

Writing In Secession:

Biopoetics and the Galician Imaginaire of Chus Pato in Canada¹

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Dans la vie et l'oeuvre... la résistance correspond
à une mise en tension qui déchire l'intériorité privée
(Érik Bordeleau, *Foucault anonymat*)

It is said that the structures of the individual *imaginaire* (the situated imagination, as opposed to the imagination as ‘thing or act which exists only in the mind’²) arise in part from place, time or era, education, as well as from social class and other aspects that combine in unique ways to make up persons (we aren’t as free as the word ‘free’ would have us believe). All these invisible bounds, however, are still predicated on the human body, for each of us inhabits just one body, and are predicated on this body’s capacity just to be in one place at once. A cellular limitation. This cellular limitation also acts to situate us.

Despite the constraints, the imagination and *imaginaire* provide each of us with our sense of what is possible or valuable: the sense or meaning of a life.

Poetry and translation of poetry are two of many activities that take form through the sited human body, through the body’s liquids, cells, febrilities, and in the possibility – in the midst of this swirl – for the emergence and formation of something very special, human consciousness: that capacity for thinking, engaging with one’s environment and

¹ A talk given 25 November 2014 in Vigo, Spain, written in French but translated spontaneously into English. The French document was later translated into English and revised for this publication.

² In French, there are two words for something that curiously in English only has one word, “imagination.” *L’imagination* is what it is in English, but *l’imaginaire* is not simply a thing that is imagined, that has its life in the mind not in the world, it is also the ability to imagine, the where-I-stand of imagining. *L’imaginaire* indicates a situated *imagination*, an imagination where the outside that pushes on it is visible, if clouded.

with other beings, and for drawing to mind what is no longer in front of us, and what is yet to come. Memory and anticipation, which together form the present tense, are intricately bound with this thinking capacity, which can include the human capacity, even in times of disaster, for happiness.

The experience of happiness.

To get to that particular experience – however we define it as individual organisms – we can engage (if we wish) the work of poets, who are simply those persons who love language and who deeply explore and exercise the human capacity for emitting sounds that reflect and transmit a thought.

A simple thought, or any thought at all: “I’m hungry.”

A complex thought: “I’m happy.”

To enter into such thoughts, both simple and complex, to recognize these (abject, abstract) things or movements from our interior³ called *thoughts* and to consider their processes of formation – all of which stem from pulsions of the body that themselves overlap (I weep with joy, I rage with sorrow) – we human beings need a further capacity. For thinking to be truly operative through this cellular bundle that is the body, we must be able to question ourselves, to call ourselves into question. And the acts of mirroring or reflexivity that constitute such a questioning require language. Where language is essential, we must know language, learn of it, explore how far it extends and where its vibrations are most intense and where they break (not because they are broken but because we do not yet understand). As such, an intensive working at the limits of language is valuable – and, curiously, this is the role of the person-poet.

³ This word “interior” reifies a border in what is, in fact, porous... but that’s another story.

From two sides of a single ocean, then, in *Secession* and *Insecession*, in one volume, we have the workings of thought of both Pato and Moure, who represent no one apart from Pato and Moure, two women poets born in the same year but who grew up and were educated in very different socio-political systems, and thus articulate very differently. Yet they do have things in common: semi-bucolic countryside was a backdrop in both lives, as were and are cities, Ourense and Calgary, and the historic passage of families from countryside to city during an epoch in their provinces and others – just after the mid-century mark in the last century – of the progressive migration to cities which changed rural life forever in both Europe and Canada.

Even so, the political and social life of two cities, two countrysides, two poetries and *imaginaires*, was distinct. Franco (never named in Pato's *Secession*) and fascism penetrated Pato's life, while Moure's was lit by "Dief the Chief" and Lester Bowles Pearson (who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 for the creation of the UN Peacekeeping Forces during the Suez Crisis, and later became prime minister of Canada, 1963-68, between John Diefenbaker and P.E. Trudeau) in a fervent democracy in a postwar boom that did not yet question male and white supremacy, or environmental degradation.

