

## The Mystery and Mystique of Pablo Neruda: An English-Speaker's Dilemma

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“Te amo como la planta que no florece y lleva dentro de sí, escondida, la luz de aquellas flores, y gracias a tu amor vive oscuro en mi cuerpo el apretado aroma que ascendió de la tierra” (Neruda). The earthy rhythm and luscious flow of these words is undeniable, even for one who does not understand Español. When you say the words aloud, no matter your comprehension, they roll off the tongue with a certain sensitivity and fluidity that is just not exuded from English words. The above stanza in English is “I love you as the plant that doesn’t bloom, but carries the light of those flowers, hidden, within itself, and thanks to your love, the tight aroma that arose from the earth lives dimly in my body” (Neruda, Trans. Eisner).

The emotion just does not compare. English is clunky, stemming from Germanic languages rather than ever-so-graceful Latin. In Spanish, there is a certain romantic quality to the phonetics that adds its own unique color to meaning. The words shimmer. They dance. And this central vibrance is lost in the English translations of Spanish language – whether it be books, songs, or poetry. Some Spanish poetry is so intricately lyrical that an accurate translation is near impossible. This is true for the work of the Chilean Pablo Neruda – “a poet, a public servant, a nationalist and a Communist”– and the author of the introductory phrase (Becker). His poetry is “very hard to translate,” thus his English work is only “a small portion of his total output.” Nevertheless, John Leonard crowned Neruda the “Whitman of the south”– perhaps a tad too Eurocentric of a complement, but a monumental honor nonetheless (Biography: Pablo Neruda). Neruda is a Chileno hero; he is a true champion in the Latin American literary sphere.

However, how much of Neruda’s work can English speakers truly appreciate? How much of its ethereal beauty is lost to the constraints and chains of language? To understand this, we must honor the opinions and thoughts of those who both speak Spanish language and have a rich understanding and appreciation of Hispanic culture.

Maria Gaxiola Borla, when asked what is lost in translations of Spanish to English, answered “everything.” Borla is a bilingual Mexican-American mother of two from Schaumburg, Illinois. She argues that Spanish is more than just a language; it encompasses unique meaning that completely disappears in translation. “I think the essence of any poem is lost with any translation,” she said. “Same for songs.” Borla’s favorite poem, “Reir Llorando” by Juan de Dios Peza, just doesn’t touch her “at the same level” in English (Borla). Borla argues that this lack of emotional complexity makes any Spanish to English translation essentially void. Burton Raffel, the author of *The Art of Translating Poetry*, would agree. “If every human language is distinct (as it is) in structure, sound, and vocabulary... then clearly it is literally impossible to fully render anything written in one language into another” (Verástegui 4). And in poems, where structure and sound are so central to the heart of the matter, any translation is entirely changed from the original work of art, disrespecting the original art on a certain level. “No, seriously,” Borla said. “I think poetry shouldn’t be translated at all. It’s supposed to be written with the soul of that one writing it” (Borla).

Neruda did add a dimension of soul to his poetry – a soul that was woven together by the Spanish language and draped in Latin American pride. Pablo Neruda, born as Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto, was born in Southern Chile in 1904. As a young man, he was a consul and a writer. His first work, *Residencia en la Tierra*, was written between 1925 and 1935. It contained “oblique imagery, difficult metaphors and a deep sense of melancholy” – surreal eroticism and romanticism capturing both his heart-wrenching love and “subjugation” for women. This was the beginning of the core foundation of his poetry – the connection between humanity and the earth. Neruda first accessed this “joyous” connection through “physical love.” He would often relate earthy creations (such as pines, mountains, and waves) and human creations (such as bells and lights) to the fleshy, feminine body of his lover (Becker).

Neruda’s obsession with tangible romance soon intertwined with his increasingly left-leaning political views. He became an avid member of the Chile’s Communist Party and in 1948 he fled his country, across the Andes Mountains, on the back of a horse. His politics bled a sort of romanticized universalism into his prose. Rather than intensely “intimate” like his younger poetry, his literary world expanded – valuing the “communal over the individual” in a “Communist fashion.” Keeping his fervid eroticism in full effect, he now connected his romance with the universe, such as this excerpt from “The Great Ocean,” the fourteenth canto of his *Canto General* (Becker).

“At night I dream that you and I are two plants

that grew together, roots entwined,

that you know earth and rain like my mouth, because we’re made of earth and rain. Sometimes I think that with death we’ll sleep below,

in the depths of the effigy’s feet,

gazing at the Ocean that brought us to build and to love.”

And the Spanish:

De noche sueño que tú y yo somos dos plantas que se elevaron juntas, con raíces enredadas,

y que tú conoces la tierra y la lluvia como mi boca,

porque de tierra y de lluvia estamos hechos. A veces pienso que con la muerte dormiremos abajo,

en la profundidad de los pies de la efigie,

mirando el Océano que nos trajo a construir y a amar.

