process, a political work. Could we imagine translation as the opposite of war?

LISA ROBERTSON

from El temps

Diumenge

Aquí. Pels volts d'aquí. En aquesta terra. Les coercions són subtils. Potser ennegrides i brillants, arrugades. Un cel marbrejat de fracassos. Una revisió estampada. I va arribar aquí a la una en punt. I va arribar calat fins als ossos. I en aquest indret també hi ha cases, aquí i allà. I sort, també, quan passa. I aquí va experimentar els beneficis. I aquí es van repetir els vestigis. I aquí va adquirir un coneixement genuí. I aquí es va endinsar en allò salvatge. I en aquest indret, també. I va arribar aquí a les dues en punt. Aquí, on sols hi ha terra. Sobre un llit de guix. Aquí on cau l'aigua fresca. Hi ha grups d'arbres majestuosos. Diccions del dèficit. Potser enuig. Aquí va arribar a una conclusió. S'ha fet tot aquí. Tots els sistemes s'han estripat o s'han pansit. La superfície és discontinua. A tot arreu inclinem el cap, dividint i limitant. Va venir a treballar aquí, dividint i limitant. Va venir a esmorzar aquí. Va venir a dormir aquí. Aquí un raig de llum, allà un raig de foscor. Aquí i allà una casa. Aquí hi ha totes les causes. Potser una pell reversible. Aquí hi ha granges i cases pairals i mines i boscos i boscanys i cases i carrers. Aquí hi ha turons i fondalades. Aquí hi ha turons, fondalades, aigua, prats,

boscós. De rengle en rengle, el revolt i la sort. Aquí hi ha nous recintes. El guix i la sorra. Aquí n'hi ha dues. Aquí, de llengües. Aquí sigues anònim. Aquí s'ha produït malbaratament. Aquí hi ha hagut feina. Aquí tanquem el dia. Aquí, al límit. Aquí hi ha una conca. Un canal. Una església. Aquí hi ha una església. Aquí hi ha una marga enfonsada en el guix. Aquí hi ha un turó. Aquí hi ha una casa. Aquí hi ha un sistema. Li brolla el temps per la boca. El dissenyem en un obrir i tancar d'ulls. Aquí hi ha la seva desolació. Per aquí creua. Aquí, finalment, cau. Aquí obté plena satisfacció. Aquí sobre les restes que encara es poden veure. La primera. Potser aquesta mirada. Aquí, esperant. Aquí va creuar. Aquí, a prop. S'abandonen algunes causes. Aquí, llavors. Aquí eren un conjunt. Aquí n'eren dos o tres. Tan exquisidament alternatives. Aquí hi haurà un intercanvi de causa i efecte. Aquí, com a tot arreu. En aquest indret tranquil. Aquí, Pete. Delicades articulacions de metacrilat. Girant i passant de llarg. Amunt, per aquí. Aquí va menjar. Aquí va venir. Va arribar aquí passades les desviacions. Va arribar aquí a les nou en punt. Va arribar per quedar-se. Potser estàvem espantats. I llavors va tornar. Aquí tota l'estona parlem des de la memòria. Quan passa. Des d'un eix. Sense conclusivitat. Va parar aquí i allà. Esforçant-se. Aquí s'ha mencionat. De fet, aquí no. Potser vam refutar teories. És un bonic llit de terra. És per tot arreu. És impossible no recordar. Era aquí. Cap a l'oest. Cap a una zona letàrgica. Cap al preciós fris de la classe lírica. Cap al fris de l'organisme que està per fer. Cap a la modernitat. Potser a l'ombra. Aquí no hi ha grans coses. Aquí no se'ls tracta durament. La gent ha de ser feliç.

S'hi viu tan bé aquí. Potser hi ha alguna decaiguda. Alguns gaudim de la seva bellesa ordinària i a voltes accidental. Brollen rierols aquí i allà. Les corrents divideixen, limiten, fracturen i creen lligams o núvols. Encara hi ha alguns indrets aquí i allà. Aquí estancats. Per aquí tots els llocs són així. Aquí la cosa no està acabada. La cosa no es detindrà. Allà passa com aquí que corrents, divisions, límits, fractures, lligams, giren, passen de llarg i també romanen. L'hora arriba al seu punt àlgid. Allà, essent aquí, hi ha una espècie de fondalada. Aquí ha plogut. Potser de forma incisiva i amb esllavissades. Aquí hi ha una llei, lànguida i laxa. Aquests són el tema de conversa. Aquí han començat a confiar-se. Passant de llarg i romanent i esperant. Ha sigut una temporada trista per aquesta terra, tot i que hi ha hagut una luxúria selectiva. Els arbres són gairebé tan grans aquí. Dues branques es troben. Molt poques vegades per aquí. Aquí, sobre un llit de guix. Va arribar cap a les tres en punt. L'atmosfera estava alterada. Quina cosa tan preciosa.