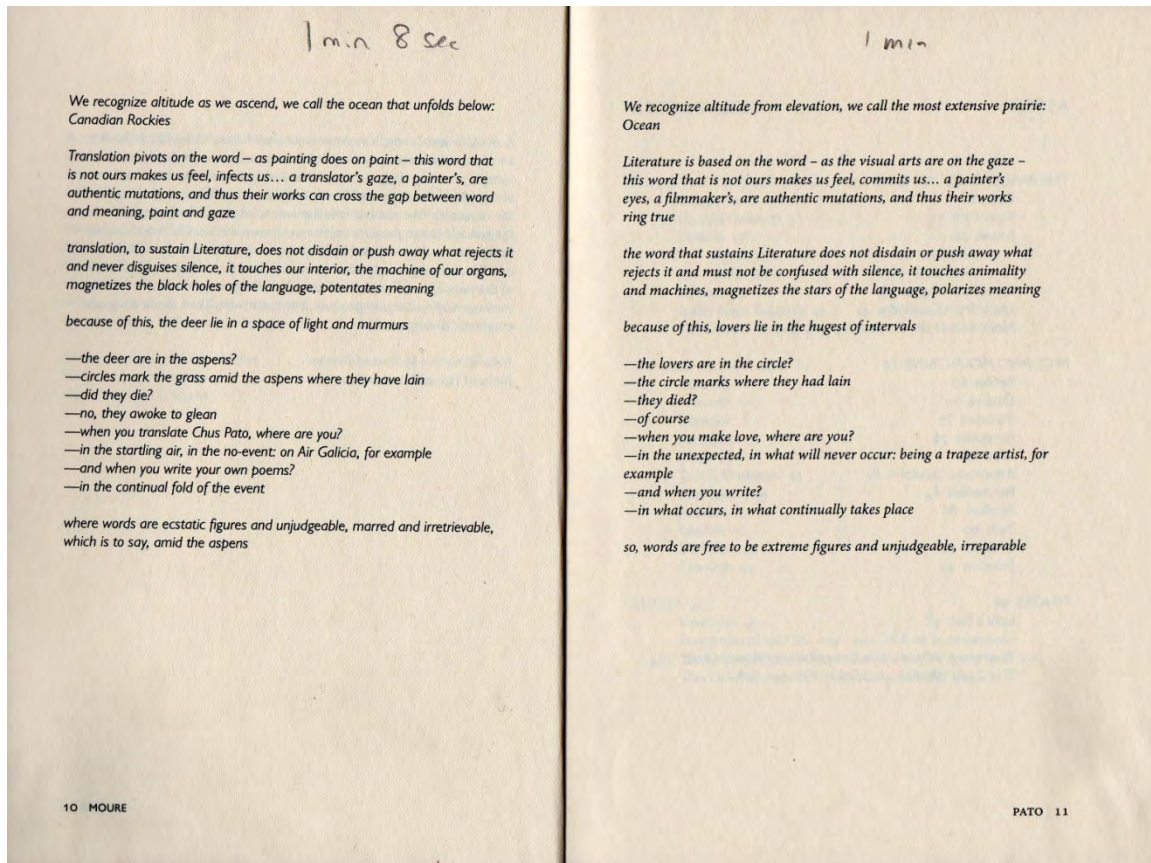
In this joined book, Pato's *Secession* and Moure's *Insecession*, I (the I who writes this essay) am implicated, for Moure doesn't simply perform the task of translating Pato from Galician into English, but spins threads from her own poetic and thinking history and makes them visible beside Pato's text (I weep from fear). To my translation of Pato's book, in other words, I wrote and added – not concomitantly but two years after translating Pato's book – an echo book, *Insecession*. My intention was not (as was the case with *Sheep's Vigil*) to simply make the translator Moure visible, but to indicate, to

readers in English, the influence of Pato's work, and of the act of translating Pato, on my own work and ethos, which is to say, on all the work of Moure.⁴ Although the 'work in question' is never 'one's own' and never 'mine,' the tissue of influences and insistences in a writer's oeuvre is partly hidden if and when an oeuvre that exists primarily for English-speaking readers is actually woven with and responding to work in another language or languages. Those other languages tend to be occluded, misrepresenting the work in English as a result. But to suppress an influence, to have that influence be invisible because of language differences, is to create a Moure oeuvre that does not exist, is part of another *imaginaire*. *Insecession* is, perhaps, a way to create a scene of struggle at the edge of that other *imaginaire* so that even if readers of my work are not able to get a full grasp on the work of related authors in other languages, they can see at least that there exists a scene, an *imaginaire*, that their own eyes have tended to disinherit.

