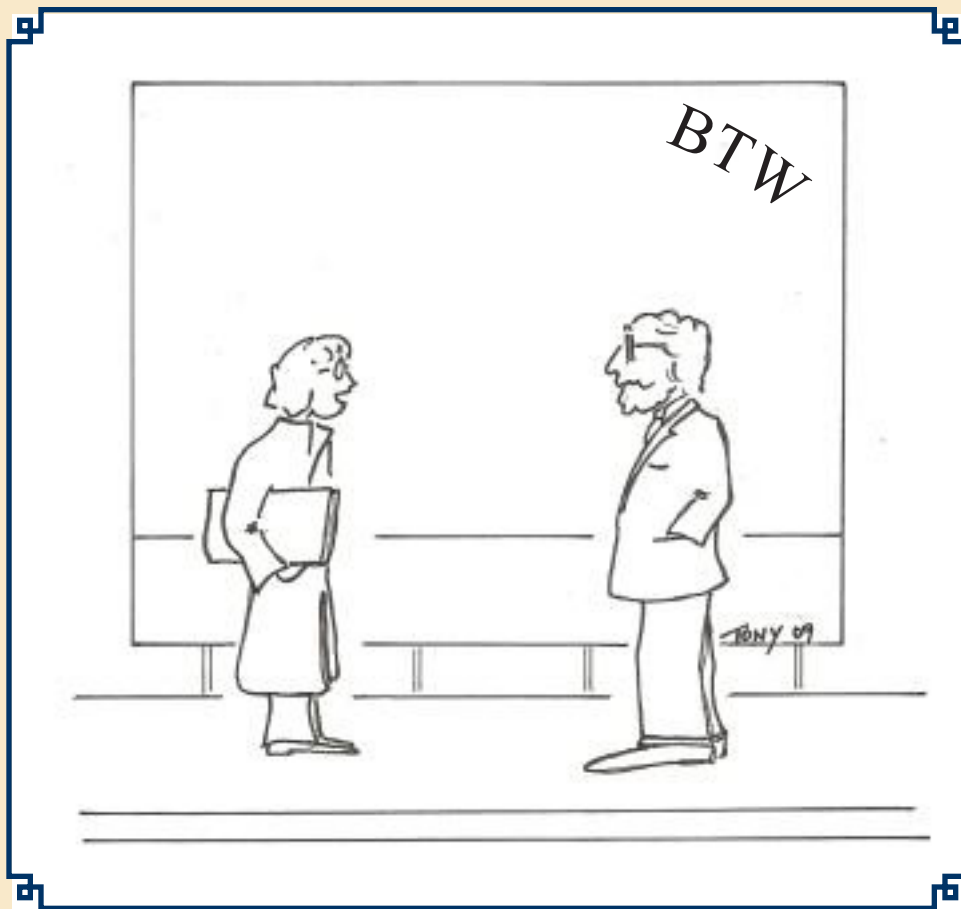


An introduction to *Spanglish*



“Forgive that I arrive late. I pinched a gum and didn’t have a cat.”
(*Spanglish*)

Perdona que llegue tarde. Pinché una goma y no tenía gato.
(Spanish)

Sorry I’m late. I had a flat tire and didn’t have a jack.
(English)

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FROM THE LD ADMINISTRATOR

Several members of the Literary Division have written asking about information on how to get started as a literary translator. It is not an easy task, so we would like to share information with our readers or stories on how they got started. I'll be the first, since I have two reasons that led me to literary translation. After completing my Ph.D. and having received my first appointment at a university, I met a fantastic professor who was a literary translator. I had been translating for years but I never thought I was good enough to be a literary translator. Interestingly enough, my main area of specialty was medieval Spanish literature and my research focused on studying translation in the Middle Ages, and on the concepts of translation and adaptation, as some translators took what they wanted from a literary text and recreated a text of their own. Prior to the age of copyright, the issues of the original author, who in many cases was unknown, and the work as being a translated work, certainly are not what they are today. We see how the role of the literary translator has evolved. This same professor also got me involved in the American Literary Translators Association. I was hooked.

The second reason is because literary translation fell into my lap, so to speak, when an author contacted me through researching the ATA database. As a literary translator I feel I have not only given voice to another voice, I have also opened up a world of literature to those who could not read the work in the original language. Do you have a story to share that would inspire others in their quest to become literary translators? Do you have tips you can share as a literary translator? Please send them in to *Source*, as this information will help to serve as mentoring for those who seek advice. We look forward to this information and dialogue among our members.

The Fiftieth Anniversary Conference is coming up soon and this year we have some superb proposals, so plan early to attend the conference and look for information on the Literary Division website about the excellent Gaddis Rose Lecture and other Literary Division activities. See you in New York.

Enrica J. Ardemagni, Ph.D.
Administrator, Literary Division
<http://www.ata-divisions.org/LD/>

The Literary Division

Officers



Administrator:
Enrica Ardemagni
eardema@iupui.edu

Assistant Administrator:
Montserrat Zuckerman
montsezuck@ameritech.net

In addition to serving as Administrator of ATA's Literary Division, Enrica Ardemagni is Associate Professor of Spanish and Director of the Certificate in Translation Studies at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, is a board member of the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care, Chair of the Indiana Commission on Health Care Interpreters and Translators, and Chair of the Communications Committee of the Midwest Association of Translators and Interpreters.

HOT LINKS

<http://www.europaeditions.com/>

From the *New York Times*: **Europa Editions Finds Success Translating Literary Novels**

It does not sound like a recipe for publishing success: a roster of translated literary novels written mainly by Europeans, relying heavily on independent-bookstore sales, without an e-book or vampire in sight. But that is the formula that has fueled Europa Editions, a small publisher founded by a husband-and-wife team from Italy five years ago. As large New York publishing houses have laid off staff, suffered drastically reduced book sales and struggled to adjust to a digital future, Europa turned its first profit last year and is enjoying a modest but growing following. (Full article at link below.)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/26/books/26europa.html>

WORKSHOP WITH LILIANA VALENZUELA

The Port Townsend Writers' Conference, taking place the week of July 12-19, is delighted to present Liliana Valenzuela, one of the foremost English-to-Spanish translators in the world--a translator who is also, as Artistic Director Cristina García notes, a superb poet in her own right. Liliana's workshop class will focus on the words that we use in our writing. "What is your particular linguistic treasure trove?" she asks. "How can you use it to enrich your writing?" According to García: "Liliana brings her boundless curiosity, her poet's musicality, and an exquisite ear for language to everything she touches. Her workshop promises to be a fascinating experience."

For more information, go to: <http://www.centrum.org/writing/2008/12/boundless-curiosity-the-work-of-liliana-valenzuela-.html>

TO RESET OR TO OVERCHARGE?

Visit <http://wordie.org/words/peregruzka> for a discussion of the translation snafu tainting Secretary of State Clinton's gift to the Russian foreign minister in March. A sample:

"Perhaps the worst thing about this faux pas was not that the word was wrong (actually it's the kind of mistake I would expect a truly diplomatic Russian to overlook, since it's very understandable why someone, even with a good general knowledge of Russian, might think that *peregruzka* meant "reset" – and in "lazy" or colloquial Russian, people do say *peregruzka* to mean reboot; Lavrov was being an a.....), but that the word was written in the Latin alphabet, not in the Cyrillic. This is truly disrespectful of Russian as a language."

THE TECHNOLOGICAL WRITING ON THE WALL AND THE FUTURE OF BOOKS

Cambridge University Press cutting 150 positions...

... and canaries in the publishing coalmines are singing in chorus. “These are scary times for all, and I wonder which other university presses are going to run into significant financial problems like these. And, more importantly, if there’s anyone out there who’s going to come up with a new business model—maybe one that doesn’t rely primarily on library sales, that incorporates e-books, etc.—that will define the twenty-first century scholarly press.” (Chad W. Post, April 7, “Academic Publishing Woes”).

See also Three Percent’s *Best Translated Book Awards for 2009*. Read all about it at Three Percent’s website: <http://www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepercent/>.

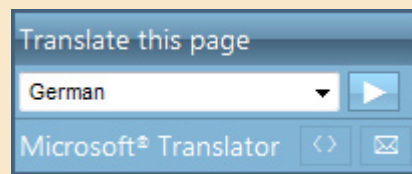
MICROSOFT TRANSLATES

Microsoft Introduces Translator Widget for Web Wizards

Note from Source editor: When I tried out the Google version of this widget (<http://blog.libinpan.com/2008/03/introducing-the-google-ajax-translation-wordpress-plugin/>) my primitive web page decided to link to another site. Note Microsoft’s widget described below also requires one to “paste a small snippet of code into your page.” For those of us who are not web-wizards, this process needs to be easier.

The Microsoft Translator team is very proud to announce the technology preview of an innovative offering for web page translations. Attendees to MIX09 this week get a [special invitation](#) to try out the [Microsoft Translator web page](#)

[widget](#). We are also accepting registrations, and will be sending out more invites as they become available.



What it is: Built on top of the Microsoft Translator [AJAX API](#) (also announced today) it is a small, customizable widget that you can place on your web page – and it helps you instantly makes the page available in multiple languages.

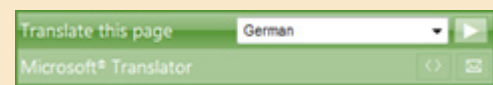
Who it is for: Anyone with a web page. If you can paste a small snippet of code into your page, you will be able to display the widget to your audience. No need to know programming intricacies, or how to

call a javascript API. No need to write or install server side plug-ins for your specific software.

What it offers: It provides a simple interface to anyone that visits the web page to select and translate content into a different language. You can see a demo on [this](#) page.

