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# Translation Review Article



# Inviting English Readers to Lucho's Notebooks: A Translation Review of *The School of Solitude: Collected Poems*

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LUIS HERNÁNDEZ. *The School of Solitude: Collected Poems*. Translation and Foreword by Anthony L. Geist. Chicago: Swan Isle Press, 2015.

Luis (Lucho) Hernández (Lima, Peru, 1941—Santo Lugares, Argentina, 1977) is a popular literary figure in Peru, who gained only limited scholarly attention. In his short life, he was a practicing medical professional who also faced drug addiction and frequent internment in rehabilitation centers up until his mysterious death. Nevertheless, Hernández's poetry has had a long-lasting impact on the Peruvian literary community. Before the age of 24, he published three collections of poetry: *Charlie Melnik* (1962), *Orilla* (1964), and *Las constelaciones* (1965). Although Hernández would never publish again, he kept writing fervently in school notebooks, filling the pages with poems, translations of song lyrics, calligraphy, colorful sketches, and musical notes floating across the pages—poetic creations and even illicit plagiarism that he would share with friends, family, and even complete strangers he would meet in bars.

In 1999, Hernández's notebooks were publicly exhibited for the first time at a local conference in Lima. The Biblioteca Central of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú then collaborated with Hernández's family to have these notebook manuscripts (known as "cuadernos del ropero," or "closet notebooks") donated to the library, which were then preserved and digitized for online public access.<sup>1</sup> The online database holds about two thousand images and about four thousand documents of Hernández's poetic and visual endeavors—yet even this vast collection remains incomplete because of the many notebooks unaccounted for, those that Hernández donated to unknown strangers.

*The School of Solitude: Collected Poems* (2015) features select poems from this notebook collection, a refreshing experience for Spanish readers and now made available to English readers, thanks to Anthony Geist's clever translations. The collection, placed in side-by-side bilingual format and with notebook illustrations included, allows a new generation of English and Spanish readers to relish in this impressive poetic and translation endeavor.

As discussed in Geist's "Foreword," Hernández's notebook poetry emerges under the sign of melancholy and nostalgia. Geist relates that "the poet evokes an irrevocably distant past from a desolate site in the present. Past happiness and joy, love, and fulfillment, are remembered (re-remembered, re-assembled) in scraps and fragments, like shards of ancient pottery cast on a distant shore" (xii). Hernández evokes images of paradises of past loves, music, gardens, beaches, and even swimming pools, that are playfully relimbed together.

Similarly, Geist's English translation continues this disjointedness from the Spanish. As Geist writes: "In trans-lating (that is, in moving the texts from one side to the other) I hope not to have fixed meaning in English but to have left the poems as open, ambiguous, and moving as they are in Spanish" (xv). Geist asserts that Hernández's poetry is built on "incomplete sentences, dangling clauses, half-finished thoughts and formulations" (xiv). In so doing, Geist's translation strips the English literary language from its tendency to be written with—and generally lauded for—clarity and precision. Geist picks up the entrails from Hernández's poems not to tie the loose ends to Hernández's dangling lines, but rather to further play with and even intensify the indecipherable ambiguities that draw Spanish-language readers to Hernández's poetry. The notebook pages spatially shape the discontinuities in Hernández's writing, and Geist's translations also invite the reader to play with the whiteness of the page that the English translation hinges on for a more enriching reading experience. In the following review article, I examine select translated poems that reveal Geist's playful interaction with Hernández's poetry.

In the poem "Cuando quiero escribir," Hernández reveals the tension between productivity and vagrancy; between writing for a productive end and writing as a continuous process that interlaces with living and re-living. The poem opens: "Cuando quiero escribir / Algo no lo hago" (32). The poem's first lines already destabilize this binary, where ending the first line with the verb "escribir" instantly jerks

the reader's linear comprehension to urgently ask: to write. . .*what?* Already the reader is denied a convenient resolution, forcing the reader to jump rather jarringly to the second line and to (hopefully) relieve the reader's frustrating bewilderment. But the second line only blurs the reader's experience even more, as the poem's dangling thought is made even more ambiguous: "Algo no lo hago." It denies any concrete purpose tied to the writing process. As the poem continues, it leaves imprints of the fragmented or vagrant experiences of crying, laughing, and chit-chatting over the phone that both keep the poetic voice from actually writing, but also inspire him to write as an act of reprocessing these lived moments. Rather than framing these emotional experiences as distractions from productively working (that of writing), the poem invites these moments of idleness to be a continuous (and frustrating) interplay between living, remembering, and forgetting these experiences.

