

DENNIS TEDLOCK "...PEOPLE EITHER GO CLICK"

Splicings based on a talk with Dennis Tedlock, McNulty Professor of English at SUNY, Buffalo, author of Breath on the Mirror: Mythic Voices and Visions of the Living Maya, and winner of the PEN translation award.

[Recorded on a 90 minute cassette]

i was
i was thinking about how to begin and they told me
that when i laid this out
that i should begin with ah
a list of your publication credits
so i thought i would mention Alcheringa and Finding the Center
and Spoken Word and the Popol Vuh translation and
Teachings From the American Earth as well as your recent Days From a Dream Almanac
id rather just have this in the interview so
that its on the tape
ah ok
to talk about

yeah

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ah

the way most people still think about their
tapes really is ah
not that this is necessarily a bad thing but still the basic problem is ah
how do i get this onto paper
so [laugh]
which is in some ways a way of not dealing with the
tape the way the
my argument has always been
cause ive always had students who would say well
im very impressed by what you say about what we should be listening to so why dont we
just
deal in tapes lets just make tapes and play them to each other
the trouble is all the theory about this stuff thats been built up has been built up off of
off the page

mmmm

and the most radical way i could think of to start to overturn that was to
to ah
however imperfectly ah you know set about the business of
well what if we listen on the page what will have to happen to the page and what will
that reveal about what we've been doing with
with the page so far
so ah

you do something with that right in the beginning of the spoken word
where you start off here speaks the storyteller telling by voice what was learned by ear,
hear speaks a poet who did not learn language structure from one teacher and language
ah

missed that
how does that go
ahh

i should just grab the book
[laughs]

language structure from one and language meaning from another
right right

but then you go on here writes the mythographer telling by typewriter what was
learned by ear by transcription and by oral recitation
although it seems like that 'recitation' might
throw some people for a loop
seems strange almost to admit that
that part

mm hmm

of what the transcriber or translator is involved in is actually

mm hmmm

physically interacting with it
rather than just getting it down on the page that their mouth is
that they're becoming a part of the production in a way

even good translators of say ah you know
a contemporary novel from a major western european language will tell you how
they they
whether they do it out loud or not well and some of them do read it aloud to somebody you

know how does this sound can you please tell me
what doesnt work here ah
theyll at least theyll readily admit and sometimes want to talk about this theyll put it right into
their talks or essays
ah that they
they are quite aware of vocalization whether its actually audible or not
because whether you can i mean
you have your minds ear
you dont necessarily have to visibly move your lips
and ah
be able to feel the fact that your vocal chords are moving
to to be vocalizing to really be thinking about how does this sound
ah
im always amazed at ah
writers of whatever sort who do claim to have
retreated far inside the safe world of writing itself
they cant
theres no way you can write well without hearing
[laugh]
no matter what your
stated objectives are

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whenever i hear the word almanac i think of the old farmers almanac
and the little icons they use to represent certain seasonal occurrences and
and the moon shapes but there are all sort of other things used there
picture-signs which again reminds of the way that youve inserted
for each one of the poems ah
a kind of icon or maybe thats not the right word for it

yeah no i think thats fine ah i started ah
wondering what to do
because some of my notes on the dreams themselves had ah
i made little
sketches to show how something looked and
ah I was thinking well
maybe that should be
part of
what was printed then i thought well

maybe theres some kind of an image that could go with every poem

so

so theres a combination of things many maybe half

maybe its more than that i cant remember

of those things actually do come out of the dream notes

that the ah

the logo's or whatever they are

and then the rest came out of the poems had already been written

ah thats

i hadnt thought you know could be i was thinking partly

of the graphics in mayan almanacs and ah

then of course theyre roughly i didnt round the corners because i didnt want to underline that point

maya heiroglyphs are roughly square not quite

so i had that in mind

but but more broadly i had in mind

you know not

not only did i want to make

ive always wanted to make writing

note something about sound other than just the phonetics letter by letter kind of sound

but all

also wanted to somehow break the uh

the page from just having the alphabet calling up as it were the ghosts of pictures of things even

