

Purgatory

Raúl Zurita
Translated by Anna Deeny
Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California
Press, 2009

Song for His Disappeared Love

Raúl Zurita
Translated by Daniel Borzutzky
Notre Dame, IN: Action Books, 2010

INRI

Raúl Zurita
Translated by William Rowe
Grosse Pointe Farms, MI: Marick Press, 2009

Jonathan Cohen

Raúl Zurita, winner of Chile's National Prize for Literature in 2000, is widely considered one of the most important poets in Latin America today. He has created a daring new poetic language, out of necessity, to express the suffering and hope of his nation—as well as his own—during the nightmare of the Pinochet dictatorship. He was twenty-two years old when the military coup took place on September 11, 1973. Living in the coastal city of Valparaíso, he was a college student at the time, finishing his studies in engineering at the Universidad Técnica

Federico Santa María. Then suddenly, on the morning of the coup, he was arrested and detained with almost a thousand others in the hold of a dark ship. He was tortured there before being released. This terrifying experience profoundly traumatized him. Indeed, it dealt the initial blow of the seventeen-year-long trauma that would define him and his poetry, along with his homeland.

Because of his arrest, Zurita could not complete his studies. He was unable to find a job of any kind at first, and struggled to make ends meet. At the same time, he was becoming more and more engaged with poetry, which he had started writing seriously around 1970. He was forming his identity as a poet and radical artist. Poetry became a refuge for him. He was giving readings and meeting other poets. At the Universidad de Chile in Santiago, he met Nicanor Parra and Enrique Lihn, among others. Their “antipoetry” clearly influenced his postmodern poetics. How could poets, then, stay up on Olympus? The first of his poems appeared in 1975 in *Manuscritos*, a journal published by the university. Four years later, the university published his *Purgatorio, 1970–1977*. It was the first book of the Dantean trilogy that Zurita would conclude more than a decade later; the second being *Anteparaiso* (1982; *Anteparadise*, 1986, trans. Jack Schmitt), and the third, *La vida nueva* (1993; *The New Life*). Since its original publication, *Purgatorio* has never gone out of print—a fact that demonstrates its lasting importance.

Now, with the recent publication of *Purgatory* in Anna Deeny’s fine translation, we have two English versions in bilingual format of Zurita’s awesome poetic sequence. The Latin American Literary Review Press published the first one in 1985. The translator of that edition was Jeremy Jacobson, of the British Council, whose English is just that: not American in its diction and cadences. More important, his rendering of the poetry is inclined toward literalism, to the point of incomplete translation. Deeny worked harder at mapping out Zurita’s language. For example, the book opens with the following lines, which function like an antipoetic introit:

mis amigos creen que
estoy muy mala
porque quemé mi mejilla

The lines describe an act of self-mutilation by Zurita. In 1975, he disfigured his cheek by throwing acid on himself, as part of a guerrilla performance staged in front of the Fine Arts Museum in the capital by the Colectivo Acciones de Arte (CADA); the activist group of artists, with Zurita as a founding member, emerged during the first years of the Pinochet regime to challenge it with “art actions.” Here are the two different translations of these lines:

my friends think that	my friends think
I've been very bad	I'm a very sick woman
because I burnt my cheek	because I burned my cheek

[Jacobson]

[Deeny]

Jacobson makes no attempt to convey the idea of gender twist, or derangement, that Zurita intends to communicate with the word *mala* and its feminine ending, whereas Deeny does so effectively by taking a creative liberty to translate the essential implication of the word.

Throughout the book, the poet's persona expands to ultimately "contain multitudes" (invoking Whitman) as it becomes others—other victims—of the madness afflicting Chile at the time. Zurita achieves this transformation of the individual self by artfully manipulating the first person singular, as in the opening lines. In another instance, opposite a photo of himself under which is written in Latin "I am who I am," he says "my name is Rachel . . . I'm in the middle of my life / I lost my way." His poetic language includes the juxtaposition of words with visual elements that are dependent on the printed page, as well as mathematical notation at points, to articulate the process of coming to terms with his subject. Both editions of *Purgatory* re-create this dimension of his work. Deeny's translation, though, is more accurate, and serves Zurita far better.

