



## Pizarnik through Levine's Looking Glass: How Subversive Is the Scribe?

### Pizarnik sous la plume de Levine : à quel point la scribe est-elle subversive?

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Résumé de l'article

On connaît avant tout Suzanne Jill Levine pour ses traductions anglaises de Cabrera Infante, Sarduy et Puig, avec qui elle a travaillé en étroite collaboration. Alors que plusieurs se sont penchés sur ses traductions de prose masculine, peu se sont intéressés à ses traductions d'œuvres féminines. Dans cette étude, nous analysons quelques-unes de ses traductions de la poète argentine Alejandra Pizarnik pour voir comment Levine se comporte lorsqu'elle traduit l'œuvre poétique d'une femme. D'abord, considérant que Levine se décrit comme une « scribe subversive qui 'transcrite' des écrits renforçant les frontières du discours patriarcal », comment le fait de traduire une auteure du même sexe influence-t-il ses « transcréations »? Ensuite, compte tenu de la complexité de la traduction de la prose que Levine a souvent soulignée, réfutant la « croyance populaire selon laquelle il est plus facile de traduire des romans que de la poésie », comment aborde-t-elle la traduction de poèmes lyriques? Enfin, à quel point est-elle rebelle quand elle traduit une auteure décédée qu'elle ne peut consulter?

# **Pizarnik through Levine’s Looking Glass: How Subversive Is the Scribe?<sup>1</sup>**

**Madeleine Stratford**

## **Introduction**

In the translation world, Suzanne Jill Levine is known above all for her English translations of Latin-American writers Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Severo Sarduy and Manuel Puig, with whom she worked closely. While much has been written about her “subversive” translations of fiction by men, little research has been done on her translations of women writers. In this paper, I analyze a selection of her English renditions of the work of Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik. These translations are unlike Levine’s other work in three distinct yet interrelated ways. Firstly, the originals were written by a woman. Secondly, Pizarnik wrote mainly lyrical poetry, both in verse and in prose. Thirdly, Pizarnik had already died when Levine translated her, which precludes the possibility of direct collaboration. Because Pizarnik’s poems represent such a clear exception in Levine’s work as a literary translator, I am interested to see whether or not she will handle them in a way similar to what is usually attributed to her. First, I will discuss Levine’s concept of subversion, because many critics seem to have misunderstood her use of the term. Then, I will show what Pizarnik has in common with the marginal writers Levine tends to translate. Finally, by comparing Pizarnik’s lyrical voice with its English translation, I intend to see how Levine actually deals with the work of a female poet.

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<sup>1</sup> The author was awarded the 2007 Vinay-Darbelnet Prize by CATS for this article.

## 1. Levine's self-image as a subversive scribe

In scholarly articles, interviews and mostly in her book titled *The Subversive Scribe*, Levine explains how she conceives of literary translation in general, and of her work as literary translator in particular. In all these texts, Levine warns us that she is a compulsive punster and that it is to be expected that she will play with words, especially with those that translation scholars are familiar with, such as “betrayal,” “faithfulness,” “submissiveness” and “subversion.” Levine’s playful way of theorizing on translation, however, has led many critics to find her observations confusing or even contradictory. This scholarly debate seems to originate mostly from a basic misunderstanding of Levine’s terminology. To set the record straight, let us start by summarizing Levine’s comments on subversive translation in order to understand what her concept of “subversion” really entails.

First, it is worth pausing on the famous title of Levine’s book, and more specifically on the heavily charged word “subversive.” Andreea Modrea explains that most dictionaries, whether general or specialized, always describe subversion as “an aggressive political act” (2004, p. 224). In the translation world, argues Modrea, the term has come to be used almost exclusively in relation to feminist translation: “‘Subversive translation’ is synonymous with such concepts as ‘hijacking’ or ‘womanhandling’ a text and refers to deliberate intervention in the source text by the feminist translator for the purpose of furthering a feminist agenda” (2006, p. 1). After a thorough reading of *The Subversive Scribe*, however, it is clear that Levine is not using the term in reference to feminist translation theories. Even Isabel Garayta, who deplores the fact that Levine does not adhere more firmly to the feminist definition of subversion, has to admit that the translator herself never uses the word in that context (1998, p. 222). But why should Levine have adhered to a feminist definition of subversion in the first place? After all, argues Modrea, Levine began to translate more than a decade before these translation theories were even born (2004, p. 140). Scholars often read someone else’s articles through their own theoretical grid. This is what seems to have happened to Levine’s critics, who have imputed a feminist stance to her translation theories often without further investigation<sup>2</sup>. Modrea sums up the actual fact of

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<sup>2</sup> Among others, see Garayta (1998) and Arrojo (1994).

the matter very clearly: “nowhere in *The Subversive Scribe* does Levine explicitly declare any alignment to the feminist translation movement, nor does she express having had any desire to ‘womanhandle’ the text” (2004, p. 140).

Let us leave aside feminist translation theories that do not seem to apply to Levine, then, and look at how she *really* describes her task as literary translator. According to Levine, literary translation is first and foremost a communication act which, like writing, demands that the reader both receive and interpret the message (1991, p. 24). She views translation as a twofold act, both creative and critical. On the one hand, the translator has to be creative, because s/he picks up where the author left off, thus continuing the original work: “Translation is really a mode of writing, [...] an incredibly creative activity” (1994, p. 2). On the other hand, the translator “re-creates” on the basis of his/her own interpretation of the text, which, to a certain extent, makes his/her work similar to that of the literary critic. In this respect, Levine believes that taking into consideration the effect that the original had on its intended public will help the translator choose which “interpretative function” is the most important to render (1991, p. 125). In order to do this, Levine suggests situating the text in the author’s production (1991, p. 131). Yet no matter how many precautions the translator takes, Levine warns, “translation betrays, because, like criticism, it makes choices” (1991, p. 34). In this interpretive context, one can better grasp Levine’s conception of translation as “subversion”: both a kind of creative “infidelity” towards the author and an uncovering of a “latent version implied in the original” (1991, p. 7). When reading these comments, it seems that the “subversive scribe” Levine describes is really a “subjective” one, as Flotow rightly puts it (Flotow, 1997, p. 37).

