

NERUDA IN ENGLISH: THE CONTROVERSY OVER TRANSLATION POETICS / *Jonathan Cohen*

THE POETRY of Pablo Neruda has been appearing in English translation since the mid-thirties. By now, to be sure, he is one of the most widely translated of all modern poets; in fact, such a poem as "Walking Around," originally published in 1935, has appeared in no fewer than twelve different English versions. The controversy surrounding the poetics of Neruda translation has proliferated along with the translations. By examining the various issues behind this controversy we can see why Neruda's many translators have created different, even conflicting, impressions of his poetry, and why translation is bound to generate controversy.

The early translators of Neruda, working in the thirties and forties, were more interested in the original Spanish than in their English versions of it. These scholars, usually professors of Romance languages, were primarily interested in understanding what Neruda had said, and so they tended to employ a literalist approach. In 1934, in the preface to his translations, G. Dundas Craig explained:

In making the translations, I have tried to steer a middle course between the literal prose translation and the poetic paraphrase. Undoubtedly, the prose translation gives the closest approximation to the poet's meaning . . . The modern poet — and particularly the Parnassian — insists . . . on the music of his verse; and it is but fair that the translator should attempt to reproduce some of the effect at which the poet aimed. The poetic paraphrase, however . . . demands of the translator an endowment of poetic genius to which I can make no claim.¹

Craig was reluctant to inject Neruda with his own peculiarities; he felt they would only obscure Neruda's personality. So, for example, in his translation of "Maestranzas de noche" ("Machine Shops at Night"), one of Neruda's earliest poems of social protest, Craig burdened the English with clumsy Latinate words, even false cognates, and followed the Spanish word order slavishly. The opening lines of the original poem are:

Fierro negro que duerme, fierro negro que gime
por cada poro un grito de desconsolación.²

Craig translated them this way:

Black iron sleeping, iron black that groans
through every pore with moans disconsolate.³

As a result, though he hoped to retain the rhythmical and musical qualities of the original Spanish, Craig obscured the poetry in his use of English. He hoped to capture Neruda's poetic spirit in a translation which tended towards metaphrase, but failed because he did not effectively construct the proper body of words in which the spirit could reside.

Like Craig, Dudley Fitts preferred a bilingual format, as in his *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry* (1942), which presented translations designed to help the English-language reader enjoy the original poems in Spanish. He believed that any reader interested in so special a work as poetry from Latin America would not be entirely illiterate in foreign languages, so he insisted on literal versions which would not be poetry, "except accidentally." Reflecting on his theory of translation, Fitts later concluded ". . . a translation must fail to the extent that it leaves unaccounted for whatever aspects of the original it is unable to handle." Fitts was referring to such aspects as "nuances of diction, of sound, of tone, that make any good poem a discrete experience, an entity somehow different from any other good poem ever written."⁴

Fitts' early method steered the translator toward metaphrase and away from poetic paraphrase. For example, his translation of Neruda's "Ritual de mis piernas" ("Ritual of My Legs"), a poem in which Neruda expressed his pained sense of separation from the natural world, closes with the following lines:

Siempre,
productos manufacturados, medias, zapatos,
o simplemente aire infinito,
habrá entre mis pies y la tierra,
extremando lo aislado y lo solitario de mi ser,
algo tenazmente supuesto entre mi vida y la tierra,
algo abiertamente invencible y enemigo.⁵

Fitts translated them as follows:

Always,
manufactured articles, hose, shoes,
or simply infinite air,
will come between my feet and the earth,
intensifying what is isolated and solitary in my being,
something doggedly thrust between my life and the earth,
something clearly unconquerable and hostile.⁶

Years later Fitts came to see that such translation did not allow Neruda to sound in English as if he were a good poet in Spanish. Fitts then understood: "Good translation involves more than the communication of ideas and images. . . . It is an act of poetry, and I do not now think that it can ever be anything else without risking failure."⁷

Angel Flores, a professor of Romance languages, also approached translating Neruda with the primary aim of helping the reader to apprehend the original poem in Spanish. His New Directions book, *Residence on Earth and Other Poems* (1946), was a bilingual edition, and his translations tended to be literal renderings of the Spanish on the facing page. For example, in "Walking Around," Flores translated line for line, and generally word for word, using a heavily Latinate diction. These are the opening stanzas of the poem:

Sucede que me canso de ser hombre.
Sucede que entro en las sastrerías y en los cines
marchito, impenetrable, como un cisne de fieltro
navegando en un agua de origen y ceniza.

