The Short Stories of Pere Calders: A Translator's Journal

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0

Just as an instrumentalist brings out a piece of music from the sheet to your ears, a translator brings a foreign text to your understanding. Translating is interpreting, in the regular literary sense –each translation is a reading– but also in the musical sense of the word. And thus it should be for the reader as much an aesthetic experience as an intellectual one. Still, as opposed to a musical interpretation, the aesthetic rendition of translation comes mixed –tainted perhaps– with intellectual ruminations. The process of translation is accompanied by constant reflection: on the material that one is translating or thinking of translating (what kind of text one is dealing with and what kind of language one is going to recast it in) and on the act of translating itself.

The editors of this issue invited a contribution, and I offered to translate a story or two by Pere Calders. While rereading all of Calders's short fiction with my selecting and translating goals in mind, I kept a journal. What follows are its entries.

I

Among the names mentioned by critics as influences on or similarities with Calders is that of Julio Cortázar. One might even say that Calders is to Cortázar as Cortázar is to Borges: while some common traits are undeniable, there seems to be a deeply ingrained set of differences, the evidence of two individualities. And one may also take to comparing Calders to Borges. Both Calders and Borges wrote terse short fiction, quite often with some reality-defying turns. In both writers improbable projects are undertaken by characters and related unprejudicially by poker-faced narrators. And yet how different Borges's and Calders's narrators can be! Calders speaks consistently through a narrator out there not to be confused (even by readers unaware of the rudiments of narratology) with the author; he remains the impresario behind the puppeteer. His narrators present often the same voice, or the same kind of voice. But such voice is definitively a narrator's and independent of Calders the way the jet of ink is different from the cuttlefish. There are lots of common traits in the

masks his narrators sport. They tend to be timid, gullible, lower middle-class, urban Catalan males of an uncertain age; in other words: your generic, local, adult. Only rarely does a more daring, eye-winking trickster speak the piece.

"Más razonable, más inepto, más haragán," Borges describes himself in his introduction to his own *Ficciones* (1941). Borges uses different narrators in his fictions (or quasi fictions), yet their voices –neither reasonable, inept, nor lazy– take over any personality we might discern behind Borges's learned, laconic voice –a mask which Borges himself in his parable "Borges y yo" feared would swallow everything near. This voice of Borges becomes the persona not only of narrator but also of author, and threatens to consume anything human that might hide behind it. There is a symbiosis between Borges and his narrators; however different they may be, they are all preoccupied with the same sort of stuff. With only slight exaggeration, one could say that Borges's narrator is Borges. Borges's Mr Hyde is a replica of himself.

Borges contorts his language into uniqueness ("la unánime noche"); and indulges in arcane rhetorical figures such as zeugma ("atronadora, ecuestre, semidormida, la policía. . ."). As did his high-baroque models, Borges almost distorts the language itself: "un sueño no soñado por alguien." Calders's diction could not be further apart. He goes for a punctiliously clear, almost plain, prose. If his vocabulary, in its quest for exactitude, includes many high-brow forms, his style compensates for such loftiness by turns of phrase of a most idiomatic and folsky kind so that the end result appears plain, even unwriterly or arid. Calders's flashiness has to do with asides and parentheses, often disclaimers by a narrator who seems as afraid of being misunderstood as of being sued for conformance with the crazy acts he recounts.

Calders is a Catalan writer as Borges is Argentine: by being who they are without indulging in the folkloric or picturesque. Calders relies more on local idiom than does Borges, but he also does so sparingly –for effect but without ostentation. An idiom such as "són faves comptades" ['it's a sure thing'] spurts out of the mouth of a character, and it feels like a defiance of Calders's usually staid tone. The way these authors use cultural reference also sets them apart. No pithy maxims by Spinoza or Hume, no references to the Sepher Yezirah or the music of Brahms in Calders. We know which writers Borges admired; only once did I find Calders mentioning the name of a writer (Conrad). Calders wears his erudition lightly.

