

AN ONLINE PUBLICATION
OF THE LITERARY DIVISION

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FALL 2010

TRANSLATION AND THE ARTS I

First of a two-issue special feature



Oh, I don't come for the art. I come to read the translations in the catalogue!

Letter from the Editor

Part I of our two-issue focus on **TRANSLATION AND THE ARTS** features an in-depth article by Erik Camayd-Freixas on his experience “Translating María la O,” a classic Cuban zarzuela, for the Chicago Chamber Opera. Tony Beckwith, our regular By the Way columnist, treats us to a sensuous prose poem about the translator and his “mistress,” the all-night translation assignment. Diane Goullard Parlante rounds out this issue with an amusing two-piece look at the “Surprising Mélange” of Art and Translation, the second part of which is a punny peek at the “Price of Gas in France.”

Our next issue, Translation and the Arts Part II, will include a fascinating piece by David McKay, “Some Thoughts on Translating Labels for Museum Exhibitions,” grounded in his philosophy of translation; “From Plaisance to Opéra,” an excerpt from art historian Beth Gersh-Nesic’s translation of André Salmon’s memoir on Cubism, Picasso and the School of Paris; an exchange among translators on how to translate the term “in-betweenness”; Ann Cefola’s article on “Learning to Translate Headache Poetry”; and a “Dirty Poem” by Ames Dee on the messy process of artistic creation.

As always, thanks go to Jamie Padula and Diane Goullard Parlante for proofreading *Source* and to LD Administrator Emilia Balke for her support.

Sincerely,

Michele Aynesworth

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Please include a photo
and brief bio of 2 or 3 sentences.

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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 grants from the NEA and the Kirtredge Foundation.

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Cover: BTW Cartoon by Tony Beckwith

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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

Dear Michele,

I have a problem with Tony Beckwith's cover cartoons, which is that I'm running out of wall space to display them on. They're the best, but the Mother of all Translations may be the acme of his cartooning career to date.

*Best regards,
Liv Bliss*

Dear Michele,

Thanks so much for your letter and for your interest in our CAA conference session. This initiative comes out of the journal that I am editing, Art in Translation, which was launched last year. You'll find details on our website**. It builds on the pioneering symposium on 'Art writing: Translations, Adaptations, Modalities' hosted by Art in Translation in Edinburgh in April 2009, which brought together a number of distinguished scholars from art history and translation studies. The aim was to locate translation in the visual arts within the broader discourse of translation studies and theory. There were papers on a range of very different art historical topics, which nevertheless spoke to each other in the most stimulating way, with 'translation' as their common denominator. You can find short abstracts on our website (click on 'events'). A couple of reviews appeared in UK translation journals, one of which I'm attaching. The papers of the conference have also been published in Art in Translation, vol. 2, no. 2.*

Together with the Managing Editor of Art in Translation, I've just submitted an article entitled "Art History and Translation" to Diogenes, the UNESCO culture journal.

*With very best wishes,
Iain*

***College Art Association 99th Annual Conference**

Feb. 9-12 in New York

<http://conference.collegeart.org/2011/>

A session on Art History and Translation will be chaired by Iain Boyd Whyte, University of Edinburgh, School of Arts, Culture and Environment.

****Professor Whyte's online journal: <http://www.artintranslation.org/>**

Welcome to the website of Art in Translation, the new online journal of the Visual Arts Research Institute, Edinburgh (VARIE). Art in Translation (AIT) will publish the best writing from around the world on the visual arts, architecture, and design in English translation. The journal was launched on 26 February 2009 and will appear three times a year. View the inaugural issue for free, find out which articles will appear in subsequent issues or how to subscribe to the online journal!

FROM THE LD ADMINISTRATOR

In about one month those of us who are going to attend the 51st ATA Annual Conference will have a chance to meet in Denver Colorado. This year, the Literary Division will sponsor seven sessions and the Marilyn Gaddis Rose Lecture.

The Marilyn Gaddis Rose Lecture (2:30-3:30 p.m.), presented by Marian Schwartz, will be a valuable source of information for novice and experienced literary translators alike.

The second half of our annual meeting, which is scheduled on Thursday immediately after the MGR lecture, will be devoted to a panel discussion about the current state of literary translation, how it is evolving, and the strategies that the Literary Division must adopt to efficiently accomplish its mission.

Please come to our meeting to share, learn and network. Our panelists will be: Dr. Peter Krawutschke, Marian Schwartz, and Lois Feuerle.

In addition to that, we will host Book Splash and the After Hours Literary Cafe. [These events are open to all ATA conference attendees.](#)

Book Splash provides an opportunity for published translators to share their books. For more information, see the box below.

Our After Hours Literary Cafe this year will be on Friday night. There is no need for advanced notice to read your translations. Just come, relax, share your work and enjoy the work of other translators.

I hope to see you at the Literary Division Open House at 7:00 p.m. on Wednesday night.

Sincerely, 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.

Book Splash

Friday, 7:00pm - 8:00pm

<http://www.atanet.org/conf/2010/special.htm#booksplash>

Celebrate books and the people who make them! Browse among books and chat with authors, translators, editors, and publishers. If you are interested in being a participant at the Book Splash, please complete the Book Splash Registration Form. This event is coordinated by ATA Literary Division Administrator Emilia Balke. A cash bar will be available.