Later in her book, Levine explains that to a certain extent, “a translation must subvert the original,” considering “what is lost and can be gained in crossing the language barrier” (1992, p. 83). She adds that this is even more the case when the original itself can be considered subversive. This, she writes, is the reason why she purposely chose to translate challenging authors who transgress cultural taboos and the boundaries of language: “What drew me as a translator to these writers was the playful, creative possibility of self-betrayal, of re-creating (in) language” (1991, p. 182). The liberties the authors themselves took to destabilize their Spanish-speaking readers would in turn, give her license to shock her own Anglophone readers, since “the translations of [the original’s] ‘abuses’ [...] must also violate” (1991, p. 8). This

seems to suggest that the “subversiveness” of the translator concerns first and foremost her choice of original texts.

Based on an analysis of Levine’s translation of puns in *Three Trapped Tigers*, Modrea argues that “although she may be faithful to the source text (in a *sourcier* manner), it is in fact an ‘abusive fidelity’ because she recreates the postmodern style of the source text in English, focusing on the signifier; that is, the verbiage, the wordplay, the parodies” (2004, p. 45). Venuti explains that “abusive fidelity” occurs when “the translator seeks to reproduce whatever features of the foreign text abuse or resist dominant cultural values in the source language” by way of inventing “analogous means or signification that are doubly abusive, that resist dominant cultural values in the target language, but supplement the foreign text by rewriting it in that language” (1992, p. 12). Garayta, however, finds that Levine’s “liberties” are not so much “subversive” as “sub-version-al.” She argues that instead of resisting English cultural values, Levine perpetuates them, as she “strives for cultural equivalents and effects rather than for literal translations” (Garayta, 1998, p. 222). If in fact Levine does “rewrite her texts at the service of transparency, humor, and the sound of language,” (Garayta, 1998, p. 222) then she does not “reject fluency” but rather seeks it. Thus, Modrea would be wrong in linking her translation technique to the “abusive fidelity” described by Venuti (1992, p. 12).

On the one hand, Modrea is right to point out that Garayta never actually analyzes Levine’s translations, but rather focuses solely on what the translator writes in *The Subversive Scribe*. Indeed, relying exclusively on a translator’s theoretical writings could be misleading. After all, scholars have often noted discrepancies between what literary translators *write* about their task and how they actually *perform* it. What sometimes looks like a contradiction between theory and practice, however, could rather be a kind of complementarity suggesting that the only way to understand fully of a particular translator’s conception of his/her task is to analyze side by side *both* his/her theoretical writings *and* his/her actual translations.

On the other hand, Modrea’s own observations are based solely on Levine’s translation of Cabrera Infante’s *Tres tristes tigres*, which represents an exception in the translator’s career: “My contribution to the translation of *Tres tristes tigres* was not the usual contribution of a translator,” writes Levine in 1975. “The novel had

already been translated by Cabrera Infante and a young English poet, Donald Gardner. My task, then, was to collaborate with the author in adapting an already existing English text to American English, and also more to the style of Guillermo's style of humor" (Levine, 1975, pp. 268-269). This particular situation led to many conscious re-writings of the text condoned or even imposed by the original writer himself.

As we have seen above, Levine's work on Pizarnik is also an exception, which seems at first glance to be diametrically opposite to her experience with Cabrera Infante, at least as far as the author's gender, the text genre and the nature of the translation process are concerned. Yet at the same time, the fact that Levine could not consult Pizarnik nor work with her closely puts her in a more traditional position as a translator, working for the text itself. This should give a better idea of how Levine deals with a text when not guided (controlled?) by its author. The real center of interest here, then, is not so much *whether or not* Levine is indeed a "subversive" scribe according to feminist, political, or even to her own definitions of the word, but rather *what kind* of scribe she *actually* is when she translates Pizarnik, and *how* it *compares* to the way in which she defines her task as a literary translator throughout her theoretical writings.

## **2. Pizarnik's marginality**

Alejandra Pizarnik was born in Buenos Aires on April 29, 1936, as second daughter to Rosa and Elías Pizarnik, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. From 1960 to 1964 she lived in Paris, where she became friends with some of the most renowned Latin American writers of the twentieth century, such as Octavio Paz and Julio Cortázar. Her whole life, she battled with an amphetamine addiction and suffered from depression, and frequently called her friends at unduly hours, terrified to die or to turn mad. She died at 36 from a tranquilizer overdose after having made-up her dolls and written her last poem on her blackboard.

In part due to her premature death and also because she corrected her texts obsessively compulsively, Pizarnik published

relatively few books during her lifetime: seven short poetry books<sup>3</sup>, one piece of poetic prose<sup>4</sup>, and a handful of poems and articles in literary magazines. In fact, the greatest part of her work was published posthumously. *Textos de Sombra y últimos poemas*, an anthology of previously unpublished poems edited by Olga Orozco and Ana Becció, appeared in 1982, ten years after Pizarnik's death. Nearly 20 years later, Lumen published in Barcelona three new editions allegedly covering Pizarnik's entire opus: her complete poetry<sup>5</sup>, her complete prose<sup>6</sup> and her personal diaries<sup>7</sup>, all of them compiled and edited by Becció.

