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Marcos Wasem

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The Espresso between Sleep and Wakefulness

Roberto Echavarren
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The effort to translate contemporary Latin American poetry falls nowadays mostly to independent publishers such as Cardboard House Press, one of many small presses offering bilingual editions of living poets. Within the current scene, Neo-Baroque poetry—Roberto Echavarren being among its main proponents and theoreticians—is one of the most complex expressions, borrowing stylistic features from classic Spanish Baroque poetry and bringing those devices into a contemporary context where all that is solid melts into air.

Neo-Baroque poetry is, in a way, an exercise in untranslatability, a language that evades logical sense in order to insert the body into the poetic experience. Hence, it applies the body’s physicality to the making of verse. Poetry is seen as both writing and performance, a performative act of a queer body.

Charles Olson’s notions of projective verse provide Donald Wellman with an angle for approaching Echavarren’s writing. The translator’s inclination to take on the Uruguayan poet derives from “compulsions of a private and personal order” that lead him to grapple with “Echavarren’s passionate, surreal, and multivalent work, each level caught in a species of frottage, planes that slide over other planes, liquids that ooze among planes of different consistencies.” Projectivist poetry is concerned with
the writer’s breathing, attesting to the presence of the body in the moment
of composition, and this breathing determines the length and rhythm of the
verse, where the poem is conceived as a field. A poetic for the translation
matching the poetry in the original Spanish.

Echavarren conceives poetic language as a current that runs through the
body, which has to do with the different possibilities of physical transform-
ation, either in terms of gender (and here we must remember Echavarren’s
pioneer work as critic in the area of sexuality in Latin American literature)
or states of consciousness. Writing is, at the same time, a sexual experience
and an altered state of mind.

Sleep and wakefulness are, indeed, states of mind, connected by a shot of
espresso or an express trip from one state to the other. In both cases, writing
behaves as a free-runner through the field between those states. That
experience is inscribed in the locus of the body, either through the drug
(the shot of espresso) or the literal trip of an express train.

The idea of the trip is conveyed in the first poem, which opens with a trip
to the urinals:

“Follow me, someone said, to the urinals
and then, instead of pissing, we’ll dive in the pool
and breathe better. I’m daring.”

The urinal becomes the pool, and underwater the writer can breathe better.
The opening of the book alludes to a clandestine gay meeting in a bar,
however it is through the metamorphosis of the urinal into the pool that
one state is transformed into another, sleep into wakefulness, that the
space of writing is opened and the writer can breathe the length of the
verses. Echavarren, who lived in the U.S. for many years, teaching at
NYU, is signaling Olson’s sense of the breath in poetry. A few lines
further, the act of writing becomes clear as this breathing underwater
develops:

And peace, the first poem,
becomes transparent between water and light.
We’re here among cottons soaked in ink.

He draws upon the tradition of what Brazilian writer Haroldo de Campos termed “metalinguistic” poetry, where the process of writing is
the topic of the poem itself. There is a twist, however, in Echavarren’s concep-
tion, because for him writing in itself is one of several possible intensities
of passion that go through the body as a current. In the poem “The Devil,”
writing is a quest for demonic possession. It recalls the Greek daymon, the
spirit taking possession of the writer and inspiring her:

The experience I didn’t have:
the devil under my skin,
and while my body expired on the page
the page became a body of water
Here again, the poem goes around the image of navigating the waters as a bodily experience. But the quest here is to reach the Devil seen on the horizon: the physical body is left behind and the writing is navigation in a “paper boat.” The experience of possession is never within reach, although the quest itself is an opportunity to experience endless states, becoming different entities through passions, and witnessing the transformations of the body.

The constant shifting is the real condition of a body that defies definition. In the prologue, Wellman expresses his fondness for the poem “Inquest,” because it addresses the topic of queerness. “We, men by definition / but not for taste or behavior” puts masculinity into question by a plurality of forms, of bodies parading in front of the reader. Here the inspiration is taken by the translator from Latin American carnivals, Brazilian in particular, that deviate from “an Anglo-centric or Euro-centric cultural construct.” The Espresso between Sleep and Wakefulness is an invitation to jump into the shifting bodies of the parade, to flow in the waters of writing, and to breathe another air. It is an example of contemporary Neo-Baroque poetry that literally highlights the embodiment of writing.

Marcos Wasem is Visiting Assistant Professor at Purdue University. He has published poetry and literary criticism. His latest book, El amor libre en Montevideo. Roberto de las Carreras y la irrupción del anarquismo erótico en el Novecientos, won Uruguay’s National Literature Prize in 2015.