

Always Living in Spanish

MARJORIE AGOSÍN

*Defying all conventional impressions of South American writers, the poet, essayist, and international human rights activist Marjorie Agosín was born in 1955 in Bethesda, Maryland, and raised in Santiago de Chile. A descendent of Russian and Austrian Jews, Agosín left Chile and settled in Georgia with her family when rumors that a military coup to overthrow the Marxist government of Salvador Allende was about to become a reality. The brutal dictatorship of Auguste Pinochet resulted in many atrocities and an untold number of disappearances, an estimated 10 percent of them Jews. In that history was born Agosín's literary and human rights concerns. After receiving her B.A. from the University of Georgia and her Ph.D. from the University of Indiana, she went on to become professor and chair of the Department of Spanish at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. The recipient of numerous awards, Agosín has also published many books, including *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love* (1996), *accounts of the lives of women under the Pinochet government*; *A Cross and a Star: Memoirs of a Jewish Girl in Chile* (1997) *about her mother*; *Always from Somewhere Else* (1998) *about her father*; and *Dear Anne Frank* (1998), *a collection of bilingual poems.**

In "Always Living in Spanish" (translated by Celeste Kostopoulos-Cooperman), which first appeared in Poets & Writers (March/April 1999), Agosín reflects on her dilemma of living, thinking, and writing in Spanish while residing in America and her need to always write in Spanish in order to recover her Chilean childhood and guard the memory of those lost. As she writes, "The new and learned English language did not fit with the visceral emotions and themes that my poetry contained, but by writing in Spanish I could recover fragrances, spoken rhythms, and the passion of my own identity."

WRITING TO DISCOVER: *Reread Agosín's statement above about her need to write in Spanish and reflect on the power of language as a way of returning to something or someone that you once knew. If you are bilingual or multilingual, comment on the accuracy of Agosín's observations about "recovering" through language based on your own experiences.*

In the evenings in the northern hemisphere, I repeat the ancient ritual that I observed as a child in the southern hemisphere: going out while the night is still warm and trying to recognize the stars as it begins to grow dark silently. In the sky of my country, Chile, that long and wide

stretch of land that the poets blessed and dictators abused, I could easily name the stars: the three Marias, the Southern Cross, and the three Lilies, names of beloved and courageous women.

But here in the United States, where I have lived since I was a young girl, the solitude of exile makes me feel that so little is mine, that not even the sky has the same constellations, the trees and the fauna the same names or sounds, or the rubbish the same smell. How does one recover the familiar? How does one name the unfamiliar? How can one be another or live in a foreign language? These are the dilemmas of one who writes in Spanish and lives in translation.

Since my earliest childhood in Chile I lived with the tempos and the melodies of a multiplicity of tongues: German, Yiddish, Russian, Turkish, and many Latin songs. Because everyone was from somewhere else, my relatives laughed, sang, and fought in a Babylon of languages. Spanish was reserved for matters of extreme seriousness, for commercial transactions, or for illnesses, but everyone's mother tongue was always associated with the memory of spaces inhabited in the past: the shtetl, the flowering and vast Vienna avenues, the minarets of Turkey, and the Ladino whispers of Toledo. When my paternal grandmother sang old songs in Turkish, her voice and body assumed the passion of one who was there in the city of Istanbul, gazing by turns toward the west and the east.

Destiny and the always ambiguous nature of history continued my family's enforced migration, and because of it I, too, became one who had to live and speak in translation. The disappearances, torture, and clandestine deaths in my country in the early seventies drove us to the United States, that other America that looked with suspicion at those who did not speak English and especially those who came from the supposedly uncivilized regions of Latin America. I had left a dangerous place that was my home, only to arrive in a dangerous place that was not: a high school in the small town of Athens, Georgia, where my poor English and my accent were the cause of ridicule and insult. The only way I could recover my usurped country and my Chilean childhood was by continuing to write in Spanish, the same way my grandparents had sung in their own tongues in diasporic sites.

The new and learned English language did not fit with the visceral emotions and themes that my poetry contained, but by writing in Spanish I could recover fragrances, spoken rhythms, and the passion of my own identity. Daily I felt the need to translate myself for the strangers living all around me, to tell them why we were in Georgia, why we ate differently, why we had fled, why my accent was so thick, and why I did not look Hispanic. Only at night, writing poems in Spanish, could I return to my senses, and soothe my own sorrow over what I had left behind.