To a certain extent, Pizarnik seems to belong to the "marginal" authors Levine usually translates. First, Pizarnik's work doesn't belong to any particular school or movement. Throughout her work, she questions, criticizes, blames language. This trial of the word, expressed through words, constitutes the basis of Pizarnik's poetry. Melanie Nicholson argues that she "stands at odds with almost everything [the Generation of 1960 that Pizarnik chronologically belonged to] came to stand for" (2002, p. 71). In fact, Pizarnik never took part in any political activity whatsoever, as opposed to most writers of her generation. There is no trace of Argentina in her poems, concludes Gwen Kirkpatrick, "ni Perón, ni el tango, ni el habla cotidiana, ninguna referencia a lo político ni a lo histórico" [neither of Perón nor of the tango, nor of colloquial speech, no reference to the political or historical contexts] (1996, p. 13). It would be difficult, then, to say that Pizarnik was subversive, given the strong political connotation of the word that was mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, her work could be termed both marginal and eccentric. Since Levine declares to be above all "a translator of more marginal figure, and of more eccentric

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<sup>3</sup> *La tierra más ajena* (1955), *La última inocencia* (1956), *Las aventuras perdidas* (1958), *Árbol de Diana* (1962), *Los trabajos y las noches* (1965), *Extracción de la piedra de locura* (1968), *El infierno musical* (1971).

<sup>4</sup> *La condesa sangrienta* (1971).

<sup>5</sup> *Poesía completa*. Ana Becció, ed., Barcelona, Editorial Lumen.

<sup>6</sup> *Prosa completa*. Ana Becció, ed., Colección Palabra en el tiempo. Barcelona, Editorial Lumen, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> *Diarios*. Ana Becció, ed., Colección memorias y biografías. Barcelona, Editorial Lumen, 2003.

figures,” (1994, p. 2) Pizarnik definitely has something in common with the other, mostly male, writers Levine has translated.

Whether writing verse or prose poetry, Pizarnik put a great deal of attention on the spatial dimension of her texts. She wrote them on a blackboard, playing with the visual aspect of the words, the punctuation marks and the blank spaces. One could say that she wrote from the void, filling just the necessary space. Most of her texts are extremely short, a handful of lines barely occupying the page. For instance, out of the nine poems Levine has translated, only two contain more than 50 words: 56 in “Un sueño donde el silencio es de oro” (Pizarnik, 1968b, p. 27) and 88 in “Lazo mortal” (Pizarnik, 1971, p. 39). The remaining seven texts have around thirty words. Moreover, Pizarnik often double-spaces the lines, graphically showing their semantic distance, as in “En un otoño antiguo” (Pizarnik, 1968b, p. 38). At first glance, the lines seem to be a collage bringing together scattered bits and pieces from different poems. In fact, one can hardly guess where Pizarnik will cut a line or start a new stanza. Actually, although Pizarnik seems to be writing in free verse, she instead imposes new poetic rules. In this regard, translator Rose-Marie François makes a very enlightening comment on Ilse Aichinger’s poetry, which we think summarizes well the translator’s task when dealing with Pizarnik: “Et le blanc entre les mots est à lire. S’il est à lire, il est aussi à traduire” (François, 1999, p. 74).

Also, Pizarnik’s punctuation is scarce. Two or more sentences are frequently joined in the same poem or the same line without any indication of a beginning or an end. This is the case of “Tête de jeune fille”, which has no capital letters or punctuation marks:

*Tête de jeune fille (Odilon Redon)*

de música la lluvia  
de silencio los años  
que pasan una noche  
mi cuerpo nunca más  
podrá recordarse  
(Pizarnik, 1968b, p. 28)

First, the usual structure (“la lluvia de música”, “los años de silencio”) has been inverted with no comma, creating an overflow: words out of control, running free almost without logic. This lack of punctuation



tends to generate not only rhythm, but also meaning. Henri Meschonnic stresses the semantic importance of punctuation: “en modifiant la ponctuation, on fait subrepticement bouger un texte. Au moment même où on croit l’établir” (1999, p. 173). Consequently, Pizarnik’s translators have to pay a particular attention to the original’s punctuation (or absence thereof) and consider its potential implications before translating it.

However, Pizarnik defies not only punctuation rules: she also often transgresses the normative grammatical structure of the Spanish language. For instance, different phrases of a single poem are not always clearly linked. Therefore, her texts sometimes lack internal cohesion. In “Tête de jeune fille,” for example, it is impossible to know for sure whether the lines form one or two sentences, or if they form any sentence at all. Literary critic Michal Heidi Gai points out, for instance, that one can find subordinate clauses without a main clause, conjunctions that are out of context, phrases that would normally need a predicate but that do not appear to have one (Gai, 1992, pp. 247-248). Moreover, it is not unusual for Pizarnik to start a new line *in medias res*, with a conjunction, without linking it explicitly to the previous lines. This is precisely what happens in “Rescate” (Pizarnik, 1968b, p. 29) which begins with “y” (and), thus giving the impression that it is a fragment of a longer poem, or else presupposing some complicity with a reader who should already know what the lyrical I is talking about. Because of this, many of Pizarnik’s poems are ambiguous, if not downright hermetic, which makes them wide open to interpretation. According to Pizarnik, only the reader can “complete” her poems, make them “whole” and meaningful by reading and interpreting them: “Únicamente el lector puede terminar el poema inacabado, rescatar sus múltiples sentidos, agregarle otros nuevos. Terminar equivale, aquí, a dar vida nuevamente, a re-crear” [Only the reader can finish the incomplete poem, recover its multiple meanings, add new ones. Finishing, here, is equivalent to resuscitating, to re-creating] (Pizarnik, 1968a, p. 67). Pizarnik’s poetry should thus be a gold mine for Levine, who, as a “subversive scribe,” claims to uncover “latent meanings” and play creatively with language.

### **3. Case study**

Let us now see how Levine has dealt with a selection of poems in which Pizarnik overtly subverts language, thus leaving room for interpretation and liberty to “transcreate.” In all, Levine has translated

and published nine lyrical poems by Pizarnik, six of which are from *Extracción de la piedra de locura*, published in 1968, while three remaining texts are from *El infierno musical*, published in 1971<sup>8</sup>. Since Levine's comments tend to suggest that her degree of subversiveness as a translator is proportionally equivalent to that of the original, I have chosen to concentrate mainly on two poems in which Pizarnik clearly deviates from normative grammar and plays with words: *Fuga en lila* and *Figuras y silencios*. I will first analyze the poems in order to pinpoint their translation challenges. For each poem, I will then examine Levine's solutions and compare their effects to those of the Spanish originals.