This broad, expanding feeling of love captures his own romance between lyrical expressions of sex and Communism. He was indeed passionate; Neruda himself described his poems as “coloring by passion” (Becker). He succeeded in coloring his world with passion and the rest of world

couldn't help but notice. He received the Nobel Prize for literature in Paris, and he died in Chile shortly after in 1973 (Biography: Pablo Neruda). But even decades after his death, Pablo Neruda's symbol lives on – he left a “strong presence in Chile and in poetry today, politically and artistically” (Becker).

Nicolas Troconso Olate is from [Concepción, Chile](#). He has lived in both the United States and Chile and speaks beautiful English and Spanish. Although not as completely turned off by translations as Borla, he found them distracting from the original Spanish elegance. “A lot of the words in the Spanish version, when translated into English, lose a little bit of meaning... The translation is a different feel with the words that they use.” He emphasized that this “feel” was different, but even then he had trouble articulating this “feel” in English.

In Spanish it's easier to connect – it's more passionate, you could say. It's more... I don't know, I'm trying to think of the word in English [chuckles]. It's more passionate... In Spanish you can understand it better. Especially from Chile, with the words that he's using, it has different feel. So not many things are lost when it's translated into English, but the main thing is the passion. Even though it's already passionate in English, in Spanish it's even *more* passionate. (Olate) Olate could not even come up with accurate English words to explain Neruda's level of emotion; passion was the closest he could find. English words that correctly capture the richness, the textures, and the complexity of Neruda's verbal displays of love just do not exist in English.

Olate also described the rhythmic changes in switching languages. “You have to get into the poetic rhythm to understand what he's saying in English.” He went on to describe that with any poem you must find the poetic rhythm of the words to fully experience it. He found that both languages require this poetic rhythm, and that does not differ greatly, but in Spanish, the rhythm is essentially easier to experience. “To be honest, there's not much change. But you gotta understand the ‘feel,’ and in Spanish that [feel] makes more sense” (Olate). Indeed, the rhythm of the original Spanish verse is a completely different listening and speaking experience. The differences in the movements of your tongue against your teeth when you pronounce the words puts emphasis on different syllables and changes the fundamental pulse of the poem. And the play between syntax and sound within the limits of the Spanish language was Neruda's speciality.

Alastair Reid, Neruda's close friend and translator, found that Neruda's voice provided the frameworks for his own personal translation. “[Neruda] had this very slow, affecting voice and his voice was the instrument for which he wrote.... I listened to that voice endlessly because I knew what I had to find in English, in translating, was a form of English that more or less reflected the same tones and the same moods as the Spanish did.” Neruda's voice was a genuine instrument, with “sound and syntax” as the “harmony” (qtd. In Verástegui 3-4). As he expressed himself in warm, passionate Spanish, his words sang. Such a beautiful collection of rhythm and tone is, and should be, universal – a type of music – without having to be entirely changed into English.

Being a Chileno, Olate also found that the Spanish words have entirely different meanings unique to Chile and Chile's cultural context. “Even though he was a famous poet, he used a lot of words that have a different sense – or meaning – in Chile than they do anywhere else in Latin America,” he said. These distinct yet subtle meanings and connotations are completely lost in translation. We must remember that “the translation of a text is part of the translation of a culture,” according to

Françoise Wuilmart. The original language and the target languages may be expressing entirely different “world visions.” These mistranslations can be expressed in “conjugation, syntax, shades of meaning and modulations, as well as in the very rhythm of the sentences” (qtd. in Verástegui 15). Olate’s reading experience differs entirely not only from mine, but also from any Mexicano, Colombiano, or Hondureño. The Chilean dialect coloring Neruda’s expression is entirely unique to that of Chile. This is an exquisite dimension of Neruda’s poetry that vanishes with any sort of meddling, obviously including English translation. “The translator who chooses to adapt original cultural elements to the ‘receiving’ culture/language ruins the exotic – and genuine – dimension of the original text and levels his translated text in an improper manner” (Verástegui 15).

To illustrate the dimensions of Neruda’s work that have been entirely transformed, Maristela Verástegui explores several different translations of the first phrase of Neruda’s Sonnet XII. Vividly erotic and thick with imagery, this poem explores “geography as a feature of the female body” from the “stars down to earth” (2). Even within the first simple phrase, the three different translations entirely transform the subtle meanings and feelings. The poem begins with “Plena mujer, manzana carnal, luna caliente,” painting a picture of a lust-filled night time scene between lovers (Verástegui 3).

Tapscott translated the first line into “Full woman, flesh-apple, hot moon” (qtd. in Verástegui 3). The phrase “full woman” does an adequate job of capturing the Biblical idea that a woman needs a man to be whole, via sexual intercourse – alluding that that is indeed occurring. This also hints to a bit of cultural Latin American machismo, where there is “incompleteness of women as part of its structure of male dominance” (Verástegui 6). