

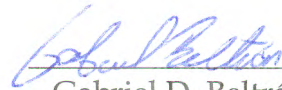
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El Killer
(Translation of an excerpt from *El Killer* by Josué Montijo)
by
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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

After I read and weighed many potential texts to translate for my thesis project, a friend recommended Josué Montijo's *El Killer* (2007) to me. I read it and was immediately engaged by the story, soon wondering how I would go about translating it. I have always been interested in the way the media portray crime, specifically serial killers. This interest sparked from how the media depicts the many serial killers, their victims, and their *modus operandi*. In recent years, the media have increasingly portrayed serial killers as anti-heroes who think they are doing the world good by murdering. This can be seen in movies such as James Wan's *Saw* (2004), in which the character Jigsaw thinks that by testing his victims' will to live – through torture methods he calls “puzzles” – he is giving them inspiration to continue living; in the North American television drama series *Dexter* (2006), the main character targets other serial killers to avoid harming innocent people. The main protagonist of Tsugumi Ohba's animated series *Death Note* (2006), Light Yagami, is a sociopath who discovers the Death Note, a supernatural notebook in which he can write the name of a person – whom he must also visualize – and then this person will die. He uses his newfound power to rid the world of criminals. However, while these fictional characters may think they are doing the right thing, most serial killers portrayed in the media are ultimately killing for personal gain. For example, Dexter Morgan targets serial killers to avoid harming innocent people, but the reason he kills is to satisfy “the dark passenger,” as he calls his homicidal urge. Light Yagami kills criminals under the pseudonym Kira to

cleanse the world of crime, but his goal is to rule the world as a god. Hannibal Lecter, the well-known cannibalistic serial killer in Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), consumes his victims. The fact that the media has sometimes portrayed killers as anti-heroes instead of antagonists, a deeper understanding of serial killers was paramount for this translation.

Many traditional critics consider crime fiction – particularly works about serial killers – as a lower-level literary genre. But the success of the many great works of literary fiction that deal with this subject, such as Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939), Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon* (1981), and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965) – to name a few – demonstrate that it is not only a very popular genre, but one that also has been transformed into a work of art. Crime fiction comprises various sub-genres: detective fiction, legal thrillers, and hard-boiled fiction, among others. Crime fiction is teeming with books of the serial-killer variety: Joyce Carol Oates' *Zombie* (1995), Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), Mark Yoshimoto Nemcoff's *Diary of a Madman* (2011), Jeff Lindsay's *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* (2004), and Jack Olsen's *"I": The Creation of a Serial Killer* (2002), to name a few. These works are referenced because, like *El Killer*, they are told from the murderer's point of view. Reading some of these novels provided me with a better idea of how the language I would use at the moment of translating. I then attempted to merge this with Juan B. Aybar's narrative

style in *El Killer*, so as to create an amalgam of both, Puerto Rican and North American, cultures.

The term “serial killer,” coined in 1950 by former FBI Special Agent Robert Ressler, was created to describe a specific type of criminal; there is, however, still some confusion regarding its precise definition (Schechter 7). The FBI defines serial killing as “three or more separate events, that is to say murders, in three or more separate locations with an emotional cooling-off period in between.” In 2005 it was changed to two or more. According to the *FBI Crime Classification Manual* (2005), serial murders account for less than one percent of homicide incidents. (Douglas et al. 96)

El Killer is a narration from the point of view of the serial killer Juan B. Aybar. He has decided to kill every junkie that plagues the streets of San Juan. He continues his life as usual, except that he has taken up this side task to fulfill at his own pace. The text he writes is in a journal format, although readers are informed that the entries are not in chronological order. Each entry by the killer is marked with a large number up to entry seventy-four. However, “The Name,” “The Killer Among Us,” and the letter that accompanied the manuscript, are not categorized in the same way; “The Name” serves as a prologue, and “The Killer Among Us” and the letter serve as epilogues. Throughout the text there are abundant literary quotes and song lyrics.

