ata SOURCE

AN ONLINE PUBLICATION
OF THE LITERARY DIVISION

NO. 48 SUMMER 2010

WOMEN IN TRANSLATION

SPECIAL ISSUE

BTW

She says she has just finished the Mother of all Translations,
and would we meet her for happy hour *RIGHT NOW*?

Letter from the Editor

Our special issue on WOMEN IN TRANSLATION gets rolling with a cartoon by Tony Beckwith on the "mother of all translations." Betty Meador follows up with an essay describing her encounter *nel mezzo del cammin della sua vita* with the "willful, outrageous, sexy Sumerian goddess Inanna" and concluding that we have much to learn from reading translations of Sumerian love songs associated with the goddess. In a preface to her translation of a poem by Hélène Sanguinetti, Ann Cefola explains how Sanguinetti "translates" French literary traditions — especially those of her native Provence — in her work. Nancy Arbuthnot reflects on her experience working with Vietnamese poet Lê Pham Lê and on the balancing act of translating poetry from another culture, another mind, another language. In "Poetry & Place: the Zapotec Roots of Natalia Toledo," Clare Sullivan examines the way in which Toledo's Zapotec roots affect her poetry. Regular contributor Tony Beckwith rounds out our issue with "My Mother Tongue"—an overview of the origins of the English language. The new Mailbox contains several letters in response to the Spring issue, and "Google Settlement Revisited" follows up on our Point/Counterpoint feature. Thanks go to Diane Goullard and Jamie Padula for proofreading this issue.

Our theme for the fall will be TRANSLATION AND THE ARTS.

Sincerely,

Michele Aynesworth

www.mckayaynesworth.com

Michele Aynesworth specializes in translating Argentine and French authors. Her recent translations include ***Deir-Zor: Tracing the Armenian Genocide of 1915***, a photographic journal by Franco-Armenian writer Bardig Kouyoumdjian (see the Fall 2009 issue of Source); numerous excerpts from works by Jewish writers for Yale UP's ***Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization*** series; and French economist Charles Rist's ***In So Corrupt an Age: A Journal of the War and of the Occupation (1939-1945)***, funded by an NEA grant.

***ata* Source**
Published by the Literary Division of ATA
American Translators Association
225 Reinekers Lane, Suite 590
Alexandria, VA 22314

Editor: Michele Aynesworth

Submissions (Word document or Text file)
for the next issue may be sent to
michele@mckayaynesworth.com.

Deadline is August 10.
Please include a photo
and brief bio of 2 or 3 sentences.

IN THIS ISSUE

Cover: BTW Cartoon by Tony Beckwith

To receive a printed copy of Source, use your ATA membership number and email address to modify your Division Membership. Go to http://tinyurl.com/2bhy5lf.
Or email Jamie Padula, ATA Chapter and Division Relations Manager, or call (703) 683-6100, extension 3017.

MAILBOX

E-MAIL *your* THOUGHTS TO MICHELE@MCKAYAYNESWORTH.COM

Congratulations!

I can't thank you enough for the Spring issue of* Source*, which dropped into my inbox on this Saturday morning. Despite a looming deadline, I read it from beginning to end (even forming an opinion on the Google issue on the basis of the articles pro and con). This is what literary translators want and need!

Sincerely,
Barbara Fasting

Google Settlement Case

Casey and Liliana are both right! We are, I believe, misguided in thinking that there is a single right side of this huge issue, although the court is called upon to act as if there were. Que será será - and our well intentioned hand-wringing and cerebration are for naught.

Eric Bye

Indian Literature and Translation

I greatly appreciated Rashid Hasan's article "Indian Literature and Translation" in the last issue of Source. I became immersed in the rich heritage of Urdu and Hindi literature, particularly short stories, while working towards an M.A. in Urdu at the University of Karachi between 2001 and 2007. I was unable to find good quality English translations of these stories, and so firmly stand with Rashid's statement, "Sometimes a poor translation is worse than no translation." In the case of Munshi Prem Chand's story Kafan, considered one of the classics of the genre, I located three English translations at the time which were so poor they neither managed to represent the cultural particulars of the story nor did they have much appeal in and of themselves. I did my own translation with my professor at that time, Dr. Hanif Fauque, and later it was featured on the website of Columbia University's Prof. Frances Pritchett (http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/kafan/krousefauque2004.pdf). It was exhilarating to pursue a native understanding of the story and represent it in idiomatic English, but I felt there was little promise in pursuing the translation of more stories, so did not continue the effort. Rashid's remarks would encourage me and others to reconsider the nature of the problem: Has a lack of interest in the literature led to disappointing translations … or have disappointing translations led to a neglect of the literature?

Jeff Krouse

From the LD administrator

It is summer again in California. On Sunday, Zama Beach, near my home, was bustling with people enjoying the sun and the fresh sea breeze. The two birds that come to nest in my back yard every year are already settled, and the squirrel, who lives in a big oak tree behind my house is snacking on the last green peach from my little peach tree as I am writing this letter to you.

Thanks to Michele Aynesworth's creativity and hard work, Tony Beckwith's interesting and informative regular contributions, and a variety of articles submitted by other members of our division, we've been able to publish two great issues of Source so far this year. We are glad that you sent us feedback. Please check the LD's website (http://www.ata-divisions.org/LD/) from time to time. We are constantly adding new useful links and other content. As some of you already know, our Listserv is up and running. We currently have a little online community of 84 members who signed up. I hope that many more will join and participate. The forum is a great way for all of us to stay connected in real time. Check there for important announcements. For those of you who haven't signed up yet, please set up a Yahoo account and then ask to join the group by sending a message to ATA-LD_Listserve-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. In preparation for the ATA annual conference this year, I would like to make a few important announcements. Please note that our Literary Cafe will be scheduled for Friday, not Thursday. See the upcoming Conference Preliminary Program for more details. If you would like to read that night, please contact Lydia Stone (lydiastone@verizon.net). During our annual meeting, we are planning on having a discussion on the various aspects of working in the field of literary translation and the role of the Literary Division in assisting its members and promoting the art of literary translation. I need volunteers to help me prepare for this discussion.

If you have suggestions and would like to help, please e-mail me. I hope to see many of you there. I am pleased with our proposal for the Gaddis Rose lecture for this year's conference. We were able to recruit a very distinguished and engaging speaker. Based on the proposals for literary seminars, which I had the privilege to review, this conference is going to be a promising one for our division.

Best regards,
Emilia Balke

Emilia Balke is a freelance translator, interpreter, and voiceover talent. She translates from Russian, German, and Macedonian into English and Bulgarian, and from Bulgarian into English.

The Literary Division Officers

Administrator:
Emilia Balke
ebalke@language-web.net

Assistant Administrator:
Rashid Hasan
richardhasan@gmail.com

Google Settlement Revisited

Our Spring issue featured a Point/Counterpoint forum on the Google Settlement, presented by Casey Butterfield and Liliana Valenzuela. As of this publication, Judge Chin still has not given his approval of the settlement.

Here are three links to articles and documents that give an idea of recent developments related to this case.

Google Translates (Not)

From p. 7 memo to the court from lawyer Cynthia Arato representing authors in New Zealand, Italy, Austria and other countries:

"Inexplicably, since its launch over seven months ago, **the Settlement Website has never included any translation of the Settlement** – even though large numbers of foreign rightsholders lack the language skills necessary to read or comprehend this dense 334-page document in English. [See footnote 6]

"Because the parties violated this Court's Order and thus deprived foreign language speakers of any genuine opportunity to read the Settlement Agreement, or understand all of its complex terms (*id.*), the Settlement should not be approved."

