

BY THE WAY

by Tony Beckwith,

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Tony Beckwith was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He came to Texas in 1980 and now lives Austin where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist. “The Span-glish I spoke with my bilingual peers during my childhood was a perfect education for a translator, as it taught me how to deconstruct both languages and create a hybrid form with rules of its own.”

My LitSIG

There were seven of us at the Literary Special Interest Group meeting this afternoon. That’s actually a pretty decent number, compared with times when only three of us showed up and — just once — only two. So there was a veritable throng of translators there today, and a lively group we were too. It was one of those rare days in Texas when the sun is warm but the air is cool and dry, so we sat outdoors in a circle on the patio. A frisky little breeze had just kicked up as we arrived and it suddenly felt a bit chilly in the shade so we lit a fire in the *chimenea*, which added a coziness we all appreciated.

The plan for the meeting was to talk about “The Translation Issue” published by Poetry magazine in April 2008. We had all received a copy in advance, courtesy of the Poetry Foundation, and had spent some time reading the poems in translation and the accompanying notes. Those familiar with the issue will recall that it consisted of English translations followed by the translators’ comments on the material and the process. About thirty poets were represented: Marina Tsvetaeva, Ovid, Ho Xuan Huong, Rilke, César Vallejo, Hafez, et al. None of the original versions were included, which was viewed as either a good thing or a bad thing, depending on one’s point of view: some of us wanted to compare each translation

against its source, others preferred to consider the translation as a work in its own right first.

Not all literary translators translate poetry, of course, but it is surely one of the essential challenges of our calling, and I think even those who never stray far from prose are drawn to it in one way or another. It certainly does provide a small group of devotees with some fascinating material to discuss over coffee and cookies.

The general idea at this meeting was for each of us to select and talk about a particular poem in the magazine, and to perform a sort of autopsy on the translation for the benefit of the other attendees. Some focused on the more esoteric qualities of their chosen piece, whereas others were more interested in analyzing and commenting on the technical process. In fact, certain questions had been posed in advance, such as whether it is necessary to have a firm grasp of the more subtle aspects of the poet’s craft in order to create an acceptable translation of the poet’s work. Should one, for example, be able to distinguish between a trochee and a dactyl and be on speaking terms with, shall we say, an iambic pentameter? In what I suspect may be a universally representative response, everyone at our small gathering had his or

her own view on such matters, and there was no majority opinion one way or the other. Also, no attempt to sway the decision in any way. The comfortable coexistence of independent minds is, in my view, one of the great attractions of this particular Lit-SIG.

Perhaps of greater concern than the technical question was the ability of the translator to understand — to deeply understand — the meaning and context of the poem in terms of time and place, and then to be able to transmute something of that meaning and context into the translation. In discussing the work of Yannis Ritsos, for example, David Harsent refers to the poet's work as being "indelibly Greek: in landscape, in weather, in the recurring statues and geraniums and balconies, the ever-present sea, the underpinning of myth." In his translation, therefore, Harsent strives to evoke a similar sense of

Greece; "And this was midday: a fierce sun, the blaze / of their nakedness, the glitter of repetitions, a dazzle / rising off the sea, the scents of pine and hyacinth..."

I used Harsent's work as my material for the "autopsy" process referred to above, and would like to quote from his comments as they relate to an issue that always stirs debate among translators of poetry: whether or not (and if so, how?) to attempt to reproduce the original poem's form and rhyming structure in the other language. Harsent says there is "nothing new about the business of making 'a version' rather than offering what is sometimes called a strict translation; in fact, I suspect that this is the approach to translation now most often taken. One way of defining this method is to speak not of 'translation,' but of 're-imagining.' It is, in short, a creative act in support of an earlier creative act."

We've probably all thought or said something along those lines at one time or another. A few years ago, in a review of Andy Hurley's translation of "Collected Fictions" by Jorge Luis Borges, I wrote: "Borges thought of literature as guided dreams. Translator Andrew Hurley has entered the writer's dreaming at the point where vision coalesces into words. He has reverently re-directed Borges' fictions, at the source, carefully choosing words and images that echo the rhythms of the original, giving us Borges in English that still sounds like Borges. What a joy!"

Translating poetry is indeed a joy, as is the immense good fortune of having a group of like-minded colleagues to hang out and talk shop with on a Saturday afternoon.

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OPEN LETTER and THREE PERCENT
http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent/images/OL_announce_final.pdf

Information about The University of Rochester's new publishing house dedicated to literature in translation + the new website which Open Letter oversees.

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