The book is divided into eight parts. Reading it as a poetic sequence is a very strange journey full of haunting sights and sounds, of surreal images ranging from grotesque to beautiful, disturbing things, unspeakable things in the vast Atacama Desert, where the dictator's henchmen committed atrocities and left the indelible stains of their crimes in the dirt, and where for Zurita "night is the insane asylum of the plants." And then in the green pastures beyond the desert, the mooing of a cow that for Zurita becomes "Eli Eli / lamma sabacthani"—the Aramaic phrase associated with the crucifixion of Jesus: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

The concluding section of *Purgatory*, titled "The New Life," presents verses at the other end of the spectrum from the book's opening. Graphically compelling, the three, basically one-line, poetic constructions—"Inferno," "Purgatory," "Paradise"—that form this closing section are printed on the scroll-like record of an electroencephalogram with its jagged lines measuring the brain's electrical activity. Deeny gives us Zurita's verses placed in the middle of the page: "my cheek is the shattered sky" in the first; "my cheek is the shattered sky and the broth- / els of Chile" in the second; and finally, in "Paradise," the central line is "of the love that moves the sun and other stars," with the following two lines of tenderness and affirmation tucked in the bottom right corner: "My friends and I / MY STRUGGLE." The last page of the sequence is the EEG print-out alone. The reader can almost hear it. Of course, the question is, what does it say? Does it corroborate the findings of "epileptic psychosis"

that the poet's doctors observed in him, as revealed in an "artifact" poem earlier in the book?

Deeny's translation of *Purgatorio* offers readers a close approximation in English of Zurita's first masterpiece that depicts his fearless creative quest for rebirth. As C. D. Wright emphasizes in her foreword, "this is ground-breaking, mind-breaking, bone-breaking style; the miracle is that Zurita heals all by the end, wringing triumph out of anguish." And in his preface to this edition, Zurita says about the book: "I feel that *Purgatory* represents a certain image of what pain can generate, of its desperation, but also, I hope, of its beauty." With his *Purgatorio* published defiantly in the dark past of Chile, Zurita bravely raised his voice against dictatorship, and for human dignity. Now, removed from the brutal history of its creation, it stands as memory—necessary memory of that holocaust—both personal and national. But more than that, it celebrates what is universal in the undying human drive for life.

More of Zurita's work is coming into English slowly, but definitely coming. *Canto a su amor desaparecido* (1985; *Song for His Disappeared Love*), well translated by Daniel Borzutzky, has just been published by Action Books. It is a sequence dedicated "To the brothers and sisters / To the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo / To the association of family members of the disappeared / To all of us, we are tortured, pigeons of love, Chilean countries and murderers." It opens with these lines, which demonstrate Borzutzky's ability to recreate the poet's voice: "Now Zurita—he said—now that you got in here, / into our nightmares, through pure verse / and guts: can you tell me where my son is?" As Zurita explained to his translator, the situation in Chile called for the unreachable goal of "responding to the terror with a poetry that was just as powerful as the pain being delivered by the state." At the same time, in his introduction to this poem, the translator emphasizes, "[T]his is a love song: a song not just for lovers split apart by disappearance, but for love that has disappeared."

Zurita's later *INRI* (2003), published in Chile on the eve of the thirtieth anniversary of the coup, appeared last year in William Rowe's excellent translation from Marick Press. Like *Song for His Disappeared Love*, this book is a stunning memorial in verse to the disappeared victims of the Pinochet regime. Collectively, their murders represent for Zurita the crucifixion of a people, his people. And thinking of them, he hears a long scream in his head: "innrrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii"! It is the acronym of the Latin words *Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum* (Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews), written on Jesus's cross. In a 2003 interview in Chile's newspaper *La Nación*, Zurita said, "INRI is the inscription of the passion of suffering, and above all the dream of resurrection." The book shows his full poetic power and it reaches great heights, as in this elegiac passage about one of the disappeared:

I hear the sound of the daisies as they bend.
 Susana is a friend underneath the black field of
 white daisies.

The black sky sinks down into the sea, into the
 black field, into the gauze-like snow of the
 mountains. Up above, the stars bend in unison
 with the daisies in the wind. The stars make no
 sound, the stalks of the daisies cry out and I
 hear them.

Susana speaks words beneath the field or the
 water or the earth.

Each of the three main sections of *INRI* opens with a biblical verse that serves as an epigraph and key to Zurita's vision. The epigraph of the first section, in which the above passage appears, is from Luke, and offers a new, very different, level of meaning here, as does the "I" in it: "And I say to you, if they keep silent, the stones will cry out."

Zurita says in his preface to Deeny's translation of *Purgatorio* that poems are "the earth's dreams." What does he mean? When I met him at New York's Poets House, in May of this year, he told me he believes "the earth wants to tell us something." Elsewhere, in a Mexican magazine, he explains: "Sometimes I think the earth has dreams, and poets are just humble translators of the earth's dreams." In this way, as a poet, he has served his homeland well and given voice to it, to its very stones and dust, but above all, to its people—during and after their long bout with evil. And through his poetry, through art, he found a way to resist the horror, to transcend it and survive.

Jonathan Cohen is a prize-winning translator of Latin American poetry and scholar of inter-American literature. His latest book is Ernesto Cardenal's Pluriverse: New and Selected Poems (2009). His compilation of William Carlos Williams's translations of Spanish and Latin American poetry, titled Poems from the Spanish, 1916–1959, will be published by New Directions in the fall of 2011.