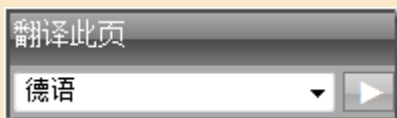
What is cool about it:

- Innovative: Unlike other (including [our](#)) existing solutions, it does not take the users away from the site. The translations are in-place and instant. Users can hover over the translation to see the original.



Microsoft Translator's Bilingual Viewer

- **Easy to Use:** Adding it to your page is as easy as copy and paste. Using it on the site is as easy as select language and click the button.
- **Customizable:** You can pick the colors that best blend into your site design. You can pick the size that would best fit into your design.



- **Thoughtful User Experience:** Progressive rendering allows for the page to get translated progressively – without having the user stare at a white space while the translation is being performed. The translation toolbar that appears when the translation is kicked off provides a progress indicator, the languages selected and a way to turn off the translation.
- **Localized:** The UI is available in multiple languages – so users that come to your page with their browser set to a different language will see the widget in their language.

Fun! What does it cost: It is completely free. You can put it on any site – commercial or non-commercial. You are only limited by the invite codes available at this point, but over the coming months we plan to make it more widely available.

Our web page translation includes a user interface we refer to as the **Bilingual Viewer**. It offers 4 types of bilingual views which users can choose depending on preference. The side-by-side and top/bottom views offer synchronized scrolling, highlighting, and navigation. In the two single language views, you can hover your mouse pointer over a sentence in one language and the corresponding passage in the other language is automatically displayed nearby for ease of reference. Finally, we render the translated text progressively on a web page in order to make it more quickly available for the user to read, while other page elements are still being translated in the background.

<http://tinyurl.com/nshj sy>

Nominate Literary Division Officers!

To nominate candidates for the Division Administrator and Assistant Administrator, please print and fill out the nominations form: <http://tinyurl.com/ljys96> You can then mail or fax it to the ATA Headquarters. (Both the address and the fax number are specified on the form.)

Interested in learning more about upcoming elections? Please view detailed information <http://tinyurl.com/lwgu3e>.

Biblical Translator Robert Alter Receives 2009 Robert Kirsch Lifetime Achievement Award

<http://tinyurl.com/kj5ett>

Alter has composed a series of translations and commentaries that approach the ancient texts with the full arsenal of his literary scholarship and his critical sensibility, his poet's ear for language and his mastery of biblical Hebrew. It is a measure of his chutzpah that Alter, after retranslating the book of Genesis in 1996 and the book of Samuel in 1999, went on to produce a fresh new translation of the Torah in its entirety in 2004, and capped it off with his rendering of the Psalms in 2007. To his credit, these undertakings have earned the praise not only of his fellow Bible scholars but also his fellow literary critics, a tribute to the quality of his work but also his ability to transcend the confines of academic scholarship.

"The poets will rejoice," enthused Cynthia Ozick, and she was right — Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney insisted that "Alter's translation can be fairly described as a godsend."

FINLAND'S LITERARY TRANSLATORS ASK FAIR COMPENSATION

JILL TIMBERS



Jill Timbers translates from Finnish into English. Her specializations are the forest industries and literature. Her literary translations have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, and a book about Tove Jansson which she translated is scheduled for publication by Drawn and Quarterly. Timbers is ATA-certified from Finnish and French into English. She lives in Illinois.

Contact: jill@timbers.fi.

In Finland people still make a living as professional literary translators. Well – sort of. More or less. A 2008 CEATL (Conseil Européen des Associations de Traducteurs Littéraires) survey, available at www.ceatl.eu/docs/surveyuk.pdf, charts the bleak situation of literary translators in Europe.

The following editorial by Finnish translator Tarja Roinila appeared on the Finnish literary criticism website Kiiltomato.net in March this year (<http://www.kiiltomato.net/?cat=editorial>). Since then, the community of Finnish literary translators has banded together in a dramatic publicity campaign to raise public awareness of their situation: Kaijamari Sivill, current president of the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters (SKTL), and translator Tarja Roinila appeared together with a publisher's representative on a cultural program of the national radio; Heikki Karjalainen, chair of the SKTL's literary division, was interviewed on another major radio program; Sivill and a representative from a different publishing house were interviewed on a popular television talk show. Newspapers continue to carry the story. The public has responded sympathetically to the translators' dilemma, and publishers, too, express concern.

The major Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* ran a summary in English.

This is just the latest instance of coordinated activism among Finnish translators. Their prolonged efforts have led to official recognition of literary translation as art: read "Capturing an Elusive Truth" in the March 2009 *ATA Chronicle* about Kersti Juva's appointment as Artist Professor. In a separate initiative, in November and December 2008, Finnish translators campaigned against proposed personnel cuts at the national Research Institute for the Languages of Finland and succeeded in having the cuts tabled for further consideration. (See the next *ATA Nordic Division* newsletter/blog for the full story.) Both SKTL President Kaijamari Sivill and Artist Professor Kersti Juva will be at the ATA conference in NY, and Juva will also attend this year's ALTA Conference.

A PROFESSION, NOT A HOBBY

BY TARJA ROINILA
TRANS. JILL TIMBERS

THIS EDITORIAL APPEARED AS "IHAN OIKEA AMMATTI," MARCH 9, 2009,
ON THE FINNISH LITERARY CRITICISM WEBSITE KIILTOMATO
([HTTP://WWW.KIILTOMATO.NET/?CAT=EDITORIAL&ID=179](http://www.kiiltomato.net/?cat=editorial&id=179)).

It will soon be twenty years since I had my first literary translation published. It was the fulfillment of a longtime wish. To make the dream come true, a publishing house had to take an interest in this newcomer and her book proposal, and I myself had to do thorough groundwork and persistent knocking on doors.

In addition, I had to be ready to work virtually for free. I accepted the situation because I had no choice. Fortunately, I knew how to bake bread, and I could print for free at the university. I figured the making a living part would work itself out later. The most important thing was to get a start in the profession.



Tarja Roinila translates literature from Spanish, French and German into Finnish. Among her recent books is a prize-winning anthology of Spanish poetry which she edited and translated together with Jukka Koskelainen.

I am among the fortunate ones who have had the opportunity to translate challenging literary texts into Finnish: poetry, philosophy, modern prose classics. I have gotten my proposals approved within the publishing houses, work has been plentiful and I have received grants in support of difficult projects. I enjoy the work, work in which both craftsmanship and critical reading skills develop constantly, work for which I must continually study new subjects and each time devise different translation strategies.

I am proud of my profession. The quality of literary translations in Finland is impressively high. Translators have a model work ethic. The

amount of expertise and specialist knowledge amassed within the translator community is astonishing, as you notice best when you send a problem or question to the communal e-mail list.

I've had it good.

I recently bumped into a colleague my age who told me she had started selling cosmetics. Although she has plenty of interesting translation work and she has also received grants, she cannot afford to be a full-time translator. The math just doesn't work, even though the work week is often seven days and there are virtually no vacations, rarely even a two-day breather between two books.

Shortly after this conversation I heard about another colleague who has begun horticulture studies. About a third, who is considering nursing. She enjoys translation, but the conditions are harsh, and exhaustion, ever-present.

My colleagues' decisions caused me to look afresh at my own "good fortune." I have taken it as more or less a given that this is a low-paying field (coincidentally, dominated by women). Nonetheless, I work for businesses that sell a product – the translated book – which would not exist without my contribution.

And so, I could have had things better. Fair compensation might have been paid for my work. I might have gotten away on vacation occasionally. It might even have been that translation fees were reflected in pension accrual. My increasing experience and professional development might have shown even somewhat in my income level.

Monthly income under 1000 euros

I calculate that my last novel translation left me with less than 1000 euros in hand per month, without even taking into consideration the two weeks of groundwork I did at my own risk to initiate the translation: reading, preparing and then writing the proposal. In the business world one would say I served as the publisher's "consultant" – does the term conjure visions of a handsome invoice?

Translations and their degrees of difficulty vary, of course, but it is my experience that it is hard to reach gross monthly earnings of 1000 euros with a 40 hour work week. I hear similar numbers from colleagues. That gross income does appear to be quite routine for experienced professionals translating the most difficult texts.

Many speak of monthly incomes averaging 700 - 900 euros. If you combine that with an annual grant (about 1300 euros a month), which only a few translators receive each year, a translator, with luck, could achieve a gross income of 2000 euros a month. From the gross income, not only taxes but also a mandatory 20.8% self-employment pension contribution are deducted.

The Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters has calculated the relationship between monthly earnings and number of pages translated into Finnish. At the *highest market prices* currently paid for literary prose (approximately 14 euros for 1000 keystrokes) a translator can attain a taxable monthly income of 1300 euros by translating about 1000 pages a year. (This figure takes into account the statutory pension contribution and some business deductions.)

A thousand pages is a lot, particularly if the text is artistically ambitious and its translation pace therefore slow.

At a quick estimate, compensation needs to be doubled or even tripled if it is even remotely to correspond to the professional skills required by the job.

Financial situation critical

CEATL, the European Council of Associations of Literary Translators, recently conducted a survey of literary translators' compensation in a number of European countries. Finland placed near the bottom of the comparison. In Finland, literary translators earn 44% of the average wages of workers in the manufacturing and services sector, whose pay averages 2730 euros. Only Italy had a lower figure.

The CEATL report states that "in Greece, Germany, Finland, Austria, Denmark and Switzerland, the material situation of translators is critical and professional literary translators are virtually on the bread line."

