

NERUDA IN ENGLISH: *Establishing His Residence in U.S. Poetry*

The multidimensional poet Pablo Neruda (1904–73)—the sexy love poet, the hot surrealist poet, the blood-and-guts political poet, the bardic poet of the American continent, the joyous everyman’s poet, the final personal poet—is now enjoying a renewed appreciation in the United States. The newly published selection, *The Essential Neruda* (2004), and the most comprehensive collection ever published, *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda* (2003), are expressions of this appreciation as much as they are stimulators and purveyors of it. Their publications, of course, were timed to coincide with the centennial of Neruda’s birth. The translations of both these works have been made mostly by poets aiming to achieve fidelity not only to the literal meaning but also to the poetic quality of the original texts. Although verse translations of Neruda’s poetry were published in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, they did not start to gain recognition here until the 1960s. The early translations were largely ignored for both literary and political reasons. In the first place, Neruda was a surrealist, and his style of writing was at odds with the poetics of leading critics and poets. Secondly, Neruda was an ardent communist who actively supported Stalin and the Soviet Union throughout the 1940s and 1950s. At that time some of the poetry that he produced was merely Stalinist propaganda. Consequently, during the years of the Cold War and New Criticism, the appearance of Neruda in English did little to establish his reputation as a great poet or to influence poets in the United States.

The proper recognition Neruda finally gained was fostered during the 1960s by the growing romantic movement of U.S. poets emphasizing freedom of form and feelings, and was accompanied by a revived interest in verse translation, through which these poets sought new ways to create poetry in English that would liberate them from the dominant formalist modes. In this regard, Neruda had much to offer, and thus he began to receive serious attention. For several poets, translating Neruda became part of their own efforts to revitalize U.S. poetry. They were especially interested in Neruda’s style of surrealism, as well as his poems of social commitment. Starting around 1960, translations of Neruda’s poetry began to flourish in the United States and became a mediating force. Furthermore, the act of translating from Spanish led a number of U.S. poets to create original poems in English.

Commenting on new trends in contemporary U.S. poetry,

poet and translator William Meredith observed in 1979 that “many poets...believe that major directions for poetry in our country will derive from the aesthetic innovations of...Latin American poets” (Meredith, 1979, 15). He referred to this cross-cultural activity as “an American tradition,” and in this tradition, Neruda’s influence has been more real than influences normally charted in comparative literature studies, based only on a reading acquaintance; for, in having translated Neruda themselves, several major U.S. poets were affected in their own poetry by what they learned and did with “the poem in the act of translation” (Barnstone, 1973, 137). Consequently, Neruda’s poetry in translation became a significant part of the literary heritage of U.S. poets. In an interview in 1970, Pulitzer-winning poet Anne Sexton emphasized this point: “We [North American poets] are being influenced now by South American poets, Spanish poets, French poets. We are much more image-driven as a result....Neruda is the great image-maker. The greatest colorist....That’s why I say you have to start with Neruda” (Sexton, 1970, 11–12).

The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to elucidate the literary activity associated with the naturalization of Neruda in English during the years of the 1960s, the decade his poetry finally established itself in translation as a major new American voice in the literature of the United States.

The first significant event must be attributed to Ben Belitt, a poet and English professor, who published his important translation titled *Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda* in 1961, the same year Carlos Lozano’s relatively literal, though delightful, translation *The Elementary Odes of Pablo Neruda* (*Odas elementales*, originally published in three successive volumes, 1954, 1956, and 1957) appeared. For Belitt, his translation represented “an attempt to express [his] own exuberance” as well as “[his] own sense of contact with things” (Belitt, 1978, 103). Politics did not motivate Belitt to translate Neruda. Instead, Belitt was after “a special magic in the divination of surrealist metaphors...a kind of irrational metaphysics or therapeutic shorthand: like reading entrails or tea-leaves” (Belitt, 1978, 28).

One of the important contributions of Belitt’s selection was his rendering of Neruda’s brief statement on poetics, “Toward an Impure Poetry,” which Neruda had originally published in 1935 and which first appeared in English in Belitt’s translation. In this statement, Neruda advocated an

art that “smells of urine and white lilies,” a poetry on which “every human activity...has imprinted its mark.” He ended on this note:

Let no one forget them: despond, old mawkishness impure and unflawed, fruits of a fabulous species lost to the memory, cast away in a frenzy’s abandonment—moonlight, the swan in the gathering darkness, all the hackneyed endearments: surely that is the poet’s occasion, essential and absolute.