El olor de las peluquerías me hace llorar a gritos.
Sólo quiero un descanso de piedras o de lana,
sólo quiero no ver establecimientos ni jardines,
ni mercaderías, ni anteojos, ni ascensores.⁸

Flores translated them:

It happens that I'm tired of being a man.
It happens I go into tailor shops and movies
withered, impenetrable, like a swan of felt
navigating a water of origins and ashes.

The odor of barber shops makes me weep aloud.
I just want a rest from stones or wool,
I just want not to see establishments or gardens
or elevators, or merchandise, or eyeglasses.⁹

In contrast to Flores' metaphrastic translation, the efforts of Joseph Leonard Grucci and H. R. Hays, who both published translations of "Walking Around" in 1942, were much closer to paraphrase. They attempted to render Neruda in English more poetically. Even so, these two poets aimed at presenting Neruda without superimposing their own voices on him. Here are the opening stanzas by Grucci:

It happens that I am weary of being man.
It happens that I enter tailor shops and movies
faded, impenetrable, like a swan of felt
swimming in spring water and ashes.

The odor of barber shops makes me weep aloud.
I alone want quiet of stones and wool,
I alone want to see neither establishments nor gardens,
nor wares, nor spectacles, nor elevators.¹⁰

Here they are by Hays:

It so happens I am tired of being a man.
It so happens, going into tailorshops and movies,
I am withered, impervious, like a swan of felt
navigating a water of beginnings and ashes.

The smell of barbershops makes me weep aloud.
All I want is a rest from stones or wool,
all I want is to see no establishments or gardens,
no merchandise or goggles or elevators.¹¹

These translations were not literal renderings. They were the efforts of poet-translators, and so were acts of interpretation, sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense, with the aim of being accurate translations which would read like poetry written in English and would at the same time be faithful to what Neruda had said in Spanish. Grucci's version of "Walking Around," however, faltered at certain important passages. For instance, he apparently misread "sólo" (only) as "solo" (alone) and thus distorted Neruda's line, "Sólo quiero un descanso de piedras o de lana."

Both Grucci and Hays took creative liberties to translate Neruda into real speech, as opposed to "translatorese." Their methods of translation recognized the fundamental differences between Spanish, an Italic language, and English, a Germanic language. Grucci and Hays were both aware of the limitations of using false cognates. As translators they understood that English requires a harder, more urgent kind of particularity. For instance, in the fourth line of "Walking Around," they confronted the image of "un agua de origen y ceniza" or, literally, "a water of origin and ash." Grucci re-created it as "spring water and ashes," and Hays re-created it as "a water of beginnings and ashes," both striving for the poetic effect of the Spanish.

Still, despite the few attempts to offer poetic paraphrase, the early translations of Neruda tended towards metaphrase. The great shift in approach took place in the mid-fifties. Then, for several poets, translating Neruda became part of their own efforts to revitalize American poetry. They were attracted to Neruda's image-driven language, his eruptive style of using objects abstractly for the emotional colors produced by the impact of their associations, and the way his writing closes the gap between poetry and real life. These poet-translators began to produce much freer, highly impressionistic para-

phrases of Neruda. The English version became more important to them than the original poem in Spanish. Some poet-translators without an intimate knowledge of Spanish felt obliged to find informants, that is, people fluent in both Spanish and English to check the accuracy of their translations. Robert Bly, for one, relied heavily on the careful readings and suggestions of Hardie St. Martin to complete his translations of Neruda.

Since the mid-fifties, the act of carrying across Neruda's poems into English resulted in a new kind of poetry driven by "fantastic" images. Translation became an act of poetry, and poets began to approach translation as a kind of apprenticeship, to learn how to write poetry. As Bly said: "There is a crucial difference when poets translate—Pound showed us that. The critics want literal translations, but they're wrong. Only poets can bring real feeling to poetry in translation."¹² The remark is excessive, since few critics in recent years have insisted on pure paraphrase. Bly was perhaps being defensive; for his translations, like Pound's, are often regarded as imitations—renditions in which he imposed his own voice on Neruda. Still, Bly made the significant point that a Neruda translation must first of all be a good poem in its own right, as if it were originally written by a poet, true not only to what Neruda had expressed in Spanish, but also to the deeper syntax of English.