The appearance in 2001 in Vigo, Galicia of Chus Pato's *m-Talá*, before the eyes and in the hands of the Canadian writer whom I then was, changed my literary progression, which means, changed my way of living and experiencing language. I decided to seriously learn Pato's language, Galician, in order to translate her poetry. I learned, under the influence of the riches that mark the poetic work of Pato, and under the influence as well of Rosalía de Castro and the medieval troubadour poets of the Iberian peninsula, who all wrote in Galician, and of my growing friendship with Pato, who brought me in contact with Galician poetic modernism and its stakes, antecedents and inheritors. With all this to nourish my curiosity, I attempted to transport the *imaginaire*

⁴ A second goal was to publish a book of Pato's in Canada; I have spoken elsewhere of the difficulty of this, given that the Canada-Council-subsidized small literary presses which publish the bulk of our literature cannot use their subsidies to publish "foreign" authors, even in the words penned by Canadian translators. Given this, my *Insecession* is one page (and one word) longer than Pato's *Secession* in my translation, making her and me, for one book, Canadian. Otherwise, the Canada Council policies foreignize me and send me out of Canada to publish the literary translations I create, in fact, for my own community of Canadians.

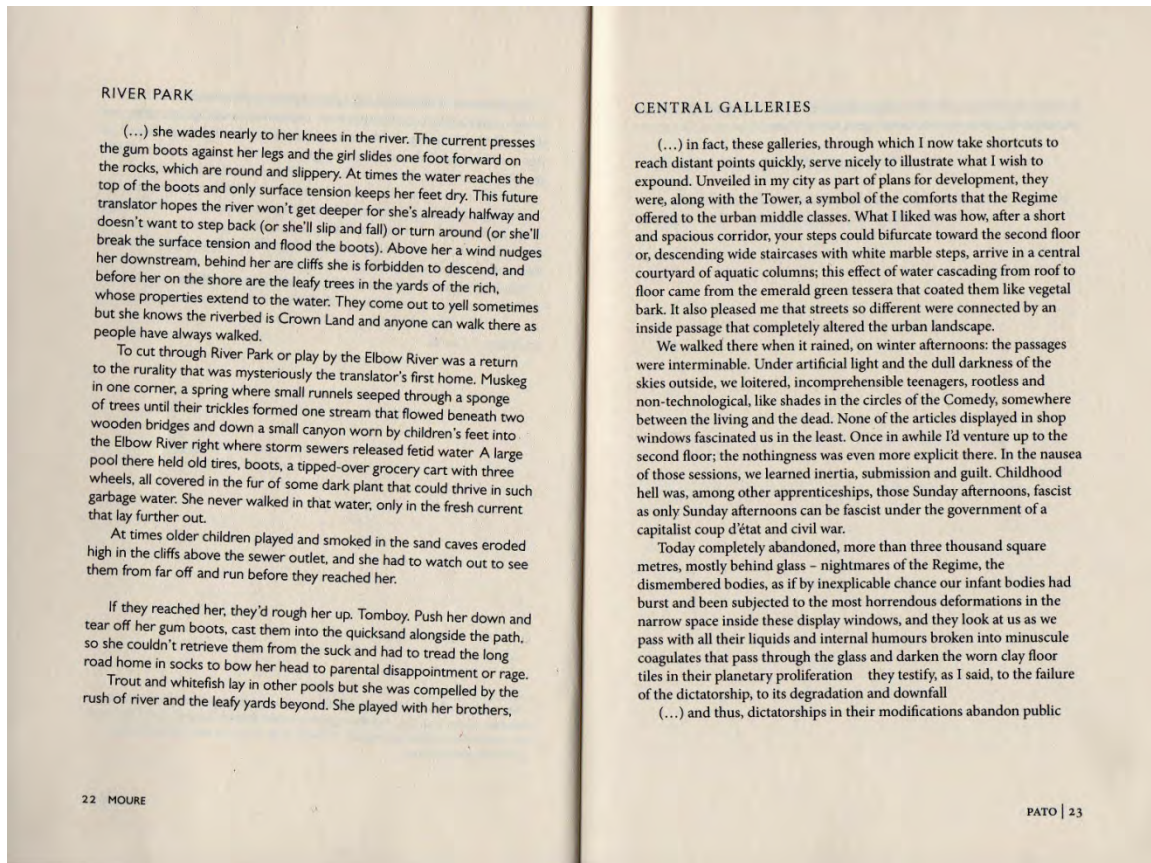
deployed in her works to my own country, and import into my language, English, through my own body, an entire ethos – a mode of thinking and perturbing thought, of remaining at the edges of possibility exactly where the impossible makes itself possible. All her work (and mine as translator presenting her work) is centred as well upon the fundamental freedom of a poet and on her relation with her nation, her place, her language, along with other constituents of the poet's *imaginaire* and life. Pato is a resistant poet, and for her as for Michel Foucault (in Quebec thinker Érik Bordeleau's words), "la résistance l'amène non à produire une *théorie* du pouvoir, mais de mettre l'accent sur les *pratiques* de liberté" (27; italics in the original). Which is to say: Resistance leads her not to produce a theory of power, but to focus on practices of freedom.