### 3.1. Different fugues

#### Fuga en lila

**Había que escribir sin para qué,  
sin para quién.**

**El cuerpo se acuerda de un amor  
como encender la lámpara.**

**El silencio es tentación y promesa<sup>9</sup>.**  
(Pizarnik, 1971, p. 35)

#### Fugue in Lilac

One should write for no reason,  
for no one.

The body remembers a love  
the way one lights a lamp.

Silence is promise and temptation.  
(Levine 1987, pp. 85-86)

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<sup>8</sup> The poems in Ana Becció's new edition of Pizarnik's complete work are sometimes presented in a slightly different form than in their first publication. "Signos," "Fuga en lila" and "Del otro lado," for instance, each appear as three-line double-spaced poems. Becció explains that she based her versions on Pizarnik's original manuscripts (Becció in Pizarnik, 2000, p. 455). Although these "new" originals present an interesting contrast to the first editions, the fact that they had not yet been published at the time when Levine translated the poems makes a detailed formal analysis of Becció's edition irrelevant in the present paper. Levine does not mention her source explicitly, but one can assume that she based her translations on the first published versions of the poems, or on reproductions thereof.

<sup>9</sup> Here, it is worth mentioning that a very interesting grammatical subversion appears in Becció's revised edition of *Fuga en lila*, where the last line reads "Si silencio es tentación y promesa." Here, "si" introduces a conditional clause or an expression of doubt or choice between alternatives. The conjunction does seem to link the clause to the preceding line, even if the presence of a period (instead of a comma, for instance) partly severs the connection between the two sentences. If the last line were indeed related to the second one, it could have at least two possible meanings: 1) the body can "remember a love like lighting a

### 3.1.1. *Fuga en lila* out of context

As the word “fuga” suggests, this poem is both a sort of escape and a musical composition. In her translation, Levine chose the word “fugue.” The English expression “fugue” refers to the emotional state of someone who experiences a “loss of awareness of [his or her] identity” (*Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, p. 603). This seems particularly appropriate in the case of Pizarnik’s poetry, whose lyrical I often lacks unity. In fact, one could even say that it suffers from a multiple personality disorder, as Gai explains: “El ‘yo’ y el ‘ella’ se sustituyen libremente en una secuencia y el ‘tú’ puede intercambiar su posición con el ‘yo’” [The ‘I’ and the ‘she’ are freely interchangeable in a same sequence and the ‘you’ can switch positions with the ‘I’.] (Gai, 1992, p. 251). In choosing to keep the word “fugue”, Levine keeps the musical connotation and shifts the reference to “running away” from a concrete setting to a psychological one.

As for the Spanish word “lila,” it can refer both to a color and to a flower, and its ending evokes the note “la,” which strengthens the musical connotation of the title. Unfortunately, this wordplay is bound to be lost in the English translation, since the word “lilac” does not end with the syllable “la.” Furthermore, English speakers tend to call this note “A,” referring to the diatonic scale instead of the fixed-do system. That being said, the double meaning of “lilac” (color and flower) is nonetheless kept intact in Levine’s English translation, because the word has been left in the singular.

The first sentence has a repetitive structure: “sin para quién” echoes “sin para qué.” This creates a rhythm which could be considered “fugue-like.” Here, Pizarnik plays with linguistic categories: “para qué” and “para quién” are question phrases, but Pizarnik uses them in a nominal context, as synonyms for “razón” (reason) and “destinatario” (addressee). What is meant is that in the past, it was necessary for the

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lamp” *only when* “silence is temptation and promise”, 2) the body can “remember a love like lighting a lamp,” and it can *also* remember *whether* (or not) “silence” is *at once* both “temptation and promise.” If this alteration indeed stems from the poet’s manuscripts, as Becció claims, the fact that the conjunction “Si” has been replaced by the article “El” in the first published edition could suggest that even Pizarnik’s original editors were tempted to “correct” the poet’s grammatical subversiveness.

lyrical I to write for writing's sake, without any particular motive or recipient in mind. Levine translates this line as "One should write for no reason, for no one." Although she did recreate a repetitive structure ("for no reason, for no one"), she did not take advantage of the possibility of playing with language that the original offers. Using question words, Levine could have written something like "without why, without for whom" or "for no why, for no whom." This is what both French translators of the poem did<sup>10</sup>. Instead, she chose the meaning of the question words over their uncanny effect.

In addition, the auxiliary verb "should" in her translation gives the line a prescriptive tone, as if the lyrical I were stating a universal moral duty. Yet in Spanish, "había que" clearly expresses an obligation in the *past tense*. Even though "should" stands as a past form of "shall," it is used more often as a deontic modal in everyday language, expressing an obligation holding from the moment of speech on<sup>11</sup>. Without a doubt, Levine's version uncovers a potential "sub-version" of the original line. However, it noticeably changes its tone. In English, another modal verb expressing "obligation" is "must," which has no past form. The non-modal "had to" might have been a closer equivalent to the original meaning.

The second line of the poem is grammatically ambiguous, mainly because of the infinitive, "encender" ("to light" or "to turn on"). Usually, one would expect the second verb of the comparison to share the same subject as the first one, "el cuerpo." Yet here, because the second verb is not conjugated, it is impossible to know for sure who the subject of the action "encender" is. Once more, Pizarnik seems to be playing with grammatical categories, treating "encender" like a noun, as in "el hecho de encender." This might be a common phenomenon in German, where all verbs can be used as substantives, but it is quite puzzling for a Spanish reader. In her translation, Levine did not convey the surprising effect of Pizarnik's linguistic transgression, but rather tried to express the meaning of the line. But in deciding to conjugate the verb "encender," she had to determine a possible subject, thus

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<sup>10</sup> See: Baron Superville and Couffon, 2005, and Rodari, 1975.

