

“The Lore of Four” is a “Copious Leaping”: Transnational Translation and the Visceral Vernacular, Oana Avasilichioaei and Erin Moure’s *Expeditions of a Chimæra*

Reviewed by cris costa

In a brief break from her career as an independent film producer in Spain, Elisa Sampedrín meddles with poetry once again and writes unforgivably preposterous translations of the work of Romanian poet Nichia Stănescu. This time, Sampedrín challenges another Montréal poet and translator, Oana Avasilichioaei, who already performed an impeccable translation of Stănescu’s work in *Occupational Sickness*. Erin Moure, having repeatedly endured Sampedrín’s fiddling with her own work, locates this act and assists Avasilichioaei in the restoration of Stănescu’s work from Sampedrín’s English versions into Romanian; thus, the poems can once again be translated into English. Then Sampedrín, relentless as she is, not only retranslates these restored originals, but she further takes this opportunity to offer these translations to another linguistic community (her desire to make poetry available in many locales has earned her a reputation of populist poet, though there is little evidence to the contrary, and the artistic nature of her films suggest otherwise), and thus transposes these English translations into the Galician tongue. This instigates Avasilichioaei and Moure to co-transimagine the poems back into English. Though the two poets’ fluency in Galician is questionable (one might even speculate that Sampedrín wrote both the translations and reverse-translations), in the collection’s epilogue critic Otilia Acacia assures readers that these translations are true originals. Then Sampedrín’s response, which was more translations, to these retranslations gives leverage to Avasilichioaei and Moure’s claim to authorship, as it serves as an example of Sampedrín’s perpetual insistence to insert herself in Moure’s opus. Sampedrín thus retranslates these poems into English again, and further translates more of Moure’s English transfigurations. The transmutations proceed this way, forward and forward, transleaped, co-leaped, co-transleaped; then (what nerve!), in its translinguistic and transnational transmutations, this debauchery imposes itself onto the work of great canonized Western poets, Paul Celan and Gertrude Stein: so we are subject to the *Expeditions of a Chimæra*. (Thankfully, Avasilichioaei and Moure have kept record of this fire breathing female cirque du soleil, so future poets can identify Sampedrín’s work from that of the professionally trained translators.)

Avasilichioaei and Moure’s collection, “with interferences by Elisa Sampedrín,” *Expeditions of a Chimæra* (BookThug 2009), is a palimpsest that interrogates local linguistic manifestations, disrupting hegemonic centers in favor of transversal relations and rhizomatic linguistic orders. The collection throws out institutionalized and sanctioned methods of translation, questioning both bilingual *and* homolingual translations as they have been employed by writers; and it engages in a new praxis that recognizes the intersubjective development of meaning through several social subjects who participate in different vernaculars and interpret meaning through different visceralities. The translated and re-translated sequences locate the recomposition of meaning inherent in a visceral vernacular that articulates itself through subjective imagination. “Submitted in a flurry of signatures” (*Expeditions* 37), the collection challenges authorship, while championing and problematizing the “I” subject, who is *I*, but not I.-one, not I. in translation. Authorship becomes both necessary and ludicrous, and, as a dichotomized entity, it

participates in the dialogic decentering of the ideological implications of standardized meaning attributed to signs.

The vernacular is both created and deployed by collective linguistic engagement, but it also transfers through visceral subjective beings—becoming shape-shifted, translated. *Expeditions* shows how language folds and unfolds in/to subjectivity, how translation is the process of understanding rather than the process by which one attempts to succinctly depict meaning as it is conveyed in another language. The collection challenges the notion that “to translate is necessarily to betray the original” (Avasilichioaei “Autora Multiplicada”)—a concept that, as Avasilichioaei notes, came from the Italian phrase “traduttore, traditore,” (translator, traitor)—while it participates in a self-reflexive playfulness that engages the process of textual development, both in its poems and in its footnotes. For example the sequence “Coatful,” as translated by E.S. from the Romanian of O.A. (14), reads:

Where smoke signals
spit on the fabric of tractors, there’s gas in a camp.
The camp’s foot, when its vantage point interests you,
dangles grasses.

Whereas the retranslation of the poem by E.M, who entitles it “Prank” (15), reads:

You can make a small city
in a textile factory, cook with camp gas.
In the camp, a huge pot of intensities,
stirred with a spoon.