Literary Division After Hours Café

Friday, 9:00pm - 11:00pm

Drink in poetry, prose, and drama at this coffeehouse "open mic" reading! Read your original or translated excerpt, listen to readings from our multitalented members, or both. If reading, don't forget to bring your works with you. This event is coordinated by ATA Literary Division Administrator Emilia Balke and ATA Member Lydia Razran Stone. Coffee and tea will be available.

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TRANSLATING MARIA LA O

BY ERIK CAMAYD-FREIXAS, PH.D.

Erik Camayd-Freixas is Professor of Hispanic Studies and Director of Graduate Studies and Translation Studies at Florida International University. Dr. Camayd is a federally certified interpreter and regularly works on Spanish television broadcasts of presidential speeches. He has interpreted for nine heads of state, including President Obama and Pope Benedict XVI.



When the Chicago Chamber Opera commissioned me to translate the libretto of the classic Cuban zarzuela *María la O* earlier this year, I knew that, as a translator, I would have to serve many masters. It was quite a creative challenge, even though, by definition, translators are not supposed to create. I first had to be faithful to librettist Gustavo Sánchez Galarraga, who wrote it in 1929, imitating the Afro-Cuban vernacular of his day. I then had to work closely with my friend, director Juan Pedro Somoza, who adapted Galarraga's lengthy version from the pre-television era for a more *vivace* contemporary audience. The English lyrics had to do some justice to the musical genius of composer Ernesto Lecuona (1895-1963); convince a purist conductor, the legendary Maestro Alfredo Munar, a disciple of Gonzalo Roig and Lecuona himself; and favor artistic director and mezzo soprano Barbara Landis in the title role. I suppose I also had to please the punctilious critics and a forgiving audience.¹ But by far the toughest master to serve was language itself.

The result was the first English singing translation ever of any Cuban zarzuela, and a great crossover opportunity for American audiences to rediscover the music of a truly great Latin American composer. Personally, it was an exciting proposition. The love of Cuban zarzuela had been instilled in me as a child by my uncle, the renowned Cuban baritone Raúl Camayd, founder of the Holguín Lyrical Theatre, and a mentor to the present generation of Cuban classical vocalists. Having studied Latin American literature at Harvard, my initial approach to translation is that of a literary critic, but two years ago I also had the opportunity to study the history of Cuban popular music at FIU's Díaz Ayala Collection under an NEH grant.² So before I tell you how I negotiated the different requirements and managed to render Afro-Cuban and *criollo* dialogue and lyrics into my second language, allow me to introduce you to *María la O*, this delightful zarzuela, its plot, social significance, and dramatis personae—each with their own style of parlance—for these are, from the start, critical considerations of the utmost importance for the literary translator. The following are the Program Notes that I wrote for the promotion of the Chicago premiere on June 5, 11, and 13, 2010.



“María la O, the quintessential *mulata*, is a Cuban cultural icon and national symbol that subsumes the social aspirations of the new people of mixed race. Since the mid 1800s, her legendary name is mentioned in hundreds of popular songs and rumbas that nevertheless say nothing about her life, as though the very name of this mystery lady said it all. That was until 1930, when the poet and librettist Galarraga gave her a face and a voice, and the incomparable musical genius of Lecuona, who adapted Afro-Cuban popular rhythms to this classical zarzuela, gave her a distinctive swagger. Since then, *María la O* has been one of the most staged titles in Cuban lyrical theatre worldwide. Represented for the first time in English translation, this powerful operetta in two acts now makes a felicitous crossover that is sure to strike a deep chord in the heart of American cultural history, with a tense plot of interracial passions and social pressures that culminates in a romantic tragedy.

“Set in 1830s Havana, the plot develops the archetypical sentimental conflict among a cast of representative figures of Cuban society in times of slavery and Spanish colonial rule. The conflict revolves around the interracial romance between the sensuous but poor *mulata*, María la O, and the *galán*, Fernando, a wealthy young *criollo* from a powerful family of Spanish descent. The *galán* has a female counterpart in Tula, the naïve granddaughter of the Marquis of Palms, who dreams of a perfect marriage, while for others it is the inevitable union of two powerful families. Meanwhile, the *mulata* has a male counterpart in José Inocente, a freed-slave renegade, who plays the typical role of the *mulato trágico*, a young Black man in love with the unattainable María la O and sworn to defend her honor. This cadre evolves into a triangle when the gallant Fernando, torn between forbidden passion and angelic love, resolves to leave María la O and marry the ingénue Tula. Alongside this plot of love and marriage, a subplot of jealousy and pride leads the heartbroken María and José Inocente to rebel against their fate and seek vengeance and the restoration of honor.³

“Surrounding the melodramatic plotline, there is an array of supporting characters adapted from the Cuban *teatro bufo*, to provide local color, social contrasts, and tension release through humor. One such traditional figure is the comedic *negrito*, represented by Fernando’s coachman, Guadalupe, a domestic slave whose female counterpart is Tula’s nanny, Ña Salú. Plantation slaves are collectively represented by the carnival King, Queen, and players of the traditional Three Kings Day Procession. The next step in the social ladder is represented by the presumptuous *mulata* Caridad and her three girlfriends. Finally, the traditional comic role of the *gallego* (Spaniard) is played by the affluent merchant Santiago Mariño, who chases after *mulatas* and lusts after María la O, but will never marry ‘down.’ He sheds light on Fernando’s true intentions, following the castes society custom of keeping a *mulata* mistress at the *casa chica* or ‘smaller townhouse.’ The practically-minded Caridad seeks to be Santiago’s kept mistress. In contrast, Maria la O is too proud for that. Her union with Fernando, symbolizing the foundation of the new nation, is tragically frustrated. In this context, the renegade José Inocente seeks to rebel against the racial and gender politics of the time. Yet, in this lyrical tragedy, his fateful and symbolically patriotic bid for revenge also ends with a twist.”

