

Viva la Poesía

There's a horse-drawn hearse moving very slowly through the streets of Granada, Nicaragua. In the hearse is a coffin, but no body. This is the Funeral of the Betrayal of Dreams: on the side of the hearse, surrounded by flowers is a sign that reads *Viva la Poesía*. It is followed by a procession of puppets on stilts, hundreds of dancing skeletons, masked ghouls of all sizes, pirouetting conquistadors, pirates and flowery girls, all of them keeping time to the drums' unwavering rhythm. It's hot, and after a couple of hours the smaller demons get fractious; there are scuffles and partially-shed costumes, wilted skeletons leaning on car bonnets. Then as dusk falls they're up and dancing again, down to the lake where the coffin is finally dispatched, shouldered by poets – because this is, in fact, a poetry reading, albeit one that is a far cry from the differently funereal experience of eight people in an arts centre listening to politely-shuffled lyric anecdote.

This is one of the highlights of the Granada International Poetry Festival 2010, and the focal point of the procession is neither the hearse nor the skeletons, but the flower-bedecked mobile stage on which one poet after another reads to the packed crowds at each street corner. Some of the major figures in this festival were active participants in the Sandinista revolution of the 70s and 80s, for example Gioconda Belli, one of the festival's presidents, and rebel poet priest Ernesto Cardenal, whose white hair and black beret are barely visible above the throng pressing forward for his autograph. A few blocks back through the city, the tail-end of the procession features masked and wigged parodies of Gioconda and Ernesto, complete with a comic entourage of 'international poets' with suitcases.

Que viva la poesía: again and again everyone's shouting it. I join in too, even though 'poesía' is becoming a blurry concept that might mean poetry and might then again mean revolution, but one in which dreams are not betrayed (despite the revolutionary period, Nicaragua is currently far from utopian). Or it might mean simply the will to live, or the coming together of poets from a hundred different countries and the sometimes haphazard encounters of their languages. A man with a megaphone keeps up a litany of names: *Puerto Rica, Columbia, Irlanda, Gales...* yes, Wales is in there too, even though I have to spend most of my time explaining where it is, and adding that its own struggle for autonomy has created a longstanding Welsh interest in Nicaragua. As for other points of connection, while poetry is more highly regarded in Wales than most places, its centrality in Nicaragua comes as a surprise: an audience of around two thousand turns up every night in the town square to listen to hours and hours of it, much of it in translation.

Such events reflect a culture in which poetry is 'as necessary as water,' as Richard Gwyn puts it in the first of his two essays on Latin American poetry. For this reason alone the four poets he has translated deserve careful attention (as do Cecilia Rossi's translations of Pizarnik, to be reviewed in the next issue). Extracts from sequences by José Ángel Leyva and Victor Rodríguez-Núñez, though not discussed in his essay, form a link with the contemporary scene in which both are significant figures. Leyva is Editor of Mexican journal *La Otra* while Núñez (from Cuba, published in translation by Arc

lectures in Spanish at Kenyon College in the States, where he is energetic as a translator and in connecting poets from across the world with Latin America.

Such connections are precious, all the more so in an economic climate when they are likely to become more difficult, not because of what they reveal in terms of exotic difference, but because the translation of poetry on which they depend is a uniquely intense struggle to find cultural crossing points. If it is in fact impossible, then so is any translation, since poetry is 'a test case for what is happening when any communication is issued and understanding achieved,' as Peter Robinson points out in his excellent new book *Poetry and Translation: the Art of the Impossible* (Liverpool University Press). He argues that the value of translation is often seen as the shock of the other, a enlivening of familiar cultural patterns, yet this can in fact underscore the division between the 'domestic' and the 'foreign', reaffirming the home tradition and 'tending to occlude the conflicts that not only mark, but also define the original text's language in its relations with its culture, and, further, the multitude of similarities in difference between the original's culture and the translation's that make the art of translation possible at all.' If a poet is already a stranger in his or her own tongue, as the uniqueness of a poet's own language would suggest, then a more nuanced take on translation is needed in which complex interactions are not reduced to a simple case of 'them and us'. Translations such as Eurig Salisbury's reworkings of Aneurin Karadog's Welsh in this issue are a reminder of the further layer of complexity in a bilingual culture.

The dialogue here between Pierre Joris and Jean Portante, both from trilingual Luxembourg although living respectively in New York and Paris, raises the question of how to translate poetry that is already shaped by interactions between languages. Joris's poetry, like his translation and critical writing, insists on language itself as nomadic, the poem itself only a stopping-place or 'poasis' rather than a home. An encounter between languages, therefore is not a contrast of at-home-ness and otherness, but becomes a continuous movement from other to other by the writer who is also an other, or many others. In his translations of Portante, the abrupt insertion of clauses mirrors in English the poems' different breathing in a French that, as Portante describes it, keeps opening up to its hidden Italian lung, one language breathing inside another just as the whale breathes as a mammal inside its fish-like existence. Joris's own poems expand outwards; there is no home ground and the points of reference keep moving, the reader often having to jump between languages and neologisms as the line between reading and translating narrows.

If poetry is as necessary as water, swimming in it isn't always easy, as Tiffany Atkinson points out in her discussion of W.S. Graham, a poet who fascinatingly explores the relationship between reader and text. Reading and translating poetry may not be the same thing, but both types of encounter involve re-imagining linguistic perspectives, and therefore re-imagining the world. It's possible that the question of how to translate, or read translation, has less to do with the work being translated than how we imagine the receiving culture. For the purposes of this magazine we could say it's Wales, which like Jean Portante's whales (and the green whale that swam by chance into Richard Gwyn's essay) has a secret 'h' that is the breath of plural language in its lungs.

To comment on this issue go to poetrywales.co.uk and click on Winter 10-11. 46.3