6 "The Settlement Website masks the parties' failure to translate the Settlement. When a user accesses the Settlement Website in any one of the available foreign languages, a translated version of the site's home page appears, with an option to access the Settlement. When the user selects the Settlement option, the table of contents for the Settlement appears, again translated into the applicable foreign language. However, when the user selects any provision listed on that table, only an *English* version of the Settlement is provided."
http://docs.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/new-york/nysdce/1:2005cv08136/273913/167/0.pdf

Artists Sue Google Over Copyright Infringement

Larry Neumeister 04/7/10

NEW YORK — Groups representing photographers and artists on Wednesday accused Internet search leader Google of copyright infringement in a lawsuit that mirrors complaints book publishers and authors have made for years about the company's attempt to create the world's largest digital library.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/08/artists-sue-google-over-c_n_529823.html

Google books Reaches Deal with Italy: Will Other Countries, Including the US, Follow Suit?

Jessie Kunhardt **First Posted: 03-10-10 02:10 PM | Updated: 05-10-10 05:12 AM**

"Negative feelings about the digitization project are rising all over the world."
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/10/google-books-reaches-deal_n_493502.html

SUMERIAN LOVE SONGS

FROM THE SACRED MARRIAGE RITUAL

BY BETTY DE SHONG MEADOR, PH.D.

Betty De Shong Meador is a Jungian analyst, member of the C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco. Her books Inanna - Lady of Largest Heart and Princess, Priestess, Poet - The Sumerian Temple Hymns of Enheduanna, both from University of Texas Press, feature her translations of all the known poetry of the high priestess, Enheduanna, 2300 BCE, the first author of record.

My friend Pat Monaghan in her enchanting book — *THE RED-HAIRED GIRL FROM THE BOG* — tells a story of decades of searching for her ancestors — human and archetypal — in Ireland. She writes:

"Like every woman, I am turning into her, into the wild creative hag who has always lived in my soul," adding, "There is more passion in a woman's heart than her body can contain."[1]

What's a woman to do with this wild creature inside? Growing up in the 1930s and '40s within the strict Protestant values of north Texas, I looked upon her in wonder, this wild hag who raised her head inside my body, stirring my desires.

My father, a successful businessman, had a passionate hobby. Beginning in adolescence, he spent his free time perfecting his performance as a magician. Naturally, he brought this obsession into his marriage to my mother - a genteel southern lady, a school teacher from Tennessee. During the depression they saved enough of the salary he earned managing a clothing store to buy a foreclosed house where my parents lived until their deaths.

---

1 Patricia Monaghan, The Red-Haired Girl from the Bog (Novato, California: New World Library, 2003), p. 43.

Ten or so years ago, by one of those fateful coincidences, a man I had known as a child, who was then the young son of the assistant pastor of the First Methodist Church we attended, bought "our" house. My discovery that he lived there occurred when Charlotte, one of my childhood girlfriends still living in my old home town, Wichita Falls, sent me a newspaper clipping picturing this man and his wife in "our" living room. The story that accompanied the photo featured his wife, who had just been elected president of the American Literary Translators Association, and noted that my friend, her husband, had been poet laureate of Texas.

I contacted them immediately. We began a friendship based on our life-long acquaintance and our mutual passion for literary translation, not to mention our love for this old house. Jim, the new owner, called me one day perplexed, and asked, "Betty, what is that huge green metal pole outside the living room window?" That pole was part of a magic trick my father had invented in which he miraculously floated me on a board on the "stage" he had built at one end of our living room, a raised stage with proscenium arch and red velvet curtains that opened and closed with a rope pully. In the space under the stage, fifty metal folding chairs rolled on a series of connecting dollys. We set them up periodically for shows to entertain soldiers at Shepherd Field during World War II, or to honor visiting performers, like the noted magician Blackstone.

During the war, we saved our gasoline rationing stamps all year so we could drive to Los Angeles for the convention of the International Brotherhood of Magicians, held at the Santa Monica auditorium. One year, my older sister and I performed in an elaborate magic trick my father had created, using props manufactured at the garment factory he and a partner now owned. We won the prize for the best amateur act, and the huge gold trophy we brought home sat on the piano in our living room, somewhat to my social-climbing mother's embarrassment.

Our household was ruled by my father, not just by his obsession with magic, but by his driven and domineering personality. All of us, especially my mother, feared displeasing or angering him. In this atmosphere, there was no reference to a sense of an individual self that a woman or a man experiences, no reference to the potential for an inner life. No place at all for women's sexual feelings or women's sexual bodies. Although this situation certainly depended on the particular character of the two individuals, my mother and my father, it perfectly mimicked, even caricatured, the larger Texas society. Men ruled. Nice women, always called girls no matter their age, were by and large silent. The disgrace of male vulnerability was hidden beneath a solemn oath of secrecy, never to be challenged or revealed, a secret as sacred as the hidden slight-of-hand behind my father's performances as a magician.

I first heard of menstrual periods from my girlfriends. We were sitting on the floor of the den in Charlotte's house. We had just learned to give the finger, and were displaying our prowess to each other. Ignorant of what exactly that gesture meant, we knew it was the worst possible curse you could wish on anybody. By some intuitive leap, my friends were then trying to spell menstruation. "MENS...," one of them began. "No, stupid," I interrupted. I was the smart kid. "A-d-m-i-n-i-s-t-r-a-t-i-o-n," I corrected. Then they told me, and I learned for the first time what was about to happen in my body, in all of our young bodies. As far as I can remember, this conversation and others like it were the totality of my sex education.

Given this naivete and upbringing, is it any wonder that the psyche sent me a powerful compensatory message. In the late 1970s, as my 25 year marriage was coming to an end, the willful, outrageous, sexy Sumerian goddess Inanna appeared to me in a dream. In the dream, I and a group of three or four women unknown to me are preparing the graves of a married couple, individuals whom I knew at the time, both alive and not actually married to each other. The two were Jungian analysts, prominent elders in the Jungian community in southern California where I had just completed training. The woman had already died, and

we were placing on her fresh grave strange stick figures that curved into a circle at the top, along with tied bundles of leaves from the date palm. Next, we prepared the man's grave. He was alive still, and confirmed the importance of our preparations as we placed similar stick figures and palm fronds in the soft dirt that was to cover his body.

Some months later in a book I was reading, I came across an illustration of a pair of figures like the ones in the dream. With some sleuthing, I discovered that the pole curving into a circle at the top was the earliest pictographic sign of the Sumerian goddess Inanna, the first depiction from the late 4th millennium BCE, of the cuneiform sign that wrote her name. I had never heard of Inanna and knew nothing about the Sumerians. I later learned that among her many characteristics, Inanna was goddess of the date palm, so abundant in her native land, present-day southern Iraq.

My first attempts to understand Inanna came from general histories and mythologies - none very interesting. Then, a 1981 issue of the magazine *Parabola* featured translations by noted Assyriologist Samuel Noah Kramer, together with performance artist Diane Wolksein. The excerpts from their book *Inanna — Queen of Heaven and Earth* included songs from the Sacred Marriage ritual, the festival that ushered in the New Year in most ancient Sumerian cities. At the culmination of the ritual, Inanna, played by the high priestess of her temple, invites Dumuzi, her consort/lover, played by the king, to her bed to consummate the marriage. Her invitation comes in the form of a love song. These luscious, explicit poems are written from the woman's point of view. When you hear them, you will understand why I was compelled to learn to translate Sumerian. Here is an example that features the curved shape of women's private parts, curved like the crescent moon that shines perfectly horizontal in Iraq, or like the curved star-handle of the Big Dipper.

peg my vulva
my star-sketched horn of the Dipper
moor my slender boat of heaven
my new moon crescent beauty

I wait an unplowed desert,
fallow field for the wild ducks
my high mound longs for the floodlands

my vulva field is open
this maid asks who will plow it
vulva moist in the floodlands
the queen asks who brings the ox

the king, Lady, will plow it
Dumuzi, king, will plow it

plow then, man of my heart
holy water-bathed loins
holy Ninegal am I [2]

2 Betty De Shong Meador, Uncursing the Dark (Willamette, Illinois: Chiron Publications, 1992), 59-60.

Need I tell you that nothing I ever sang or heard in the Methodist Church in Wichita Falls contained the smallest hint of such a message as that in the Sumerian love songs from the Sacred Marriage ritual. The only relationship between the two institutions is that both represented the dominant religious organizations of their respective cultures.

