

of that text's own intentions it may be the translator's imagination that is best able to relate it to the intentions of others.

Notes

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Discovering Neruda: An Interview With H. R. Hays* By Jonathan Cohen

H(offman) R(eynolds) Hays was born in 1904, in New York City. He took his B.A. at Cornell University in 1925, and his M.A. at Columbia University in 1928. He has published various kinds of books, including four novels, several works of anthropology (his *In the Beginnings* won the nonfiction award from Putnam in 1963), books of poetry and of verse-translations from both Spanish (Jiménez, Andrade) and German (Brecht). *12 Spanish American Poets*, his landmark anthology presenting Neruda (Vallejo and others) in English was originally published by the Yale University Press in 1943.

Hays is also the author of about twenty-five television plays, and his books have been translated into Arabic, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, French, Portuguese, German, and Japanese. He is now working on a biography of anthropologist Franz Boas, for Prentice-Hall, and he continues writing poetry.

In 1977, Street Press published a special issue, *H. R. Hays & Spanish America* (guest-edited by myself). This volume opens with a tribute to Hays, written by Robert Bly, called "H. R. Hays as a Mountain Pass," in which Bly says:

When I was trying to write my first book, I found the most amazing things in the Reading Rooms — the two big ones with their green lampshades and ecstatic high ceilings — of the New York Public Library on 42nd St.; and one of the most astonishing to me was H. R. Hays' *12 Spanish American Poets*.

* * * * *

This book is a mountain pass. How odd that you don't even know of the mountains until you are in the pass! I am grateful to H. R. Hays for so many gifts, in prose and poetry . . . but especially for this gift.

It is in the same tribute that Bly acknowledges Hays as the one who showed him "how wild Neruda was."¹

Hays published his first translations of Neruda's poetry in 1941, in the May issue of

H. R. Hays died on October 17, 1980. This interview was conducted in May 1980.

Decision. He introduced Neruda's work by saying "it seems likely that when it is better known to an English-speaking audience he will be recognized in the United States as one of the leading poets of our time."² Although, as Hays has more recently pointed out, "it took thirty years for the work of . . . Neruda to penetrate the North American literary establishment,"³ Hays was right about Neruda from the start.

Hays's translations have opened important new doors for many poets in the United States, and his translations enrich our own speech, our own art and sensibility. Too often the translator is thought of as a mere adjunct to the original work when, in fact, he is being asked to reproduce the totality of the original poetic experience in a natural, expressive English. Hays has given us real translations of Neruda's poetry and, in doing so, he has made a tremendous contribution to American poetry.

Who is Hays the man of letters, the poet-translator? Where did his path cross Neruda's? How have their poetic temperaments come together? What follows is an attempt to answer these and other questions about Hays's life and work.

* * *

You have taken the credit for introducing Neruda to the American public in 1943, when you published 12 Spanish American Poets.⁴ What were you doing as a poet before this work, in the twenties and thirties?

I hadn't really gotten started.

What about your book of poems called Strange City which you published in 1929?

Yes, well, that I want to forget. It's too much like the stuff of the period . . . too sentimental.

So when did you begin writing well?

Not till I had been to Europe. In about 1930, I became interested in what was going on there, and read the literary stuff. I was studying Flemish writing, the Flemish movement in Belgium. Paul van Ostayen, one of the Flemish poets, was very advanced and very experienced. He published two volumes of criticism and several volumes of poetry, one of them really wild, with typographical stuff all over the page, all kinds of type and in several languages (French, Flemish, English).

When I first read the French surrealists I had friends who were sort of involved in it. Charles Henri Ford, for one, later ran a little magazine in New York called *View* [1942-47], for which I used to write.

In 1930 French surrealism was the most

exciting work around. Everybody was reading it. I read the poetry in French, because I knew the language; when I went to study at the University of Liège for a year, I really got to learn French, speaking it in Belgium.

By the way, I was just reading in the last issue of *The New York Times Book Review* a review of a biography of Jules Laforgue, which the reviewer ends by saying we need new translations. I have translated a poem of his, and I like his work. It's really quite tempting. If I were up and about more, I could go and cope with the editors . . .

