

Aimée and Camila Zito Lema on translating the script for *The Actress*

*In February 2023, I asked Camila Zito Lema to reflect on her experience translating the script of The Actress. We sat down at our family house in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and went through the translation together. Throughout the interview, I highlighted certain passages that Camila commented upon. -Aimée Zito Lema*

Aimée Zito Lema: At the beginning, the text takes us to Brazil. We could start from there, taking this geographic context as a reference. How do you think the geographic context defines the way one interprets a text at the moment of translation, taking into account that the entire first part of the text is about Brazil, Latin America, related to insects and then comparing them with the emperors or different political figures from European history? Here we come across something interesting, I think. How to read those characters, like [Otto von] Bismarck, [Camillo Benso di] Cavour, from a Latin American point of view? Is it taken for granted that certain European history is well-known?

Camila Zito Lema: Well, according to European common sense, what is Latin America after all? It's the land of heat and insects, of abundant nature and lush vegetation, etc., etc. Here you have a complex political matter that consists of identifying Latin America with all that exuberance, and on the other hand, identifying politics with more rational aspirations, with the construction of a certain power and a way of politically organizing the world and its societies, with Europe. Latin America stands for nature and Europe stands for reason, for organized politics. Europe claims to be universal, which is reflected in the fact that in Latin America we know who all those characters are, the king of Macedonia, Bismarck, etc., etc. We do know them, but why? Go and ask a European whether he or she knows who were the liberators, the Inca kings or the first constitutional presidents of Latin America. I very much doubt they do. But we all know who [Abraham] Lincoln and [George] Washington were, or the main North American politicians. Here there is something related to the idea that the countries' hierarchical structure (center vs. periphery, metropole vs. colony) is translated into their languages. The more or less strategical place, in terms of economy and politics, that countries occupy can be translated into the cultural interest in their languages. In that sense we are lucky because Spanish is a rather known language, a Latin language, spoken in Spain so we have a foot in Europe, which is not the case for other peripheral languages. There is a certain correspondence between what happens at a linguistic level and a political level. But to go back to what you said at the beginning, I think you better ask that of the author. Why does this association exist between insects and Latin America on the one hand and great political leaders and Europe on the other? Why, when we talk about great political leaders, we mention Bismarck and not Túpac Amaru?

AZL: How did you approach translating specific phrases, such as: “Our piles, their piles. Mandible, tooth, fingernail; prizes in a game of chance at the boardwalk”?

CZL: For example, “prizes in a game of chance at the boardwalk” [“las fichas de la costanera”], is a choice I made at the time of translating. Here you have Argentinian Spanish, differing from the Spanish spoken in Spain and other regions of Latin America. A translator naturally translates into her or his own Spanish, and mine is from the River Plate region. Taking into account that this text was going to be used in Argentina, it seemed to me to make more sense for it to be translated into Argentinian Spanish. Probably I would have chosen a different reference if translating a text for readers from Spain.

AZL: “The gene falls like a coin down the branches of taxonomy. The bat nose is the orchid of the animal kingdom. Not animals but animality, a flow surging up in brief waves, forming a snout or cat's eye, and breaking again on itself, slipping back into the churning water, dissolving into sea foam. And thinking, thinking is the beet-red froth glistening on its surface. I fall into this self, washing up into my form I feel it as a loss; everything I am not was split off from me; a million openings, and in each a thought stretches across the hole.”

CZL: That part of the text is very beautiful... To me it is a text about the personal search for identity and the construction of identity. And how it is developed, with these multiple “selves”. How we make ourselves from the pieces of our own history and the history of others, the crossroad between them. How identities are temporary masks, something that changes all the time. For me the script is about that search. Before in the text there is also a reference to “being sterile,” the idea of reproduction, which is precisely what relates us to animals, the most animal part of the human being.

AZL: An identity that questions the animal part of the human being, and at the same time, the idea that human beings are not the only ones that think.

CZL: “What do termites think?” It starts with that, taking for granted that termites do think, and all the time. It is not a comparison, but more like a coming and going... like a dialogue within the text between the woman and the termites.

AZL: “I fall into this self, washing up into my form. I feel it as a loss; everything I am not was split off from me...”

