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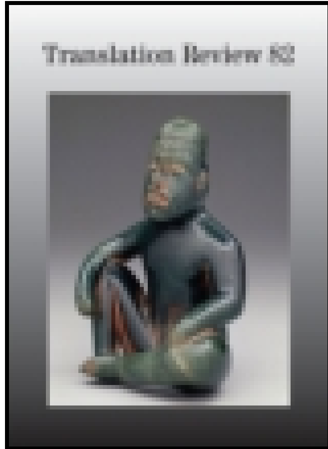

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Margaret Sayers Peden

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Telling Others' Tales

by Margaret Sayers Peden

When Rainer Schulte called and invited me to give this talk, my first reaction--as always when I am asked to say something about the process of translation--was, what can I say? To me, translation is a doing, not a talking. While translation is a very cerebral act involving all the information we have gleaned through our reading, our experience, our research, none of those things is consciously employed at the moment we are translating. We can analyze only after we do.

On the other hand, I immediately contradict myself by saying that I love talking about translation. It must be the words "process" and "analyze" that cause me to hesitate. I feel that I explain very poorly what it is I try to do, or how I try to do it, although I find that talking about the problems that arise from that activity is fascinating. Perhaps the closest I have come after years of translating and years of thinking about translation, is to say that for me translation is most accurately described as the sifting process. A large part of the act of creating a new work from an old--a recreation from a creation --is putting quantities of possibilities in the mental hopper, then shaking and choosing and testing and casting out, until we are left with what seems to be a final choice. Not necessarily the *correct* choice--we've all read and created too many translations not to recognize the hubris of the word "correct"--just the final choice.

It is not this aspect of process, though, that I want to talk about this morning. I want to focus today on one aspect of process, to me the most important aspect: *voice*. Voice is where I begin a translation; "voice," or at least what I mean when I say "voice," determines choices, engages the gears of process, directs my telling of others' tales.

I chose voice as a subject in the most elementary way. After Rainer's call, I thought a long time about possible topics. That evening, talking with my husband, Bill, I said, "Rainer wants me to say something about the process of translation. After all these years, what it comes down to for me is *voice*." Bill, logical as always, said, "So why not talk about that?" And that is what I shall do.

What do I mean by "voice"? By "voice," I mean the way something is communicated: the way the tale is told; the way the poem is sung. Who is reflecting, narrating, composing, explaining, describing, transcribing, communicating, obfuscating--telling? Whose voice is creating the Spanish sounds that in my mind's ear begin to change into English? (And may we not, peripherally, have a *mind's ear* to correspond to the mind's eye?) One of the difficulties with being among old friends, I must interject at this point, is that they have heard just about everything one has to say. But the good thing about old friends is that they are tolerant. I take advantage of that tolerance when I repeat something I have told more than once before: my metaphor for the process of translation, the recreation of an ice cube.

We begin with an ice cube: the text. We melt the ice cube: this takes place somewhere in the brain--I am sure it has been proved scientifically exactly what part (somewhere behind the eyes and between the ears). In its liquid state, the ice cube as ice cube does not exist, only the matter the ice cube contained, the contents that formed the cube. All the molecules are in that frenetic state of movement that our scientist friends tell us molecules are in. What exists of the ice cube in this second state is *flux*. Then we--the translators--begin to reshape the ice cube. This is the part of the process I cannot describe, but it involves the "sifting" I mentioned at the beginning, and numbers of other things I will talk about as we continue. Finally, we have another, a new, ice cube that looks like the first. Nothing about it is exactly the same, but, if we are fortunate, it appears to be the same. The apparently identical ice cube is the ideal translation.

Voice is active throughout this process of moving from ice cube to ice cube: from first text to new text. Do you hear a voice when you read? Think about that for a minute. I once did some research on the physiology and psychology of that "inner voice." The results were unsatisfactory. Speaking for myself, however, I know that I hear what I can see on the page. The words are somehow voiced--not always perfectly enunciated, because as I read faster, words become sound in some kind of vocal shorthand. I don't think that I hear "parts"--that is, different roles played out inside my head--but always something aural is translated from the visual. During the melting state, as the Spanish begins to move toward English, I hear a myriad of tentative voices--in Spanish and English--suggesting correspondences, verbs, adjectives, testing phrasing, questioning: what is the word for that? In this state the voice of the author is fragmented, drowned out by the cacophony of possibilities.