W. S. Merwin has also referred to Pound's method to explain his own attitude toward translation. In 1968, discussing his development as a translator, Merwin said:

When I was still at college I made the pilgrimage to St. Elizabeth's to see Pound. He spoke of the value of translation as a means to continually sharpening a writer's awareness of the possibilities of his own language. He meant English, not any personal idiom of mine . . . Pound also urged . . . the greatest possible fidelity to the original, including its sound.¹³

Translating Neruda, Merwin and Bly wrote versions valuable in themselves as poems in English. They were both motivated by the new poetic self they wished to create out of the process of translation. For Merwin and Bly, translating Neruda meant attempting to make Neruda sing, rage, curse, and laugh in English as he had done in Spanish. Merwin and Bly produced poetic paraphrases of Neruda's "Walking Around," demonstrating this impressionist style of translation. Both translators kept Neruda in view for the most part, without deviating from the original poem's sequence of images, the effects produced by its rhythms, and especially the embittered tone. Here is Merwin's translation of the opening stanzas:

As it happens, I am tired of being a man.
As it happens I go into tailors' shops and movies
all shrivelled up, impenetrable, like a felt swan
navigating on a water of origin and ash.

The smell of barber shops makes me sob out loud.
I want nothing but the repose either of stones or of wool,
I want to see no more establishments, no more gardens,
nor merchandise, nor eyeglasses, nor elevators.¹⁴

And here is Bly's translation:

It so happens I am sick of being a man.
And it happens that I walk into tailorshops and movie houses
dried up, waterproof, like a swan made of felt
steering my way in a water of wombs and ashes.

The smell of barbershops makes me break into hoarse sobs.
The only thing I want is to lie still like stones or wool.
The only thing I want is to see no more stores, no gardens,
no more goods, no spectacles, no elevators.¹⁵

To reproduce the force of the Spanish word that literally means "tired of" in its original context, Bly chose to use the more charged idiomatic expression "sick of," with its colloquial sense of revulsion and weariness. To express the sense of the sixth line, Merwin paraphrased it. He chose to amplify the sense of the words by translating "sólo" (only) as "nothing but" and by adding the word "either" to emphasize the contrast between the repose of stones and that of wool. Both Merwin and Bly paid close attention to the associations surrounding the English words they used in their translations, and both tended to prefer English words derived from Anglo-Saxon, in an effort to translate the immediacy of Neruda's language.

When Clayton Eshleman began to write poetry, around 1959, Neruda was one of his heroes. Like Merwin and Bly, Eshleman approached translating Neruda as an impressionist, and his method was to compose a poetic paraphrase of the original. Thus, his version of the opening stanzas of "Walking Around," which he published in 1962, reads:

It happens I'm tired of being a man.
Happens I enter tailorshops and movies
shriveled, numb, like a felt swan
circling a pond of beginnings and ashes.

Odor of barbershops makes me shout aloud.
All I want's rest from stones or wool
all I want's to see no establishments or gardens
no merchandise no glasses no elevators.¹⁶

Though his own version took considerable liberties, he objected to Bly's kind of paraphrase that would read "intentionally casually" and would be "very conversational as if it were intended to be read to an audience who was only going to hear it once." Attacking the kind of translation that would result from Bly's approach, Eshleman argued: "It is, in effect, a translation to ENTERTAIN, it utterly lacks the elliptical backlash of poetry. Images, constructs, are sanded off, there is a loss of sharpness of detail, of precision of language." He insisted: "There is something right about keeping the reader aware that with every line he is *reading a translation*, not an original poem. For translation IS slavery, every translation of a poem ever done is the grief of the tower of Babel; translation of language is a yearning for something to happen in the psyche of man and woman that language itself is but symbolic of."

Agreeing with the most common argument against Bly's translations of Neruda, Eshleman complained that Bly was the one "really being presented or, better, presenting himself," and he concluded:

It is true, that in the Bly and Company versions, there IS no 'translator personality' getting in the way of what one thinks the poem is, as there is in Ben Belitt's versions of Neruda in which one again and again encounters Belitt's own rhetorically constricted syntax . . . there is something at work behind Bly's translating that is more important to him than any foreign language or poet: this something is a stance toward American poetry, a kind of Poundian hangover, which says, in effect, that there is nothing of value in 20th century North American poetry. THEREFORE Bly will translate Neruda . . . to teach us what a 'real' poem is and to whom we should bow. Bly's translations are *versions of his doctrine*. . . .¹⁷

Eshleman said that he had more respect for Belitt's approach to Neruda because Belitt insisted on translating with personality and shaping Neruda to a specific image.

