

THE ONLINE PUBLICATION
OF THE LITERARY DIVISION

NO. 50

WINTER 2011

*featuring Literary Division activities
at the 2010 annual ATA Conference*



BTW

"...and there's a sliding fee scale based on the IQ of the phone you select."

Letter from the Editor

Celebrating the 50th Issue of *Source*

This month's issue, our 50th, features Literary Division highlights from the ATA's Fall Conference in Denver. Emilia Balke gives us an overview of LD activities in her "Letter from the LD Administrator." The After Hours Café is enthusiastically reviewed by Nora Seligman Favorov. Then, in her essay "The Echo of Translation, from Poetry to Religion and Fable: A Reflection on LD Sessions at the 2010 ATA Conference," Martha Kosir takes her inspiration from conference presentations by Lydia Stone and Patrick J. D'Silva to consider the deeper level of equivalences underlying literary translation.

Rounding out this issue are pieces by regular *By the Way* columnist Tony Beckwith and award-winning poet Ann Cefola. Tony has woven a lyrical fable to remind us of the song of language that surrounds us. In "Learning to Translate Headache Poetry," Ann takes a humorous look back at her first efforts to translate the intriguingly complex poetry of French poet Hélène Sanguinetti.

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"; and a "Dirty Poem" by Ames Dee on the messy process of artistic creation.

Thanks go as always to Jamie Padula 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 *Season of Infamy: A Journal of the War and of the Occupation (1939-1945)*, funded by grants from the NEA and the Kittredge Foundation.

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FROM THE LD ADMINISTRATOR

I am very glad to inform all of you who were unable to attend the 51st Annual ATA Conference in Colorado that the Literary Division sponsored and hosted a number of interesting seminars and well attended events. We had seminars on translation of prose, poetry, children's books and religion. We had a very informative Marilyn Gaddis Rose Lecture followed by a panel discussion during the second half of our annual meeting. Patrick Hubenthl successfully handled the impossible task of writing the meeting minutes, but if you are a novice translator and would like to learn more about where to begin and how to get published, I encourage you to listen to the recordings of the MGR lecture and our panel discussion. Both Book Splash and Literary Cafe went very well, and I hope to hear feedback from the participants. I am glad that we had a variety of languages represented at all of the events and I hope that more languages will be represented next year. I would like to thank all of you who recommended speakers for this year's conference. I reviewed all of your thoughtful recommendations before making the final choice. I hope that you will appreciate my choice. In the upcoming weeks you will be receiving a survey broadcast, so please take a moment to complete it. The information from the survey will help me plan services and activities for the division.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate a few announcements that were made at the annual meeting. We need volunteers to help develop and implement a list of local literary translation groups, a calendar of literary translation related events, a mentor's circle and a nominating committee for future Distinguished Speakers, among other initiatives. Please let me know if you have any new ideas, suggestions or comments about the services that our division offers and the direction in which it is headed.

I wish you a very happy and productive 2011!

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.

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**PANEL DISCUSSION
on the current state of literary translation
and the Literary Division's role**

Left to right:

Emilia Balke, LD Administrator

Margaret Sayers Peden, Spanish to English literary translator,
Professor Emerita of Spanish, and recipient of this year's Lewis
Galantieri Award

Lois Feuerle, German to English translator, ATA Director, and
Chair of the ATA Honors & Awards Committee

Marian Schwartz, Russian to English literary translator, past
president of the American Literary Translators Association,
and presenter of this year's Marilyn Gaddis Rose Lecture

BOOK SPLASH and AFTER HOURS CAFE



Above: The Book Splash's Russian tables: Elena and Vladimir Kovner promote his new book of Russian translations of English-language children's poetry while Nora Favorov and Lydia Stone display works published by Russian Life Books, including Lydia's *The Frogs Who Begged for a Tsar*, translation of 62 fables by Ivan Krylov. Left: Sharon Neeman entertains After Hours Café attendees with ballads such as the YouTube hit "5000 Words." Below: Paula Dieli and Sarah Llewellyn enjoy the After Hours Café.



