

UC Santa Barbara

Translation Studies Journal

Title

Neruda and Blake, The Visionary Company

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/155337tq>

Journal

Translation Studies Journal, 1(1)

ISSN

1555-8614

Author

MacAdam, Alfred

Publication Date

2005

Copyright Information

Copyright 2005 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Neruda and Blake: The Visionary Company

Alfred Mac Adam

Two thousand and four: this year—in case you'd forgotten—marks the one-hundredth year since the birth of Pablo Neruda, the great Chilean poet and 1971 Nobel Laureate. It is fitting that in this symposium dedicated to literary translation we take some time to consider the fact that Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) was a translator and that we acknowledge the traditional role translation has played in the formation of poets everywhere. I would like to use this opportunity generously offered to me by the University of California at Santa Barbara, the Translation Studies Research Focus Group, and my dear friend Jill Levine to examine Neruda's translations of William Blake, whose poetry Neruda probably read in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), during the period 1927-1933, when he was Chilean consul there and in other steamy, exotic nations including Burma and Java.

How and when Neruda first discovered Blake is uncertain, as uncertain as how and when Neruda learned enough English to read Blake.¹ I am, therefore, speculating about the origins of Neruda's Blake translations, but I think my speculations are founded on reasonable assumptions. I will try to recreate the process that gets Neruda to Blake and conclude with a consideration of the translations themselves.

There are many ironies involved in the conjunction of this twentieth-century Chilean poet and an English Romantic, and the first is language. The young Pablo Neruda thought he might be a teacher of French, a perfectly logical idea given the prestige of French culture (especially in Latin America), and given the fact that French literature, French poetry especially, constituted a unified, coherent history and was still going strong—the Surrealists are blazing new poetic paths in 1924. But when Neruda reached Asia—yet another irony: in order to get across the Pacific to Ceylon from Chile, Neruda had to go all the way around the world in the opposite direction (go east in order to go west) because there were no ships sailing directly from Chile to Asian ports—he found himself in an environment where English, thanks to the British Empire, was *the* diplomatic and commercial language. So he learned English, though how is anyone's guess.

After leaving Ceylon, he eventually made his way, in 1930, to Batavia—today's Jakarta—where he met and married a woman of Dutch extraction, Antonieta Hagenaar. The only language they shared was English, as he says in a letter to his father (15 Dec. 1930): "Since I don't speak Dutch yet, and she doesn't speak Spanish, we communicate in English, a language we both speak perfectly" (Montes 50).² That "yet" became an eternity.

Another irony is that the edition of Blake that Neruda probably used was the one edited by Geoffrey Keynes for The Nonesuch Press, the Centenary Edition of 1927. Yet another crux none of Neruda's biographers resolves: Neruda publishes his Blake translations in 1934, but it is not clear if he began them—as I think he did—in Ceylon, or if he did the actual work in Spain. It is slightly weird to think that Neruda in Asia was handed an edition of Blake's poems printed a hundred years after Blake's death in 1827, but equally bizarre that we are all here in Santa Barbara mulling over his translations, which he only published once, in 1934, in Spain, and in a magazine, *Cruz y raya*, owned and operated by the Society of Jesus. So we have an atheistic Chilean poet translating a radical English protestant poet and publishing his translations in a Catholic journal: Either the height of globalized poetry or Surrealism in action.

A good question to ask, yet another not answered by his biographers: Where the devil would Neruda find Keynes's edition of Blake in Ceylon? Indirectly, Neruda himself answers that question. He met a highly cultured man named Lionel Wendt, about whom Neruda says:

This Lionel Wendt, whose personal library was huge and who received the latest books from England, adopted the extravagant and excellent habit of every week sending over to my house a bicycle messenger loaded down with a sack of books. So during that period, I read kilometers of English novels, including *Lady Chatterley* in its first, private edition, published in Florence. (Rodríguez Monegal 86)

Neruda does not mention Blake and says nothing more about Lionel Wendt, an extraordinary man: He was born in Colombo (Ceylon) in 1900, studied law at Cambridge, studied at the Royal Academy of Music, returned to Ceylon in 1924 (just in time to meet Neruda in 1927), and became after 1935, a photographer. He died prematurely in 1944. While

we are at it, it is worth noting that the editor of the Centenary Blake, Geoffrey Keynes (1887-1982) was the brother of John Maynard, the economist, and was both a literary scholar and a surgeon. It is not at all far-fetched to infer that Lionel Wendt would have received Keynes's edition, published by the Nonesuch Press run by Francis Maynell and David Garnett.