Finland's situation is particularly alarming for two reasons. First, the percentage of literature published in translation is greatest in Finland of all the countries mentioned above, at 66 percent. (The corresponding figure for Germany is 22%.) Second, Denmark and Finland are the only countries in the "critical" group in which literary translation is the full-time primary occupation for at least half of the literary translators. The future of the whole profession is thus at stake.

Finnish translators deserve better. The majority depend on the income from this work for their livelihood, and many of those who do other work in order to keep their heads above

water would prefer to concentrate on literary translation. Professional literary translators are not a marginal group. Two thirds of our literature is translated into Finnish from other languages.

Nor is it all the same who translates these books. If experienced literary translators burn out and more and more of them decide to throw in the towel, the quality of translations will suffer. This is a matter of the survival of literary translation as a true profession. "What does it say about the quality of literary exchange between our societies if literary translators are forced to dash off their work just to be able to earn a basic living?" asks CEATL.

The fact that in the past decade translators' real income has remained constant or even dropped does not help the situation. According to a report by the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters, translation compensation rose 15% and the cost of living, 18% between 1997 and 2007. This figure includes all types of literature, fiction and nonfiction. Compensation for literary prose rose 21% during the same period, but even that is just half what the general income level index rose.

The pay level has no objective basis

The harsh facts compel me to look at my professional work environment with new eyes. The high quality of Finnish translations and the dedication of Finnish literary translators to their work seem downright amazing.

Unless they do it for "the love of art." That diabolical phrase may explain quite a lot. Perhaps it reveals a way of thinking that lurks behind these problems, a way of thinking that

afflicts not just the field of translation but the whole cultural arena. As a literary translator I should be satisfied with little, because I enjoy my work so much.

The linkage between a calling and gainful employment can be wearisome. It is tedious to explain to the other party in fee negotiations that I actually try to support myself with this work – as if the other party did not know that. An unspoken current running through these discussions is a concept or at the very least an established practice that insults my professionalism – the idea that I do not deserve to be paid reasonable compensation, in contrast to an industrial designer or an architect, for instance, who are also key figures in the process of artistic production and who work for businesses. This is a structural problem for which there is no single scapegoat. For that very reason it requires us all to rethink the issues.

Our literary language was created through translation into Finnish. The profession's roots stretch back to the late 1800s. The body of professionals is nevertheless young, for professional literary translators emerged only in the 1970s when we were allowed entry to the world of grants and subsidies. In an amazingly short time, the profession of literary translators has achieved widespread esteem, which can be seen not only in media recognition but also in surveys of what Finns value.

Measured by the other gauge dominant in our economic system, however, we are the dregs of society. Money is at once both a symbolic and the most tangible measure of esteem, although it remains a delicate subject to discuss in the

cultural realm. We aren't really doing this for the money, are we?

Habits of thought and established practice are deeply entrenched. For this reason it is important to remind people that there is no rational, objective basis for the reigning level of compensation. There are only so-called economic realities on whose account discussions of value are assiduously dodged. There are only pragmatic reasons, one of which is that we have no real power in negotiations -- bluntly put, no way to exert pressure. In terms of the basic functioning of society, we are not key players; but in terms of the foundation of culture, we are indeed.

Sustainable conditions for the practice of the literary translation profession in Finland must be achieved. This work is not finished. To accomplish it we need the efforts of not only the literary translators but also the publishers, and, most of all, we need frank discussion between the translators and the publishers. It would be nice to be able in good conscience to recommend this fine profession to the linguistically talented literature lovers of the next generation who dream of it.

BY THE WAY

by Tony Beckwith,
<http://www.tonybeckwith.com/>



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.

Spanglish

English was my first language, my mother tongue. It's what my family spoke at home and in our social circle while I was growing up. But outside that circle we spoke Spanish because we lived in Montevideo, Uruguay. We were *ingleses*, members of a bilingual community made up of people like my parents, whose own parents came out from England just before the First World War. There was also an assortment of expats from many different countries, and English was the lingua franca at our social gatherings, sports events, clubs of various kinds, and the local British School.

At the school — affectionately known by its de facto name of *El Breeteesh* — we were forbidden to speak Spanish. Most of the teachers were imported from England, and valiantly struggled to instill in us the basics of a classical Cambridge syllabus, just as the sun was setting on the British Empire. In the

playground, however, we spoke a language of our own, a hybrid concoction called Spanglish.

Spanglish — the name just rolls off the tongue! — was a brilliant blend, a splendid synthesis of our two languages. It wasn't until much later in life that I came to understand that the linguistic gymnastics involved in speaking Spanglish transported me to a level somewhere beyond the venerable Arthur J. Hobson's grammar class. He taught us the rules, but Spanglish taught us how to bend them.

As in border regions all over the world, our linguistic frontier inevitably led to an overlapping that not only produced the usual code-switching and word substitution; it also created half-breed words and unwritten rules that governed their use. This whole exercise provided the outlet for those subversive forms of expression that are so essential to

adolescence, and gave us the delicious sense that “they” could not understand what “we” were saying. This was, of course, not entirely true, since most of the adults had learned how to fracture the languages in pretty much the same way when they were kids. A decent command of both English and Spanish is really essential to a thorough appreciation of the scope and beauty of Spanglish, so I won’t go into much technical detail here. Anyone who speaks more than one language is perfectly familiar with the idea.

I should mention that the Spanish we spoke at that time and place was the Uruguayan version, which is similar to the Argentine, since both were strongly influenced by Italian migration during the settlement of these neighboring countries of the Río de la Plata region. Some words are actually spelled differently in this kind of Spanish. But the main difference is in the inflection, which falls closer to the end of words like “dec*í*me” (“tell me”) and “escuch*a*me” (“listen to me”), compared to the emphasis favored in Spain and other parts of Latin America where one says “d*í*me” and “escúchame” instead.

Spanish verbs end in “ar,” “er,” and “ir.” “Caminar” means “to walk,” “comer” means “to eat,” and “escribir” means “to write.” English has many verbs that end in “ate,” such as translate, emulate, and compensate. When this ending is cobbled onto a Spanish verb, “caminar” morphs into the Spanglish “camate,” keeping the same meaning. It is conjugated thus: I caminate, you caminate, she caminates, etc. We can also say “caminating” and “caminated” and so on. By

a happy twist of serendipity, English words like contemplate and accommodate are also full-fledged Spanglish words, though there is little serious doubt about which came first. In certain forms of American English, one occasionally hears the noun “conversation” transformed into the verb “to conversate” (as in “I enjoyed conversating with you”), but that’s a different phenomenon altogether.

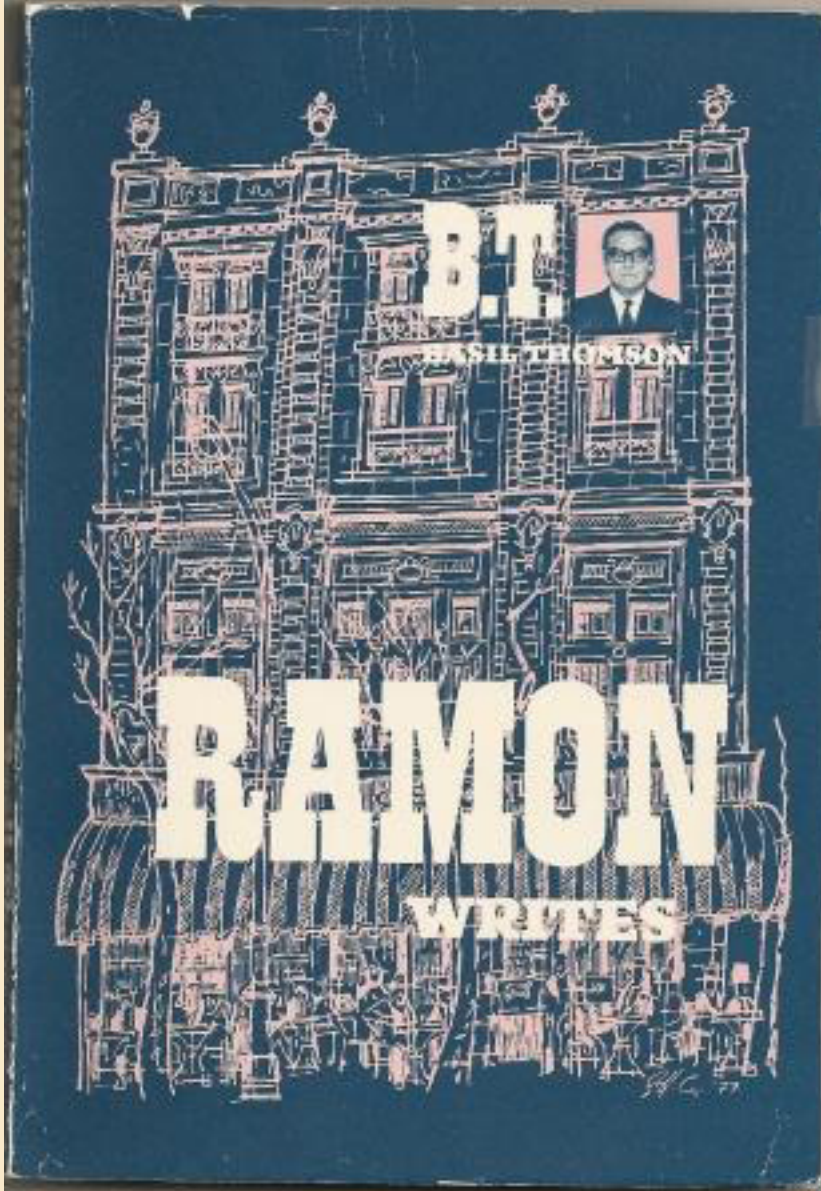
Verbs are the most fertile ground for outbreaks of Spanglish. For example, the Spanish verbs “dejar” and “jorobar” have various shades of meaning, but for our purposes here we will use “to quit” and “to pester,” respectively. The Spanglish for “quit pestering me, will you!” borrows the reflexive and the syntax from Spanish and becomes: “Dejate yourself from jorobating, do you want!”

