**SJ Fowler interviews Paulo Henriques Britto for Poetry Parnassus**

 SJF: You are a professional translator and have established a remarkable reputation for your Portuguese renderings of English language authors like Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, Henry James and Elizabeth Bishop. How does the process of translation impact upon your own work?

PHB: When you are both a writer and a translator, you make a distinction between your own writings and your translations, of course, but the separation is never absolute. When there’s a huge gulf between you and the writer you are translating, because you belong to different centuries or because the two styles are completely different, the dividing line can be pretty sharp. But in other cases there’s quite a bit of crossover. My own poems tend to be written in more or less regular forms, but the language I use is usually colloquial, and the syntax is straightforward—as in the poetry of Philip Larkin, or of Elizabeth Bishop. So when I’m translating Bishop, who also uses regular forms and colloquial language, I often use structures I might just as well use in my own poems—and vice versa.

SJF: You stated that sometimes you even write in English and then translate your own work back to Portuguese! This is quite a remarkable situation, to be poetically fluent in two tongues...

PHB: Well, I’m hardly the first one to write in two languages. The greatest poet in the Portuguese language, Fernando Pessoa, lived in South Africa a few years when he was a boy, and he wrote hundreds of poems in English (not quite his best poetry, it must be said). Until recently, though I write in the two languages and I translate poetry regularly, I had never attempted to translate my own poems; I guess I felt the temptation to rewrite radically, and end up producing a new poem, would be too strong. But then I started a regular correspondence with Idra Novey, a young U.S. poet who was translating a selection of my poetry into English, and giving her suggestions, and exchanging solutions with her, and before I knew it I was translating my own poems too. And I realized the temptation wasn’t as strong as I had imagined; some of the translations seemed good enough to publish, so that in my books I now usually include two or three “self-translations,” as I call them.

SJF: What is your sense of translation, do you hold to Walter Benjamin's supposition that the untranslatable moments of poetry are axiomatic, and thus illuminated by the act of translation?

He’s right about that; the untranslatable—or hard-to-translate—moments of a poem are precisely those in which the poet has managed to use what is most idiosyncratic, most contingent, about a language as a creative resource. Think of Yeats’s line “in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart”; the fact that the phrase “rag and bone shop” means what it means and includes the words “rag” and “bone”  is a mere accident, but no other phrase would have the same force in association with “of the heart.” It is a stroke of genius, and it is, I think, untranslatable. (Of course, you can never be really sure anything is untranslatable, because some translator might actually find a brilliant solution for it. I’ve seen it happen again and again.)

SJF: Your current research is centred around evaluating poetry translation, and the systematic study of poetic forms in English and in Portuguese in order to find possible equivalences and correspondences. Does this technical application of translation and its study add to your practise as a translator do you believe?

I hope it does. I’m really not that much interested in theory per se; my study of English and Portuguese verse forms is meant to inform my work as a translator and as a teacher of translation—and as a poet, too.

SJF: The history of Brazilian poetry is innately modern but remarkably energetic and effusive. Modernists like Mario de Andrade and avant garde pioneers like the de Campos brothers have left a huge impact on world poetry. Is that felt in Brazil by contemporary poets, the weight of your modern tradition?

SJF: And do you believe contemporary Brazilian poetry receives the reception it deserves beyond Brazil?

I suppose I can answer the two questions together. Yes, the Modernist tradition is quite strong in Brazil, but—to me, at any rate—right now it is a liberating force rather than a source of influence anxiety. For a time, my generation felt a sort of obligation to be “rigorous” because of João Cabral de Melo Neto, and to be constantly reinventing poetry because of the Campos brothers; over the past two decades or so, however, this kind of pressure has decreased, and we are turning back to the more relaxed and permissive models of the first Modernist generation, such as Manuel Bandeira. But I don’t really think that Portuguese-language poetry has had much of an impact on world literature. The truth is, English and French poetry have a disproportionally large weight because of the centrality of French up to World War I, more or less, and of English since then. I don’t mean, of course, that English and French poetry are not as great as they’re made out to be; I simply mean that German, Italian and Spanish poetry are probably just as great, but they have much less influence; and the poetry written in other languages—Portuguese and Russian, to mention only two European languages spoken by a very large number of people (Portuguese has 250 million speakers, Russian 140 million)—are even more underrepresented. A world-class genius like Fernando Pessoa ought to have been translated into every language, as he would certainly have been if he had written his greatest works in English or French instead of in Portuguese.

SJF: The parnassian ideal that really centres Poetry Parnassus reaches back to the Poetry International festival held in London in 1967 which sought to address notions of free speech, community and peace through the artform of poetry. Do you believe this tradition needs to be maintained in 2012?

Of course I’m all for freedom of speech and peace. But I must say I’m somewhat skeptical about poetry’s impact on world peace or any other weighty issue. The truth is, not many people care much for poetry these days. Forty years ago it was pop musicians who really made a difference; it wasn’t for nothing that the military regime in Brazil persecuted and banned songwriters like Chico Buarque and Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil. Now, it seems, it’s hip-hop artists who are the voice of our time. But even though poetry may not do much for world peace, it’s of the utmost importance, I think, for the language it is written in. Poets are certainly not the unacknowledged legislators of the world, nor the antennae of the race—which is all to the best, in fact; I, for one, wouldn’t care to live in a world ruled by the likes of Shelley or (perish the thought!) Pound; but they do for their languages what no one else could do: they make what is accidental seem essential; they breathe life into words. And for that we must all be grateful, even those of us who don’t write, or even read, poetry.

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