The first translation challenge was to find intercultural equivalents for the different social types of 19th-century Cuba. For example, the wealthy Spanish merchant Santiago Mariño was a *peletero*, which in Cuban Spanish means nothing more than a shoe salesman, while in Spain it means a furrier. Yet shoe salesmen are seldom wealthy, and furs have not much of a market in tropical Havana. So in the translated script he is introduced descriptively as “the wealthy shoe shopkeeper.” The implication is that he is a smalltime merchant really, in the grand scheme of things, but for Caridad and her presumptuous mulatto friends he is indeed a wealthy catch. Other challenging terms included the *Cabildo de Reyes* (a traditional Three Kings Day carnival procession organized by plantation slaves) and the most problematic of all: the freedman José Inocente, who belonged to a particular social type in 19th-century Havana, called the *curro de manglar*.

Curros dressed somewhat like pirates, with red turban, loop earrings, fluffy white shirt, tight pants below the knee, and red silk waistband with a tucked, sheathed knife. The *curro* was part bully, part hoodlum, part rebel, and part dandy. “Dude” was the only previous translation I was able to find, but it lacks the connotation of “outlaw” and its current pop-culture usage makes it wholly unsuitable. It was important to find a positive alternative more akin to ‘rebel’ because José Inocente, with his *curro*’s code of honor, represented the freed Afro-Cuban race. After weighing numerous other options, I settled for “renegade.” In turn, *El Manglar* (literally “The Mangrove”) was a maroon community on the outskirts of Havana that developed in the 19th century as a hideout for runaway slaves. Around the time the zarzuela premiered, Walker Evans published his famed photo-essay, *Havana 1933*,⁴ depicting the city’s outer neighbors as depressed *shantytowns*—a term used also in Jamaica and other parts of the English-speaking Caribbean. Hence, in my translation, *el curro del manglar* became “the shantytown renegade.”

The aforementioned twist in *Maria la O*’s finale can be any one of the alternate endings that have been imagined for this “foundational romance”⁵ of Cuban nationality: 1) the *mulata* entices the *mulato trágico* to kill her ingénue rival so she can marry the *galán*, but at the last minute the jealous *mulato* kills the *galán* instead; 2) the *mulata* gets ahead of her accomplice and kills either the ingénue out of jealousy or, more likely, the *galán* out of scorn; and then kills herself, or not, and has the rest of her life to regret it in jail; or 3) she changes her mind at the last minute and comes between her beloved and his assailant, either averting a tragedy altogether or being unintentionally stabbed in the process (which of course ruins her singing finale). The first of these tragic endings is the most artistically accomplished in terms of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, that is, when “reversal” (*peripeteia*) and “recognition” (*anagnorisis*) coincide in the final scene.⁶ But this had already been done. In fact, the entire plot structure of *Maria la O* is lifted right out of Cirilo Villaverde’s classic novel *Cecilia Valdés* (1882).⁷ Rumor has it that Ernesto Lecuona went to Villaverde’s heirs to acquire the rights to *Cecilia*, but the original mulatta was already spoken for by a more established composer, his friend and rival Gonzalo Roig (1890-1970), whose zarzuela *Cecilia Valdés* premiered in Havana in 1932.

This anecdote is very telling in various important ways. First, *María la O* profits not only from Lecuona's music but also from Villaverde's archetypically tragic and masterful plot in *Cecilia Valdés*. Second, the impossibility of copying Villaverde's signature ending (without falling into obvious plagiarism) means that any staged ending of *María la O* will always be flawed in one way or another. Third, Galarraga's original libretto was not only scarcely "original" but also quite melodramatic, and his lyrics fairly clichéd. Neither he, nor *Cecilia*'s librettists, Agustín Rodríguez and José Sánchez-Arcilla, understood Villaverde's genius, the nationalist underpinnings of the plot, or for that matter the art of Aristotelian tragedy. As director Juan Pedro Somoza commented to me: "the problem was that Cuba had no good librettists at that time"—and would not have them until the coming of age of Cuban radio in the 1940s. Both librettos, *María*'s and *Cecilia*'s, were ultimately saved by the music.

For the translator, this presented two hairy predicaments: how to faithfully inflect both, the plot and the language. First, the 1930s libretto based on a plotline set in 1830s Romanticism was constantly in danger of falling from classical tragedy into soapy melodrama. Previous productions of *María la O* tended to portray the characters as Manichean heroes or villains, all good or all bad, which led to a melodramatic development and resolution. Tragedy, in contrast, depends on the characters being, neither good nor evil, but human beings like us, with flaws and virtues. The feeling that "this could happen to us" is essential to the tragic effect. The characters' fall should be precipitated through no fault of their own. Rather, it is society's prejudices and pressures that impel them tragically to their fate. In this way, the work delivers its social message.

