

BY THE WAY

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ART IN TRANSLATION



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 in Austin, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist.

“In soccer, playing well is not enough; you also have to feel it profoundly.”
— Jules Rimet

Madrid was hot in the summer. My apartment was stifling with the windows closed, and not much better when they were open. The annual exodus of mothers and children was in full swing, and the city felt comfortably empty in the absence of those who retreated from the heat to spend as long as they could in the mountains or on the coast. It was my favorite time of the year.

It was after midnight, and I sat in a pool of light in the darkened front room on the third floor. The window was open in front of me, framing my view of the night sky hanging over the quiet neighborhood. The warm air stirred lazily around me as I sat at my desk, my fingers on the keys of my typewriter—a green Olivetti portable, my pride and joy.

It was the usual story. They’d called that afternoon to say they had a project with a tight deadline and they understood perfectly that there would be a rush charge—was I interested? Consuelo went to

bed after dinner and I stayed up with the Olivetti and a most intriguing behind-the-scenes account of the sherry business in Andalucía that included a rambling history of southern Spain. Well written by an articulate Spaniard with a very agreeable fluency and style, it was gracefully evocative, a pleasure to read. A miracle! And long — I was going to be up all night.

In the wee small hours Consuelo briefly stood behind me, her hands on my shoulders, gazing out at the sky. “You always do this when you get one of these,” she said. I nodded. “Your translation becomes your *querida*” she murmured as she turned away, “your mistress.” She was right. A translation like this can’t be handled at arm’s length. It has so many undercurrents and subtleties that one must allow oneself to be drawn into it without a struggle. It demands the total surrender of one’s life for a while, and in turn stimulates a pin-point focus which is its own rich reward.

My train of thought was now interrupted, and I sat back in my chair and stretched. My neck was stiff; my shoulders too. I stood up and moved to the window; looked down. A man was walking along

the pavement across the road, his shadowy silhouette long in the light from the street lamps. One hand in his pocket, the other swinging at his side. He got to the corner and was gone. Now the street was empty and still, and strangely inviting. I left a note on the typewriter and went downstairs. The Café Gijón was a few blocks away and it felt good to walk. The Gijón never seemed to close, and there were several patrons sitting at the bar when I arrived. I ordered a scotch and soda in a tall glass. A hand fell on my shoulder and I turned around. “Hombre, ¡Javier!” Javier is a writer who also works as a translator when driven to it by circumstances of one kind or another. He understands the all-nighter phenomenon from personal experience and wants to know, “How’s it going?”

“It’s going well,” I tell him. “The narrative is fine, the terminology is fine, but I’m trying to convey the tone of the original; you know, the texture, the *dejo*, the essence of Andalucía that’s such an important part of the story. I haven’t got it yet.”

Javier smiled broadly, and ordered another round. “Tone? *Dejo*? Texture? Such words! What are you trying to do, create a work of art?”

I thought for a minute, stirring the ice cubes in my glass with my finger, and then said, “Yes, as a matter of fact I am.” Javier studied my face, his eyebrows raised. “You know how it is,” I went on. “We translate all kinds of documents; some are horrible and some are more or less interesting, a few are decently written and once in a while we get something that really does seem worth translating. This is one of those. I’d like to do what the writer did in Spanish. I want the English version to have the same *duende*, the same magical quality as the original.”

Javier was nodding and smiling. “I recognize these symptoms! I too have been stricken as you are tonight. I think what you need right now is a transfusion of flamenco, my friend. Come, the drinks are on me at Las Brujas.”

There is nothing like the soulful sound of the

flamenco singer, especially when it weaves in and out of the music of the flamenco guitar to serenade the raw passion of the flamenco dancer. In the dim, smoky light at Las Brujas we felt the throbbing of hands clapping and the pounding of heels, and we breathed a little more deeply. “You want to convey the tone and the texture of Andalucía?” Javier shouted. “This is *pure* Andalucía.” He was right. Flamenco came across from North Africa with the Moors, and southern Spain inherited the music of the desert. Since then, the great cities of Granada, Sevilla, and Córdoba have produced generation after generation of flamenco artists who preserve the tradition of their forefathers, the ones who settled al-Andalus. “And it’s not just what you can hear at a flamenco tablao like this,” added Javier. “Sit quietly one day, preferably with your eyes closed, and listen—really listen!—to Tárrega’s *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*. You will be steeped in the essence of the south.”

The street was empty when we left the tavern. We walked down the Calle Mayor to the Paseo and were soon looking across at the Prado Museum, gleaming white against the Parque Retiro. “You want to put some art into your translation?” Javier enquired, pointing with his cigar. “There’s plenty of art in there!”

“A pity it’s closed,” I said.

“*Por favor!*” sputtered Javier, slapping his forehead with his free hand. “How are you going to put art into your translation with an attitude like that? Come with me!” He took me by the arm and led me across the street, then walked me slowly back and forth the length of the sidewalk outside the museum, talking in a serious, urgent tone. “If you want your translation to be a work of art, the art must be inside you. What you see and understand inspires your choice of words. Think of the paintings and the sculptures you’ve seen in there. Remember the Goyas, Velázquez, the old masters, can you see them in your mind? Look closely at them. They are speaking to you; they want to tell you something. *Listen!*”

I did, and my mind filled with thoughts of form and color, proportion and perspective. The fingers on the hands of a statue appeared to move, and the outline of her stone body reminded me of beauty I had known. An echo of history entered my memory and the past came forward into the light. Everything had a rhythm and a reason and I felt that I understood what they were trying to say. I was suddenly anxious to get back to my translation. I said so to Javier and he laughed, “You hear the urgent call of a lover who cannot be ignored? Then it is time. Let’s go home!”

We had quite a few blocks to cover and it felt good to be walking, one hand in my pocket, the other swinging at my side. The emptiness of the streets created a sense of space that suggested endless possibilities. The graceful lines of a roundabout hinted at an earlier period when there was time to pause and savor special moments, to live more deliberately and in harmony with one’s surroundings. An idyllic time, it occurred to me, when sherry epitomized a way of life.

Back in the apartment, the light was still on over the typewriter. My note had not been read. I closed the kitchen door and made some coffee. Then I stood at the window and watched the first light break along the skyline. My mind was clear and I felt excited. I sat down and began to work.