

Dibaxu, poetry by
Juan Gelman, 1994

Translated from Spanish by Arianna Afsari

Translator's Introduction

What follows is a series of English translations of Juan Gelman's (1930–2014) *Dibaxu*, a bilingual collection of twenty-nine love poems written originally in Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish ("Sefardi" in Gelman's terms), accompanied by translations into modern Spanish by the author himself. In other words, there are two translators present here: Gelman, the self-translator who moves from his adopted tongue, Ladino, back into his native Spanish, and me, the translator who carries his verses over from the Spanish translations into English.

Although not published until 1994, Gelman composed *Dibaxu* between 1983 and 1985, while exiled in Europe. A lifelong leftist political activist, the poet was banished from his native Argentina in 1975 due to his involvement with the Montoneros, a guerrilla, left-wing Peronist organization. The year 1976 ushered in a period of collective horror and pain for Gelman and his compatriots. Although Gelman managed to escape political persecution under General Jorge Rafael Videla's military dictatorship during the *Guerra sucia* (Dirty War, 1974–1983), Gelman's son, Marcelo Ariel, along with his pregnant wife, María Claudia Iruretagoyena, were disappeared and extrajudicially murdered by the military's right-wing death squads.

The multilingualism present in *Dibaxu* as well as Gelman's deliberate choice to write in Ladino and then self-translate invites a reflection on language and, specifically, on the complex relationship between language and exile. For Gelman, Ladino, the language of the Sephardim, is a tongue that exists exclusively in exile. The diasporic language of Ladino carries histories of displacement, beginning with the Edict of Expulsion of Granada in 1492, which ordered the banishment of the Jews and *Conversos* from the kingdoms of Spain's Catholic Monarchs. In his brief preface to *Dibaxu*, Gelman writes, "It was as if the extreme solitude of exile had pushed me to search for roots in language, the deepest and most exiled ones of language." This quest, spurred by the unbearable pain of his personal expulsion, follows a downward trajectory as captured by the title of the collection, *Dibaxu*, which is Ladino for "debajo" or "beneath." Gelman not

only descends, plunging into the depths of sixteenth-century Spanish to uncover its substratum, Judeo-Spanish, but his self-translation into modern Spanish insists on a movement across as well, ultimately suturing the substrata through the common theme of exile. Gelman beseeches us to listen carefully to this dialogue, which defies geographical, temporal, spatial, and linguistic boundaries, traveling between “the two sounds” of displaced voices of the far past and of Gelman’s more recent past. The slashes that complete each poem emphasize the dialogical aspect of *Dibaxu*, inviting the reader to trail the narrative voice full of longing as it weaves in and out of the bilingual verses. If we dive beneath the romantic surface of the poems, we discover allegories of exilic discourse below the ostensible sensual longing, where dreams of a distant native land and mother tongue, of loved ones disappeared, are encoded in the figure of the beloved.

The true genius of Gelman resides in his ability to craft a poetics of estrangement in order to achieve a disalienation of the self. Through a number of stylistic techniques including the feminization of masculine nouns, intentional grammatical errors in verbal conjugations, and unconventional syntax, Gelman distorts language so that his poetry may begin to articulate the ineffable and estranging violence of his world. Exile is an extreme form of alienation. The dispossessed subject is brutally confronted with the startling absence of a motherland and deafening silence of a mother tongue. In the poems of *Dibaxu*, Gelman radically distances himself from his native Spanish, his typical playground for language experimentation and grammar tricks, embracing Ladino instead as the site for his idiosyncratic poetic expression. Before he self-translates back into Spanish, the poet begins with a linguistic self-banishment, opting for the exilic tongue par excellence in order to circumvent the discourse and material violence of Argentina’s military dictatorship and regain control over the conditions of his own forced expropriation. Oddly, it is through his decision to write in Ladino, estranging himself further, that Gelman rediscovers the tenderness of language that speaks most immediately to the pain of his immense loss. Certain intrinsic aspects of Ladino such as the innate diminutives, the feminization of masculine words (“la calor” in Ladino versus “el calor” in Spanish in Poem VII), and the normalization of irregular verb constructions

all reflect hallmarks of Gelman's poetic oeuvre. The naturalization of the poet's most salient rhetorical tricks in Ladino highlights the extent of Gelman's estrangement from Spanish and his discovery of an adopted mother tongue in Ladino. This exilic language, which invites the natural expression of Gelman's previously "unnatural" rhetorical games in Spanish, becomes a repository for the most emblematic Gelmanian traits.