As Canadian poet Lisa Robertson has written,

For Pato, a member of the Galician political and linguistic independence movement, language, the body, and history are radically incompatible with capital. The role of the person is to inhabit a topography and recognize oneself as an institution of constellations, relationships, and positions – and so to produce Earth. Every place the poet’s attention alights becomes productive – that is, both material and transcendent: ‘She was interested in the unsayable (in the nation, in the poem, in the union), in conflicts of incomplete information, in fractals, in linking a discontinuous and non-rectifiable grammar that produces not consensus but the unknown’. (Robertson: online)

As such, I too work (I thrill with shame) *through my own body*, and through my own history, which is to say, in intimate relation with an ever-emergent *biopoetics* – my own incorporated and historicized way of participating in the conversation and the challenge that is poetry, and in engaging with what is at stake in poetry today. *I’m hungry* and *I’m happy*. I say conversation here when I say poetry, because it isn’t poets that count in poetry, it’s poetry. This distinction is important, seriously so, today. I’ll come back to why.



Readers might conclude, on examining my texts twinned with the texts of Pato in *Secession / Insecession*, that Moure is more optimistic than Pato and less political, but Moure has never had to experience life under a dictator and the resulting torsions of time and space. Moure's language is not losing ground where she lives; her language is not, as Galician is, perennially overshadowed by the threat of loss. Her first language, English, is not at risk even if the current versions of capital and economics have colonized it; its ruin is palpable in many ways but it is a commercial ruin, no more. An entirely different working of ideology is in operation here than in the case of Galicians and the Galician language, in the midst of which Pato works and breathes.

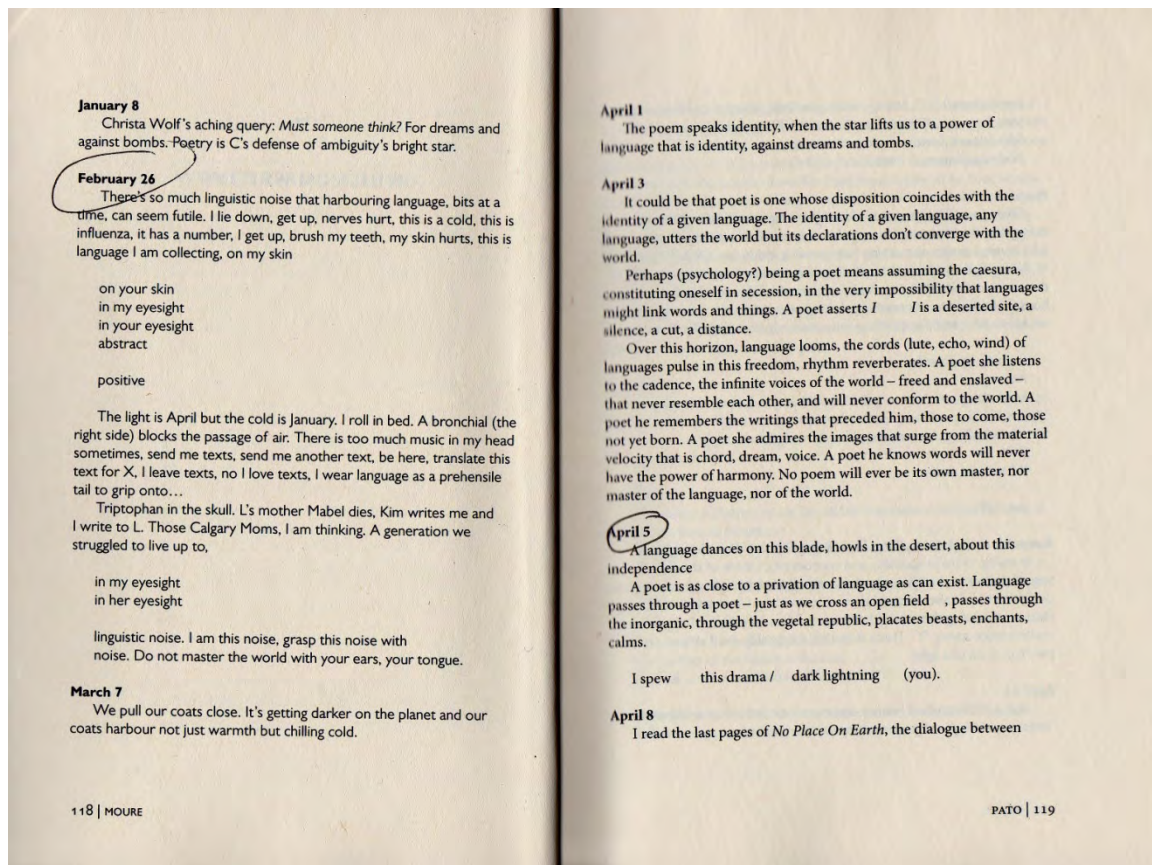
Even so, these perhaps more optimistic traits hide my own sombre vision of the world, and of the imagination and its scars, for I in fact bear a cruelly pessimistic vision of the future world, and of the progressive ruin of the planet. To bulwark that vision, I

can't code my poems and my textual processes in a bacterium as Christian Bök does, a bacterium that then will replicate poetry even when there are no more human beings left. My book, *Insecession*, will perish, as will Pato's *Secession*. Their combination is a book that is already starting to crumble, a book that involves two biographies of two women, two poets, two lives or voices or retrospective constructions or thinking processes that are no longer possible lives. And we are still young, Pato and I. We are still writing and learning to write; language is still teaching us.

What's important to me (the I who writes this essay now) in all this is not my biography – and I would insist that neither my nor Pato's autobiographies are exemplary. What interests me above all are the intersections and echoes between biographies. What counts for me, and what materializes in my reading is the *one* that arises between *two*, the life that emerges from two lives.

Yet what is the 'material' of such an intersection, of a 'between,' of any intersection? If I first claim, as a poet and thinker, to have a material practice in language, how can I then defend an *intersection*, where materialities simply seem to pass by without taking form?

Intersections involve unsealed edges that let material leak in order to cross over, and what leaks is the very material that the borders should protect and limit. They are sites, as a result, where we human actors are not yet able to define the material, the matter, or 'what matters.' Perhaps we never will be able to, as the very conjunctions point us to a material (language) that has properties for which our tools (language) are inadequate. I think here of Agamben's *ex opere operato*: "more real than being because it exists only in the operation that makes it real... it acts *ex opere operato*, independently of the qualities of the subject that it celebrates, or calls attention to..." (Agamben, 2013 xii).