The reforming state is the vital--indeed, the unique--responsibility of the translator: the reader reads and may hear the inner voice; the critic reads and may hear the inner voice, and most probably melts, that is, reduces the coherent authorial voice to its fragmented parts. But neither of these readers reforms, recreates. It is in the reforming state--to repeat, the vital responsibility of the translator--that voice becomes imperious, tyrannical, and most welcome, once it is heard. In this stage, voice is determinant, quiding all choices of cadence and tone and lexicon and syntax: all the things we know compose a narrative--or a poem, if we add music and rhyme and symbol or a play, if we add phrasing and timing--and so on and so on. I would like now to offer an illustration of this...we can't call it "theory," but perhaps "idea," or "practice," with

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some concrete examples, to convince you that "what comes first" in translating is the original teller's voice.

In playing with this idea, let's begin with a situation. Let's make the examples burlesque--extremes often lend themselves willingly to purposes of demonstration. Let's think of a park bench, a young man sprawled across it, taking more than his share of the seat, and someone who wants to sit down. Then let's imagine a series of passersby and listen to a series of voices requesting a share of that bench--never forgetting that we are consciously burlesquing those voices.

"Mmmmm, sweetie pie. Could you just scrooch over there a little? I don't like to muss my ruffles."

"Shape it up, buddy," accompanied by a few raps of a nightstick. "Move it over. We got a little old lady here needs to sit down."

A foreign visitor who speaks our language, but in a foreign tongue: "I say. Could I prevail upon you to, uh, well, gather yourself up a little, old man?"

"Uhhhh, bozo. You got a stranglehold on this property?"

"Young man!" pince-nez trembling indignantly on chalk-white powdered nose. "Must you be so regrettably... relaxed? I should like to sit down."

In the group here today, especially, I'm sure we could go on in this vein for hours, since burlesque is by far the easiest register to work in. But, you say, my example is unfair. You ask what it has to do with translation. You point out that I am working not from a text but a situation. That's true. But I am going to suggest a text, the opening words of a hypothetical short story or novel that fit that situation. The Spanish words would read: "Oye, dijo...el policia, o el britanico, o la reina de belleza, o lo que sea." That is, "Oye," said..., and you fill in the character. *Oye* is one of those filler words that mean anything at all, but still must be translated. I guarantee that you will be tongue-tied if you do not hear the voice that is speaking that "oye": *"Young man!"*; *"I say..."*; *"Uhhh, bozo..."*; *"Hey, buddy..."*; *"Mmmmmm, sweetie pie..."*

That is, I admit, a contrived example, but I will turn now to a more practical, and completely authentic, example from my most recent translation: Ernesto Sabato's *El Tunel*, published in 1948, translated in 1950 by Harriet de Onis, and scheduled for publication in a new translation in January, 1988. (I ought to claim a minute here, totally apart from the thesis of these comments, to tell you a bit of fascinating trivia. Four years ago, before I knew I would have the pleasure of translating *El Tunel*, I had a conversation with Sabato in Buenos Aires. He told me that one million North American students had read *El Tunel*, in Spanish. That is an astronomical figure. The question that interests me now is whether one million potential readers will say, "Oh, I read that in Spanish, I wonder whether..." Or will the reaction be, "*El Tunel!* Are you crazy? I had to read that in college, and hate it!!!" We will know the answer to that question in January, although happily the odds are tilted toward a new readership by the fact that a film will be released concurrently.)

So what I want to read now is part of the first line of *El Tunel*, one of the most famous opening lines in Latin American literature--and one of the best of any literature--a straightforward, forthright, simple opening line, one that should pose no difficulty: "Bastara decir que soy Juan Pablo Castel, el pintor que mato a Maria Iribarne..."

The first verb of that phrase is *bastar*, to be enough. "Basta!" one says, with appropriate gesture. "Enough!" The first complication lies in the tense. Although the verb is in the simple future, it might be read as an example of the "future of probability." So, how shall we translate this "simple," this "straightforward," this "forthright" sentence?

"It will *be enough to say that I am Juan Pablo Castel, the painter who killed Maria Iribarne..."?* Simple future.