The themes of the Sumerian love songs are unique in ancient sacred literature. Archeologists have found among the remains of inscribed clay cuneiform tablets, thirty-seven of the love songs containing some 1700 lines of poetry. Every song is written from the woman's point of view, her desire, yes, her insistence on sexual satisfaction, her descriptions of sexual arousal, her explicit instructions on how to give her pleasure. Not one of the songs mentions having babies or motherhood. Inanna was never a mother.

The earliest archeological evidence in Mesopotamia of the centrality and sacred nature of sexual intercourse comes from 48 clay representations of couples in the act, dating from 3500 - 2700 BCE. The beautiful Uruk Vase, dating from 3100 - 2900 BCE, is thought to depict the ritual of the Sacred Marriage. On the top register of the vase, a priestess welcomes the king into the temple of Inanna. Two stately emblems of Inanna, the tall pole that curves into a circle, stand behind the human priestess. The outlined silhouette of this vase appears in pairs on a number of ancient cylinder seals, suggesting that, like the cross or the Star of David, this shape of the vase carried sacred meaning and was an icon of Sumerian religion. The only surviving example of the Uruk Vase was stolen from the Iraq Museum in Baghdad the day of the US invasion. Fortunately, when the museum director granted amnesty to those who looted, the vase, slightly damaged, was returned.

Uruk Vase detail
Image courtesy of The Artchive

The Sacred Marriage was celebrated at the spring equinox at the time of the disappearance of the moon. Elements of the ritual that were observed throughout Sumer included the ritual setting up of the bed, the bathing of Inanna — the priestess — then the entrance of Dumuzi — the king or his representative. The intimate relationship between the king and Inanna stretches from the 4th millennium Early Dynastic period, 3000 BCE, to the Middle Assyrian period in the 2nd millennium, 1400 to 1050 BCE, a period of 2000 years.

Later, a revival of the Sacred Marriage occurred in the mid-1st millennium BCE. Around the same time, the Biblical Song of Songs with its similar motifs appeared. In the 7th century BCE, the Neo-Assyrian empire controlled the Syro-Palestinian area, homeland of the Song, and texts of the Sacred Marriage the Assyrians still celebrated may well have contributed to elements in the Song. Scholars believe that ideas expressed in the Song are almost certainly a direct continuation of the Near Eastern love poetry that originated almost three thousand years before in Sumer.[3] As in the Song, the most dominant themes of the Sumerian love poetry express the woman's point of view and her sexuality.

The poems suggest a very different perception from our own in the Sumerian culture toward women's bodies, and uniquely express the centrality of women's desire and ecstatic experience of sexual pleasure. "She wants the bed / she wants it" one poem chants. "The joy of her heart bed / with his sweet thing bed / with his sweet thing." [4] In another poem Inanna speaks for herself.

I want you, Dumuzi
Your bough raised
Dumuzi you belong in this house

Listen
I will scrub my skin with soap
I will rinse all over with water
I will dry myself with linen
I will lay out mighty love clothes
I know how exactly
I will look so fine!
I will make you feel like a king![5]

Inanna was never a mother, although in a few texts she refers to her hairdresser, Shara, as her "son." No mention occurs in any of the love songs that the purpose of the ritual was pregnancy; rather, the enactment of the union of the goddess with the king assured the well-being of the land. When Inanna shouts, "plow then, man of my heart / holy water-bather loins" she calls only for the joyous pleasure of it, not pregnancy. In Sumer, woman was not a furrow anticipating seeds.

The elevation of woman's desire in the Sumerian Sacred Marriage articulates in the year's most important ritual, a model of self-assertion. Women in the culture mature into adulthood with this model before their eyes. The model teaches young women, "my growing, maturing body is beautiful," as Inanna sings, here calling herself Baba:

3 Lapinkivi, P. The Sumerian Sacred Marriage. (Helsinki: SAAS vol. XV, 2004), 85-94.
4 Betty D. Meador, unpublished translation.
5 Betty De Shong Meador, Inanna — Lady of Largest Heart (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000) 19-20.

Now my breasts stand up
Now hair has grown on my vulva
Going to the bridegroom's loins, let us rejoice
O Baba, let us rejoice over my vulva!
Dance! Dance!
Afterwards, they will please him, will please him![6]

Is it possible to imagine developing this point of view toward women and girls in our modern Western culture? Can you imagine as a woman dancing with your adolescent companions, or with your women peers, as your body and your desires evolved? My girlfriends, sitting on the floor of the den in Charlotte's house in north Texas, spontaneously began this dance. Excitement was swelling in our young bodies.

Obviously, western attitudes toward women's bodies that surround young women in childhood and adolescence have an impact on their sense of self, on their developing psyches. How utterly different it would be to grow up in a culture that praised women's bodies as replicas of its most venerated goddess, a culture in whose major annual religious event, that goddess sings to the beauty of her sexuality, her sexual parts, and prods her divine bridegroom to come to her, to give her sexual satisfaction.

Here is a portion of a song from the Sacred Marriage ritual in ancient Sumer, that describes sexual awakening in a young adolescent girl:

My sister, what did you do in the house?
Little one, what did you do in the house?

I bathed in water, scrubbed myself with soap
I bathed with water of the pure urn
Scrubbed myself with soap of the bright bowl
Anointed myself with the good oil of the bowl,
I donned the royal garments of the queenship of heaven

Then, I roamed around the house
I painted my eyes with kohl,
The straggly hair on my nape, I straightened
My hanging hair I washed,
Tested my weapon, making the place pleasant for him,
The hair of my head was disheveled - I straightened it,
My locks were loosened - I tightened them
A golden bracelet I fastened on my hand
Small lapis lazuli beads I tied on my neck
Their knob I laid upon my neck sinews. [7]

How familiar these concerns sound, how like those of our adolescent daughters or granddaughters, or indeed, of our young selves. This translation is from Assyriologist Yitschak Safety, who authored the only currently available translation of all of the Sumerian love songs.

6 Thorkild Jacobsen, The Harps That Once..., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 18.
7 Yitschak Safety, Love Songs in Sumerian Literature (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1998), 135.

In the annual ritual of the Sacred Marriage, sexual intercourse between the goddess Inanna and the king remained the central event for 3000 years. Historical documents confirm this. In 2700 BCE, the legendary king of Uruk, Enmerkar, was the earliest ruler to call himself Inanna's husband. Other kings in this early period of Mesopotamian history claimed the title, "the beloved spouse of Inanna." In 2300 BCE, king Sargon, father of the first poet of record, the high priestess Enheduanna, famously said, "when I was a gardener, Inanna loved me." His grandson, Enheduanna's nephew, the powerful king Naram-Sin, declared he was husband of Inanna, and because of this relationship to the goddess, became the first king to claim his own divinity.

Rulers who followed the Sargonic kings after 2000 BCE, left many of the surviving texts written in cuneiform script on fragile clay tablets that contain the evocative songs of the Sacred Marriage ritual. Each one of these kings considered himself Inanna's husband. The kings indicate that the ritual took place in the 'gipar', the building in the temple complex that was the residence of the high priestess. Here is a love song that refers to the gipar, the 'house' of the high priestess:

Your coming to me
Is life
Your entering the house
Is abundance
Lying at your side is my greatest joy
My sweet! Let us delight ourselves on the couch! [8]

The identity of the persons who actually took part in the Sacred Marriage is uncertain, and even the meaning of the Sumerian terms used to designate the female participant is unclear. However, it is clear that the ruling king took the male role. In the love songs Inanna is referred to by the term nu-gig. Scholars suggest that the use of this term indicates that she was a priestess. Others add that the term nu-gig relates to a person who engaged in ritual prostitution. In disagreement, some think the term indicates a high royal title. The term itself implies a person who is taboo. Inanna, the designated divine personage who in the ritual lay with the king, is in other texts connected with prostitution. In this regard, she is like the Gnostic Sophia, who is both a prostitute and a holy virgin. In the Gnostic text "Thunder - Perfect Mind", Sophia says, "For I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one. I am the whore and the holy one." Still, some argue that the Sacred Marriage was purely symbolic, that no actual intercourse took place.