Those who shun the “bad taste” of things will fall on their face in the snow. (Neruda, 1961, 40)

Thomas McGrath, who reviewed the book for the leftist magazine *Mainstream*, regretted the lack of Neruda’s social-political poems. This dimension of Neruda soon became more important to U.S. poets in light of the mounting protest movement against the Vietnam War as well as the efforts by many to recover the lost tradition of communal poetry and to write engagé poems. Unlike poets in the United States, Spanish-speaking poets did not have to convert their lyrical tools, because they never had that sense of being foreigners in their own society, and it was natural and easier to strike the required familial tone of the people of their society.

Many critics attacked the peculiar method of Belitt’s translation (i.e., imitation). Robert Bly, an outspoken poet, translator, and critic, who during the 1960s distinguished himself as Neruda’s greatest champion in the United States, led the assault against Belitt and other translators who failed, in his estimation, to do justice to Neruda. Bly argued that throughout Belitt’s translation

there is an inability to see or take Neruda for the original man he is—he is constantly being presented as stale Shakespeare, stale Lowell, or stale Eliot. Because he is not, this book does him a severe injustice. In the original Spanish there is no feeling of “I am sick, please help me” such as we sense in Eliot and in this translation. The original Spanish has a sense of energy, of joy in the imagination, and an abundance of images. (Bly, 1962, 470)

Bly insisted that Belitt had distorted Neruda because his poetic temperament was so unlike Neruda’s, and that he had weakened Neruda by “rewriting” him. For Bly, many of Belitt’s translations ascended “beyond even literary language to the realm of the Stuffed Owl” (470). Nonetheless, despite the peculiarities of Belitt’s approach, the genius of Neruda’s potent voice still came through and quickly found an audience. [For the author’s analysis of the bitter controversy over the methods of translation that accompanied the various publications of Neruda’s poetry during the 1960s and 1970s, see: Cohen, J. (1983). *Neruda in English: The controversy over translation poetics. Missouri Review* 6(3): 176–192.]

The early 1960s saw a great flourish of activity surrounding Neruda’s poems. Literary magazines printed English translations made by a number of different poets, who often

translated the same poems, such as “Walking Around,” “There’s No Forgetting,” and others from Neruda’s surrealist *Residence on Earth* (*Residencia en la tierra*, originally published in two volumes appearing in 1933 and 1935, plus *Tercera residencia*, published in 1947). Clayton Eshleman, Jerome Rothenberg, Robert Kelly, James Wright, W. S. Merwin, Selden Rodman, and Robert Bly, among others, began to generate much excitement with their Neruda translations. By 1963, Neruda was being translated into English more widely than any other contemporary poet. Both Belitt and Eshleman devoted much of their energies to him. It was Bly, however, who became Neruda’s leading advocate in the United States, for his special interests as a poet and editor were in the areas of deep-image (surrealist) poetry and political poetry. Bly energetically spread the word that Neruda was the greatest living poet in the world, with “an imagination utterly unlike that of any poet who has ever written in English” (Bly, 1962, 471).

In 1964, in the seventh issue of his magazine *The Sixties* (formerly *The Fifties*), Bly featured five of Neruda’s poems translated by Wright and himself, with the invisible yet essential help of the translation genius Hardie St. Martin—translator of Neruda’s *Memoirs* (1977; *Confieso que he vivido; memorias*, 1974). He also published an essay titled “The Surprise of Neruda,” in which he argued:

We tend to associate the modern imagination with the jerky imagination, which starts forward, stops, turns around, switches from subject to subject. In Neruda’s poems, the imagination drives forward, joining the entire poem in a rising flow of imaginative energy....He is a new kind of creature moving about under the surface of everything. Moving under the earth, he knows everything from the bottom up (which is the right way to learn the nature of a thing) and therefore is never at a loss for its name. Compared to him, the American poet resembles a blind man moving about above the ground from tree to tree, from house to house, feeling each thing for a long time, and then calling out “house,” when we already know it is a house. (Bly, 1964, 18)

Bly hailed Neruda as “wildly romantic, and more sophisticated than Hulme or Pound could dream of being.” Like many poets of his generation, Bly was looking for an alternative to the dry, impersonal poems of the modernists of the United States and England; and in Neruda’s work, he found precisely what he was after: an unrestrained poetry “heavy with images from the unconscious” (Bly, 1964, 18).