<sup>11</sup> "Should" is the past counterpart of "shall" in reported speech. In British English, it is also sometimes used as an equivalent to "would" to indicate the conditional. Neither of these uses is common in North America, where "should" is generally interpreted as a deontic linked to the present. In the past, this deontic is expressed by "should have."

disambiguating the line. Instead, Levine could have chosen to recreate Pizarnik's ambiguity by using, for instance, a present participle, as in "like lighting a lamp." The fact that Levine could have translated thus, but did not do so implies that she made a choice. Levine is thus quite right when she writes that it is because translation "makes choices" that it sometimes "betrays" (Levine, 1991, p. 34).

### **3.1.2. *Fuga en lila* in context**

According to the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, a fugue is "a contrapuntal composition in which a short melody or phrase (the subject) is introduced by one part and successively taken up by others and developed by interweaving the parts." At first glance, it is difficult to see how this poem could be "fugue-like," as there are not many repetitions in it. Yet one has to consider that the poem forms part of a series of three texts appearing one after the other in *El infierno musical* (Pizarnik, 1971, pp. 33, 35, 37). These are the only poems in the book to present the same structure: three sentences lacking cohesion and divided into three very tight stanzas of one or two lines. Let us now briefly discuss the relationship between the three texts in order to better understand the overall meaning of "Fuga en lila."

The first text, "Signos" (Pizarnik, 1971, p. 33), not only shares strong thematic links with "Fuga en lila," but it is also its exact mirror-image as far as stanza structure is concerned (1 line/2 lines/2 lines, instead of 2 lines/2 lines/1 line):

#### **Signos**

**Todo hace el amor con el silencio.**

**Me habían prometido un silencio  
como un fuego, una casa de silencio.**

**De pronto el templo es un circo y  
la luz un tambor.**

The "love" that the "body remembers" in the second stanza of "Fuga en lila" seems to refer to the first line of "Signos," where "Everything makes love with silence." Also, the mention of "como encender la lámpara" (like lighting a lamp) seems to be linked both to the "silencio como un fuego" (silence like fire) in the third line of "Signos" and to the "light" which becomes "a drum" in the last line. Moreover, the last

line of “Fuga en lila” clearly summarizes the first two stanzas of “Signos,” which are mostly about “silence” and how it is both a temptation, a sexual attraction (“Todo hace el amor con el silencio”), and an expected gift or a promise (“Me habían prometido un silencio como un fuego, una casa de silencio”).

As for the third text of the series, “Del otro lado” (Pizarnik, 1971, p. 37), its thematic connection with the other two seems to depend mostly on the musical theme: in “Signos,” there are “silences” and a “drum;” in “Fuga en lila,” there is a “fugue” and a “silence,” and in “Del otro lado,” the word “música” (music) appears four times, and the word “voz” (voice), twice.

### **Del otro lado**

**Como un reloj de arena cae la  
música en la música.**

**Estoy triste en la noche de colmi-  
llos de lobo.**

**Cae la música en la música como  
mi voz en mis voces<sup>12</sup>.**

In this third poem, the silence desired by the lyrical I, both its temptation and its promise, has disappeared. Only music and voices are left, which could explain why the lyrical I is “sad.” Also, while “light” was present in the first two poems (“fuego” and “luz” in “Signos”; “lámpara” in “Fuga en lila”), it has faded away in “Del otro lado,” which takes place during the “night of a wolf’s fangs.” Thematically, then, the first two poems seem to be both “on the same side,” while this

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<sup>12</sup>

#### **On the other side**

Like an hourglass music  
falls into music.

I am sad in the night  
of a wolf’s fangs.

Music falls into music like  
my voice in my voices.

(My translation.)

third one, is “on the other side,” as its title indicates. As for the structure of “Del otro lado,” it is interesting to observe how close it is to that of a musical fugue. Indeed, the theme (or exposition) stated at the end of the first stanza, “cae la música en la música” is repeated word for word at the beginning of the third stanza (“Cae la música en la música), and then altered as to produce a variation on a theme (“como mi voz en mis voces”).

Levine translated two of the three poems: “Signos” (“Signs”) and “Fuga en lila” (“Fugue in Lilac”); the translations are the first two published in the anthology *The Renewal of the Vision*. This seems to suggest that Levine was conscious of the connection between the two poems. Levine’s translation of “Signos” is almost exactly the same as Susan Bassnett’s, published more than a decade later (2002), which probably means that the semantic content of the poem leaves no particular room for the translator to be “creative.” However, while Levine respected almost exactly the spatial disposition of the poem<sup>13</sup> and its strophic divisions, Bassnett clearly modified the form of the poem:

<b>Signs</b>	<b>SIGNS</b>
Everything makes love with silence.	Everything makes love with silence.
They had promised me a silence like fire, a house of silence.	They promised me a silence like fire, a house of silence. Suddenly the temple is a circus
Suddenly the temple is a circus and the light, a drum. (Levine, 1987, p. 85)	the light a drum (Bassnett, 2002, p. 32)

Indeed, Bassnett’s version couples the two last stanzas of the poem into one four-line stanza. Also, it does not present the slight indentation at the beginning of each stanza of the original (and of Levine’s translation). Moreover, Bassnett introduces a change in the punctuation of the text: the last line of her translation has no full stop, while the original text does.

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<sup>13</sup> The blank space between the stanzas is slightly wider in Levine’s translation than in the (very compact) original, but this seems to depend on the font type chosen by the respective editors.

