

INTRODUCTION

by Allison Funk

I conceived of the idea of a special feature on contemporary Catalan poetry for *Sou'wester* during the summer of 2004. The catalyst was a Fulbright grant received by my colleague, Jeffrey Skoblow, to fund an exchange between the English faculties of our university, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and the University of Lleida in Spain. That summer I learned that I would be one of the four from my department to travel to Lleida in 2005. Called Lérida in Castilian Spanish, Lleida is a city of about 120,000 situated 155 kilometers west of Barcelona. I spent nearly a month there in May of 2005, and Dr. Nela Bureu, of Lleida's *Departament d'Anglès i Lingüística*, traveled in January to Edwardsville. For the last year, between us, emails have flown back and forth as we collaborated on the majority of translations you'll find in the pages that follow.

We brought to the project complementary abilities. Though most of *Sou'wester's* readers are familiar with me as co-editor of this journal, I am also a poet. I have taught creative writing for 16 years at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and I have been writing poems for nearly twice that long. I am the author of three collections, *The Knot Garden*, *Living at the Epicenter*, and *Forms of Conversion*. I brought whatever skills I'd acquired through years of writing poems to this project, as well as a fairly strong background in French and some knowledge of Spanish, but no Catalan at first. To someone just being introduced to Catalan, familiarity with these other two Romance languages helps a great deal, for Catalan shares characteristics with both. During the last year I have acquired a reading knowledge of Catalan, but the translations you'll find in our pages could never have been completed without the full participation of my collaborator, Nela Bureu, who most generously and patiently has worked with me on this project. Nela has two native languages, Catalan and Spanish.

Nela Bureu teaches courses on Shakespeare and contemporary poetry and drama in English at the University of Lleida. She has an extensive knowledge of contemporary Canadian poetry. She also writes beautiful poems herself, mainly in Spanish. When I was in Catalonia last year, she was the most extraordinary host. She introduced me to the fascinating city of Lleida, whose university was founded in 1300. She took me to the city's old cathedral, the *Seu Vella*, begun in 1203, built on the top of a former Muslim mosque. We went together to the New Cathedral (built between 1761 and 1781!) and walked in Lleida's parks, including the beautiful *La Mitjana* on the banks of the Segre River. She also introduced me, most often in her own kitchen, to Catalan cuisine, including the wonderful, traditional *pa amb tomàquet*, bread rubbed with tomato pulp

and dressed with olive oil and salt.

Catalan (or *Català*) is a Romance language that developed between the 8th and 10th centuries. It is spoken today by most of the approximately 7 million inhabitants of Catalonia, the region in eastern Spain bounded on the east by the Mediterranean Sea, on the north by France and Andorra, and on the west and south by Aragon and Valencia. Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia, which is divided into four provinces. Catalan is also spoken, with regional variations, in the Balearic Islands, Valencia, the part of Aragon called the *Franja de Ponent*, in Andorra (where it is the only official language), in a section of southern France (so-called Northern Catalonia), and in the Italian city of Alghero.

During Franco's dictatorship in Spain (1939-1975) he prohibited the public use of the Catalan language. It continued underground, spoken in families, until the recovery of democratic rights after Franco's death. Since then, it has been the official language of Catalonia, along with Spanish. Most people who live in the region are bilingual. The resurgence of literature written and published in Catalan after Franco has been exciting. Little of it has been translated into English—many of the poets in this issue of *Sou'wester* have never appeared in translation in the U.S. before. To bring into print, and to an American audience, poets who are little known in this country is an editorial pleasure of mine.

With the demise of Franco, Catalonia also regained its political autonomy within the Spanish nation. In 1979, Spanish King Juan Carlos I established Catalonia as one of a number of autonomous communities within the country. Catalonia is administered by its *Generalitat*, an institution made up of a parliament, president, and executive council. (The question of whether Catalonia would fare better as a country itself, altogether independent of Spain, is a subject of debate among its residents.)

At the beginning of our translation project, I wanted to focus on living poets, but I made an exception to include Maria-Mercè Marçal, the poet I read first in Catalan. This groundbreaking feminist writer, whom I came to admire greatly, died in 1998. Marçal and many other poets Nela and I chose to translate have a connection to Nela's city of Lleida, including Rosa Fabregat, Jaume Pont, Pere Rovira, Jordi Pàmias, and Xavier Macià. We also translated Lala Blay (from Barcelona) whose second book recently won a major literary prize in Catalonia.

In 2001 I met Anna Crowe, who is a British poet and an experienced translator of Catalan poetry. Anna translated four of the poets included in our issue: Anna Aguilar-Amat, Miquel Desclot, Joan Margarit, and Francesc Parcerisas.

How Anna came to translate Catalan poetry is very interesting. She was born in Plymouth, England. When she was ten, her family moved to Marseilles, France, where she went to school and quickly learned French. Later she was sent to a boarding school in England, after which she completed her undergraduate and graduate degrees. As an undergraduate she briefly studied Catalan. She completed her M.A. in French and

Spanish at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

It is thanks to Catalan poet Francesc Parcerisas and to the first director of the Scottish Poetry Library, Scottish poet Tessa Ransford, that Anna began translating Catalan poetry. She writes, “In November 1998, I and my fellow poet, Stewart Conn, were invited by the *Institució de les Lletres Catalanes* to go to Barcelona to have some of our work translated into Catalan. We worked at the *Centre d’Art i Natura*, in the tiny village of Farrera, high in the Pyrenees, with a team of ten experienced translators, three of whom were poets. The Farrera poetry translation seminars are the brainchild of Francesc Parcerisas, and the fruits of this first one came together in the collection, *L’ànima del teixidor*, which was published by *Edicions Proa* in parallel text, in their *Ossa Menor* imprint in November 2000. The main purpose of these seminars was, in Francesc’s words, ‘to bring the poetry of good writers working throughout the world to the attention of our Catalan colleagues.’ Such contacts would, he hoped, ‘strengthen literary relations and personal ties between all the writers involved and help to get Catalan poetry known abroad.’ While in Farrera, I found that I was beginning to remember the Catalan I had studied briefly while an undergraduate, and I decided there and then that I would re-learn it in order to begin translating the poetry of my new Catalan friends and colleagues, and to strengthen the Catalonia/Caledonia bridge built by Francesc Parcerisas and the Scottish Poetry Library.”

Anna also writes that she finds “Catalan is an extremely rewarding language to translate. Its mixture of harsh and mellifluous sounds, and monosyllabic and iambic patterns of stress, means that it is often possible to find close sound and rhythmic equivalents in the mix of Anglo-Saxon and Latin components in English. Another reason why I feel so comfortable with Catalan might be that the Mediterranean landscapes of Catalan poetry feel very familiar to me, reminding me of my childhood in Provence. Certainly, when I am there, it feels as though I have come home.”

Anna’s translation of Joan Margarit’s book of poems (*Tugs in the Fog*) will be published in November of 2006 by Bloodaxe. A collection of her translations of Anna Aguilar-Amat’s work was published on-line by Sandstone Press in 2005. She is also at work on an anthology of Catalan poetry in translation to be published jointly by the Scottish Poetry Library and Carcanet Press in 2007. She is currently also translating the work of the Mexican poet, Pedro Serrano, and Ramon del Valle-Inclán’s novel of the twenties, *Tirano Banderas*.

For her own poetry written in English, Anna won the Peterloo Open Poetry Competition in 1993 and in 1997 in the U.K. Her first collection, *Skating Out of the House*, was published by Peterloo Poets in 1997. Mariscat Press published a pamphlet of poems, *A Secret History of Rhubarb*, in 2004. A second Peterloo collection, *Punk with Dulcimer*, was published in April 2006. She is a co-founder and, for the first seven years, was Artistic Director of *StAnza*, Scotland’s Poetry Festival, which was where I met her in 2001 when I was invited to read my poems at the festival. She has taught creative writing

for the Arvon Foundation and in the continuing education division of St. Andrews University for years.

I want to thank Anna Crowe for her wonderful contribution to our special feature on Catalan poetry in this *Sou'wester*. I'd also like to thank Enric Llorca, Chairperson of the Department of English at the University of Lleida, for helping me with my Catalan in the early stages of this project. Thanks, also, to his wife, Dolors, who read poems into a tape recorder for me to help me *hear* their music. My gratitude to the Fulbright Program for the grant that fostered the exchange of faculty between my university and Lleida's, and to Southern Illinois University Edwardsville for providing summer funds to support my translation work. Most of all, to Nela Bureu, for her generosity, hard work, intelligence, and friendship, *moltes gràcies!*