CZL: All those infinite possibilities not being fulfilled in genetic terms, but also when you construct your identity, what you affirm, means necessarily that you abandon “the other”,

what could have been but hasn't, what is so but could have been different. I mean a certain "classic" idea of understanding identity in negative terms, or even from a more dialectic point of view, nothing is in itself, but only in relation to the other, the others and with the others.

AZL: "My world is small, but it is still a world. I can still speak of it as a world, as my relationship to the world, even if it's only a few creatures, a few places. So don't call me pretentious for talking about the world. It's everything else that is no longer a world. Every day I wake up in the illegibility of this former world, and in the contradiction I think like a spider weaves."

CZL: I think the image of the spider web shows us what the character sees as a contradictory thought, like the way of thinking, shaped like a web.

AZL: "Destroyed by the events of the afternoon, it is reassembled by morning. Maybe only the dead can think. Weave weave weave weave weave wave, a thought is the tidal wave that follows the earthquake." From here until the end, the text starts to include word games, from a visual point of view, the weave, the image of the "i" as a broken column, which at the same time is a "minor i"... How did you work with these word games in your translation?

CZL: Well, that is THE problem of translating. Playing with the sound of words in one language can be totally different in another language. You sometimes may be lucky and find something similar, but most of the time it is not the case. So fundamentally there are two choices: either you translate the original text literally, and in the case of the "i" this worked out because visually the "i" in Spanish maintains the idea of a "broken column," that is to say, at a graphic level it is alike, there is a continuity, but not so in the sound, that continuity is impossible to achieve, that sound cannot be reproduced, because it doesn't exist in Spanish; or you have to write a footnote and explain. This wouldn't help though, because in this case it wasn't a text to be read, it was to be performed out loud. A footnote would not work with the use meant for the script. If it was a written text, normally the translator could appeal to a footnote to explain something. The other option is to look for another word game and sound but then again it might not have anything to do with the meaning of the words in the original text. So, there will always be something lost and you have to be willing to sacrifice something. There is no way you can reproduce 100 percent of its meaning, the sound, the graphic, you have to make a choice. To me, in this case the most important thing was the meaning, it's about the "I," but no word will replace the giant meaning of "I," which is the core of this text. I have chosen to keep it literal as much as possible, to be faithful to the original and let the Spanish version be what it can be. With all its limitations. At the end that is what translating is all about... In another situation I might

have found a synonym, a different adjective, but not in this case, there is no right synonym for “yo” [“I” in Spanish]. This text is more constraining because it is conceptual. It is poetic, but it is conceptual. The concepts are very restricted at one point, you can think a lot about them, but there is a core that is like a rock. The choice I made was to be as faithful as possible to its literal meaning. If in Spanish you say “i,” you think of the letter “i,” so you see the letter “i” as a broken column that connects with all the rest of the text. If I would have written “yo” “yo” “yo,” in no way could it visually connect with all that is said afterward.

AZL: The same thing happens at the end, where the “o” works as a graphic image of a hole.

CZL: That is what the text itself is about, it is a possibility. You are also everything you choose not to be, as we talked about before... That’s why it is possible to make more than one translation, something that happens a lot in the literary world. Literature is translated again and again all the time. There are many ways to translate something from one language to another. The perfect version doesn’t exist. The translation has to live with that problem, with that constituent imperfection, with the fact of being an “another” to the original.

AZL: When she says, “let this minor i stand for me,” that reveals in some way a gesture, to move away from the center, saying: let me be a minor i. And besides that, broken.

CZL: Of course, that is what she means when she says that although her world is small, it is still a world. This character doesn’t need to continue being the center of the world to talk about her world, to identify with her world, to build a world. Here we have something very typical of the twentieth and twenty-first century, which has to do with the radical criticism to modern thought, to modern epistemology, to modern ontology, which builds that idea of “man/rational subject/creator of the world/center of the universe,” an idea rejected in this text, or at least a transaction that this text tries to reveal.

AZL: “Maybe only the dead can think.”

CZL: That is a very strong idea, I think it has to do with what we talked about yesterday, about stillness, when we remembered our father’s sentence “to the dead belongs the stillness of death, to the living the despair for life.” Here I see something in the text that has to do with thought, like the spider weaving and its web being destroyed and starting all over again... it is rather exhausting to think all the time and to be in constant movement. The idea of thought as movement, but when you move constantly it also becomes difficult to think. You will be dragged by the same non-stop dynamic. The only way to pause might be death. When she says, “only the dead can think,” it’s telling us that to be able to think you

need a certain stillness that in the dynamic of life, the living do not have, because of that logic of weaving all the time. It is a very strong image. It is a character searching for its identity but also a very melancholic character, that of the woman. With a thought filled with darkness bringing her closer to a matter of death than to life: the destruction of mounds, the forest, the infertility, are related to death impulses. And the statement that only the dead can think, what about that? At one moment she is talking about the voracious dynamics of life where one is weaving all the time, the image of the weaving as thought is very clear, and besides nothing is simple, it's one big web, nothing is linear... and all of a sudden you need to pause to be able to think, and somehow you can only achieve it in death, which is where this character brings us, her temple, her energy, her voice.

AZL: "O o o o o o ..." In the script, the sea goes away and leaves a void. A hole?

CZL: The avalanche goes away and leaves a void. This image at the end, the "o," a hole is what is left when something goes away, leaves. But a hole to me is something much more graphic, it even has a shape, a geometric one, you think of a hole and you think of something round, a circle like the letter "o." An emptiness is much more metaphysical, a hole is more material.

AZL: And then it makes sense because after that she talks specifically of the body.

CZL: Yes, and the body is matter. That's why this text is so complex to translate, because it has multiple layers. There is the meaning layer, the visual layer, and then there is the layer of sound, which is another problem when translating, the music of the words, and that same music opens doors in one language and closes them in another. In that sense it is a difficult text to translate. That is, each text has always many layers, but in this one it is deliberately searched for and elaborated. What happened to me at the moment of translating, is that I had to assume and embody that search proposed by Becket in the original text.

Someone else might have taken other decisions. Each translation therefore is a different text and each translator is legally the author of his or her translation. That work is recognized, it is not at all mechanical or something repetitive, instead it is creative.

When someone is getting into the world of translation, one of the first things they tell you is that the idea of translation, on the contrary to common sense, is anything but passing a word from one language to another.

You may consider translating as what it isn't: it is not passing a word from one language to another, it is rebuilding a context, many times inventing or building a context, in order to provide the reader with as many feelings, ideas, images, sounds, problems, as those present in the original text.

Besides, a translation can be qualified as being more or less successful, depending on how much it achieves that goal. And there is another "problem", the fact that the translator is a person who, when reading, interprets; that is to say, it is giving its readers an interpretation. That is why you are an author. In translation the word fidelity is often used. Trying to be as faithful as possible to the original text and avoiding betraying it. There is a famous sentence, a maxima, "traduttore traditore." In fact, a translator is a betrayer, although they try to be faithful, on its way fidelity meets a lot of obstacles. Translation is problematic in itself; it is a difficult task. So, that is the starting point of understanding and reading a translation. If you are not willing to encounter these problems, you better learn the original language of the text and read the original.

AZL: "This little i with its head teetering atop a ruin. Let the minor i stand for me, who can support nothing, elevate nothing. The column cracks and crumples into a pile of stones. I weigh thirteen stone."

CZL: In this part in a certain way the text goes back to the image from the beginning. The pile of stones, the mounds of dirt. It leads back to a more specific vocabulary from the beginning. In a translation there is a tendency to form a family of words, and many times there is a word that will transmit its meaning throughout the entire text. In this case it is presented at the beginning, in relation to the image of the termites, and it appears again at the end referring to a person, the character. Throughout the entire text, there is a chain of transmission of sense of that word and of the images linked to it.

AZL: "I weigh thirteen stone: two for each limb, three for the torso, one for my head, and one for the fluids. My rubble is now scattered on the ground, thinking no more of the edifice, but pressing into the dirt, to make holes in it, gaps in my shape."