Many critics attacked Belitt's Neruda on the grounds that it was not translation at all but rather imitation. Michael Wood claimed: "Belitt makes Neruda sound like Belitt, a man lost in a maze of affected diction and syntax."¹⁸ For an example of Belitt's translation work, here is his version of the opening of "Walking Around":

It so happens I'm tired of just being a man.
I go to a movie, drop in at the tailor's—it so happens—
feeling wizened and numbed, like a big, wooly swan,
awash on an ocean of clinkers and causes.

A whiff from a barbershop does it: I yell bloody murder.
All I ask is a little vacation from things: from boulders and woolens,
from gardens, institutional projects, merchandise,

eyeglasses, elevators—I'd rather not look at them.¹⁹

In rendering "un agua de origen y ceniza" as "an ocean of clinkers and causes," Belitt carried across little of the real meaning of the Spanish. Instead, he sought not to "rest on the completed action of the poet and compile a memorandum of *words* removed from the drives of the originating excitement," but to "press for a comparable momentum in his own tongue and induce translation accordingly."²⁰ Belitt added that the "stresses" at times forced him further from the originals than he wanted to go, and that sometimes his English was an effort to straighten out the syntactical disorders of Neruda's poetic design.

Over the years, Belitt continued to defend his approach to translation as "an act of the imagination forced upon one by the impossibility of the literalist transference or coincidence of two languages, two minds, and two identities, and by the autonomy of the poetic process." Belitt believed that the literalist approach was by nature inappropriate for translating Neruda effectively, especially for translating the poems of *Residence on Earth*. The political poems in the *Third Residence*, however, could very well be translated literally; that is, direct translation was "functionally appropriate" for "the assertive discourse of the patriot and the propagandist." But Belitt felt that most of the book demanded another, more creative, approach. He argued:

. . . literal translation is especially ill at ease with a poetry where the pressures of language are multiple, disruptive, suspended. It does not cling naturally to the contours with which the syntax and velocities of the original invested its intentions. This is particularly true of the *Residencias*, where the thrust is not merely open, as the mode of Whitman may be said to be open: it yaws in all directions with craters and cicatrices, splinters like shrapnel, makes a fine art of its vertigo. It compels risk, curiosity, impurity, *poetry*.

For this reason, Belitt and many other poets condemned the literalist approach used by Donald Walsh in his 1973 edition of *Residence on Earth*.

Belitt accused Walsh of neither presenting the voice of Neruda nor the voice of Walsh. Rather, he saw Walsh's work as literalism "at its most supine and myopic, reaping the wages of anonymity: a translator's option of poverty, chastity, and obedience transposed into a crucifixion of self-abnegation."²¹ What follows is Walsh's version of the opening stanzas of "Walking Around":

I happen to be tired of being a man.
I happen to enter tailorshops and moviehouses
withered, impenetrable, like a felt swan
navigating in a water of sources and ashes.

The smell of barbershops makes me wail.
I want only a respite of stones or wool,
I want only not to see establishments or gardens
or merchandise, or eyeglasses, or elevators.²²

For Belitt, Walsh's Neruda lacked personality. Belitt wanted to give Neruda "a pulse to his language, a style to his utterance, a point of view to his choices," by making "a poet's demands on the emerging English rather than a pedant's."

In reviewing Belitt's Neruda selection, *New Poems*, Walsh found ample opportunity to respond to Belitt's method, and to defend his own approach to translating what he considered Neruda's simple, earthy language. Like the early translators of Neruda, Walsh was primarily interested in translation as a means to providing knowledge of the original Spanish. He came to translating Neruda as a professor of Romance languages, not as a poet. He believed it was presumptuous for a translator to replace the author's imagery with his own, and he believed that most of Neruda's translators, especially Belitt, stood between Neruda and his audience, without allowing him to speak directly. Walsh asserted:

The translator's double responsibility is, surely, to find out what the author says and to express this in the translator's language with the greatest possible fidelity to the author's concept and his expression of it. In *New Poems* Ben Belitt fails both responsibilities. His translations often betray an ignorance or a misinterpretation of what Neruda says. And even when he understands the Spanish, he does not give a direct translation. He has a compulsion to express himself as well as or instead of Neruda. He decorates Neruda, and Neruda does not decorate successfully.²³

Walsh claimed that weaknesses in Belitt's knowledge of Spanish led him to produce translations wide of Neruda's mark, and he found an "unwillingness to let the poet speak for himself . . . present on almost every page." Like Craig, Walsh preferred the impersonal mode of translation, steering the middle course between metaphrase and paraphrase, whereas Belitt was moved to range between paraphrase and imitation. Walsh disagreed with the theory of translation that encouraged "a translator to express himself as well as his author in his translation." Given that Belitt and Walsh were committed to diametrically opposed modes of translation, the controversy between them could not be resolved. Each translator refused to recognize that the other's mode could indeed serve a valid, though distinctly different, purpose—one poetic, the other pedagogic.

