

In The Dark with Juan Gelman: The Test of Truth in Translation

By Paul Pines

*Heisenberg argued that the deepest levels of reality do not
involve particles but symmetries.*
Synchronicity, F. David Peat

1 – Summoning the Hosts

Wine, tapas, and word-of-mouth brings sixty people to the Instituto Cervantes on a bitter January night to hear Hardie St. Martin's translations of the Argentine poet, Juan Gelman, published in the recent tribute issue of *The Café Review*. Hailed as one of the great living masters in Latin America and Europe, Gelman is virtually unknown in English even though he has been awarded the highest honors in the Spanish speaking world and may well be on the short list of Nobel Prize candidates. His poems embody the ability of the human spirit to transform unspeakable challenges into an affirmation of humanity. I titled our evening "DARK TIMES/FILLED WITH LIGHT," after a Gelman poem.

Things They Don't Know.

dark times/filled with light/the sun
spreads sunlight over the city split
by sudden sirens...

My co-presenter, Guatemalan-American novelist David Unger, opens with a few words about the translator, Hardie St. Martin, whose 1975 anthology of 20th century Spanish poetry, *ROOTS AND WINGS*, schooled a generation of poet/translators including Robert Bly and W.S. Merwin. *Kirkus Review* called it "a landmark." *THE SMALL HOURS OF THE NIGHT*, a collection of Roque Dalton's selected poems published by Curbstone Press in 1996 earned him an American Literary Translators Award. David, an MFA student at the time, met Hardie in 1974, when he was guest-teaching at Columbia University and translating Pablo Neruda's *MEMOIRS*. They became fast friends and until Hardie's death in 2007 worked closely on a number of translation projects.

In my opening remarks about Juan Gelman, I describe a drama which began with the Argentine political repression of the 70s, when military forces brought a reign of terror to Buenos Aires, perpetrating a Holocaust of dissidents. In 1976, Gelman's son, Marcelo, and daughter-in-law, Claudia, pregnant with the poet's grandchild were "disappeared." The poet fled, spending the next thirty years as an exile in Mexico and Europe creating a body of work that has garnered him the highest honors bestowed by the Spanish speaking culture, the Juan Rulfo, Pablo Neruda and Cervantes prizes. Gelman records the loss of

children, homeland and, after a relentless pursuit over decades, the discovery of his granddaughter alive in Paraguay.

2 – The Edge of Song

At my first reading of Hardie's Gelman translations my eyes snapped open. I was reminded of why I was first drawn to poetry, and have stayed in its precincts for over fifty years. Hardie's work impressed me with the impact possible when the translator brings to the table artfulness equal to the poem. The art and vision of the two have become fused for me, or, more accurately, were the Virgil and Dante I met in my own dark wood. I trailed them past the legend of abandoned hope, into depths that filled me with hope of finding what had been abandoned.

In his notes for an introduction Hardie reflects on Gelman's courage at the edge of the abyss. Staring directly into that darkness is a risky business. As Nietzsche points out, *when you look into the abyss, the abyss looks back into you.*

I followed the poems into a space first described by the 16th century poet and mystic San Juan de la Cruz as the "Dark Night of the Soul." Juan Gelman used the other Juan to guide his soul's existential free fall. The Carmelite Juan passed through his dark night to find union with transcendence. Gelman abandoned himself to the ache of a secular compassion: *my soul passed through like a voice/ walking now with the world's feet,* ("Quiet at Last"). In a series of poems called Commentaries, Gelman addresses the other Spanish mystic, Santa Theresa, on confronting both the horror of evil and the rawness of redemption.