Spanglish offers endless opportunities for entertainment in other areas as well. It permits the speaker to stubbornly translate words in an intentionally literal way, to ignore conventional syntax, and to manipulate the spelling of words in one language to create new ones that masquerade as real ones in the other. This produces sentences of haunting beauty such as, “the tranquil doesn’t come well to me;” “they want to independizate themselves;” “a splinter off the old wood, eh?” and “there would arm itself a scandal of the first.” These are the immortal words of Basil Thomson, to whom Spanglish is deeply and forever indebted. Thomson, under his initials de plume “B.T.” wrote a humorous column – “Ramon Writes” – in the Buenos Aires Herald for almost 30 years during the mid-twentieth century. He was

born in the Argentine province of Tucumán and, like many of his generation, volunteered to fight in the Second World War and was “commissionated” by the British Army. What that experience did to his command of language, and to his sense of humor, has been the subject of awed speculation ever since.

Many years after reading “Ramon Writes,” I realized that, by deconstructing two languages and assembling a hybrid version out of the parts, I learned something about how languages function. While my brother was taking motorcycles apart to see how they worked, I was putting languages up on a virtual hoist and dismembering them, phoneme by phoneme. Spanglish and other similar homemade tongues encourage the mind to loosen its grip on the essential but rigid linguistic forms and structures taught by an academic education. I discovered syllables that way, and came to understand their vitally important role, especially in poetry. I learned to see words embedded in other words, and to scramble the letters into anagrams. When a word is seen as a single unit, it is a firm, unyielding plank; but it has an entirely different range of flexibility — and will confide clues concerning its origins — when viewed as a sequence of independent syllables. I think the melody in a language flows from the syllables, just as the sound emanates from the vowels. When playing with words and meanings, stretching and reassembling them into endless alternatives, it becomes evident that just as some words have many meanings, some meanings have many words. Insights like this can expand horizons at a dizzying rate.

As a translator, there comes a time when I feel the need to pull away from the structure of the text and immerse myself in its essential meaning. This is not always as simple as it sounds, for me at any rate. The source language is seductive and exerts a powerful influence over the translator’s perception of the nuances of the original. But all that syntax, all those words, must be temporarily set aside in order to allow the underlying meaning to float free and be reinterpreted in the target language. I believe that Spanglish provided the experimental and boundlessly playful environment where I learned how to encourage that process to unfold in my mind. Spanglish helped give me a way with words.



Ramon Writes is so popular in the Southern Cone that a compilation of his columns came out in a new edition published by the **Buenos Aires Herald** in 2007.

RAMON WRITES: AN APPRECIATION

BY ANDREW GRAHAM-YOOLL



Andrew Graham-Yooll
Photo by Adriana Ortea

*Andrew Graham-Yooll (1944) was born in Buenos Aires of a Scottish father and an English mother. He is the author of about thirty books, in English and in Spanish. Graham-Yooll was the editor of the English-language **Buenos Aires Herald** (founded in 1876) up to December 2007. He joined the paper in 1966. He left the **Herald** in 1976 and went into exile during the military dictatorship. In 1994 he returned to Argentina where he became editor and president of the board of the **Herald**. He is Reader's Editor and "Ombudsman" at the newspaper **Perfil**, in Buenos Aires.*

*Graham-Yooll's books include the now classic **A State of Fear: Memories of Argentina's Nightmare** (1985), which author Graham Greene called "the book of the year" at the time. He is known for **The Forgotten Colony. A History of the English-speaking Communities in Argentina**, first published in 1981, and for his massive chronological history of Argentina in the second half of the twentieth century (**Tiempo de Tragedias y Esperanzas, 1955-2005**). He translates Spanish poetry into English, and British and US poets into Spanish. In 2002, he was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE), by the British Crown. He has four children and three grandchildren.*

*The following essay is an abridged version of Andrew Graham-Yooll's introduction to the 2007 edition of **Ramon Writes**.*

The idea that Ramon is the original Homo Spanglish in Argentina has been accepted by many people, especially English-speakers of long residence and Spanish-speakers of ancient loyalty. It is not difficult for the *Buenos Aires Herald* to portray a humourist of Basil Thomson's quality as a pioneer among his peers. His Ramon ranks as the most ingenious of the many ingenuous Spanglish-speaking characters he introduced, five days a week, in his *Herald* section "The Mulberry Bush." However, not everybody understands us. This is serious entertainment and will someday merit an entertaining academic study in linguistics.

Ramon's "Spanglish" was elevated to a special status by *Herald* readers through the decades, but it had been evolving even before the launch of *Ramon Writes*. There were magazines printed in Buenos Aires such as the short-lived *Ourphun*, published during and shortly after the First World War, and the almost-contemporary but longer lasting *Argentine News*. And it was used in other Anglo-Argentine publications as well. These versions treated linguistic adaptation — some might call it distortion — as the norm. In some cases, the dialogue printed beneath cartoons used interspersing (and interacting) words in English and Spanish, which is precisely how it was spoken.

For years, especially before the 1960s, Spanglish was frowned upon by the better class of schools and society in Buenos Aires. In certain quarters, there was no doubt that speaking Spanglish was the first step on the much-feared descent into the dreaded state of "going native." However, the worst of Spanglish was constantly evolving.

The beauty of Basil Thomson's Ramon (he wanted no accent on the o and no quotes around Ramon Writes) is that, while warning against a diminishing command of English, the character's speech was a tacit admission that change is inevitable in something as rich as the English language. Thomson, through Ramon,

in the *Herald*, was a trail blazer. In keeping with his approach, academe everywhere else assures us that the beauty of English, post imperial, post war, post hippie, or whatever, is that it has changed all over the world. Spanglish is not pidgin; it is more like an adjusted slang, but not jargon. It is original, and it happens everywhere. For example, in post-war Kenya, a civil servant, asked to provide files on an individual might reply: "I find him but I no see him," which means, "I searched but did not find them." And there is Germish (German-English), Yanito (Gibraltar), Franglais, and Engrish (in Japan, which can also be read as Japlish and Janglish).

And then there is Indian English, or "Indish", which is up there with the best. In May 1986, the New Delhi journal *Seminar* devoted a whole issue to Indish. One of the articles was by the well-known writer Khushwant Singh, who provided some interesting examples. He reported that, "Fairly early in their sojourn, the English were eating *curry*, drinking *toddy*, and smoking *cheroots*, on the *verandahs* of their *bungalows*. They were *Nabobs* with their own private *sepoys*. They employed *baboos* to teach them, *ayahs* to look after their *babalog* and *nautch* girls to entertain them."

If this can be dismissed as Indian adopted by the English, or as spoken by the late Peter Sellers (1925-1980) imitating an Indian, try writer Dharma Kumar's article in the same journal. His favourite anecdotes, he wrote, came from the offices of personal assistants to important officials. His best story: One day he rang a close friend at the Finance Ministry. The PA recognised the caller but said the boss could not take the call because "He is on the sofa with a foreigner. Should I disturb him?"

Nowadays, the Spanglish of Ramon and others provides material for stand-up comics and academic analysts. Examples include classic New York Puerto Rican ("Nuyorican") expressions such as, "Vacuum the carpet/Vacunar la carpeta" or "No grocery deliveries on Tuesdays/Los martes no se deliberan grocerias."

But apart from phonetic adaptation, there is the more common and more widely used Spanglish which involves "switching," i.e. the use of either language as a short cut (as in lazy speech syndrome), using the words that are most easily recalled in either English or Spanish. For example, an Anglo-Argentine family in London was invited to be the

subject of a study by a Masters student who went on to get her degree at the University of Newcastle in 1985. Her paper, titled "A Spanglish Tango: A Study of Code Switching with particular reference to an Anglo-Argentine family," seemed to consist of nothing more than recording a conversation during supper, and then highlighting the howlers.

Thank goodness there is always the academic rescue: Steven Pinker, an MIT lecturer and author of such books as "The Language Instinct," has argued that English may deteriorate over the decades, but it will always refer back to its original structures, no matter how unrecognisable it may become.

Former *Buenos Aires Herald* columnist Martin Eayrs once wrote that he had been asked to contribute an entry to a book on international varieties of English, and wanted to locate some of the features of Argentine-English (not Spanglish per se, but same difference, in an opposite sort of way). The examples given by Eayrs are commonplace and very much in current usage. They include expressions such as "going to the camp and drinking gin tonics in the living," whereas an Englishman goes to the country and drinks gin and tonics in his living room. From that simple start, anything can happen to the language. What Basil Thomson did was to take all available samples of distorted English and collate them into his character's correspondence, thus showing how the language can deteriorate while at the same time demonstrating that it can be adapted and even enriched. The result is the product of genius.

Rejection of "Spanglish" in Hispanic academe has been something of a continuing fad. However, one of the better reviews of the subject appeared in the Argentine daily newspaper *Página/12*'s Sunday supplement, *Radar* (4/6/2000), which printed a selection of critical views and fragments of fiction to support the argument that Spanglish in the United States had been developing during a century of immigration. The serious press published a critical view of Spanglish in the monthly journal of the Argentine publishers' association (ADEPA, April 2001), "¿Por qué no en castellano?" ("Why not in Spanish?") Well, perhaps because language offers many ways of saying things the same way, or better, when slightly changed.