"It should *be enough to say that I am Juan Pablo Castel, the painter who killed Maria Iribarne..."* Future of probability. Or:

"Suffice it to say that I am Juan Pablo Castel..."

"It should be sufficient to say that I am Juan Pablo Castel..."

"It should suffice to say that I am Juan Pablo Castel..."

"I need only say that I am Juan Pablo Castel..."

"To say that I am Juan Pablo Castel, the painter who killed Maria Iribarne, should be enough"? "...should be sufficient"? "...should suffice"?

"I am Juan Pablo Castel, the painter who killed Maria Iribarne. That is all I need to say...?"

There are probably another dozen variants for this superficially simple sentence. The information to be communicated is clear. It is not meaning, it is not vocabulary, it is not any of the other components of the process of reading and translating--not even the problem of the verb tense, which begins to fade beneath the landslide of variant translations--that gives us difficulty. The narrator of the novel, the murderer Juan Pablo Castel, is announcing his name (Juan Pablo Castel, by now you are quite familiar with that); his situation (that he has killed Maria Iribarne); his identification (he is a painter); and he will complete the sentence by implying that everyone will remember who he is because of the notoriety surrounding his recent trial. The remainder of the sentence following *bastara decir* is actually straightforward: "...that I am Juan Pablo Castel, the painter [notice that he does not say artist, a clue: he detests artistic affectation] who killed Maria Iribarne." Not much mayhem we can commit on the rest of the phrase.

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The answer to the question of what determines how those two--only two--words will be translated is not to be found in the dictionary, or in the encyclopedia, or in any treatise on theory: the answer will be determined precisely by the voice of the person who is telling. In this instance, the teller is the neurotic, obsessive, paranoid, intelligent, artistic--*malgre lui* --fussy, twitchy-but-precise, ultra-rational Juan Pablo Castel. The sentence cannot be translated in isolation. The translator must know Juan Pablo Castel, must hear the voice of the person telling this story of compulsive attraction and rejection, and be enabled to choose among the many possibilities--all technically correct--of that opening line.

That word *correct* comes up again. And it motivates me to take a brief detour, one that winds past the Slough of Despondency and the Sea of Despair to the dark caves where lurk...THE CRITICS. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure I wanted to take a minute today to address the current state of book reviews of translations--which ranges from the dismal to the criminal. Rarely is a reviewer properly qualified to judge what is "correct"--can he read Spanish (substitute your language)? does he know anything about the process of translation?--but even more rarely does the reviewer hesitate to offer that judgment, anyway. You will hear, obviously, the rancor resulting from more than one personal experience.

Seldom, it seems, is a reviewer capable of separating the teller of others' tales from the original teller--if they acknowledge at all that there is a second teller. If I remember accurately--and these are things one tends to remember--only once in twenty years did a critic comment favorably on my work when he was less than favorably impressed with the book. In sum, and we all know this: we are usually judged guilty for a bad book, and seldom given credit, even grudging credit, for a good one.

I will tell you a story having to do with Gregory Rabassa. Years ago, a colleague of mine from the English department of my university stopped me in the hall to tell me he had read *The Green Pope* (or *Strong Wind* or *The Eyes of the Interred*), one of a trilogy of works by the Guatemalan Nobel laureate Miguel Angel Asturias. "I bought this book," my colleague said, "and read it. It was translated by Rabassa... and it's a bad book!" It was difficult to tell whether he was more outraged or amazed. Whichever it was, Rabassa stood accused of having produced a bad book, when he should have been congratulated for having refrained from what our old friend Miller Williams, one of the founders of this organization, always refers to as "the sin of improvement." As a translator, I was obviously guilty, too: guilty by association!

Aside from our interest in a reviewer's influence over our fortunes, is the matter of voice pertinent to the subject of reviewing translation? Yes. And to a large degree. Often--usually?--the reviewer has not read, as I have said, may not be able to read, the original work. He has probably not heard the voice of the original teller--how can he judge how well the translator tells the other's tale? What follows are only a few examples.