In fact, in Bassnett's bilingual edition, both the English *and the Spanish* present the same structure, which differs *in both cases* from Pizarnik's original text (see Bassnett, 2002, p. 32). In a recently published article, Bassnett explains that she "translated dozens of [Pizarnik's] poems, from pirate editions (no definitive edition had appeared), with no intention of publishing them" (Bassnett, 2006, p. 179). Even if it might be true, as Bassnett claims, that there was no "definitive" original version at the time she made her translations, Becciu's edition of Pizarnik's work had been out for two years when Bassnett published her book. The translator either was not aware of its existence, or simply chose to ignore it precisely because she never intended to make them public in the first place. Then again, it could also be that Bassnett felt entitled to reinvent the poem's form. After all, she openly admits to having taken here more liberties in her Pizarnik translations than she usually does, ultimately declaring accuracy to have been "irrelevant," as she was translating Pizarnik mainly "for pleasure" (Bassnett 2006, p. 182). This peculiar translating situation suggests that Bassnett's changes to the poem's form were probably intentional.

### 3.2. From "silences" to "silence"

#### *Figuras y silencios*

Manos crispadas me confinan al exilio.  
Ayúdame a no pedir ayuda.  
Me quieren anochecer, me van a morir.  
Ayúdame a no pedir ayuda.  
(Pizarnik, 1968b, p. 20)

#### **Figures and Silence**

Trembling hands send me into exile  
Let me not ask for help  
They want me to fall like night, to go and die  
Let me not ask for help.  
(Levine 1997)

#### 3.2.1. Pizarnik's *Figuras y silencios*

Thematically, this poem represents a silent cry for help. In the first line, the lyrical I describes the difficult situation she has to face: twitching hands hold her prisoner and deport her far away from home. In the third



line, the menacing nature of the hands is reinforced. There is a clear gradation in the description of the hands' actions, beginning with what they *are* doing to her (*confinar*), moving to what they *want* to do to her (*anocheecer*), and ending on what they *will* (most probably) do to her (*morir*). While the first and the third lines inform the reader of the threat menacing the lyrical I, the second and fourth lines are written in the form of a plea. The lyrical I urges an invisible other to "help her" keep silent and not "ask for help." Ironically, however, the lyrical I *is* asking for help at the same time she claims not to want any: "Ayúdame," is an imperative, a direct request. Could it be that what is at stake here is the literary life of the writer whose work is slowly killing her? Could it be that the hands she describes are in fact keeping her restricted to the written page, stranded in a world not of people but of words, away from real life? In any case, this could be a possible reading of the poem, considering the fact that most scholars underline the intimate relationship Pizarnik establishes between life and poetry, as well as her fantasy of living inside her own poems.

However, the real interest of this poem—at least from a translator's point of view—lies not so much in its content as in its form, in Pizarnik's ingenious treatment of Spanish. This is especially the case in the third line, where two intransitive verbs—*anocheecer* and *morir*—have been given a direct object: *me*. In Spanish, *anocheecer* can act both as a noun and as a verb, and refers to nightfall, the moment of the day when it gets dark. As an intransitive verb, it is not meant to have a direct object. Yet Pizarnik uses it here transitively, as she would, for example, the verb *apagar*, which means to "turn off." The resulting image is striking to say the least: by turning the lyrical I (daylight) into night (darkness), the hands would turn off the light (the life?) inside her, i.e. they would kill her. The rest of the line only strengthens this interpretation, as the lyrical I predicts that the hands will eventually kill her. The phrase "me van a morir," however, is just as unusual as the previous one, because the "correct" way to express this thought would have been "me van a *matar*." In fact, one could argue that the change of the transitive *matar* to the intransitive *morir* suggests a parallel with the reflexive formulation "me *voy* a morir," literally, "I am going to die." All in all, what the lyrical I does in this line is to tone down the violence of the expected murder, first by using the very poetic (and almost romantic) metaphor of the "end of day," then by moving the focus away from the killer towards the victim. This seems to be reinforced by the fact that the lyrical I twice voices her ambivalence at being helped, as if she felt she had to accept her fate, no matter how

much it hurts. One could read this poem as a poetic manifestation of Pizarnik's lifelong struggle between the will to live and the wish to die.

### 3.2.2. Levine's *Figures and Silence*

In the first line, the original combination “*confinar al exilio*” has been replaced by the idiomatic phrase “*send into exile*.” In Spanish, *confinar* suggests the obligation to live within determined limits, which means that the lyrical I is not only exiled to a faraway place, but also to a tight space, a prison cell. By changing the verb to “*send*,” Levine focuses solely on distance, losing the threat of being held captive. In the second and fourth lines, Levine rendered the phrase “*ayúdame*” by “*let me*.” First, this change annuls the chiasmic nature of the original line, where “*ayudar*” was first positive (cry for help) then negative (refusal of help). It also affects the visual structure of the line. In Spanish, the lyrical I (*me*) is literally trapped in (or confined to) a vicious circle, starting with the need to ask for help and ending with the need to reject it. Levine translated the line as “*Let me not ask for help*.” Not only is there no circular structure; the irony is also gone, as the lyrical I doesn't ask for help, but rather pleads to be given the right (“*let me*”) not to ask for help. Since the line is repeated twice in the four-line poem in the manner of a refrain, Levine's change alters considerably the meaning of the text. Of course, her translation sounds much more “*natural*” in English than Molloy's version, “*Help me not to ask for help*<sup>14</sup>.” Yet Molloy's solution is much closer to the effect that the original has on the Spanish reader:

#### Figures and Silences

Rigid hands confine me to exile.  
Help me not to ask for help.  
They want to nightfell me, they want to die me.  
Help me not to ask for help.  
(Molloy, 1991, p. 206)

Given that Levine stresses the “*interpretative*” nature of literary translation, it was to be expected that she would “*interpret*” Pizarnik's text and translate meanings that would reflect her own personal reading of the text. As mentioned earlier, though, Levine

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<sup>14</sup> Perhaps Molloy could have made her line less heavy to read by omitting the “*to*”.

usually justifies her translation choices by stating that the author's subversiveness with his/her mother tongue gives her license to be just as insubordinate, or even more so, with the target language. Yet in this case, Levine's solutions have little to do with Pizarnik's subversive use of language. In the third line of the poem, for instance, Levine did not take advantage of the license to play that Pizarnik offers. Instead of looking for creative ways to reproduce the author's innovative poetic use of the verbs *anochecer* and *morir*, Levine translated (one) meaning only: "They all want me to fall like night, to go and die." Levine's line is quite poetic and reads very well, but "fluency," as we have seen above, is precisely what Pizarnik was avoiding in the original. How is this different from the "disruptive effect" of Cabrera Infante's and Puig's prose that Levine says the translator must translate by "violating" his/her own language?