The themes of the poems range from the innocent anticipation of an adolescent to the full, aggressive desire of an experienced woman. Here is another song that pictures Inanna dressing to meet her lover:

Now she picks for her buttocks the buttocks beads
She picks for her head the head beads

INANNA

A rough cut lapis she hangs at her neck
Slender gold ribbons she picks for the wool of her hair

8 Ibid., 180.

In her ears she places golden bobs
From her ear lobes she dangles bronze loops
The royal house seal she puts on her nose
And her eyes overflow with honey

Building wood she chooses to gird her waist
Boxwood and palm for her navel
Honey from the full well sweetens her skin
Fine alabaster - the stone of bright light
She places on her thighs

From the tree at the well she chooses black wood
To place on her black maiden hair
Her feet dazzle with sandals
O praise Inanna with song [9]

A number of the songs are explicitly sexual.

In the midst of her song the maid calls for her father
In the midst of their dance Inanna says to her father
I want him, I want him long in me
I the Lady want him long in me
In my gipar house, I want him long in me

Tell the people to set up the bed
Spread the bed with lapis grass
I want my heart's love to come in
I want my dragon of An to come in

I will place my hand in his hand
I will touch my heart to his heart
Hand in my hand in blissful sleep
Heart to my heart beautiful friend
It is sweet[10]

Here is another explicit poem:

As I set my eyes upon that place
My beloved man met me,
Took his pleasure of me, rejoiced alone in me;
The brother brought me into his house
And laid me down upon a bed dripping with honey.
My precious sweet, when lying next to my heart,
Time after time, making tongue, time after time
My brother of beautiful eyes, did so fifty times

9 Meador, unpublished translation.
10 Idem.

Like a powerless person I stood there for him
Trembling from below, I was dumb silent for him there
With my brother, placing my hands upon his hips,
With my precious sweet, I spent the day there with him[11]

Where did this powerful erotic/spiritual energy, so graphically expressed in Sumerian poetry, go? What happened to this compelling narrative, central to Mesopotamian culture for 3000 years? Some parallel evidence appears in subsequent eras.

The first apparent example in a neighboring culture is to be found in the Biblical Song of Songs. As mentioned before, the Song probably was composed in the 4th to the 2nd centuries BCE. It seems to have been influenced by the Neo-Assyrian culture that ruled the Syro-Palestinian area in the pre-exilic period. The Assyrian love rituals of the Sacred Marriage continued to hold a central place in the Neo-Assyrian culture. The literature and mythology of the ritual were clearly influenced by the ancient Sumerian prototype. Parallels between the Neo-Assyrian love songs and the Biblical Song include the woman locking herself in her room, undressing and bathing there, entering the garden. She goes to search for her lover, and in a parallel to the Assyria-Babylonian ritual, she finds him in his garden. Other similarities between the Song and the ritual include the poetic structure as dialogue, the poetic form, the song of praise, the nocturnal yearnings of the couple for each other. The Song is almost certainly composed as a direct continuation of the previous Near Eastern love poetry tradition that originated in Sumer. Both emphasize the woman's point of view and her sexuality.

The Gnostic tradition, like medieval Jewish mysticism, had many variations. We have already met the Gnostic Sophia, who, like Inanna, was simultaneously a prostitute and a revered holy virgin, "first and last, honored and scorned." Whether actually or symbolically, in Gnostic tradition the sacred marriage was enacted in the "bridal chamber," implying a spiritual marriage of the individual with Christ.

The ecstatic Kabbalist of Jewish mysticism would see the Song of Songs as an allegory between the perfect man and God, a union of the soul of the Kabbalist with the supernal soul. In Jewish mysticism the human-divine union is understood as a sexual one. In the Tree of Life, the living forces of the Godhead pass into Creation through secret channels, in which the divine influx is able to flow and enable the sexual union between Yesod and the Shekhinah.

These later incarnations of the divine/human intercourse are presumably symbolic. The literal, explicit descriptions of the Sumerians have disappeared. Sexuality, so prominent in religious ritual for 3000 years in the ancient Near East, has become spiritualized, symbolic rather than embodied in sacred ritual. In the dominant modern religions, sexuality has fallen out of sacred practice completely, has become in many instances "sinful," to be risen above, conquered.

Attitudes towards women's bodies in present-day religious dogma tend to follow strict moral precepts. These attitudes pervade much of western culture. Glimmers of change have made inroads, signaling hope that more realistic behavioral norms may evolve. We have much to learn from the explicit assertions of desire expressed by the revered Sumerian goddess Inanna.

11 Safety, p.153.

RADIANT INANNA
Courtesy of the Oriental Institute,
University of Chicago

for an explanation of this imprint from a cylinder seal, see
http://tinyurl.com/RadiantInanna

Hélène Sanguinetti:
Scraping the literary ground around her

by Ann Cefola

In the brief poem that follows, experimental poet Hélène Sanguinetti evokes her native Provence's troubadour tradition. Sanguinetti lives and works in Arles, where she takes much of her inspiration from the Mediterranean landscape that surrounds her. She also taps into her French literary inheritance by weaving fable into her narrative. In this way, she exposes both French and English readers to some of France's greatest literary traditions. The nimble layering creates what poetry critic Jean-Marie Perret calls—after Bartok—an "imaginary folklore."[1]

While far from surrealist, Sanguinetti's work also reflects more inventive 20th century approaches; like the work of René Char, it is

> at once a lyrical summoning of natural correspondences and a meditation on the poetic process itself…. This is a poetry that does not attempt to record or evoke feelings as much as it seeks to embody the ongoing struggle of words to ground themselves in the world.[2]

This struggle may be the reason for Sanguinetti's inventive spacing and deliberate line breaks—as well as the language she refers to as "raclé" or "scraped." In translating her work, I seek to honor the magical poetic impulse as well as its measured architecture. Her poetry, "more chanted than inspired," says her Flammarion Poetry Series editor Yves di Manno, "seems to emerge from some primordial tribe or the imagination of a little girl dreaming of an ogre at night." In this poem the creative poet gives us two kernels to "gnaw."

---

1. Perret, Jean-Marie. *Bleu de Paille*, August 2005, http://noirsanssucrevnunet.blog.fr/bleudepaille/2005/08/hlne_sanguinetti.html. (page no longer available)
2. Auster, Paul, on René Char in *Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry* (Vintage Books, 1984) page XLIII.
3. di Manno, Yves. *Vient de paraître*, September 2005.

Deux Noyaux Pour Commencer La Journée

— Hélène Sanguinetti

Hélène Sanguinetti is the author of *De la main gauche, exploratrice* (Flammarion, 1999), *D'ici, de ce berceau* (Flammarion, 2003), *Alparegho, Pareil-à-rien* (Éditions L'ACT MEM, 2005) and *Le Héros* (Flammarion, 2008). Her work has received critical acclaim in *Le Monde, Le Figaro Littéraire* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Poetry critic Claude Adelen, in *L'Émotion Concrète* (Éditions L'ACT MEM, 2004), praises her poetry for "its emotional quality, physicality of verse, mythic intelligence and profound depth of being."

Rouiller n'est pas manger
Grignoter n'est pas jaunir
Musiquer est parti en barque
2 seins pour Nouadja-sa-déesse
+
sexe peint en bleu et son coeur

Holà!

HÉ!

Vois s'il n'y a point quelque lumière

D'en haut (un chêne avec la pluie) laissa
s'Envoler son Chapeau jusqu'en bas retrouva
pain, 2 nids d'hirondelles sous
les jupes (de la déesse)

Répéter n'est pas consteller, Trouer survient à jeun
secoue l'arbre—le prince avec des yeux
pleins d'amour
enchaîné

This poem originally appeared as part of a joint work (Galerie REMARQUE, Trans-en-Provence, September 2009) by artist Stéphanie Ferrat and the poet and may be viewed under Vidéos at http://galerieremarque.blogspot.com/.