This is how I became a Chilean poet who wrote in Spanish and lived in the southern United States. And then, one day, a poem of mine was translated and published in the English language. Finally, for the first

time since I had left Chile, I felt I didn't have to explain myself. My poem, expressed in another language, spoke for itself . . . and for me.

Sometimes the austere sounds of English help me bear the solitude of knowing that I am foreign and so far away from those about whom I write. I must admit I would like more opportunities to read in Spanish to people whose language and culture is also mine, to join in our common heritage and in the feast of our sounds. I would also like readers of English to understand the beauty of the spoken word in Spanish, that constant flow of oxytonic and paraoxytonic syllables (*Verde que te quiero verde*), the joy of writing — of dancing — in another language. I believe that many exiles share the unresolvable torment of not being able to live in the language of their childhood.

I miss that undulating and sensuous language of mine, those baroque descriptions, the sense of being and feeling that Spanish gives me. It is perhaps for this reason that I have chosen and will always choose to write in Spanish. Nothing else from my childhood world remains. My country seems to be frozen in gestures of silence and oblivion. My relatives have died, and I have grown up not knowing a young generation of cousins and nieces and nephews. Many of my friends disappeared, others were tortured, and the most fortunate, like me, became guardians of memory. For us, to write in Spanish is to always be in active pursuit of memory. I seek to recapture a world lost to me on that sorrowful afternoon when the blue electric sky and the Andean cordillera bade me farewell. On that, my last Chilean day, I carried under my arm my innocence recorded in a little blue notebook I kept even then. Gradually that diary filled with memoranda, poems written in free verse, descriptions of dreams and of the thresholds of my house surrounded by cherry trees and gardenias. To write in Spanish is for me a gesture of survival. And because of translation, my memory has now become a part of the memory of many others.

Translators are not traitors, as the proverb says, but rather splendid friends in this great human community of language.

FOCUSING ON CONTENT

1. Why does Agosín feel “so little is mine” (2) here in the United States?
2. Why does Agosín say that she “left a dangerous place that was my home, only to arrive in a dangerous place that was not” (4)?
3. Why does Agosín see her first poem that was translated into English as so important? Cite some of the comments Agosín makes about translation. In what ways is translation important for her?
4. Why does the author say she will never write in any language but Spanish?

FOCUSING ON WRITING

1. What is Agosín's thesis in this essay? (Glossary: *Thesis*) Where is the best statement of her thesis?
2. Agosín says that she would like her readers to experience Spanish, “that constant flow of oxytonic and paraoxytonic syllables” (7). What do these two terms mean, and what quality does she say they give Spanish?
3. How effective is the beginning of Agosín's essay? (Glossary: *Beginnings and Endings*)
4. Agosín's essay was first published in *Poets & Writers*, a journal for writers. In what ways do you think Agosín's essay might be helpful to the journal's readers? (Glossary: *Audience*)

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Agosín's essay is about translation, and in her final paragraph she makes an oblique reference to the Italian proverb “Traduttore, traditore!” which roughly translates as “the translator is a traitor.” Examine the following translations taken from “Archived Humorous Translations” at www.wordmill.com/archive2.html.

- These Japanese instructions were found on an air conditioner: *Cooler & heats. If you want just condition of warm in your room, please control yourself.*
- This copy was found in an advertisement for a Hong Kong dentist: *Teeth extracted by the latest Methodists.*
- A Swiss restaurant's menu boasts: *Our wines leave you nothing to hope for.*
- When the Parker Pen marketed a ballpoint pen in Mexico, its ads were supposed to say, “It won't leak in your pocket and embarrass you.” However, a translator for the company mistakenly translated “embarrass” to the Spanish word “embarazar.” Instead the ads said: *It won't leak in your pocket and make you pregnant.*
- The Coors beer slogan “Turn it loose” was mistranslated into Spanish as *Suffer from diarrhea.*
- A sign posted at a onetime German Café in Berkeley, California: *This rest room is for use of our only customer.* No wonder they went out of business.
- This detour sign was posted in Kyushi, Japan: *Stop! Drive sideways.*
- This notice was found on the back of a restroom door in Basra, Iraq: *Have you left your ring? Have you left your watch? Have you anything of value left?*

Why do you suppose it is so difficult to translate ideas from one language to another? If you, or any members of your class, speak one of the languages in the examples above, try to explain what went wrong with the translation. What insights into the nature of language do you get from this exercise? Do