Commentaries II (saint theresa)

With my love running over and spilling/
all around me the miniscule animals
grow fat feeding on your absence/
or is it your presence
makes me childish like feet crushing
sadness on the edge of what it is about to sing/

This journey strips bare all who take it. Any hope the civilized Ego carries with it is left at the door. Gelman speaks of his poems as "descalated," the same word San Juan uses to describe his monastic reforms as well as his poetic lines. Only a poetry stripped to the bone can express what so many have suffered at the hands of despots. Gelman has done this in Spanish. Hardie delivers it whole. Since my first reading, the two have become fused in my mind. I ask myself if a translation can be equated with the original, or the two form a third. The mystery fueled my desire to bring the translation to English language readers. Hardie's files existed for years on my computer unknown to anyone but me and David until Steve Luttrell, editor of *The Café Review*, called to ask if I'd be interested in editing a tribute to Juan Gelman.

3 – Monkey River

Hardie liked to turn off his hearing aide at boring literary occasions, such as the one honoring him for ROOTS AND WINGS, at which Robert Bly called him “an invaluable resource.” The big guns he loaded during WWII had left him deaf in one ear. Hardie’s habit amused David, who was perhaps the only one cognizant of his friend’s propensity. When Hardie got a certain beatific expression on his face, David observed, “He’s back in Monkey River.”

I met Hardie in the late 70s, at a time when I was building a house at Rum Point, a peninsula in the Stann Creek District of Belize. He was delighted that someone else among his acquaintances knew his homeland existed and confided that his family owned land in Monkey River. I confessed to a sleepless night anchored on a sail boat at the headwaters in front of his village fighting predatory insects. I couldn’t wait to get out of Monkey River, didn’t understand how anyone could live there.

Hardie knew what I meant.

Born to a distinguished Bayman (white Creole) family, he spent his youth in the Fort George section of Belize City where he was educated by Jesuits. As a high achieving student, he turned his back on a scholarship to Oxford to study in the States.

The fact remains: he made it out of Monkey River to become pre-eminent in his field. Hardie literally translated himself out of that insect infested delta. The list of poets he guided in translating other poets reads like a Who’s Who of contemporary American poetry. Robert Bly described Hardie’s work as “illuminating.” Hardie worked his way from inside the poem out into the world, the way he did out of Monkey River. The analogy doesn’t end here. He was more at home in the poem than in either Monkey River or the world.

Hardie lived in New York City first as an antique dealer, then as a teacher before settling in Barcelona. He returned to undergo two operations on a cancerous prostate at the Manhattan VA. The second operation was botched, and left him enfeebled. When David came back from a visit to Barcelona in 2007, he reported that Hardie had become a husk, but, judging by his smile, was spending quality time in Monkey River.

4 – The Test of Truth

Hardie’s files came to rest in my virtual memory after a deal to publish Hardie’s *Selected Works of Juan Gelman* with Curbstone Press fell through and he, in desperation, forwarded them to me. I moved both “NOTES FOR INTRODUCTION” and “GELMAN” from hard drive to hard drive for over a decade, tended them with periodic visits. The poems haunted me. Reading his notes, I felt Hardie working his way through Gelman’s poems from the inside out.

“Holds back part of the meaning of his words,” wrote Hardie. *“G. tries to express complex feelings with new invented language. His meaning depends not only on new language but also in its arrangement....”*

Hardie knew how carefully the poet selected the words in Spanish, but translation often requires a leap to remain true to the original, must penetrate the emotion at its point of origin. Again, Hardie noted:

“Comentarios – tormented language of the soul tortured by divine love...echoes St. John...puts the saint's methods to his own use.

Perhaps the only way to evaluate a translation is through what poet George Oppen calls the measure of any poem: “the test of truth.” The test of truth leaves no room for pretension or dissimulation. It is confirmed by seismographic tremors, a tectonic shift in the sensorium of the reader. Hardie had to find his way into Gelman’s grief.

Echo of St. Theresa in Carta Abierta dedicated to his dead son. It's so difficult for the poet to speak of the dead...

A true literary translation isn’t about a literal substitution of word, but the alignment of symmetries that exist under the verbal radar. Great poets can speak the dead back to life; locate them in depths where they speak to us. No literal substitution of words in translation can capture this even when it is evident in the original poem. Ghosts, like underlying symmetries, can be brought to light only by one who feels them take shape. Hardie reaches for underlying vectors in Gelman’s work. Both the original poem and the translation must deal with the voices of the dead as facts.