If it were absolutely impossible in English to recreate "disruptions" similar to Pizarnik's, one could argue that it was just one of those unavoidable "losses" translation often causes. But this is not the case. Indeed, Molloy's translation of the same line is actually even bolder than the original: "They want to nightfell me, they want to die me." Instead of simply dislocating an existing verb from its common usage as Pizarnik did with *anochecer*, Molloy created a neologism, a cross between the substantive "nightfall" and the verb "to fell," which adds a little violence to the line. Another less graphic option would have been to write "They want me to nightfall," which would have been much closer to the original image and to its degree of grammatical transgression. As for the second part of the line, Molloy rendered it literally. Even if the English verb "to die" is intransitive as in Spanish, however, it creates an awkward ambiguity. Orally, it is impossible to distinguish it from its homophone, the transitive verb "to dye." Written on the page, it almost looks like a typing mistake. If Molloy had seen this problem, she could have used, for instance, "perish", another intransitive verb almost synonymous with "die."

Considering how Levine has toned down Pizarnik's transgressive use of language throughout the poem, the fact that Levine rids the poem of all periods but the final one is a rather unexpected twist. On the one hand, this move seems consequent with Pizarnik's tendency to use as few punctuation marks as possible, and could thus be interpreted as Levine's way of compensating for the losses in the translation. On the other hand, the alteration results in a change in the poem's rhythm: whereas the original introduces clear breaks (silences)

at the end of each line, the translation has only one full stop (silence) at the end of the last line. Here, it is quite important to note that Levine cleverly changed the title accordingly, from *Figuras y silencios* (Figures and silences) to *Figures and silence*, which suggests that the translator was aware of the repercussion her punctuation changes could have on the overall meaning of the poem.

Interestingly enough, Levine made a much bolder visual alteration to the form of another Pizarnik poem published alongside “Figures and Silence” in 1997:

### **Tete [sic] de Jeune Fille (Odilon Redon)**

the rain is music  
the years, silence  
one night passes  
my body  
    will never remember again

As can be seen, Levine pushed the last line of the poem away from the rest of the stanza, introducing a visual silence that was absent from the original text. This new blank makes the words “my body” stand out, as they now occupy the whole line. This is an interesting twist, because as the translation steps away from the original text, it paradoxically becomes even more “Pizarnik-like.” Formally, we have seen earlier how much Pizarnik uses blank spaces to draw attention to the words she uses. Thematically, the fact that Levine highlighted the word “body” is absolutely consequent with the importance Pizarnik gives in her work to the (poetic) representations of her (literary) body<sup>15</sup>. Maybe Levine wanted to leave her mark in her translation, the trace of her “interpretation” of Pizarnik’s poetry. Indeed, it could be that, ten years after her first translation experience with Pizarnik, Levine felt more at ease with the poet’s style, enough so to take new creative liberties with the poem’s treatment of space.

### **Conclusion**

If, as we have seen above, the adjective “subversive” is too strong and controversial to be ascribed to Levine’s translation practice, what kind of scribe is she then? At the beginning of her book, Levine writes that

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<sup>15</sup> See Forster (1994).

what drew her to translating literature was the “fun [...] to take on the most uncompromising texts, to try to solve the most difficult puzzles” (Levine, 1991, p. vi). As we have seen here, Levine indeed chose some rather thorny texts by Pizarnik, which makes her quite a courageous scribe. Also, the analysis of Levine’s Pizarnik translations has proven that she is no submissive scribe; at least not as far as the original text is concerned. Levine’s slight changes to the punctuation and to the visual aspect of some of the poems seem to suggest that she is an interpretive scribe, taking more liberties with the form of the author’s text as she grows more accustomed to her style. Indeed, her translations *are* critical acts: she did interpret the texts, making choices, privileging some aspects over others. Yet in her “balancing act,” Levine was not as creative a scribe as she could have been: she did not “attempt to push language beyond its limits,” like the “good translator” she describes in *The Subversive Scribe* (Levine, 1991, p. 4). On the contrary, her English versions tend to abide by grammatical rules. When translating Pizarnik, she obviously preferred to stay on the safe side. Ironically, this analysis has shown that choosing the safe side is sometimes *also* quite a risky move. To a certain extent, then, Levine’s Pizarnik translations almost transform her into a “subtractive” scribe who takes away words or structures from the original. This in turn makes her “submissive,” to a certain extent: not to the Spanish original, but rather to her mother tongue, English.

Maybe this tendency to “adapt” and “correct” Pizarnik’s language could be explained by the fact that Levine allegedly privileges meaning over form: “translation’s *first and final* function,” she writes, “is to relate *meaning*” (Levine, 1991, p. 7, my emphasis). In theory, Levine is right to suggest that “perhaps translations, like originals, ultimately subvert *form* more than *meaning*, despite our modernist notion that form is meaning” (Levine 1991, p. 167). In practice, however, we have seen here that changing the form of a poem written by Pizarnik *does* alter its meaning, as well as the way the author will be perceived by the public of the target culture.

This consideration for the readers of the translations could point to another possible reason for Levine’s clarifying Pizarnik’s ambiguities: the fear that the poet’s unusual grammatical structures and neologisms would be badly received by the American public. After all, Levine mentions in her book that “[t]he Spanish language tolerates, even seeks polyvalence, while modern English demands straightforward clarity” (Levine, 1991, p. 3). However, while this

observation might be true in relation to modern English-language *fiction* writers, contemporary English *poets* are just as likely to write hermetic texts as Pizarnik was. Maybe it is Levine herself who isn't ready to do so.

