

## Le Tango à trois –A Multilingual Transformation

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This could also be called “Why I Learned French, or *Tengo una vaca lechera...mais je ne parle pas français comme une vache espagnole*” ! (That is, “I have a milking cow, ...but I don’t speak French like a Spanish cow”!)

FIRST WORDS. It is 1948 and my father is Station Commander (RAF) in Gibraltar on the southern tip of Spain. My parents send me to a kindergarten run by nuns. It is here I learn to read (“The cat sat on the mat”) and here also I sing my first words in Spanish (“*Tengo una vaca lechera. No es una vaca cualquiera*”). Spanish and English flow effortlessly together, no borders, even though, in fact, the community of La Linea (the line) divides Spain from Gibraltar.

THE FRENCH CONNECTION. By the fifties we are back in the UK, living in the Thames Valley. It is my Welsh mother who stresses my French heritage (from my father) with her excellent command of French culled from her years working at the League of Nations in Geneva before the Second World War. I chant after her, “*Je suis, tu es, il est, elle est...*” – only one verb for “to be” and not two as in Spanish – great! A couple of years later I am in Latin class and see the logic of two verbs “to be.” The first, the Spanish *ser*, (in French *être*) is from the Latin *esse*, meaning our essence whereas the second, *estar* is from the Latin *stare*, to stand or be in place, not just our predetermined being, but what we may become in the world. This perception projects me to the heroes of my adolescence who turn out to be French and Spanish, to the excitement of reading the existentialist works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and the brilliant short stories and Christian existentialism of Miguel de Unamuno, the crises and promises of faith. Are we already made (essence) or do we make ourselves (existence)?

“*WORDS, WORDS, WORDS...*” Is Latin a dead language? Not so much! In Latin the first word I learn is *mensa*, table. I see the connection with Spanish *mesa*. But what about the English and French *table*? Ah— these two are also from the Latin, *tableta*! Suddenly words are sprouting like rabbits from a hat! What about “to set a table”? In Spanish it is *poner la mesa*, in French it is *mettre la table* (Latin, *ponere* and *mettere*, two different Latin verbs). Now I’m on a scavenger hunt. Or a treasure hunt? I become a jackdaw! Words start to gleam like excavated silver. “Jackdaw” in Spanish is *grajilla* (Latin *graculus*), but in French it is *choucas*, a word based entirely on the sound the bird makes to the French ear. I am flying from one language to another and back again and accumulating a large pile of silver coins. This is fun! Later still I learned that Spanish and French each have two words for hummingbird, and one of them they share: *colibri*, a favorite of mine. But Spanish has one word for lobster and locust: *langosta*. French dances around locust with *grillon* and *cigale* and even the word *locuste*. Which? Oh *embarras du choix*, embarrassment of riches! I am learning about cultural perspective, how words and their meanings shift, how language may open like an oyster and reveal a pearl.

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THE POWER TRIANGLE. I pursue my studies at London University. In 1964 I am sent to Franco's Spain. A Spanish friend says "*Veinticinco años de Franco y para qué?*" ('Twenty-five years of Franco and for what?') I conjure up the great French film about the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 and its aftermath, starring Yves Montand, one of France's premier actors. The film's title is ironic, *La Guerre est finie* ('The War is Over'), for it deals not only with Franco's dictatorship but also with the Spanish exiles in France still fighting that dictatorship for years after the war. Indeed, Paris is known as the refuge for political exiles from all over the Spanish-speaking world and the hub of intellectual and artistic activity for so many of them. Thus, it is through a French film that I learn more of that difficult period of Spain's history, a topic unthinkable within that country until well after the death of Franco in 1975. Later I read with pleasure the great stories of Julio Cortázar, an Argentine exile to Paris; two of his most famous stories are set in Paris, one in the Jardin des Plantes, the other on the Île St. Louis. I read the new novelists, Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Michel Butor and see their influence on the Latin American "boom" writers, Cortázar, Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, García Márquez, Isabel Allende, not to mention the presence of other writers in the ferment of Paris, among them Faulkner, Joyce and Beckett.