Reviewing my recent translation of Isabel Allende's second novel, *Of Love and Shadows,* Gene Bell-Villada, writing in the *New York Times Book Review,* said, "While the translation by Margaret Sayers Peden is at times awkward...and could use more colloquialisms and contractions...on the whole it's ["it's," we note, not "it is"] a supple piece of work." This comment bears directly on the question of voice. We do not hear the same teller. In my view, the Allende voice is not one that invites contractions in the narrative--although they appear liberally in the translated dialogue. Bell-Villada, certainly able to read the Spanish, either had not read this Spanish, or, if he did read it, heard it differently. Or else he is simply a person who finds contractions elegant.

And what of this comment from Michael Wood, reviewing Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The Adventures of Miguel Littin* in a recent *New York Times Book Review:* "The *idea* is moving, indeed dazzling, and Mr. Littin's courage and good humor are clear and attractive facts. But the account itself is a little dull--aimiable but out of focus, as if a committee had rewritten a John Le Carre novel [a good line, but you hear Wood's opinion of the book]. This effect is not the fault"--and here comes the single sentence devoted to the translation--"This effect is not the fault of the translator Asa Zatz. His version reads awkwardly enough, but he has awkward material to go at."

I do not expect that Mr. Zatz is present here this morning, so I shall ponder in his place whether Professor Wood--a veteran reviewer of Latin American literature--had, in fact, taken the time to read the Spanish. Was it awkward? And did that make the translation awkward? In Wood's view, could a translator have produced a graceful translation of an awkward text? Carried to its logical extreme, this question might have a deleterious effect on future publications, for if a translator is to be damned for telling others' awkward tales--like Mr. Zatz and Greg Rabassa--perhaps we should all shut off our word processors and turn to a different trade.

Even worse, however, is a recent review also in the *New York Times Book Review* (yes, I read other reviews, but the *NYTBR,* like it or not, carries a very big stick, and these three very recent reviews illustrate how easy it is to find something to take issue with). The reviewer is Alfred MacAdam, a critic recently turned translator. In his assessment of *Cuzcatlan; Where The Southern Sea Beats,* he takes the translator to task over this passage: "Element of nature which is special to me: *metate.* It's a precious stone, made from the lava of volcanoes; my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents all made a living from it. They made grinding stones. For grinding corn." The passage, MacAdam writes, "shows why translation is a mystery... *Metate* is not a kind of stone but a corn grinder made from scoria. It is not, as the translator Clark Hansen would have it, a 'precious stone' but, as Ticha says in the original, 'a stone precious to me'."

Well, we have to wonder what dictionary MacAdams reads; what marketplaces and villages he has visited. My Simon and Schuster dictionary defines *metate* as "metate, stone with a concave upper surface used in Latin America for grinding and pulping seeds, vegetables, etc." MacAdam's "corn grinder made from scoria" is the kind of phrase that is a little difficult to work into a translation, particularly that "scoria" falling from the lips of a peasant. Similarly dubious

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is MacAdam's complaint about the ambiguous "precious stone." Here the voice of the teller has been muted, suppressed. May not this simple woman, Ticha, be referring to a "*precious* (i.e., valuable, costly, priceless, invaluable) stone," a stone, as MacAdam says, precious to her, to her ancestors, not a "precious *stone*," which is obviously the meaning the reviewer reads. Voice in English, the voice of the teller, can specify what print cannot communicate. We might remember that stories were told for generations and generations before they were printed, and we must all listen to the inner voice telling the tale. My sympathies here are with the translator. There may be infelicities in the translation, but let he who is without infelicities cast the first stone--precious or otherwise.

The inner voice. The teller's voice. That voice is so real to me that I hear it always in my left ear, never in my right, in which I am about eighty percent deaf. That voice should not be ignored. When I translated Sor Juana's "Response to Sor Filotea de la Cruz," my intention was to keep the language contemporary, to couch the phrases and ideas of Sor Juana's remarkable document--so modern after all--in contemporary speech patterns. My plan was subverted, however, by an insistent and persistent whispering in my good ear in a register several notches higher than I had planned. The teller was demanding that her consciously intellectual, her elegant argument directed to an audience of pedantic peers, be told the way she wrote it.