The six-years, 1927-1933, Neruda spends in Asia is also the period in which he produces the most visionary of all his books, *Residencia en la tierra* [*Residence on Earth*], a book he had begun writing in Chile before 1925, a book he published first in Chile on his return in 1933, but a book that only achieves its final form in Spain in 1935. All of Neruda's roads led to Spain, the poetic paradise he'd longed for all his life, the place where poetry had become, thanks to Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Jorge Guillén, Pedro Salinas and other members of the Spanish Generation of 1927, the preeminent form of literary expression. But in 1936, Spain become the fiery crucible of the Spanish Civil War. One Neruda would die in the Civil War—the visionary; another Neruda would be born, the poet-prophet of *España en el corazón: himno a las glorias del pueblo en la guerra* [Spain in My Heart: Hymn to the Glories of the People at War] (1937) and *El canto general* [General Song] (1950).

Let's try to put all of these metamorphoses into perspective. Pablo Neruda—born Neftalí Ricardo Reyes, a name he discarded early on (1920-21) to confuse his father who wanted no poets in the family; besides, Pablo Neruda just sounds better—was a provincial, the son of railway worker who became a station chief. Poor but not absolutely poverty stricken, he moved in 1921 from rainy southern Chile (Temuco) to Santiago, where he became a pseudo-student, a full-time poet, and a hard partyer. Santiago in the twenties was a small town; Neruda, despite the success of his extraordinary *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* [Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair] (1924), was an unsophisticated young man, who had seen nothing of the world.

By 1926, Neruda has published three books, is a contender among the young poets of Chile—no mean feat in a field with such figures as the avant-gardist Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948) and Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), another name-changer who would win the Nobel Prize in 1945—and it would be logical for him to make the time-honored journey to Paris that

had been an essential part of the Spanish American poet's education for several generations, especially for the *Modernistas*, the poets of the generation preceding that of Neruda. Huidobro goes to Paris in 1916 knowing very little French, but with help from friends like Juan Gris publishes poetry in French. Neruda, with a good knowledge of French, makes his way to Asia and the English language.

Neruda's experience in Ceylon, Burma, and Java is a bizarre combination of sexual and political anguish, loneliness, boredom, and linguistic exile. Several facts emerge from the poems, letters, and the few journalistic articles he writes during those six years, material Edmundo Olivares Briones has brought together in his *Pablo Neruda: los caminos de oriente; tras las huellas del poeta itinerante* (1927-33). First, Neruda remains poor. He moves in diplomatic circles, attends cocktail parties and receptions, but his only income derives from taxes on goods sent to Chile—fortunately the *chilenos* drink tea. As he says in a letter from Ceylon to the Argentine writer Héctor Eandi dated October 5, 1929:

Consuls of my rank—honorary consuls—receive a miserable salary, the lowest of all in the diplomatic service. My lack of money has made me suffer immensely until now, and even at this very moment I live filled with ignoble conflicts. I receive \$166 U.S. dollars per month, but here that's the salary of the third assistant in a drugstore. And even worse: that salary depends on the income accumulated in the Consulate; that is, if there are no exports to Chile in a given month, I get no salary. (Aguirre 147)