The Polish-Mexican US academic, Ilan Stavans, produced a Spanglish dictionary of over six thousand words in 2001. The late Inés Pardal (whose

articles apropos of B.T.'s Ramon in the *Buenos Aires Herald Magazine* are reprinted as postscripts to the appropriate columns), reviewed the dictionary in the Herald On Sunday supplement, describing it as a valid departure in language development. And it was the subject of rebuke in a later report in the Buenos Aires newspaper *Clarín* (Patricia Kolesnicov, June 15, 2001), delightfully quoting the director of the Real Academia Española (Spain's Royal Academy of Letters), Victor García de la Concha, who said that "*Spanglés es un disparate y un producto del marketing* [Spanglish is nonsense and a product of marketing]." He was also quoted as suffering from "jet lag" on arrival in B.A., apart from blaming "marketing."

More recently, the purists were up in arms. There was a campaign against Spanglish by the keepers of a clean tongue, most notably at the Third Congress of the Spanish Language (Rosario, Argentina, November 2004), whence the holier than thou warned against the perils of "*spanglish*" (in lower case and italics, perhaps to show that it was truly venomous). Ramon Writes, by B.T., or Basil Thomson, towers above the controversy.

For years after the 1979 edition went out of print (having been reprinted several times), readers from all over the world wrote to ask if the *Herald* might have kept any copies hidden somewhere. The *Buenos Aires Herald* then produced the 1994 edition, which included far more Ramon columns, and a more thorough indexing.

The 2007 edition, fine-tuned by education section chief and prize-winning novelist Pablo Toledo, includes the delightful explanatory and exploratory articles by Inés Pardal (1943-2006), the paper's book reviewer for many years, which were printed in the monthly *Herald Magazine*.

Despite the passage of time, and criticism of the variety of uses of Spanglish, Ramon, or BT, or both, writes better every day, just as the late tango legend Carlos Gardel reportedly "sings better every day." The origins of Ramon are explained in an article by Basil Thomson that was first published in the September 1976 centenary edition of the *Buenos Aires Herald*, and is included in this new edition.

Ramon still "runs," as Basil Thomson's, or the *Herald's*, special version of "Spanglish" is still the subject of delight and recollection.

In his introduction to the first (1979) edition of this collection, Robert Cox — editor of the *Herald* for ten years until the end of 1979 — recalled that B.T., like all great humourists, was a perfectionist when it came to writing. He was never truly satisfied with his own work. Had he been working in an English-speaking country he would have been recognized by some agent and become famous in spite of himself, Cox argued. If the agent, and the paper, had understood Ramon's "Spanglish," that is. Cox recalled that B.T. retired from the *Herald* asking: "What have I achieved? Where has all the effort gone? What is there to show for it?" B.T. answered his own sad questions by saying: "The answer is, nothing."

This third edition of Ramon's writings, often delightfully "politically incorrect," might help prove how wrong B.T. was. People still quote him, the *Herald* is constantly asked for copies of his articles, readers still write letters trying to imitate Ramon or offer articles "in the style of..."

Ramon Writes is both a period piece and very contemporary, which just goes to show that Basil Thomson's columns are mini masterpieces to which readers can return time and time again. That is proof of both good humour and genius.

THREEPENNY POLITICS IN TRANSLATION

BY JANE H. CHAMBERLAIN

Jane Chamberlain is a small publisher, writer, and translator of Russian and French living in Austin, Texas.



All translations are failures. The best you can do is to find the translation that fails least.

—Marc Blitzstein

She also pays attention to politics and studies daily how to build a sustainable world for her four lovely grandchildren.

My first marriage began as a wanderers' idyll. Throughout the late sixties we possessed little more than our ability to move efficiently and cheerfully from one place to another. One of two LP records we owned was an MGM recording of songs from the off-Broadway production of *The Threepenny Opera* that had opened at the Theatre de Lys in 1954. As we learned the songs and sang them to each other, it never occurred to us to ponder where they came from or why we loved them so. We knew the music was Kurt Weill's, and we'd heard of Bertolt Brecht, but what mattered was that singing these songs made us feel the vibrations of life with a certain delicious decadence. By the time, several years later, that we lent the record to a friend who wanted to study the German theater style, it was so hopelessly scratched he probably thought nothing of his failure to return it.

But the songs were in my head for good, and some thirty years later I would come smack up against a shocking realization: other words had also been put to these melodies, and performers had the naiveté and insensitivity (in my view) to try to sing them. First it was Robyn Archer on a cassette tape, then Ute Lemper on a CD. Then, during a television special honoring Weill, my unbelieving ears heard from Teresa Stratas not "What keeps a man alive?" but "What keeps mankind alive?" Shocked at the difference one word could make, I listened to the rest of the chorus (with the parentheses protesting in my head):

What keeps mankind alive?

The fact that millions(#)

are daily tortured, stifled, punished,
silenced, oppressed.

Mankind can keep alive thanks to its brilliance(#)
in keeping its humanity repressed.

For once you must not try to shirk the facts.

Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts.

(What keeps a man alive?)

(He lives on others.)

(He likes to taste them first then eat
them whole if he can.)

(Forgets that they're supposed to be his brothers.)

(That he himself was ever called a man.)

(Remember if you wish to stay alive)

(For once do something bad and you'll survive.)

To my ear, “mankind,” “the fact,” and “daily” brought an intellectual distancing from the subject, as did the Latinate vocabulary, the sarcasm of “brilliance,” and the weak gerundial phrase in the last line. And enjambment in two places (#) interrupted normal speech patterns. What I was hearing was agit-prop posing as a song; what I remembered was an angry, passionate lament on the condition of “mankind” that had touched me with its brutal Anglo-Saxon idiom and its focus on the individual man and the roots of his inhumanity.

The most obvious question this disparity posed was “Why use the one when you have the other?” Other questions followed: Which was done first and by whom? Are there other translations? Which is most true to Brecht?

The translator whose lyrics I knew by heart proved to be Marc Blitzstein, an American composer/librettist whose other works include the operas *The Cradle Will Rock* and *Regina*. The author of the more recent translation was John Willett, an English writer, musician, theatre director, and Brecht scholar. That was the beginning of an exploration which has uncovered other translations as well, along with a rich tale of adaptation and borrowing that begs to be told. Here, however, I hope simply to answer the questions posed above, focusing finally on “Why use the one when you have the other?”

My query also led to politics on at least two levels: (1) the exploitation of art to transmit a political message, and (2) the political skirmishes within a culture that decide which messages will be heard. In this article, over a backdrop of political give-and-take, I present a brief history of the work’s composition and performances, compare selected lyrics in Brecht’s German with English translations by Blitzstein, Willett, and others, and poll ten contemporary production companies about the versions they’ve chosen to perform.

From John Gay to the Twenty-first Century

Early in the eighteenth century English poet and playwright John Gay was looking to ridicule the ethereal landscape of Handel’s operas and invent a musical genre grounded in the social realities of the time. Following Jonathan Swift’s suggestion of a “Newgate pastoral,” Gay developed *The Beggar’s Opera*. To arrive at an idiom of the streets, he consulted the poetry of François Villon (as Brecht would do exactly 200 years later) as well as numerous

contemporary sources. His immensely successful work, staged in 1728, was almost a revue of then-popular songs.

One hundred years later a London revival of Gay’s play caught the attention of Bertolt Brecht’s secretary, Elisabeth Hauptmann. She began translating it into literal German, feeding it bit by bit to Brecht. Kurt Weill had approached Brecht, desiring to set some of the latter’s words to music, and *Dreigroschenoper* proved to be an ideal vehicle for their collaboration. Like Gay, both envisioned a nonelitist, socially relevant art form for the whole population.



Original poster from Berlin, 1928

Describing the genesis of *Die Dreigroschenoper*, Lotte Lenya, Weill’s widow and a central focus of early performances, recalled Brecht’s notoriety for borrowing not only from Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Villon, but from Kipling, Gorki, Charlie Chaplin, and members of his own theater community. Lenya quoted a Berlin friend: “Why deny that Brecht steals? But — he steals with genius.”¹

The production came together in haphazard fashion; up until opening night it was regarded as an inevitable debacle. But theater magic prevailed at the Theatre am Schiffbauerdamm on August 28, 1928, and although the critical response was mixed, the play was an instant success with its target audience. Lenya, who sang the role of Jenny Diver, recalled that people who hadn’t been among the 800 attendees on opening night began to lie about it, and she reported

an encounter with a “blind” beggar who called after her, “Fraülein Lenya, is it only on the stage that you notice a blind beggar?”²

The play ran nearly five years, until the Nazi climate made it impossible to continue. In 1931 Lenya appeared in G. W. Pabst’s loose adaptation entitled *The Threepenny Movie*. Because Brecht’s own Marxist sympathies had been piqued by communist criticism of the bourgeois aspects of *Dreigroschenoper*, he rewrote the screenplay to pass muster in those quarters, converting Macheath’s thieves’ den into a corporate bank and Peachum’s beggars’ march into a sad, mute, human rights demonstration. The songs were forced into the background, and little of the stage production’s vitality survived. (The eventual breakup of the Weill/Brecht collaboration, according to Lenya, was about politics: “Kurt said he couldn’t set the Communist Party Manifesto to music.”³)

By 1933 when Brecht and Weill were forced to leave Germany, the play had been translated into eighteen languages and performed more than 10,000 times on European stages.⁴ During the war the score would go underground; Weill’s publisher reported

that the songs became “a type of anthem in certain private circles and served as spiritual renewal for many oppressed souls.”⁵

The first performance in English was John Krimsky and Gifford Cochran’s translation of *Dreigroschenoper*, staged in 1933 at the Empire Theater on Broadway. Although it was indulgently reviewed in the *New York Times*⁶ and the *Nation*⁷, the production closed after twelve performances. A *New Republic* article remembered that the translation had “completely dimmed Brecht’s ironic lyrics.”⁸

By September 1935 Weill and Lenya had settled in the U.S., while it wasn’t until 1941 that Brecht and his family reached California after a circuitous passage through Scandinavia and the Soviet Union. When in 1942 Brecht undertook unilateral negotiations with Clarence Muse to mount an English adaptation in New York with an all-black cast, Weill blocked the production, saying such an effort would dilute later success of a more mainstream production.

