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Text Selection and the Image of the Other: Translations of Pablo Neruda's *Canto general*

Introduction

For the literature of one country to be received and appreciated by another it needs to “pass through” several professional readers, through whom non-professional readers would perceive that literature and that culture. Ideological issues are present throughout the whole decision-making process, from the moment an author or a particular text is selected to be translated, to the point the target text appears in bookstores. Wolf claims that:

Translation can be interpreted as a strategy to consolidate the cultural Other, a process which implies not only the fixation of prevailing ideologies and of cultural filters but also the blocking of any autonomous dynamics of cultural representation. This phenomenon can be observed, for instance, at different levels of the production of translations, from the selection of texts to be translated to the modes of distribution, all marked by power relations, including the translation strategies adopted.

representation or image projection of Latin America by the US (moving the West/East axis to a North/South one). This concept could be applied to all representations of non-Western cultures, and, thus, in our case, the Other will be Chile, the source culture.

Part of the basis of and justification for this image-construction is a teleological concept of history, according to which, history is a process of evolution from a primitive origin to an end or “telos” where usually European or Western civilisation is placed. Therefore, all non-Western cultures are located within the “past” of the West and considered to be “proto-European,”⁷ in need of improvement,⁸ which provides a justification for colonial (or neo-colonial) domination.⁹ As Pike points out “[p]erpetuation of myths and stereotypes about the Other demands that the Other remains essentially unchanged.”¹⁰ Thus, the placing of the Other within a primitive past is accompanied by a “dehistoricising move,”¹¹ which produces an image of the other as “fixed,” “stable” and “static,”¹² in other words, “objects without history.”¹³

Postcolonial scholars also believe that the Western attitude towards the non-Western is ambivalent and often swings from repulsion to attraction.¹⁴ Therefore, sometimes the same image such as, for example, an image of a culture as childlike and primitive could be seen as derogatory or negative, or as a positive romantic image of unfragmented innocence.¹⁵ According to Carbonell, both attitudes spring from “the projection of the (idealized) self onto the Other.”¹⁶ This takes us to another idea in the postcolonial theoretical framework, namely that “our image of the ‘other’ is formed over and against our image of ‘self’ and viceversa.”¹⁷ Thus identity or self-identity is constructed “through a process of alterity,”¹⁸ whereby the Other is necessarily distant, different and the opposite to us.¹⁹

Within this framework, we will analyse the published translations of Neruda's *Canto general* into English by looking at the selections of the poems made at the "macro-level" of the text, that is to say, the whole book, rather than at the translation techniques used at the "micro-level," where we would study the individual poem. First we will give some background information on the source text, then look at what has been translated and what has been left out from the *Canto general* and, finally, we will try to identify the images that may emerge from text selection and explore whether the professional readers involved were influenced by ideological²⁰ factors and, if so, to what extent.

With regard to Neruda, in the substantial body of criticism on this author, little has been written about his work in English translation. What there is, is usually prescriptive, without operationalised concepts or categories, under-theorised, focusing on fault-finding instead of the strategies used by the translators, and often the texts are reviewed as if they had been originally written in English. Regarding translation studies, although there has been some research into the construction of images of the Other, particularly from a postcolonial perspective,²¹ more needs to be done, especially concerning translations from Latin America to Western cultures. Furthermore, this research could be aided by using methods such as the analysis of the selection of texts to be translated, not only from a particular literature or by a particular author, but also with regard to selections from a single text.

Background

Canto general was first published in Spanish in Mexico in 1950, and in a clandestine edition in Chile where the book was banned which, according to some critics, added to its popularity. At that time the US was going through the years of the Cold War,

McCarthyism, the House Committee of UnAmerican activities and the so-called Communist witch-hunts. Neruda had already published nine books of poems (the first one when he was nineteen) but, according to the critics, *Canto general* marks a change in his poetics, from a surrealist, modernist, hermetic and erotic poet into a socially committed one. He started to compose the book in 1938, after his experiences

- IX.** *Que despierte el leñador.* (Let the rail-splitter awake) The rail-splitter or woodcutter is Abraham Lincoln and the poem is an appeal for peace between East and West and a warning to the USA against its expansionistic or imperialistic foreign policies.
- X.** *El fugitivo.*

marginalisation in the Anglophone world during the 1950s is the pamphlet *Let the Rail Splitter Awake and Other Poems*, published by the Marxist press, Masses and Mainstream, in 1950 and translated by Waldeen. In this book we have a version of Section II from *Canto general, Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, together with more explicitly political sections such as a version of Section IX, *Que despierte el leñador*, which is overtly anti-US, a version of Section X, *El fugitivo*, and a selection from Section V, *La Arena Traicionada*. The book was reprinted in 1951 and 1952 in the US and also published in the UK by Collect in 1950. Looking at the political climate of both target cultures and of the US in particular during these three years, 1950-1953, at the height of the Cold War, we must admit that the printing and reprinting of this pamphlet was an admirable feat. The pamphlet was accepted by a particular publishing house which did not comply with the dominant conservative and anti-communist ideology of the time and may have used the text to raise the readership's consciousness. The other exception to Neruda's marginalisation during the 1950s, is Whit Burnett's inclusion of Angel Flores' English version of Section II from *Canto general, Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, in the collection *The World's Best* published in 1950, which will be further discussed below.