2

My readings of Conrad are skimpy and thus I cannot go very far in a comparison between these two authors. Nevertheless they might be closer than they appear at first sight. Of course Conrad's tone and diction, so stately and solemn, stand an ocean apart from Calders's unpretentious joviality. And no one would think of Teodor Josef Konrad Korzeniowski as a comic writer. Yet, perhaps influenced by their respective exiles, both authors center their stories around men who have been marked by the puzzlement of their experience, who have been brought to a paralyzing realization by witnessing a kind of vacuum, a disappearance of some sort. Their protagonists are often men who, at the time of the narration, realize they have been brought to the limit by their own, unsuspected, behavior. They battle despair by telling their stories, a narrative that tangles them deeper into the absurd. These are characters who, once you get to the heart of their darkness, live with perfect logic a life that makes no sense.

Critics have sought to unveil one single influence on Calders, as if to be able to pronounce him "the Catalan Kafka," or "the Catalan Massimo Bontempelli," or "Cortázar." Yet no one, I suspect, would declare Calders "the Catalan Conrad." Still, Calders's "Cadascú del seu ofici" may well be read as a reduced, somewhat mutated version of Conrad's "The Secret Sharer."

3

I wonder what to choose, what to translate. The puzzlement of this choice draws my attention to the problem of the diversity of Calders's output since I feel my translations will be my chance to make a case for my author. Having read, and enjoyed, the stories in *Contes diversos*, published in the volume *Tots els contes* (1936-1967) and now in volume three of his *Obres completes*, I consider translating "L'espiral," a philosophical Borgesian-Kafkaesque, but ever Caldersian, fable. Right away I feel less sure of such choice; the fact that there is a published English translation of the piece, by Amanda Bath, gives me an easy out. Later I look at the tender stories that have a child as a protagonist, such as "Explorador celeste a la deriva" ['A Celestial Explorer Adrift'] or "La finestra" ['The Window']. Tenderness is a quality that sets Calders apart from comparable writers. Yet I am not sure I want to render one of those short stories either, because they represent only one side of Calders's output-whimsical, magical. What is missing? The social commentary of other pieces, a commentary which, to me, is the most engaging of Calders's traits. Often his stories present the

absurdity of everyday life. His main trick (in the good sense of the word) seems to be the introduction of a logical but absurd (or unusual, or simply not done) turn of events into a perfectly familiar situation: a gentleman announces his decision to go to the moon, for example, and the daily routine is thrown into chaos, perhaps even tragedy. (See "Demà a les tres de la matinada," translated as 'Tomorrow at Three in the Morning' by Amanda Bath.) Last night I read "El dia del judici" ['Judgment Day']. Even though it is not a family story (its characters are known by the names of their profession or role), still it could be considered the quintessential Calders story...

4

I realize that I have been looking for that ONE story to embody Calders, all of Calders. Of course I want my choice to be as strong a statement as my translations. My goal is to select and translate that one short story that will have all of the Caldersian elements. Surely a Utopian undertaking...

Although it may also be that Calders's writing itself leads one to believe that he can be so encapsulated. There is such a feeling of simplicity in it, that readers –a translator, a commentator– are tantalized into believing that we have captured the man. Critics seem stuck in describing the singularity, or the "oneness," of Calders. It seems we want an author, and we prefer to have one easy to label. Thus we make every effort to create our Author, even if it means ignoring his "plurality," his "otherness." Of course, sooner or later, Calders's richness comes through, and we awake to see that his simplicity was only a ruse. (A ruse for what? To make us consume more, perhaps. Writers without a stable persona have to create their audience with each publication.) Calders has changed; in my comments and translations I shall try to present his variety, his multiplicity. Calders's meta-irony: complexity masquerading as ordinariness.