In July 1945 Brecht asked Eric Bentley, a young English professor who had been promoting Brecht’s work, to act as general editor for a collection of his works in English. Among the submissions was Desmond Vesey’s translation of *Dreigroschenoper* with Bentley’s own lyrics, which the latter described in a letter to Blitzstein as “a literal version made for the British public.”⁹ Although the publication project fell through, the Vesey/Bentley translation was published in 1949. The work was performed six times at Northwestern University without orchestra, accompanied on an electric organ, and Bentley’s lyrics would later be used in a film (see below); but no other performances are on record.

In 1950 Marc Blitzstein became obsessed by the *Dreigroschenoper* song American audiences know as “Pirate Jenny” to the point that he was driven to translate it. His lyric, sung over the phone to a skeptical Weill, cinched a deal. “That I can sing,” was Lenya’s response. “Marc, do it all, why don’t you?” Weill said, “you’re the one for it.”¹⁰ Blitzstein began working on an adaptation, cutting or altering some musical numbers and reworking Weill’s score for an eight-person orchestra. Leonard Bernstein previewed the songs in a concert at Brandeis University in 1952 -- with Blitzstein reading an interspersed narration -- to a warm critical response.

Two years later, after turning down several opportunities to open in larger venues on Broadway, Blitzstein found a home for *The Threepenny Opera*



Lotte Lenya and Kurt Weill

at the small Theatre de Lys off Broadway. Featuring Lotte Lenya in the role she had created in Berlin, the play had to close after only twelve weeks owing to administrative problems. Fifteen months later, amid a general clamor for its return, the production reopened at the Lys.

Although early reviews tended to be critical of the acting and direction, they were mostly complimentary of Blitzstein's libretto: "pithy lyrics that can be sung idiomatically," "remarkable intuitive insight and witty skill," "the finest thing of its kind in existence," "words that fit the music, words that retain the bite, the savage satire, the overwhelming bitterness underlying this work."¹¹ Brooks Atkinson wrote in the *New York Times*, "The brains, taste and inventiveness of the musical theatre have moved off-Broadway this season."¹² Negative reviews did appear in the *Nation* ("labored and awkward"), the *New Yorker* ("singularly flat and uninspired"), and the *N.Y Daily Mirror* ("pretentious and forced"). Eric Bentley wrote that Blitzstein had destroyed the work by altering its style and betraying its meaning (though in 1951 Bentley had petitioned unsuccessfully to be its director).¹³ Others complained that Blitzstein had bowdlerized Brecht. Atkinson's cheerleading prevailed, however, and audiences came out in droves for more than six years, making it the then-longest-running musical in Broadway history and taking in an estimated three million from an investment of under \$10,000.¹⁴ Blitzstein received a congratulatory letter from Brecht, and Lenya boasted, "He has kept the slang and the sting." As for Blitzstein, he wrote to a friend: "*The Threepenny Opera* is a nondescript production of a masterpiece, and the masterpiece comes through."¹⁵

English-language performances of *Threepenny* during the sixties were limited to a puppet show using the Blitzstein lyrics and a Joseph E. Levine (1963) film called *The Three Penny Opera* which credited Eric Bentley for the lyrics; however Blitzstein lyrics sneaked into three numbers (including the opener, "Mack the Knife," which had made its imprint on the American public via recordings by some forty artists).

Early in 1972 Tony Richardson directed a new stage version at the Prince of Wales Theatre in London from a translation by Hugh MacDiarmid, a Scottish poet. The plot followed the anticapitalist overhaul used in the Pabst film. MacDiarmid's relatively bland lyrics, though faithful to Brecht, made little effort

to introduce humor, clever rhymes, or otherwise accommodate Weill's compelling music.

For his 1976 Shakespeare Festival production called *Three Penny Opera*, Joseph Papp used a new translation by Ralph Manheim with lyrics by John Willett, the English translator/scholar. The translation had been commissioned by Brecht's son, Stefan. It was previewed, touted, and promoted amidst vociferous anti-Blitzstein fanfare. Blitzstein had castrated the work, Papp maintained, out of the need to censor it for the America of the mid-fifties. Furthermore, Blitzstein's rendition was entirely too "singable." Brecht's ensemble had made a special point of speaking song lines against the rhythm (a technique called *Sprechstimme*) so the lyrics would stand out and hold their own against Weill's "seductive



Bertolt Brecht

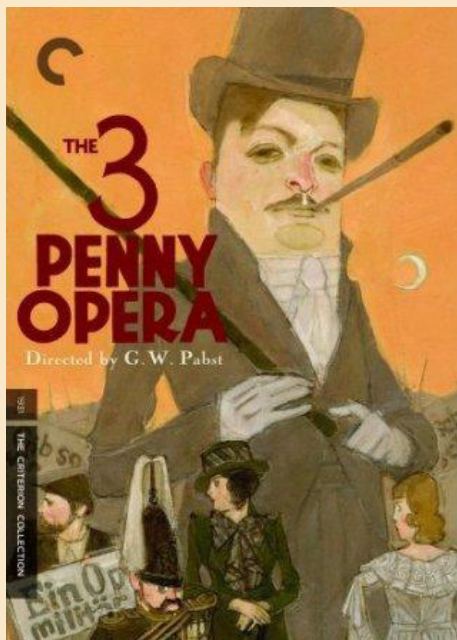
music. The new translation would sacrifice nothing to tastefulness and would restore Brecht's original intentions in every way.¹⁶

Richard Foreman's staging was innovative (again, the "beggar's bank"), and the starkly stylized and choreographed production was received as "brilliant" and "original," although several reviewers complained that more than half the lyrics were unintelligible. One review applauded a restoration of Brecht's *Sprechstimme* technique,¹⁷ but there was a sense among reviewers that Papp's production had carried it to an un-Brechtian extreme: "Foreman's stylization forces the actors . . . to sing with a strain that can be read in their neck muscles."¹⁸ Though Bentley

apparently chose not to review the production at the time, he would admit a decade later, “You couldn’t tell what the hell the performers were singing about and had to look it up in the book.”¹⁹

In 1988, Cannon Films reunited some of the Papp cast, including Raul Julia as Macheath, for a film called *Mack the Knife*, which based its musical numbers on Blitzstein’s lyrics, though extensively edited by director Menahem Golan and musical director Dov Seltzer. It was perhaps the most “bourgeois” betrayal of Brecht’s work, diluting the power of the songs with awkward graphic enactments, cluttering the performances with gaudy production numbers, crowd scenes, and carriage chases. Paradoxically, however, some of the sanitized lyrics reviled by Bentley, Papp, et al. were altered rather creatively in this score to convey more of the lost vulgarity.

Two years later, *Threepenny* returned to Broadway for ten weeks at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, featuring the rock star Sting as Macheath in a new translation by Michael Feingold, an East Coast poet and playwright. Feingold’s translation was described as “unidiomatic” and “witless” in an *Opera News* review;²⁰ however reviews focused mostly on directorial shortfalls.



Pabst movie poster

Notwithstanding its Broadway failure, the libretto has enjoyed recent performances in several university and community theaters (while the rarely staged Willett/

Mannheim version is still frequently mentioned as the “preferred standard.”²¹)

Perhaps the most successful production since Blitzstein’s has been a 1994 British adaptation with lyrics by Jeremy Sams, a British writer, translator, composer, and lyricist whose background seems to echo Blitzstein’s. The Donmar Warehouse production was set in contemporary London, where policemen have cell phones (though “cannon balls roar like thunder”). Reviews unanimously hailed Sams’ lyrics as “brilliant,” “unimprovable.” Nicholas de Johgh wrote, “Jeremy Sams has replaced Brecht’s songs and ballads, inspired by Villon and Rudyard Kipling, with terrific lyrics that reek of venomous misanthropy, sardonic vulgarity and cynical disenchantment.”²² With its bumper-sticker catchphrases like “Life’s a bitch and then you die,” “Yes!” “Like it or lump it!”, this translation has gained popularity among production companies targeting youthful audiences, though localized slang demands revision. More than other recent translators, Sams delivers the brutal weight of Brecht’s message idiomatically without much academic baggage.

The most recent Broadway production on record is playwright Wallace Shawn’s adaptation, which ran eight weeks in spring of 2006. Staged by the nonprofit Roundabout Theatre Company, it was reviewed as an uneven, gender-bending production with bondage costumes, exposed genitals, and wall-to-wall vulgarity. A libretto has yet to be found.

Are the Words the Thing?

It could be misleading to compare libretti in a purely literary context considering that the stage is such a visual and auditory medium, and I’ve seen none of these stage performances. But even listening to recordings of the Blitzstein, Willett, and Sams lyrics in performance reveals radically different interpretations. The Theatre de Lys production was consistently energetic with vivid, exaggerated performances conveying a strong sense of irony. The actor/singers seem to have taken their cue from Lenya – less melodic than dramatic, almost caricatured, but with a touch of sweetness and vulnerability.

