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## Angles on Insects: Translating Surrealism in Coral Bracho

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The Mexican poet Coral Bracho has been called "the granddaughter of surrealism" (Kamenszein 35). Inspired by postmodernists such as Gilles Deleuze, she writes poetry that is often dense and difficult to untangle. Bracho's writing can confuse the reader because it is not directed to a defined audience. In addition, she creates her own grammatical structure where words can take on multiple roles. The reader is often left with the difficult task of figuring out how one verse relates to the next. It is to be expected, then, that her poetry would be difficult to translate. In attempting to confront the difficult terrain of her poems, I have therefore sought out a touchstone to guide me: imagery taken from the natural world, in particular the depiction of insects. I will take my examples from her most recent volume *La voluntad de ámbar* [*The Will of Amber*].

In her poem, "Una avispa sobre el agua," Bracho depicts a wasp swirling on the water and compares it to our human fate. The poem begins with a wasp perched uncertainly upon the surface of the water: "La superficie del agua es tensa / para una avispa." There is tension upon the water's surface, she says, and therefore, by extension, tension for the insect. Fortunately for the translator, "tense" in English also denotes a physical and emotional state.

After this initial verse, Bracho moves immediately away from the wasp and focuses on the water. It is the water that swirls away into many possible paths. The water becomes a symbol for time because it passes quickly over any object in its way. She uses the adjective "corto" to describe the space of water beneath the insect, a deliberately awkward choice because it would normally be used to modify time instead of space. I have replaced it therefore with "brief" rather than "short" in order to mimic the awkwardness. Another strange word she uses is "tacto" to describe time as if time itself could feel. This word I translated to "feel" then instead of merely "touch."

The choice of the word "corto," however, allows her to link the themes of time and distance in the second stanza: "Corto es el tiempo en que fluye / corto el espacio que revuelve." ("Short is the time / that it floats on; short / the distance that it swirls.") The wasp is carried along by the water, swirled and lost and exposed to danger, presumably as we are by fate. But the complex relationships of

this poem are made manageable by the poet's use of imagery from the natural world. The wasp sits tensely upon the swirling water, water that carries it away to a fate unknown.

In the poem "Murmillos," death is portrayed by bees. Told from the perspective of a young girl, death is confusing and intrusive. It surprises her in the safety of her home, surrounding her noisily and persistently:

Al día siguiente escuché, aturdida,  
frente a mi puerta, los murmullos. Un borbollón  
de gente, un bullir amarillo, como de abejas,  
rezumbaba y fluía. (45)

The next day I heard, bewildered,  
outside my door, the murmurs. A boiling over  
of people, a yellow swarm, as of bees,  
buzzed around and flowed.

The reader of an English translation may very well be confronted with a portrayal of death that is strange, even unsettling. But the scene is clarified by sound and imagery.

The repetition of the oral stop "b" reproduces the intrusive and relentless effect of death, while the voiceless fricative "s" can have a hypnotic effect. These sounds reinforce the confusing presence of death, a presence at once menacing and soothing. In his essay, "Sound and the Pattern of Poetic Meaning," Walter Nash, though skeptical of attributing specific meaning to sounds in poetry, does admit that certain sounds commonly evoke a given perception in the reader: "For example, oral stops such as [b], [p] [. . .] may readily suggest an equivalence with interrupted, obstructed, discontinuous incidents in nature [. . .] or voiceless fricatives of the type [s], [f] [. . .] may seem to present ready-made phonetic semblances of any kind of scraping, scratching, hissing, etc. (136)." A poet succeeds in convincing the reader of this illusion by effectively weaving sound and imagery.

These sounds can be recreated in an English translation. The "b" appears in the English translation three times to the Spanish five, but the English "b" is harsher than the Spanish "b." The "s" and "z" sounds (which are pronounced the same in Mexican Spanish) can be heard five times in this verse, while the English "z", again a harsher sound, is heard three times. Thus the translation approximates the sonoral effect of the original.

Bracho's imagery also presents the conundrum of death to the reader. First she uses a simile to compare the mourners' procession to a swarm of bees. The initial impression is a menacing one, but the bees are not attacking. Like a swarm of bees in real life, they simply "buzz around and flow".<sup>1</sup> The poet also relies upon the reader's sense of smell and sight to capture the "miel espesa de

perfumes y luz" ("the dense honey of perfumes and light") of the funerary procession. But the sweet smells and brightness are also cloying and overwhelming. This presentation of the Catholic ritual with its incense and flowers is heightened when seen and smelled and heard by a young girl. Thus sound and imagery in translation do not dispense with the surrealist presence of death but rather recreate the confusion and ritual that surround it.