Second, his experience of British colonialism sharpens his sense of social injustice; the poet with undefined concerns about humanity who will become a totally committed Communist begins to find his way to the Party in Asia. Third, he is linguistically isolated. Neruda was a master of the Spanish language who completely dominated traditional metric forms as well as the eccentric rhythms of free verse. For six years, except for letters and the occasional tourist, he is deprived of the Spanish language. Fourth, he faces personal isolation and anguish. Even before he left Chile, Neruda was in love with Albertina Azócar, the object of his affections in his *Veinte poemas de amor* [Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair]. He tries to get

her to run away to Ceylon and marry him. He fails. He enters into a series of liaisons with local women, including the explosive Josie Bliss, from whom he flees, memorably chronicling his cowardice in a great poem "Tango del viudo" ["Widower's Tango"], from *Residencia en la tierra* [Residence on Earth]. So, isolated, dissipated, drinking, he produces the anguished poetry of *Residencia en la tierra*. His time in Asia is a "season in hell," with Neruda suffering the tortures of the damned but achieving the status of visionary in his poetry.

Neruda's reading of Blake was one of the important steps in his achieving visionary status. When we use the word "visionary," we automatically think of Arthur Rimbaud, especially his *A Season in Hell* (1873) and *Illuminations* (1886), and "The Drunken Boat." In his famous letter of 1871 to Paul Demeny, Rimbaud declares:

The first study for a man who wants to be a poet is knowledge of himself, complete. He looks for his soul... But the soul has to be made monstrous... I say one must be a *seer* [voyant], make oneself a seer... The Poet becomes a *seer* by means of a long, immense, and well-planned *disordering of all the senses*. (Rimbaud 10)

Well, how do you do that? The universal standard has been alcohol, sex, and drugs. Lots. Works for me. But that was not Blake's way. He was inspired by those twin generators of madness: politics and theology.

Neruda's criteria in selecting Blake's texts to translate and, ultimately, to publish for a Spanish audience are entirely personal. One biographer, Volodia Teitelboim, commenting on Neruda's translations says:

Neruda continues evolving his life as a poet in love with poetry by translating poetry, by unearthing his great, half-forgotten colleagues. In the Madrid magazine *Cruz y raya*, edited by his friend José Bergamín, appear the "Visions of the Daughters of Albion" and "The Mental Traveller," by William Blake, a poet who fascinated him. He often commented on the impression Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" made on him. (Teitelboim 173)

For the record: Neruda's translations from English, as presented in the third edition of his *Obras Completas* (1967), include Blake, two poems by James Joyce from *Chamber Music*, and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Teitelboim, discussing a poetry reading in Santiago in 1968, adds Walt Whitman to the list. Neruda adored Whitman and had pictures of him in all his houses, but no translations appear in the complete works.

Now to Blake: First, how did Neruda read Blake? Why would he choose the poems he did as opposed, say, to the ten poems included in the 1900 edition of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*? There we find, much as we would expect, "The Tiger" ("Tiger, tiger, burning bright / In the forests of the night") or "Jerusalem" (from *Milton*) ("And did those feet in ancient time / Walk upon England's mountain's green?"), or "The Little Black Boy" ("My mother bore me in the southern wild, / And I am black, but O, my soul is white!"). These are among the "standard" items in the Oxford anthology—the nuggets Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch thought English readers ought to find in such a collection. Neruda is not interested in presenting Blake *per se*, but intent on presenting his idea of Blake.

But was that idea shaped by comprehensive readings about late eighteenth-century English culture, with special emphasis on politics and religious speculation? Or was Neruda reading Blake to the tune of French poetry, especially Rimbaud? *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (ca. 1793) is full of what we would call visionary writing:

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling. (191)³

or, among the "Proverbs of Hell":

Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead.
The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.
Exuberance is Beauty. (192)

To be sure, mixed in with these strange utterances is "A Song of Liberty," a kind of hymn to the successful revolution of England's American colonies and the ongoing French revolution. These thoughts on desire, on the negative effects of reason's control over desire, the need to "disorder the senses" in excess, this meditation on the collapse of ancient regimes in

England and France ("Empire is no more!" Blake shouts) would have struck a resonant chord in Neruda if he could see where Blake, whose language is opaque, is actually talking about politics. Most of us require notes, or, even better, a course to explain these things. But what about the poems he did translate?