In an essay entitled "Some Thoughts on Translation," Walsh elaborated on his approach to translating Neruda. He said: "The translator who consciously departs from the text is reprehensible. But even more reprehensible is the translator who cannot read the text." He went on:

The translator should have mastered not only the language of his author, he should have mastered his own language, and this means far more than just being a native speaker of it. He should not attempt to translate an author unless he feels a genuine sympathy for his work and unless his finesse and security in his own language approach the finesse and security of the author that he is translating.

Walsh approached Neruda "as a brilliant, daring imagination" who "expressed his imagery in beautifully simple, earthy language" heightened by the directness with which he set it down. For this reason, Walsh criticized those translators who "weakened or muddled or misinterpreted the boldness of Neruda's imagery" and adorned "his monolithic simplicity and earthiness with flights of their own fancy."²⁴ Walsh concluded that Neruda was often botched by translators incapable of understanding and responding to the tone and the overtones of the poet's words, as well as incapable of trying to re-create in English the poetic fusion of thought and expression that produced the original.

In 1973, in *The American Poetry Review*, Walsh and Bly exchanged heavy critical fire. Bly attacked Walsh's new translation of *Residence on Earth*, saying it was "pale, bland, without temperament, without a trace of Neruda's anguished 'tone,' monotonous vanilla mush, as if written by a comfortable Englishman." Bly claimed Walsh had failed to notice the particular mood of Neruda's poetry, citing as an example Walsh's translation of "Melancholy in the Families." Like the rest of the book, the prevailing mood of this poem was one of despair, desolation, and alienation. The closing lines of the poem are:

Pero por sobre todo hay un terrible,
un terrible comedor abandonado,
con las alcuas rotas
y el vinagre corriendo debajo de las sillas,
un rayo detenido de la luna,
algo oscuro, y me busco
una comparación dentro de mí:
tal vez es una tienda rodeada por el mar
y paños rotos goteando salmuera.
Es sólo un comedor abandonado,
y alrededor hay extensiones,
fábricas sumergidas, maderas

que sólo yo conozco,
porque estoy triste y viajo,
y conozco la tierra, y estoy triste.²⁵

And Bly, together with James Wright, translated them this way:

But above all there is a terrifying,
a terrifying deserted dining room,
with its broken olive oil cruets,
and vinegar running under its chairs,
one ray of moonlight tied down,
something dark, and I look
for a comparison inside myself:
perhaps it is a grocery store surrounded by the sea
and torn clothing from which sea water is dripping.

It is only a deserted dining room,
and around it there are expanses,
sunken factories, pieces of timber
which I alone know,
because I am sad, and because I travel,
and I know the earth, and I am sad.²⁶

Walsh rendered the same lines as follows:

But on top of everything there is a terrible,
a terrible abandoned dining room,
with broken jugs
and vinegar flowing under the chairs,
a rather dark lightningbolt
stopped from the moon, and I look for
a comparison within myself:
perhaps it is a tent surrounded by the sea
and torn cloths oozing brine.
It is only an abandoned dining room,
and around it there are expanses,
submerged factories, boards
that only I know
because I am sad and old,
and I know the earth, and I am sad.²⁷

Focusing on what he believed to be a significant error in the next-to-last line of Walsh's version, Bly said:

How did 'old' get in there? Walsh's poorly proofread Spanish has 'viejo' (old) instead of the correct 'viajo' (I travel). But . . . Walsh failed to notice the *mood* of the poem, or even to notice when it was written. Neruda, still in his twenties, is proud of the energy of his

youth, and is unlikely to say 'I am sad and old.' Errors always turn up in all translators' work, and they can be corrected. But the haste with which this book has been done can not be corrected.²⁸

Walsh then responded to this charge by saying:

I ask in turn how anyone who has read, much less translated, this poem can speak of it as an example of Neruda's pride in his youth. The poetry of *Residence on Earth* is so melancholy, so prematurely old, so suicidal, that the author at one time seriously considered denouncing and renouncing the whole work and withdrawing it from circulation.²⁹

Walsh defended his revision of the original Spanish text, arguing that he had corrected the error of an inattentive typesetter, "slavishly followed by editors and translators." Walsh explained: "In the next-to-last line 'viajo' (I travel) kept puzzling me. It seemed a trivial let-down. And suddenly I realized that it was [a] misprint, 'viajo' for 'viejo' (old), which makes much more sense." Then, Walsh launched his offensive, pointing out errors of translation in Bly's book of Neruda, and concluding: "Some of Mr. Bly's unfortunate translations come from his ignorance of Spanish. Others reveal that he has a tin ear, a sad defect in a poet."