LITERARY DIVISION AFTER HOURS CAFÉ

BY NORA SELIGMAN FAVOROV

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Nora Seligman Favorov has been translating Russian into English professionally for more than 20 years, specializing in history, medicine, psychology, literature, and poetry. She is associate editor of *SlavFile*, the newsletter of ATA's Slavic Languages Division, a Russian-English certification grader, and a former administrator of the SLD. Her translations appear regularly in *Russian Life* magazine. This summer, her translation of *Jews in the Tsar's Service* by Lev Berdnikov will be published by Russian Life Books. She lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

I have been attending the Literary Division's annual After Hours Café for many years, and the one that took place in Denver on October 29th was one of the best ever. For better or worse, there were not very many of us in attendance, but in some ways that was a plus. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly. The quality of the readings, however, was top notch.

For those of you unfamiliar with this event, it is an opportunity for any ATA conference attendee to come and read his or her prose or poetry, either original or translated, or simply to listen. (I've been a lurker for years. Maybe one of these days I'll allow myself a few minutes of modest fame.) Readings are limited to approximately 10 minutes. Some readings, especially of poetry translations, are bilingual. This year it was a great bonus to have some music as well, and not just any music, but a performance by YouTube star Sharon Neeman, whose masterpiece, "5000 Words," I had heard months before, back when it first went "viral" and links to it were zigzagging back and forth through the internet from translator to translator.

Unfortunately, I do not have the names of everyone who read, but I will mention those I do have. At least two people read their own original prose, Paul Howell and Elena Chang. Paul, a prolific novelist, read an excerpt from his novel, *Eustis Circle*, about growing up in the northeastern United States in the 1940s. Elena read two stories: "The Interpreter" and "Million Dollar Baby." Her talent as an actress made these readings particularly entertaining and, especially in the case of "The Interpreter," moving. Martha Kosir read her exquisite translations of Slovenian poets Jure Jakob and Peter Semolič. Sarah Llewellyn read a fascinating excerpt from Ingrid Betancourt's recently-published memoir, *Even Silence Has an End: My Six Years of Captivity in the Colombian Jungle*, which she co-translated from French. Lydia Stone, who presided over the evening as master of ceremonies, read her translation (from Russian) of Alexander Blok's poem "An Unknown Woman" and some fables from her recently published collection, Ivan Krylov's *The Frogs Who Begged for a Tsar*.

The evening closed with a few of Sharon's original (and extremely humorous) songs. It was a great pleasure to hear some of the songs from her non-translation-related repertoire, such as "Working Single Mother Blues," "TAX," and "Sex after Sixty."

As an organization, we can be proud of the sometimes unexpected talents we have within our ATA membership.

THE ECHO OF TRANSLATION

FROM POETRY TO RELIGION AND FABLE: A REFLECTION ON SELECT LITERARY DIVISION SESSIONS AT THE 2010 ATA CONFERENCE IN DENVER, COLORADO

BY MARTHA KOSIR
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Martha Kosir earned her Ph.D. in Spanish from Vanderbilt University. Her special area of interest is poetry and the philosophy of language and translation. She has done poetry translations from English into Spanish, and from German and Slovenian into Spanish and English. She works as an Assistant Professor of Spanish at Gannon University.

What is translation? Why do we translate? Why literary translation? These are some of the questions that I am sure all of us have, at one point or another, asked ourselves. One of the fundamental reasons why we pursue literary translation is our relentless search to encounter what we believe to be the meaning behind the texts we work with. It is meaning that we hope to enrich through our linguistic expertise and our cultural and personal experiences. Translation inevitably becomes interpretation, and the interpretative act according to Steiner inherently implies that “there is more than meets the eye” (316). Steiner claims that translation is “the act of elicitation and appropriative transfer of meaning” (312), and most importantly, is “the demonstrative statement of understanding” (312). This brief reflection will focus on the complexity of literary translation and the production and representation of meaning through translators’ ‘understanding’ of texts.

Every act of translation begins with the act of reading. In the introduction to *Modern American Poetry*, the editors Coulson, Temes, and Baldwin maintain that in reading poetry, for example, “effective technique directs your curiosity into asking questions, drawing you into conversation with the poem” (3). Commenting on William Carlos Williams’ poem “January Morning,” they make the crucial observation that the poet suggests his dependence on the efforts of a reader; a reader, in fact, “must ‘complete’ what the poet has begun” (4). This explains why Jorge Luis Borges “used to say that he was a reader first and foremost, then a translator, and finally a writer” (Sagastume 6).

