

Eros, Ethics, and Emily Dickinson in English via Nuria Amat's Faithless (Spanish) Love

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Fidelity

So thin our bond, but hair  
will not dissolve.

Nuria Amat

### I. Eros

In 2004, Spanish novelist and poet Nuria Amat published *Amor infiel* [Unfaithful/Faithless Love], a collection of what she referred to at the book's launch as "free versions" based on the poetry of Emily Dickinson. She described her work as an effort not to translate Dickinson's poems but to write *with* Dickinson, a daring endeavor by her own admission but one for which she took full responsibility (Punzano). Amat's comments intrigued me. Her versions, however, disappointed, even angered me at first. Despite the admiration that she professed for Dickinson and her declared intention to adhere closely to the spirit of the original poems, even when she used them as points of departure for her own poems in Spanish, I sensed far more infidelity than love. How, I asked myself, could she speak of writing *with* Dickinson when her poems resembled Dickinson's so little? Not only had she titled the poems—something that Dickinson never did--, she had used neither the dashes nor the capitalization that mark Dickinson's poetry, and she explained that her knowledge of English is quite limited; at times I questioned whether she had thoroughly understood the poems. Why my reading did not stop at that disappointment, I'm not sure. Perhaps it was because of my friendship with Peter Bush, who has translated Amat's fiction into English and who suggested to her that *she* translate Dickinson's poems. However, I felt curious about Amat's work, and it occurred to me that I

might probe through translation the love she professed for Dickinson's poems. I wondered what might I learn about Amat's bond with Dickinson if I translated some of her versions into English as poems in their own right, as a way of discovering what she was up to? What might I learn if I thought of Amat's love as faithless rather than unfaithful? What if her rewritings were not linked to faith at all, but to a different mental act?

I chose at random several poems and began to rough them, out deliberately not looking first at Dickinson's originals. What I learned was that I had made an error about the ability of Amat's poems to spark a response in me. For as I began to translate, I experienced what Elaine Scarry, in *On Beauty and Being Just*, has called "a revisionary moment" (12) or "a correction" in one's perception with respect to beauty (13). According to Scarry, people often remember precisely times when they realized they had made an error, either by learning that "something held to be beautiful no longer deserves to be so regarded" (12) or by suddenly seeing beauty where they had not seen it before. Scarry cites both a poem by Dickinson, in which Dickinson experiences a correction of the first type or "genre" of sensory moments (14), and also an instance of her own altered perception, in which she sees as beautiful an object in which she had not before perceived beauty. As Scarry explains, instances such as the one she cites from her own experience prompt a physical response, in that they compel one to participate in beauty, to recreate it in some way, even if only by looking again and again. Often, however, the response involves far more than a repeated gaze, and Scarry cites examples of many forms of sensory response and physical gestures that bring imitations of beauty into being (4).

In my case, it would be impossible for me to identify an exact moment at which my disenchantment with Amat's poems was transformed to an appreciation that goaded me into

persisting with my versions in English. I do, though, remember the context of my first translations, and I remember the physical sensation that accompanied my experience. I was in Barcelona, in my hotel room, a modest, even unpleasantly modest and poorly illuminated room. I had just eaten breakfast at the rather shabby desk and I picked up some photocopies of Amat's poems that I had brought along with the thought of trying a few translations. The papers were spread out in front of me and, almost without thinking, as I read I began to write, And I remember that, as I wrote, I began to recognize the tension in Amat's work that results from her interaction with Dickinson, and I realized that I was being led to respond to the poems, to reproduce them in some way—by rereading them, studying them, recreating them in English. Scribbling rapidly, I found myself recognizing subtleties that I'd not seen before: the predominance of "o"; the use of space instead of dashes; concision and stripped, simplified language, although in ways different from that in Dickinson's poems. Like Dickinson's poems, Amat's were often puzzling on first reading, and as I puzzled over them it was hard to remain seated, so strong was the surge of energy released as I wrote—energy that I would refer to as erotic.

It's not easy to describe that sort of energy, but I've thought about it often since I began to translate, and in recent years my thought has been centered most specifically in the context of my work with Rosa Chacel. In Chacel's work, the erotic—as opposed to eroticism—is linked to what she called the "hot zone" of writing ( Porlán 71). In that zone, she explained, the confrontation with something that surpasses the limits of the human (which she refers to as "the superhuman") sparks "momentos genésicos" ('genetic' moments) that literally as well as figuratively move one both to think in a different way and to create—and led Chacel to define

herself as an “erotic novelist” (71). Chacel’s comments also resonate for me with comments by other, more contemporary, writers whose work I admire, for example, North American poet Anne Lauterbach. Like Chacel, Lauterbach has spoken of her desire for “a certain dumbstruck quality . . . where you are so surprised and thrown that things come unstuck in your own ways of being able to understand . . . linguistic events that sit on the edge between comprehension and incomprehension.” Lauterbach says that her goal is to create that quality, which she refers to as “pleasure,” or “a kind of erotics”—not “sexuality—“that thing,” she explains of being called, of being compelled” and, again like Chacel, she produces work that could be described as genetic in the sense of both rethinking and acting on one’s thought—in fact, Lauterbach’s images have been linked to “a process of thinking [itself] as eros” (Peterson).

I have quoted the passages about Chacel and Lauterbach because they fit well with my own experience and the articulation of that experience with respect to the effect that translation can have on me, and, I believe, on others. So that—and I want to stress this--whatever is eros is a sort of energy, physical energy, an inner tension, a pulsing not unrelated to rhythm. In fact, ever since I began to translate expressive texts, I’ve experienced the drive to translate in terms of a physical sensation that represents (or images) itself in terms of blood, of veins. I’m reminded here that North American poet Diann Blakely speaks of a “musical language or verbal music” that “can be triggered by images . . . accompanied by the . . . blood-noise of our own hearts” (366), and I believe that Blakely is writing about this same experience. Blakely’s description, however, seems limited to me because I’m afraid that it might stop at the metaphorical. It has been my experience that the blood noise of eros—and I am not speaking figuratively here, at least to the extent that it is possible *not* to speak figuratively about such things—the blood noise

of eros is an inner dis-ease (remember that, although noise is not necessarily unpleasant, the root of “noise” is “nausea”), in other words, blood noise an often violent sensation (to use that word as Giles Deleuze uses it with respect to Francis Bacon, esp. 34-35) that gives rise to the responses or imitations of beauty that Scarry describes, by making it impossible for one not to re-create them.

## II Ethics

(a) Page from my journal, October, 2006

Reading poems in Robert Creeley's *On Earth* sent me to the poems in his *Life and Death* and then back to *On Earth*, to his essay on Whitman and age, where I find Emily Dickinson's #258 and remember reading early one evening in the car on our way to Akron a passage from Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in which Didion mentions a certain light seen one afternoon in New York City. Didion doesn't mention Dickinson, but I believe that Dickinson is present in that passage, in that "effect of light falling." Reading those words, I remembered that I had recently read other possible allusions to the same poem in poems as diverse as Creeley's "When It Comes," Martha Ronk's "shadows lengthen[ing] across the lawn," and a student writer's gloss on Rilke's first Duino elegy. And suddenly I was sitting in the center of a visual kaleidoscope in which those poems converged, experiencing the effect of that light, thinking about apprehensions of death but also about the fact that those apprehensions are alive, *can* be alive when they arise as what Federico García Lorca referred to as poetic facts (or, one could say, events), as they had just done for me. And I realized that this was happening because of my work with Nuria Amat's transgressive translations, which I did not trust but which have enabled me to experience Dickinson with an intensity that scholarly work, even work as provocative as Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* (which I greatly admire and to which I return often) have not.