As the poem playfully concludes, these lived experiences "me pretextan / Hacia la vagancia" (32). "La vagancia" translates as idleness or even laziness, but it also invites an additional meaning of exploration, where its purpose is fulfilled in the act of wandering. Moreover, "me pretextan" suggests a motive, either voluntarily or involuntarily enacted to excuse oneself from an obligation. Thus, the poem concludes with this ambivalence between one's active choice, or simply having no choice in the matter to write, to live, and to produce; all of which circulate as fragmented parts to in a continuum of aimless experiences. But it is in these aimless experiences that allow for writing to re-attach and to also forget these past moments. Hernández's poem is interested both in the memories that fill the pages, but also in probing which memories are forgotten and that leave blank spaces on the page.

Geist's translation takes a fascinating turn with the poem, which invites a new understanding to Hernández's intimations. Geist's poem introduces an additional shade of pre-emptive *guilt* that also comes out of this binary between productivity and vagrancy. As Geist writes, ". . .Laughter/ Or the telephone / Alibi me / Toward indolence." To claim an alibi evokes an urgent act of justification, on the verge of accusation. Geist's translation intensifies Hernández's "pretexts" for not writing: the English version invites outside parties to easily judge and fault the poet. In a similar light with Hernández's "vagancia," Geist carefully plays with the ambivalent tension between

the extremes of laziness and productivity. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “indolence” suggests a state of rest or ease, in which neither pain nor pleasure is felt. Geist’s “indolence” is neither laziness, nor productivity, but rather an in-between alibi that offers more of an ambiguous justification that cannot be easily judged.

This theme of indolence or “vagancia” continues to thread itself throughout the collection, and is also worked through in “Yo hubiera sido” / “I would have been.”

|                  |                   |
|------------------|-------------------|
| Yo hubiera sido  | I would have been |
| Premio Nobel     | A Nobel Prize     |
| De Física        | In Physics        |
| <br>             |                   |
| Pero el mar      | But the sea       |
| La cerveza       | A can of beer     |
| <br>             |                   |
| Y un amor        | And a lover       |
| <br>             |                   |
| Me lo impidieron | Got in the way    |
| (Hernández, 110) | (Geist, 111)      |

As in “Cuando quiero escribir,” Hernández destabilizes the binaries between the value of achievement (symbolized in the Nobel Prize) and the value of triviality (of love, drinking beer, the sea). Hernández blurs these constructed ideals that also mitigate any quick judgments to be made toward vagrancy or productivity. Rather, he re-constructs these modes of producing and living to be continuous in experience rather than demarcated, where the reader is left questioning whether falling in love versus winning the Nobel Prize share greater, lesser, or equal value. As the poem concludes though, these moments of loving, drinking, and wandering keep the lyrical voice from winning the Nobel Prize: “me lo impidieron.” But as with the previous poem, Hernández leaves the reader to question whether it was a deliberate choice made by the poetic subject or the consequence of non-sequiturs that led to this non-achievement. Hernández denies readers the ability to judge, and instead leaves them to contemplate the continuities of events and non-events and the cultural, economic, and social values placed upon them.

Geist’s translation carries forward this playful tone into a colloquial English translation. Translating “La cerveza” as “A can of beer,”

Geist evokes a moment of light-heartedness and gaiety that friends share over a beer. Geist continues this playful tone in concluding the poem with “. . .Got in the way” for “Me lo impidieron.” More literal translations like “which prevented me” or “which distracted me” would have created a heavier effect, which could have more easily opened the English reader to make a snap judgment. Geist smoothly resolves this ill-tendency with the colloquial phrase “Got in the way,” a phrase that sidesteps judgment, accusation, or resentment from the reader. The indecipherability of meaning that so permeates through Hernández poetic writing is extended into the English translation, offering a shade of ambiguity that the English language generally eliminates altogether to achieve a sense of clarity. Geist undermines this tendency toward clarity, and successfully offers a degenerative tone in the English language that not only dialogues well with the Spanish original, but also opens a new space in English.

