

m-Talá

Also by Chus Pato:

In Galician:

Urania
Heloísa
Fascinio
A ponte das poldras
Nínive
Heloísa
m-Talá
Charenton
Hordas de escritura

In Galician and Spanish:

Un Ganges de palabras
(selected poems edited and translated by Iris Cochón)

In English:

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O Ciudadán
Little Theatres
O Cadoiro

CHUS P A T O

m-Talá

translated by Erin Moure

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TRANSLATING CHUS PATO

The first time I read publicly from my translation of *m-Talá*, I sent Chus Pato a photo of the event, and she emailed me back from Lalín where she lives in Galicia, in the very northwest of Spain, to say she felt welcomed into English-language poetry.

I think that this is part of what having a literature is: to invite others to join it, to exist in its language, not as foreign but as different, as glad bearers of a difference which strengthens, in the paradoxical way that difference does have of bringing strength. To me, part of nurturing poetry in a national literature is welcoming a voice from another language into our own, and letting it change our own language.

To invite a work across a border is to open the self to something new, for translation upsets and opens a reader's own habits in their native (or other!) tongue. Chus Pato has upset mine, and in ways neither she or I could predict. Sometimes such openings also open the language, open English, in this case.

The prime example of this process, of course, in our tongue, is Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, and his 16th century translation of books 2 and 4 of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Howard responded to the demands of the Latin original by creating a new form in English. and though his publisher called the result "this strange meter," blank verse has since been inextricably associated with our poetry.

No wonder, then, that translation beckons glad foment into my own writing practice, and its effect reverberates in my own poetry, and through that poetry, into the poetry of others. Translation expands the range of what is possible, and in unpredictable ways!

Chus Pato is a poet whose work through the 1990s, culminating in *m-Talá* at the turn of the century, has had a phenomenal effect in Galician literary culture. As María do Cebreiro, herself a fine poet in Galician, once said, upending Pato's own words: *m-Talá* is a poker game of impurities—and writing about it is like sending a postcard home from a foreign country: there's so little space, so much to say.

Chus Pato was born María Xesús Pato (Chus is a diminutive of María Xesús) in Ourense, in the interior of Galicia—a green equivalent, oh, of Osoyoos, BC if Osoyoos had been founded by the Romans who had left a bridge in a valley topped by hills that had previously harboured Celtic towns. Pato was born in 1955, the year I too was born, but I was born in Calgary in Canada, and Pato in a region of the state of Spain that is not Spanish. She grew up speaking Galician—that language of a 1,300-year-old kingdom joined to Spain in a monarchical shuffle 900 years ago, and language at the root of modern Portuguese. Yet Galicians, ordinary Galicians, have maintained their difference, their Galician language and culture. Despite the odds.

Pato and I may have similar wary, hopeful, discordant poetic sensibilities but our background and work have differences, too. Fundamental ones that extend to the way we each grew up. The country into which Chus was born was ruled by a fascist dictatorship, that of Franco, which endured until she was 20. In her childhood, the pain of the era called *posguerra* still lingered strongly in the silences and divisions, in the poverty and hunger of a people overshadowed by the pomp of state and church. In one poem she wrote: “My native language is fascism.” It’s a statement that slaps, defiant but sad too. While acknowledging her education and the tenor of her native land and upbringing, she goes on to defy it, by writing in Galician—a language oppressed under Franco, not taught in schools, not published except very marginally and late and in allegory, or by exiles in Argentina—and of a republic that is yet to come. Pato is not interested in essentializing ethnicity, but she wants to speak her own language, in a place where it’s not always—even today—easy to do so. Language itself propels her for another reason: *it’s a freedom-machine*. It breaks with every code. It opens possibles that no other regime can.

The year Pato was 20, in 1975, Franco died, or they pulled the plug on him, and in 1976 Spain could finally open doors to Europe. Some of my Spanish friends who grew up in that era grew not even knowing that the government overthrown in a coup on July 18, 1936 by General Francisco Franco had been democratically elected. They learned that and many things after

1976, and quickly. People emerged from shadow into official culture, more or less. It was a time of conflicting codes, codes newly legal, speech newly legal amid the death rattle of old fears, words newly minted that could be seen—when the carnival slowed down—as part of a culture that was larger and more multiple than central Spain would admit to. And this still holds true today. The smaller, “peripheral” nationalities in the Spanish state have not yet received their due. For many reasons. Part of it was a successful “transition to democracy” that involved a “national reconciliation” which let the same people step into democratic power without answering for past collusion with repression, a transition thus partly built (and still is—though slowly it changes) on a silence that to many seemed necessary at the time. One result is that old cadavers, bones, crushed skulls, bits of cloth and coat-buttons, still lie covered in ditches in Galicia and elsewhere. There’s a restlessness not just in Galicia, but in Spain, that keeps surfacing, for memory doesn’t go away that easily, even with the shiny surfaces of capitalist economy as distraction. It’s readily acknowledged that the American Civil War still affects America; the Spanish Civil War, much more recent, can’t help but have its reverberations in today’s Spain.