In addition to Neruda’s brand of surrealism (more earthy and less random than that of the French), Bly admired the poet’s ability to deepen political awareness through poetry. Ranking the Chilean with Yeats, he claimed Neruda had written “the greatest political poetry of this century so far” (Bly, 1967, 523). For Bly, for instance, Neruda’s poem “The Dictators” from *Canto general* (General Song, 1950) was a masterpiece of the political poem. Unlike the bombastic U.S. agitprop poetry of the 1930s, this poem is not political in

terms of opinions or propaganda. Instead, its language demonstrates the psychic landscape of a South American country in a dictatorship. It works with surprising images, as in Bly's rendering: "The tiny palace gleams like a watch / And the rapid laughs with gloves on / cross the corridors at times / and join the dead voices" (Neruda, 1971, 93). Working this way, it penetrates the cruel reality of political life under a dictator. Without proclaiming a revolutionary message or sounding the call to action, it uses objects abstractly for the impact of their overtones—that is, the associational values of words and the social-political atmospheres that accumulate around them and that communicate the feeling of what it is like to suffer a dictatorship.

Although Neruda did produce a body of great political poetry, he also failed at times to measure up to his own genius in this regard, writing verses that resembled bad agit-prop. He chanced falling into journalism when he wrote about political themes, but his poetic successes well justified the risk. English translations of his less successful efforts often lost the lyrical resonance of his Spanish, becoming mere prose in disguise—a double defeat for Neruda.

Many U.S. poets became deeply involved with translating Neruda in the 1960s because they wanted to provide an alternative to the formal, rationalistic modernism that had dominated the poetry scene in previous decades and that was aided and abetted by the prevailing New Criticism. According to critic and translator John Felstiner, U.S. poets also wanted to share Neruda's "strong political vantage point, and to overcome the anti-Communist, xenophobic isolation" that had kept poets like Neruda in the dark in the United States for so long (Felstiner, 1972, 231). By the mid-1960s, as the Vietnam War was beginning to rage, growing numbers of poets here began to take part in the nation's political life, and at this time many flocked to Neruda's work for its nourishing political style. After all, U.S. poetry had been relatively weak in the area of socially committed verse. Neruda's social context was vastly different. Indeed, Latin American poets were generally not regarded with the suspicion and tolerant indifference inhibiting our own poets.

English translations of Neruda's poetry enjoyed an ever-expanding popularity in the late 1960s. Translators—predominantly poets, not Spanish teachers—were publishing their efforts in all kinds of magazines, especially little magazines, and in anthologies. At least a book or two of Neruda in translation appeared each year, thus giving the English-language audience a more complete picture of his entire canon. All the while, Neruda kept writing new books and encouraging various translators in the United States and in England to translate his poems. Nevertheless, apart from the poets themselves—who were reading and translating Neruda, among other Spanish-language poets (Federico García Lorca, César Vallejo, Octavio Paz, to name three of many), and who understood the importance of the encounter—the wider reading public and critical audience had little or no idea of the real significance of Neruda's impact on U.S. poets.

In *Poetry* in 1967, Willis Barnstone, a worldly poet, translator, and scholar, pointed out that, through Neruda and others from Spain and Spanish America, U.S. poetry was "revital-

izing itself in many ways: finding a new passion, a clear image, a new root in nature...the energy and visual floodtide of Neruda" (Barnstone, 1967, 47). Donald Hall, another poet, translator, and critic of distinction, helped to define this new movement among U.S. poets. They were "using fantastic images, images from deep in the imagination, either to reveal an inward world, or to understand our objective existence in the light of inward knowledge." Writing about the new "deep-image" poet, mentioning Bly and Wright as prime examples, Hall explained: "His method is the image—not the objective picture of the imagist movement, but the fantastic image that comes from the unconscious mind" (Hall, 1964, 18–19). Describing the style of this new U.S. poetry that "eschews logic and other conventional structures," Hall was also describing very accurately, though indirectly, the style Neruda had perfected in his *Residence* poems, which Bly and Wright were actively importing to the United States.