In his famous essay “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin argues that the purpose of translation is to give the original a continued life (16), assuring thus the survival of the original work and serving the purpose of “expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages” (17). Benjamin also insists that “languages are not strangers to one another, but are, *a priori* and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express” (17).

Willis Barnstone in his work *The Poetics of Translation* points to Louis Kelly’s two main views of language: a person-centered and an object-centered view of language (222). While technical translation is based on a linguistic analysis which “hovers around specific paradigmatic problems for the purpose of creating the closest equivalences,” literary translation, on the other hand, focuses on a message that contains “unrepeatable and indeterminate elements such as expression, connotation, diction, and art” (Barnstone 227). As such, literary translation becomes in Louis Kelly’s terminology multidimensional and person-centered (in Barnstone 222).

The presentations of Lydia R. Stone and Patrick J. D’Silva at the 2010 ATA Conference are *a propos*. Stone’s presentation of her translation of Krylov’s fables (“The Translator, the Bear and the Roadblocks”) and D’Silva’s comparative analysis of translations of religious texts (“Translating Religion: Pitfalls and Perils”) lend themselves to a comparative analysis of the fundamental relationship between poetry, religion, and fables as literary texts. What seems to connect these texts is the similarity in their character and in the message they seem to convey, and the understanding they elicit from a translator.

Speaking of the character of these texts, what calls special attention in Terry Eagleton’s definition of “poem” is its quality to represent a “verbally inventive moral statement” (25). Similarly, Dictionary.com refers to “fable” as “a short tale to teach a moral lesson,” an “apologue” which in turn is defined as a “representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another.” Texts of religious nature likewise serve to convey spiritual and moral meanings.

The notion of re-creating a moral message, representing spiritual meaning, and exemplifying a figurative treatment of a subject points to the essence of literary translation, be it poetry or another literary genre, as it essentially strives to re-create meaning beyond the mere lexical significance of words.

Willis Barnstone states that translation essentially signifies “a radical departure from the source text in the sense that words are not perceived as mere proxies for denotated objects” (229). He proceeds to explain that in literary translation the sign “cannot function as a raw transfer of measurable data” (Barnstone 228). This is why in literary translation, the translator needs to be aware of what D’Silva calls a “deeper level of equivalences” beyond grammar and syntax.

A translation of poetry, religious texts, and fables in essence becomes meta-lingual and highly dependent on contexts and subtexts. D'Silva also points out the importance of the "insider/outsider subjectivity" in translation. He observes that translating religion presents an extra layer of complexity beyond other types of texts. The principal difficulty and one of the crucial "perils and pitfalls" of translating religion is associated with the possibility of altering theology through translation. Perhaps not to the same extent, but similar consequences can be perceived in poetry translation when it aims to convey philosophical, even theological contents of a poem. As for translating fables and their moral lessons and capturing the author's criticism of human foibles, as typical of Krylov's works, the translation likewise deals with issues beyond linguistic complexities and unavoidably reflects in the translated text the translator's subjectivity, be it insider or outsider.

When working with a literary text, the translator needs to be aware of the intricate relationship between the source and the translated text. Walter Benjamin pointed out that translation is not "the sterile equation of two dead languages," (18) but that languages are interrelated in what they want to express. Benjamin maintains that "while all individual elements of foreign languages – words, sentences, structure – are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement one another in their intentions" (18). Although it may seem daunting at times to translate religion, poetry, even fables, and to articulate the moral and spiritual inference behind these texts, Benjamin believes in the positive relationship between the original and the translated text. Literary translation becomes "a means of reaching linguistic complementation" (Barnstone 251), but most importantly, a production of language of spiritual proportion, the so-called "pure language" which becomes the essence of literary translation.

