

What Would I Do?

By Tony Beckwith



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Three of my school teachers were passionate about English literature and passed on to me their love of prose, plays, and poetry. I am eternally indebted to Miss Agnes McCulloch, Mr. Kit Edridge, and Mr. Arthur J. Hobson for the seed they planted in me. A seed of curiosity about words and what words can do when spoken or written by someone who understands that they are so much more than just symbols representing meanings. These teachers taught me how to hear words sing; how to see them dance and slip in and out of different colors. They gave me a love of words.

But what to do with those words? What to write? That was always the question in the early days, and I didn't always have an answer. One day, at the Louvre, I watched an artist copy a painting that was hanging on the wall. She sat in a chair facing the painting, working at a portable easel. People milled around her and sometime stood in her line of vision, but she just kept working on her canvas. As I watched I understood that she wasn't merely recreating the image she was looking at; she was also experiencing how the painter had moved as he worked, how he'd held his brush to apply a particular stroke. She was channeling the painter, repeating his gestures and learning how that felt. She wasn't so much interested in *what* he was painting as in *how* he was painting. How he used his brushes and his colors to express his vision, just as a musician uses his instrument to play

a piece of music. So I copied the copyist and started reading writers and poets to see *how* they wrote rather than *what* they wrote. I found that process to be helpful during the time when I was honing my way with words as I would if I were learning to play a musical instrument. There's a risk, of course, of drinking a little too deeply from a particular well and one must be wary of allowing someone else's style to overflow too strongly into one's own writing. But all that gradually became clear, and somewhere along the way the question of what to write seemed to answer itself as new ideas began to percolate up through an evolving sense of self.

Every poem, in my experience, arrives in its own individual way. This one tumbled into my mind almost complete, in all its simplicity. There was very little to tweak or add as I transcribed it into my notebook.

What Would I Do?

What would I do
if I weren't doing
what I do
when I'm doing what I do?

If I weren't doing
what I do
when I'm doing it
I guess I'd be doing something new

Maybe I could learn
how to do something different
I could do
without further ado?

But what I could do
instead of doing what I'm doing
I confess I haven't a clue

So I think I'll keep doing
what I've always been doing
which is doing
what I'm doing
when I do

At the time, I gave no thought at all to the question of audience demographics. Those considerations came later. First of all when an editor friend said she thought the poem was suitable for young readers. I went back and read it again and saw what she meant. There are stages of childhood and adolescence when one is excited about new knowledge and fascinated by new forms of expression. I remember a phase when tongue-twisters and clever riddles were popular among my contemporaries. And a stage when we knew what we knew and derived a great deal of satisfaction from knowing that we knew what we knew. I'm fairly sure I would have loved this poem when I was that age, about nine or ten.

A week or so later I had another epiphany: the poem was also eminently suitable for translation. Since it is essentially a pretty straightforward soliloquy, with no hidden depths or obscure allusions, there were relatively few of the usual challenges involved in translating a poem. It was more a matter of slipping into a subjunctive mood and approaching the idea from a Spanish point of view. But the same constants still applied. The original poem was a string of meanings, their symbols wrapped in a language. The original language was helpful because without it there would be no poem and because it contributed the sound and the rhythm and the tone I hoped to approximate. But once I'd understood the meaning of the symbols, I had no further use for it. So I held the bouquet of words in one hand and peeled away the wrapping, the original language, leaving just the meanings and their interrelationships. Those primal referents were the inspiration and the guide for the poem I then wrote in Spanish.

¿Qué haría?

¿Qué haría
si no hiciera
lo que hago
cuando estoy haciendo
lo que hago?

Si no hiciera
lo que hago
cuando lo estoy haciendo
supongo que estaría haciendo algo nuevo

Tal vez podría aprender
a hacer algo distinto
que pudiera hacer
sin preámbulos

Pero, ¿qué podría hacer
en vez de lo que estoy haciendo?
Confieso que no tengo idea

Así que creo que seguiré haciendo
lo que siempre he hecho
Que es hacer
lo que hago
cuando lo estoy haciendo

As the translated poem took shape, I kept an eye on the original's structure and rhyming pattern, references, musical quality, register, and general tone. I decided that the rhyming in the original, though appealing and useful, was of secondary importance compared to the phrasing and verb tenses and the narrative quality of the poem. I thought an attempt to create similar rhyming lines in the translation would be disproportionately detrimental to the other elements, so I abandoned the idea. Readers of the translation, therefore, will not have a rhyming pattern to hold the lines together as it does in the original. But I think the translated poem is held together quite satisfactorily enough by the rhythm created by the sentence structure and narrative quality mentioned above. All that notwithstanding, the question is: will monolingual readers of each version experience something similar? To the extent that they do, I believe the translation can be considered a success.