Hernández’s notebook poems are also enriched with his erudition in musical culture ranging from Baroque and French impressionism, to modernism and 1960s rock. His poems eulogize composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Richard Strauss, Jacques Offenbach, Claude Debussy, Franz Liszt, Igor Stravinsky, Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, as well as Brian Jones from the Rolling Stones. But the leading figure that guides his ideological relationship to music is Apollo, the Greek god of music, muses, and the arts. Several of his poems, such as “Apollon Musagète,” “Los laureles” / “Laurel leaves,” “Si cantara,” / “If I were to sing,” and “Apolo azul,” / “Blue Apollo” play with this trope. But rather than laud Apollo’s elliptical transcendence, Hernández reassembles the mythic god into a plastic figure to draw out multiple meanings, stripping away any universal meaning toward music. In “Los laureles,” Apollo’s signature laurel crown is reconfigured to dress a pasta dish:

Los laureles  
 se emplean  
 En los poetas  
 Y en los tallarines  
 (Hernández, 20)

Hernández re-employs the beauty of a laurel wreath as a beauty also found atop a pile of noodles.



Geist's translation facilitates this interplay between noodles and gods by layering an alliterative relationship between "poets" and "pasta: "Laurel leaves / Crown / Both poets / And pasta." Rather than translating "tallarines" as "noodles," which would be a more literal translation, Geist amplifies a sonic and more colloquial dimension with "pasta." Moreover, this alliteration parallels beautifully with the alliteration "Laurel leaves." Apollo's figure now becomes a sonic figure in the English translation, an improvement on the Spanish original.

Musical composers are also malleably reconfigured to participate in Hernández's colloquial music-word-play. Hernández's "Bach es capito" creates an alliterative sonic effect:

Bach es capito  
 El Concierto Brendenburgués  
 Número cinco  
 Es la cumbre  
 Del ciclismo.  
 (Hernández, 50)

The poem sonically cycles between alliterations, re-playing Bach's baroque style of composition that cycles the thematic motif in melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic variation. This musical reference is then folded into the literal cycling motion of a bicycle, "el ciclismo," a double entendre that recalls a mode of transport and the cycling effect that moves forward a Baroque piece. Hernández's word play is a crucial moment in the poem, which offers the reader a new alternative bike path, to re-cycle Bach's music and to decenter its meaning anew.

Geist's translation just shies away from this musical effect. Geist's choice of translating "ciclismo" for "bike racing" doesn't quite render Hernández's double entendre of "ciclismo":

Bach is Boss  
 The Brandenburg Concerto  
 Number five  
 Is the peak  
 Of bike racing.  
 (Geist, 51)

Nevertheless, Geist might have shied away from its English cognate (cycling) to avoid the translator's easy choice. In a more elegant fashion, Geist does find an alternative solution that both keeps an alliterative effect and, more significantly, manages to also add a rock music reference—a double-edged solution that improves Hernández's original. Geist's "Bach is Boss" makes a direct reference to Bruce Springsteen's nickname, "The Boss," who became a popular figure by the late 1960s. In so doing, Geist's translation makes the clever move to align with Hernández's penchant for combining high and low musical referents, while also enriching the English reader's familiarity with 1960s rock culture even more.

Hernández dedicates the final poem included in *School of Solitude*, "A un suicida en una piscina" / "To a Suicide in a Swimming Pool," to Brian Jones, a former rhythm guitarist for the Rolling Stones. In 1969, Jones was kicked out of the Rolling Stones by Keith Richards, Charlie Watts, and Mick Jagger due to his drug addiction. One month later, he was found drowned in his swimming pool in Hartfield, caused by alcohol and a drug overdose. Nevertheless, he was much beloved by the musicians and artists leading the 1960's counterculture. Upon his death, Pete Townshend from The Who published a poem in the *Times* entitled, "A Normal Day for Brian, A Man Who Died Every Day," and Jim Morrison wrote "Ode to L.A. While Thinking of Brian Jones, Deceased." Their poems intimately poeticize a lost friend and sorrowfully bid him farewell.