CZL: The building can be thought of as a body, and also in metaphysical terms, like a "self", an identity, precisely thought of in terms of a robust thing, both the physical body and the identity. But what actually happens is that, that building is falling apart. There is a Derridean image to talk about deconstruction, it refers to a building inhabited by the "principle of ruin". They are buildings ontologically inhabited by the principle of ruin, meaning that the ideal robustness, without cracks, doesn't exist. The crack is a constitutive part of the building. Deconstruction is about that, about that process that never finds closure. Things are ontologically inhabited by the principle of ruin, by ghosts. This has to

do precisely with the idea of a body decomposing, an identity constructed from what it is not, which is necessarily moving and changing, in constant construction and deconstruction, it is dialectic.

AZL: “Someday my body will decompose and leave only these thirteen pockets, like the hollow tombs of the Vesuvius. A collection of holes o o o o o o o o o o o.” Here the text goes back to what you mentioned before—to be able to think you have to be dead.

CZL: Dead not in a literal sense, but in a sense of being able to stop, to get out of the whirlwind of the ongoing web and weaving all the time, which is life and thought, as something moving. How can one get out of it to try to create something of one’s own? For instance, when she says, “how would I know if what I have thought is really a thought, rather than something received, from a bloviating uncle or trivial repetition?,” here we have a thesis of Becket about what thought is, his idea of what a thought implies. Or at least, a worthwhile question, about what is thought and what is not. Not everything that passes through our mind is thought. Maybe thought must have other traits, as, for example, to stop. To pause to think. To lay down. To pass it throughout the body. Many things....

AZL: Toward the end, when she talks about the “the hollow tombs...” these holes show up in the earth, Becket puts them again in the context of a historical fact: the graves of the Vesuvio. The author sees it as the European historical event, the eruption of the Vesuvio volcano. When the text was performed by Maia (the actress), in an Argentinian context, which is the part of the work filmed here, the word Vesuvio took another meaning. Helena Nassis, who was directing Maia, when interpreting the monologue, did not think the text from a European perspective. She interpreted that word as the name of the concentration camp. For her those were the empty tombs of El Vesubio. These tombs are empty, without bodies, because those bodies disappeared. If you consider that, that link that happened during filming makes all the sense.

CZL: Exactly. Helena reads it within the Argentine context. In Argentina Vesubio was a clandestine concentration camp of detention and torture. Actually, there are cases in Argentinian courts classified as Vesubio 1, Vesubio 2. For her it could never have been something different from that.

This is a very clear example of the translator as a mediator. There is an original text, the source; I translate it; and a metatext as a result. What the author meant, what I, as a translator, say the author says, and what the reader will read, who in turn interprets whatever they can or want, etc.

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I could have added the word *volcan* before the word Vesubio and the “problem” of interpretation would have been easily solved. To eliminate the ambiguity. Instead of the empty tombs of the Vesubio it would have been the empty tombs of the volcano Vesubio. I don’t know, maybe now that I see it, it might have been a mistake of mine, but at the same time it gave us the chance to reflect on this, on what happens with a translation and what happens when a text is being read and appropriated from another geographic and cultural context. Because it doesn’t even have to do with Spanish. Because if this text is read in Spain, or Mexico or Peru, I don’t know whether the people in those places know the names of these concentration camps in Argentina, or even have any idea that there was a terrible dictatorship causing 30,000 people to be disappeared. I myself don’t know the names of the concentration camps of Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile, or Uruguay. That is something one knows because of one’s own historical context. That’s why I say that this reinterpretation of the text lets us see the figure of the translator as an intermediary.

Thought is, whether you want it or not, situated thought. Becket thinks from Becket, from his mother tongue, from where he lived, from the culture he comes from, the community he belongs to, from his being an artist, and he writes from there. This text is not purely a reflexive exercise, it is a creative exercise, and in this exercise one’s identity comes through.

In this case it is a matter of having situated the representation of the text in Argentina. For those who know the Argentinian history, which aren’t all Argentines either, because we are 42 million and there are people who have no idea about our history or even deny it. But there is a certain sector of Argentinian society that knows this episode very well, so that when they read Vesubio, they cannot think of anything else but the concentration camp.

AZL: The text itself helps with that interpretation. Because it is about the body, the empty tombs.

CZL: Yes, at some point it looks like a text written for Argentina, continuously making reference to the political history of our country and its disappeared people. For an Argentinian reader, the references are immediate. And reading the word Vesubio at the end, has of course also an impact on the whole text and the way of reading and understanding it.