For many critics, Benjamin's notion of attaining "pure language" is ultimately a religious experience, since true understanding is only possible and attainable at the level of "pure language." Until then, it remains hidden in the texts and exposed through the translator's re-creation of the text. The supreme example of translation for Benjamin is that of the Scriptures because they contain between the lines their virtual translation (Barnstone 241). Poetry, religion, and also fables lend themselves to a similar quest for understanding of that which needs to be encountered between the lines, the virtual translation, an equivalence beyond mere language.

This explains why in literary translation, as Terence Hawke observes, verbal art "does not function as a transparent 'window' through which the reader encounters the poem's or the novel's subject" (Barnstone 228). In translation meaning remains in a state of constant flux, since every translation, in addition to reflecting subjective idiosyncrasies of a translator, also echoes the cultural characteristics and traditions of its time. Although the language of fables appears quite transparent at times, the message behind it can be interpreted in different ways. Likewise proverbs, as D'Silva observes, can be translated, that is to say interpreted, in many different ways. Fables, proverbs, and religious texts like poetry cannot be translated in a literal way.

When translating literary texts and re-creating the meaning of these texts, it is important first and foremost to let the texts speak for themselves. In the process of translation the translator actually plays a number of different roles. Interestingly enough, Thesaurus.com lists a series of synonyms associated with the word “translator” such as “adapter, cryptographer, cryptologist, decoder, dragoman, explainer, glossator, linguist, polyglot.”

The genuine task of the translator is to comprehend the historical and cultural circumstances of the source text in addition to its specific linguistic categories. As every translator embodies his/her own thought and language categories, each translation becomes enriched through the translator’s personal, cultural, and linguistic experience. The diversity of translators in turn accounts for the great variety of literary translations, be they of poetry, religious texts, fables or other literary texts. Translation becomes what D’Silva calls the translator’s “all-encompassing vision,” “the deepest level of localization,” and the translator, according to Stone, “the first character” in the fable of translation.

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EVERYBODY'S TALKING AT YOU

by Tony Beckwith,
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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 came by bus from Oaxaca, arriving in the village in the early afternoon. The air was hot and still and the dusty streets deserted. We sat in the shade under an awning on the west side of the plaza. I shut my eyes against the glare and when I awoke a man was talking to me, a huge grin spread across his leathery brown face. He was saying, “My *tienda* is open now.”

Inside his store it was dark and cool and smelled of corn and burlap. We bought three bottles of apple-flavored *Peñafiel* and drank them standing up at the rough wooden counter. The man asked what we were doing in Teotitlán del Valle. I pointed at Neal and said that he was a weaver who had come to learn from the famous weavers of Teotitlán. The man nodded, then looked at Donna. I explained that she had decided to call herself *Mariposa*, was searching everywhere for herself, and probably wouldn’t be here very long. He smiled, then looked at me. I told him that I was a student of language, and that I was here to listen to the sounds of the village.

“An excellent idea,” said the man. “You will hear many many things that will surprise you.” And he told us that Olivia could give us a place to stay. Up the hill, to the left.

We strung our hammocks in Olivia’s courtyard, and settled into the rhythm of the village. Most of the men were weavers. They spent their days working at the huge looms crowded into brick and adobe houses, talking and laughing quietly among themselves in the dimly lit rooms. The young boys looked after the sheep and goats, whispering and shouting at them as they rambled together across the barren, rocky

fields. The women and girls cared for the crops and the mules, prepared the food for their families, and washed their clothes on the rocks in the stream. They were always in groups, and their chatting sounded like birds returning to their nests at sunset, their laughter as clear and bright as spring water from the hills.

At night, moonlight flooded the courtyard, and the air smelled sweet and warm. My hammock hung beside a rough mud-brick wall, under the eaves of a tin roof. From where I lay I had a clear view of the wide-open sky and the pinpoint stars. On the other side of the wall was the mule corral. These mules were sociable creatures, and it took them a while to settle down at the end of the day. They all had stories to tell about being out in the fields, and I could hear them moving around, muttering and nuzzling, whinnying and chuckling. And haw-heeing. All my life I thought mules and donkeys said “*hee-haw*.” But they don’t. They say “*haw-hee*,” exhaling on the *haw* and inhaling on the *hee*.