5 – Ghosts at the Gate

Paul Blackburn warned me to beware the siren song of translation. As a young poet, I listened attentively, knowing the sirens had drawn him to Julio Cortázar, Octavio Paz, and most intensely to Troubadour poetry. Blackburn was so moved by Ezra Pounds evocative translations of the Troubadours, that he traveled to Rapallo to ask permission to mine this vein. The two poets, one at the beginning, the other at the end of their respective journeys, sat in the village square at a table shaded by an umbrella. Paul asked Pound’s blessing. The old poet’s gaze seemed fixed on something in the distance, as if watching the *vaporetto* that would soon take his ashes out to sea. Paul waited. Finally, Pound grunted, a gesture that might’ve been a nod or an involuntary spasm: thus ended the interview.

Blackburn’s forgotten translation of Troubadour poets, *Proensa*, is a testament to translation as a test of truth—a *testamentum*. It highlights translation as an act of bringing unseen shapes to light by demonstrating that underlying symmetries are not constrained by time and space. The translation of 12th century poets in the south of France by a 20th Century poet at the dawn of changes in the art of his time is powerful evidence of this. Never did strings plucked at such a distance reverberate so closely. One can hear it in

Paul's own modern *Sirventes*, an ear tuned to the music of the tongue spoken in the south of France, *langue d'oc* (the "language of Yes"). Paul could not, as he advised me, plug his ears to the siren song of translation.

How could he?

It was a process through which he realized a part of himself.

Paul heard himself echoed in the Troubadours he discovered through Pound, much as Gelman touched the ancestral experience of my own family disappeared in the Nazi Holocaust, and what life after that experience required if one were not to withdraw from the world. His ghosts spoke to mine through Hardie, whose own Mopan Maya cheekbones were links to a Conquest that (to quote Cortés), "sowed the earth with corpses and crosses."

Gelman's Catholic signifiers, San Juan and Santa Theresa, were descendants of *conversos*, Jews who chose or were forced to change their faith, or appear to do so. Juan Gelman, the son of a Jewish father who fled the Russian revolution he fought in and which would have rewarded him with death, is the Catholic son of a *converso*. San Juan escaped from prison to flee Papal persecution. Juan Gelman fled Argentina, to which his father had fled—both outrunning certain death.

6 - Blessings of the Father

Though I knew he was very much alive, Juan Gelman had eluded me like a ghost, unreachable, until the last moment. I'd emailed Irma Jiménez, Gelman's gatekeeper, a year earlier introducing myself and the idea for a tribute to him. Irma's function was to protect the poet from annoying claims on his time. I emailed Gelman in the spirit that Blackburn approached Pound. Had I traveled to see him, he might've given me a grunt and a nod. As a correspondent, he dissolved in cyber space. Irma was apologetic: *Mr. Paul Pines: I received your mail and I send this mail Mr. Juan Gelman. Mr. Juan Gelman is traveling out of Mexico City. Thank you, Irma.*

I began to suspect that in the life of this poet certain weariness. After several follow ups with the same result, I set out to put the tribute together.

Through the winter and spring of 2009, I selected poems from Hardie's translations, and, with David's help, made a list of writers connected to Gelman from whom I solicited work. Six months later, I emailed Irma to let her know we were about to go to press.

Gelman's response was instantaneous. *Dear Paul Pines, thank you for your effort, but I would like to see the translations of my poems before giving my authorization. Best regards, Juan Gelman*

I replied the next day: *Muy Estimado Juan Gelman: I am attaching the entire issue of the tribute. I believe Hardie's translation are the strongest representations of your work in English to date. Let me know what you think. Sincerely, Paul Pines*

I waited, recalling the deal with Curbstone that had imploded. I now risked the displeasure of the man whose voice sounded synchronous notes in my being.

What if he said, "No!"

This would affect not only Gelman's work, but Hardie's as well. I could not in my heart separate the original from the translation.