By the early 1970s, Neruda's poetry in English translation—his love poetry, surrealist and political poetry, bardic poetry, populist and inward poetry—had become a significant part of the national literature of the United States. It had helped in a powerful way "to induce a general change of direction in United States poetry, centering around the 'deep image' writers, but branching out into other areas" (Cramer, 1976, 121). Largely through the efforts of Bly along with the other poet-translators, Neruda became a model for poets looking for new directions. Translations of Neruda's poetry had extended the bounds of our own poetry. In the preface to his anthology *Contemporary American Poetry*, published in 1972, Hall acknowledged this contribution, emphasizing that the new movement of what he called fantastic, or expressionist, poetry would become "such a cliché—*bad* fantastic poetry—that it will be difficult to read the good things for a while. You can tell the dominance of a school by the prevalence of bad versions of it....Now the magazines and publishers are overwhelmed by bad imitators of Pablo Neruda" (Hall, 1972, 36).

The 1970s also saw Neruda in both Spanish and English become a source of strength for a new generation of Latino poets in this country, such as (to name a few) Julia Alvarez, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Julio Marzán, Frank Lima, David Unger, Sandra Maria Esteves, Marjorie Agosín, Aurora Levins Morales, and Martín Espada. Among these poets Espada would be the principal heir to Neruda's tradition in terms of his own poetry's wildness, imaginative leaps in language, and political commitment. He would pay frequent homage to Neruda in his work, as well as in accounts of his development as a poet [see: Crohan, C., & Miller-Lachmann, L. (2004). On poetry, war, language, and baseball: An interview with Martín Espada. *MultiCultural Review* 13(1): 55–58].

At the end of that decade James Wright noted that Neruda—the poet most widely translated from Spanish to English—had become a "household word" in the literary community in the United States (Wright, 1980, 50). Even so, among critics here Neruda found both laudators and detractors, friends and enemies. As poet H. R. Hays, an early translator of Neruda, pointed out in 1974, "it took thirty years for the work of...Neruda to penetrate the North American liter-

ary establishment" (Hays, 1974, 32). The translations made by Hays and others that were published in the 1940s and 1950s found only a small audience. (It was, in fact, Hays's renderings in his *12 Spanish American Poets* [1943]—an old copy in the public reading room of the New York Public Library—that originally provided Bly with his first glimpse of Neruda.) But in the 1960s, the steady flourish of English translations finally enabled the Chilean master poet to establish a permanent residence in U.S. poetry, and to confront this establishment with unrelenting zeal. 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—and the number of new books continues to grow. At the same time, Neruda in English needs to be more fully appreciated for having a marked influence on U.S. poetry; that is, for extending the range and capacity of our own speech, our own art and sensibility, through the very act of translation itself, and by opening doors to new possibilities of poetry. 📖

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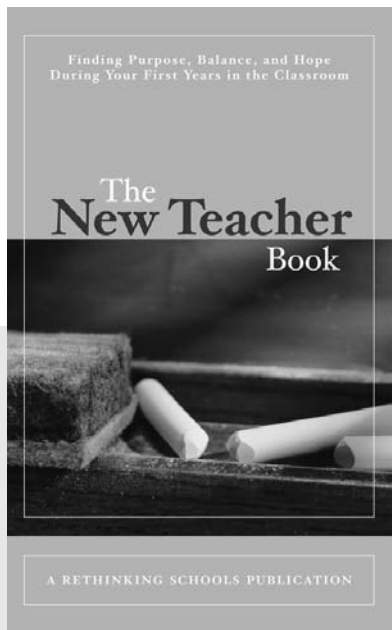
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Jonathan Cohen is the author of prize-winning translations of Latin American poetry and a pioneering scholar in the field of inter-American literature. His latest work is *A Pan-American Life: Selected Poetry and Prose of Muna Lee* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004). He is writer/editor of the surgery department at Stony Brook University and a member of the affiliated faculty of the Latin American and Caribbean Studies program there.

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