PODCAST – “LA BIBLIOTECA”
Hispanic Division, Library of Congress

An exploration of the Library’s collections that focus on the cultures of Spain, Portugal, Latin America, and the Hispanic community in the US.

SEASON 1/Episode 5
Listening to Raúl Zurita

Introduction

Catalina Gómez: ¡Hola! and welcome to “La biblioteca” the podcast series from the Hispanic Division at the Library of Congress. I am Catalina Gómez, a reference librarian at the Hispanic Reading Room.

Talia Guzmán-González: I am Talía Guzmán González, also reference librarian in the Hispanic Reading Room. ¡Hola, Catalina!

CG: ¡Hola, Talía! It’s great to be back here to talk about Latin American Literature and to discuss some highlights of our Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape. Just in case some listeners today are new to our podcast, in this season we’re diving deep into some of the authors and poets that have recorded for this historic audio archive which the Library of Congress begun in 1943 in which contains close to 800 audio recordings of Luso-Hispanic poets and prose writers reading from their works.

TGG: Today’s episode is about the Chilean poet Raúl Zurita. Working at the Library we are fortunate to meet some of these great living legends, and Raúl Zurita was one of them. He came to the Library in February 2016 and read some of his poems with translator Anna Deeny, reading her translations. Zurita is without a doubt one of the most important 20th century Latin American poets. He was born in Santiago, Chile in 1950, and he’s the author of more than 20 books of poetry including *Purgatorio* from 1979, *Anteparaíso* from 1982, and *Las cuidades de agua* from 2007. His poetry speaks about the injustices and sufferings during Chile’s military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, about community, and also about hope. He’s the winner of numerous prizes, among them the National Prize of Literature in Chile, and the Premio Pablo Neruda. He recorded for the Archive of Hispanic Literature on Tape in 1985.

CG: And now we will listen to an interview that we did with Anna Deeny some weeks ago. Anna Deeny teaches for the Center for Latin American Studies at Georgetown University. She’s a literary critic and a translator who received her doctoral degree from the University of California, Berkley. Her translations of Raúl Zurita’s work include *Purgatory*, *Dreams for Kurosawa*, and *Sky Below*. Other authors translated by Deeny are Mercedes Roffé, Alejandra Pizarnik, Nicanor Parra, Gabriela Mistral, Marosa di Giorgio, Idea Vilarriño and Malú Urriola. She’s currently writing a book called *Other Solitudes* which considers trans-American dialogues on consciousness and poetry.

TGG: Let’s listen to the interview with Anna Deeny.
Interview with Anna Deeny

CG: Hola, Anna, it’s so good to have you here with us to record this podcast. You’re such a dear friend of the Library of Congress, and of our reading room, and it’s always pleasure to see you.

Anna Deeny: Hola Catalina, and Talía! And thank you so much for this invitation to be here. It’s a huge honor.

TGG: Thank you for being here in “La Biblioteca”

CG: Yes! You basically are the perfect person to speak about Raúl Zurita, the Chilean poet that we’re discussing today. You actually came here to the Library last year and joined Zurita in a beautiful reading where he read his poems and you read your own translations of his poems in English. What can you tell our listeners about Raúl Zurita?

AD: Well first of all, I would like to acknowledge other translators of his work because I believe that this is a work that a lot of us are doing. So there’s a great poet and translator named Daniel Borzutzky, who actually just won the National Book Award for his book *The Performance of Becoming Human*, so he has translated *Canto a su amor desaparecido*; and has also done a different type of anthology called *The Country of Planks*. And then there’s William Rowe who’s a writer and translator who lives in England and he’s translated *INRI*. So I just want to acknowledge their work so that, you know, when you translate someone’s work, it’s not like you become a centripetal force of their work, right? You’re just one voice among many different ways of interpreting this writer’s work; however I appreciate the chance to speak about Raúl Zurita as much as I can.

So I’m going to introduce Zurita by reading a poem that is one of the first poems of his first book called *Purgatorio* which was published in 1979. This is the poem:

- [Excerpt] Anna Deeny reads Zurita’s “Domingo en la mañana”

AD: The reason why I think this is a good introduction to thinking about Zurita and his biography is because... so Zurita was born in 1951 in Santiago, Chile, but really a moment that marked his work definitively as a historical moment which is the *golpe de estado*, the *coup d’état* on September 11th, 1973. So for this book to begin with that line “me amanezco” and “domingo en la mañana”, the symbolic value of that is that, this historical moment marks definitively his work for the rest of his life. So it was a moment in which on September 11th, 1973 in around six in the morning, there was a *coup d’état* in Valparaíso which is one of the main ports of Chile, and also in Santiago where the *moneda*, the capitol, was bombarded. And Raúl Zurita along with many, many young people, people who worked as labor organizers, anybody who worked in the solidarity of the people, and in solidarity with Salvador Allende – who was the president as the time – they were rounded up on the streets and placed in prisons, and Raúl Zurita was placed in the hold of a ship called the Maipo, which was docked in the port of Valparaíso.