"The Mental Traveller" and *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* document moments in the cyclical, recurring failure of mankind to achieve what in Blake's terms "Humanity Divine Incomprehensible" attains at the end of Jerusalem IV. In that text, the Four Faces of Humanity converse:

And they conversed together in Visionary forms dramatic
which bright
Redounded from their Tongues in thunderous majesty, in
Visions In new Expanses... (749)

This is the moment when the Imagination reaches autonomy, the "Spectre" of doubt banished, when the poet is capable of creating the cosmos through his own visionary powers. "To me this world is all one continued vision of Fancy or Imagination," says Blake in a letter to his friend Trusler, a statement that makes him equal to Rimbaud in postulating a visionary self that would transcend egoism.

"The Mental Traveller" describes the abject human condition: sexual differentiation, instinctive breeding, inability to rise above contingency. The narrator is a superhuman observer who describes the newborn child as the fruit of contradiction ("born in joy / begotten in dire woe"), and how, if he is male, he is given up to an old woman who "nails him down upon a rock / catches his shrieks in cups of gold." As the boy matures, the woman grows younger: He turns into an aged wanderer, she into a maiden. He pursues her madly until he becomes, once again, an infant. At the end, he is "the frowning babe," in a grotesque nativity scene. The only way this ever-worsening process of repetition can be stopped is through an explosion of the imagination.

The Visions of the Daughters of Albion also deals with the individual's failure to embrace his own imagination and, like "The Mental Traveller" also concentrates on human sexuality. Here the protagonist is female, Oothoon, raped by Bromion, a thunder god, as she is on her way to her intended mate, Theotormon, an anguished ocean god. Bromion, like

Amnon in the Absalom story, rejects Oothoon as a harlot, but when she turns to Theotormom for consolation she finds only tormented indecision. He can neither love nor despise her. Oothoon is sexually alive in a world where sexuality is repressed. The end of the poem, a kind of Sartrean *Huis Clos*, describes Oothoon lamenting while "Theotormon sits / Upon the margin'd ocean conversing with shadows dire" (215). The Daughters of Albion, the female chorus of the text, echo Oothoon's lamentations, thereby showing that all women share her doom.

The erotic element in Neruda's poetry recalls the defense of sexuality in the *Visions*, just as Blake's criticism of a society based on repression and the blind acceptance of dogma would also appeal to him. But even more important is the central theme of both "The Mental Traveller" and the *Visions*: the need to transcend social restraints (including orthodox religion) and individuality in order to become a visionary. To be a Visionary is to see all (the motto of the *Visions* is "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows") and not to need the comforting rules of society to survive. Neruda's denunciation of things as they are parallels Blake's, and both evoke a world that might be.

Now, the translations themselves. Neruda inverts the chronological order of Blake's poems, but he does repeat the order in which they appear in Keynes's edition. So "The Mental Traveller" (ca. 1803) comes first. The poem is written in four-verse stanzas in Blake's usual iambic pentameter with rhymes in the even verses:

I travel'd thro' a Land of Men,
A Land of Men & Women too,
And heard & saw such dreadful things
As cold Earth wanderers never knew. (110)

Only four words longer than one syllable; it's not exactly the height of sophistication at the level of versification.

Neruda has a problem: to compress laconic, monosyllabic English into polysyllabic Spanish. Let's see what he does:

He viajado a través de un país de hombres,
un país de hombres y también de mujeres,
y he oído y visto tan horribles cosas
como nunca los caminantes de la fría tierra han conocido. (1234)

First, Blake uses a simple past tense (travel'd, heard, saw) that corresponds to the Spanish preterit, but Neruda, possibly evincing a French influence, translates as a present perfect (he viajado, he oído y visto). He conserves Blake's four-verse stanzas, but eliminates rhyme. Where he runs into real difficulty is verse four "As cold Earth wanderers never knew." English allows Blake to use "cold Earth" to modify "wanderers," a kind of catachresis or misuse, but Neruda can't do that. So his verse loses Blake's concision. "Caminantes" sounds more like Baudelaire's "flâneur" than Blake's mysterious "wanderers."

