

The Reluctant Translator: Beckett's Road to Mexico (via Paz)

Patricia Novillo-Corvalán

Samuel Beckett has long been associated with translation, be it the colossal collaborative enterprise of translating sections of James Joyce's "Anna Livia Plurabelle" into French or the sustained process of self-translation that enabled his work to co-exist in two languages. Equally significant, albeit less celebrated, is his translation of an *Anthology of Mexican Poetry* (1958), a volume of one hundred poems that has so far occupied a marginal place within the Beckett canon. The anthology was part of an international cultural project sponsored by UNESCO and developed in close collaboration with the Mexican writer Octavio Paz in the early 1950s.

This paper seeks to recuperate this overlooked aspect of Beckett scholarship in order to explore in detail one of Beckett's most onerous tasks as a translator. Beckett himself, however, flippantly dismissed the poems as "execrable", while stressing that the work was purely an "alimentary chore". For Beckett, the translation of the anthology became food for thought (quite literally), but when it came to the actual translation of the poems it is clear that Beckett found the Mexican "feast" of one hundred poems difficult to stomach. This paper seeks to dispel Beckett's own scathing view of his Mexican translations as superfluous exercises that he reluctantly executed in order to make a living. Close scrutiny of the anthology lays bare the complexity and underlying strategies of Beckett's re-creative translation practice. It is my argument here that Beckett's translation of Mexican poetry benefited from, and was influenced by, his previous experience translating Joyce. And whilst the translation of the anthology cannot be equated with the linguistic difficulty presented by *Finnegans Wake* (1939), I demonstrate that certain poems, especially the baroque lyrics written by the seventeenth-century poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, would have required a similar sensitivity to wordplay and linguistic experimentation. Beckett utilised and privileged the idea of translation as re-creation, a strategy that allowed him to enhance and even improve some of the original Spanish poems, a point that is discussed in the light of the recent world literature theories developed by David Damrosch, among others. Finally, the paper focusses on specific poems that Beckett translated, including 'Upon a Corpse' by the Romantic poet Manuel Acuña, in order to suggest that Beckett was intrigued and captivated by Mexican notions of death as celebrated in the Day of the Dead where the living consumes the bread of the dead.

Short bio:

Dr Patricia Novillo-Corvalán is a lecturer in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Kent. Her research interests include comparative and world literature, medical humanities, translation studies, modernism, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century Spanish and Latin American literature. She has written extensively on cross-cultural encounters between writers worldwide, including a monograph on Borges and Joyce, and articles on Gustave Flaubert, Julio Cortázar, Samuel Beckett, Derek Walcott, Roberto Bolaño, Manuel Puig, and Marina Carr. She is currently writing a large-scale study on the transnational cultural exchanges between Anglophone modernism and Latin America, and also editing a collection of essays titled *The Art of Medicine in Iberian and Latin American Literature*.