Olivia’s husband, Ismael, was a master weaver, an artist whose sarapes and tapestries sold for high prices in the finest stores and galleries in Mexico City. His inspiration came from ancient legends of the Zapotecs and Mixtecs who lived in this valley long before the Spaniards came. He looked for power and simplicity in his designs and used nutshells and onion, pomegranate, tree bark, and cactus to create natural dyes for his wool. “The earth talks through us if we allow it,” he said. “Everything speaks in its own tongue and the artist interprets so that others may understand.” I nodded. “Have you been to Monte Albán?” he asked.

It was a short bus ride to Monte Albán, the ruins of a citadel that felt like a portal to an ancient time. It was one of the earliest cities in Mesoamerica—founded by the Zapotecs in about 500 BC—and became the dominant force in the Valley of Oaxaca for centuries before being abandoned towards the end of the first millennium AD. The upper terrace is open to the sky, and a cursory glance perceives it as vast and empty. But those who sit off to one side and remain in silent observation will see the space gradually come to life in their mind’s eye. Stalls will appear that look just like the ones in the market in Oaxaca: food stalls, ceramics stalls, spice stalls, tool stalls, fruit and vegetable stalls with boxes out front and awnings overhead. The open space teems with men, women, and children milling about, carrying bundles and pointing and talking, just as they do in every market square in Mexico. The space comes alive with the same smells, the same colors, the same sounds. The plaza retains its memory of life in the glory days on the hill, and projects a sort of permanent hologram that becomes visible and audible to the patient.

I sat beside a window on the way home, my elbow jutting over the sill, the warm air rushing past my face. We rode in silence for a while then I told Ismael about the mules' conversations. "Yes, haw-*hee* is how they say it," he agreed, laughing. "Everybody gets it wrong at first, gets it backwards. I don't know why. I guess they just don't listen very well. They listen but they don't hear."

He'd seen me writing in my notebook and he added, "Are you going to write that down, about the haw-hee?" I nodded. "That's good," he said. "You weave your words into stories. I'll weave my stories out of wool. Let's see if we are understood any better than those mules."



LEARNING TO TRANSLATE HEADACHE POETRY

BY ANN CEFOLA

www.anncefol.com



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 Comp'Act, 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 Comp'Act, 2004), praises her poetry for "its emotional quality, physicality of verse, mythic intelligence and profound depth of being."



Ann Cefola published translations of Sanguinetti's poetry include *Hence this cradle* as well as selections from *De la main gauche, exploratrice*. She won a 2007 Witter Bynner Poetry Translation Residency and the 2001 Robert Penn Warren Award judged by John Ashbery. Her chapbook *Sugaring* (Dancing Girl Press) appeared in April 2007. Ann holds an MFA in Poetry from Sarah Lawrence College and works as a creative strategist (jumpstartnow.net) in the New York suburbs where she lives. annogram@aol.com

When I got a hold of Hélène Sanguinetti's *De la main gauche, exploratrice* in 2001, I had never translated a book. I dove in with my bilingual dictionary I'd inherited from my older brother in high school and my copy of *201 French Verbs*. Sanguinetti's language, often knotty, required a second opinion on certain phrases. I queried listservs and French teachers who, with some exasperation, would write back, "That's exactly what she is saying!"

I began to imagine someone in France translating Ashbery and wondered how that might feel. No matter—I had graduated from an MFA writing program two years earlier and welcomed Sanguinetti's inventiveness. Fortunately, I had just moved next door to Ligia Yamazaki, a professional translator fluent in English, French, and Spanish. More significantly, Ligia's brother, Gonzalo Mahecha Valenzuela, is a Colombian artist whose

provocative canvases often inspire people to say, “If you painted happier paintings, more people would buy them.” “I don’t paint for people,” Mahecha always answers. “I paint for *museums*.”

Ligia, as Mahecha's sister and broker of his paintings, had an openness to H  l  ne's work. Others, with whom I shared the text, found it daunting: "I couldn't get through H  l  ne's book," one French friend admitted, "it gave me a headache." After reading a few translated chapters, Ligia invited me over to review passages I might have misread. That was, as they say at the end of *Casablanca*, the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Ligia and I would spend more than a year questioning, pantomiming, making perplexed faces and shouting "Ohhh!" over this challenging text. This is the story of how she helped me make sense of a 185-page experimental French poem.