LANGUAGE AND LOVE. It is 1968. A recipient of a Fulbright, I am sitting in the language lab at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, and confused over the "new technology." A tall, good-looking man offers to help. His name is Pinet; mine is Pettit. He is Franco-American and a French T.A. I am Welsh and French and a Spanish T.A. The rest is our history, *historia, histoire!*

POETRY AND INSECTS. All along I write about poetry and I write poetry. My Ph.D. dissertation is on the poetry of Jorge Guillén who himself was exiled to the U.S. during the Spanish Civil War. As I research his background and influences I see his enormous debt to the French symbolist poets, to Mallarmé and Valéry. It is with special delight that I read the beautiful opening lines of Valéry's poem, "Le cimetière marin" in French: "*Ce toit tranquille, où marchent des colombes, / Entre les pins palpité, entre les tombes; / Midi le juste y compose les feux / La mer, la mer, toujours recommence...*" and then return to the radiant poetry of Guillén's collection, *Cantico*. Years later I enter the exquisite Musée de Paul Valéry in the Mediterranean port city of Sète, in southern France, and lean over the glass to read Guillén's translation of "Le cimetière marin" into Spanish. For me this is a defining moment as the Mediterranean sunlight pours into the room.

So what kind of poetry do I want to write? I am attracted to the virtuosity of Lorca and Neruda, the pathos of Antonio Machado, the luminosity of Guillén, but also to the sensuousness of Baudelaire, the liberating genius of Rimbaud, the emotional economy of Prévert. Traveling back and forth between Spain and France I am assailed again by the plethora of insect-words. The *saltamontes* of Spain is transformed into the *sauterelle* of southern French, a word so much more colorful than "grasshopper" and to me evocative of Provence. These insects bring insights and a poem inspired by crossing borders and tongues:

*Insects I Have Known*

The great green grasshopper  
of New Orleans  
strums a base guitar  
in the streets of Paris.  
Once I heard a cricket.  
Clouds of locusts  
rose like dust.

We argue over etymology  
and entomology  
with relish.  
Elsewhere a minuscule  
spider trembles  
on a blue vein.

In the south a *sauterelle*  
greener than Mediterranean  
green, fluorescent,  
lands on my fork,  
its one leg bowed.

Is it luck or love  
that returns us  
to the source  
of syllables and sense,  
this sudden leap  
of spirit,  
or finger-tip touch?

Montpellier – Paris. Summer 1995.

At the end of the poem it is the lovely French *sauterelle* I return to, but what an array of beautiful choices!

TRILINGUAL CROSSINGS. In the 90s I am about to attend a European Studies Conference in Omaha. My area of research has become tango, its social, cultural and literary history. How can Argentine tango be a European study?! The answer lies in the nature of tango itself and in my own life-long tango triangle of English, Spanish and French. I have chosen to speak about Sally Potter's film, *The Tango Lesson*, which she directed in three languages, English, Spanish and French. Sally Potter's story is a story of tango's exile to Paris from Argentina during Argentina's dirty war (1976–1982). It is a story of how cultures and languages may inform one another, break down solitude and separation and seek community. Many tango dancers and musicians left Argentina during the dirty war and in Paris tango became transformed while retaining its

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exuberance and resilience. In 1981 the Argentine film director, Fernando Solanas, made a film in exile in Paris, *Tangos, el exilio de Gardel* ('Tangos, the Exile of Gardel'), a testament to tango's and Argentina's survival of the brutal dictatorship. Sally Potter's film shows us that French, Spanish, and English may complement each other; one language does not dominate the others; rather, just as a woman *tanguera* dances with two male partners to the strains of Piazzolla's *Libertango* ('Freetango'), so the three languages in her film also tango together. By extension, on our French and Spanish borders, with French Canada and Mexico, we should show respect for the integrity of each of these cultures and their languages. But what an opportunity to "*penser big*" ('think big') and to open our minds to the cross-fertilization and possibilities of enrichment offered by better communication with and understanding of these countries!

LANGUAGE AS CASH COW. "*Tengo una vaca lechera./No es una vaca cualquiera*" – 'I have a milking cow, but not just any old milking cow!' As a school-girl I cross France and Spain by train, traveling from Paris to Irun and down to Madrid. I look out at the cows peacefully grazing in the French and Spanish meadows. I see them as different from English cows as well as similar, answering to calls of Marguerite and Jérôme, or Remedios and Pancho. Do they have differently shaped tongues? I know my mouth changes physically in some way when I go from articulating one language to another, sounding out those seductive vowels and consonants. What about my brain? I like to think about it as a sea anemone expanding in water or a wavering orange and puce-fleshed jelly-fish (Spanish *medusa*, French *méduse*, so much more evocative!), gracefully trailing its hairy appendages. I do speak French "better than a Spanish cow," but believe me, the milking isn't over: as long as I live, it's never over!