What is more, Gelman employs his self-translations as a method to further alienate himself from Spanish, in that his translations are virtually devoid of the idiosyncratic qualities typical of his poetry. The nondescript nature of the Spanish of his translations vacillates between the Argentine *vos* and standard *tú* forms of the second-person singular. Furthermore, Gelman observes correct verbal forms in instances where he would normally toss out the grammatical rule-book, such as in Poem XVI, where he translates "muridu" as "muerto" instead of "morido," the latter sounding both closer to the Ladino but also constituting an intentional error found frequently throughout Gelman's previous work. His self-translations, therefore, do not represent a full return or assimilation into his native Spanish. By denying the Spanish the intimacy and new expressive horizons he discovers in Ladino, the poet displaces Spanish as the privileged terrain for his poetic voice, converting it into the mirror of the Other.

Only by descending into the substrata of these Spanishes, toward the most exiled roots of language, can Gelman recover the tenderness of his motherland and his mother tongue and reject the discourse commandeered by the military junta. Through this adopted language of exile, the poet finds a type of confirmation rather than a realization regarding the power of estrangement as a return to the self.

From *Dibaxu*

ESCOLIO

Escribí los poemas de *dibaxu* en sefardí, de 1983 a 1985. Soy de origen judío, pero no sefardí, y supongo que eso algo tuvo que ver con el asunto. Pienso, sin embargo, que estos poemas sobre todo son la culminación o más bien el desemboque de *Citas* y *Comentarios*, dos libros que compuse en pleno exilio, en 1978 y 1979, y cuyos textos dialogan con el castellano del siglo XVI. Como si buscar el sustrato de ese castellano, sustrato a su vez del nuestro, hubiera sido mi obsesión. Como si la soledad extrema del exilio me empujara a buscar raíces en la lengua, las más profundas y exiliadas de la lengua. Yo tampoco me lo explico.

El acceso a poemas como los de Clarisse Nikoïdski, novelista en francés y poeta en sefardí, desvelaron esa necesidad que en mí dormía, sorda, dispuesta a despertar. ¿Qué necesidad? ¿Por qué dormía? ¿Por qué sorda? En cambio, sé que la sintaxis sefardí me devolvió un candor perdido y sus diminutivos, una ternura de otros tiempos que está viva y, por eso, llena de consuelo. Quizás este libro apenas sea una reflexión sobre el lenguaje desde su lugar más calcinado, la poesía.

Acompañé los textos en castellano actual no por desconfianza en la inteligencia del lector. A quien ruego que los lea en voz alta en un castellano y en el otro para escuchar, tal vez, entre los dos sonidos, algo del tiempo que tiembla y que nos da pasado desde el Cid.

J.G.

SCHOLIUM

I wrote the poems of *dibaxu* in Sephardi, between 1983 and 1985. I am of Jewish origin, but not Sephardic, and I suppose that this had something to do with it. I think, however, that these poems are above all the culmination, or rather the confluence, of *Citas* and *Comentarios*, two books that I composed in full exile, between 1978 and 1979, and whose texts are in dialogue with the Spanish of the sixteenth century. It was as if searching for the substratum of that Spanish, substratum at the same time of our own, had been my obsession. It was as if the extreme solitude of exile had pushed me to search for roots in language, the deepest and most exiled ones of language. I don't even understand it myself.

Access to poems such as those by Clarisse Nikoïdski, novelist in French and poet in Sephardi, unveiled a necessity that lay dormant in me, deaf, ready to be awakened. What necessity? Why did it lay dormant? Why deaf? Nevertheless, I know that the syntax of Sephardi returned a lost candor to me and its diminutives, a tenderness of other times that lives on and, therefore, is full of solace. Perhaps this book is merely a reflection on language from its most scorched location, poetry.