I waited two angst-filled days for his answer: *Dear Paul Pine, thank you very much for the splendid tribute you imagined and performed. You have my authorization to publish the translations of Hardie St. Martin, they are really good and please, give him my thanks. Best regards. Juan Gelman*

7 – Traitors and Translators

Physicist F. David Peat describes synchronicity as "a finger pointing to the underlying structure of the intelligence that links mind to matter, event to event, affinity to affinity." This sentence stayed with me as I struggled to understand why editors at fifteen presses, with catalogues that included distinguished poets in translation, failed to respond to my letter and tribute issue of the *Café Review*. I remain stunned by the absence of interest in a collection by one of the most eminent living poets rendered by a master translator.

But the reality of the publishing world has little to do with the "intelligence that links mind to matter...affinity to affinity."

Far more important is the role of synchronicity; it flows against the laws of Newtonian physics in which time is an arrow that moves forward gathering energy as it goes. As the White Queen says in *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll's translation of underlying structures: "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards."

Synchronicity informs my experience of translation, and continues to offer me a glimpse of White Queen Memory. Blackburn was drawn to the inchoate future in which the resonance set off by his reading of Pound was realized through his work with the Troubadours.

Pound aspired to White Queen Memory, one that works forward as well as backward. By channeling the voices of Homer, Propertius, Arnaut, Cavalcante, Li Po, etc., he built a Cathedral of synchronicities called *The Cantos*. His ambition was to create a space in which temporal elements ceased to be functions of history but exist contemporaneously in psychological space. By pointing at "underlying structure" Pound hoped to eliminate temporal divisions altogether.

“Translating literature is an art,” states Edith Grossman, known for her translation of *Don Quixote*, in a recent New York Times article. David Unger, an artful translator in his own right, is quick to draw a boundary. “I refuse to think Rabassa’s translation of García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is equal to the original, no matter how much GM insists he prefers to read the translation over his own original.”

The old adage states, “All translators are traitors.” Certainly, some are.

Consider once again Peat’s definition of synchronicity as “a finger pointing to the underlying structure of the intelligence that links mind to matter, event to event, affinity to affinity.” If we understand the act of translation as an expression of “minds and affinities linked by an underlying structure,” Grossman’s claim for translation as an art may be worth considering, and my own fusing of Hardie/Gelman understandable. Assuming this, why shouldn’t a translation be held to the same standard as the original poem?

Let’s reserve the designation of “translation” for what stands the truth test, where the impact of the work leaves a footprint in the reader’s psyche. While not an objective assessment, I suggest that there are other possible responses to competent work that may be memorable, but not transformative. One might refer to lesser efforts as, say, “attempted translations.” But who would rush out to buy such a book: “City Lights is proud to launch *Don Quixote*, in a new *attempted translation* by Maxwell Blagg?”

One can parse it more finely to indicate that certain qualities are captured, but the disappearing Unicorn has eluded the net. *Simulation* captures the character of a well intentioned, even a scrupulous effort? “Don’t miss Blagg’s *vivid simulation* of *Don Quixote*.”

A Borgesian might suggest that in a parallel dimension the *simulation* is contemporaneous or even prior to what is being simulated, and so create a niche-market for it. Perhaps Edie Grossman’s point, as closely as it touches my own, is irrelevant in a culture that can’t distinguish between a *simulation* and a veridical translation.

8 – THE HEART OF THE MATTER

In many creation myths the Creator speaks or thinks the world into existence. Where matter rises from mind, the universe is an expression of underlying symmetries. In certain ancient texts, like the Egyptian, the thought-form is not seated in the head. “The tongue speaks the thought of the heart.” From this point of view, creativity is the translation of potentials of which we are ourselves translations. The connectedness of the world erupts in moments of White Queen Memory, hypnogogic visions, and compelling synchronicities.

