Cultural Daily

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On the Popul Vuh

Robert Wood · Wednesday, August 29th, 2018

On my uncle's desk in his apartment in Berlin there is a rusty rail nail from a sleeper collected from the desert near Cook on the Nullarbor in Australia. Here, next to his collection of pipes and his Bauhaus aretfacts, is this relic of a place that resembles a dusty archaeological dig. What are we to make when the remnants of civilisation decay? What are we to make of the objects that empire leaves as a trace when it is brought back as a souvenir to a high modernist place? What does that aging bring?

My uncle himself has seen a lot – he was a boy during the war, where his family escaped to Switzerland; he watched the rebuilding of Germany and the fall of the Wall. He recorded these in his own way, first with short stories and then with television documentaries. For the last fifteen years he has taken photos of mannequins in shop windows, providing a diary of how his neighbourhood presents itself to the world. My favourite artefact of his is a photo he gave me, which shows him sitting with Borges while they make a documentary. I have it somewhere in my archive at home, a testament to my uncle as well as the literary world I used to look up to.

My uncle has that peculiarly generational and national interest in 'America'. When I visited him one summer he was unrelenting in his criticisms of Obama and the wars he still waged. But to him, 'America' was dumb if intriguing; a false, pretentious place that produced imbeciles if some greatness. This is a congealed if common vision of Americans. They make for obnoxious and obvious tourists – stomping through the Louvre in August, lounging louchely on the beach in Bahamas. This is supported by their inability to think in a language other than 'American', a kind of brute, ignorant *lingua franca* of mass capitalism. And yet there are American poets who buck this isolationist trend, poets who go into the world and meet it. Here I am thinking of David Hinton translating the Chinese classics, of Matvei Yankelveich as a Slavic champion at Ugly Duckling Presse, of Susan Bernosky translating Yoko Tawada in a three-way language love affair. The Americas, these internal ones and the ones to the south be that in Columbia or Argentina, are something different, and in Borges, my uncle had found a voice of fiction that was distinct and of interest. Because of this he had on his shelf *Martin Fierro* and the *Popul Vuh*.

When I stayed there, the *Popul Vuh* came to be a type of totemic reference, a kind of impossibility, one that was in a language all its own, one that suggested the Queen of the Americas was not the new imperial state in the North, but the mediating central corridor, the isthmus that connected Patagonia and Nova Scotia. The *Popul Vuh* was the story of that bridge, a bridge between gods and humans, between heaven and hell, between times themself.

I knew the *Popul Vuh* from the Dennis Tedlock translation. I did not, of course, know what the original meant or what it 'literally' was, but I knew what the universal language of its essential tongue through Tedlock. I 'got' those hieroglyphics when I visited the ruins in Palenque, which were a cousin and a translation of the Mayan epic. I could see the jaguar and the macaw and the corn. I could see the monkeys and the stars, the fire and the dawn. I could see the serpent lord and the lapis lazuli. But I had to make sense of them differently. I had to learn how to read it 'slant' in Emily Dickinson's phrase. And in that seeing, I began to see through to the cosmos and the universe itself, apprehending them in an unmediated way by simply looking, by visualising the material that was right in front of me. It was a hallucinogenic moment. It was the moment when I saw what Walter Benjamin meant when he said:

Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages, that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.

Translation shows us that languages have a special kinship with each other, 'interrelated in what they want to express'. The Tower of Babel is not quite the story to tell, not when there is a pyramid nearby that we all build. This is not only about seeing the page as a field from Robert Duncan and Charles Olson to Eugen Gomringer and Haroldo de Campos back to George Herbert and Robert Herrick. The more radical implication of this is being able to 'read' text wherever we find it, a painting in Arnhem Land, the Gweagle shield, the funerary boards of other uncles. That is where we begin to see that everyone has a language, everyone has a poetry that marks them as being for humanity, and that is something the translator has to tell.

In 2002, at a time of drought and starvation Jaime Alevar, a Franciscan monk, said in a *Financial Times* article, "The *Popul Vuh* says that men are made of maize. The Maya take that too literally. It is all they eat, and the children cannot grow on that alone." But maybe we don't take it literally enough. The question is how do we eat our ancestors to replenish ourselves rather than cannibalize and feed off their souls? That question is what the *Popul Vuh* asks of us and there are conventions and taboos in societies the world over, of how to eat one's totem and live to tell the tale, of how to appease the jaguars and crows and elephants and kangaroos with offerings. Those are the rules we must translate into new rituals that show us how to live and be, that show us what is the essence of the language that is universal to us all no matter where we dwell.

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