Two Kernels to Start the Day

—Translated from the French by Ann Cefola

To rust is not to hunger
To gnaw is not to yellow
To make-music departed by boat
2 breasts for Nouadja-his-goddess
+
sex painted in blue and his heart

Hello!

HEY!

See if there isn't some light

From the top (oak in rain) left
to Fly away his Hat found below
bread, 2 swallows' nests under
the skirts (of the goddess)

to Repeat is not to star-stud, to Pierce arises from an empty stomach
shakes the tree—prince with eyes
full of love
chained

Ann Cefola's translation of Hélène Sanguinetti's second book appears as *Hence this cradle* (Seismicity Editions, 2007). The author of *Sugaring* (Dancing Girl Press, 2007), Ann also received a 2007 Witter Bynner Poetry Translation Residency at the Santa Fe Art Institute and the 2001 Robert Penn Warren Award judged by John Ashbery.

BALANCING ACTS: THE ART OF TRANSLATION

by Nancy Arbuthnot
U.S. Naval Academy

Lê Pham Lê and Nancy Arbuthnot

Nancy Arbuthnot is a poet and professor of English and creative writing at the United States Naval Academy. Her latest publication is Guiding Lights: United States Naval Academy Monuments and Memorials (Naval Institute Press, 2009).

Whenever I try to understand a culture different from my own middle-class, white, suburban American experience — whether because I am living in another country or simply researching another time and place or people — I find that poetry helps me experience that culture more deeply. In particular, it is in my attempts to translate poetry (in my terms, to turn it into poetry in English) — from languages I am familiar with, such as Spanish or, to a lesser extent, French, or to an even lesser extent, Russian; or from languages I know very little about, such as Nahuatl and Vietnamese — that have given me most of my insights into different cultures. But the act of translating poetry is a rather precarious balancing act — or, rather, a series of balancing acts — that requires tossing words out, as though upon the waves, to see which ones float and which ones sink, then leaping with blind faith from one floating word to another, then using those words to fashion an act, a text, that displays no hint of flailing, but flows smoothly from opening to close.

In translating the poetry of Lê Pham Lê, born and raised in Vietnam, but now an American citizen living and working in California, I am lucky to have the poet herself to work with. The process of translation that Lê and I have worked out goes something like this: Lê sends me her original Vietnamese poems and her literal line-by-line translation. My first unbalanced wobbling occurs when I look at the originals. I must overcome my sense of guilt for my very limited knowledge of Vietnamese language and literature (a guilt I have assuaged somewhat with a course in beginning Vietnamese and with readings of the national epic, *The Tale of Kiều*, and other classic Vietnamese poems). At any rate, I begin with Lê's original composition, sounding the poem out as best I can, looking for words I know or know how to look

up in a dictionary, looking for the rhymes and the poetic form. Lê often also provides an audio tape or a live reading. Then, based on the literal translation as well as my notations on the rhyme scheme, I rough out an English "rhyming" version. "Vắng Anh," for example, "Without You," is a delicate, four-line rhyming poem about love, which in Lê's literal translation reads:

Từ dạo ấy, chữ buồn trên trang giấy.
Nàng thơ hờn, bút mực cũng lặng câm.
Mở hộp thư nào thấy một hồi âm.
Vườn thơ vắng gió trăng đùa trước ngõ.

Since then words define sadness on paper.
Poetry's inspiration is upset; pen and ink have been silenced.
No more messages in the mailbox.
Wind and moon no longer play at the poetry garden's gate.

To begin to create a poem in English, I play around with words and lines. Then, after many wobbling steps toward a new version and e-mails and phone calls to Lê (and whenever we can, conversations in person — often at the annual American Literary Translators Association's Annual Conference), Lê and I discuss the poems. A single phrase or image may convey a vast connotative world that cannot be rendered by simple translation. Wind and moon are iconic symbols in Vietnamese poetry, often standing in for romantic love. Sometimes I personify them with capitalization; other times, as in this poem, I hope the context is strong enough to evoke lost love. Playing with sound effects in English such as rhyme and off-rhyme, I have settled on the (current) final version of "Without You":

Since then, words on paper are full of regret,
Or pen and ink silent, the muse upset.
In the mailbox, no more letters;
No wind and moon playing at the garden gate.

Often I feel that the literal words do not do justice to the poems, and that connotations of a word or image need to be drawn out more precisely in the English version. I rearrange lines, add description. For example, Lê's Vietnamese poem "From the Bay Area" includes the image of the traditional gown, the *áo gấm*, worn in graduation ceremonies:

Nhớ con thao thức đêm trường,
Thương con biết mấy đại dương cho vừa.
Nghẹn ngào trong buổi tiễn đưa,
Mơ ngày áo gấm chốn xưa con về.

The gown conveys to the Vietnamese reader the history of the ancient educational system of Việt Nam: students who passed a major exam would be appointed scholars or mandarins by the King; traditionally, these new mandarins returned to their hometowns riding in procession on horses, in ceremonial robes, or *áo gấm*. Joining the celebration of the new scholar were local government officials, family, friends, and, if he was married, his wife, who was carried on a hammock behind her husband's horse. Moreover, the Vietnamese reader would automatically recognize that because *gấm* material is very shiny, it is a symbol of glory. But Lê's literal English version of this graduation piece does not include the image of this glorious return home

on horseback, so for American readers untutored in Vietnamese traditions, I felt I needed to enhance the English version of the poem, adding the phrase about the graduation "in glory" and describing the iridescence of the gown. My final version of "From the Bay Area" then becomes:

> Sleepless with worries, too numb
> to weep — oh, the ocean's not deep enough
> to hold my love! — I await your graduation
> in glory, *áo gấm* flowing, iridescent in sun.

In other poems, I change words to come up with rhymes or near-rhymes. Lê's poem ("Riding Dragon") describes a thread that ties two lovers together for a "thousand thousand years," or eternity. Using the word "silk" instead of the "thread," however, enables me to create a near-rhyming couplet: "My heart's a ribbon of heavenly silk/ Tied to you for as long as I live." These changes for the sake of sound can be seen in my transformations of the literal to the final version in the poem "Poetry Garden." Literally, the poem can be translated:

> I open my poetry garden to invite the wind in.
> The night sky is filled with a bright moon and shining stars.
> My verses unfinished yet my inspiration overflowing.
> His goodbyes have not begun yet I burst into tears!

After many versions, and learning from Lê that saying goodbye in Vietnam is often indicated by "drinking farewell wine," I come up with a tighter, more metrical, more song-like version:

> Tôi mở vườn thơ để gió vào.
> Trời đêm vằng vặc ánh trăng sao.
> Câu thơ chưa viết, tình lai láng.
> Rượu tiễn chưa tàn, lệ chứa chan.
>
> I open the gate and invite in the wind.
> The night sky glitters with stars and moon.
> My poem not begun, I overflow with ideas.
> His farewell wine not drunk, I burst into tears.

So I follow this process of leaping from word to word, trying to keep my balance. And soon I am deep into the poem, no longer concerned with whether or not I know the original language, but only with dancing from word to word, composing the best possible poem within the parameters of the literal meaning and echoing somehow the original form.

But this question of form haunts me as the most delicate balancing act of the translator. I am committed to keeping form always in mind, even as I dispense with it, or vary it. Because Vietnamese, a six-tone monosyllabic language, is rich in rhymes, and English is not, and because many of Lê's poems are written in the intricate rhyming forms of traditional Vietnamese poetry, I decided not to attempt any real replica of the rhyming patterns of Lê's poems. Yet it is crucial to me as a translator to convey some of the musicality of the poetry, so I include rhymes or near-rhymes (or sometimes simply assonance or consonance) to help shape the poems. In the last line of "Wild Wind," for example, I use a series of single-syllable alliterative words — "wild wind whips" — to convey the rough music of a young woman's farewell with her lover:

Ngày mai anh sẽ lên đường.
Có người không đến phi trường tiễn đưa.
Phố buồn rả rích cơn mưa.
Gió khuya hiu hắt, đường thưa vắng người.