(b) The passage from my journal, and the experience that occasioned it, would not have occurred if I had not begun to translate Amat's poems; and I would not have begun to do that if I

had followed my first instinct as a reader and, especially, as a translator. For at first I saw her poems only as acts of a transgression of which I disapproved, rejecting them as adaptations written by a poet whose admittedly limited knowledge of English gave rise to misreadings and odd rewritings. Thinking as a translation scholar concerned, as current research in translation studies indicates that most translators and translation scholars are when it comes to ethics, about the translator's responsibility to know the language and culture of a text well, I initially censored Amat's work. I also nearly censored my work and, even when I did begin to translate her poems, I worked more in a spirit of rebellion than collaboration. I did not trust Amat, so I began to dissect her, put her under the microscope. As luck would have it, I discovered there her drive and my own, but I know that my original disapproval was strong and that it was only by chance that I began my translations. This was a near miss that I believe worth considering, not because the world of literature would be impoverished if I were not writing these translations, but because of what it suggests about a continued veneration of a stable original that persists, despite what research in many fields that has shown such veneration to be inappropriate, and despite recent insistence on the need to understand far more thoroughly what Sandra Berman has referred to as "the act of translation" (7).

(c) Even as I wrote that last sentence I sensed my own "voice" reminding me of the translator's duty to refrain from deluding myself about playful recreations of another's text that occasion the pleasure referred to by Lauerbach--but a pleasure unacceptably different from that occasioned by the original. However, having disobeyed that voice, I am led to suggest that in order truly to understand the act of translation, at least literary translation, translators and translation scholars must be willing to accept and to probe far more fully than they have to date

the complex, contradictory entanglement of eros and ethics. To do otherwise is to ignore (as in not to know as well as to fail to consider) what might be the greatest “gift” of translation *as* an act: the access to the “erotics” or “process of thinking” (Lauterbach) of another human organism, through the effort of untangling that process. This means looking at translations not only as products (which may seem flawed or “unfaithful”) but also finding ways to practice translation and discuss the act of translation that might reveal appreciation and affinity not readily apparent. As my work with Amat has shown me, the sensations prompted by translating against one’s grain, so to speak, can reveal as much about the act of translation as those experienced when one translates on the basis of attraction. Maria Tymoczko has written recently that two of the areas of research that are “likely to be productive in the coming decades” (1082) are cognitive science and the neurophysiology of translation. I could not agree with her more, and I would venture to add that when neuroscientists are able to image the brains of writers and translators at work and enable us to move, literally, beyond the figurative when we discuss sensation in the context of translation, they will discover an inter-relatedness between duty and desire far more complex than translators have dared imagine.

### III. Exercise

A first reading of Amat’s version of Dickinson’s #258 left me feeling annoyed because, although “There’s a certain slant of light” came to mind without my having to look for it by using the number given at the end of Amat’s version, I keenly regretted what seemed to be a substitution of “slant” by “rota”(broken), especially when there would have been at least one word in Spanish that could have conveyed “slant.” Remembering the painstaking, even

agonizing effort described by translators of Dickinson's poem into Chinese, Japanese, and Swedish, for example, I mentally chastized Amat for taking what seemed to have been an easy way out. In this instance, attempts on my part to translate her version failed to open a path to appreciation, as for days I pondered what to do with her "broken light." Finally, one day after rereading the afterword in Amat's book and some correspondence she and I had exchanged about her affirmation of transgression as an essential element of creativity, and after spending an afternoon with her at her home in Barcelona, I sat down and wrote out a translation. I have since revised it slightly, but neither that version nor subsequent versions were written with regret or a sense of loss. All of them diverge from Amat's translation and Dickinson's original, but I believe that Amat would approve, given her insistence that true translation is both creative and transgressive as a translator experiences pleasure, recognizes beauty, and begins to think on her own.

Would Dickinson approve as well? My hunch is that she would. Not only did Dickinson wish that the world had written to her but, according to Marilyn Hacker, her "secular transformation of rhymed measure was . . . [a] deliberate gesture of prosodic innovation" (13); moreover, Susan Howe reminds us that Dickinson had a sense of humor (152).

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