1976 also happily and powerfully marked other trajectories, such as that of poetry in Galician. That year, *Con pólvora e magnolias*—*With Gunpowder and Magnolias*—was published by Xosé Luís Méndez Ferrín, a writer of intensely beautiful and galvanizing prose, poetry, essays and journalism who would be world-famed if he wrote in the idiom of the central state, but he chose Galician. This book marked a radical change in the course of poetry in Galicia, in its “modernization”, in its political commitment and its resonant and powerful use of the language, in its wide and sure step away from feeding the myth of a purely rural, docile culture that can’t raise its voice, that is not “educated” unless it writes in Spanish.

Chus Pato’s *m-Talá* marked, in 2000, a further rupture, an invitation across a boundary. It is considered a turning point in Galician poetry. Its strange title is a word with no meaning in Galician; it’s untranslatable. People have said *m-Talá* is an un-

pronounceable, untranslatable cry. Yet, unbeknownst even to Pato, perhaps, it echoes pertinent realities. In the Temi language of Tanzania, “mtala” means “sudden apparition.” In the American tongue, EMTALA is a law to stop hospitals from dumping desperately ill patients who are uninsured, unable to pay. Pato’s *m-Talá* is her own sudden apparition into discourses that harm us, in searing poetry that identifies the sickness, refuses no treatment, and—without being a hospital—sends no one away. For me, it’s a name that seems to have risen from the cradle of written western culture. Yet Chus Pato’s work faces not the past, but the future, and our future selves.

In *m-Talá*, Pato refuses to maintain the illusion that the lyric “I” is the personal voice of the poet. She refuses the singularity of poetic voice altogether, taking on voices till she is these voices, these pantonymic heteronyms, this chorus in which Agape, cyborgs, Raida’s astral body and Brenda jostle alongside Mephisto, Kafka, Poe, Ferrín, Celan, Lautréamont, and Rimbaud. Here every doorway is rainbow and fruit, wave and *dérive*. *m-Talá* is a wild and assured romp through histories that are literary and geographical, geopolitical and local, gendered and national. As Pato has said, she writes “after the deluge” where “the void is not a limit, it’s a passage.”

In Pato’s hands, Galician is dynamic, radicalized language. The language of a woman alive in history who names a country. A language droll and fierce, which is to say, one of optimism. Or hilarity. She plays with every code imaginable: gender coding, positioning of the spectator, positioning of the poet, the identity of the author, in ways that we are more used to seeing in theatre or visual art. Or in Fernando Pessoa, perhaps. She uses radio interview, dramatic dialogue, letters, diaries, ticket stubs, screams. She is Chus, Brenda, Nefertiti, and the writer in her study in Galicia weighing potatoes at her desk. Her work is flow and clamour, snicker and oration, bellow and murmur, outcry and dance, and it stops for breakfast at 6 a.m. in a deserted railway station in Monforte and gives up literature altogether.

Only to take it up again. And we readers are glad she does.

Erín Moure
Fredericton, Montreal

our history: *incised into
granite from which dreams are made*

belén feliú

i ask myself if in this phrase all the yews of the free city of Paris lean and fall, all my reflections on language—the word that shuts the edifice of Language is the same that opens to the wind’s dominion—it was possible in those days to cross not just one but two, three, endless rainbows, each portal and fruition; to you, I wanted to say “onyx,” to tell you Camille sculpted “the wave” and three figurines of bronze, and who can say if the waters are fertility, flow. I dreamed of the sewers, of the king’s libido or rather his absence of libido, out by the pond, pondering the total dearth of desire in an art devoid of passion with only calculation and the aesthetics of calculation to trace the guiding principles of its trade. The waters: what an architecture to house civilizations, sister! Babel is time and Aphrodite. I craved a Ganges of words; how terrible these tresses are, whose sole clasp is my hand and sole emblem, the wind! It’s like waking from a dream, of the body, of words

the lake

we're lost, we turn in circles to get out
they traverse the huts
hers, her memories, sad, amiable and sad—target
for gunshot at the fringes of whatever city. *He* utters sentences,
I don't know if I'm to transcribe the sentences *He* utters or not,
they're phrases about the baffling semiotic of signs.
She launches into her story: about minks, knows mink farms
have always existed, knows they'll bite the swan's neck, in the
artery, the congealed blood is sperm on any altar, cetaceous.
You utter the most beautiful phrase of all
—Sirius is blue

to be inscribed on the skins of 101 dalmations, in the
slaughterhouses of Chicago, Cincinnati, Chicago.