Here's a poem I wrote in the thirties, before I knew Neruda's work:

MANHATTAN

I have eaten the city.
I have seen myself in a thousand doorways,
Simple as light,
Single as crowds,
The air extinguishes my footsteps.
My skin surrounds the shadow of the
monument.
The long afternoon,
Burning with women's beautiful dresses,
Flows with the tide of my blood.
Among the public privacies of the sunset
I can hear the dust falling.
The reflection of voices
Struggles to rise
Like a bird without wings.

I have eaten the city,
Surrounded by musical silence,
I have swallowed crowds of pigeons.
Grass grows on my eyelids.
My body is full of windows.⁵

* * *

Yes, you were way ahead of American poets of recent decades, who have been trying to write surrealist poetry ("heavy with images from the unconscious,"⁶ as Bly would have it), in an attempt to get away from Pound's influence.

There are people today who believe that the present age of translation began around seventy years ago with Pound's versions of Cavalcanti, the Troubadours, and the Chinese. Did you know what Pound was doing in translation when you began to translate poetry?

I gradually became aware of Pound. You see, I went to Cornell, which was not very humanistic. Nowadays you'll have a young instructor who knows what's going on, but in those days we didn't. When I attended Cornell in the early twenties, I don't think anyone on the Cornell faculty had ever heard of Pound.

During your early days at Cornell, T. S. Eliot published "The Waste Land," and the year you graduated (1925) he published his poem "The Hollow Men." How did you feel about Eliot's poetry at the time?

I liked his work, but I didn't like the way everybody started imitating his tone, doing the same thing. This got to be a bore very rapidly — there was too much Eliotizing all over the place.

In the thirties we were all reading French surrealism, and the center of gravity of poetry seemed to be in France. Then it shifted to Latin America, and I think my book might have had something to do with it.

You have said that the cliché "a land of song" carries a certain truth about Latin America, because the amount of poetry produced there is so great.⁷ How do you explain the flourishing of poetry in Latin America?

Well, I don't know. Every Latin American is able to write some kind of passable poem . . . like the Eskimo (laughter). The only trouble was that they were all writing what's called *modernismo*, which was symbolist really. Anybody in Latin America with a vocabulary of "alma" and "noche" and "corazón" and "amor" could do a poem.

When did you first discover Neruda's poetry?

I don't remember just when it was. Nobody talked about him here. About forty years ago I spent a summer in Mexico. I didn't know any Spanish then, but decided to learn it. I began to look around for Mexican poetry — whenever I go some place I try to find out what the poets are doing there. So I bought an anthology and started reading it. That's when I was first impressed with Latin American poetry.

Why exactly did you go to Mexico?

For a vacation. My wife and I went around to various parts of the country. We were all over Mexico, except the north.

Why Mexico City instead of Paris?

Well, Paris was more expensive to get to . . . I'm trying to think back . . . of course, I have always been interested in anthropology and archaeology. That was the real reason for going there: to see some of the sights, and to visit the ruins.

When exactly did you take this trip?

It was the summer the cold war got to be a hot war in Europe, 1939.

Did you meet any poets and writers in Mexico?

I found that Mexican intellectuals were not really very cordial to North Americans; it was very hard to do anything with them. I did meet one or two writers. There were three Revueltas: a painter, a musician, and a novelist, José, who was a good novelist, too. (Last I heard he was in a Mexican jail.) Anyhow, I translated a novel of his, *The Stone Knife*, which was published here in 1947.

I didn't meet poets. My wife and I shared a place with a New York friend, Hanns Eisler, the famous German musician who has set a lot of Brecht poetry to music. He was a thoroughly nice guy; he was very fond of the musician Revueltas, who worshipped him and who would come to sit at his feet. It was from one to the other that I got to José, and then I got really involved with the literature.

It's been said that French surrealism was a dream poetry.

Yes, that's what they wanted it to be.

And you have said that Neruda dreams with his eyes open.⁸

Yes.

Do you think this helped surrealism to take root in the United States?

It might have, because his images were more incisive and impressive. Even the French surrealists couldn't get away from the Academy altogether. Their images were strange sometimes, but if you look at them carefully you'll find they are quite traditional.

I think the great value of surrealism was that it broke open the established forms, but we had to wait for a new kind of romanticism that came about in the mid-fifties here in order to appreciate Latin American poets like Neruda. The influence of the British expatriate, Auden, had a deadening effect on the appreciation of Neruda, too.