By contrast, the performances in the Papp production were pale and uneven. Several critics pointed out that each character appeared lost in his/her

own play, each affecting a different style of delivery; in fact, the uniting factor may have been the pervasive absence of Brechtian irony in their performances. The women's voices were too thin and reedy for this play, and it was hard to tell them apart. Blitzstein's women, however, were cast deliberately to play off one another so that the Lucy/Polly duet becomes a true "clash of the Titans" with Bea Arthur's basso profundo countered by Jo Sullivan's soprano wail. Although this casting may not have been true to Brecht/Weill, it worked splendidly.

Lotte Lenya on Youtube

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPG9GcykPIY>
Lotte Lenya singing "Mack the Knife" in German

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJKkqC8JVXk>
Video of Lotte Lenya singing "Surabaya Johnny"

Blitzstein's characters delivered their lines succinctly but without the peculiar consonantal emphasis that characterizes especially Macheath's and Peachum's delivery in the Papp production ("good and dead-uh" for "good and dead", "hacketat" for "hacked at"). A glance at these dental traffic jams reveals the unsingability of Willett's lyrics and suggests that the overstressed consonants may have been an effort to save content from the void into which it ultimately fell. As for *Sprechtstimme*, there is a lot of it in both productions; however, judging from the reviews, Papp's goal of highlighting the lyrics failed utterly. My notes on the Papp recordings are littered with the word "lost" – the unsingable lyrics simply do not reach the ear.

The Sams libretto is quite singable, skillfully delivered, and easily heard – notwithstanding the localized slang. My difficulty in listening to this performance stemmed more from the harsh, melodramatic tone of the voices. This is, of course, a directorial quirk which could be easily remedied in performance.

Translating the "Zonks"

Eric Bentley relates that in rehearsal Brecht used the

English word "song" (*zonk* to the ear, long "o") for the ballads which Bentley says the audience expects to be "frivolous and peripheral." Instead, they are "serious and central"; in fact, Bentley suggests that whereas in most stage musicals the songs interrupt the dialogue, "in Brecht's plays, the dialogue is an interruption of the Zonks."²³ Reading Vesey's and MacDiarmid's libretti, I realized with a shock that my only experience of the *Threepenny* narrative had been through the "zonks." So much of character and event is revealed that the songs can, and often do, stand alone to create a narrative.

Though little space remains for discussion of specific songs, I want to present a few illustrations of Blitzstein's creative genius, his sometimes unwarranted softening of Brechtian vulgarity, and the intellectual dryness and/or unsingability of John Willett's lyrics in the Joseph Papp production. We'll recognize some

contributions of Eric Bentley and Hugh MacDiarmid, the Golan/Seltzer film revisions of Blitzstein's lyrics, and particularly those of Jeremy Sams, who at times approaches Blitzstein's legerdemain with English. Three songs illustrate both the sins that led to Blitzstein's apparent abandonment by *Dreigroschenoper* fans and the strengths that lobby for his preeminence. "Wovon lebt der Mensch?" and "Kanonensong" both contain examples of each; and a significant instance of Blitzstein's bowdlerization is found in "Die Zuhälterballade." We'll look at these, consider the phenomenal success of Blitzstein's "Mack the Knife," and discuss Jeremy Sams' treatments of the "Salomon-Song" and the "Ballade von der sexuellen Hörigkeit." (Unfortunately, I was unable to locate a libretto or recording of the Feingold translations so couldn't include his lyrics in this comparison.)

Denn Wovon Lebt der Mensch? What keeps a man alive? Returning to the song discussed in our introduction, the question is posed by Jenny Diver. Macheath and Mrs. Peachum take turns providing answers. The subtext is anger bubbling up from the lowest level of society to attack well-fed clerics, judges, and executors of laws made only to keep

the poor and ignorant in check. But when “man” becomes “mankind” per Willett, this angry little guy is swallowed up into an overarching concept that makes a poor fit with “alive.” While mankind could become extinct, it can’t die; so “alive” is not a good choice.

Brecht’s third line gives a polemical list of things humans do to one another, the German verbs falling rhythmically like a fusillade of blows. Though Blitzstein’s “He likes to taste them first then eat them whole if he can” doesn’t try to capture this verbal rain of abuse, it does embody the carnivorous, cannibalistic tone of the song. Willett’s more faithful “Are daily tortured, stifled, punished, silenced, oppressed” seems a mere catalogue of possibilities, losing the hypnotic, numbing pain of the Brecht lyric. Bentley’s solution better conveys Brecht’s impact — “Ill-treating, beating, cheating, eating some other bloke”; however the verse’s strength is diluted by an outcropping of adverbs: “resolutely,” “absolutely,” and finally “Men live exclusively by mortal sin,” bringing in Brecht with the air of a papal nuncio.

Blitzstein’s well-rhymed and idiomatic first stanza is essentially faithful to Brecht -- “First you’ve got to give us some grub, then you can talk”²⁴ becomes “First feed the face, and then talk right and wrong.” There is a subtle political softening here, however; it allows that hungry people have problems with right and wrong but stops short of invoking the welfare state as do Bentley’s “Your prior obligation is to feed us” and Sams’ “First give us breakfast.” In the second stanza, bowdlerization does occur when the German, “You teach us when a woman may lift up her skirts and also when she may give you the eye,” becomes “You warn us with appropriate caresses / That virtue, humble virtue, always wins.” Willett’s solution is better here: “You say that girls may strip with your permission. / You draw the lines dividing art from sin.” These words are mostly short and sharp, there is no enjambment, and accenture follows melody. The ideal translation might choose this solution over Blitzstein’s, except that it falls apart in the next line, “First sort out the basic food position,” which pales before Blitzstein’s “Our middle’s empty – there it all begins.”

“*Kanonensong.*” According to Lenya, the “Cannon Song” was the deciding moment in the first-

night audience’s acceptance of the 1928 production.²⁵ A comparison of its translations illustrates a common pitfall for translators – the pressure to do something new. Because Blitzstein’s was the principal English translation for several years, his words were to a crippling extent off-limits to his successors. Note, for example, the extremity Willett was reduced to: Blitzstein’s “Johnny joined up and Jimmy was there / and George got a sergeant’s rating” becomes for Willett, “John was all present and Jim was all there, / and George was up for promotion.” Similarly, in the last line Blitzstein’s “And the army is still recruiting” becomes “And the Army still goes on ahead recruiting.” Bentley comes up with “John was a soldier and so was James” and MacDiarmid, “John marched with us and Jim came along,” perhaps the best of the lot after Blitzstein. But none scan to the music as Blitzstein’s does – with a sure instinct he lengthens or shortens syllables to avoid difficult locutions, softening the double J of “John joined” simply by using nicknames, Jimmy and Johnny, thereby also reminding us that the subjects were mothers’ sons, relevant to the antiwar focus of this song.

Blitzstein’s “Let’s all go barmy, live off the army” gathers force by moving from Brecht’s generalized “Soldiers live on the cannons . . .” to a more specific “we.” But in the next few lines, Blitzstein’s amusing and singable lyrics completely gloss over the racism implicit in Brecht’s “when a rainy day would come and they encountered a new race, a brown one or a pale one, they probably made raw mincemeat out of them.” Considering the tenor of the times -- full-blown McCarthyism with the cultural rigidity of the fifties -- some of these omissions are forgivable; however this one is hard to understand, particularly in light of Blitzstein’s well-documented sensitivity to issues of human rights. His line, “And if the population / should treat us with indignation,”²⁶ is part of a repeated chorus that could have been altered slightly to show the soldiers as not merely xenophobic but racist. Willett, Golan/Seltzer, and Sams all introduced well-rhymed alternatives that acknowledge the racial theme: “When they come face to face / With a different breed of fellow / Whose skins are black or yellow” (Willett), “Pallid or swarthy faces / of uncongenial races” (Sams), and “We’ll meet that darker race / We’ll fight them face to face” (Golan/Seltzer).

Die Zuhälterballad (“The Procurer’s Ballad”). Sung in the bordello by Macheath and Jenny just before she betrays him to the police, this tango mixes a hazy air of nostalgia with narration of the most dissolute, immoral, and violent sort of life, some of which Blitzstein was obliged by his time to omit. When Blitzstein’s faithful translation of the pimp’s account -- “A sailor would appear, I’d get out of bed, / Went out and had a beer, he’d crawl in instead / And when he’d paid his bill, back in bed I’d climb, / And say ‘Goodnight, my friend, thank you, anytime!’” - - was too much for the MGM recording studio, he was obliged to coin the “milkman” replacement on the spot for the original cast album (“The milkman rang the bell, I’d get out of bed / I’d open up her purse and give him what he said. / I’d have a glass of milk, back in bed I’d climb. / You understand, she was out working all this time”). This was, perhaps, an ingenious method of coping with the censors -- so far out of context with the general tone that even in my innocent youth I imagined Macheath winking broadly throughout this passage.

Brecht’s original third stanza made such offensive reference to the disposal of an aborted pregnancy that only two of the six translators I’ve looked at had the stomach to render it with complete fidelity (Willett and Sams); and this stanza wasn’t even used in the original Berlin production! My own response to the articulately delivered Sams lyric “But then we thought it best to wash it all away. / A drunken doctor showed us what to do. / We took the mess and put it down the loo” was a chill rather than a wake-up call. Perhaps both Brecht and Blitzstein removed it with good reason. Is this bowdlerization or diplomacy? And is the latter sometimes useful in translation?

Die Moritat von Mackie Messer. Why have Blitzstein’s “Mack the Knife” lyrics not been replaced as have other equally good lyrics? Exposure, of course, comes to mind; universal acceptance makes it harder to slip in something new, demonstrated by the use of Blitzstein’s lyrics in two films based on other versions.