Director J.P. Somoza understood this and did a wonderful adaptation, which corrected the evident flaws of earlier productions. I had the opportunity to work closely with him as he made various last minute changes to the script and tried out three different versions of the ending, at the request of the Chicago Chamber Opera.



Artistic director Barbara Landis wanted a more dramatic ending, one that would highlight her character María la O. It was decided that Maria would get ahead of José Inocente, kill Fernando, and after singing the finale (“*Never more will he return. Death is your dream!*”), turn the knife on herself. That is how it premiered on June 5. But after a review by critic Dennis Polkow, claiming that Galarraga’s “original” ending was more believable and made Maria more likeable, the Chamber Opera had the final scene completely re-blocked to the critic’s specs. So in the last two shows, on June 11 and 13, a secretly pregnant Maria la O comes between her lover and his assailant’s knife and—inexplicably after being fatally stabbed—is able to sing her final verses at the top of her lungs, just before dropping dead. The only tragedy, despite the best efforts of the director and the translator, is that melodrama ultimately prevailed.

The satisfied critic praised the company for “daringly re-blocking the finale along the lines of the original” and having it “conform to the best information obtainable about the ending.” But, as it turns out, he was wrong about Galarraga’s finale, which he “was able to supply...between memory and a detailed synopsis and partial libretto from a long out-of-print recording.”⁸ This must refer to the only album ever made of *María la O*, a sound LP cut in Spain, with an all-Spanish cast, by Fernando Montilla’s record label in 1956. The discography included an insert with the original cast, the complete lyrics, and a synopsis, but only four lines of dialogue. This “partial libretto”—billed as “Texto original de Gustavo Sánchez Galarraga”—was all he ever published, and yet it is copyrighted by Montilla. This underscores the fact that Galarraga was really a lyricist, not a librettist. His lyrics are written in stone, his synopsis is loosely lifted from Villaverde’s novel, and the adaptation is ultimately left to each successive director. Yet, to the extent that Montilla is faithful to Galarraga, the four lonely lines of dialogue are there to fix the final scene, unequivocally. When José Inocente grabs his knife and prepares to go look for Fernando, Maria stops him, “and”—says the script—“the following dialogue develops”:



- ELLA: *No, José Inocente.*
 EL: *Pero, ¿por qué? Tú ibas a matarlo.*
 (But, why? You were going to kill him.)
 ELLA: *Sí, pero sangre de su sangre en mis entrañas sentí,*
 (Yes, but blood of his blood in my womb I felt,)
que esto que en mí ya palpita, es hijo suyo, señor...
 (for this that already beats inside me is his child, sir...)

Then Maria repeats her final ballad, the zarzuela ends, and nobody dies. That is the only published original ending.⁹

The second predicament involves the language of the dialogue and lyrics. Director J.P. Somoza adapted the dialogue, but left Galarraga’s 1930 lyrics untouched. It was unclear at the beginning whether my translation would be performed or be used only for surtitles to be flashed above the stage, a practice that has become very common in operatic productions across the country. I guess it ultimately depended on how my work turned out. Conscious of the crossover opportunity and the historical importance of it being the first English production of a Cuban zarzuela, I decided to make my translation as perfect as possible and suitable for full stage performance,

which took a solid month of work to accomplish. That was also what the Chicago Chamber Opera preferred. Most of the actors, after all, were non-Spanish speakers, and while Americans are perfectly capable of singing opera in Italian or German, zarzuelas have long portions of spoken dialogue, which is much less forgiving than song when it comes to foreign accents. Moreover, much of the dialogue in *María la O* is in Afro-Cuban vernacular—difficult to memorize and impossible to pronounce for non-Spanish speakers. Even the Montilla recording, with its all-Spanish cast, flopped miserably when it rendered old mulatto speech with an Andalusian accent. The other option was performing the dialogue in English translation and the songs in the Spanish original, but that would sound contrived and artificial. Ultimately the entire libretto, both dialogue and lyrics, was rehearsed and performed in English translation.

Parts of the dialogue were in standard Spanish and needed only straight-forward idiomatic translation, minding the rhythm and prosody of the often witty speech, the personality and significance of each character, the dramatic situation, and the added agility that is appropriate to modern musical theatre. In order to render Afro-Cuban vernacular into English, I used as a model Zora Neale Hurston's classic novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).¹⁰ Hurston was a master of Southern Afro-American dialogue, which she transcribed phonetically in this folksy social novel set in provincial Central Florida. In sum, I rendered 1920s Afro-Cuban vernacular into its 1930s Afro-American counterpart. This would give American audiences a sense of familiarity and authenticity, a trans-cultural experience they could relate to, and a taste of the period's social history and slightly archaic flavor.

There are, however, different levels of the vernacular in *María la O*, from that of the African slaves, to the presumptuous mulatta Caridad and her social circle, to the refined Maria la O, whose speech is indistinguishable from that of the white *criollos*, except for the occasional slip when her emotions take over. Indeed, the vernacular becomes thicker or subtler depending on the interlocutor and the social or dramatic situation, resulting in a fluid sociolinguistic layering. Here are some excerpts from the opening scene:

CARIDAD: Santiago Mariño is one golden prospect of a Spaniard, oh-rite! And dat lowly metal, oh..., is such a necessity in dis here cruel and bitter world...!

CHARO: But I reckon yo riches is slippin' away, 'cause he's **c-r-azy** for dat María la O.

CARIDAD: So? Whut dat María la O has, dat dis here Caridad Arrendares don't?

MERCE: Beside she ain't as black as you... nup'm!

CHARO: It's just dat folkses is always fixin' to bill'er up... As if dat *Mulatta* was better dan usns. Dey ain't know nup'm at all...! Nup'm at all...!

CARIDAD: Oh-rite, oh-rite... mah friends... come on over to my spread. There's-you all kinds-a-fixins, meringue and puddin' for all. Come on, now. Come on up.

SANTIAGO: (Entering) Good evening, Miss Caridad!

CARIDAD: Oh, Mariño, even'n indeed. Thank you for comin'. But, please, don't call me Miss, 'cause dat's way too growed-up for mah years. Today I celebrate my 30 springtimes.

LOLA: (Aside) She forgot to count all her autumns n' winters...!

SANTIAGO: In point of fact, all that gracious Cuban spice on all you beautiful Mulattas will never let you age.

CARIDAD: Ohhh... you such a proper man.

Meanwhile, when María la O enters the party amid a chorus of cheers and accolades, she sings with simple language but refined diction: “*Thanks so much! / I don’t deserve such praise you sing to me. / You’re much too kind, and too polite and sweet.*” Yet, when provoked by the envious mulattas, she is quick to snap back: “*Oh, I’m gonna tell you oh-rite... but without wastin’ mah spit... you big mouth!*” José Inocente, the black renegade, has a certain dignity about him; so his vernacular is subtle and elegant: “*Dat woman is María la O, the woman I’ve loved, and even tho’ she has rejected me, I have sworn that —face to face or from behind— any White man who deceives her I will lay at her feet.*” When María finally speaks alone with the darker José Inocente, her vernacular surfaces as a sign of racial solidarity: “*It was true what you told me. The White boy only wanted this Mulatta for a moment’s pleasure. Just ‘cause his skin ain’t colored like mine, he thinks he has the right to abandon me after he satisfied his whim.*” Finally, even the thick vernacular of the domestic slaves has its layers. The comical coachman Guadalupe has trouble not only speaking but understanding figurative Spanish: “*Stabbin’, massuh? We’s don’t see no blood. Us no unnerstan’ nup’m dat yo’ lordship say. Please, talk mo’ Christian fo’ dis Negro coachman ta unnerstan’.*” Yet, the stern old nanny Ña Salú speaks with sententious wisdom: “*Oh, thank you kindly, master Fernando. De only thing Ah axe is dat yo’ be good tuh mah child Tula. Don’t stay away so long witout comin’ tuh visit wit her. She done suffer plenty when youse don’t come see her.*” This is when linguistic casting makes all the difference: my phonetic translation of Ña Salú’s vernacular speech came to life admirably in the voice of the superb African-American actress Jeanette Blackwell.

At the request of the Chicago Chamber Opera, director J.P. Somoza had edited the previous versions of the libretto for political correctness, removing lines and adapting scenes that could be perceived as racist. Cuban zarzuelas during the repressive Machado dictatorship (1925-1933) established a tradition of setting their plots safely in the 19th century, during the times of slavery under Spanish colonial rule, thereby avoiding any controversial reference to contemporary racial conflicts, discrimination, and black urban poverty.¹¹ Cuba had been independent only since 1898. So in the 1920s and 1930s a still fresh nationalist sentiment tended to displace the new republic’s flaws onto the colonial past. Spaniards, particularly the old aristocracy, were often characterized as racist, despite the fact that various forms of discrimination still prevailed in Cuba’s own bourgeois, theatre-going society. Even the vogue of *afrocubanismo* as a matter of national pride in the Cuban artistic avant-garde harbored more or less subtle forms of racial prejudice. So a certain amount of editing for political correctness was definitely in order, and my translation was certainly faithful to the director’s adaptation in this and all other regards. But after I submitted my final English libretto, the Chicago Chamber Opera, out of an excess of caution, subjected it to yet another round of edits, which went as far as to suppress instances of the words *Negro*, *slave*, and *skin* from the dialogue and lyrics. Moreover, this racial paranoia seems to have been fully justified, since one critic even imagined having heard the “n” word from the lips of Ña Salú, only to have the actress clarify that what she actually said was “this old *nanny*.”¹² Ironically, such censorship only succeeded in “whitening” the historical context and the social message of the work, presenting a romanticized image of slavery and racial relations, and reducing the plotline to a generic love story.

The translation of the lyrics presented a whole new set of technical challenges. Lecuona’s music is metrically complex, blending Afro-Cuban rumba, habanera, bolero, and classical rhythms with avant-garde influences from edgy composers such as Alejandro García Caturla and Amadeo Roldán. The original sheet music for *María la O* remained in Cuba with Gonzalo Roig after Lecuona passed away. The revolutionary government would not allow the score to leave the island. So the conductor, Maestro Alfredo Munar, transcribed the entire orchestral score years ago from existing recordings. In his arrangement for the Chicago Chamber Opera he also included three later ballads by Lecuona for a total of 16 songs in the modernized two-hour production. Maestro Munar had every reason to feel protective about this musical treasure, and was not at all convinced that it should be desecrated by singing the arias in English translation. “Look what happened to *Somos novios*...,” he sang to me at our first meeting. “It was translated as *It’s impossible*... Nothing whatsoever to do! That’s exactly what it is: impossible! If they insist in doing it in English, that’s it: I quit!” (typical Cuban exaggeration). Only when

we rehearsed the songs and I showed him that my translation was faithful to the original, that it fit the score, and that it rhymed, did he grudgingly accept. “But only on one condition”—he added with his good humor... Then, after a pause, he begged *me* not to sing.