In "The Betrayed Sand," Part V of Neruda's epic Canto General, he speaks harshly of the United States, that is, our financial colonialism in Latin America. He deplores how U.S. companies forced low wages and bad conditions on their workers. For instance, in his famous poem, "The United Fruit Co.," he says (in Bly's translation):

. . . it established the comic opera:
abolished the independencies,
presented crowns of Caesar,
unsheathed envy, attracted
the dictatorship of the flies,
Trujillo flies, Tacho flies,
Carias flies, Martinez flies,
Ubico flies, damp flies
of modest blood and marmalade,
drunken flies who zoom
over the ordinary graves,
circus flies, wise flies
well trained in tyranny . . .⁹

What prepared you for the negative picture of the United States that has come out of Neruda's poetry?

Well, I have always been somewhat of a leftist. I have always been a reader of *The Nation* and *The New Republic* — and sometimes *The Partisan Review*, but not often, because I have always fought with those editors, especially with Philip Rahv.

Did you become friends with Neruda through your work translating him?

No, I have only met him a couple of times, and I didn't get along with him, mainly because he refused to let me speak Spanish to him. He only wanted to speak English, with a horrible accent, which nobody could understand.

I never showed him my translations before they were published. In fact, Neruda never said anything about them — he was too egotistical.

Going back to the forties, in 1942, a year before your own anthology came out, New Directions published Dudley Fitts's Anthology of Contemporary Latin American Poetry, which was supposed to be New Directions' contribution to "a quickened cultural understanding . . . a poetry that North American writers may profitably consider."¹⁰ Did you work with Fitts on this project?

I never worked with Dudley Fitts. I was hired to do all the biographies in the back of the book, which I did. I took part in some of the translating — I did a poem of Neruda's — but Fitts was such a schoolmaster: he docked everybody 50¢ for every mistake. Now really, isn't that childish?

It was an "omnibus" anthology all right. Somebody once said that Fitts included everybody in Latin America who had ever written a poem!

When 12 Spanish American Poets came out, it was rather well-received by critics at the time. It got a favorable review in The New York Times Book Review ("And there are hands among these poets

writing in Spanish that our own poets may well take," *the reviewer said*).¹¹ Mildred Adams enthusiastically reviewed your book in *The Nation*, and she said:

The publication of this new anthology should bring cheer to the hearts of those who love Latin American poetry and want it to reach a wider audience on this side of the Rio Grande . . . Last year Dudley Fitts . . . like a traveler doing the grand tour of South America by air in two weeks, covered much and discovered little. Now H. R. Hays . . . takes a second trip. This time he covers less ground, looks more closely at what is in front of him, and lays a basis for the beginning of an understanding on the part of his reader.¹²

What sense of the response to your book have you gotten over the years since then?

Well, a lot of people say that they discovered Latin American poetry from my twelve poets. Robert Bly, for one, has always been very nice about it, and he was largely responsible for the re-edition that Beacon Press brought out in 1972.

Yes, I have always enjoyed the wild note from Bly on the book jacket: "H. R. Hays is to the translation of South American poetry as Madame Curie is to the x-ray!"

Over there, in that box, you'll find the latest issue of a magazine called *Ironwood*, which features a long section of my Vallejo translations, some of which I've just done, though most of them are from thirty years ago. It also has a nice letter about my anthology that James Wright wrote to the editor:

. . . When Bly showed me Hays's *Twelve Spanish American Poets*, I had never even heard of Vallejo and had scarcely seen anything by Neruda. Since those days, about twenty years ago, both great poets have virtually become household words in the literary community (sic) of the United States, and yet you still rarely see even a reference to Hays himself, without whose lonely and pioneering work most people would have gone to our graves without realizing Vallejo and Neruda belong to our age, and to us . . .¹³

In 1974, you published an article about Neruda and Vallejo translations in The American Poetry Review in which you say how the forties and the early fifties were a bad time to introduce Neruda in the United States, because of the "reactionary atmosphere."

Yes, that's when I started writing a lot of dramas

(over two dozen) for television, and that was the beginning of blacklisting: so I knew all about the blacklisting that was going on. It was only just luck that I didn't get it. I simply didn't have any enemy out to get me.