The broader critical arguments presented by Walsh and Bly typify the controversy among translators. Walsh was primarily interested in translation as a means to understand the Spanish; he aimed at translating what Neruda *said*. Bly, on the other hand, was primarily interested in translation as an end in itself, as a means to forcing English into a new kind of poetry; he aimed at translating what Neruda *meant*. Their aims differed radically, and as a result, no clear resolution to the bitter controversy between them could emerge. Those critics preferring Bly's translations of the *Residence* poems tended to respond unfavorably to Walsh's translations, and vice versa. Michael Wood, for one, maintained that only Bly made Neruda sound in English as if he might be a good poet in Spanish, because Walsh was "not trying to *translate* Neruda, merely to provide us with literal versions."³⁰ Wood disagreed with Walsh's literalist attitude that, since Neruda expresses his poetic ideas very simply and directly, it was possible to translate him quite literally with no loss of validity. For Wood, Walsh's approach yielded a translation that was "honest, dull, stilted, usually accurate, the right sort of rendering for people . . . really reading the Spanish with a little help from across the page."

On the other side, Florence L. Yudin celebrated "the presence of Walsh as rhapsode, not the precision of the translator." From Yudin's point of view, Walsh's translation of *Residence on Earth* gave the

English-language audience “the unique experience of a writer . . . equally gifted in the language of English poetry and in Neruda’s inspired Spanish.”³¹ She argued that Walsh produced “a brilliant text, stunning in its harmony with the Spanish original.” *Residence on Earth* demonstrated Walsh’s “talent to re-create and project Neruda’s unique voice.” His English revealed “that gift for word and rhythm which comes from the best poets.” Another critic, Walter Snow, said: “Walsh is by far Neruda’s best American interpreter. He recognizes the special problems in translating from a Romance language like Spanish into a Germanic tongue like English. Most of his predecessors do not appreciate Neruda’s fondness for alliteration, his repetition of V-sounds, the lovely S’s and double L’s.”³² For Snow, Walsh succeeded in capturing Neruda’s melody with renderings such as “the great, gray albatross died that day” and “wavering waters.”

Interestingly, Walsh’s detractors often accused him of putting a poem into English with Latinate vocabulary and Spanish syntax, leaving it essentially untranslated. Bly charged that Walsh followed “the translator’s typical habit of reaching for the nearest Latinate equivalent,” and Bly asserted: “Neruda for example says ‘personaje,’ and it’s easiest just to reach for ‘personage,’ as Walsh does, though the words in English and Spanish have actually diverged a great deal in meaning. When Walsh writes, ‘his prophetic food he propagates tenaciously,’ Neruda sounds like what he is not, English.”³³ But Walsh made the same argument as his critics and expressed his clear understanding of this particular problem in translation. He said: “In Spanish . . . Latin derivatives are everyday, bread-and-butter words. But in English they are often fancy substitutes for earthy Anglo-Saxon words, substitutes introduced directly from the Latin or indirectly through the Norman French.”³⁴ Nonetheless, Walsh’s pedagogic motives ultimately distinguished his mode of translation and generated controversy among those insisting on a more poetic mode.

The controversy over translation poetics was heightened by the United States copyright law, which gave to the publisher of a translation by an American of a foreign work exclusive United States publication rights for twenty-eight years. The copyright could be renewed once, for a total of fifty-six years. With the author’s consent, the copyright could be extended to all English-speaking countries. Shortly after Neruda won the Nobel Prize in 1971, two American publishers—Farrar, Straus & Giroux and New Directions—signed “exclusive contracts” for the bulk of his work, thereby assuring that no one else in the United States would publish a translation of the books. Consequently, many of Neruda’s translators, especially the poets, felt this would ruin Neruda’s reputation as a great poet in the United States, because the “bad” translations being published would block other efforts.