LECUONA

Being faithful to the original meaning, in a way, was the easy part. What was difficult was to also fit the meter and stress patterns, and at the same time make it rhyme. When you translate poetry, you can get away with some metrical variation, but a song must fit the score exactly. To complicate matters, Spanish and English prosodies are quite different. Spanish is a tonal language, while English is based on vocalic quantity, that is, the stressed vowel is elongated rather than accented. For this reason, the metric unit in Spanish is the syllable, while in English, like in classical Latin, the metric unit is the foot. In Spanish, if a verse ends with the stress in the last syllable, you add one syllable to the meter, and you subtract one if it is stressed on the antepenultimate syllable. In my English translation of the lyrics, I used Spanish versification rules for highly rhythmic songs of Afro-Cuban beat, which depend on a more staccato syllabic meter; and I used English foot-based versification for ballads and more melodic compositions. I searched each of the songs in You Tube and played them repeatedly, adjusting my lyrics until they fit the meters and stress patterns exactly. I then used both internal and external rhymes, in order to have more rhyming flexibility.

After polishing each song as much as possible, I met with

the director at the maestro's house, where Munar played each song on the grand piano while I made further adjustments. After another week of polishing, we met a second time for final adjustments. It was a labor of love for all concerned:

María la O, bella como flor,
como tú en La Habana nunca hubo dos.
María la O, por gozar tu amor,
te diera en pedazos el corazón.
Loco por tu amor, mulata sin par,
tu boca de miel quisiera besar.
Mírame una vez con ese mirar,
que yo esa mirada no he de olvidar.

María la O, gorgeous like a rose,
Your eyes in Havana outshine the sun.
María la O, to deserve your love,
I would tear my heart to lay at your door.
Crazy for your love, Mulatta of my heart,
I yearn for your lips to press against mine.
Give me one more look with those burning eyes
That will burn forever in my heart's shrine.

One of my doctoral students asked me skeptically, “Okay, I’d like to see how you are going to translate *Las chancleteras*.” Well, here is my version of *The Sandal Clappers*:

La mulata soy yo
que nació en el Manglar
y por eso soy flor
de un aroma sin par.
Chancletera nació,
y mi alegre chancleta al sonar
va anunciando
que voy por la calle a pasear.
Así... con la chancleta camino así,
y a su sonido vienen tras mí,
pues doy la fiebre y el frenesí.
Así... a ver qué quieren con esa flor,
flor de canela que es la mejor.
Oh sí, señor...

A Mulatta —that’s me—
born in The Mangrove streets,
A wild flower —it’s true—
of the rarest perfume,
The sandals on my feet...
make a sound as they clap ha-ppi-ly,
Letting all know...
that I have come out for a walk.
Like this... clapping my sandals I go like this;
They hear my clapping and follow me,
In rapture too, wherever I lead.
Let’s see, what kind of flowers they want from me
Cinnamon flower is what I bring.
Oh, yes, sirree.

Lecuona’s ballads required a more melodic approach, mixing internal and external rhymes:

Como el arrullo de palmas en la llanura;	Like a palm tree lullaby across the plains;
Como el trinar del sinsonte en la espesura;	Or like the nightingale singing deep in the grove;
Como del río apacible el lírico rumor,	Just like the lyrical murmur of the meandering stream,
Como el azul de mi cielo, así es mi amor.	Deep like the blue sky above us, such is my love.

Eres tú, flor carnal de mi jardín ideal,	Carnal bloom’s what you are in my garden of desire.
Trigueña y hermosa, cual musa	Olive skinned and luscious, a goddess
Gentil de cálida tierra tropical.	In this my tropical and gentle land.
Tu mirar soñador	Your serene dreamy gaze
es dulce y triste, mi bien,	evokes sweet sadness, my love,
Y tu andar tentador un armonioso vaivén,	While your hips as you walk sway in a rapturous roll,
Y tu piel, dorada al sol, es tersa y sutil,	And your skin, so tan and soft, is tempting to touch,
Mujer de amor sensual, mi pasión	Sensuous goddess of love, my desire,
Es rumor de un palmar.	Rustling breeze through the palms.

The ballads of José Inocente and María la O needed to keep to the original lyrics very closely, because they express complex and conflicted passions that are crucial to the credible development of the plot.

ROMANZA DE JOSÉ INOCENTE
Mi corazón herido sin piedad,
por donde va, publica su dolor.
¿Por qué mintió con torpe afán?
¿Por qué se fue dejando en mí
la pena inmensa de su gran traición?
No puede ni podrá tener perdón
el crimen de matar una ilusión.
Si engaño fue el amor que me juró,
irá tras él mi eterna maldición.