the alphabet itself used to be

so thats part of

what i had in mind there too

the

it sort of brings to mind olsons fixation with the glyphs

do you think that he was a little mistaken in what he expected to get from them

well he was wrong

he was terribly wrong in one way and terribly right in another

heres my take on the mayan letters

where he was wrong is ah

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ah in his own way he really wanted it to be the capital o

the other kind of writing

ah

he

so he would have had to have been
disappointed to find out that it had turned up as
being so phonetic as it did as it has

ah

ah although

you know if he had enough time to think about it he might have had something interesting to
say about that what remained different about them

something does remain different about them though we still cant quite put our finger on it
but uh

he didnt he didnt i dont think in those letters he
made any direct appeals to the pound-fenellosa thing
or analogized it to chinese characters but that was really heading
he wanted it to be a

ah thats why he

i mean he really did want it to be some kind of
route to the world that didnt have to go through language in the ordinary
sense

and anyway he was right

if he had been able to write the program for maya research at that date

and say heres what i want everyone to do

we still wouldnt have the decipherment

the decipherment came through phoneticism

but

having said that

where he was right

where he was right where he was really onto something

and that nobody has really thought about was the

ah the particular way life forms were used

the frequency with which human forms

parts of the human body

ah faces both front and profile

ah human faces

also there are some animals in there too

i mean

theres when you do see images

you know

some kind of iconicity in mayan writing its

its virtually always life forms

and thats probably more true of it than of course

if we start looking at egyptian writing

we will notice that theres snakes and there are ibises and so on

and the parts
of this theory of theres a hand in maya hieroglyphs too
its just the sheer i mean the maya writing is fairly bristling with
with life forms or parts of living things ah
and ah
thats one of things that olson was noticing that it seemed to him to give this writing a kind of
purchase on the world
that um
now the irony now im getting into a lecture but
the irony of this is that
thats all true its called the wonder the wonder of it is
that ah nine times out of ten youre just supposed to think of the sounds
and they turn out to be spelling
lets suppose there is a hand
and ah what looks like some feathers from a bird
and the third glyph has some other kind of life form or piece of life form in it
they spell out something which might be completely different from any of those three objects
ah
in maya poetry
if hed thought more about that
see its all built on parallelism which means
almost everything is said in two
sometimes three or four different ways
even when youre still talking about the same thing so it constantly works against any kind of
essentialism between words and objects
mayas really keep language quite a distance from the world that way
they dont confuse the two things you dont have to lecture them about the perils of
representation
and so on
and so it is with the writing
the key with the writing is not getting too attached that you can go straight from this little
image here to
sometimes that little image is just a mnemonic
youre look
you know you look at might still look like a footprint in the maya glyph and you think
footprint oh thats the glyph for
b'e which means road
and then oh yes but that must just mean that the syllable *b'e* is in this word
well the footprint still helped you
but you had to play with sound to get to the right place so that

its a combination of images and
sound play
and the degree to which mayas pun not
not surprisingly given the way the writing system works
is just astounding
puns are not just funny puns are serious business (laughs)
so
and then again all that punning gets you away from any kind of essentialism about
theyre always ah
so you want also to say among mayas it would never have been necessary to have a language
poetry movement because
you know they know that
that language
in a certain sense is a thing unto itself apart from the world
its built into the
every time you construct poetry or
used maya glyphs you were
there was this chasm between the object and what you were
writing so its
anyway

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[Talking about Tedlock's poetry book Days from a Dream Almanac]

youre using uh
Quiché calendar signs for the names of the days
and Im wondering whether this is just something that comes across when you put it
into English
or whether it relates to a Quiché conception of things when you physicalize
the days like when five
dawn becomes six net ah
in the middle of the night where three death meets four deer
at the mouth of the river of amazons
its a real place where these days are meeting
suddenly its as if the time has been grounded
mapped