This business matter complicated the controversy over translation. For instance, Belitt approached translating Neruda without attempting to produce the definitive work. He said: "For me, translation remains the sensuous approximation of an amateur—a histrionic projection of my visceral and intellectual fascinations—and, I would always want to add, my *pleasure*. Translation should always give pleasure." Thus Belitt was glad to see the appearance of Neruda in English by other translators. In a conversation with Edwin Honig, Belitt explained:

It's what I'd hoped for—many sounds, many orientations and intonations, many biases (though not their accompanying Mafia of vendettas), many permutations of pleasure—a whole orchestra tuning up on processes and procedures. But recent translations have all been on the side of a puristic leveling of Neruda to the lowest case of the literal word. Neruda is sacrosanct to his American idolators. I prefer the 'choral' rendering of Neruda because tolerance and abundance are better than authorized or monogamous translation. I deplore all fixed points and terminal goals of translation.³⁵

But the need of publishers to survive in the business world limited the possibilities for Neruda in English, and the controversy was aggravated by the copyright law. Since Neruda had already signed his agent's contract, he could only alter the conditions if his American publishers would agree, which they would not and did not. Unfortunately, Neruda realized too late the mistake of giving exclusive rights to a few, particularly for poetry like his, and in view of the many other translators working on his books in the United States.

In 1974, the year after Neruda's death, Paul Zweig wondered why American translators were not doing better at approaching Neruda's eloquence and his wry brand of surrealism more closely. Zweig observed:

Now that Pablo Neruda is a Nobel Prize winner, and dead, the stonemasons are closing in. The works are being compiled, annotated, standardised. Definitive editions are in course. Must the crucial work of translation remain slack and bureaucratic? Is it too late to call together poets who can do the work well, and offer them the possibility of doing it?³⁶

But the variety of approaches to Neruda and the different poetics used in translating him could not possibly please everyone. Translators and critics offered different solutions to the problem of doing the work *well*. No single approach fulfilled their aims and expectations. No poetics of translation could eliminate bad translators because none could ever convince them that they were not good.

Neruda himself felt that his poetry suffered in English translation due to the fundamental differences between Spanish and English. Neruda knew English well enough to translate poets such as Blake and Whitman, and well enough to understand that the language did not "correspond to Spanish—neither in vocalization, nor in the placement, nor the color, nor the weight of the words." He therefore believed:

This means that the equilibrium of a Spanish poem, which may be written with verbal lavishness or economy, but has its own order and way of placing each word, can find no equivalent in . . . English. It's not a question of interpretive equivalents, no; the sense may be correct, indeed the accuracy of the translation itself, of the meaning, may be what destroys the poem. That's why I think Italian comes closest, because by keeping the values of the words, the sound helps reflect the sense. . . . It seems to me that the English language, so different from Spanish and so much more direct, often expresses the meaning of my poetry but does not convey its atmosphere.³⁷

And, shortly after Neruda's death, in a tribute to him in *The Nation*, the author noted:

Neruda's poetry is in general ill-served by its English translations—through no fault of the scholars who have done the translating, some of them accomplished poets in their own right. The fault lies with the demotic speech that industrial society has fostered, and with the variant employed by literary men writing in English in our day. Poetry is above all the art of evoking powerful emotions through verbal music, and Neruda's exuberant Spanish has its counterpart in the English poetry of the Renaissance rather than in the sober dialect of our contemporary major poets—or the willful stridencies of some of our lesser writers. Neruda in translation tends to sound inflated and bombastic. Nothing could be less true of the original.³⁸

While of course failing to admit that Neruda had in fact produced some truly bad, inflated and bombastic poetry in Spanish, this commentary defined one of the more significant problems in translating his work.

In the last analysis, the controversy over translation poetics came down to what Belitt considered "the forfeits of expressive translation against the privations of anonymous translation: 'translation as personal mode,' against 'the translator as nobody in particular.'" Both were essentially "ploys, impersonations, heuristic deceptions."³⁹ The very nature of translation, filled with both possibility and impossibility, in addition to the different motives of translators, fostered a wide range of

voices for Neruda. Consequently, no single mode could—or ever can—measure up to the standards of all interested parties. For this reason Neruda in English is bound to generate an irresolvable controversy. The broader implications of the controversy are clear: we must contend with the real complexities of the art.