Rather than guaranteeing the emergence of a subjectivity (the social purpose of a biography), these two books jointly decompose it, because no unitary subject or subjects emerge from the discourse of these two women. Yet, and still, I think a new subjectivity or alter-subjectivity does arise between the two, and in between their two texts, singular (Pato, written alone) and dual (Moure, written as echo). What arises isn't a desubjectivization or a resubjectivization, but an emergent in(tra)subjectivity that surges from reading itself, and thus is situated, strangely, in proximity to the reader, in the very act of reception. It is a subjectivity that comes without matter and utterly without any guarantee. And it seems to have no need to be framed by any phantasm of future replication; it recognizes and walks the border of the readable/unreadable now, creating a textual space of the 'between.'

This subjectivity, this in(tra)- or insubjectivity or ‘alterivity’⁵ that emerges is – as are all subject/ivities – subject to surveillance. From Edward Snowden and his revelations about Internet surveillance of persons in the United States and in the world who are ‘not yet’ suspected of any crime, we know irrevocably that each of our own words uttered in electronic media is monitored. This surveillance, however, along with the machinations that subtend it, is grounded on the existence of *individuals*. Individuals are the hooks on which the flux and flow of words emitted and received are pinned. Individuals are solid beings, embodied, and thus can be ‘selected’ for suspicion if the machines of state determine today or tomorrow (as our words are stored) that our ideas represent a risk for capital. Yet, in the inter-personal trafficking that constitutes the emerging ur-subjectivity of *In/Secession*, there is greater space for holes, for errors, and for language that does not make sense today but can only make sense tomorrow, than there is in any individual person. As such, it is impossible to know *yet* or to seize upon and monitor the thinking of this intrasubjectivity, which is not simply a link between two monitorable individuals but is *something else*, a something completely different that emerges when two thoughts and individuals are in consonance, in proximate space, in and between their languages. There is a new space of thinking that emerges which is neither the thoughts of one nor of the other, nor of the reader, but arises in between and among.⁶ This in-between is not monitorable, as any surveillance results in text riddled with gaps and errors. It is not structural but infrastructural. It appears and is sustained in the movement of reading itself, and in conversation about reading, and, of course, in poetic (and artistic, and philosophical) practice, which is also a readerly practice.

⁵ To coin a word.

⁶ I have been known to call this ‘the third space.’

To me, this thinking will be the thinking of tomorrow, tomorrow's place of freedom. What can upsurge between us, each and all, as readers and writers of any language, and as persons in this world of surveillance, is a subject not (completely) subjectable, and this subject emerges at the limits of language where the impossible deforms and reforms as possibility. Poetry.

For what matters, as I mentioned earlier, is poetry.

That's the end, really, of what I have to say. I'm aware that my argument gives rise to further questions, however, so I will go on to ask and answer one!