5

I find myself looking forward to reading what the critics contributing to this volume will say about the work of Calders. I tend to read him, for all the training I've undergone in my years in the critical profession, as a writer essentially devoted to producing delightful pieces. (I know that I am letting Calders's complex rhetoric lure me into the illusion of pure pleasure, of non-resistance; but, for now, the illusion is real enough.) Being a writer, as far as I am reading Calders

today, is not essentially different from being a craftsman –a person who owes allegiance to his patrons, who wants to produce that well-turned piece, that stepping-stone to joy. He is far from those late-twentieth-century writers (write the name of your favorite postmodern bore here) who seem monomaniacally intent upon building a dutiful temple to their joyless personas.

So transparent and unpretentious is Calders's persona that I am even led to seeing no evolution in his work, no periods. Of course he produced his Mexican pieces –and a weighty view of Mexico they are– but I find no different Calderses in his complete works. In a way he is like a folk artist who has found his niche and reached the limits of his craft. But one whose imagination is never exhausted. One who never tires of finding the new and the surprising, even among his familiar tools.

6

Popping up here and there in Calders's stories are his comments on time. They amount to a well-developed and particular notion. The Bergsonian idea that experienced time –Bergson's *durée réelle*– bears little relation to the pulsation of clocks and the grids of calendars is expressed by Calders as the awesome clashing of two independent realities: the life of emotions and actions, and the surreptitious sneakiness of calendar time. This clashing constitutes a rebuttal of Bergson. Time in Calders seems to owe something to the tempos explored by comic strip artists. The reader is not surprised to learn that Calders started out as a cartoonist. One of his early cartoons illustrates a dialogue between a man falling alongside a high-rise apartment building and a tenant who happened to be looking out the window a few floors below. The observer, surprised by the vision of the falling man, asks: "Que veniu del cel?" The falling character replies: "Ca. Me n'hi vaig..." (Like all jokes, this is hard to translate since Catalan cel means both 'sky' [as meant by the observer] and 'heaven' [as implied by the falling guy]: "Are you from heaven?" "Nope. But I'm on my way.") The observing character operates from his short-sighted perceptual time, from his *durée réelle*, while the falling character is well aware, in Calders's fiction, of the all-engulfing, greater-scheme-of-things Time. The inevitable, but untold and unshown, street-level collision of human body with unforgiving asphalt is emblematic of Caldersian time: even in the face of a doomed and fatal crash, the characters continue to live in their myopic, present-laden time; the joke, like many a Calders story, straddles those two realities.

If there is a trick to Calders's stories –his shtick as a writer– I am sure it has to do with the blending of two related but antagonistic

perceptions of time. The time of action and the time of consequence are related to but deny or ignore each other. The best of Calders's stories present the clashes of opposing yet unimpeachable ways of accepting reality. And not only in his opposing conceptions of time. A person who encounters an alien, for example, is shown by that alien to be as full of inexplicable behavior as the most erratic of Martians. A convicted assassin can manage to question the logic of his judge and reveal the unreason at the heart of our justice system. The way we see things in our unquestioned everyday way forms the source of the outlandishly fantastic.

7

As a further example of Calders's notion of time, I pause on the following sentence from "Zero a Malthus": "El calendari s'esfulla i ens va colgant a tots sota una capa de vesc" [The calendar sheds its leaves and little by little smothers us all under a blanket of mistletoe]. Coming at the end of a farcical, bittersweet story with equal doses of humor and gloom, this untypically poetic expression achieves a moving impact that may well be lost in translation. Of course context is everything, but nothing in the story explains the use of *vesc*, mistletoe. Perhaps Calders chose the autumnal vegetable parasite to signify that calendar time, even in its opposition to perceived time, is just a natural phenomenon, an uninvited guest that not only stays on but ends up taking over.

Much of Calders, really, is about the inuring passage of time, most especially in this "F for Malthus," with its macabre and ridiculous ending. We all end up smothered in the parasitic passage of time, and what we call personality may well be the way each one of us ends up making amends with the all-engulfing blanket of mistletoe.

