

The Translator

Cristovão Tezza

1

Beatriz returned to her desk with a damp towel twisted around her head like a towering turban —I'm late— and immediately resumed her work on the translation, *a philosophical thought that, as the novice heir of French structuralism and the descendant of the School of Frankfurt, turned pessimism into its ontology; the shadow of a universal conspiracy*, that preoccupation with not wasting time, life is short and all of life is a dream, she remembered the line as she waited for her bread to warm up in the toaster-oven, *a residue of the Middle Ages that persists as an explanation for the visible world —espoused here by the likes of Foucou Foucault, Bur Bourdieu—* I'm always misspelling those names, I get the letters wrong, I wonder whether it's a symptom of —*and their followers— became a type of metaphysics, an unsolvable jigsaw puzzle, a resentful cul-de-sac* [blind alley, dead end?] *whose only purpose is to enhance the power of the contemporary magus, the transcendental wise man with a pointed finger, rather than to elucidate what is real. The triumphant amoral irrationalism, taking refuge in varying degrees of prestige, in a spectacular return to* —the sentence is too long, I need to put in a full stop, Beatriz re-read, she checked against the original, in the baroque, elaborate and convoluted Spanish by the Catalan author Felip T. Xaveste, that's how it is, his sentences are endless, *a brilliant Catalanian* is how he was described by Chaves, the publisher from São Paulo, first on the phone and then in person, at the Figueira restaurant (though not really from São Paulo, as Beatriz was able to confirm on Wikipedia, actually born in Minas Gerais, but with the accent of a Paulistano, which meant that he moved to the city in his youth): I'll need the translation by next month, before the World Cup, because once it starts no one will even bother to read the information leaflet for their medicines and we'll have to put up with forty days of listening not to the brilliant Catalanian Felip, but to the great Brazilian philosopher Felipão, or Big Phil, and he laughed with all his teeth, *Did you notice the son of a bitch's laugh?*, Donetti had asked her when

they last met in Curitiba, where he had rushed to see her following her own trip to São Paulo; after three tense days in Curitiba, as they had often been lately, Beatriz had driven him to the airport almost under duress, *I have to work!* Did you hear what he said about my book, *It's very good, but it won't sell, the publisher is perilously close to being in the red, people are only reading on Facebook.* I don't trust him, Donetti added –I generally hate publishers, they always screw me over, and he laughed at himself, that old self-indulgent trick. *It's just that I'm becoming a bad person,* she would confide to Bernadete. *Impatient.* Beatriz, did you see the face that Chaves pulled when I showed up at the restaurant? That look of slightly annoyed surprise, as if thinking *I've been ambushed,* I think he wanted to hire only the translator as part of the package and now this loser boyfriend comes along, an also-ran writer at the fag end of his career, that's what he must have thought. I was left there just watching, nodding like a simpleton while you looked at each other with a glint in your eyes. The way he leaned his head forward, his mouth open and his slobbering jaw dropping so low it almost touched the steak that bled on his plate. For goodness' sake, Paulo Donetti, when will you grow up? Where did that idiocy come from? He knows you and I are together, he found me through you, it was you who gave him my name, here in São Paulo I stay with you, where did you get that... that... have you lost your mind?

—What do you think?— the publisher was asking. —Will Brazil win the Cup?— and then he would go back to the translation job, suggesting there might be much more work in store, *Donetti tells me you're very skilled,* and Beatriz (who smiled and almost added *maybe he meant it in a different way,* but it was best not to joke about such things) immediately accepted the job, the fee was surprisingly good for an inexperienced translator, 32 *reais* per page, a high profile author to put into her CV, and published under a respectable imprint. And then, that strange jealousy attack out of the blue, disguised as political conscience, That guy is right-wing, Beatriz, you'll disgrace yourself at the University, nobody reads Xaveste in Brazil, but she could not understand, have you gone mad? Why did you even give him my name? And besides, no one gets any work commissioned during the World Cup, and I'm not a permanently employed government official yet, the fate of