In the Mexican poet's work even the simplest poems must be unraveled and examined for their multiple possibilities. In the poem "Hilo en una tela de araña," the poet uses the spider web as a metaphor for communication. However, her metaphor is far from the clear-cut conceit that a Romantic poet might use (Chouciño 245). Instead she infuses the spider's web with properties not normally associated with it. For example, the web is like a string of iron filings responding to the magnetic forces of the wind. The light from the sun, however, tints the web copper. In addition, it is not merely a thread but rather a stream that flows.

*Hilo en una tela de araña*

Un arroyo imantado por la brisa y la luz,  
un transcurrir cobrizo es el hilo que fluye  
en la tela de araña. Charcos de plata cambian  
de unas hojas a otras, de una huellas  
a otras sobre la tierra blanda. Te veo cruzar  
entre dos líneas. Lo amo,  
digo,  
Entre dos ramas del azar  
fluye el arroyo,  
su hilo hechizado por el mar de la luz,  
por el licor  
de su corriente. Es el agua que embriaga  
el atardecer. Es el fuego que fluye  
sin cesar hacia el este.      Bajo su fiel  
solar  
te pienso.

*Thread in a Spider's Web*

A stream magnetized by the breeze and the light,  
a copper elapse is the thread that flows  
in a spider's web. Puddles of silver move  
from some leaves to others, from some footprints  
to others on the soft earth. I watch you cross

between two lines. I love him,  
 I say.  
 Between two branches of chance flows the stream,  
 its thread bewitched by the sea of light,  
 by the liquor  
 of its current. It is the water that intoxicates  
 the afternoon. It is the fire that flows  
 ceaselessly toward the east. Under its sunlit  
 constant  
 I think you.

The Romantic poet Walt Whitman used the spider web as a straightforward reference to denote the precarious bond between God and man (456). Bracho makes this element of the natural world into something new. But even an enlarged metaphor such as hers helps the translator by providing an image for the reader to grasp. Instead of starting with ideas, Bracho creates a poem from the words themselves and the images that they conjure (Chouciño 253). The translator, then, can offer these images to the reader: "A stream magnetized (charmed) by the breeze and the light, / a copper elapse is the thread that flows." (Bracho *La voluntad de ámbar* 16)

Though Bracho does not use the automatic writing practice of the surrealist movement, she does confuse the reader by displacing language and challenging the grammatical function of certain words. Mexican critic and writer Adolfo Castañón speaks of how she creates a language "[. . .] that would have to be characterized by the gravitational or magnetic force that the nouns [. . .] exert and where description is like an enumeration and the best adjective is another noun, the adverb most appropriate another verb" (61 *my translation*). Castañón uses Bracho's own diction to describe her language; her vocabulary exerts a "magnetic" force on other words in the text, pushing and pulling them into assuming other roles.

Thus words and images create a world unto themselves, a place with referents in the natural world but one that follows its own rules. For example, "the breeze and the light" become magical forces that entrance the spider's web. Bracho's vocabulary distinguishes these forces from the usual actions of wind and sun. The thread is "*hechizado por el mar de la luz*" (*bewitched by the sea of light, emphasizes mine*). She refers to the moving thread as "licor" ("liquor" or "liquid"). Because of the way that Bracho creates a language in her poetry, the light becomes a supernatural force and the spider web becomes a stream "que embriaga" ("that intoxicates"). Bracho infuses her poem with meaning not by a simple comparison but by a succession of words that lead one into another.

The world of this poem is defined then not by its limits but by its intersections, as water interacts with light and webs with the breeze. For example,

another element enters into the poem "Hilo en una tela de araña," the person to whom the words are directed. Unlike a Romantic poem in which the clear purpose of the text is to communicate a message to a passive reader (Chouciño 245), in this text the "tú" appears briefly, almost masked by the organic world of the poem. It is difficult for the reader to distinguish this person from the natural elements of the poem, and it may be that in Bracho's way of piling signifier upon signified she has created a person who is also a spider web or a flowing band of light. "Te veo cruzar / entre dos líneas. Lo amo, / digo." Because "te" and "lo" refer to the same object, it would appear that this is a male person and not a female spider "*la araña*." "El hilo" ("the thread") and "el arroyo" ("the stream"), however, both mentioned before, are masculine in gender and singular as well and so this figurative person can be confused with the flowing thread and water.