For further consideration of the importance of time in Calders we may turn to his early story "Cada u del seu ofici" ('To Each His Business,' in *Cròniques de la veritat oculta* of 1955; OC I, 232). Here a passenger aboard a ship meets the Captain who, rather than listen to this passenger's concerns, confides his own worries:

"Els homes tenim, en el món, un rellotge per cada un de nosaltres, però només un que ens vagi bé... Jo sóc un cas de vocació contrariada. Faig de capità de mar per herència, i una mica perquè em van enganyar dient-me que un vaixell és una de les coses que s'assemblen més a un rellotge. No ho creguéssiu pas." ['There is, in this world, a clock for each one of us... I am an example of someone who has erred his métier. I am a ship's captain because of my family background, and also up to a point because I was deceived into believing that a ship is one of the things that most resemble a clock. Don't you ever believe it.']

The story ends with the news that the ship, its captain, and its eight hundred passengers are wrecked on a sandbar. The Captain's obsessive meditation on clocks does nothing to set his timing straight and the crash becomes inevitable.

8

It was hasty ignorance that made me write above that there is no evolution in Calders's writing, or that he never fails to stick to his comic themes. His later work becomes grimmer and grimmer, as if some latent despair that his earlier stories left undeveloped finally found its maturity. The same mechanisms that allow him to find the comic and the absurd in everyday events now let him see (or make him see) the despair in the way time erodes human life towards death. In "Visita periòdica" (translated in this issue) the narrator and his roommate, Present, receive the visit of Past (who now looks older, feels more irritable, and is ever set in his grumpy ways) and try to make it to an appointment with the ever-elusive Future. They all engage in a disquieting dialogue at the end of which the only thing to remain stable is the dynamic of finiteness.

This story, or parable, or whatever, complements "Nosaltres dos" ['The Two of Us'] (also translated in this issue). Here the theme of time –relentlessly working its way against human will and winning the battle– finds its most concise expression. "Visita periòdica" prefigures the political allegory found in the piece about nose rings, "La societat consumida" ['Consumed society']. In this story the dictatorial decree that requires all citizens to wear a hitching ring on their noses is turned by many into an excuse for ostentation. Social satire slinks over to grim allegory, and perhaps to a demonstration that all humor has its tragic lining. These are all examples of Calders's later period. Reading his late stories we realize that even when laughing we cannot ignore his demonstrations of the all-engulfing decay that is the fate of human life.

9

The protagonists of Calders's short stories seem to belong to one or two types. Amanda Bath has coined the phrase "Caldersian Man" (her capitals) which might be something of an exaggeration. Nevertheless there seems to be lower-case Caldersian folks. These protagonists are married or engaged to be married men. Wives in Calders are given a lesser role, tend to be smarter than their husbands (as in the title story

of *Invasió subtil*), and contrast with them in being much more in touch with reality –"toquen de peus a terra," their feet are firmly on the ground. The male protagonists are shy and fairly ordinary men pushed to extremes by some event or person. In their push-comes-to-shove condition these protagonists reveal an inherent human contradiction. Calders puts it succinctly in one of his later stories:

> Durant unes hores, poques, quan em quedo sol em sento amo i senyor del meu destí. No he de donar comptes a ningú dels meus actes, encara que me'n mori de ganes.
>
> [For a few hours, when I am left alone at home, I feel lord and master of my own destiny. I must account to no one for my acts, even though I am dying to do so.] ("Regal d'aniversari" ['Anniversary Present'])

Yes, this is Calders's version of common human lunacy: here I am, free at last, and defiantly so, even though craving bondage as always. The question posed by those characters' actions or thoughts appears to be: Do I want freedom or would I rather be content with its illusion? (Only, don't tell anyone.) The theme is recurrent, as Calders's characters in their behavior are more deceitful to themselves than to others. Their stories show the rich paradox of human life: we crave what we cannot have, and should we attain it, we then will crave that craving. Life is contradiction. We laugh at the delusions of others, but eventually we realize that we've been looking in a mirror.