In Aybar’s journal we also experience the sense of discord that marks the narrator’s life between his murders, which are described in gory detail, and the

musings of his mundane life as he loses his mind. At one point, the narrator presents his murders as a sort of performance. He gradually gives us an idea of who he is and who he is becoming. The only way I could feel comfortable translating Aybar's text was to attempt to understand both how he thought and what might have led him to commit these gruesome acts. I was trying not only to understand his motives, but also his mental state as his emotions shift.

One of the important factors in translating this novel was consideration of the possible psychological aspects of the serial killer's motivations. This information allowed me to make decisions about word choice and tone. There have been attempts to create a general profile for serial killers: white, male, with a median age of twenty-eight (Aamodt 5). Some other shared traits include a history of child abuse, be it physical, psychological, or sexual; suffering some type of brain damage; being raised by a domineering mother; a history of torturing or abusing animals while growing up; and/or coming from a family that has dealt with alcoholism, criminality, or psychiatric problems (Schechter 22). Pinpointing a potential serial killer without first creating a psychological profile is nearly impossible. Such descriptions can also be used to understand how writers and readers imagine these figures.

Such profiles are very significant when we try to psychoanalyze the behavior of Aybar, the main character and narrator of Josué Montijo's novel, who, according to the author, does not want to read newspapers or watch the news — although he explicitly does during the first pages — because he fears that

he might fit into the FBI's serial killer profile, which would make him merely another murderer, and nothing more. The author states that Aybar thinks that the typical serial killer wants to be caught because it validates his acts. That constitutes his moment of fame and glory, when people find out who was the person who killed so many. Aybar, however, does not follow the established pattern: he always exercises extreme caution, even if his technique is initially in need of some polishing. Aybar lacks any experience as a murderer. As the plot progresses, he soon learns; he makes sure that all the crime scenes are isolated and picks up the casings after each killing. He knows the consequences of being caught. Before committing suicide, he sends his manuscript to be read with the hope of having it published. In the end he does want that recognition.

Josué Montijo is a Puerto Rican author who was born in Ponce in 1975. He has published history-related texts as well as short stories in various Puerto Rican magazines and newspapers. Montijo holds a master's degree in History from the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, and he is currently finishing a doctorate in History at the same institution. *El Killer* (2007), his first novel, was considered by the newspaper *Primera Hora* as one of the best books of 2007. In 2011, Montijo published an essay titled "Los Ñeta," in which he researches the origin of an organization of the same name, founded in one of the maximum-security prisons in Puerto Rico in the late 1970s. This organization sought improvements in the inmates' living conditions and protection against abuse by guards and other inmates. The *Ñeta Association* still remains active in numerous

countries, including Puerto Rico. In 2013, the author published a short story in *revista Cruce* titled “Tú no jodes más,” in which he deals with subject matter similar to that of *El Killer*. Montijo is currently working on other works of fiction.

During my exchanges with the author, he explained that his intention with *El Killer* was to portray a reflection in the form of a dialogue between citizens and their city. This is why the character continuously expresses his enjoyment with walking around the city by himself, exploring his surroundings without any specific goal in mind, that is, until he embarks on his mission to kill the homeless junkies that “plague” the streets of his neighborhood. It is important to point out that while he does have a general target in mind, he never sets out to kill one specific junkie. His personal dialogue with the city always takes him to his next victim. He lets his destiny take him to wherever he needs to be; he moves around the city on foot or by public transportation, and he pays attention to the noises and sights of this urban jungle and its inhabitants.

Montijo creates a story about the frictions between the cityscape and its people by establishing an opposition between humans and the surrounding constructed geography. The narrative that unfolds is about one person’s strategy to control the chaos and violence that surround him. This is a recurrent theme in the author’s work, as we are able to see in his published essay, “Los Ñeta,” which can be interpreted as a conversation between the prisoners’ world

and the outside world. This theme is also covered in Montijo's short story "Tú no jodes más," which introduces new characters and a new dialogue between the city's violence towards citizens and, as a consequence, the violence of citizens against the city.

