

Caterina Albert: Translating Stories, a Dramatic Monologue, and a Novel

*Kathleen McNerney
West Virginia University*

My analysis of translations into English of the work of Caterina Albert (Víctor Català; 1869-1966) has two distinct parts: first, an explanation of my own versions of short stories and a dramatic monologue, and then a scrutiny of David Rosenthal's 1992 rendition of the 1905 novel, *Solitud*, her only work in English to date..

Caterina Albert first came to my attention years ago, when I went to Spain as a graduate student to study the poetry of Ausias March, but it would be years before I could devote the time to her that her complexity requires, and more years before I would have the chance to travel to l'Escala, near Girona, where she was born, to work on translating some of her narrations. I have tried to make these wide-ranging stories sound normal in American English without losing their rich linguistic variety, powerful expression, attention to detail, and great lyricism. In spite of the immense divide between rural and industrial Catalonia of a century ago and our urban, postmodern, globalized time and space, Albert's close look at human nature gives universality to these works, helping in the translator's task. In her prologues and other essays, she shows herself to be a sophisticated theorist, but one can almost hear a weariness in her voice as she says in the "Pòrtic" to *Caires vius* (1907, *Rough Edges*): "tenim per millor obrar que teoritzar, anc que l'acció resulti defectuosa i la teoria sembli perfecta, perquè teoritzar en desmesia és entrar amb paranys i obstacles arbitraris la lliure empenta de l'acció" (597; we prefer to work than to theorize, even though the action might result defective while the theory seems perfect, for too much theory creates traps and hindrances to the free impulse of action).¹ Although she is referring to literature, I would like to apply her words to translation as well. My methodology is really quite simple: after a close reading of the text, I look up words, and start to type. I usually follow the structure of the original, sometimes breaking up exceedingly long sentences or paragraphs and avoiding repetitions that would be cumbersome in English. Then I let it rest and do something else, coming back at it without looking at the Catalan at first, and reading aloud. After incorporating the useful suggestions, giving it another rest, and then another read, it is ready for professional evaluation and input from a prospective publisher.

As an anthologist, I chose stories that I felt were the strongest, while at the same time striving for variety; Caterina Albert lived a long life and participated in most of the literary styles of her day, and without entering into a long polemic about the "ismes" that formed the artistic fashion of a century, I wanted to show the great range and richness of styles and themes that form her work. For that reason, I started with one of her earliest works, "La infanticida: Monòleg dramàtic en vers" (*Infanticide: A Dramatic Monologue [in verse]*), and I ended with stories from her latest collections.

"Infanticide" won a prize in the "Jocs florals" (Floral Games) of 1898 and a scandal ensued when it was learned that the writer of this brutal rural tale was a young woman of a certain status. It is one of two works included here composed of hendecasyllables. Since the dramatic monologue uses line separations, I tried to stay within those parameters as much as possible to retain a certain poetic rhythm. Another difficulty in this piece and most of the others is the lack or little use of proper names:

Nela calls Reiner “l’altre,” which appropriately conjures up the differences between her lover and the other fellows. He is high-class, urban, and sophisticated, but I ended up using his name, Reiner, most of the time since “the other” made it seem as though Nela had various lovers. I used that expression only once, alternating between “he” and “my love” when the context was clear. The other possible suitors, whom Nela finds so uncouth by comparison, present problems as well; for example, the designation of “hereus,” technically “heirs” in English, makes them sound like Rockefellers, but it simply means they will inherit the family farm, so I called them “landholders.” Different customs often call for alterations in translations, and in this dialogue within the monologue, I have simplified Ciset’s reference to “romanços,” since, with a few rural exceptions, we don’t make up ballads about local happenings. Ciset is ready to take his leave, saying “abans de gaire n’hem de veure una que anirà als romanços” (1586; they’ll soon be singing about it). Translator David Rosenthal’s work has many more examples of variations in customs, set phrases, and especially poetic renderings, and I will return to these themes when I discuss his translation.