But has Levine *really* ever wanted to shock her English readers by writing grammatically challenging texts? What is more, *should* she want to just because she pretended to be a “subversive scribe”? On the one hand, there is no *actual* reason why a translator's theoretical practice should follow his/her theoretical precepts in the first place. After all, it is well possible for one to have a conceptual ideal without ever wanting to put it in practice. On the other hand, when looking at Levine's book title, critics have clearly put too much emphasis on the “subversive,” and not enough on the “scribe.” As the present analysis has shown, the “subversive” part of Levine's translation process mostly concerned the choice of poems to be translated. As far as the too often overlooked “scribe” part is concerned, Levine sums it up very clearly in her book's epilog: “once in the realm of verbal discourse, whether or not we are dissident, we all usually have to use the so-called patriarchal code, even though our intention is to question or to make it over” (Levine, 1991, p. 182). In a new understanding of the seemingly paradoxical nature of Levine's book title, one could thus conclude that Levine's translation practice is, in fact, quite faithful to her theoretical reflections.

**Université Laval**

**ANNEX 1:**  
**Pizarnik's Originals**

*Tête de jeune fille (Odilon Redon)*

de música la lluvia  
de silencio los años  
que pasan una noche  
mi cuerpo nunca más  
podrá recordarse

*a André Pieyre de Mandiargues*  
(Pizarnik, 1968b, p. 28).

**Fuga en lila**

**Había que escribir sin para qué,  
sin para quién.**

**El cuerpo se acuerda de un amor  
como encender la lámpara.**

**El silencio es tentación y promesa.**  
(Pizarnik, 1971, p. 35)

**Signos**

**Todo hace el amor con el silencio.**

**Me habían prometido un silencio  
como un fuego, una casa de silencio.**

**De pronto el templo es un circo y  
la luz un tambor.**  
(Pizarnik, 1971, p. 33)

*Figuras y silencios*

Manos crispadas me confinan al exilio.  
Ayúdame a no pedir ayuda.  
Me quieren anochecer, me van a morir.  
Ayúdame a no pedir ayuda.  
(Pizarnik, 1968b, p. 20)

**ANNEX 2:**  
**Translations by Suzanne Jill Levine**

**Tete [sic] de Jeune Fille (Odilon Redon)**

the rain is music  
the years, silence  
one night passes  
my body  
    will never remember again  
(Levine, 1997)

**Fugue in Lilac**

One should write for no reason,  
for no one.

The body remembers a love  
the way one lights a lamp.

Silence is promise and temptation.  
(Levine, 1987, p. 85)

**Signs**

Everything makes love with silence.

They had promised me a silence  
like fire, a house of silence.

Suddenly the temple is a circus and  
the light, a drum.  
(Levine, 1987, p. 85)



## **Figures and Silence**

Trembling hands send me into exile  
Let me not ask for help  
They want me to fall like night, to go and die  
Let me not ask for help.  
(Levine, 1997)

### **ANNEX 3: Other English Translations**

#### **a) Susan Bassnett**

##### **SIGNS**

Everything makes love with silence.

They promised me a silence  
like fire, a house of silence.  
Suddenly the temple is a circus  
the light a drum  
(Bassnett, 2002, p. 32)

#### **b) Sylvia Molloy**

##### **Figures and Silences**

Rigid hands confine me to exile.  
Help me not to ask for help.  
They want to nightfell me, they want to die me.  
Help me not to ask for help.  
(Molloy, 1991, p. 206)

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**ABSTRACT: Pizarnik Through Levine’s Looking Glass: How Subversive Is the Scribe?** — Suzanne Jill Levine is known above all for her English translations of Cabrera Infante, Sarduy and Puig, with whom she worked closely. While a lot has been written about her translations of fiction by men, little research has been done on her translations of women writers. In this paper, I analyse a selection of her English renditions of Alejandra Pizarnik in order to see how Levine behaves when translating the poetic work of a woman. First, considering that Levine describes herself as a “subversive scribe, ‘transcreating’ writing that stretches the boundaries of patriarchal discourse,” how does the fact that she shares the author’s gender affect her “transcreations?” Then, bearing in mind that Levine has often stressed the complexity of fiction translation, refuting the “common belief that novels are easier to translate than poetry,” how does she deal with the translation of lyrical poems? And last, how rebellious is she when translating an author who has passed away and whom she cannot consult?

**RÉSUMÉ : Pizarnik sous la plume de Levine : à quel point la scribe est-elle subversive?** — On connaît avant tout Suzanne Jill Levine pour ses traductions anglaises de Cabrera Infante, Sarduy et Puig, avec qui elle a travaillé en étroite collaboration. Alors que plusieurs se sont penchés sur ses traductions de prose masculine, peu se

sont intéressés à ses traductions d'œuvres féminines. Dans cette étude, nous analysons quelques-unes de ses traductions de la poète argentine Alejandra Pizarnik pour voir comment Levine se comporte lorsqu'elle traduit l'œuvre poétique d'une femme. D'abord, considérant que Levine se décrit comme une « scribe subversive qui 'transcrite' des écrits renforçant les frontières du discours patriarcal », comment le fait de traduire une auteure du même sexe influence-t-il ses « transcréations »? Ensuite, compte tenu de la complexité de la traduction de la prose que Levine a souvent soulignée, réfutant la « croyance populaire selon laquelle il est plus facile de traduire des romans que de la poésie », comment aborde-t-elle la traduction de poèmes lyriques? Enfin, à quel point est-elle rebelle quand elle traduit une auteure décédée qu'elle ne peut consulter?

**Keywords:** subversion, transcreation, fidelity, marginality, poetry translation.

**Mots-clés:** subversion, transcréation, fidélité, marginalité, traduction poétique.

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