El Killer, written as a first-person narrative, begins with an introduction by Juan B. Aybar, who, as the author abruptly states, has decided to kill all the junkies. He continues by pointing out his justifications and reasons "to avoid any misunderstandings in the long run." In this monologue it is made abundantly clear that his actions are not driven by hate, but by having grown tired of the "urban zombies" asking for money in the streets. Aybar establishes a radius of operation to use as the location of his murders; states that, although he will be using a diary format, his entries are not strictly chronological; and mentions that he does not want outside help. Aybar makes it known that he is aware of the possible repercussions of his actions. Ultimately, he gives his task a name—Operation Max Payne—and invites the reader to enjoy what follows.

Aybar narrates his story in a total of seventy-four entries in which we see his mood shift countless times: in one he seems euphoric and excited, in others he feels depressed and alone. What he decided would be a chronicle of his killings suddenly becomes a medium for expressing his feelings. He even acknowledges this, saying that this was not the point of keeping his journal. His journal becomes the only way he is able to express his deeds and not keep them bottled up inside. This is made evident in two instances: when he visits his

mother and is unable to talk about what he has been doing and when he visits a friend at his apartment after killing a junkie nearby. When the commotion outside catches their attention, he talks vaguely with his friend about the murders; later, in his journal, he chalks up his composure to having been able to talk about them and not evade capture. "I passed the trial by fire. I spoke about my murders and I felt completely at ease. Not one bit of discomfort."

In one of his entries, he writes a speech he has prepared in the event he's caught and has to stand trial. At this point, it is evident that he feels no remorse for what he is doing, and he explicitly states that he is afraid of giving the impression that he's sorry when he's truly not.

In the end, his task proves to be much more traumatic than he thought, and he is driven to the verge of insanity. Ultimately he commits suicide after sending his manuscript to someone, to be published if deemed necessary.

The next part of the book is written from the point of view of a violent-crimes reporter who was entrusted with the journal written by Aybar. This reporter, called Josué Montijo, admits that he did not pay adequate attention to the email to which the killer attached the manuscript when he received it. In this statement, Montijo provides details about how he received the manuscript and the investigation he carried out to discover who Juan B. Aybar was. He tells us that Juan B. seems to fit the profile of a standard serial killer who had been smart and able to avoid capture by means of the strategies he developed. Montijo makes it clear that, while he does not agree with Juan B. Aybar's

reasons and methods, publishing the manuscript would be beneficial for future investigations and prevention techniques. However, it should not be in any way inferred as an acceptance of what the killer has done. In a way, this article gives us an insight into the person behind the killer.

The last part of the book is the letter that Juan B. sent to Montijo along with the manuscript. In it, the killer explains that although he must choose his words carefully, given that the events are recent, and cannot help but feel that another person has written them, almost as if it were a projection of himself. He boasts about his crimes and how he has managed to avoid being caught by the police. Aybar says that his freedom may be due to his actions benefited many. In the end he states that he'll be made into a criminal, pointing out that he knows he is one.

In translating this text, I decided to strive for a balance between Schleiermacher's contention that "translations from different languages into German should read and sound different: the reader should be able to guess the Spanish behind a translation from Spanish, and the Greek behind a translation from Greek" (Lefevere 7) and Venuti's theory of the translator's invisibility. The way I see it, the translator could, and at points should, be invisible. But the fact that the text is a translation should not be overlooked. A translation can read naturally without compromising the source text. The source culture is, ideally, the essence that should emanate from a translated text. To achieve this, domesticating the text should be the furthest thing from the translator's mind.

Now this may sound as if I am leaning more towards foreignization, but I feel that would also be an equivocal way of placing oneself in front of a text.

Retaining the foreignness of the source text would cause a breach between the reader and the text, which would be counterproductive. As Anthony Pym notes, "Equivalence does not say that languages are the same; it just says that values can be the same" (Pym 8). This could be understood as a way of saying that although the values are to be nearest to the target language, the value of the source language shall always remain, which is mirrored in Nida and Taber's idea that "Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message" (12). For this translation I tried to create a balance between natural equivalence and Schleiermacher's idea that it should be understood that it is in fact a translation from another language.