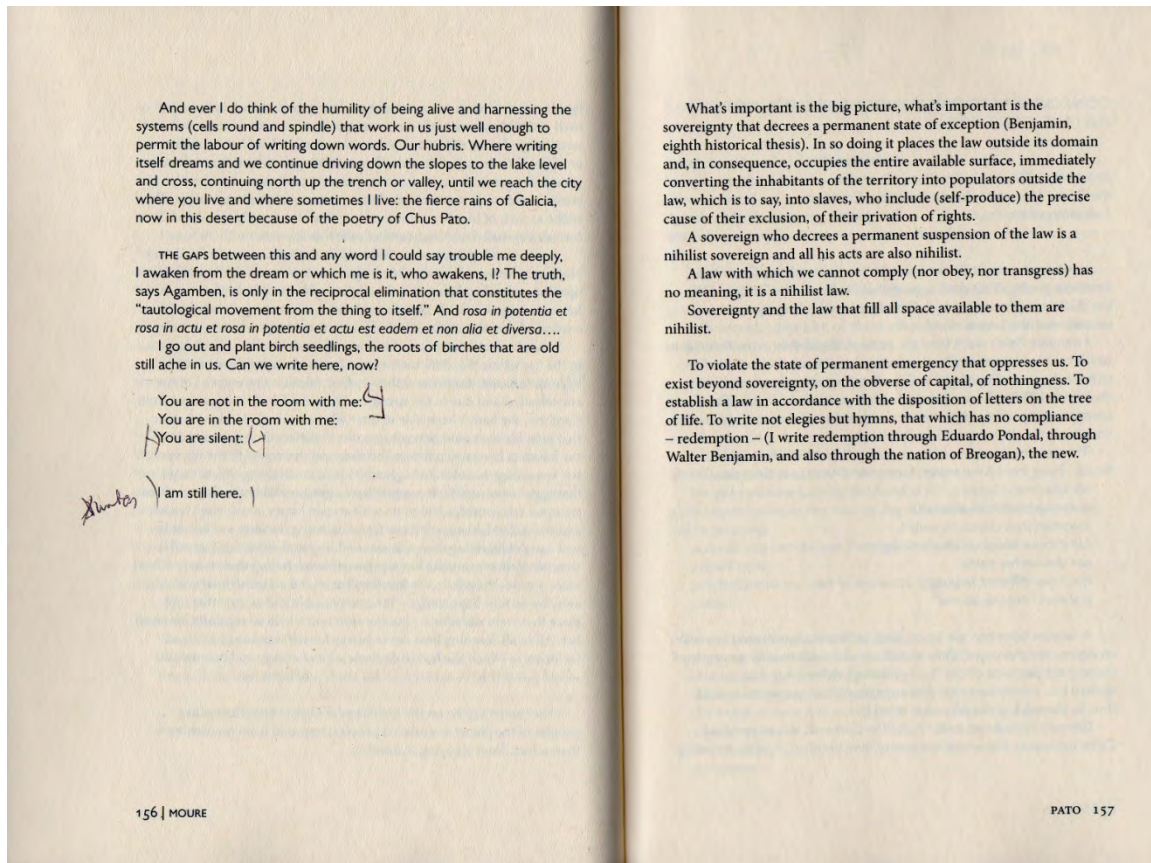
What should these ideas mean now to a reader who seeks not subjectivity's sputter and holler but rather pleasure and gain in reading? I maintain that there *is* a pleasure in reading that above all comes from risk, from the very risk of no guarantees that places the subject in a questioned, opened, cicatrized, tensile position. This risk, an abstract thing, reflects the very real opening of synapses in the brain in the act of reading. To risk loss, and termination, and corrosion is to also participate in the gorgeous exchange of words, the co-construction of poetry in a world that would otherwise pursue freedom, it seems, through fear and surveillance. The beauty of reading is that, once opened, these synapses can stay open in our lives, and give each of us the critical powers to view paradox and contradiction, and not be frightened by, or vulnerable to, dogmatism. These powers are essential in order not to fall prey to the dogmatism of those who govern us and will make us bend though it may be that no one of us will even feel the bending.

These powers are the promise of literature. It offers freedom, not from surveillance but from the dogmatism that drives it, that finds sustenance in surveillance.

Literature: what is it but a writing formed with lettered signs that give rise to a grammar, one that sustains and cherishes an alteration of the very world? The promise of literature, I sustain, is what materializes in the immateriality of the intersection of the words of Chus Pato and Erín Moure, for example, in their memories and in their poetic discussions, their prying apart of ‘poet’ and ‘translator.’ This radical immateriality is what is summed up for me in the word ‘biopoetics.’⁷

And the Galician *imaginaire* of Chus Pato? It’s not ‘peripheral’ but ‘central.’ It is a pebble that, once cast into the ocean, lands and precipitates larger and larger waves around the point where it fell. Galicia, the Galician language, thoughts of social and linguistic justice, and the possibilities that loom large in the words of Chus Pato, echo thereafter in cultures in other places, and help, in their small way, all culture grow, all ‘critical power,’ all reading.

⁷ A bow here too to Canadian poet Fred Wah’s ‘biotext,’ iterated in all his works in some way but here I will signal *Waiting for Saskatchewan* and *Diamond Grill*.