The story written in hendecasyllables is “L’enveja,” (The Craving), from *Drames rurals* (1902, Rural Dramas), but here I chose clarity instead of trying to capture the poetry, which comes across in other ways, for example, the repetition of epithets for the protagonists: she is “una deessa camperola” (a great goddess of the countryside) who covers her deity’s head with “una cistella que no semblava d’esquerdalls de canya, sinó de llenques d’or entreteixides,” (552; a basket that seemed made not of bits of straw but strands of woven gold) and he is “un bon noi de terra cuita,” (523; a goodly fellow from solid earth): these expressions function much as a refrain would in a poem. Another epithet in the story is used by the townspeople to refer to the childless protagonist, but here, “forra” lends itself perfectly to the double entendre in English, “Barrenness.” In “L’empelt” (The Graft), from the same collection, the characters are named by place within the family: “l’avi”, “el noi”, and “el petit” the grandpa, the kid, and the little one, even though all are adults. While the first two are acceptable in English, “little one” had to be changed to “younger brother” or sometimes “the intruder” when he was engaged in that activity. This story also includes a repeated line that lends it a certain lyricism as well as reinforcing the naturalistic theme: the old man begs his older son to take pity on the younger one, for “no és pas el responsable de la deshonra de la casa.” (512 / 516; he is not responsible for the family’s misfortune). This memory keeps the “kid” from killing his younger brother when he has both excuse and opportunity.

I chose two stories from *Omrívols* (1904; Shadows), but “Conformitat” has religious overtones about the acceptance of death which might indicate “Resignation” as a title. The protagonist is designated throughout as “el avi, el viudo” (the grandfather, the widower), easily translatable, but when the defunct is called “la dona” (561; the woman or wife), I changed it to “his wife” to avoid the impersonal expression. “Animes mudes” is alliterative as it is in English as “Silent Souls,” and this will probably be the title of the collection. This story of star-crossed lovers but also of the passage of time begins with “l’hereu” and “la pubilla” and ends by changing the landholder to “l’avi Però” but keeping “pubilla Xuriguera.” I shortened the nickname to “Xuric” in her case, avoiding for the moment the problem of pubilla, a designation I will explain more fully in a story in which it matters more, “La pua de rampí.”

Caires vius includes two stories of great contrast in tone and style as well as specific vocabulary problems. In “Carnestoltes” (Carnival), the Marquesa d’Artigues wears a “pelegrina d’astracan” (697), and we have the same cloth with the same name, “astrakhan,” but that is too exotic for most of us, whereas a “woolen shawl” works perfectly for character and context. In the same story, “l’unció amorosa” (701) serves better as a “balm” than a “lotion,” since it has a mystical, calming effect on the maid. “Giselda” is recounted as a fairy tale, using formulaic, stylized, repetitive language which had to be rendered into English in a similar vein. From “El noble i poderós Virrei” to “Pal de la forca” (715; the most high and powerful lord Viceroy / the hanging post), the titles needed to be high-sounding officially, and terrifying in general usage. Fortunately, fairy tales have common characteristics across languages and “damsel in distress” works perfectly for our Giselda, at least until she turns the tables on the not so noble Viceroy. “El secretet rosa” (The Rose-colored Secret), published in *La illustració catalana* in 1910 and not reedited until Albert’s *Obres completes*, is extremely stylized as well, giving force to the visual perception of this painterly tale, more a vignette than a narration.

Several other stories have similar problems with names and titles: “La pua de rampí” (The Pitchfork Prong, from *Contrallum* [1930; Backlighting]) presented challenges beginning with the title itself. A “rampí” is a specialized sort of rake, but that conjures up an instrument, to English-speakers, that is incapable of its role in the story; a pitchfork is more adequate and familiar to all. The use of proper names or those indicating profession or place in the family structure created difficulties as well, for example, the tendency in rural Catalonia to call people by their relation to each other instead of given names would be confusing and awkward in English. The same story never names its protagonist, instead consistently referring to her as “Pubilla.” Literally the word means “heiress,” but, as in “L’infanticida,” that evokes connotations in English that misrepresent the rural reality: while the young woman stands to inherit the family farm, she is not wealthy. Rather than baptize her as Maria, Núria, or some other name, I ended up using “Pubilla” as her first name (and this is one of the few times I permitted myself the use of an explanatory footnote, which in general I think should be avoided in literary translations). Other examples of troublesome words include jobs as specific as “cercoladores,” which, rendered as “women cleaning the base of the grape plants” might seem cumbersome, but saves the image of these hunched-over workers greeted by Pubilla on her long walk.