I decided to translate non-sequential parts of the book – the source text being approximately 131 pages long – because of the challenge posed by the varying tones and registers, and how they shift throughout the entire text. Depression, euphoria, composure, and sadness are some of the emotions our narrator goes through in unusually short intervals, from one entry to the next. At first we are presented with a killer who is very excited about the journey he is about to embark upon. At times he's euphoric and at others he's calm. At times he expresses himself in a cultured manner, citing different works of literature, while simultaneously exhibiting a depressive mood. We also have

the reporter's tone near the end, who is an entirely different person and should be portrayed as such.

There was no need to translate the title of the novel since it is already in English for the most part. Although it does not have quite the same feel in English as it does in Spanish, I opted for maintaining the article "El" in Spanish because it could be taken as a reference to El Cid, an idolized figure in Spain. And although Aybar's deeds cannot be compared to those of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, it evokes the concept of the hero, which is how I feel Aybar might have wanted to be portrayed. It is evident that Aybar is not committing these acts to save Puerto Rico. He creates an idea of himself of a heroic outlaw, this is what I wanted to highlight by keeping the original title, *El Killer*, as opposed to changing it to *The Killer*.

The word *tecató* is Puerto Rican slang for a drug addict. However, the etymology of this word is very important to fully understand it. In Spanish, the street name for heroin is *manteca*, and thus the user becomes the *tecató*. *Tecató* may be a combination of the last two syllables in *manteca* and the last syllable of *adicto* (addict). One of the biggest issues with this translation was whether or not to translate the word *tecató*. While the word "junkie" might be a close equivalent, I feel that the Puerto Rican must be preserved on some occasions, since the term has its own emotional and cultural charge. There is also the consonance of this word with the name of gun Aybar uses for most of his murders, the Intra-TEC Tec 9. This is why the first sentence in the book was

expanded to keep the use of *tecatos*. It reads, “I’ve decided to kill all the *tecatos*. Every single junkie” as opposed to the original “*He decidido matar a todos los tecatos.*” I felt it was important for this term to show up in the first sentence, since it is one of the strongest elements in the Spanish text.

At one point in the book there is a mention of a dish of “*carne frita and tostones,*” which I left in Spanish for similar reasons: this is a quintessential Puerto Rican dish, and consistent with my approach. The concept would have lost most of its meaning if I had opted for fried pork and fried plantains, which would have also been somewhat cacophonous: “fried this/fried that.”

Similar decisions were made with respect to the use of the terms *avenida*, *calle*, and *callejón*. Through this approach, I sought to make it evident that this is a translation without throwing the reader off completely. Some readers, even monolingual ones, will recognize these terms or be aware of their meaning because of the context in which they occur.

I attempted to keep the vocabulary in the translation as crude as it is in the source text, devoid of any gentleness. I do not want the translation to read like a censored book. The killer never apologizes for what he does, even after writing the speech he has prepared for the jury in case he is caught: “I’d even say it sounds greenhorn. It can even give the feeling that I’m asking for forgiveness, or that I’m sorry or something. No, I refuse.”

And then again towards the end, as he is giving his last bow to his audience, he makes it clear that he doesn’t want forgiveness:

“I did what I did and there’s no way around it. Adjectives for my behavior? Countless, help yourself to the one you like best. Lastly, I interject the same question: what’s left? Look at me, here I am. As Millás says, ‘You’ll make a criminal of me.’ I can tell you straight away that I already am. The task is half fulfilled.”