The following verse indicates how Bracho continues to open the poem up to new meanings: "Entre dos ramas del azar / fluye el arroyo." This appears to repeat the action of "I watch you cross / between two lines." But the reader does not know if the "two lines" are equivalent to the "two branches" or if one action is just an echo of the other, a metaphor for the other. Another change is present in this permutation of the poetic material because the two branches are not from a tree but "of fate." It is almost as if Bracho has expanded the whole poetic universe in the space of one image to include fate and destiny and chance.

The poetic world of Bracho unfolds for the reader, but such a world can confound the translator. As critic and poet Tamara Kamenszain writes: "[Her verses] live in a world of words that, magnetized, exist all together, but on the surface. There is no incorporation, nothing eats anything else: no encounter becomes a metaphor [. . .] (Verses that unfold intermingling with others, form the new society of a common grammatical ground [. . .])" (36 *my translation*). Once again, a poet and critic characterizes Bracho's work using Bracho's own words. Like her predecessor Deleuze, Bracho conjures a landscape where objects and actions exist simultaneously instead of replacing each other in a linear fashion.

However, even as natural imagery provides a touchstone for the reader and translator, the poet undermines any sense of security by pulling the dry land out from under us. This spider web in a tree, this stretch of fate, becomes liquid. During the course of this short poem, Bracho uses ten verbs and nouns related to water. A symbol that readers might expect to understand, a spider web stretching across a tree to symbolize change or space and time becomes a liquid world where "Charcos de plata cambian / de unas hojas a otras."

Perhaps the stream of images can be linked, as Bracho has done, by their sounds. For example, when she writes of "el agua que embriaga el atardecer," the repetition of the short "a" sound echoes the incantatory effect of the flowing water. The next verse changes the sound and the tone as the image melts

from water to fire: "Es el fuego que fluye / sin cesar hacia el este." The reader can hear eight long "e"s in succession, a sound that might denote strength or force ("fuerza" o "fuerte") while the power of fire is softened by the repetition of the "f" and the "s." The sound of the water proved difficult to capture in translation, but the force of fire could be rendered, at least partially, through the use of the English long "e" and the "f": "It is the fire that flows / without ceasing toward the east."

Just as Bracho expands her images of water, fire and webs to overlap and then reach beyond each other, so does her diction work in multiple ways. A combination such as "*fiel solar*" can puzzle the translator. These two words are preceded by the verse about fire ("El fuego que fluye / sin cesar hacia el este") so they may be read initially as a reference to the sun's rays. But which is the adjective; which is the noun? "Fiel" could be the pointer on a scale and "solar" an adjective describing something that proceeds from the sun. Or "fiel" could be the adjective "faithful" and "solar" refer to family plot of land. Either option introduces an incongruous image (scale; homestead) into this natural world of sunlight, insects and water. Since Bracho has been shown to lengthen her images, to put them where they do not seem to belong, perhaps she has done the same with words and combined two adjectives together.

How, then, to translate "*fiel solar*" within the context of its verse? ("Bajo su fiel / solar / te pienso"). Significantly, the words are separated by a line break. This may indicate that they can stand alone as two adjectives or nouns. However, the multiple functions of her diction are bound to be lost in translation. To choose two adjectives ("faithful" / "solar") introduces an awkwardness not present in the Spanish. Meanwhile, to choose an adjective-noun combination eliminates the options for meaning that the original can generate. "Faithful / lineage" preserves the sense of loyalty and the image of a line or ray from the pointer on a scale or a ray of sunlight, but it loses the allusion to the sun. "Solar / faith" keeps the adjectival meaning of both words, while forfeiting any imagery at all. Another option would be to replace the two words with more than two words, thereby losing the simplicity of sound but incorporating more possibilities, "loyal / rays of light" or "fidelity / from the sun." None of these versions can capture the simplicity and complexity of the original. In the end, I chose two adjectives that were true to the meaning of the original though not to its imagery.