A dose of insanity

Ligia insists I keep my shoes on, but I leave them by the front door to respect her husband's cultural tradition. Pancho Villa, her aged and fierce Jack Russell terrier, greets me with a low growl. Following Ligia through the living room, I wave to her husband Yuki, who is watching TV on the sunporch. The living room is full of plants, Ligia's own crafted green and blue ceramics, and Mahecha's paintings: an amber Madonna, an impressionistic profile of Yuki, and toothy oil portrait of a young girl.

Ligia's brother, Mahecha, is a self-taught artist whose award-winning drawings, oils and pastels appear in Soho and Paris exhibits, ArtExpos and recently at La Galería Casa Cuadrada in Bogotá. Mahecha, like Sanguinetti, is committed to outrageousness. "A good starting point," he writes, "digs into the mind's depths and lets concepts and ideas free-flow—influenced by an unbribable dose of insanity." (Yamazaki 5)

What Mahecha and Sanguinetti first have in common is a traditional skill set: Mahecha's portraits pulse with accuracy and character, while the fables in *De la main gauche, exploratrice* demonstrate deftly crafted lyric narrative. From his representational expertise, Mahecha takes the leap into distorted figures that engage in love, lechery and violence. Sanguinetti's poetry taps into similar themes—with one character who “strikes his chest his mouth his sex he strikes, all is red and he is nude: ‘From here and with this I will love her and will love her!’” (Sanguinetti 133)

Like Mahecha, Sanguinetti is reinventing her art form. She lives and works in Arles where Cézanne-inspired imagery such as Mont Sainte-Victoire and cypress trees find their way into her poetry. Her first book, *De la main gauche, exploratrice*, which I translate as Left-hand Exploring, is soon to be followed by *D'ici, de ce berceau* and *Alparegho, Pareil-à-rien*, receiving critical acclaim in *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro Littéraire* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*. My translation of her second book would eventually appear here as *Hence this cradle* (Seismicity Editions, 2007).

It is fitting that a Mahecha pen-and-ink drawing presides over Ligia and me, with our respective bilingual dictionaries, as we deconstruct Left-hand Exploring at the dining room table. “Okay,” she commands, “you read.” I pull out my translation, which she follows in the original French—a language she learned when she and Yuki lived in Belgium and wanted to be able to converse with doctors about the impending birth of their son.

Today, as medical translator at a New York hospital, she helps others—from pregnant teens to frightened elderly—negotiate some of the most vulnerable moments in their lives. On Saturday mornings, she takes lessons in Japanese, her husband's native language, which she savors using on yearly trips to Japan.

Let the horse drink

Left-hand Exploring seemingly combines *The English Patient* with the best 1950s science fiction. Sanguinetti creates dramatic energy by opening the poem with fifty-eight compact, numbered stanzas in a section called “Daughter of Jeanne-Félicie” and then juxtaposes them against the wild and unpredictable second part, “Left-hand Exploring,” which gives the book its title.

This second part mixes prose poetry, narrative, three fables, and one man’s journal entries. On a pilgrimage to nowhere, a caravan climbs snowy peaks, camps in stark deserts, endures marauders and encounters sky-high creatures. Perplexing as it is compelling, “Left-hand Exploring” unearths breathtaking moments that make the strange trip worthwhile.

It is not long before Ligia and I run straight into our first linguistic knot: a stream-of-consciousness sentence whose subject could be one of several things. If translated literally, it would read:

[...] without looking at them, he speaks at last of the drinker of the plain, who waits on his horse, that he may drink the horse, the water of the river or the pond, or nothing, and that all the skin of the plain passes through his, the warrior and that of the river, the grass, and the cloud together on the feathers of his head, and his fingers, touching the neck of the horse, drinker of the plain.
(86)

We agree the second line’s “qu’il ait bu le cheval” does not mean the horse is the drink. Ligia reads her notes written in the margin: “This ‘drinker of the plain’ is really difficult! Maybe translating it in Spanish will help.” And we take her suggestion to heart: We find the Spanish, “que el ha bebido, el caballo” makes perfect sense: “that it may drink, the horse” or, more to the point, “that the horse may drink.”

