In a New Light

In the search for a title for a proposed anthology of short fiction and poetry in translation, the name Beacons thrust itself into consciousness with the clarity of its physical counterpart. The metaphor is appropriate. . . . The authors represented here call to us through the urgency of their writing, at the same time alerting us to the cultural and linguistic distance that separates us. . . . A beacon communicates from afar, as do these voices as distant in space as Japan, as remote in time as sixth century Arabia.

Clifford Landers, from the preface to the first issue of Beacons.

From the beginning, Beacons has been a work of art lovingly put together by a chain of dedicated editors, beginning with Cliff Landers. This tenth issue of Beacons marks a stepping stone in that tradition, with voices as distant in space as China, as remote in time and space as Sumeria, four millennia ago. The Table of Contents for this issue, in fact, emphasizes the geographical or historical context for contributors rather than the language translated; to say “Spanish” or “French” or “English” today is much too vague, since these languages cover so much territory and varieties of idiom. In keeping with tradition, we have a broad collection of works from Europe and Latin America, and a good bit from Asia.

But we also mark a number of departures this time around. Beacons Ten opens with an excerpt from a francophone novel set in Africa. This is to recognize the fact that selections from Africa have been a rarity in past issues, as well as to feature a new rubric—INTRODUCING—in which a seasoned literary translator introduces an author not well known in the U.S. In their introduction of Waberi, David Ball and Nicole Ball note that “the main achievement of this remarkable tale may well be to give the western reader a feeling of identification, projection, and compassion” (Waberi) for the real populations of Africa and Asia.”

Many of the contributions here feature commentaries by the translators, sometimes by the authors, and for the special showcase of Chinese poetry, an overview by Beacons board member John Balcom, who worked with several translators to place their “snapshots” into the context of Chinese literature.

Beacons Ten contains some fascinating glimpses into the history and art of writing. Authors from Enheduanna to Ames Dee, over a period of four thousand years, have been writing about writing. The early scripts, such as the Sumerian cuneiform, Tibetan, and Chinese scripts represented here, were so beautiful that there is scarcely need for further illustration. The pride early authors took in the new art can be seen in Temple Hymn 42. Addressed to Nisaba, the Sumerian goddess of writing, it is signed by Enheduanna, the first known author:
the person who bound this tablet together
is Enheduanna
my king something never before created
did not this one give birth to it.

Opening the section on Latin America, translator Louise Popkin gives us an extensive and insightful overview of Mario Benedetti’s evolution as a poet, from his early “office” poems in the 1950s to his politically committed poetry of the 1960s and 1970s, and more recently, to poems on aging and death. In the same section, we are treated to Manuel González Prada’s Grafitos, darts thrown at some of the world’s most famous writers, and to Bolivian poet Matilde Casazola’s corporeal poetics. “Poem 56” is described by her translator as “an affirmation of a more elemental, intense, and personal style in which the poet prefers ‘to write with worms and roots and falling waters.’ ”

In “To a Poet,” “Poem, Translating Tomas Venclova,” and the following excerpt from Flowers for Losers, Latvian Peters Bruvers addresses the topics of writing and translating.

I know how to write know how not to write
above black chimneys such white swans slide
from the corner of an eye I watch them quietly
and no longer write down even the shortest poems

once I longed to announce everything through myself
now it’s enough to see how my own shadow falls
on rune stones from which symbols vanish.

Romanian poet Mariana Marin, silenced for much of the 1980s by the Ceausescu dictatorship, uses the image of a tortoised-shell binding to express how difficult it was for her to publish:

The reality of rope in the hanged man’s house
and the tortoise-shell
I bound my manuscripts with.

Because, listen!—near the century’s end
I had to learn
to become a banned poet.

In his poem on Michelangelo, Robert Cogswell describes the physical joy of creation:

Like God I extend my hand upward
creating a world, spinning off souls.
I’ve got paint in my eye.