During the sixties the anti-communist isolationist attitude in the US no longer held absolute sway. With the increased participation of the US in the Vietnam War during the mid-sixties, those poets who opposed it needed a model of a socially committed verse to protest against the war.²⁸ During the seventies three important events took place: Neruda was given the Nobel Prize in 1971, General Augusto Pinochet led a military coup in Chile in September 1973 and Neruda died shortly after. Therefore, by this time, the political, ideological and literary climates in both target cultures were right for the reception of Neruda, who "emerged as the best

known Spanish American poet in the United States, the poet most widely translated from Spanish to English verse.”²⁹ Thus, for example, four books with selections of poems from *Canto general* were published during the 1960s and six during the 1970s. From the 1980s onwards, there was a slight decrease in interest.

The Target Texts

With regard more specifically to *Canto general*, selections of the book came out in Spanish throughout the 1940s and in English translation since 1942, but it was not translated into English in its entirety until 1991. Lefevere³⁰ believes that although a work of literature might be marginalised because of not complying to the dominant ideology and/or poetics of the target culture at the time of publication, it is often adapted to conform,³¹ which in our case could be interpreted as adaptation by “mutilation,” or even “cannibalisation.” This appears to apply to *Canto general*. As de Costa says:

Neruda’s epic, partly because of its extraordinary length, but mostly because of its controversial content, was soon cannibalised by diverse literary establishments for no less diverse and conflicting purposes. And so it is that most non-specialist readers of Neruda today know *Canto General* only partially, through “representative” selections.³²

This brings us to the main objective of this chapter, namely to identify the images created by the “representative” selections made of the text and published in the US and the UK. Looking at several selections may help us discover the perceptions of the Other that the anthologists may have had at the times of publication. For the sake of brevity I will only focus on the selection and publication of whole sections and not of individual poems.

Until 1991, of the fifteen sections of *Canto general*, only three were translated and published in their entirety: Section II, *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*,³³ Section VIII, *La tierra se llama Juan*³⁴ and Section IX, *Que despierte el leñador*.³⁵ Section II, *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, was translated and published nine different times by nine different translators. Two of these translations were published practically simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic, namely, Waldeen's translation published in 1950 both in New York and London, and Nathaniel Tarn's translation published in London in 1966 and in New York in 1967. The rest of the translations of Section II

However, there might be other reasons for the interest in this section on the part of the English translators. At least on the surface, *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* could be considered an apolitical view of Latin America. At the same time, the image of the Other created by the selection of Section II, is of a primitive and ancient culture which could easily be fitted into the “past” of the West, if we follow the teleological concept of history mentioned above. Even the title itself may produce an attractively exotic and mysterious image of the poem and, as a result, of its poet and its culture. If we look at the latest translation of Section II, published by Bulfinch in 2001, which is a beautiful combination of photographs and poetry, we find this mysterious and exotic image enlarged to a point that reading it almost becomes “a spiritual experience,” as expressed by Isabel Allende in the prologue.³⁸ Whether this is a derogatory image of

only read English. Consequently the book is rather biased towards the Anglophone world (there were thirty-two authors from the US and twenty from the UK). South America came under one heading and only three authors were selected: one from Argentina and two from Chile, Neruda and Gabriela Mistral who had already received the Nobel Prize. Therefore, Neruda's chosen work was intended to be considered by the readers as "representative" of Latin America as a whole.