Or the book's engravings would sear my eyes

PS: it's all about liquefaction of blood; they'd always used sperm,
dyed: above 10°C it no longer coagulates so when the believers
cram into the temple, the prodigy spontaneously occurs. In the
text, it means She could have felt like that, object of superstition
and veneration, and it could also be a metaphor for the poem,
pouring out over all past liturgies. As for those slaughterhouses,
my love for the study of contemporary history will absolve this
thought that masks such dark dissolution, Lautréamont Terrace
—the huge pedestals eroded, the colossal fractures. The dawn,
of course, is the dawn of Patroclus.

(with Xosé Luís Méndez Ferrín)

leaning on a tree, not breathing. Have to solve this problem,
I don't accept the non-dissolution, mystic or otherwise, of a
body into any Mother Nature. Next, the video scenes: abducted,
reverberations in the capsule, I feel the reverberations bend
me double, will you unbend me, in the marrow, shelter me
there, you on the verge of turning into Jupiter, and me into
Danae—what's left of you a flower, the wettest flower in your
hair—guarding flocks.

Quartz of words
cuneiform
from the inside
i'm translucent.
Filiform, of words

you can't see the battle because it's far off, in Eritrea
the painting's monstrous, three or four times bigger than an
opera backdrop. The mother, one of the lad's four mothers, will
speak and does. Nothing; in some symbolic place the mushroom
turns into a maiden

—just look at her little hood and lepiota cloak
intuit her body, svelte and tigery, her touch, cold. How icy it
is among the mushrooms when night falls. Surprised and glad
because you can pull your hand away and glove your fingers or
warm them in your pockets. She's mute, naturally. There's only
the perfect name of God, the name of Antonin Artaud where
someone bares the stone. Great sheets of rain into it, miles
down, deep with damp dead leaves and since you're late you
crouch in chestnut husks where children sleep with solar tiaras
and rock themselves and one of the four mothers will speak and
does in this bedroom dedicated to Sterne because that's where
we are, in the grimorium of a poet, and Julia Moesa tells how
she had to wade through twenty-five yards of manure to find a
lost bit off the milking machine,
and everyone gazes, miles down, the pages of the Outre-tombe
frozen to kill bookworms, to cure it of evil, and they all breathe
and the stone must be cloaked again

what we'll never figure out is if we're inside or not, if the
teardrop is jet or basalt, if inside are the three dancing witches, if
we'll someday tunnel to the open. The stone compacts itself, as
in a zigguri ritual. Just notice the initials, white and red initials,
of the royal male-sun, and the female-sun, royal. We'll never find
out if our nerves are solar emanations, if the page is parasitical
on the secretions of my brain
our nerves radiant with saffron in the letters of the betyl
Especially when the losses are so violent and close

Veracruz, May 1947.

i've reached a place where pain impedes thought, my brain
works like an image-factory—or more exactly, a sea of hearts. So
right now they're distending, morphing into flat surfaces, filling
sea to the horizon. They suggest huge leaves of tropical plants,
carnivorous, then strewn islands, Saint Brendan's, verdant, all
these sands flowering in the sea
—look for me in the direction of the Indies
huge scarlet bubbles, floating in the shipwreck—then aprons are
pin-ups, they invade the waters as far as the eyes can see

keep faith
never write these words down

idols of the heart

Forty years staring at the wall, windowed, on the same grand
scale as the Carthage airport
so the air can split in two

and crown itself

that's it, they killed me, or how the poet abandons the
rites of autumn to become human

the queen had a heart
—yummm, so tasty!

silently
like Krishnamurti
silently

because all of it was already too screwed up to have to deal with
that if democracy and yes, we all ended up on i don't know what
kind of shitty union epiphany-list, it was sort of like hearing
talk of doors
—get out!

then nothing
not a single, single, death

left