The two poems by Ames Dee that conclude this issue are about reading others’ writing (“Reading Nadine Gordimer in Flu Season”), but not being able to write oneself (“L’heure bleue”). Her last poem concludes:

Mark this on my grave,
perhaps my only published line —
“Words and books, she loved.”

These poems have been rendered into Spanish by Horacio Peña and Carolina Valencia:

Como Dios extendí mi mano hacia arriba
para crear un mundo, engendrando almas.
Tengo pintura en el ojo.

Inscriba esto en mi lapida,
quizás mi única línea publicada —
“Las palabras y los libros, adoró.”

These last two examples represent a further departure for Beacons Ten: a rubric called SE HABLA ESPAÑOL, intended to reflect the growing importance of the Spanish language in the U.S.

In addition to focusing on the art of writing, this issue highlights the challenges of literary translation, most notably through
Betty De Shong Meader’s work with ancient Sumerian hymns, Norman Thomas di Giovanni’s Slaughteryard Project, and TraciAndrighetti’s interview with Geoffrey Brock, translator of Umberto Eco’s latest novel.

The special section EROS IN TRANSLATION: THE MUSIC OF LOVE brings to the fore an ancient aspect of poetry: its association with music. The works represented here include the erotic jingles of a dalai lama, love songs from the medieval Carmina Burana, and the haunting Vietnamese song-poems of Lê Pham Lê.

This issue’s electronic version represents another departure. Readers will find many extras there, including the original versions, or links to them, of prose translations; a look at the variants from six different tablets for Enheduanna’s Temple Hymn 42, the lyrics to “Sola me ne vo per la città,” mentioned in the interview with Geoffrey Brock; many photos of authors and contributors; links; and a number of audio clips. These latter include, in addition to Lê Pham Lê’s performance, Mario Benedetti reading his poetry; Ben Van Wyke reading his translations of Sandra Santana’s poems; José Castro Urioste reading his story “Hechizo”; Andrea Labinger and Ana Maria Shua reading the English and Spanish versions of “Bed Time Story”; and Tony Beckwith and Liliana Valenzuela reading their Spanish versions of Daniel Grandbois’s funny fragments from Unlucky Lucky Days: Book 3 (Monday).

One last, sad departure to mention: that of Geoff Waters. He contributed doubly to literary translation—from both Chinese and Tibetan—and will be doubly missed. A banker with an MBA in Finance, a PhD in Classical Chinese, and a minor in Tibetan and Inner Asian Studies, Geoff was a beacon in his own right, signaling to the world that interest in literary translation need not be limited to monks and scribes.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Enrica Ardemagni for her encouragement and support as Chair of the American Translators Association’s Literary Division, as well as Jamie Padula, ATA’s Chapter and Division Relations Manager, and Mary David, Member Benefits and Project Development Manager, in charge of the online publication of Beacons Ten.

I am very grateful to members of Beacons’s Board of Editors for their work on this issue—vetting contributions, suggesting the new “Introducing” (Marian Schwartz) and “Se Habla Español” (Liliana Valenzuela) rubrics, organizing special sections (John Balcom), proofreading (Ingrid Lansford), and other instances too numerous to mention.

Thanks, too, to the contributors for their insights and careful review, particularly Steve Bradbury, who, between typhoons in Taipei, gave invaluable help with proofing and layout; to Ray McKay for information given regarding Argentine submissions; to Alis Manolescu, for serving as a reader for our Romanian submission; and to Dan Aynesworth for being an on-the-spot consultant.

Illustrations:


The “Sleep and Love” woodcut (p. 71) appeared in the first Latin edition of the “Nnvis Stultifera” of Sebastian Brandt in 1497 and in Wine, Women and Song by John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) in 1884. This was the first book to have some of the Carmina Burana poems in English translation.

Special credits:

The epigraph to “Reading Nadine Gordimer in Flu Season” is from None to Accompany Me by Nadine Gordimer (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994, p. 299).

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