The relationship, made slightly covert here, between text and textile, sign and city, suggests that the development of language and meaning is rhizomatic as it passes through subjectivities and material locals. The visceral being and its participation in the vernacular always engages in a mutually inclusive relationship between language, body, and place/space. This space is forever in translation, it is always performing and performative. In “Staging Vernaculars” Moure identifies that space is created by the vernacular itself, insofar that the vernacular both “projects into a theatrical space” and *is* a theatrical space: “In most of our envisioning, ‘vernacular’ is a space projected as natural or local when it is in fact a construct, and its construct is blurred” (15). This space is a layering of vernaculars that are always in process, determined by subjectivities:

The fold dissimulates. Alongside another fold. Raise its flap and it says something else. Raise its flap again. The vernacular is often a dissimulation for this structure. It can’t help its folds. The fingers enter. I ask you a question. We unfold a response. The tips of the fingers can’t quite touch, but appear to. This mimics the mouth. The vernacular is a septum. Its model is our prosthesis we use to fortell. (13)

This collection thus explores these folds, and unfolds, as the natural consequence of language. The response—here, the translation—is not only the passage between material locals—that is, visceral places and also spaces where languages proliferate—but the pathways that, when

traversed, direct the subject through ephemeral structures that attempt to mimic the real. “When the trajectory from center to periphery or from periphery to center is abandoned, and the compass needle turns back on itself, the poet’s words retrace a nomadic wandering from periphery to periphery in a gesture that deterritorializes the notions of center and periphery” (Godard 318).

The ancient structural pillar of the I. is disrupted, complicated, shown that it is not I. Dialogism manifolds. Yet the *I* is still celebrated, even more celebrated because it is collective and theatrical. In the later sections of *Expeditions*, Avasilichioaei, Moure and Sampedrín recognize the veracity of all their translations: authorship, first indicated by name, then by initial (still, I.) dissolves into vacant lines (actual blank lines: _____) left for the reader to fill in, thus readers are injected into the imaginations of a “we” that morphs into an *I* to imagine the potentialities of collective imagination. Artistic temperament melds with temperature, which provides a temperate and temporal space for further linguistic regeneration:

We transgress between *temperature*, *temperatură*, *température*, *temperatura* with ease. We are mislead, illusionary. Solid and breathing we enter their temperatures only to feel a jolt, a sudden change in wind, a dissolving at the edges. A peasant’s blouse convulsively catches fire.
[Footnote] (56)

Noon’s successors were squabbling over walnuts and lace. It was autumn, an incendiary season. I ate the letter *q*. Its one leg, dangling-lopsidedness somewhat bothersome, and that language kept forgetting to use it. To cure the ensuing stomachache, that evening I ate the letter *i*...
[Footnote] (57)

The season’s denouement unwittingly made her entrance as my enemy. I battled the clocks and disheveled hair, infuriated by the steady constancy of the act, present in every act, of translation. To take a bodily feeling, a sensation of aliveness, a quickness in the air, the noise of a smell, and set it down in words is to translate. From being to words. No equivalency.
[Footnote] (58)

In the transition from “being to words” one must eat “the letter *i*” and participate in a shift—an environmental one: temperature; an internal one: temperament—where the body is recognized as the site of language, and its presence “in every act” of translation is a process that sets the material covers, the textile coverings of our bodies, the textual peasant blouses, ablaze. The I. is lost in translation, it burns and dissolves, and it becomes *I* that is “more open, multiple, theatrical” (Avasilichioaei “Athora Multiplicada”).

In her essay, “How to Begin?” Avasilichioaei notes that the English language has an authority because it is a “majority language,” a “language of colonization,” which has “moved across many lands and has assimilated or taken by force, by coercion or by love, [and] has in a sense cannibalized many other parts of languages and thus ways of thinking and existing” (57). A language of power and capital, English is “also a stray dog, who has mucked about in ditches and in dirt, whose origins are ever invented, and who is always easily, readily adopted” (58). This

nature of the language lends itself to an un-fixity. Its natural engagement in peripheries—the dog is always sniffing in new corners, entering different yards—is necessary to maintain its flexible existence. For Avasilichioaei, this flexibility must be recognized by the user/speaker, otherwise the language colonizes. Juxtaposing the English words with the Romanian or Galician translations, or its other homolinguistic interpretations, “destabilize[s] English’s authority on the page,” it “makes it vulnerable, open to question” (58).

Expeditions not only participates in this act of destabilization, but its intratextuality and self-reflexivity also identifies this peripheral nature and malleable structure of English. For example, the section of the book entitled “Airways,” gestures toward the earlier section of the text, “The Anatomy of Temperature,” where the anonymous translator of the poem “Diving into Life” repeats the phrase “if i whet my wings” three times throughout the sequence before asking “where am i, where am i, where am i” (58). The section “Airways” recalls this sequence (readdressing “wings” throughout) and answers that the subject’s location (“where am i”) is the foreign language where the subject finds him/herself, the place where the subject is peripherally constituted. This section contains a series of translations of poems and letters, which ends in a blending of letter-poems requesting a plural/multiple confession: of authorship, of enjoyment in process, of visceral enjoyment, of an admission that the subject is only “artifact” (77) constructed by text, an admission that the authority in authorship is constituted via translated language taken from the translation of another: “discourses are objects of appropriation” (Foucault 108). The poems in this section also explore this movement of language, and the dialectical relationship of language, the visceral subject and subjectivity. For example in “Leap Child,” the “child” is both the social subject and language itself:

O.’s mistranslation, found in the passport of a stranger, in the long security lineup at YUL.