Brecht’s alteration of Macheath from the Robin Hood-typerogue of Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* to a cutthroat generator of every imaginable crime including arson and child rape to me lacks psychological validity. Crimes tend to be profilable,

but this character is a crimestopper’s potpourri. Jeremy Sams’ “he’s slashed you and you’re dead,” “Mackie slashed him weeks ago,” and “Still he’s evil – he’s a murderer” may be faithful to this overdrawn Macheath, but like National Enquirer headlines these lyrics leave nothing to the imagination.

The crux of Blitzstein’s lyric, on the other hand, is a hypnotic, dangerous, and dreamy fascination with the evil it only suggests. The repetition of “dear” must be responsible for a good bit of his song’s success; it serves as a counterpoint to the horror, humanizing the narrative and bringing it home in a way that is both terrifying and reassuring. This ambiguity is perhaps the secret of Blitzstein’s overall success with this adaptation; and if it is a dumbing down of Brecht, it’s also a successful rewrite that acknowledges more subtly the tension between the darkness and the light.

Salomon-Song. Jenny’s waltzing review of *Threepenny* events set against the wider web of history has inspired some of the best translations on all sides. None are outrageous, but two are special: Blitzstein’s and Sams’. Each lyricist departs in his own way from Brecht’s original, which has a highly structured rhyme scheme with more than half the lines repeated from stanza to stanza. Blitzstein gets cohesion from repeating “on the spot” and “guess not” and maintains Brecht’s order in pondering the fates of Solomon, Caesar, and Macheath while telling the stories with more rich detail. Sams creates an entirely new story that brings Brecht’s moral home, thoughtfully and inventively, using Socrates and Icarus instead of Solomon and Caesar as examples presaging Macheath’s downfall. His opening line, “It’s always swings and roundabouts,” repeated in the final stanza, works well with the carnivalesque music in the background waltz. And the concluding couplets are outstanding, e.g., “And ingenuity’s no use at all / If you can fly, then you can fall” for the Icarus stanza. This translation couldn’t be called faithful but it raises the oft-considered question: Is it acceptable to improve on the original? – a question also relevant in Blitzstein’s case.

Ballade von der sexuellen Hörigkeit. The “Ballad of Dependency” citing Macheath’s weakness for women as his downfall is perhaps the one Blitzstein

lyric I never quite understood before reading a libretto—it was a bit too subtle for me. Sams, though he takes little directly from Brecht, spins a new story about a modern Macheath which includes some very trenchant and funny verses such as: “And lastly there’s the padre, celibate in name / A proper copper-bottomed hypocrite. / If you preach chastity, then practice it / Not do the opposite — Has he no shame? / He may be kneeling but he’s often thrusting, / Enjoying what he claims to find disgusting.” The last two lines are “He’ll take to Hades like a duck to water / Bet he gets to shag the devil’s daughter.” Humor is an essential element throughout the play, both as a counterpoint to the horror and as a mediation between the rawness of Brecht’s messages and the smoothness of Weill’s tunes. The humor enjoyed and exploited by Sams and Blitzstein rarely comes out in Willett’s and Bentley’s literally rendered lyrics. Did Blitzstein and Sams add it? If so, the work becomes richer for their inventions.

Threepenny in Performance

As to Blitzstein’s neglect by sensitive performers like Robyn Archer, Ute Lemper, Teresa Stratas, and others: I don’t know – none of these ladies has answered my query yet. However, a poll of ten theaters staging *Threepenny* over the past year has brought interesting results. Asked about their choice of libretto, four chose Feingold, one Sams, and five Blitzstein. None chose Mannheim/Willett.

Feingold was preferred by three repertory theatres in major cities and one small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. Comments included “more engaging and sharp for modern audiences [Shashin Desai, International City Theatre in Long Beach, CA],” “utilized a vernacular that spoke best to . . . college students,” and “more singer-friendly than Blitzstein or Willett [Jeffrey Lentz, Albright College Center for the Arts in Reading, PA].” The lone Sams producer was Niagara University Theatre in New York state, whose associate director Doug Zschiegner says the language seemed more “organic, biting and clear and seemed to fit the music more effectively.”

Of the five choosing Blitzstein, four were small educational institutions, two of these in Canada. The fifth was the Horizon Theatre at George Washington University. The Blitzstein libretto is now controlled by Rodgers and Hammerstein, which may make it the

preeminent choice, though one Feingold fancier cited his desire for royalties to go directly to the lyricist rather than a third party. There was a sense among them that while it was a softer version, it demanded -- or allowed -- more interpretation. Ilkay Silk at St. Thomas University in New Brunswick says, “The actor has to dig deep to get to the darkness and blackness of the humour, but I think Brecht’s message comes through.” Leslie Jacobson of George Washington University was more emphatic in her preference for the Blitzstein lyric but added that she uses a Willett libretto in a course on politically relevant theatre because it’s more true to Brecht. Scott Uddenberg of Elmhurst College Theatre in Illinois says that though they chose the Blitzstein production, they combed other versions and adapted some lyrics using contributions from practically every version I’ve mentioned.

Marc Blitzstein was a generous humanist: “What I love is people. I am ashamed of the meanness and stupidity which disorganizes people, and I am proud of the insight and generosity which organizes them.”²⁷ He would probably be energized to see his work being kept alive with this kind of adaptation. He might also be gratified by the 2008 online commentary of Wright State University Theatre (Dayton, OH) director W. Stuart McDowell: “Blitzstein still works. Why? Because Blitzstein was a fabulous musician, and his lyrics convey the pulse of Brecht’s poetry and the rhythm of Weill’s eclectic score. True, on the page some dialogue reads rather 1950-ish. But when spoken and sung, the play comes quite alive; moreover, it has teeth! One could argue, line by line, which translation best renders Brecht’s words. But the proof of the pudding for any musical is: which text sings best? For me, it remains the text by the writer/composer of perhaps the most Brechtian piece of American theatre, *Cradle Will Rock*.”²⁸

McDowell advises theatre groups planning to perform *Threepenny* not to listen to the MGM recording of the Lys production but to Lenya et al.’s 1930 Telefunken recording in German. “Lay Blitzstein’s words on top, and you’ve got pure magic.”

Conclusion

Back to my question, Why use the one when you have the other? While it's true that some jarring social issues were glossed over in Blitzstein's texts, looking at the otherwise high quality, the production's unparalleled success, and the aesthetically poor alternatives that have tried to replace it, one has to wonder if the issue was more, or perhaps less, than bowdlerization and demarxification. In these times, with marketing regarded as an intellectual endeavor and an end in itself, we might consider the possibility that public sentiment has been manipulated. Stefan Brecht, who commissioned the Mannheim/Willett translation Papp used and controlled the Brecht copyrights for years, was apparently not a Blitzstein fan; after encouraging the latter to translate some of Brecht's other plays, he would choose other librettists, and he refused biographer Eric Gordon's request to reproduce the letter of commendation his father had sent Blitzstein in 1954.²⁹ Joseph Papp saturated the media with a public relations campaign that effectively presold his 1976 package to his leftist intellectual theater audience while rendering Blitzstein passé. Eric Bentley, whose initial enthusiasm for the Lys production flagged when Blitzstein rejected him as director and when a production of the Vesey/Bentley libretto was blocked by Lenya,³⁰ had been preparing the way for Papp for twenty-odd years with tongue-in-cheek references to adapters who ruin masterpieces.

I would argue that because of his fine sense of language, drama, music, *and* human rights, Marc Blitzstein was able to do a monumental job of getting the spirit of Brecht into English and making it available to a large audience. Its financial success alone testifies to an extraordinary accomplishment. Blitzstein's works all breathe a fine awareness of the pyramidal shape of political power and its effect on the little guy; he owes no apology for adapting this work in a way that would take Brecht to the greatest number. *Threepenny* is the only Brecht play that has made its way into American core culture, and Blitzstein's mediation was surely a principal factor in its success. Although his background, like Brecht's, was bourgeois, and although his youthful Marxist attachment had already been severed by the time of *Threepenny*, Blitzstein's left-leaning credentials are clear from his entry in the red-baiting *Red Channels*

report of 1950: only Langston Hughes has a longer dossier.³¹

It's hard to pin down Blitzstein's genius -- it hides in the least conspicuous niches. I remember chuckling to myself over the ambiguity of naiveté and sarcasm of Jenny's word choice in the "Solomon Song:" "He was the wisest man on earth, / And *so* he cursed the day of his birth." Compare this with Willett's "To him complexities seemed plain. / He cursed the hour that gave birth to him" or Bentley's "He came to view the world with scorn / And curse the hour that he was born." It is the word "so" in Blitzstein's lyric, with the cause/effect relationship it creates, that brings a smile.

Brecht's last four lines read, literally: "For the ones they are in darkness / And the others are in light. / And you see the ones in brightness / Those in darkness drop from sight." Blitzstein's rendition is more ambiguous: "So divide up those in darkness / From the ones who walk in light. / Light 'em up boys, there's your picture. / Drop the shadows out of sight." Again, not completely faithful to Brecht, but perhaps an evolution of Brecht? The longest-running production of *Threepenny* privileged neither the vulgar low spots of life nor the "bourgeois" blessings all life seeks, but the tension between them. Maybe what Bentley, Willett, Papp, and other interpreters have lacked is the lightness of spirit that allows us to look on the darkness without succumbing to it.

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Latinate and so prominent that they become amusing, unlike “promotion” and “commotion” in Willett’s translation of the first verse.

27 From The Marc Blitzstein Web Site

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