



Aztec Birth: the turquoise mockingbird of light (Inklings) (Volume 2)

Paul Portuges

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(from the Afterword by Peter Whigham) Paul Portuges's translations are unusual in that they are a reliving in modern terms of a body of ancient experience. This sounds straightforward enough; but there is a catch: the body of ancient experience can, in human terms, only be guessed at. There are no Aztec poems of which these English poems are the rendering. There is no living record, save in the most attenuated forms, of the rituals and the attitudes which are their subject. Discernment can come only through the most strenuous acts of historical imagination, working two ways: in order to find out what they—then—must have felt like, try it on oneself—now—under similar circumstances. The author and his wife, armed with various Indian manuals of childbirth, went to Tepoztlán, so that their first child, Amin, might be born there. This is not the place for biography, but Paul Portugés's efforts at in-feeling—at feeling himself into an ambience, ultimately unknowable—can only be regarded with respect. The result is to be seen in the poems, solemn yet celebratory instances of living, translations, in the general sense of all art that “brings it off”, and in the sense of cultural transference. However, they are also translations in the narrower sense. They draw, often word for word, on Brother Bernardino de Sahagún's records, in Aztec, of ancient Aztec ritual.

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