Leap Child

Words abort copiously
from the airplane’s wings.

Myrrh sweetens sentient
before the priest hammering, hammering.

Lang plucked from the east
beings a tale, a beaut brute.

Playing on the name of the influential German, then Hollywood, expressionist film maker Fritz Lang, language moves across borders easily, quickly, “informing a new hemispheric imaginary” (Godard 318), creating new tales of being—“brute,” barbaric, perfect—in the “multiple processes of transculturation” (318).

As Otilia Acacia suggests in the epilogue: “the book is voyage” (85), not only in this collection, but all texts. Acacia, however, downplays Sampedrín’s contribution to this voyage, a mistake

that many critics make, because the Montréal poets always overshadow Sampedrín's work. While the collection puts authorship into crisis—disrupting the Capital Initial and all of its structural implications—Avasilichioaei and Moure's names feature on the text's spine, while Sampedrín is only noted as a contributor on the title page. Though Acacia notes that her correspondence with Sampedrín was crucial to her coming to this text (which prompted her introduction to Avasilichioaei and Moure), she gives the impression, as does the text, that Avasilichioaei and Moure had more influence on the bulk of the poems and the production of the collection than did Sampedrín. However, Sampedrín's European ethnicity, her closeness to Paris (hence, familiarity with the work of Celan and Stein), and her filmmaking knowledge (hence the reference to Lang, whose films influence Sampedrín's recent filmic work with independent Spanish production company Pequeno Cine Estudio) not only suggest the invaluable nature of her contributions to this text, but suggest that she is truly an author of blurred borders, and, furthermore, is groundbreaking in her approach at circumventing and subverting authorship, thereby putting all notions of property and ownership into question. In fact, knowing the ephemeral quality of Sampedrín's identity, Moure has, in recent years, attempted to claim that she made up Sampedrín as a heteronym—some believe this was done to deter Sampedrín from her insistent rewriting of Moure's work. However, upon announcing this in Vancouver at a KSW reading a couple of years ago, an audience member spoke up and announced that this was *not* true, that she had just returned from Madrid where she watched Sampedrín's films. I consulted Acacia on this point (Sampedrín is currently on a Spanish pilgrimage, *El Camino de Santiago*, and cannot be reached), and she suggested that Sampedrín's desire to remove herself from capitalist-state control underscores all of her work and most of her actions. She further noted that Sampedrín's consistent meddling with Montréal poets' work, Moure in particular, is an indication that not only is she attracted to Moure's poetry, but that she recognizes it as a dialogic challenge to patriarchal-capitalist order. In our conversation, Acacia recalled an anecdote where Sampedrín quoted from V.N. Vološinov's *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*, where she noted the “properties of the word” make it “the fundamental object of the study of ideologies.” Sampedrín's imposition, interference, and then collaboration with Avasilichioaei and Moure thus gains another dimension, as she challenges the Canadian poets to further interrogate the propert(y)ies of their already innovative texts.

In the end, the collaboration is the construction of a new vernacular, which, as Moure suggests in her interview with Eichhorn, “can draw people together around a specific problematic” (221). The vernacular creates desire, and it is desire manifested: the vernacular (in textual and sonic form) bears the closest resemblance to the material realm and further creates it. Thus *Expeditions of a Chimæra* puts our common patterns of manifesting the material world into crisis. Not only does it suggest that we reappropriate the vernacular and find new ways to negotiate our visceral existence in an English capitalist-structured society—which through colonial and definitive language determines the subject's movement through space as mediated by language—but the collection also provides examples of how the subject might undertake that: to move away from authorship and claims at originality, to a decentered collaborative (collective) project which cannot pin any one authority as responsible. Of course, I'm well aware that this is a rather idealistic interpretation of the potentialities of the collection. Since all poetry books (published by presses) are commodities (though the extent to which they are is questionable), and this review serves to further assist in the accrual of value for this cultural artifact and, also, the accumulation of cultural capital for its authors—whom we all know are

Acacia and Sampedrín—this does not negate the fact that the book does challenge language and meaning, and, on the whole, institutionalized methods of translation. And it does this in innovative ways. In addition, the collection is engaging, often lighthearted, ironic and droll.

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