Tomorrow morning he will leave.
She won't be able to see him off.
Tonight the ceaseless rain pours down.
The empty road recalls his footsteps
And a wild wind whips her heart.

Yet “a wild wind whips her heart” is not the literal translation of Lê’s words about that young woman. Although the words “rả rích” and “hiu hắt” in Vietnamese suggest a similar feeling of the slow soft rain falling all night long and a late night wind tearing her heart, the burdens of guilt resurface — am I translating this correctly? Can I change the words and keep the meaning? Is the music really so much a part of the meaning? Is my translation musical? Along about this time in the translation process, I begin to feel suffocated, claustrophobic. This is another, major dilemma faced by translators: feeling trapped in the space of someone else’s mind where no one else can enter. Or is it just possible? Fortunately with Lê, I can talk about my feelings. “I can’t translate one more poem about suffering!” I blurted out in exasperation one day after working on “Wild Wind”— to which Lê calmly replied, “Then I will write more poems about my childhood in Việt Nam.” And feeling suddenly liberated, no longer confined, I was able to find new ways to translate Lê’s painful poems of the loss of loved ones and the loss of her country.

Another of my best moments as a translator came when we were discussing an automobile image from a love poem which one reader had told her was too mechanical, especially since all the other images were from nature. I described to Lê how I had struggled with that same image, with trying to figure out where it had come from: I had retraced the good-bye scene between two figures, followed by a scene of the speaker alone, followed by a scene with the speaker emotionally overcome while driving, then pulling off the road by the side of a lake to recover. Traced out in this way, the sudden introduction of the car in the last part of the poem then did not seem so sudden to me after all, but a real part of the scene. After describing to Lê my thought-process of trying to follow hers, Lê’s response shines like a beacon I always now look towards when I feel lost in the murky waters of translation: “That’s what I like about working with you — you find my meaning in English!”

If as a translator I have indeed found Lê’s meanings in English, maybe I have done a good job after all, and the burden of not quite getting it right is lifted, for awhile, and I dance again across what Lê calls “the bridge of poetry” between cultures, between languages, between minds, from word to word, almost balanced.

Poetry & Place: the Zapotec Roots of Natalia Toledo

by Clare Sullivan

Clare Sullivan, an Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Louisville, teaches translation and contemporary Latin American literature. She is also working to begin a Graduate Translation Certificate. In 2007, Wings Press published her translation of Argentine novelist Alicia Kozameh's 259 saltos, uno inmortal and in 2008 her translation of Mexican novelist Cecilia Urbina's Un martes como hoy.

Natalia Toledo was born in Juchitán, Oaxaca in 1967 but she now lives in Mexico City. She received national prizes for her poetry from the National Fund for Culture and the Arts (FONCA) in 1994 and 2001, and a regional prize from the Oaxaca State Fund for Culture and the Arts in 1995. To date, she has published four books of poetry: ***Paraíso de fisuras*** (Juchitán: Consejo Estatal para la Cultura y las Artes de Oaxaca, 1992), ***Ca gunaa gubidxa, ca gunaa guiiba' risaca/Mujeres de sol, mujeres de oro*** (Juchitán: Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas, 2002), ***Flor de pantano*** (Juchitán: Instituto Oaxaqueño de Cultura, 2004) and ***Olivo negro*** (México, D.F.: Culturas Populares y el Consejo Nacional para la cultura y las Artes, Conaculta, 2005), all bilingual in Spanish and her native Zapotec.

My project, to translate her latest book of poetry from Spanish into English, required that I consider how her indigenous Zapotec roots affect her poetry and how her move to the capital and into Spanish has affected her artistic production. My translations of the poems included in this article are all based on that collection.

The Women of Juchitán

The women of Juchitán, the pueblo of Natalia Toledo, are also those women commemorated by the celebrated writer Elena Poniatowska and photographer Graciela Iturbide in their book ***Juchitán, ciudad de las mujeres***. And it was their manner of dressing that was borrowed by Frida Kahlo, though she wasn't really a Zapotec woman herself.

Women of Juchitán

According to German Sociologist Cornelia Giebeler, the power of Juchitecan women began centuries ago when María Tachu and the four Robles sisters helped to fight off the French invasion in 1866. In the twentieth century, women were instrumental in the foundation of COCEI (the coalition of workers, farmers and students of the Isthmus), the first opposition party to beat the PRI in elections. Today, the women demonstrate their creative power through cooking, weaving, and orchestrating the "velas," traditional festivities celebrated every May. "They don't seem to need machismo [in Juchitán]," says Giebeler (7).

When Natalia was a girl in Juchitán, much of the village life there took place around the black olive tree in front of her house. It was there that fishermen unloaded their nets and her grandmother told stories. These were the stories of origin of the Zapotec people, events that Toledo recreates and honors in her poetry. Her poem "Origen" describes the creation of the Zapotec people:

We were scales sluffed from God,
flower, deer and monkey.
We were the hachet that split the lightning bolt in two
and the dream our grandparents told.
We fell to the wilderness
and the sun ran through us with his arrow,
we were the vessel, Auoo!
we were the water, Auoo!
Now we are ashes
beneath the kettle of the world.

In another poem, "Childhood Home," we can sense the completeness and a kind of edenic innocence in her descriptions of the place:

As a girl I slept in my grandmother's arms
like the moon in the heart of the sky.

My bed: cotton from the fruit of the pochote tree.
I made oil from the trees, sold my friends
the flamboyant's flowers as red snapper.
We stretched ourselves out on the petate mat, like shrimp drying in the sun.
A pleiad of stars slept upon our eyelids.
Tortillas fresh from the comiscal, ropes stained for the hammocks,
food was made with the happiness of light rain upon the earth.
We stirred chocolate,
and dawn was served up to us in a gourd bowl.

Indeed it was her grandmother and the oral tradition of Juchitán that first awakened her gift for poetry. Natalia Toledo was the first woman to write and publish in Zapotec. When she began, since there were no other women writing, she used it as a way to engage in a dialogue with herself.

Natalia Toledo wearing a huipil-poem of her own creation

Poetry as a Life Preserver

Through her poetry, she also tries to keep Zapotec tradition alive. For example, she writes many poems about childhood games, games that are being supplanted now by technology. Toledo fears losing her language and the traditions that accompany it. And her fears are not unfounded. When I spoke to a linguist from Juchitán, Víctor Cata, he told me that children no longer play traditional games such as "Los hijos" but instead opt for solitary entertainment like Game Boy. They are also losing the linguistic tradition that bound them together, as young people less than twenty years of age are no longer very likely to be bilingual.

But Natalia's story is not the same as that of many Zapotecos. She was born the daughter of Francisco Toledo, a world-renowned graphic artist who has shown his works in galleries in Paris and New York City. Consequently, as a young woman Natalia had the opportunity to travel, not just in her own country, but around the world. She also got exposed to art that was diverse and edgy.

Still, it was traumatic for Natalia when she moved to the Mexican capital at only twelve years of age. She left the story-telling grandmother who had been firmly rooted in the Zapotec tradition and went to live with her other grandmother, who was trying hard to fit in with a larger Mexican (and international) culture. For example, this 'new' grandmother refused to speak Zapotec with her. She felt lost and torn between the past and the present. Poetry came to her aid: "It rescued me and kept me afloat," she told me.

Translating Zapotec

Zapotec (and indeed most indigenous writers) must be translators as well because there are no literary translators that know the language sufficiently to translate it on a poetic level. The poets themselves know the intricacies of their language and the richness of its imagery. However, they are not trained translators and so sometimes lack grounding in theory and the conceptual aspects of the translation process. At times, they may create something in Spanish that does not reach the depths of sound or imagery of the Zapotec original.

Luckily for me, Natalia is an accomplished translator of her own works. But I still did not want to ignore the sound of the original Zapotec. The poet has recorded much of her poetry in Zapotec and Spanish so I have had a chance to listen (and re-listen) to the sounds of the original. I am also guided by the strength of her imagery. As a jewelry and textile designer, Toledo is aware of the visual impact of all art. Carlos Montemayor has referred to "the plastic character of her work, the search for visual images, and the persistent sensory nuances" (Words 3). She wants to make her poetry more than just words on the page.