Thus we have the source text author, Neruda, selecting this section himself as representative of Latin America in an anthology of, allegedly, the best literature of the world. On the other hand, we have the anthologists of the target culture, choosing to convey a romanticised image of the source culture as a spiritual and exotic experience, possibly appealing to that faction of the counterculture which longed for the exotic and more primordial cultures. Since Section II of *Canto general* did not explicitly question either the social values or the foreign policies of the target culture, by selecting it the anthologists "domesticated" both *Canto general* and Neruda as a poet, to a certain extent, producing a representation of the Other which was acceptable to the values of the target culture and possibly conformed to their preconceived images and stereotypes of Latin America.⁴²

The image of *Canto general* produced by the selection of Section II is far different from that created by the Marxist press *Masses and Mainstream* in 1950. This press, in addition to Section II, *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, also selected Section IX, *Que despierte el leñador*, which is overtly anti-US, and a selection from Section V *La arena traicionada* which is also overtly political, thus choosing to create a more complex image of *Canto general* and of its author, by placing the exotic and mysterious image of Macchu Picchu side by side with that of a socially committed writer who wanted to send his political message to the world. If we take into

consideration that this anthology was published in 1950, during the McCarthy years,
and that Neruda was likely to have been

Press) in 1977, the effect that this image had on the target culture perception of the Other is likely to have been marginal. Furthermore, in 1977, the year in which this translation was published, Neruda was already an established author in the target culture⁴⁶ and the Marxist faction of the counterculture was less strong than in 1950.

Conclusion

In the above discussion we have first seen how Neruda was, to a certain extent, marginalised in the Anglophone world during the 1950s. Published in Spanish in 1950, *Canto general* as a whole did not appear in English translation until more than forty years later, possibly due to its ideological content, style and Neruda's reputation as "subversive" of the dominant ideology of the time. Nevertheless, selections of the book did appear in English during those forty years and continue to appear at present.

We have also identified two major images that have emerged from the sections of *Canto general* selected to be translated, namely, a socially committed image and an exotic, mysterious and primitive image. Both of these images appeared together in 1950 in the pamphlet *Let the Rail Splitter Awake and Other Poems*. In this publication Section II, *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* and Section IX, *Que despierte el leñador* appear side by side, thus creating a complex, though still incomplete, image of the source text and its author. The socially committed image of the poet Neruda also emerged when Section VIII, *La tierra se llama Juan*, was selected, although to minimal effect.

By looking at the selections of *Canto general* which were translated and published in English, we could say that the prevailing image is that which emerges from the selection of Section II, that is, the exotic and mysterious image. This is the image chosen by Neruda himself in 1950 as "representative" of his work and of his

country, which would appeal to a greater spectrum of readers within the target cultures. However, this image would not be a fair representation of the source text because it was the result of a manipulation or adaptation by selection to conform with the stereotypes already present in the target cultures and because underlying this image is a teleological concept of history which justifies an idea of the West as being superior to non-Western cultures.

Thus we may conclude that the professional readers involved in the process of translating *Canto general* into English are likely to have been affected by ideological factors in their decisions. In other words, some anthologists appear to have chosen to go against the dominant ideology of the time by selecting sections of the book which would result in an image which was threatening to the target culture, in so far as the values and foreign policies of that culture were questioned (by selecting Section IX, *Que despierte el leñador*). On the other hand, more professional readers appear to have decided to comply with the dominant ideology of the time and carry out a selection, which resulted in an image which conformed to pre-existing stereotypes in the target culture (by selecting Section II, *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*). There have also, almost certainly, been commercial factors involved in the process of selection since, by confirming the preconceived images of the source culture and not questioning the values of the target culture, the chances of publication and commercial viability are increased.⁴⁷

Notes

¹ Michaela Wolf, "Culture as Translation—and Beyond: Ethnographic Models of Representation in Translation Studies," in Theo Hermans, ed., *Crosscultural Transgressions: Research Models in Translation Studies II: Historical and Ideological Issues* (Manchester: St Jerome, 2002), 188.

² Esperanza Figueroa, "Pablo Neruda en Inglés" (*Revista Iberoamericana* 39, 1982-83), 319.

³ André Lefevere, *Translation and the Manipulation of the Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1978); James Clifford, "Introduction," in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Anuradha Dingwaney, "Introduction: Translating 'Third World' Cultures," in Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier, eds., *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg Press, 1995); Mahasweta Sengupta, "Translation as Manipulation: The Power of Images and the Images of Power," in Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier, eds.; Frederick B. Pike, *The United States and Latin America: Myths and*

³³ Pablo Neruda, "Heights of Macchu Picchu," trans. by H. R. Hays, in *The Tiger's Eye*, 1.5, (1948), 112-122; "The Heights of Macchu Picchu," trans. by Waldeen, in Pablo Neruda *Let the Rail Splitter Awake and other poems* (New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1950). Published also in London in 1950 by Collect and reprinted in London in 1988 by Journeyman; "Summits of Macchu Picchu," trans. by Ángel Flores, in Whit Burnett, ed., *The World's Best* (New York: Dial Press, 1950); *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*, trans. by Nathaniel Tarn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966); *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*, trans. by Hower Zimmon, et al. (Iowa City: Seamark Press, 1971); "The Heights of Macchu Picchu," trans. Tom Raworth, in E. Ciaracciolo-Tejo, ed.,