On a similar note about the difficulty of what to call people, while Beleta of “La jove: tot pastant” (Kneadings of a Daughter-in-law, from *Vida molta* (1950, Much Life) has a name, she is often called simply “la jove.” Generally, this means “the young one,” but here it specifically means daughter-in-law. Her in-laws do not have names, and are called “el sogre,” “la sogra,” and “la cunyada,” but so much repetition of the in-law tag is awkward, so I alternated between those forms and “the old lady,” “the old man,” and “the youngest sister.” Other examples of troublesome words include the wrought-iron bars in the form of lizards; I could not find anything as poetic as “llangardaix de ferro” (1017) to describe the artistic window bars from “La jove,” even though I had some in the lovely modernist house where I was staying in L’Escala. Finally, set phrases and dialogues are always especially tricky and must sound natural, and it is my hope that the Catalan peasants do not sound too much like a professor of Spanish literature from West Virginia University. I will mention one little couplet repeated by the mother-in-law in “La jove:”

while kneading bread she repeats “Padrina, padrina, vós que passeu la farina, traieu-me de dins del sac, catric, catrac” (1005). Since “sack” is the same in English and the final words have no meaning, I could keep the little rhyme: “let me out of the sack, catric, catrac.” “Pas de comèdia” (Parts in a Play) presented technical difficulties, since the story revolves around a woman using brains instead of brawn to reverse roles in her home. In a story reminiscent of Emilia Pardo Bazán’s biting “Feminista,” an abused woman manipulates heavy sacks of grain that her husband cannot budge by creating a complicated system of leverage to accomplish the task.² Thereafter she “wears the pants,” so to speak, but the reader has to comprehend the job at hand for the power shift in the story to make sense.

David Rosenthal was an accomplished poet, and his rendition of *Solitud* contains many examples of lyricism. One of the most interesting characters in the novel is the elderly shepherd Gaietà, whose speech is rich in idiomatic expressions and especially in the “rondalles” that he tells. Rosenthal alternates between “tales,” “stories,” and “legends” to translate this word as well as its synonyms, “faules” and “recontes.” Chapter six of the novel includes a concentration of them, rendered beautifully by the translator who maintains both content and form (rhyming couplets of 8 syllables, aa, bb, cc, dd, ee):

Comaretes les comaretes,
 tireu en orri les mitgetes,
 prengueu la pinta d’adamant,
 l’espill de lluna foguejant,
 el coiaret d’ui de serpent
 que fa encegar tota la gent,
 el vestit verd de flor d’alguer
 brodat d’escates de roger,
 i les xinelles de setí,
 que els homes tornen cap aquí! (142)*

English translation:

Oh fairy sisters on this wondrous day,
 Throw your foolish knitting away!
 Take up your diamond combs of old,
 Your moon-mirrors of flaming gold,
 And your necklaces of serpent-eyes
 That provoke the blindman’s cries.
 Lily-robos will now be worn
 That you with salmon-scales adorn,
 And your satin slippers you must don,
 For men will come anon! (88)

Rosenthal also chooses well for names used in this context: “Dawnflower” is perfect for “Floralba,” for example; the giant “Veutacrusques” (137) becomes “Crunchnoggin” (84). A possible ideological change occurs when the shepherd says of women in general that “són qualche micota fluixes de llengua i gasten molta escopinaya a l’en va” (133); Rosenthal restricts this gabby stereotype to the fairies of the legends.

Solitud presents a number of the kinds of difficulties I encountered in the stories and monologue. There are examples according to certain categories that I have defined and Rosenthal solves in different ways. Socio-cultural differences include religious expressions and descriptions of food: religious usage in the Romance languages often

finds a counterpart in English, but since religion is not as pervasive in our culture as in the Latin-based groups, an equivalent in English can sound exaggerated or affected, distorting the tone and distracting the reader. In Catalan, the usage is so formulaic that the speaker / listener would not even think of religion upon hearing “A Maria” or “Déu vos guard,” but Rosenthal uses the matching formula with “Anyone home?” a simple “Hello,” or he suppresses it altogether. Sometimes the pious flavor can stand but without reference to the local saints, meaningless elsewhere: “Puix que de Déu coneguereu / tan altes perfeccions, / donau-nos salut i vida / gloriós Màrtir Sant Ponç” (160) becomes “Since God accorded you / Such blessings and wealth, / Give us, oh glorious martyr, / Life and good health” (105). Or the translator may slightly change the association: when the shepherd speaks of a “minyona bonica com una Mare de Déu” (136), Rosenthal has him say “a girl as pretty as the Holy Virgin” (83). Rosenthal gets it right, as well, when in one of the “rondalles,” the shepherd says that a bird is “doble de l’àliga de l’Evangalista” (207); in English, since we do not have the Evangelistic symbols in our heads, it becomes “the biggest eagle you ever saw” (144). The description of the chapel in Chapter 4 and the Festival of Roses in Chapters 8 and 9 contain many other examples of religious expressions. A number of cultural references have to do with food: “aïoli” stays the same but is italicized; “resolis” becomes “mead” (84), not because the drink is similar, but because it appears in a “rondalla,” suggesting a medieval ambient. “Ensaïmades” become “cinnamon buns,” not exactly the same flavor, but similar circumstances. “Cargolada” is comprehensible as “snail picnic” (70), even though such outings not common here. The shepherd compares a mountain delicacy to “una pubilla casadora” (230); Rosenthal captures the comparison as “a sixteen-year-old girl” (163).