The following poem, dedicated to T.S. Eliot, shows how Natalia and her art have been stretched beyond the boundaries of her language and community. In leaving her linguistic and geographic homes, she fears that she has betrayed her origins, but poetry is her way of saving place:

For T.S. Elliot

Red flowers, long and beautiful,
grew from my fingers
as if forgetting the fear that robbed me of certainty.
I walked with my hands
and stuck my body where there was mud.
My eyes filled with fine sand.
They called me the girl of the water lilies
because my root was the water's surface.
But I was also bitten by a snake mating in the marsh
and became blind. I was Tireseus making his way with no staff.
What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?
Perhaps I am the final branch who will speak Zapotec.
My children, homeless birds in the jungle of forgetfulness,
will have to whistle their language.
During all seasons, I am in the south,
a rusted boat dreamt by my eyes of black coco plum:

I will go to smell my land, to dance a son with no one beneath a bower,
I will go to eat two things.
I will cross the plaza, the North wind will not stop me, I will arrive in time
to embrace my grandmother before the last star falls.
I will go back to being the girl who wears a yellow petal on her right eyelid,
the girl who cries flower's milk.
I will go to cure my eyes.

List of Works Consulted

Bennholdt-Thomsen, Veronika. "A Matriarchal Society in the Age of Globalization: Juchitán/Southern Mexico." http://www.second-congress-matriarchal-studies.com/bennholdtthomsen.html.

Cata, Víctor. Personal interview. 21 November, 2009.

Giebeler, Cornelia. "Juchitán, la ciudad de las mujeres: identidad de las mujeres en una sociedad zapoteca." ***Guchachi' Reza***. 38. marzo-abril 1993.

Iturbide, Graciela y Elena Poniatowska, Pablo Ortiz Monasterio. ***Juchitán de las mujeres***. México, D.F.: Ediciones Toledo, 1989.

Iturbide, Graciela. Foto de las mujeres juchitecas. http://www.rosegallery.net/index.php#mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&s=4&p=1&a=21&at=2

Montemayor, Carlos and Donal Frischmann. ***Words of the True Peoples: Anthology of Contemporary Mexican Indigenous-Language Writers***. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.

Toledo, Natalia. ***Guie' yaase' Olivo negro***. México, D.F.: Culturas Populares y el Consejo Nacional para la cultura y las Artes, Conaculta, 2005.

Toledo, Natalia. Personal interview. 15 December, 2008.

BTW

In my country, *language* is a man but *translation* is a woman!

BY THE WAY

by Tony Beckwith,
tony@tonybeckwith.com

My Mother Tongue

A brief chronological account
of the origins and evolution
of the English language

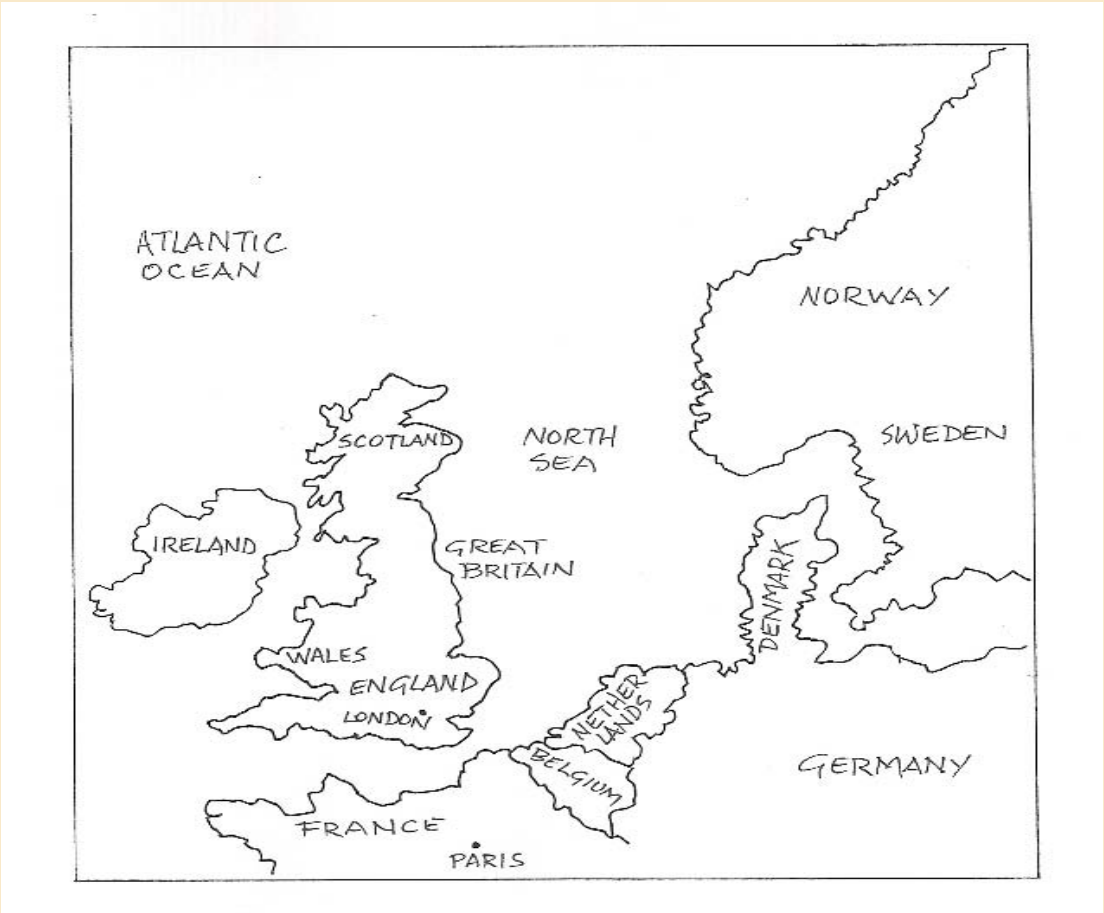
By Tony Beckwith

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.

We all have a mother tongue. Mine is the English that my grandparents brought with them from Great Britain when they settled in Argentina about a hundred years ago. I am certainly not alone. Statistics vary but, worldwide, those whose first language is English would seem to number between 350 and 400 million. If non-native speakers are included the total is far higher, and makes English one of the most widely spoken languages on Earth. But, what exactly is English? Where did it originate? How did it start?

To answer these questions we must travel back in time. The roots of the English language can be traced to a succession of migrations and conquests that took place a long time ago in the area we now call the British Isles. The earliest known inhabitant of the region was Paleolithic Man, who roamed the northwest corner of Europe as the Ice Age receded and lived in what would eventually be Great Britain. Very little is known about those hunter-gatherers, and the bones they left behind reveal nothing about the language they spoke. Such northbound migrations presumably became more difficult when the region broke away from the continent in about 6,500 BC and formed the islands we know today.

Neolithic Man appeared in the area in about 5,000 BC. This race of people came north from the Mediterranean, bringing with them a rudimentary form of agriculture and domesticated animals. They left no record of their language, although some think it may be related to the mysterious tongue spoken by the Basques living in the Pyrenees in northern Spain. On the other hand, they did leave monuments like Stonehenge, which are just as mysterious.



The Celts

The Celts were a race of people whose influence was felt throughout Europe and as far to the east as Greece and Asia Minor during the first millennium BC. They apparently began crossing the water and settling in what we now call the British Isles in about the 7th century BC. They brought with them a version of the Indo-European language that evolved into the Celtic that is still spoken in certain areas to this day. These clans, closely related to the Gauls of northern Europe, conquered and absorbed the earlier settlers of the islands and became the established inhabitants that Rome would subsequently refer to as the Britons.

The Romans

In 55 BC Julius Caesar was conducting his Gallic Wars and invaded Britannia for the first time. The Celts, who were in no mood to be conquered, fought back *con brio* and sent the Romans home to the continent empty-handed. But the setback was only temporary, and a subsequent invasion in AD 43 established a Roman province on the island that lasted for nearly 400 years.