The puzzling two words "*fiel / solar*" form part of the final verse of the poem: "Bajo su fiel / solar / te pienso." As earlier in the poem, here a human element is introduced by the object pronoun "te." Once again, though, the poet conjures a person who is not clearly delineated. This purposeful confusion is created grammatically by pairing an intransitive verb with a direct object. Instead of writing "Pienso en ti," she chooses "te pienso," something more akin to "I imagine you" than "I think of you." But she does not write "Te imagino." This verse then demonstrates the power of poetry to conjure and create, but the

image is always dependent on another image or another description. Particularly in the case of Bracho, every image that she creates is left incomplete because it is stretched out to form part of another image. Thus her strange use of a familiar concept ends her poem in a voice that is both stronger in its creative power and more inconclusive.

Finally, to elucidate Bracho's creation of metaphor, it may be useful to examine the short poem, "La mariposa." Though only four verses in length, this poem captures Bracho's method of making poetry:

Como una moneda girando  
bajo el hilo de sol  
cruza la mariposa encendida  
ante la flor de albahaca. (20)

As a coin spins  
beneath the sun's ray  
the illumined butterfly passes  
by the white basil flower.

In this poem, Bracho expresses poetry in its purest sense; she is simply making an image through words. A butterfly swirling past a white, basil flower is likened to a spinning coin illuminated by the sun. Unlike the wasp, the spider, and the bees mentioned earlier, the insect in this poem does not represent humankind or an aspect of fate. Instead, the insect is the focus of the poem, the object of the metaphor. However, true to Bracho's form, the poem is not as straightforward as it might appear. It is unclear why the poet has chosen money to represent the butterfly, although its color and motion may approximate the butterfly's wings. What's more, the spinning coin shining in the sun is compared not just to the butterfly, but also to the insect flying past a flower. One thing becomes two. Once again, Bracho does not make linear comparisons, but rather splits her subject in unexpected ways.

It is difficult to unravel the mystery of Coral Bracho's poems in the process of translation, to reveal them sufficiently without causing them to fall apart. She does not write a clear message to a specified reader. She does not structure her verses according to a grammar that is always familiar. Instead, her words seem to have a life of their own, as they work upon each other, magnetizing a noun, for instance, to make it move as a verb. In this difficult terrain of her poetry, in this water always shifting and flowing away, images from nature can be grasped in an attempt to make sense of her poetry. Like insects trapped in amber, they provide a brief glimpse of a world that is always changing.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Swarms of bees are generally docile phenomena. Traveling in great numbers to follow their queen to a new home, the bees do not pose a threat to the animals or people they encounter. People have been known to walk alongside a swarm for miles. (Kelly 148-9).

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## Care for a Drink?: Representational Discourse of Desire in the Works of Sabina Berman

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One of the subtle but meaningful common threads that runs through Mexican writer Sabina Berman's numerous works is the use of coffee, tea, and alcohol as part of a symbolic act of non-verbal communication between friends and lovers. Although Berman inscribes the drinks as part of the background or setting, she employs them in many major, meaningful moments that appear in her works. This has not gone unnoticed. Sharon Magnarelli has analyzed the use of tea in *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* as a performance of desire in terms of traditional vs. contemporary gender roles in Mexico, and Stuart A. Day has studied the use of food, such as ice cream, in *La grieta* as part of the drama's parody of the inefficiency of Mexican government officials.

My study adds to this examination of use of beverages in Berman's texts by expanding the analysis to some of her other works. The aim of this study is not to contrast the use of drinks between works, but to offer a view of how the use of drinks is a recurring theme and part of a figurative discourse that Berman constantly uses when she empowers her characters with drinks as a tool of manipulation or expression of emotion. In *Lunas*, *El suplicio del placer*, *Muerte súbita*, *Yankee*, *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, and *Amante de lo ajeno*, the protagonists utilize beverages as representations of a wide-array of emotions, such as pleasure, love, anger, confusion, dissatisfaction, and sadness. The drinks serve as either non-verbal cues or as complimentary support to the protagonists' spoken speech and express to the protagonists' companions what words alone cannot convey.

While it is implied that the act of sharing drinks and conversation is an intimate, non-threatening, friendly gesture in which a person enjoys the company of another and in which communication is positive, reciprocal and productive, in many of Berman's works this act almost always stems from the protagonists' ulterior motives, is tense in nature, and oftentimes ends in dire disappointment. It is representative of how humans attempt, but fail to communicate in many types and various levels of interpersonal relationships. Critic Ronald Burgess has observed that many of Berman's works show us the complexities of life, our constant search for answers, and our failure to find them, since even