10

Reading Calders's short fiction reminds me of the way I used to read when I was a teenager. I would rush home from the streetcar stop with gleeful anticipation and immerse myself into whatever yarn I was reading –for the third or fifth time. That was not so much the pleasure of the text as the pleasure of reading, the joy of taking a vacation from my own pesky consciousness, and diving into the lives of the narrative's characters. It was important to read a novel more than once, in the same manner that my children today watch a video of a movie several times over. There was, there is, of course, the assurance that those characters have not gone away, that they still exist and profess their schematic but steadfast friendship to us. Also, with each rereading the narrated events became more and more real, more like one's own memory.

Despite the great variety of plot and situation, there are enough common traits in Calders's stories to make them part of the same whole. I have mentioned the repeated typographies of most protagonists: the henpecked, paranoid husband, the the-devil-take-

the-hindmost loony who wants to pedal to the moon or dive into the fourth dimension, the ever-present neighbor who can at once appear as the vigilant eye of societal control or as one more doorway into the absurd. In a way Calders's characters are like characters in the comics which exist at once in the instant time of the daily vignette and in the recurrent time of the syndicated strip. They exist today, each day, gloriously new, fresh as a child's first smile; and they are also as old as the hills and as crotchety as the most predictable of curmudgeons. Calders's protagonists create the same effect. The osmosis between character, type, and situation is achieved in every story, and the reader can flow into these pages freely and smoothly, much like a teenager who can pick up the book at half paragraph and reenter that fiction as his or her own. And can do so anywhere: in a crowded streetcar, in line in the lobby of a cinema, while being scolded by a parent, or while some tired teacher proceeds with a dull explanation.

II

In my translations I have tried to capture Calders's preferred level of language. His narrators and his characters share an urbane, careful but unpretentious diction. They speak like folks who continue to wear their ties or dress shoes at home; this prose may loosen the knot but it never completely relaxes into the casual. Some details of the action confirm the tone: whenever leaving home (which is normally an apartment in Barcelona), even just to stroll to the corner to get the newspaper, characters put on a jacket. Salutations are polite, excuses offered frequently. The choice form of address is *vostè*. Catalan has three forms of address: the informal *tu*, the traditional *vós* (mostly associated with country and somewhat old-fashioned), and the business-like *vostè*. Calders's is a middle-class, socially (though not politically) conservative world where reserve can easily become timidity or, conversely, where people may erupt from the straightjacket of manners and convention to eccentricity or even crime: a good number of Calders's characters are polite, if accidental, murderers.

Yet the overall effect is one of ease. When translating his prose I was constantly afraid of making it sound too stiff and thus tried to emphasize the familiar tone over the formal. The fact that the stories are about just plain folk, that their protagonists may be anyone you'd run into downtown during regular hours constitutes one of their main resources: the surprising always springing out of the ordinary.

12

If this were a regular academic piece it would be in the form of a rhetorical construct, with a central thesis to be defended, and it would lead naturally to some sort of closure. This being a journal, I can only interrupt it.

I'll let go by quoting a sentence that seems to me quintessentially Caldersian. In the alluring and disturbing story "La ratlla i el desig" ['Desire and the Line'] first published in *Cròniques de la veritat oculta* of 1955), the narrator says: "L'ambició per a les coses d'aquesta terra s'esmorteïa i, en el seu lloc, una flama quieta mantenia quimeres que no treien la son ni la gana." [Ambition for things of this world was on the wane, replaced by a gentle flame that fired the kind of chimeras that did not prevent one from eating or sleeping regularly.]

In meaning, and in syntax, we have here a self-defeating sentence not unlike many of Calders's protagonists: timid romantics that set their sights high only to be eaten up by their own reluctantly-accepted mediocrity. The key word is 'quimeres,' a word evoking at once the quixotic and the arcane. But as a concept it is neutralized by the ensuing adjectival phrase that turns it into a paradox: the flame of freeze-dried aspirations. There must be a message of some sort behind these mental and linguistic contortions: One must live of the imagination, and, yes, we all have our dreams –let us call them chimeras. But at the same time there is nothing like the peace of regular eating and sleeping habits.

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