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NOTES FROM THE BLACK PALACE: A REVIEW OF JOSÉ REVUELTAS'S *THE HOLE*

The Hole. José Revueltas. Introduction by Álvaro Enrigue. Translated by Amanda Hopkinson and Sophie Hughes. New Directions. October 2018. 79 pp. \$12.95 (paperback).

The year 2019 will mark fifty years since publication of *El apando*, the 10,000-word short story that Mexican novelist José Revueltas wrote in six weeks at El Palacio de Lecumberri penitentiary. In his introduction to the book's new edition, Mexican author Álvaro Enrigue says, "I consider the final twenty pages of *The Hole* one of the greatest pieces of writing from the twentieth century composed in Spanish" (14). Yet even aficionados of prison literature are less likely to have heard of it than they are Malcolm Braly's *On the Yard*, Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead*, Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* or Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Thanks to the Hopkinson-Hughes translation, *The Hole* now assumes its rightful place alongside those perennials.

Some background on the author and setting is in order: Revueltas was a Communist; seven-term president Porfirio Díaz built the Black Palace to contain political dissidents. By the time Revueltas arrived, presumed guilty and sentenced to two years for being the left-wing "intellectual author" of student movement demonstrations leading to the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre, Lecumberri was "over-crowded with petty criminals" (6). On Tlatelolco night, 1,345 were arrested; some were "forcibly abducted" (7); others simply "disappeared"; many were tortured. Not Revueltas. He wasn't even in the hole. Isolated from fellow political prisoners, he was housed with murderers from the lowest rungs of society. He was also granted access to a typewriter, and so began *El apando*.

Rumors of the work's "difficulty" are greatly exaggerated. Storywise, it's simple. Three dope-sick inmates confined to punitive segregation (*apandados*)

are holed up in a punishment cell (*el apando*). They've conned three women into muling, past three guards, during visiting hours, thirty grams of heroin stuffed in a jerry-rigged tampon "up [the] crack" (60) of the eldest female, the one least likely to be strip-searched. Revueltas, an atheist obsessed with "Mexican religiosity," as Octavio Paz noted in his preface to Revueltas' first novel, *Human Mourning*, is working in threes; shackled triplets jangle "to the swing of each step" (24), like ankle-chains and belly-chains around a pacing prisoner's wrists and feet. "The novel opens," Enrigue explains, "at the precise moment of the female visitors entering the prison" (11). Among the three inmates, suspended in "a kind of despairing eternity" (47), tension builds. Will they and their accomplices succeed in introducing contraband into the facility?

While the brevity of *The Hole* can be absorbed in a single sitting, the "singular peculiarities" (46) of Revueltas's narration cannot. Most obvious of these is that the story unfolds over the course of one paragraph, fifty pages long, of consciousness streaming intermittently, conventionally punctuated, carefully orchestrated, suggestive of both claustrophobia and expansiveness. Revueltas, says Paz in *Human Mourning*, "barely alludes to what [his characters] actually do," but rather "prefers to tell us what they think, what they remember, and what they feel." Yet the reader quickly grows accustomed to this simultaneity of overload and deprivation, as the sense of sight does to darkness, or hearing to the sounds that guards can't "pin on any one person" (69), the ricochet of human voices off stone and steel, fists and feet kicking and banging on cell doors, the collective roar of "exclamations, shouts, insults and guffaws, some in protest, some in sympathy, and some savagely gleeful" (72). It goes almost unnoticed for the first twenty-five pages that, beyond waiting for the drugs to exchange hands, nothing really "happens."

Revueltas was a writer capable of what Paz deems "subtlety and profundity of analysis." But he was also "a writer of impulses and guesses, prolific and careless, sometimes awkward and other times brilliant." His brother was a composer, and Revueltas's prose—oracular, symbol-laden, "Christological" (13), hovers at the outer limits of what writing seems capable of expressing. Reading *The Hole* twice, first in Spanish and then in English, underscores one's suspicion that the text's occasional muddiness may be endemic to the original, not to the translation. Hopkinson and Hughes seem to have no difficulty following Revueltas's Marxist analyses of socioeconomic structures outside prisons and hierarchies within them. The problem they seem to have is with

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scaling up and down what Enrigue calls “opposing linguistic registers—that of the prisoners and that of the narrator” (15), with going back and forth between highly literary Spanish and Mexican prison slang.

A given chunk of translated text represents one of many possible solutions to a linguistic problem. So, rather than speak of “errors” in the Hopkinson-Hughes version, it’s better to talk choice and consequence. Prison slang varies from joint to joint, just as profanity does from region to region and from country to country, even within languages such as English. The voice you hear in a prison drama like *Bronson*—a film, to quote Enrigue’s introduction out of context, about “prison life as an avant-garde production, where Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty, Jean Genet’s Theater of Hatred, and Ionesco’s Theater of the Absurd all intersect” (7) is very “different to” that of even *Chopper*. In *The Hole*, sound is everything because “in the dark, they couldn’t tell one from the other, except by the tone of voice they used” (27). Hopkinson and Hughes just happen to be British, but the reader’s sense of their dialogue being off-pitch and out of key is not a question of their choosing “governor” over “warden.” In fact, the “foreignness” of certain word choices is what lends their translation piquancy.

More problematic in establishing a tonal center for *The Hole* is how to translate the name of the prisoner farthest down the pecking order. His cellmates nickname him El Carajo, an expletive containing an almost “infinite number of meanings” (30), depending on usage. In the galley stage of book production, Hopkinson and Hughes called him “The Prick,” which is etymologically correct but not quite right. A simpler solution, one that loses less of Revueltas’s humor in translation, would simply be to leave “El Carajo” untranslated and let the reader’s imagination fill in the blanks for all the senses in which Revueltas puns on its usages—since he could give a flying *carajo* about anything or anybody, is a waste of space, a useless *carajo*, cripple, missing one lung, blind in his right eye, and even with his one good eye, the criminal eye, can’t see *un carajo* through the peephole. As far as they’re concerned, he can go to *el carajo*. In fact, once “amped up” on the drugs they hope to score, they plot to kill him off, during movie night, one to shank him in the ribs while the other covers his mouth so he can’t squeal. Because El Carajo’s the type who’d rat out his mother in order to save his own skin. *Pinche carajo*.

Given mounting rates of incarceration among US citizens and legal residents alike, not to mention immigrant detainees, New Directions’s

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decision to reissue *The Hole* in the landmark Hopkinson-Hughes translation seems all the more timely and bold. Consider, too, that until the University of Minnesota Press released *Human Mourning* in 1990, no book-length work by Revueltas had ever appeared in English. Likely to appeal to a wider audience than the tiny percentage traditionally targeted by publishers of foreign fiction in translation, *The Hole* signals that the art of José Revueltas is no longer the exclusive province of Mexico, the “Boom” in Latin American literature, or even the Spanish language. This is a book many will find relevant.