Most examples of onomatopoeia are animal sounds: “aucell de bardissa” (85) is a predictable “tweet-tweet” (38), or the very name of “puput” (133) suggests its sound, “hoopoe” (81) in English. The “bruel” (84) says “moo” (38) like our cows, and the cricket’s “ric” (290) is “chirrup” (212) for an English-speaker. Evildoers become associated with animals by their sounds as well: in a “rondalla,” the Lord of Llisquets cannot “tornar el bleix” (204); in English he is “huffing and puffing” (142). Most characteristic is the antagonist Anima, whose unwelcome greeting is “hu hu hu,” and Rosenthal simply phoneticizes it for us as “hoo, hoo, hoo.”

Caterina Albert uses fewer Castilianisms than many Catalan writers, but some do appear, often from the mouths of policemen or officials. When the festival turns into a riot, Rosenthal captures this sociopolitical reality by having the police say “brutos!”; easily understood, followed by “the sergeant cried again in Castilian” (112). The guard goes on: “Fuera!...o va a haber fandango!” but the color is lost with “Go to hell!...or there’s going to be trouble!” (113). The festivities include a few off-color jingles, one in Castilian with an anticlerical flavor when a priest appears: “Un fraile y una monja / dormían juntos” (162): “A friar and a nun / who slept together” (107) without comment by the translator. Little Baldiret complains that, while he has no problem learning the multiplication tables, he must do so in Castilian. “Serenó” is “policeman,” which is just as well since that office no longer exists in current Spanish life. Matias pronounces a “bueno” with a sense of resignation, as do even the most purist among Catalan speakers; “Well, good” (131) works in the context. The few Castilianisms within the narration have little effect, here, on the work of the translator.

Nicknames, titles, place names and insults present special considerations. We have seen a tendency in the stories to not use proper names very much, which can cause confusion or tedium in English. Nor do we call people by their professions, functions, or descriptions. Albert prefers “pastor” to the shepherd’s given name, Gaietà, and she regularly uses “ermitana,” “ermità” and “jove” (this last, as we have seen, presents additional difficulties), where Rosenthal calls them Mila, Matias, and Marieta. The shepherd has a series of negative epithets for Matias: he is “Un llocot, un mauló” (247) which become “A brood hen, a loafer (176), who would have “deixat menjar el cul per les arnes;” Rosenthal keeps the moths but loses the body part they would have eaten. In his usual colorful language, the shepherd also has a few choice names for Anima: he is “coqui,” (180); “mala besti(a),” (247, 255), “bordai,” (130). Rosenthal uses “bastard” for all these variations (121, 176, 183, 77) but when the shepherd calls his enemy “mala espurna” (130), the translator uses the less strong “rascal” (77), and “consagrat” (179) and “cuca borda” (191) remain untranslated. Perhaps the rich vocabulary in Catalan makes the English counterpart seem colorless: when Mila says “mala baba” (235), the translation is simply “nasty” (167). Other nicknames are translated literally, even though we do not use them much in English. The dog’s name, “Mussol,” (Owl) is kept in Catalan. Due to the beauty of the landscape and descriptive quality of place names, Rosenthal often translates literally, which gives the reader a sense of the magnificent region. A few examples will suffice: “Torrent de Mala-Sang...Gorga de les tres Pintetes...Sitges de Bellsolera...Nina Blava” (132-33) become “Badblood Creek, Three Comb Gorge, Flatrock Caves, Nina” (but not blue; 80). A few place names appear in Catalan, but two that are translated, not literally, are interesting: “Jueu del Pom-Xiscleny” (220), and “Salt del Crestat (192) are called “Jew on Windwhistle Heights” (156) and “Wild Goat Falls” (132).