This morning I find an email from playwright Ken Brown. Attached is a U-Tube 1970 performance by Joni Mitchell of “Big Yellow Taxi Cab.” The elfin artist she was in that moment forty years ago enters my life again in May, 2010. I eat breakfast, and then return

to my work on this essay, which has veered unexpectedly into an exploration of synchronicity. Faced with the task of linking these to my subject, “truth in translation,” I search my shelves for physicist F. David Peat’s book, *Synchronicity*. On impulse, I pick out another by that author, *The Blackwinged Night*, open randomly to page 206:

People romanticize about the countryside only when they have abandoned it for the city. As the singer Joni Mitchell put it in “Big Yellow Taxi Cab,” ‘You only get to miss what you’ve got when it’s gone. They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.’

A *frisson* passes through me; rather than analyze synchronicity as a subject, I’m touched by it as an event. The oracle has tapped me on the shoulder. I listen for answers to my questions. Why have I received no response from publishers to Hardie’s Gelman? What is the mystery at the heart of a true translation? Why am I waiting in the dark?

The oracle spoke first in the message from Ken Brown, then a second time through the work of F. David Peat, to answer me in two a-causal events linked to the original Joni Mitchell lyric: *Paradise, where energy flows freely, has been paved over.*

9 – A Forensic Meditation

The world grows smaller and more populous. Geographic boundaries give way to virtual ones. There’s an ever increasing urgency to lighten, simplify, reduce—to move on the surface. How else withstand the uncertainties that threaten to annihilate the ground on which we stand? We might analogize our world to a parking lot where shoppers search for their cars, eyes glazed. It’s hard to tell one SUV from another. It’s easy to think that we may one day visit the Tree Museum, as Joni Mitchell tells us, to remind us of trees.

Our psyches remain as they were when Paleolithic painters translated the spirits of bison, deer, horse and eland on temple caves in the womb of the earth. Only those who descended into that darkness were illuminated, returned with the vision of structures that support the visible world. Juan Gelman has mapped Hades, but we travel there at our own risk, with Hardie, not Hermes, as our guide.

Peat suggests that what used to be the province of the poet, the quest for truth, has become that of the quantum physicist. For openers, the underworld resembles that of sub-atomic reality where truth is not logical, but complimentary, can manifest as both particle and wave. Its dance is unpredictable, but Heisenberg indicates the attitude of the observer determines the way it unfolds. One truth-particle can replicate another’s rhythms with metronomic precision over a distance, as Blackburn’s reed vibrated at the same rate as that of medieval troubadours, and Gelman did in Hardie. I’m tempted to echo Nietzsche’s warning about the abyss: *when you look into quantum reality, it looks into you.* This defines the test of truth in translation: *Does the translation look into you?*

Anything less is “simulation.”

Open Letter – to my son

crestfallen my burning soul
dips a finger in your name/ scrawls
your name on the night's walls/
it's no use/ it bleeds dangerously

.....
opens its breast to take you in/
protect you/ reunite you/ undie you/
your little shoe stepping on the
world's suffering softening it...

10 – Da Capo: Waiting in the Dark

Unfortunately, the speed and power of our technology has substituted adrenalin prompts for the immeasurable field of the unconscious, “simulation” for “translation.” Carl Jung calls it “*a rationalistic hubris which is tearing our consciousness from our transcendent roots...*”

But the ancient Night Sea Journey, which describes the course of the sun's course between the death of the old day and rebirth of a new one, echoes in the descent we make nightly in sleep. James Baldwin's protagonist in “Sonny's Blues,” offers a profound insight into the situation: “*All I know about music is that not many people really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations.*” He concludes that the fear of drowning stops people from setting off on the journey. What we find on the night-sea are the dead alive in us, dismembered emotions remembered, memories of events yet to come waiting to be delivered.

Underlying symmetries can be brought to light only by those who feel them take shape as heart-thoughts. I am bound to those whose translations are an enlargement of consciousness. Paul Blackburn is among them, and Hardie St.Martin. Juan Gelman is there, too, a living presence informed by his son, Marcelo, and the mystic, St. Juan de la Cruz.