That strategy—translating key phrases into her native Spanish—proves invaluable time and time again. My knowledge of French alone would never let me understand the European usage that is second nature to Ligia. But more than her Romance languages, Ligia credits two years of Latin and Greek where, as a young student, she learned to identify roots and prefixes. To illustrate, she plucks *terre*, *fleuve* and *montagne* from pages 85-86 and writes the Latin *terra*, *fluvialis* and *montanæa*.

Why future generations will hate me

In the phrase, “qu’il ait bu le cheval,” Sanguinetti omits the comma which would have helped identify who was drinking what. Her progressive approach deliberately avoids traditional commas and periods. Given that the text is so challenging, I separate sentences and insert commas.

While the French might accept creative punctuation, English readers’ comprehension would pile up like cars on an icy interstate. I make this decision—aware it might evoke ire in years to come—much like what Thomas Wentworth Higginson endured for manipulating Emily Dickinson’s work. In this case, access to meaning wins over exactitude.

My graduate writing program’s rigorous examination of contemporary poetics serves me well in translation. When Sanguinetti writes “se bolide un serpent,” she transforms a noun, “bolide,” into a verb—a not uncommon poetic practice. I love replicating Sanguinetti’s wordplay and write “meteors a snake.” To suggest the weary pilgrims’ delirium, Sanguinetti writes:

Alors quoi, quoi, quoi, y a quelqu'un, quelqu'un,
qu'un, qu'un, qu'un, y a personne, sonne, sonne,
sonne, ou quoi, quoi, quoi, quoi, qui répond, pond, pond,
pond, pond, c'est ainsi qu'on se plaint. (108)

I translate:

Then what, what, what, there is someone, someone,
one, one, one, there is no one, one, one,
one, or what, what, what, what, who responds, ponds, ponds,
ponds, ponds, we complain this way.

Internet match

People ask how I found Sanguinetti: After online queries to French journals and web sites, corresponding with a Sorbonne professor and translating questionable poems for someone named Bruno, I connected with one Cynthia, a Texan working at the Avignon Poetry Center. When she e-mailed me a stanza from Sanguinetti's *De la main gauche, exploratrice*, I read and re-read it. *Hmm. Hmm* again. No bolts of thunder as conventional wisdom dictated.

I called a famous translator in New York City to see if she could recommend any French poets. "If you find someone, let *me* know!" she said and hung up. As I listened to the dial tone, one thought arose. I shot an e-mail to Cynthia and then ordered the yellow-covered book from a Manhattan bookstore.

First I read *De la main gauche* to grasp its flow. Then, just as in high school and college, I laboriously underlined and looked up words and verb tenses. Not trusting myself, I examined even the most innocuous word. Famous for *faux amis*, or false friends, the French language has words that may look like English but can mean something entirely different: *Discussion* can mean "argument," for example, and an *air débonnaire* can mean a "kindly" air rather than a "sophisticated" one.

"I thought you had to be fluent to translate," friends would protest. "I know enough," I would answer, "to get into trouble."

Surrounded by thick dictionaries and slim verb books, I checked and re-checked. Finally, I painstakingly inserted paragraphs into an online translation service to see if I had missed anything. This usually yielded laughable results—but, even Ligia agrees, is a practice good for building vocabulary.

Making it new

I cannot have a more passionate translation instructor than my neighbor. Ligia takes my draft translation on the plane on family visits to Colombia, reads it on her commute to New York, considers difficult phrases before sleep and e-mails French friends for advice. When we face a particularly challenging passage, she exclaims, "This is fun!"

Carving out a few hours Saturday or Sunday afternoons, we become archeologists, detectives and clairvoyants. The work seems to demand all that and more. The challenge is to communicate the narrative without removing its inherent difficulty. Often, it is a stretch to understand what is being said or done:

————— Il suffirait de quelques gouttes au creux de palmes, à mi-distance femme ou homme parmi les palmes leur souriant, puis leur essuyant le front avec la main ————— douce lentement, chaque tête de voyageur se posera dans ces genoux-ces palmes, reposera s’abreuvera. (130)

Ligia slowly pantomimes as she reads, “I smile, I wipe my forehead with my hand, I put my head in my knees.” We study the sentence and test different versions out loud. Finally, we agree:

————— It would be enough to have a few drops in the hollows of the palms, halfway woman or man amid palms smiling at them, then wiping the forehead with a hand ————— softly, slowly, each traveler’s head will rest on their knees and drink from these palms refreshed watered.

