

## CHAPTER II

### MISREPRESENTING NERUDA IN *THE HEIGHTS OF MACCHU PICCHU*

Pablo Neruda is one of the most widely translated figures of Latin American literature, in any language, and continues to be a predominant literary figure in the United States.<sup>1</sup> When considering the nature of Nathaniel Tarn's *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*, as well as its reception and influence in the United States, we must first understand the context in which it was translated. Tarn, a British poet of Anglo-French origin, was one of many poets in the United States that translated various Spanish and Spanish American poets, a trend that reached its apex in the late 1960s. By translating Neruda, these US poet-translators sought to revitalize the English poetic tradition through their poetic efforts. The first section of this chapter discusses the nature of poetry and the unique challenges of verse translation. The second section offers a brief overview of the issues and controversies surrounding the role of translation in the reception of Pablo Neruda in the United States from the 1920s to the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> The final section, which is the heart of this

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<sup>1</sup> "At present, more than 100 books of his poetry have been published in translation here, from slim volumes offering a broadsheet of a single poem to last year's 1,000-plus-page volume of some 600 poems" (Cohen, "Establishing" 28). Here, Cohen refers to *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, edited by Ilan Stavens and published in 2003 by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Cohen is the foremost scholar on the role of translation in the reception and influence of Pablo Neruda in the United States. I will draw from his three articles on the subject: "The Early History of Neruda in English (1925–1937)," published in 1982;

chapter, provides a close comparative analysis of selections of Tarn's translation and the original, triangulating it with the respective translations of John Felstiner and Jack Schmitt. On one hand, *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* presents formidable challenges because what we ultimately hear is the voice of Nathaniel Tarn and not that of Pablo Neruda. On the other hand, it is a breathtaking poem in its own right that reinforced Neruda's growing acclaim in the United States.

### **Verse Translation**

When discussing the translation of poetry, one usually confronts the oft-quoted aphorism of Robert Frost: "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." Translators of poetry tend to malign this statement while the layperson, especially the one with little experience with poetry in translation, nods in agreement. Regardless of Frost's original intention, this statement presupposes intrinsic qualities of poetry that are unique and specific to the original language, qualities that somehow resist the transfer from one linguistic and cultural system to another. Although Edith Grossman calls Frost's adage a "mock definition," I do not think we can discount it outright (64). It serves as a point of departure for a broader discussion on the nature of poetry. What is poetry and why do some consider it to be untranslatable? Why is translating poetry so

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"Neruda in English: The Controversy Over Translation Poetics," published in 1983; and "Neruda in English: Establishing His Residence in US Poetry," published in 2004. See also John Felstiner's "Neruda in Translation," published in 1972, and Esperanza Figueroa's "Pablo Neruda en inglés," published the following year in 1973.

TRANSLATION AND THE RECEPTION AND INFLUENCE OF  
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By

James Remington Krause

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Approved:

Professor Earl E. Fitz

Professor William Luis

Professor Emanuelle Oliveira

Professor Marshall C. Eakin