A similar elevation of tone was demanded in my recent translation of *Ariel* (due Spring 1988 from the University of Texas Press). This book by Jose Enrique Rodo, for those of you not familiar with it, is best described as the philosophical-political-esthetical bible of Latin America, a book that either positively, or negatively in reaction against it, shaped the attitudes of generations of Latin American intellectual and political leaders. It is written in what is without doubt the most clotted prose I have ever translated. Rodo published *Ariel* in 1900. He emulated to the point of adoration late nineteenth-century French thinkers, and his imitation of the style of that period is often *preciosite* at its worst: long, almost unintelligible sentences, lengthy allusions and quotations, long perorations about beauty and good and honor and responsibility and virtue and heroism and...and... Yet what Rodo has to say matters, matters to Latin Americans, and matters to us who have been so remiss in understanding the motivations and attitudes of our neighbors to the south. This book had to be simplified--no, not "improved," maybe "untangled" would be a better word. No contemporary English-speaking reader would happily slog his way through that morass of rhetoric. But the book could not be modernized, trimmed or un-kinked in a bow to modern taste, because Rodo's message is so inseparable from his prose style, his love for beauty and grace so compelling, that to chop those sentences into dehydrated bite-sized pieces would have been to change its character irreparably: its medium was certainly its message. Once again, voice came first: it drove and determined vocabulary, rhythm, phrasing, even syntax.

The most complex work I have ever translated was *Terra Nostra*, by Carlos Fuentes. We see relevance of voice to this work in a slightly different, but related area, when we realize that for at least ten years critics and readers have been trying to identify the "real" authorial voice of that novel: the last of the Russian dolls inside a Russian doll, inside a Russian doll... *Terra Nostra* is the exact opposite of the novel I have just begun to translate, Isabel Allende's third novel, *Eva Luna*. *Eva Luna* is like *One Hundred Years Of Solitude,* or Sabato's *El Tunel,* which I mentioned earlier. That is, it is told in a univocal voice. (The dictionary tells me that univocal means "having only one meaning." I use the word, either incorrectly or neologistically, as univocal, having only one voice.) Like *Terra Nostra, Eva Luna* covers a lot of territory, but it is all told through the single voice--colorful, sensual, imaginative, marvelous, but single--voice of its protagonist. *Terra Nostra* belongs to the category of novels like Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Three Trapped Tigers,* or almost any of Mario Vargas Llosa's novels, in which "voice" becomes an assault of voices, a parade of voices in the case of *Terra Nostra* marching through twenty centuries and across four continents.

Fuentes was jealous of his teller's identity. Since I did not begin translating from the first pages but, rather, considerably farther into the novel, I would often ask Carlos to identify for me the principal narative voice. I wanted to know whose voice was the voice behind all the other voices; whose voice those voices were being filtered through. I never found out. To my knowledge, no one to this day has found out. But the multi-voiced novel demands that the translator turn up the volume of his hearing aid and listen to the distinctions among the many voices telling. It might be the voice of Cervantes, writing on a ship of the Spanish Armada on the eve of the Battle of Lepanto. Or the voice of the Pilgrim who is washed up on the shores of the New World before the discovery of that world. Or the voice of a Roman scribe, Teodorus, "writing in the last year of the reign of Tiberius." Or the voice of a different scribe, Guzman, recording the last thought and wishes of Philip IV as he lies dying in his Escorial... A priest. Smoking Mirror. Ludovico. Celestina. Sor Juana. The voice of a dozen other tellers, including those of Oliveira, Buendia, Cuba Venegas, Humberto the Mute, the cousins Esteban and Sofia, Santiago Zavalita, all voices cribbed from others' tellings.

So when we begin a translation, let's forget word choice for a minute--although soon we will need every dictionary and thesaurus and living native speaker we can lay our hands on. Let's forget accuracy--although soon we will be spending long hours in the library searching for quotations, verifying transcribed titles and names, reading for hours on subjects that are new to us but subjects we must familiarize ourselves with in order to use the correct terminology. Let's forget syntax, although soon we will spend long hours recreating the effect of an order and arrangement alien to English. Let's forget for a minute editors with poised pencils, critics with poison dartguns...and listen. Listen to the voices. Let the voices whisper, shout, curse, flow, stammer, sing in our ears. Let the voices set the tone that will determine all our choices. Let the teller's voice speak, as we listen. And then we translate--bring across; then we translate, not traduce; then we translate: we, the tellers of others' tales.

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