After these tough lines, we unearth a phrase that makes us gasp in admiration as the meaning becomes clear: “————— Think of me strongly now wherever you are, so I can drink your shadow where I am and walk walk walk ————— ” (130).

Other intriguing discoveries: “All these questions the heart answers but no one understands it” (113); “[...] fire sticks to our skin which it lights but does not burn” (120); and what one traveler inscribes on his knapsack, “————— If I die, leave me standing so I can still hope —————” (132).

Three questions

Between translating, Ligia and I take in an occasional foreign film, museum exhibit or Indian meal. If I have a dying plant, I give it to her and she returns it verdant and blooming. “What do you do with them?” I ask. “I talk to them,” she smiles, and I realize she is—in addition to master potter and linguist—a *curandera*.

Her cultural experience—from living in Belgium to visiting relatives in Madrid—advances and enriches the translation. One of the poem’s fables refers to a woman sitting in a bullring’s “shadow side” (140). Unaware the arena has a “shadow side,” I learn from Ligia that half the seating is in the sun—and the other in the shade.

Sometimes we talk through a sentence such as “chacun porte à l’élastique son enfant entre front et bas du dos, chacun mord les mèches pour ne pas glisser...” (88). We decide an elastic band holding a baby between forehead and lower back must be a sling. Once we can visualize that, we are free to translate the paragraph:

Air inflames and pushes the flock. Each one carries her child in an elastic sling on the hip, each chews the ends of her hair so as not to slip, be left behind, mixing up names, clinging against love, skin, mask, banner, cloth, eyes, onward! Onward! Onward! (88)

I have to smile when we consider “clochard” (96). “Cloche” means “bell” in French, which calls to mind “Bell head,” a term I heard when working as a writer at a Bell System phone company, i.e., “He’s such a company man, his head is shaped like a Bell,” or “She’s such a Bell head, she clangs when she walks.” In context, “clochard” is a slur on a character who has bells embedded in his skin—so I choose “dumbbell” over the dictionary’s “bum” or “tramp.”

Ligia's not crazy about "dumbbell" but lets it go. She goes back to "la putain de question," (89), which is probably incorrect as "this whore of a question." By comparing it to Spanish equivalents, we find it means "this f**king question," whose expletive we change to the milder "damn." In addition, Ligia discovers "souk" (90) is Arabic for market.

She also returns to the "drinker of the plain" passage. Later on, the narrator calls himself the "drinker of winds" (105), which makes Ligia think he may be the "drinker of the plain." She had shown this section to her multilingual colleagues at work, and even they could not say if "the drinker" was the narrator or a third person. "It baffled them," she says, and pauses. "Translating this takes..." Words uncharacteristically fail her. I nod slowly and think, "It takes being comfortable with dense language, ambiguity, and uncertainty; and knowing that there may be no right answers or need for them."

Being unable to fit something together is less a headache than a slight heartache.

Happily, however, we usually roll through the challenges: Each one of us will throw out possibilities like a game of charades. When one of our phrases captures a difficult line, Ligia shouts, "Write it down before we forget!" And I quickly scribble it. Then, she unfailingly asks:

"Is it English?

"Does it make sense?

And finally, "Is it poetry?"

If I can answer yes three times, I know we have succeeded.

Ligia and I work on *Left-hand Exploratrice* for more than a year. In that time, Pancho moves into the kitchen where Ligia feeds him warm rice and milk. African violets bloom on the window sill. One day she surprises me with a print on a handmade paper by her brother. I am thrilled to have an original Mahecha. Like Sanguinetti, he is true to his artistic vision. Don't ask either one to change or be less complex. What drives them to such artistic extremes? That, my friends, is a good *putain de question*.

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BOOK SPLASH



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