So when he was in the hold of this ship, he had poems in a notebook in his pocket. And he’s explained how the soldiers believed that these poems (they were actually very avant-garde poems – that are
found in *Purgatorio* were secret leftist code. And they said “What is this?” and they took it away from him, and they threw it away. So he lost his poems, and so in his mind... this is actually what a lot of writers, a lot of individuals say if they’ve been detained during this or any period, and it’s that they elaborated, they worked very deeply in their memory to build the poems back again in their minds, with the hope that in the moment that they get out they’ll have the opportunity to write those poems down again. So that’s what Raúl Zurita did.

So actually a section of *Purgatorio*, his first book, he had been working on in the period before the coup d’etat, but then he finished the work after when he was finally released and it was published in 1979. At that time, because it was such an avant-garde work, it actually wasn’t perceived as a work that spoke against Pinochet’s dictatorship; it was actually perceived because of the review of an important critic for a journal of the right called *Mercurio*, it was viewed as the new avant-garde work of the new modern free market state, which was Pinochet’s state. So he was actually lauded by this critic Ignacio Valente, and what Valente saw in his work was the deep religious sentiment and so it wasn’t seen as offensive to the state.

TGG: You mentioned the religious sentiment and it’s something the religious imagery, it’s something that’s very present in his poems, right? It’s very evident. Could you talk a bit about themes that we could find? Overall themes that we can find in Zurita’s poetry...?

AD: Well something that Zurita himself has often said is that in the Spanish language, were you to remove Christianity, you would leave a large hole – *dejarías un grade vacio* – because it’s impossible to speak Spanish without that religious sentiment, without the models of religion embedded in it, no? *Vaya con Dios*, the same in English, Goodbye. *Vaya con Dios*.

TGG: Exactly.

AD: *Sí, Dios quiere*. All of these, almost stitches of language of everyday life are embedded with this religion.

TGG: It doesn’t matter if you’re a believer or not.

AD: That’s right. That’s exactly right. You can’t escape it, right? So there’s that one element that he’s spoken of as far as language is concerned. What I think is happening beginning in *Purgatory* is actually a slow, steady displacement of this centripetal Christ figure; so basically an undermining of the need of Christianity to require the sacrifice of one individual for the group which is the Christ, right? So instead of having this one, this religious form that requires the sacrifice of one man for the group, Zurita, I think, in his work – what he begins to develop in *Purgatory* – is the idea that if just one man falls, in this case, because of the ferocity of the military state, we all fall. So the murder of one, the rape of one, the torture of one, is the torture, the rape, the murder, the abuse of the entire group. So in other words, we don’t need a sacrifice. And to unbind the demand for the sacrifice of Christ is to unbind the cornerstone of Christianity, which is that sacrifice of the father for the son. So there’s a poem in particular in which this happens in *Purgatorio*, and it’s one of “The Desert of Atacama” poems.
CG: So for today’s conversation we asked you, Anna, to listen to the recording that Zurita did here for our Archive. He did this recording in 1985. So what poem or poems did you choose from the recording to discuss.

AD: So I chose the three poems that in the recording he calls “Fragmentos”, of the section called “Cordillera” of Anteparaíso, which was his second book that he published in 1982. So these are poems that if you know anything about Bob Dylan... This first poem called “One hundred one” “Ciento uno”, which he also calls “Allá lejos” in the book, in the recording and that’s the name in the book. These are the lines from the 1965 Bob Dylan song called “Highway 61 revisited”

- [Excerpt] Anna Deeny reads Bob Dylan “Highway 61 revisited”

AD: So this is the first stanza of Bob Dylan’s song and so Zurita basically takes is word by word for his poem, for this first poem. So that’s why I wanted to read that but the story as you know is form Genesis 22; it’s when God wants to know the extent of Abraham’s loyalty to him. So to understand the extent of his loyalty he tries to understand the extent of his possible cruelty.

TGG: Yes.

AD: So for Zurita, and for Bob Dylan, it’s a way of seeing how perfectly normal everyday people can be caused, incited to do atrocious things because they were told by someone who they see as powerful. So for Zurita, and I think for Bob Dylan, this begins with this model of Christianity, and in this case Judaism.

CG: So let’s listen to the poem.


AD: “One hundred one” from “Cordilleras” from Anteparaíso

- [Excerpt] Anna Deeny reads her own translation of Raúl Zurita’s poem “Fragmentos” from Anteparaíso.