umm that
ahhh
at the abstract level theres this

the Mayas
more than we do we do it too but
more than we do they always pop back and forth between time and space so they had a great
tendency to
spatialize time but also to temporalize space for example the reason a lot of
rural monolingual Mayans in Mexico and Guatemala think gringos are cannibals is that
were so far away from civilization that we must live in
the farther you get from the center of the world which is where they are
they conceive
they conceive of you as going backwards in time
since human beings were cannibals in the remote past people who live in remote places must
still be cannibals whereas we maya are advanced beyond that
so you know
they work both ways spatialize time and temporalize space
so thats part of whats going on there more concretely uh
they actually
sometimes in their art they picture ah the burden of
that when one day changes to another they picture one
human anthropomorphic figure handing a kind of a backpack to another person who will carry
it the next day down the road
so its actually
you know the other
reason
then theres a third thing the reason you see me doing that so often is
that they are not
people are always asking
its still regarded as a great unsolved one of the great unsolved mysteries of the Maya
is supposed to be when did one day change to another
and we assume that they either did it at sunset or midnight or sunrise
sunset and midnight being two possibilities we re familiar with
you know in the Jewish calendar holidays sacred days begin at sundown you know not at
midnight for example
the Islamic calendar too but
so ah people keep asking this question
and sometimes they give an answer but basically in this calendar the concept is that
the days sort of fade into each other
in the influence of say
itd be pretty accurate to say that the influence of yesterday
lasted until about sunrise this morning
and since we re now talking in the afternoon
ah well within three hours or so if it hasnt already started to happen

Im not going to argue that they overlap all the way into noon but [laughs]
but by the time it starts getting dark out there ah
this has already started to acquire the qualities of that other day tomorrow
it doesnt happen at the stroke of midnight so thats why
so then when you report your dreams to a mayan dream interpreter
you uh theyre not interested in
at first you say
ah Im sorry but you know I scribbled down some notes about this dream in the middle of the
night but I have no idea whether it was before midnight or after midnight
i forgot to look at the clock
and they laugh and they say that doesnt you know
ah thats where three lets see yesterday was three snake and today is four death
four death is a rather nice day by the way thats today
so a dream you had last night was given by
three snake to four death and both
both days have to come into play
in an interpretation of the meaning of that dream
its not
it doesnt matter whether you had the dream at six AM or midnight or
ten PM the previous or whatever
its that night that we re talking about and it belongs to two days

SIDE B [Tedlock pauses, waits for the tape to be flipped and the leader to pass, then continues
repeating the last several words from side a]

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well i have more

yeah

but theyre only going to give us a few pages
so maybe we should ah

well
lets see
do we want
try another one or two
lets see how it goes
just so you have something to pick from

I was trying to make some kind of connection

between the form of Days from Dream Almanac
and something ive seen happening in some of your more
quote unquote critical writings of late
where instead of letting the translator narrator run
as you did in Finding the Center
its always broken up
if we get five lines running without
the interruption of a commentary or a talking back to it
breaking it up
thats a long line run

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the mayas keep looking at you
expecting you to
theyre hardly even willing to tell a story unless they get a response from you
at least
say every third sentence or so
so then
i feel fully justified doing this in the case of the maya discourse
even if its after the fact
i mean they
they themselves would think it was silly to just
ah you know preserve a record of an event without further
commenting on it

there are even some Mayas not so much the ones I studied with
who wont even tell you a story unless you respond to it
and you cant with the people I worked with you cant say
tell me Id like to collect some stories can you think of a story
theyll say well I cant think of a story right now
why would I tell you a story
thered have to be something that brings a story to mind
so the whole thing is conversational so it
the original event is perforated with interruptions and so you just
carry that over into the writing

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you cant really re-present a past event anyway
so its not altogether
its not so obvious as it might once have seemed to people

why presentation or re-presentation of a story taken from a tape
should be separated from the interpretation of that
that the text is thus created so

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theres one article in which you end with something to the effect
and the tape kept rolling or
we ran out of tape that sort of thing
calling attention to that youre not just giving them the story

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a lot of people who publish stuff in this field
in their introductions say
they acknowledge that Tedlock and two or three other people
have been working on this kind of thing
with a different kind of format than the one I have chosen here
umm
but for meeee
putting it lines or doing this or that just didnt make it
I just felt that it didnt
it didnt get off the page or it didnt
speeeak to me
however they might have put it
I guarantee you that every one of those people
is somebody who doesnt read poetry and doesnt go to poetry readings
I mean if they cant
look at a page other than a prose one and not
if they cant hear it
its such a definite thing people either
people either go click I see whats going on there
or they just dont get it at all

[20 minutes more tape]

Kenneth Sherwood