

## HOW POEMS WORK

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*(from)*

# Most Intimates Mélange

BY ANDRÉS AJENS

### III. zu den Stimmen von Estremadura

at this rate, inti-  
midated in cochabamba?

at this rate

a lean day away from santa cruz  
saint ignatius & co.,

face to face

at this rate, igneo- (chiñihue),  
my date in concepción, more or same?

~~no pasarán.~~

—translation by E. Mouré

**T**ranslating poets is a task of absolute listening, and has taught me endlessly about mystery and paradox in poems. Poetry is able to sustain dense layers of reference, and that it never gives up its references fully is part of what lets us touch mystery, the incommensurate. We just have to let ourselves wonder, instead of feeling we must "get" everything. (If that were the case, we'd have to reject even Shakespeare and the Bible!)

This poem, from a long book by Chilean poet and essayist Andrés Ajens, brings us a southern view that our northern-hemisphere cultural biases often can't help us "solve." The poem works by using multiple echoes — of other poets, events current and ancient, aboriginal cultures (*inti* is Ayamara for "sun," *cochabamba* Quechua for "land of marshy lakes") — in two colonial languages: Castilian and German.

Geographically, Chile is South America's western spine, its Extremadura. Yet many of the poem's places — Santa Cruz, San Ignacio, Cochabamba — are in Bolivia, as if in order to face Chile, one has to leave it. Concepción is in Chile; it's not so easy to leave one's conception.

Non-geographic meanings are here too: *santa cruz* is "holy cross," the crusading Catholic religion; St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits who so permeated life in the Americas during early colonization. *Concepción* echoes the immaculate C., but also one's own.

Also crucial are echoes within words: witness "intimidated" and my date, "ignatius" and "igneo." And, by Ajens's suggestion, the original "no pasarán" is translated by "~~no pasarán~~." The words are unaltered, for the cry of Spanish Republicans defending Madrid, "They will not pass," have not passed.

Ajens cites it, however, not from Spain but from the great German language poet Paul Celan's *Shibboleth*, the last lines of which form Ajens's title: "To the voices/ of Extremadura." Ajens's poem addresses, then, the voices of his own country, his Extremadura. And "Extremadura" also echoes, in Spanish, as "extreme duress." Hard voices.

There's another echo of exile and war in the original Spanish: "*allende santa cruz / san ignacio & cia.*" Allende means "beyond," but it's also the name of Chile's president, killed in Pinochet's 1973 coup. "A lean day away" keeps the sound of Allende, and still leans beyond the holy cross, whose religion has traced such bitter paths (just ask native peoples — and now it's beatifying Pius IX) and from St. Ignatius's company.

At this rate, the poem asks, in this way, given the world's odiousness, is one's own conception just "more or less" or "more of same"? And the poem answers: *No pasarán*. It's clear in its resistance. Even when barred, "under erasure," the poem's powerful password and rallying cry can't vanish.

*Erin Mouré is an acclaimed Montreal poet and translator, her most recent collections are A Frame of the Book (aka The Frame of a Book) (1999) and Pillage Laud (1999).*

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