TGG: That is wonderful. I like the image of the cordilleras de Chile, right? That he repeats in all three poems and they mean something different in all of them. I have a question about translation because you are, as you said, at the beginning, among others, the translator of Zurita’s works. You translated Purgatory, which was published by the University of California Press in 2009, the Dreams for Kurosawa which was published twice, first by Arrow press in 2012, and then in India by Almost Island in 2015, and then your most recent translation is Sky Below: Selected Works published by Northwestern University Press in 2016. How do you approach the work of translation? And especially translating an author that is
still alive and is someone with whom you have such a close, personal and professional connection like Raúl Zurita?

AD: So I think any... this is translation for me, so I think to begin with translation is a genre. Just as someone who is working in the genres of poetry, the genres of narrative, the genres of film, visual arts, each individual who works in those genres has their own approach to that work; so that’s the first thing. So I think that to respond first to your last question, when you read someone else’s work deeply, you understand someone else. So any act of close reading, any act of – for me, in this case – translation is understanding another person. What I’ve noticed throughout the years is that sometimes this is a better way of understanding that person than fumbling through other forms of language. So in other words, poetry, I believe, in particular provides an opportunity to understand the complexity of the human mind and spirit, in a way that just talking to someone directly isn’t necessarily the case. So I think that we’ve gotten to know one another through our conversations through the texts.

TGG: So Anna, do you have a personal anecdote of working and traveling with Raúl Zurita that you could share with us today?

AD: I have many, many memories that come to mind of having the opportunity to travel and read with Raúl Zurita. One of them is a few years ago when an Indian writer named Sharmistha Mohanty had invited Raúl to participate in some dialogue with other Indian writers in New Delhi. So we travelled there and we read together and it was the evening we were in this courtyard under this beautiful tree and in the background as we read there was a Muslim wedding occurring; and so we could hear this typical wind instrument, that I don’t know the name of, playing as we read. And it just seemed like a miracle to me that I was there and having the opportunity to dialogue with different regions of India, to dialogue with the music that was occurring at the same time, with the traffic that you could hear around us in New Delhi.

Another memory I have is from about six years ago, I wrote to Raúl and his wife Pauly, and I said “I’m coming to Chile, and I would really like to go see the writing in the desert,” which is Ni pena ni miedo that he had bulldozed into the landscape at the end of the Chilean dictatorship. He said “I haven’t been there in twenty years, Paulina has never gone. Let’s just go together.” So we took a flight up to Antofagasta, and he couldn’t find the pilot that knew how to get there via helicopter, so we went with a group of people in their trucks through the desert. And it was very, very hard to find, but they knew how to find it. And the desert was dizzying, it felt like being in the middle of massive waves without a sense of orientation, and finally we made it to the writing in the desert which is where I took the photograph that’s on the front of the selected works that just came out called Sky Below. But the letters are so massive that you jump into them, they’re over a meter deep and about 1.5 miles long. So it was just extraordinary to be there. And when I think about the poems that he has written in this section particularly in Purgatory, his first book, called “The Desert of Atacama” and the convergence and divergence of the landscape; actually being in that landscape and its arid quality, and the dizzying, and the lack of a sense of perspective really changed how I understood his work. What’s interesting is that when he wrote that book, he had actually never been to the desert of Atacama. When he wrote one of the most well-known sections of his poetry, he had never been to desert; so the desert existed as
something in his imagination, which in the end is what everything is. You know? Everything is a construction; everything is how we have written it and how we’ve imagined it.

TGG: Before we leave, would you recommend to our listeners who have never read anything by Raúl Zurita, where do they start?

AD: With Purgatory. Yeah. With students... Students always come to class who have never read poetry, they come from all different fields and there’s something about Purgatory that really resonates with youths, and I think that... with a lot of people... but I think that since who we teach are young people, right? That is was a book he wrote when he was very young, he was in his 20s, and like all young people he felt a great sense of passion combined with hope, and fear, and passionate friendships, passionate loves. Youths are blossoming people and unfortunately during many regimes, the people they target are youths, right? And so there are assaults on youths. So there’s something about that book that really resonates with young people and how they feel.

TGG: Excellent.

CG: Well Anna, thank you so much for such this wonderful conversation.

AD: Thank you, Catalina and Talía. This was a real pleasure.

TGG: Thank you.

Conclusion

TGG: This is it for today. Thank you for joining us in “La biblioteca!”

CG: Thank you for tuning in! To listen to some of the recordings on the archive of the Hispanic Literature on Tape go to www.loc.gov. You can find the project by clicking on our “Digital Collections” link on the homepage and selecting “Audio Recording” collections category. You can also find it by going to the Library’s Hispanic Division’s website which is www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic. ¡Hasta pronto!