I pair the texts with the contemporary Spanish translations not out of any lack of faith in the reader's intelligence. I beseech whoever reads these poems read them aloud in one Spanish and then in the other in order to hear, perhaps, between the two sounds, something of a time that trembles and gives us a past since *The Cid*.¹

J.G.

¹ Given the poetic context here, Gelman's reference to *The Cid* (*El Cid*) most likely concerns *El Cantar de mio Cid* (*The Song of My Cid* or *The Poem of My Cid*), the oldest preserved Castilian epic poem. Based on a true story, it recounts the deeds and adventures of the Castilian hero Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar—commonly known as “*El Cid*”—and takes place during the period of the Reconquista, or the Reconquest of Spain. However, “*el Cid*” is left unitalicized, suggesting that Gelman could also be referring to the historical figure of *The Cid* himself.

V

quí lindus tus ojos/
il mirar di tus ojos más/
y más il airi di tu mirar londji/
nil airi stuvi buscando:

la lampa di tu sangri/
sangri di tu solombra/
tu solombra
sovri mi curasón/

V

qué lindos tus ojos/
y más la mirada de tus ojos/
y más el aire de tus ojos cuando lejos mirás/
en el aire estuve buscando:

la lámpara de tu sangre/
sangre de tu sombra/
tu sombra
sobre mi corazón/

V

how lovely your eyes/
and more so the gaze of your eyes/
and more so the air of your eyes when
you gaze into the distance/
in the air I was searching for:

the lamp of your blood/
blood of your shadow/
your shadow
over my heart/

VII

la calor qui destruyi al pinser
si destruyi pinsendu/
la luz timbla
in tus bezus/y

queda al caminu/queda
al tiempu/londji/avri
lus bezus/dexa
yerva nil curasón quimadu/

si dispartara la yuvia
di un páxaru
qui aspira al mar
nil mar/

VII

el calor que destruye al pensar
se destruye pensando/
la luz tiembla
en tus besos/y

detiene al camino/detiene
al tiempo/lejos/abre
los besos/deja
hierba en el corazón quemado/

se despertó la lluvia
de un pájaro
que espera al mar
en el mar/

VII

the heat that destroys thought
destroys itself thinking/
the light trembles
in your kisses/and

halts the path/halts
time/far away/opens
the kisses/leaves
grass in the burnt heart/

the rain awoke
from a bird
that awaits the sea
in the sea/

VIII

nil ‘amaniana aviarta
in tus ojos abagan
lus animalis qui ti quimaran
adientru dil sueniu/

nunca dizin nada/
mi dexan sinizas/y
solu
cun il sol/

VIII

en la mañana abierta
lentamente por tus ojos pasan
los animales que te quemaron
adentro del sueño/

nunca dicen nada/
me dejan cenizas/y
solo
con el sol/

VIII

in the open morning
through your eyes slowly pass
the animals that burned you
within the dream/

they never say anything/
they leave me ashes/and
alone
with the sun/

IX

tu piede
pisa la nochi/suavi/
avri la yuvia/
avri il día/

la muerte no savi nada di vos/
tu piede teni yerva dibaxu
y una solombra ondi scrivi
il mar del vazío/

IX

tu pie
pisa la noche/leve/
abre la lluvia/
abre el día/

la muerte nada sabe de vos/
tu pie tiene hierba debajo
y una sombra donde escribe
el mar del vacío/

IX

your foot
treads on the night/light/
it opens the rain/
it opens the day/

death knows nothing of you/
your foot has grass beneath it
and a shadow where it writes
the sea of emptiness/