Caterina Albert’s great interest in sayings and set phrases is well-known, and her nephew Lluís Albert used her notes to publish a collection, *Mil Adagis*. Many appear in her work, along with euphemisms and colloquialisms. Some examples of popular wisdom cross borders and have equivalents, if not exact translations, in other languages, such as “val més tenir que penedir” (184); “a bird in the hand” [is worth two in the bush] (125). Fairy stories have their formulas as well: “vet aquí que per temps” (132) is “once upon a time” (79); “follia enartadora (137, 139) is “wicked witch” (84, 85). Saddened and surprised by the rejection she receives at the farmhouse, Mila wonders “quin ca els aborda” (255), more prosaic in English as “what was bothering them?” (183). The euphemism “*La cosa aquella*” (218) with reference to sex, is translated simply as “it.” (154) “Gatejar” appears on various occasions, and means “making fools of themselves” (109) at the festival; “drunk” (109), and “laughed and made merry” (127). “Follejar” (133) is the favorite activity of the littlest fairy, so “avespada:” the “naughty” one who likes to “fool around” (80).

In a few cases, the English version alters the carefully constructed symbolic system in the novel. Mila sees her husband not just as a “bèstia,” but a “bèstia anormal...una bèstia sense zel” (147), which suggests that Matias is asexual or perhaps homosexual, possibilities that occur elsewhere in the work. Rosenthal says that he “was never in a rut,” (93), an expression that can refer to an animal in heat, but is more commonly used to mean routine, so it loses its strength compared to the original. Along the same lines, San Ponç’s “ventràs / ventre de dona grossa” (78, 290) can certainly be a

fat lady's belly, but with so many references to maternity, or lack of it, throughout the novel, it seems to me that a "pregnant woman's belly" fits the context better. Mila describes Matias's cap as a "solideu de capellà" (59), and the literal translation as a "priest's calotte" (16) is correct, but even sophisticated readers would have to look that one up: perhaps just "priest's cap" would be better. Readers might conjure up a Bishop's red cap, but this example is more complicated than it seems. "Skullcap" would be right, but here, that might suggest Jews, which would lose yet another suggestion that Matias is priestlike at least in his celibacy.

Toward the end of the novel, after the rape, Mila calms herself down as best she can, and "s'hi trobà bé" (286) in the great silence. Given the circumstances, I cannot accept Rosenthal's "happily." (209) Nor does "botó de foc" (288, 289) work as "knotted stomach, entrails" (210, 211); I think I would use "burning knot" here, and I certainly wouldn't translate "penetrar" (294) as "impress" (215). Finally, I find that the crescendo of Mila's desperation is lost, so to speak, in translation. When she returns from the snail picnic, she repeats the words that describe her situation, between "un negat i un vell!" (252). Rosenthal concentrates on Mila's disappointment on learning the shepherd's age and simply says "An old man with one foot in the grave!" (180), losing the force of Mila's dilemma between the young but useless husband and the old man. Rosenthal left out many repetitive phrases throughout the novel, and rightly so, I think, for the most part. But in the last chapter those extra words could have been left in, contributing, as they do in the original, to the magnificent rhythm of the precipitous downhill closing of this wonderful novel. In general, though, I do think this is a fine translation of a splendid novel.

Works Cited

- Català, Víctor (Caterina Albert). *Mil adagis*. Ed. Lluís Albert. L'Escala: L'Ajuntament, 2000.
- . *Obres completes*. Barcelona: Selecta, 1972.
- . *Solitud*. Ed. Isidor Cònsul. Barcelona: Magrana, 1996 [1998].
- . *Solitud*. Ed. Núria Nardi. Barcelona: 62, 1990.
- . *Solitude*. Trans. David Rosenthal. London: Readers International, 1992.
- Pardo Bazán, Emilia. "Feminista." In *El encaje roto y otros cuentos*. 110-117. Ed. and intro. Joyce Tolliver. New York: MLA, 1996.

¹ I have used *Obres completes* for all quotations from stories and the monologue; my translations.

² This fine story by Pardo Bazán is just one of several comparisons to be made between the two contemporary women writers. Both wrote striking tales of rural life in their regions (Galicia in the case of Pardo Bazán), both were virtually autodidactic and erudite. As well, both portray the difficulties of women's lives in their narrations.