

PRADO, Adélia. *The alphabet in the park.* Trans. by Ellen Watson. Middleton, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1990. 63 p.

This attractive volume contains selections from three of Adélia Prado's earliest works: *Bagagem* (1976), *O coração disparado* (1977) and *Terra de Santa Cruz* (1981). Chronologically ordered and divided into three parts, the book takes its title from one of the poems in the section entitled "Land of the Holy Cross." Although several of the forty-seven translations were published previously in literary anthologies and reviews, the collection as a whole represents the first serious attempt to introduce one of Brazil's most important contemporary poets to an English-speaking audience.

In her preface, Ellen Watson (who also translated the novel *Zero* by Ignácio de Loyola Brandão) sketches out the career of the poet from Minas Gerais, whose first book, *Bagagem*, was widely praised by Brazilian critics and writers – including Carlos Drummond de Andrade, generally regarded as her "discoverer". From a working-class background, Prado was the first person in her family to attend the university, where she received a degree in philosophy and religious education. Although she wrote poetry from a very early age, she didn't publish her first volume until she was forty. A former public school teacher and the mother of five children, to date she has written five books of verse and three volumes of prose. In 1987, a theatrical production, *Dona Doida*, which is based on her writings, opened in Rio de Janeiro to wide acclaim and subsequently toured Brazil. Prado continues to reside in her hometown of Divinópolis in Minas Gerais; in recent years, she has served as the city's cultural liason, and in

1988, during one of her few trips abroad, she visited the United States, where she gave a series of poetry readings.

Among Prado's many talents is her ability to convey the extraordinary in the ordinary, as seen in her poems "Praise for a Color", a meditation on the color yellow, and "Window", where the window of the poet's house becomes a looking-glass into her past. A short poem called "The Black Umbrella" is a kind of eulogy for a discarded umbrella, whose owner lies in his grave. An even shorter piece, entitled "Day", draws an interesting analogy between the tension and excitement of a flock of chickens, "arteries quivering in their necks", and a woman's pleasure and delight in sex. Some of the most compelling poems in the book focus on commonplace, almost sentimental themes of childhood and the family. "Successive Deaths", "Lesson", "Lineage", and "Tyrants" glimpse the quirks, the sadness, and the charm of domestic life, and reveal the power of love to keep people alive even after death. In their directness and apparent simplicity, these poems have a photographic quality reminiscent of Drummond's "Retrato de Família."

Other preoccupations of the book include sexual love, religious faith, poetic creation, and womanhood. Several of the poems take place in a rural setting, replete with dogs, chickens, and four o'clocks. Occasionally, however, this lyricism gives way to more activist or political verse. In "Falsetto", Prado writes a dramatic monologue by a mother whose son has been beaten to death by the authorities; in "At Customs", she deftly satirizes government bureaucracy; and in "Denouement", she sings the praises of being a Brazilian.

Both contextually and stylistically, Prado's poetry is, in the words of the poet Ferreira Gullar, "simple but not simple". Written in free verse, the poems make frequent use of conversational dialogue, but they also have a strong rhythm created by parallel constructions and refrains. Despite the accessibility of the language and the apparent informality of the voice that speaks, there is also something compellingly elusive and surreal about these poems. Like the narrator in "Seduction", we are enthralled by the "hot tongue" of language, and caught up and scored from head to toe by its "toothed wheel".

The translations by Ellen Watson read smoothly in English, but I regret to say they are filled with elementary mistakes. A few

of the more obvious errors in English include the following: "impatience" for *espera* (expectation) [p. 3]; "inscrutable" for *insolúveis* (insoluble) [p. 5]; "bashful" for *envergonhada* (ashamed) [p. 6]; "peephole" for *clarabóia* (skylight) [p. 15]; "gives up on" for *consumir* (to consume or use up) [p. 17]; "steel" for *ferro* (iron) [p. 18]; "thicket" for *bosque* (grove, woods) [p. 51]; "nonsense" for *desatinos* (madnesses, follies) [p. 51]; "they came" for *viram* (they saw) [p. 54]; "gate" for *porta* (door) [p. 62]; and "Window on the open world" for "Janela sobre o mundo aberta" (Window open on the world) [p. 15]. There are also some inaccurate translations of certain idiomatic expressions: "tweaked my nose" for "faz festa" (makes a fuss over, shows affection) [p. 8]; "Love one another" for "Amai vossos inimigos" (Love your enemies) [p. 51]; and "a token of their guilt" for "mataram de pancada meu filhinho" (they beat my son to death) [p. 53].

Occasionally, Watson seems to bowdlerize the text. In the poem "Consecration", she translates "As vibrações da carne entoam hinos, / também as que se vira o rosto como a fornicções" into "The vibrations of the flesh sing hymns, / even those we turn away from". And on several occasions, she makes a series of mistakes in translating a single poem. The following lines are from the poem "Antes do Nome":

... o "de", o "aliás",
o "o", o "porém", e o "que", esta incompreensível
muleta que me apóia. . .
(. . . "of", "besides",
"the", "however", and "which", that incomprehensible
crutch which supports me. . .)

Watson's version is as follows:

"of", "otherwise",
"nevertheless", and "how", all those inscrutable
crutches I walk on. . .

Another problem appears a few lines down in the same poem:

A palavra é disfarce de uma coisa mais grave,
[surda-muda,
foi inventada para ser calada.

(The word is a disguise for something deeper, deaf and
[dumb,
it was invented to be silenced.)

In Watson's book we read:

Words only hide something deeper, deaf and dumb,
something invented to be silenced.

Several translations employ idiomatic expressions in English for no clear reason, thereby changing the feel of the original. Some examples: "Mama shot me a look" for "minha mãe me passando os olhos" (my mother glanced [ing] at me) [p. 58]; and "Because there's always someone/smack dab in the middle of my happiness saying" for "Porque sempre há quem diga / no meio da minha alegria" (Because in the midst [middle] of my happiness there's always someone saying) [p. 37]. The more colloquial terms "yell" and "shriek" are regularly used to translate the verb *gritar* when the words "call" or "cry out" might have been preferable. Ironically, the word "grandmother" is used to translate the more informal *vovô* (grandma) [p. 47].

In a few poems, phrases are inexplicably placed in parentheses when no parentheses appear in the original. Nouns originally in the singular are often made plural in the English and vice versa; such apparently trivial changes can radically alter meaning, as when the title "Antes do Nome" a play on the expression, "Bfore the Word" is translated "Before Names". Elsewhere, the choice of words is idiosyncratic and a bit awkward, as in the phrase, "There's no way not to think about death/among so much deliciousness. . ." (Não há como não pensar na morte, entre tantas delícias. . .) [There's no way not to think about death, among so many delights] [p. 47].

Of course a translator sometimes needs to be unfaithful in order to be loyal. In her preface to the volume, Watson states that she has occasionally "bent" or changed an image because it was impossible to find a word or phrase in English to convey the meaning of the original. In many cases, however, there are perfectly acceptable English equivalents for the lines or words she has altered. She states that Prado, with whom she worked on the translations, was delighted with many of her word choices,

she also notes that the poet was initially angered at those places “where I strayed from the literal, from the image as [Prado] had conceived it” (p. xiv). I had a somewhat similar reaction. I was delighted with the appearance of this handsomely produced translation of a major Brazilian woman poet, but I was frustrated by the many errors and unsatisfactory word choices, which do a disservice to Prado’s skillful Portuguese.

Darlene J. Sadlier
Indiana University – Bloomington