BALLAD OF JOSÉ INOCENTE
My wounded heart’s lament I can’t hold back.
Where’er it goes its sorrow always shows.
Why did she lie without regard?
Why did she go leaving behind
This endless chain upon my betrayed soul?
There is no way... fate will ever forgive
The senseless crime of killing love’s last hope.
If all was false in the sweet love she swore,
Then love’s a word I curse forever more.

ROMANZA DE MARÍA LA O

Mulata infeliz, tu vida acabó.
De risa y guaracha se ha roto el bongó
que oías ayer temblando de amor,
y con ilusión junto al hombre cruel.
Su amor ya se fue de mi corazón,
que hoy ya le aborrece porque mi pasión
que hizo su traición ya tan sólo es
sed de verle al fin tendido a mis pies.
María la O, ya no más cantar.
María la O, hora es de llorar
y de recordar el tiempo feliz
de tus besos, que fugaz ya voló.
María la O, todo se acabó.
María la O, tu amor ya se fue
y jamás él volverá.
María la O, sueña en morir.

BALLAD OF MARÍA LA O

Mulatta in tears, your life is all done.
All laughter and dance have shattered the drum
That you used to hear quivering with love
And romantic dreams by a cruel man.
Out of my cold heart his love is now gone.
It is filled with loathing because in my soul
The love he betrayed is now thirst to see
The life of my life lying at my feet...
María la O, you shall sing no more.
María la O, it is time to weep
And to reminisce fleeting days of glee
When I felt your kiss caressing my skin...
María la O, your life is all done.
María la O, your love is now gone.
Never more... will he return.
María la O, death is your dream!

Minor adjustments to the lyrics needed to be made during rehearsals, as the singers vocalized the verses. The purpose of this feedback is to ensure that the verses are easy to sing, that they support proper diction and complement the vocal instrument. We definitely did not want any tongue twisters in the lyrics, but also there are certain vocalic phonemes that do not project well on very low, baritone notes, or very high, sustained, soprano phrasings. Finally, there are two highly complex duets in *María la O*, which needed to be finalized with singer feedback at rehearsals. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend rehearsals in Chicago due to budget constraints. In retrospect, I should have insisted on it at contract; so it was a lesson learned. I entrusted the adjustments to the Opera's artistic director and leading lady, Barbara Landis, who makes all the final decisions. But instead of minor adjustments, she rewrote more than half of my verses without consulting me, eliminating references to race and sensuality, the typically Cuban rhythmic patterns, and the poetic subtleties that I had painstakingly preserved in my translation. One critic called the lyrics "corny" and lamented that they had not been left in Spanish. I would have to agree. Just like Maestro Munar begged me not to sing, I should have asked Ms. Landis not to write. The complex and conflicted passions of the tragic arias were gone, and in their place, easy-to-sing romantic platitudes debased the decorum of the plot, reducing it to a generic, soapy love story. Moreover, the Cuban flavor, the sensuality, and the traditional topics of Cuban popular music were gone as well. In the most important verse of the entire zarzuela—"Mulata infeliz, tu vida acabó"/*Mulatta in tears, your life is all done*—I struggled to preserve the counterpoint of the vocalic phonemes |i| and |o| so characteristic of Afro-Cuban rumba and undoubtedly intended by Lecuona. In the rewrite, however, "*Mulata infeliz...*" became "*A woman betrayed...*" And indeed she was...but not by the translator.

In serving many masters, many lessons were learned. But in the end, a single recognition stands out above the rest—that, with its subtleties and pitfalls, only Language remains, as the master of us all. Yet, aside from the inevitable flaws, Lecuona's music, Munar's conducting, Dame Libby Komaiko's choreography, J.P. Somoza's directing, and some brilliant moments in the performance, carried the day. Most importantly, we collectively proved that a zarzuela crossover could be successfully accomplished. So perhaps a bit wiser now, we might set our sights on other stages and mulattas, like Roig's *Cecilia Valdés* (1932), Lecuona's *Lola Cruz* (1935), or Rodrigo Prats' *María Belén Chacón* (1934) and *Amalia Batista* (1936).

Notes

- 1 John von Rhein, "A girl named Maria sings to an Afro-Cuban beat," *Chicago Tribune*, June 2, 2010; Gerald Fisher, "Uneven production apart, Lecuona's *Maria* worth seeing," *Chicago Classical Review*, June 7, 2010; Dennis Polkow, "Review: *Maria la O*/Chamber Opera Chicago," *New City Stage*, June 8, 2010; Daniel Fernández, "*María la O* en Chicago," *El Nuevo Herald*, June 13, 2010; Ariel Remos, "Llegan a Miami los ecos de la 'María la O' en inglés," *Diario Las Americas*, June 17, 2010.
- 2 See Cristóbal Díaz Ayala, *Música cubana: del areyto al rap cubano*, 4ta edición (San Juan: Fundación Musicalia, 2003) and *Los contrapuntos de la música cubana* (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2006).
- 3 See Henry W. MacCarthy's superb dissertation, "Cuban Zarzuela and the (Neo)Colonial Imagination: A Subaltern Historiography of Music Theater in the Caribbean" (Ohio University, 2007).
- 4 Gilles Mora, *Walker Evans: Havana 1933* (New York: Pantheon, 1989); Walker Evans, *Cuba* (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2001).
- 5 Doris Sommer in *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (University of California Press, 1993) interprets these plots of interracial romance as an expression of failed national unity.
- 6 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater (New York: Modern Library, 1984).
- 7 Cirilo Villaverde, *Cecilia Valdés* [New York, 1882] (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2002).
- 8 Dennis Polkow, "Review: *Maria la O*/Chamber Opera Chicago," *New City Stage*, June 8 and 12, 2010.
- 9 Gustavo Sánchez Galarraga, *María la O: Sainete lírico cubano en un acto. Texto original de Gustavo Sánchez Galarraga. Música de ERNESTO LECUONA. Estrenada en el Teatro Payret de La Habana el 1 de marzo de 1930* (Cordoba: Montilla Records, 1956).
- 10 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* [1937] (New York: Harper, 2006). I am indebted to my wife Joy, a Southern Belle, who proofread and corrected my vernacular renditions from the point of view of a native speaker.
- 11 Robin Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997) 139-141.
- 12 Dennis Polkow, "Review: *Maria la O*/Chamber Opera Chicago," *New City Stage*, June 8, 12, 2010.