“The task is half fulfilled” – is maybe an invitation for someone else to carry on with his mission, and “what’s left?” is a reiteration of his desire to “remain.” He feels he has done a service to the community, when in reality all he is doing is satisfying his own very questionable desires. He enjoys his own performance; that’s why he states that he remained the same outside of his “killer role”: “Nobody suspected me. I stayed the same person in everyday life; the same quiet neighbor, the same employee who would report to work every morning, five days a week, the same college student. My coworkers discussed the news, and even shared their concerns with me, since they knew I lived in the area where the crimes took place. I played along in the most discreet way possible. They wanted my distress, and I gave it to them. For the time that this lasted, I continued being the same, sometimes the same, the same but slightly changed. Things don’t happen in vain. People deceive themselves; people want to be deceived.”

For a long span of the translation process, I meant to leave the killer’s name – Juan B. Aybar – unchanged. However, when rereading the book and the translation, I began to analyze the importance of the killer’s name. I felt that the

author's introduction, "The Name," was about more than just the killer explaining what he was about to do and the name he wanted to give his operation. I came to realize that the killer remaining anonymous throughout his narrative was more important than I had initially thought.

If we take a moment to break down his name, we can identify elements that match the book's theme. His last name, Aybar, is an anagram of Rabya (or *rabia*, which translates as "rage"). This brought up additional considerations about what to do with his name, were I to find a synonym for rage and have it spelled backwards and stylized differently. An anagram was suggested as a way to create a last name that was not just a randomly reconfigured word, but an actual last name that worked as an anagram. For instance, Regan is an anagram for anger, which is a very similar concept to *rabia*, so in the translated text, the killer becomes Juan B. Regan.

The first entry, stylized with a large number 1, begins with an allusion to the Bible: "En el principio fueron las armas," which was translated as, "In the beginning were the weapons." Perusing the Bible, we can see that in the Gospel of John the first verse is "En el principio fue el verbo" and in *The NIV Bible* "In the beginning was the Word." This gave an added importance to the killer's name, and thus to translating the reference the same way.

The middle name for the character, Benito, was left as in the source text because it could be linked to the fascist Benito Mussolini, while also keeping a Latino feel to his name, this avoiding fully Americanizing him.

In some instances, the song lyrics sprinkled through the text proved to be a challenge to translate. For instance, in the last paragraph of entry 8, the killer quotes an excerpt of the song “Te Vi Te Vi” by Estopa, a rock duo from Spain, “Si se ha muerto un sentimiento, yo le prenderé una hoguera.” However, the correct lyrics are “si se ha muerto un sentimiento/Yo le encenderé una hoguera” which could be translated into “if a feeling has died/I will light it a pyre.” This is one of the quotes that was hardest to translate or find an equivalent for, because the meaning of the lyrics is vague and could be interpreted in various ways. I opted for finding lyrics in English that would have the same meaning as the one given in the source language, as opposed to a direct translation. Finding an equivalent was difficult, at the same time, the fact that some of the lyrics were misquoted gave me the liberty of deliberately misquoting the lyrics to “Dream in Colour” by Rick Springfield. Altered, they could be considered an equivalent. “You wake up to tell me/That you're numb inside, that the feelings all have died” becomes “Wake up and tell me that you're numb inside, that all the feelings have died.” While this is not an exact equivalence, the passage does give the impression that the killer is talking about his feelings of mercy having died after his last murder.

During the killer's final entries, he quotes the song “A mi manera” by Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz: “Pronto realizaré mi última escena.” At first I thought I would have to find another equivalence. Fortunately enough, while researching the song “A mi manera” I came across the fact that this song is a

translation of Frank Sinatra's "My Way." Finding an equivalent was therefore rather straightforward: "And so I face the final curtain."

This juxtaposition of the lyrics is an interesting example of the debunked myth of literal translation as word-for-word translation as opposed to sense-for-sense translation. With the lyrics by Estopa, there was a need to find a sort of equivalence between the author's choice of song and the translation. Finding lyrics that kept a similar sense was arduous and complicated. In the end a resolution was found, albeit a resolution I am not happy with because it lacks the idea of he himself lighting the pyre for the feelings that have died.

However, when we see these last lyrics, sung by Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz, finding the word-for-word equivalent was a matter of researching the origin of the song. This made it easier to find a sense-for-sense translation, since the English version of the song is not a literal translation. Finding an existing version of the song in the target language definitely made the process much easier because it kept the same sense found in the source text.