NOTES

- ¹G. Dundas Craig, *The Modernist Trend in Spanish-American Poetry* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1934), p. xi.
- ²Pablo Neruda, "Maestranzas de noche," *The Modernist Trend in Spanish-American Poetry*, p. 226.
- ³Neruda, "Arsenal by Night," tr. G. Dundas Craig, *The Modernist Trend in Spanish-American Poetry*, p. 227.
- ⁴Dudley Fitts, "The Poetic Nuance," *On Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 33.
- ⁵Neruda, "Ritual de mis piernas," *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1942), p. 308.
- ⁶Neruda, "Liturgy of My Legs," tr. Dudley Fitts, *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry*, p. 309.
- ⁷Fitts, p. 39.
- ⁸Neruda, "Walking Around," *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1957), p. 215.
- ⁹Neruda, "Walking Around," tr. Angel Flores, *Residence on Earth and Other Poems* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1946), p. 59.
- ¹⁰Neruda, "Walking Around," tr. Joseph Leonard Grucci, *3 Spanish American Poets* (Albuquerque: Swallow & Critchlow, 1942), p. 41.
- ¹¹Neruda, "Walking Around," tr. H. R. Hays, *Anthology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry*, p. 303.
- ¹²"Poets Initiate New Translation Award," *Coda: Poets and Writers Newsletter*, 5, No. 2 (November/December, 1977), p. 10.
- ¹³W. S. Merwin, "Foreword," *Selected Translations* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. viii.
- ¹⁴Neruda, "Walking Around," tr. W. S. Merwin, *Selected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 105.
- ¹⁵Neruda, "Walking Around," tr. Robert Bly, *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 29.
- ¹⁶Neruda, "Walking Around," tr. Clayton Eshleman, *Residence on Earth* (Kyoto, Japan: Amber House Press, 1962), without pagination.
- ¹⁷Clayton Eshleman, "In Defense of Poetry," *Review* (Center for Inter-American Relations), Nos. 4/5 (Winter, 1971/Spring, 1972), p. 40.
- ¹⁸Michael Wood, "The Poetry of Neruda," *The New York Review of Books*, 21 (October 3, 1974), p. 8.
- ¹⁹Neruda, "Walking Around," tr. Ben Belitt, *Selected Poems* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 77.
- ²⁰Belitt, "Translator's Foreword," *Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda*, p. 31.

- ²¹Belitt, "The Translator as Nobody in Particular," *Review* (Center for Inter-American Relations), No. 11 (Spring, 1974), p. 26.
- ²²Neruda, "Walking Around," tr. Donald D. Walsh, *Residence on Earth* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 119.
- ²³Donald D. Walsh, "Undressing a Translation," *Review* (Center for Inter-American Relations), No. 9 (Fall, 1973), p. 55.
- ²⁴Walsh, "Some Thoughts on Translation," *Review* (Center for Inter-American Relations), No. 11 (Spring, 1974), p. 22.
- Neruda, "Melancolía en las familias," *Residencia en la tierra* (Santiago, Chile: Ediciones Ercilla, 1941), p. 65.
- ²⁶Neruda, "Melancholy Inside Families," trs. Robert Bly and James Wright, *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems*, p. 51.
- ²⁷Neruda, "Melancholy in the Families," tr. Donald D. Walsh, *Residence on Earth*, p. 133.
- ²⁸Bly, "The Problem of Exclusive Rights," *The American Poetry Review*, 2, No. 3 (May/June, 1973), p. 48.
- ²⁹Walsh, "Letters: Donald D. Walsh Replies to Robert Bly," *The American Poetry Review*, 2, No. 4 (July/August, 1973), p. 55.
- ³⁰Wood, p. 8.
- ³¹Florence L. Yudin, "Earth Words," *The Caribbean Review*, 6, No. 2 (April/May/June, 1974), p. 38.
- ³²Walter Snow, "Historic Publication of Neruda's Work," *The Daily World Magazine*, July 7, 1973, p. 9.
- ³³Bly, p. 48.
- ³⁴Walsh, "Some Thoughts on Translation," p. 20.
- ³⁵Belitt, *Adam's Dream* (New York: Grove Press, 1978), p. 27.
- ³⁶Paul Zweig, "The Poet Rehearses His Instrument," *Review* (Center for Inter-American Relations), No. 13 (Winter, 1974), p. 76.
- ³⁷Neruda in Rita Guibert's *Seven Voices*, tr. Frances Partridge (New York: Knopf, 1973), pp. 35-36.
- ³⁸"Pablo Neruda," *The Nation*, 217, No. 12 (October 15, 1973), pp. 357-358.
- ³⁹Belitt, p. 30.