BTW



. . . and for “art translation,” she charges by the metaphor.

BY THE WAY

by Tony Beckwith,
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ART IN TRANSLATION



Tony Beckwith was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He came to Texas in 1980 and now lives in Austin, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist.

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

— Jules Rimet

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


There is nothing like the soulful sound of the

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

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

“A pity it’s closed,” I said.

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



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

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

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

Surprising Mélange

By Diane Goullard Parlante

<http://www.FrenchAndEnglish.com>

Diane began her career translating and interpreting French and English in 1984 and has been freelancing since. She authored an insightful book on communication from the perspective of someone who has dedicated her life to helping people connect meaningfully. Follow the link to hear her latest contribution:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nh7-zFKO-v0>.



TRANSLATION AND THE ARTS can produce a surprising mélange. I experienced such when reading Maurice Denis' *Journal*.

Maurice Denis was born in France in 1870. His life straddled two centuries: the 19th, marked by the industrial revolution, and the 20th, marred by the first world war.

In journeying through the three tomes of the journal that he began writing around the age of fourteen, I discovered how inseparable were his life and the lives of others who influenced him. To produce the unique Nabi art he became famous for—a simplification of the Symbolist style for which he was named “the Prophet”—Maurice Denis pondered over the art and the lives of countless other men and women, some famous, some not.

In writing my master's thesis, I focused on the French and Italian references in Denis' journal, translating the languages into English, but many other traditions were represented as well, describing art, people, and influences from Belgium, Canada, China, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Russia, and Switzerland. I noted a timeline of twenty-two thousand years spanning across the 800 years of the lives represented in portions of Tome I alone of the journal. Much of man's history, language, and environment gets translated into the arts, just as the arts have in turn influenced man's history, language, and culture. We are the sum of impressions made on us. This exploration made me feel part of the tableau painted by humanity's history, as all of us share in the composite of bits and pieces from the past, the present, and the future.

European art history professor Anthony Gully has remarked, “The ‘Italian’ character of art cannot be reduced to a few characteristics. Italian art varies so much, depending upon which region the art comes from and what period one is speaking of.” That inability to “reduce” art “to a few characteristics” mirrors language translation, as we, translators and interpreters, labor over finding the right word to render a term from one language to another, searching to match the innuendos, connotations, associations, and meanings.

To close, here's an original and funny way of combining words and art to translate sentiments and the social vicissitudes of life. *Au plaisir!*

The Price of Gas in France...

A thief in Paris planned to steal some paintings from the Louvre.



After careful planning, he got past security. Stole the paintings. And made it safely to his van.

However, he was captured only two blocks away when his van ran out of gas.

When asked, “How could you mastermind such a crime and then make such an obvious error?”
he replied, “Monsieur, that is the reason I stole the paintings.”



“I had no Monet



to buy Degas



to make the van Gogh.”



See if you have de Gaulle to send this off to someone else.



I share it with you because I figured I had nothing Toulouse.

CREDITS

For the article “MARÍA LA O”:

Photo of Erik Camayd-Freixas: Ivan Santiago, FIU Magazine

<http://www.chamberoperachicago.org/maria-la-o.html>

<http://www.amazon.com/Cecilia-Valdes/dp/B000006O9E>

<http://www.amazon.com/Maria-O-Ernesto-Lecuona/dp/B00000BKC6>

<http://www.last.fm/music/Ernesto+Lecuona>

http://www.chanson.udenap.org/paroles/ramona_amapola_marinella.htm

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lecuona_white_ink.jpg

p. 20 background image: Etienne-Maurice Falconet’s Pygmalion & Galatee (1763).

Image taken from <http://www.jinglebell.nl/?cat=3&paged=2>

“THE PRICE OF GAS IN FRANCE.” A humoristic tale found abundantly online. Reasonable efforts to locate its original author did not produce one. The images have been changed for this article, the substance of the text remains the same.

LOUVRE. <<http://www.world-city-photos.org>>

MONET. Douma, Michael, curator. Blue Water Lilies, Claude Monet, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, 1916-19.

<<http://webexhibits.org>>

DEGAS. <<http://www.abcgallery.com>>

VAN GOGH. Starry Night, o/c, 1886, Saint-Rémy. New York, Museum of Modern Art.

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

DE GAULLE. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_de_Gaulle>

TOULOUSE. Woman at her toilette I. <<http://www.toulouse-lautrec-foundation.org>>