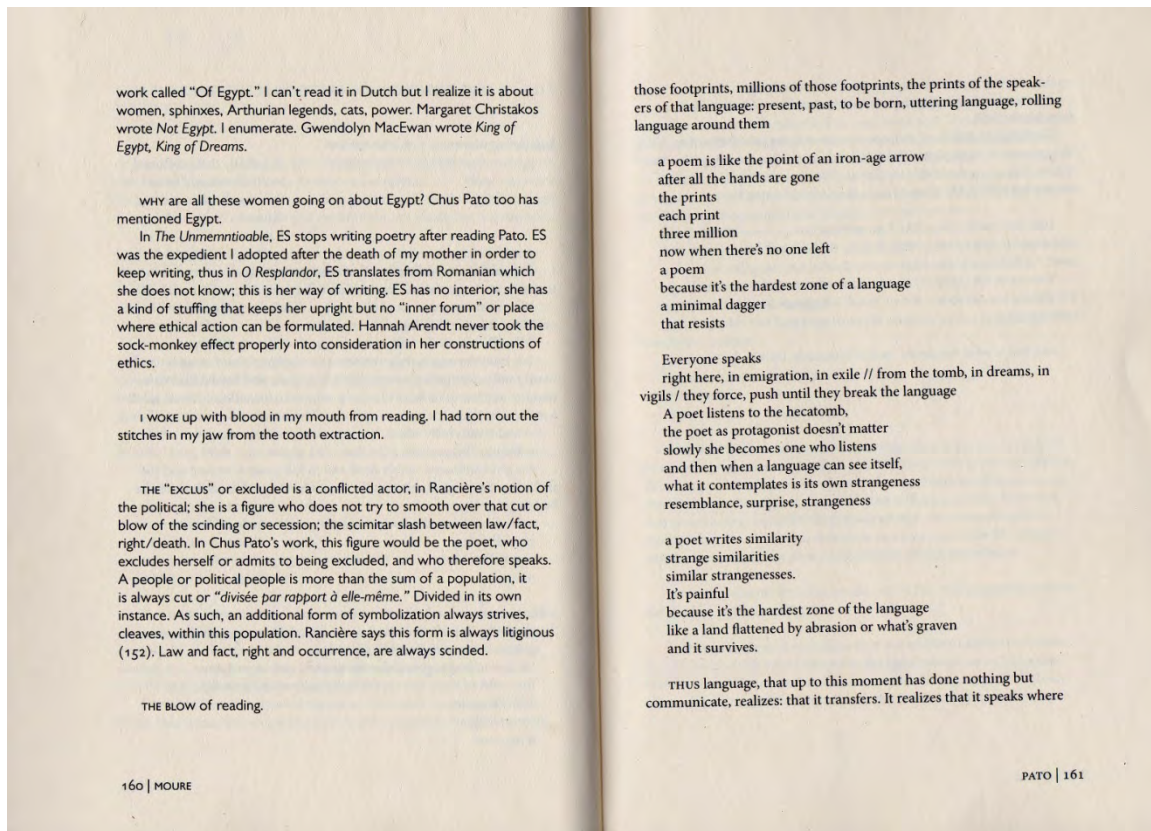
Thus the Galician language, even for those elsewhere who do not speak it, matters to us all. Poetry (who knew?) matters to us all. Women in poetry, even women of ‘a certain age,’ matter to us all.

They matter for our happiness, for our hunger, for our thinking out possibilities in that space-to-come where surveillance may not totally own us. As Agamben wrote: “La pensée pour moi c’est le courage du désespoir. N’est-ce pas le comble d’optimisme?” [To me, thought is the courage of desperation/hopelessness/despair. Is that not the height of optimism?]. (2012; my translation)

Regarding the role of biography, or autobiography, there is a direction perhaps in the words of Foucault, who said in 1982 in his “Conversation avec Werner Schroeter”: “The art of living is that of killing psychology, of creating – with ourselves and with

others – individuals, beings, relationships, qualities, that are unnamed. If we can't manage to do that in our lives, they don't deserve to be lived" (2015; my translation).

Like the books of Foucault or Agamben, this twinned book of Moure and Pato, with or without their wanting it, under surveillance but free, rubs gladly at the borders of a desperate thinking, an aimless thinking on poetry and translation and nation and language, and on attentionality.⁸ In so doing, the *Insecessional Secession* seeks the public of the reader, the public already present in and of the reader, and, in tandem, for its writers, it "cherche à se faire une âme anonyme", or "seeks to make of itself an anonymous soul" (Bordeleau 21; my translation).



⁸ Attentionality is something that enters my conversations in other places, for example in Roth, Brian. "A Conversation with Erin Moure." in *580 Split*, Oakland, CA, spring 2013.

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Credits

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