X

dizis avlas cun árvulis/
tenin folyas qui cantan
y páxarus
qui djuntan sol/

tu silenziu
disparta
lus gritus
dil mundu/

X

dices palabras con árboles/
tienen hojas que cantan
y pájaros
que juntan sol/

tu silencio
despierta
los gritos
del mundo/

X

you speak words with trees/
they have leaves that sing
and birds
that gather sun/

your silence
awakens
the cries
of the world/

XV

tu boz sta escura
di bezus qui a mí no dieras/
di bezus qui a mí no das/
la nochi es polvu dest'ixiliu/

tus bezus inculgan lunas
qui yelan mi caminu/
timblu
dibaxu dil sol/

XV

tu voz está oscura
de besos que no me diste/
de besos que no me das/
la noche es polvo de este exilio/

tus besos cuelgan lunas
que hielan mi camino/
tiemblo
debajo del sol/

XV

your voice is dark
from kisses you didn't give me/
from kisses you don't give me/
the night is dust of this exile/

your kisses hang up moons
that freeze my path/and
I tremble
beneath the sun/

XVI

cuando mi aya muridu
sintiré entudavía
il batideru
di tu saia nil vienti/

uno qui liyera istus versus
prieguntara: “¿cómu ansi?/
¿quí sentirás? ¿quí batideru?/
¿quí saia?/ ¿quí vienti?”/

li dixí qui cayara/
qui si sintara a la mesa cun mí/
qui viviera mi vinu/
qui scriviera istus versus:

“cuando mi aya muridu
sintiré entudavía
il batideru
di tu saia nil vienti”/

XVI

cuando esté muerto
oiré todavía
el temblor
de tu saya en el viento/

alguien que leyó estos versos
preguntó: “¿cómo así?/
¿qué oirás? ¿qué temblor?/
¿qué saya?/ ¿qué viento?”/

le dije que callara/
que se sentara a mi mesa/
que bebiera mi vino/
que escribiera estos versos:

“cuando esté muerto
oiré todavía
el temblor
de tu saya en el viento”/

XVI

when I'm dead
I'll still hear
the trembling
of your skirt in the wind/

someone who read these verses
asked: “how's that?/
what will you hear? what trembling?/
what skirt? what wind?”/

I told him to hush/
to sit at my table/
to drink my wine/
to write these verses:

“when I'm dead
I'll still hear
the trembling
of your skirt in the wind”/

cuando mi haya morido
mi curasón ~~ovirá~~ ^{Sintra}
il batideru
di tu vistidu nil vienti/

(comedy)
~~unopserixx~~ qui liyó istos versos
li preguntó: "¿cómo así?/
~~¿quién zistox?~~ ¿qui curasón?/
¿qui vienti?"/

li dixe qui ~~calidara~~ ^{calidara}
qui si sintara a la mesa cun mí/
qué ~~lixerex~~ biviera ~~vinu/arrichadu~~
~~qui lixera~~ istos versos:
qui /scriviera

"cuando mi haya morido/
mi curasón ~~ovirá~~ ^{Sintra}
il batideru
di tu vistidu nil vienti"

pmo 10/10/83

"Poem XVI." Composed in Ladino and taken from the first original manuscript of *Dibaxu*, dated August 5, 1983. This manuscript, containing Gelman's hand-written revisions, is the first of three original drafts of *Dibaxu* housed in Princeton's special collection.

Source: Juan Gelman Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

XVII

un vienti di separadus/
di bezus qui no mus diéramus/
acama il trigo di tu ventre/
sus asusenas cun sol/

veni/
o querré no aver nasidu/
trayi tu agua clara/
las ramas floreserán/

mira istu:
soy un niniu rompidu/
timblu nila nochí
qui cayí di mí/

XVII

un viento de separados/
de besos que no nos dimos/
doblega al trigo de tu vientre/
sus azucenas con sol/

ven/
o querré no haber nacido/
trae tu agua clara/
las ramas florecerán/

mira esto:
soy un niño roto/
tiemblo en la noche
que cae de mí/

XVII

a wind of the separated/
of kisses we didn't exchange/
breaks the wheat of your stomach/
its lilies with sun/

come/
or I'll wish I was never born/
bring your clear water/
the branches will bloom/

look at this:
I am a broken boy/
I tremble in the night
that falls from me/

XXIV

amarti es istu:
un avla qui va a dizer/
un arvulicu sin folyas
qui da solombra/

XXIV

amarte es esto:
una palabra que está por decir/
un arbolito sin hojas
que da sombra/

XXIV

loving you is this:
a word that's yet to be said/
a small leafless tree
that gives shade/

Lenguas

Dice un poema en sefardí:
amarti is istu:
un avla qui va a dizer/
un arvolicu sin folyas
qui da solombra
Y en castellano actual:
amarte es esto:
una palabra que va a decir/
un arbolito sin hojas
que da sombra.