Providing detailed descriptions of the guns that the killer uses give readers an idea of the intense violence the author allows us to witness. The ease with which Aybar is able to acquire these guns is a testament to the corruption and gun violence that has prevailed in the streets of Puerto Rico, especially in areas like Santurce. Not only that, the narrator also refers to the silencer on the Intratec Tec-9 as a prophylactic, thus eroticizing the violence and guns, metaphors for his virility and hypermasculinity.

His guns are supporting characters of the story. In many ways they are described as having their own thirst for killing. This made me very aware of the importance of paying close attention to the nuances of the parts of the text that describe guns. It is as if they have chosen Aybar, he mentions that when he carries them, he can feel the gun pulsating in his bag. They are as much a character as he is. After most of the killer's murders, there is a comment about the guns; they are always present throughout the narration. The translation for these passages was handled through techniques that consider metonymy between two languages: "fire-breathing" for *Dragón*, "boombox" for *estereofónico*. In these cases, there is an evident change in the way the reader will picture this in Spanish and in English. But selecting words that communicate the idea of specific sounds was important.

The text is characterized throughout by wordplay, which proved difficult to translate in any literal way. For example, during one of his murders, the killer states "Ahí cayó y se calló" which was translated as "there he fell and fell silent." This was used to keep the idea of "fell" in both cases, but there had to be an addition to communicate the meaning and style.

In other cases, some phrases were changed to maintain Puerto Rican elements. This can be seen when the killer writes "Mi cerebro parece una poza inmunda, apestosa, sancochándose con el caliente del sol." Here, the killer can't find a way to bring out the words in his head. He describes them as a pool of stagnant water boiling in the sun's heat. However, the element of "sancocho"

would have been lost if the translation had been more faithful in more traditional terms. For this reason I opted for translating it as “My brain seems like a filthy and stagnant pool, stewing like a pot of *sancocho* in the sun.” The image of a stew of boiling *sancocho* is very different from that of boiling water, and it conveys the image of thicker, murkier water, like that of a mangrove swamp. When one thinks about that thickness and adds the image of stagnant water, it becomes a stomach-churning depiction. This is necessary to portray the disgust he feels about the situation he’s about to describe. The way the author conveys an amalgam of textures brings to mind the fact that his words are stuck, and he can’t find a way to put them on paper.

The reason why consideration of tone is such an important aspect of this translation is that it shifts throughout the book. It goes from euphoria to depression to mundanity to gruesome and then switches to another character that had never been introduced.

In entry 74, the killer seems to have lost his mind. Aybar writes about invoking the devil and seeing him stride toward him. At this point his tone has shifted, and it seems very defeatist and conceding. Translating this entry was gripping; conveying the depression that he was undergoing required considerable effort. This entry is the longest one before his suicide. Keeping the tone present was of utmost importance. When Aybar invokes the devil, we know that he has finally lost it; the killings have affected him to the point of

madness. However, in this entry, the devil, is seen as the inevitable end; Aybar welcomes his final moments.

The part following Juan's last entry was written by Josué Montijo, a crime reporter who was entrusted with Aybar's journal to publish it or do with it what he thought appropriate. This part is told from the point of view of another character, a character that has not been present at any other point. I had to be aware of this, to make sure I didn't make them sound other characters. After Montijo's epilogue the book closes with the email Aybar wrote to Montijo along with the manuscript, at which point the tone had to be adjusted once more.

A few months back, I would have never imagined I would have to understand the mind of a serial killer in order to provide an accurate translation of his thought process. The abundant wordplay and the references to Puerto Rican and pop culture were also aspects that required extensive research to make sure nothing would be lost. The process of translating this text posed a tremendous challenge; it helped me grow both academically and professionally. Ultimately, I am glad that of all the books I read as potential texts for my thesis, this was the one that I chose, it posed a great challenge to me as a translator and I enjoyed every moment of the process.

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