And they could have, I suppose. Not only did Neruda declare himself a Communist in 1945, but I have had other ties to the Left. I did worse than just translating a Communist's poetry — they got a real file on me — I also wrote a play for the Communist party, for the Lenin memorial, called "A Song about America." It was performed at Madison Square Garden in 1939, and there was a song in it called "Sweet Liberty Land" that became very popular for a while — it almost replaced the Internationale (laughter).

Once I finished *12 Spanish American Poets* in the early forties, I didn't work on any big translation projects, but I never felt intimidated about translating Neruda. Occasionally I would translate something.

In 1948 you published your translation of Neruda's long poem "The Heights of Macchu Picchu."

Yes, that was a one shot thing. I happened to know the editor of *The Tiger's Eye*, who asked me to do it. So I translated it.

I did something else then that nobody knows about. In that same little magazine, in 1948, I published the first Borges story in English. It was a very good story called "The Babylonian Lottery."

As for publishing Latin American work, there has been a curious bias against it, mostly from commercial book people. Publishers tend to believe that any Latin American book is bound to fail commercially. A few novels have really broken through the barrier, but a kind of condescension toward Latin America still prevails. Here people generally think of Latin America as a continent of musical-comedy revolutions, but they're not musical comedy at all: people are killed.

I wonder what's happening in El Salvador now? The media tends not to tell you anything about the background, or who's who, such as the way we were fiddling with the Nicaraguan Revolution. I was afraid we were really going to louse that one up, because the government here has a crazy theory that the Sandinistas are agents of Castroism. It seems we never learn from our mistakes.

That was one of Neruda's criticisms too, especially after he committed his poetry to the communist cause.

Neruda did write about political themes, but that stuff never appealed to me much. I didn't care much for his political poetry. If I tried to translate it I'd only end up in surrealism, deliberately. Most of his political poetry just turns into journalism.

According to Margaret Sayers Peden, who provides the historic first section on translations in the Handbook of Latin American Studies (1978), "translation is flourishing as never before." She concludes that "to a large degree because of translations into English, Latin American literature is acknowledged as a major literature in the U.S."¹⁴ What do you think of all the translations of Latin American poets that have been published in the past twenty years?

I think it is a very good thing, and a good influence.

How do you feel about the quality of the translations today?

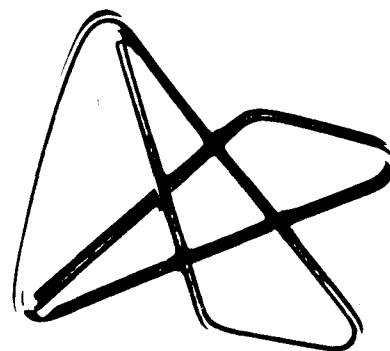
Well, all sorts of people translate Latin American poetry badly — some of them don't even seem to know Spanish.

The age of Dryden and Pope analyzed the nature of poetry in translation, and its rules and standards were carefully worked out. Have you formulated your own poetics of translation?

I just think that, when you translate, you ought to let your readers know what the poet says. A lot of translators don't believe in this approach: they prefer to put down what they think the poet ought to have said.

Vuelta

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How do you feel about the recent movement to elevate the status of translators?

I know that there has been a lot of talk about how they deserve this and they deserve that. I guess they deserve it, if they're any good. But we have to have some standards. Nobody seems to have any idea about how we should set up standards.

I think my standard is honest: to translate what a poet says, *not* what you want him to say. For instance, that Vallejo line "I shall die on a rainy day in Paris . . . on a Thursday like today" in Spanish has "in a heavy shower of rain." Yet a bad translator like Clayton Eshleman translates it as in a "hard dirty rain." Where did he get that "hard dirty rain"?¹⁵ It's in his own mind (laughter): he must have a dirty mind.

You know that Eshleman's translation of Vallejo, *The Complete Posthumous Poetry*, won the 1979 National Book Award for translation.

What a miscarriage of justice!

But, in that translation, he revised the line to read, "I will die in Paris with a sudden shower,"¹⁶ which is much more like an "aguacero" to me . . .

Well, we are almost at the end of our tape. Thanks for talking about your life and work. De nada.

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