3

La poesía es un árbol sin hojas que da sombra.

“Poetry is a leafless tree that gives shade.” Juan Gelman
Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections,
Princeton University Library.

XXV

ista yuvia di vos
dexe cayer pidazus di tiempu/
pidazus d'infinitu/
pidazus di nus mesmos/

¿es por isu qui stamus
sin caza ni memoria?/
¿djuntos nil pincer?/
¿comu cuerpos al sol?/

XXV

tu lluvia
deja caer pedazos de tiempo/
pedazos de infinito/
pedazos de nosotros/

¿por eso estamos
sin casa ni memoria?/
¿juntos en el pensar?/
¿cómo cuerpos al sol?/

XXV

your rain
lets pieces of time fall/
pieces of infinity/
pieces of us/

is that why we're
without house or memory?/
together in thought?/
like bodies in the sun?/

XXVI

il diseu es un animal
todu vistidu di fuegu/
teni patas atan largas
qui yegan al sulvidu/

agora pinsu
qui un paxaricu in tu boz
arrastra
la caza dil otonio/

XXVI

el deseo es un animal
todo vestido de fuego/
tiene patas tan largas
que llegan al olvido/

ahora pienso
que un pajarito en tu voz
arrastra
la casa del otoño/

XXVI

desire is an animal
all dressed in fire/
it has legs so long
they reach oblivion/

now I think
that a little bird in your voice
drags
the house of autumn/

XXVIII

¿cómu ti yamas?/
soy un siegu sintadu
nil atriu di mi diseu/
méndigu tiempu/

río di pena/
yoro d'aligría/
¿quí avla ti dezirá?/
¿quí nombri ti nombrará?/

XXVIII

¿cómo te llamas?/
soy un ciego sentado
en el atrio de mi deseo/
mendigo tiempo/

río de pena/
lloro de alegría/
¿qué palabra te dirá?/
¿qué nombre te nombrará?/

XXVIII

what's your name?/
I am a blind man seated
at the atrium of my desire/
I beg time/

I laugh from sorrow/
I cry of joy/
what word will speak you?/
what name will name you?/

XXIX

no stan muridus lus páxarus
di nuestrus bezus/
stan muridus lus bezus/
lus páxarus volan nil verdi sulvidar/

pondrí mi spantu londji/
dibaxu dil pasadu/
qui arde
cayadu com'il sol/

XXIX

no están muertos los pájaros
de nuestros besos/
están muertos los besos/
los pájaros vuelan en el verde olvidar/

pondré mi espanto lejos/
debajo del pasado/
que arde
callado como el sol/

XXIX

the birds of our kisses
are not dead/
dead are the kisses/
the birds fly in the green forgetting/

I'll put my fright far away/
beneath the past/
that burns
silent like the sun/

SYLVIA ESTELA PETTIGREW
11 de julio de 1976



no están muertos los pájaros
de nuestros besos
están muertos los besos
los pájaros vuelan en el verde olivar

pondré mi espanto lejos
debajo del pasado
que arde
callado como el sol

Juan Gelman

Loş que sobrevivimos todavía necesitamos respuestas.
irakcasagrew@hotmail.com
Tu hija Karina Casanova Pettigrew

Newspaper clipping requesting information regarding the whereabouts of Sylvia Estela Pettigrew, a disappeared person. The words beneath Gelman's poem read, "We who survive still need answers. Your daughter, Karina Casanova Pettigrew." Source: Fondo Luis Mangieri, Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Cultura de Izquierdas, CeDInCI.