What we have, in short, is a linguistic exercise. Neruda wants to stay as close as possible to the text, but, we remember, it's the text he perceives, so he makes some questionable calls. After Blake's old man moves in with the Maiden, he consumes her and grows young again:

The honey of her Infant lips,
The bread & wine of her sweet smile,
The wild game of her roving Eye,
Does him to Infancy beguile. (112)

Neruda's fine until he gets to "wild game." Everything about her is food: lips are honey, smile is bread and wine. "Wild game" is something you hunt, but Neruda renders the verse "el juego desordenado de su ojo vagabundo," which translates: "the disordered play of her wandering eye."

The *Visions* is much more complex, and here we see Neruda making choices, decisions with which we can agree or disagree. Blake's epigraph "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows" in Neruda is "El ojo ve más de lo que el corazón conoce." Why not *saber*? After all, Blake wants to talk about knowing through the senses rather than the intellect. Blake begins the *Visions* plunging us into his personal mythology:

Enslav'd, the Daughters of Albion weep; a trembling
lamentation
Upon their mountains; in their valleys, sighs toward
America.
For the soft soul of America, Oothoon, wander'd in woe,
Along the vales of Leutha seeking flowers to comfort her;
And thus she spoke to the bright Marygold of Leutha's vale:

"Art thou a flower? art thou a nymph? I see thee now a
flower,
Now a nymph! I dare not pluck thee from thy dewy bed!"
The Golden nymph replied: "Pluck thou my flower,
Oothoon the mild!
Another flower shall spring, because the soul of sweet
delight
Can never pass away. (205)

It's prose, with Blake positing an America of freedom opposed to an England, a Europe in the chains of monarchy. Neruda renders it this way:

En la esclavitud, las hijas de Albión lloran: un lamento
tembloroso
sobre sus montañas, en sus valles, suspira hacia América.
Porque la dulce alma de América, Oothoon, erraba en
aflicción
por los valles de Leutha, buscando flores que la consolasen,
y de este modo habló a la brillante maravilla del valle de
Leutha:
"Eres una flor? Eres una ninfa? Te veo ahora como una flor,
luego como una ninfa. No me atrevo a cogerte de tu lecho
de rocío."
La ninfa dorada respondió: "Coge mi flor, o suave Oothoon,
otra flor nacerá, porque el alma del dulce deleite no puede
morir nunca. (1224-25)

Except for rendering "enslav'd" by the longer "en la esclavitud," Neruda's version here stays very close to the original. Translating "trembling," a participle, as an adjective, "tembloroso," takes away some of the action, but Neruda may have had no alternative here. The rest is straightforward and literal.

What the readers of *Cruz y raya* got in 1934 was Pablo Neruda disguised as William Blake. Perhaps that's what all translators are: Authors in disguise.

Notes

1. Even the most recent biography of Neruda, Adam Feinstein's *Pablo Neruda: a Passion for Life* (2004), makes no mention of how or when Neruda learned English.
2. All translations unless otherwise stated are mine.
3. All quotations from Blake taken from: ed. Geoffrey Keynes, *Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (1927), 1932.

Works Cited

- Aguirre, Margarita. *Vidas de Pablo Neruda*, 1973
- Blake, William. *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. Geoffrey Keynes, 1932 (1927).
- Montes, Hugo. *Pablo Neruda: cartas a Laura*, 1978.
- Neruda, Pablo. *Obras completas*, 3 vols. 3rd. ed., 1967
- Olivares Briones, Edmundo. *Pablo Neruda: los caminos de oriente; tras las huellas del poeta itinerante [1927-33]*, 2000.
- Quiller-Couch, Sir Arthur, ed. *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250-1918* (1900), New Edition, 1941.
- Rimbaud, Arthur, Letter to Paul Demeny, May 15, 1871. Trans. Oliver Bernard in the Penguin *Rimbaud*, 1966.
- Rodríguez-Monegal, Emir. *El viajero inmóvil*. 1966.
- Teitelboim, Volodia. *Neruda*, 1985.

***Other works without which I could not have written this paper:
Erdman, David V. *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, 3rd. ed. 1991.
Frye, Northrop. *Fearful Symmetry: a Study of William Blake*, 1962.