all Brazilian men and women of letters —I have to work like a camel, but now time was pressing and the text —*the School of Frankfurt that, even after the terror of a Europe torn apart by Nazism's devastating eruption, was unable to disengage from its own Jacobin neo-illuminist roots, and, though rescued by the reviled capitalism upon its arrival in the new world, was still prepared to berate jazz, freedom, money, America's capacity for vulgarisation, the transforming power of commerce, all of its members nostalgic aristocrats pining [yearning??] for some melancholy hell, for the Baudelairean wanderings of a pessimistic marquis whose only responsibility is my own desire* —is *my* the right word here? She turned back two pages. Revising will be harder than translating this, and Beatriz sighed, tired in anticipation and still only the morning, and she calculated how much remained to be done, over eighty pages of small print, difficult to keep the hardback open to the right page, I should have photocopied it, like Paulo suggested, there is no original pdf file. Stop penny-pinching, he had said. He spends his life correcting me, if only she could share this with someone, maybe some *complaints tribunal*, and Beatriz looked up at the ceiling, she found the idea funny, she could offer a good deposition about their dysfunctional relationship, he's always finding fault with everything, penny-pinching *curitibana*, he once called me jokingly, and I put up with it, isn't there a libel or anti-defamation law, why do I even answer his calls any more? My life is barren, all I ever do is offer private tuition, proof-read and dream of the day when Paulo Donetti—

—The bread!

She ran to the kitchen and opened the toaster oven's door — yesterday's bread was now done to a crisp. Fine, add some butter and it's not too bad —and she almost burned her fingers trying to pull out the steel tray. As she had run over, she had formed in her mind a vague image of an envelope being slipped under the living room door, she had heard a noise of something scraping against the wooden parquet floor, surely the concierge delivering mail —the usual bills. But so early? She looked up at the clock on the kitchen wall, it was stopped at twelve past four in the morning, all that *Made in China* crap, changing the battery makes no difference. She pressed a button on the coffee maker and waited for the cup to fill. She sat at the small

kitchen table, on top of which the microwave oven display offered a more or less correct time: 7:12 am. She liked the sliver of light cutting across the white tiles, and she imagined some animation film, the lit-up geometry of a ray of light making its way through space, a luminous blade cutting through emptiness for a million years and at this precise moment striking the windows in Curitiba until it lands there, uncertain in front of her, a brief flicker –and then it's gone. An early shower always makes me feel better, I need to get back to the gym, but the fees —and perhaps that is why she never really adapted to Paulo Donetti, that dispirited indolence, that metaphysical grumble; as Felipe Xaveste might have written, in Spanish, *there is a philosophical conspiracy and its objective is to paralyse freedom of thought, as if it were a perpetual expression of control, subjugation and repression*, what a lovely language Spanish is, *as if it were a perpetual expression*, Donetti lazing in bed until eleven o'clock, the decadent mulatto marquis sauntering around the world like a *flâneur*, although it did have its advantages, as I explained to Bernadete, not that he behaves like a marquis, but those mornings in bed —Beatriz felt an uncomfortable twinge of longing for her indocile friend, frankly hostile, her beloved enemy, skin on skin, a passing memory that, if only for a fleeting moment, made her feel well. Sex in the morning. The laziness draining away, her body stretched out, eyes shut tight come come come. *As if we were solely and perpetually the puppets of capital and its ghosts, horrendous of course. Of course. And yet.* Untranslatable expressions. A kiss on the mouth, slow – it's enough to make peace, she once said to him. Don't say a word. Just kiss me. Let me objectify you, I joked, and he pretended to be offended. The green striations in your eyes, and the dark skin, and I so pale, with eyes as black as the wings of a blackbird. But my eyes are not as black as the wings of a blackbird. Donetti was never a realist writer, despite his own opinion of himself. He knows in advance what he wants to see, so that what he sees in the end is his own invention, not what is actually in front of him. He asks me to comment on what he writes and immediately hates it as soon as I say as much as the first word, just from the tone of my voice, the adversarial shadow always lurking. *You need a break*, I said. You are in the middle of a total crisis –maybe I'll tell him that. He thinks Dilma Rousseff's government is *a total cesspool* and spends time decrying the *oafs* in opposition, *the worst right-wing*

politicians in the West; depending on how much wine he's had, the politics of racial quotas are both a return to some form of inverted Nazism, why must I tell them whether I'm black or white, so the State can label me, and, two glasses later, the only means to break the racial inertia of the most bigoted, racist, violent and intolerant country in the world. Only capitalism, in its healthy political context, has the power to create sustainable wealth, and the hatred felt towards it by most of contemporary thought is less dictated by economic rationale than by the millenarian Christian ideal advocating the suppression of inequality, not only in what is on every person's plate but, above all, inequality in the human soul. The contradiction that —

Opening fragment of *The Translator*, by Cristovão Tezza

Editora Record, September 2010

(Translated by Ángel Gurría-Quintana)