In a similar way, Hernández's ode to Jones adds a new voice to the 1960s rock stars' eulogies. But more importantly, Hernández revises how we read, listen to, and remember 1960s musical countercultures, transforming it into a violently image-full and corporeal sensation. The poem recalls Jimi Hendrix's 1967 psychedelic love song, "Purple Haze." Revised as "añil claridad," / "indigo clarity," this phrase is repeated three times in the poem. Hernández's poem turns Hendrix's purple hazed world inside out, where we stare at Jones from the other side of Alice's looking glass and where Hendrix's purple is now a few shades bluer. At the same time, Hernández's poem keeps Jones's revived corpse at an impenetrable distance, whose musical artistry now must be remembered as untenable, drowned echoes—floating between the living and the dead, between blue and indigo.

In one of the most crucial turning points in Jones's reawakening, Hernández writes:

|                                |                                    |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| No mueras                      | Do not die                         |
| Entreteje con su añil claridad | Weave into its indigo clarity      |
| No mueras                      | Do not die                         |
| Por lo que Dios más ame        | In the name of what God loves best |
| Sal de las aguas               | Emerge from the waters             |
| Sécate                         | Towel off                          |
| Contéplate en el espejo        | Look into the mirror               |
| En el cual te ahogabas         | Where you were drowning            |
| (Hernández, 160)               | (Geist, 161)                       |

Geist's translation extends this colorful revision of this cultural phenomenon of 1960s rock—a crucial step for an English-language readership who would be very familiar with this music culture. Geist's translation brings a new understanding of “purple haze” into the mix by stretching its optical limits into “indigo clarity.” This represents a huge literary contribution to this well-canonized era of music and how it is historicized in the English language.

Hernández's poem continues to stretch the corporeal experience embodied in 1960s rock music. As the poem continues, lines are blurred between the sounds produced by the human body and those produced by the body of technology used to amplify the human singing voice:

|                                  |                                    |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Por tener unos seres bellísimos  | For its gorgeous beings            |
| Que emiten sonidos con el cuello | Who emit sounds from their throats |
| Esa unión entre el cuerpo        | That hinge between body            |
| Y los ensueños                   | And dreams                         |
| Y con sus máquinas ingenuas      | And with innocent devices          |
| Que se llevan a los labios       | They raise to their lips           |
| O acarician con las manos        | Or stroke with their hands         |
| (Hernández, 160)                 | (Geist, 161)                       |

Geist's translation intensifies this ambiguity: the word choice of “hinge” more intensely reveals this indecipherable threshold between the human body and technology and challenges Hernández's term “esa unión.” The “throats” that produces sound or the microphone that amplifies it, called “innocent devices,” are impossible for listener and singer alike to untether. Through Geist's translation, the sensational creation of 1960s rock music hinges upon not only the human body

producing the sound, but more importantly, the sound reproduced by the microphone and recording device. Geist's translation makes clear the connection between the history of technology and the music-making body that is in constant play and fragmentation, rather than in complete unity as suggested by Hernández. This poem and its translation make for the perfect close for introducing a Peruvian poet to a North American and English audience who would greatly appreciate this ode to 1960s music culture.

I conclude with Hernández's own work in translation from English into Spanish. In one of the thousands of documents available in the online library collections of the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, I found a treasure not included in *The School of Solitude*, but one that furthers the dialogue with Hernández's affinity with 1960s music. Hernández penned in red a Spanish translation of The Beatles' song, "Honey Pie" (words and music by Paul McCartney and John Lennon; song released in *The White Album*, 1968). This song, and its placement in *The White Album*, would align perfectly with Hernández's poetic commitment to play with the blank (white) page, reminding the reader of fragmented and unfinished stories that The Beatles, too, leave behind within the traces of their lyrics.