Roman influence gradually spread, forcing rebellious Celts to take refuge in the highlands of the north and west. It was as difficult then as it is today to flush insurgents out of mountain hideouts, so the Romans contented themselves with ruling the bulk of the southeastern region, building the famous Hadrian's Wall in the north, and keeping military detachments along the troublesome borders.

Thus began a new era in the nascent history of the Britons as they adapted to life in a

Roman province. Latin was the language of the ruling elite and in time was also spoken by the upper echelons of society. But it did not replace Celtic—the common language of the people as a whole—which continued to be widely used throughout the entire Roman period.

The Germanic Tribes

As the Roman Empire began to decline in the early 5th century AD, it retracted its long tentacles from distant provinces, and the legions were withdrawn from Britannia. Into the vacuum they left behind came a new invader that would change the islands forever and lay the foundations of the language that would define the Britons down to the present day.

Under the protective rule of the Romans, the Celts had lost some of their warlike nature, and were now vulnerable to the new threat looming in the east. In about the year 450, Germanic tribes started arriving from present-day Denmark and the Netherlands. Three tribes—the Jutes, the Angles, and the Saxons—came in successive waves and settled mainly in the southeastern part of the island. To a greater extent than the Romans before them, they forced the Celts out of their lands and towns, and marginalized them from the mainstream of their own country. The Celtic language was relegated to the fringes of this new society, and Latin was no longer as widely used. The difference, this time, was that the Romans had always been an occupying power, subject to the recall that eventually withdrew them from their Britannic province. But the newcomers were there to stay. In time, the Angles and the Saxons established kingdoms, and by the middle of the 9th century, Saxon leaders were acknowledged as kings of all England.

By about the first millennium AD, the country was called Englaland, which meant "land of the Angles". The Germanic tribes that had settled there were referred to as the Angelcynn ("Angle-kin" or Angles race), and the language they spoke was known as Englisc, which was derived from "Engle", the Old English version of Angles. The English we speak today is therefore a descendant of the language brought to the British Isles about fifteen hundred years ago by those tribes, who spoke a West German dialect of the Indo-European family of languages.

But that isn't the end of the story. Not by a long shot. Since the arrival of the Jutes, the Angles, and the Saxons, the language has evolved through three main periods, dated approximately as follows: Old English (450-1150), Middle English (1150-1500), and Modern English (1500 to the present).

The Christians

Christianity was first brought to the British Isles in about 200 AD during the Roman Period, but the Anglo-Saxon invasion reversed much of that process in southern and eastern England. The re-Christianization began in the latter part of the 6th century when Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, took office. Since the Church enjoyed an almost total monopoly on literacy at that time, it was involved in a far broader range of functions than we might expect today. It operated as a civil service and was

responsible for legal documents, education, and social services. Even the Treasury was run by the Church. As a result there was a renewed influx of Latin words that were absorbed into the language, but since they were primarily concerned with religion, learning, the law, and public administration, these borrowings didn't directly affect the common man to any significant degree.

The Vikings

The Viking Age spanned the late 8th through the 11th centuries, during which time the seafaring Danes raided and invaded eastern portions of the British Isles. The latter part of this period brought widespread Viking settlement and a significant influence on the local vocabulary, and for a while England was ruled by Danish kings. The Vikings spoke Old Norse, which was related to Old English since both were descended from the same Germanic roots, and words, myths, and legends were absorbed into the Anglo-Saxon language and culture over a number of generations.

The Normans

The Norman conquest of 1066 had a greater influence on the English language than any other event in its history. Originally from Scandinavia, these conquerors had settled in northern France in the 9th and 10th centuries and had become totally assimilated. By the time of the invasion, Normandy was essentially French, and the Normans were among the most civilized and sophisticated people in Europe.

When they arrived in England they vanquished King Harold and his Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Hastings and assumed control of the country for the next two centuries. The vast majority of the English aristocracy either died on the battlefield or was subsequently executed or exiled, and the power vacuum in government and the church was filled by Normans. So once again, as had happened during the Roman period, the ruling elite spoke a foreign language. This was surely an excellent time to be a translator living in London! Through intermarriage, and for political and other reasons of expediency, many English men and women soon began to speak French, and it wasn't long before the distinction between speakers of the two languages was social rather than ethnic.

The bulk of the population spoke what was steadily developing into Modern English, but the ruling classes spoke French. There was inevitably some overlap and a much closer relationship with the continent, both of which had a profound effect on the grammar and vocabulary of the host language. During this period, many Old English words were discarded and replaced with French and Latin ones that were borrowed to express new concepts in government, religion, the law, military matters, fashion, cuisine, social life, art, learning, and medicine. It is interesting to note that, of the thousands of French words that entered the language during this phase, some 75% are still in use today, albeit in altered forms. As a result of these borrowings, modern English is richly endowed with synonyms. In many cases, we can choose from three alternative words thanks to the substantial French and Latin contributions that were grafted onto the core Anglo-Saxon language. For example, we can say fire, flame, or conflagration. And we can ask, question, or interrogate.

This period also saw an influx of words from the languages of the Low Countries—Flemish, Dutch, and Low German—due to the close contact between the Britons and the people of Flanders, Holland, and northern Germany. But all these changes and additions must be kept in perspective. Though the evolving incarnations borrowed heavily from other languages—creating an ever greater flexibility of expression—and were influenced by foreign grammar and syntax to varying degrees, the ultimate version was a Modern English whose essential features were inherited from the Germanic dialects of those who came to England in the fifth century.

The Modern Era

By the middle of the 13th century France's grip on England had weakened, and political and economic realities were forcing many of the rich and powerful—who had grown accustomed to treating the two countries as one—to choose whether to remain in England or settle permanently in France. These circumstances led to a resurgence of English throughout the land, and by the 14th century it was once again the common language, proudly spoken by all—rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief. This in turn fueled a demand for English literature, which reached unprecedented heights in the works of some of the greatest writers in the English language: Chaucer (circa 1343-1400) and Shakespeare (1564-1616).

As political and economic ties to France unraveled and England settled into its newfound independence, the language coalesced into four main dialects, one for each of the major regions of the country. In time, a need arose for a standardized version and—just as standard French was based on the Parisian dialect, and Castilian became the dominant form of Spanish—the basis for Standard English was the dialect spoken in and around London. As the Renaissance spread across Europe, new factors came into play that directly influenced the development of a standardized form of English: the printing press, the rise of popular education, greater communication, and an early form of social conscience. In response to the changing times, English kept evolving as any living language is constantly doing, and was hungrily absorbing words from Greek, Italian, and Spanish, as well as the perennial favorite sources, French and Latin.

It wasn't long before the colonial era began, and England became a major world power. As the British Navy set out to rule the waves in an early version of globalization, trade flourished and commodities from distant lands were imported for consumption in the British Isles. Along with raw materials and exotic delicacies from the far corners of the Empire came new words to season and enrich the language that had been evolving for a thousand years. And then one day the Mayflower set sail for America and opened the door to a whole new chapter in the evolution of the English language. But that's another story.

Acknowledgements: The author is indebted to Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable for their book A History of the English Language, from which many historical facts and insights have been drawn. Those interested in further research might consider exploring the extensive linguistic works by David Crystal, as well as many other writers, too numerous to mention.

Credits

Uruk Vase image, p. 10: Courtesy of Archive.com

Radiant Inanna image, p. 16:
Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

Photo credit, p. 20: Lynn Prothro House

Rainy Day image, p. 23:
http://fc49.deviantart.com/fs38/f/2008/332/5/b/Rainy_day_by_nayein.jpg

Background image, p. 24: San Antonio bridge, Riverwalk; public domain image, Bing.com.

Photo of Clare Sullivan, p. 25: Jim Beatty

Photo of Women of Juchitán, p. 26: Iturbide, Graciela.
http://www.rosegallery.net/index.php#mi=2&pt=1&pi=10000&s=4&p=1&a=21&at=2

Photo, p. 27, courtesy of Natalia Toledo.

Map, p. 32, by Tony Beckwith