Thus, Hernández writes on the blank spaces of the *White Album*, offering his own version to these famous lyrics that cleverly brings into the Spanish lyric the English brevity that colors McCartney's and Lennon's lyrical aesthetic. And if sung out loud, Hernández's translation lines up almost perfectly in musical phrasing and rhyme to replicate the English lyrics. For example, Hernández's translation of the refrain, "Oh honey pie, you are making me crazy. . ." fits nicely for a Spanish song refrain as well:

|                    |                                    |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Honey pie me estás | Honey Pie,                         |
| volviendo loco     | you are making me crazy.           |
| Estoy enamorado    | I'm in love                        |
| Pero soy flojo     | but I'm lazy,                      |
| así pues           | so won't                           |
| ven al hogar.      | you please come home. <sup>2</sup> |

The English refrain's alliteration, "I'm in love but I'm lazy," translates beautifully in Hernández's assonant play between "loco" and "flojo," that captures the colloquial language in McCartney's and Lennon's

lyrics. This translation not only demonstrates Hernández's love for this music—it also reveals the reach and reinterpretation of this popular global phenomenon by those living on the margins.

|                            |                                    |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Ella era una empleada      | She was a working girl             |
| al norte de Inglaterra     | North of England way.              |
| Ahora está                 | Now she's hit                      |
| en su bello tiempo         | the big time                       |
| En los U.S.A.              | in the U.S.A.                      |
| Y si ella me oyera         | And if she could only hear me      |
| Esto es, los que le diría: | this is what I'd say. <sup>3</sup> |
| le diría:                  |                                    |

Through Hernández's poetry and Geist's translation, English and Spanish become a much more fluid and playful duet of linguistic, musical, and cultural exchange between North America, Western Europe, and South America. This translated work offers a notable contribution of re-writing and re-configuring the 1960s generation of counterculture writers and artists, which irrevocably is provoked, played with, and challenged by the work of the Peruvian poet, Luis (Lucho) Hernández.

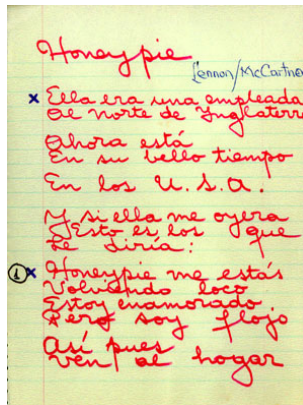


Fig. 1. Cuaderno 31, pp. 75. *Cuadernos de Luis Hernández*. Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. Biblioteca Central, Colecciones Especiales, Oficina de Comunicación Digital. [http://biblioteca.pucp.edu.pe/luis-hernandez/cua/cua\\_pag.php?31](http://biblioteca.pucp.edu.pe/luis-hernandez/cua/cua_pag.php?31)

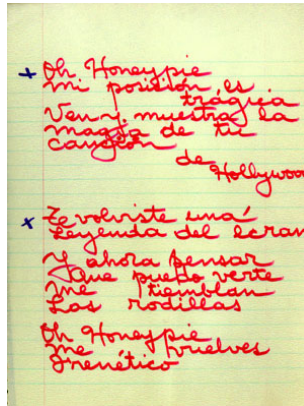


Fig. 2. Cuaderno 31, pp. 76. *Cuadernos de Luis Hernández*. Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. Biblioteca Central, Colecciones Especiales, Oficina de Comunicación Digital. [http://biblioteca.pucp.edu.pe/luis-hernandez/cua/cua\\_pag.php?31](http://biblioteca.pucp.edu.pe/luis-hernandez/cua/cua_pag.php?31)

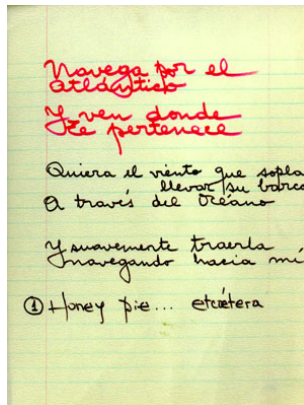


Fig. 3. Cuaderno 31, pp. 77. *Cuadernos de Luis Hernández*. Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. Biblioteca Central, Colecciones Especiales, Oficina de Comunicación Digital. [http://biblioteca.pucp.edu.pe/luis-hernandez/cua/cua\\_pag.php?31](http://biblioteca.pucp.edu.pe/luis-hernandez/cua/cua_pag.php?31)

## Notes

1. "Presentación." Cuadernos de Luis Hernández. Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. Biblioteca Central, Colecciones Especiales, Oficina de Comunicación Digital. <http://biblioteca.pucp.edu.pe/luis-hernandez/pre.htm>

2. The Beatles. "Honey Pie." McCartney-Lennon. *The White Album*. 1968. Words and Music by Paul McCartney and John Lennon. Copyright 1968 Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

3. *Ibid.*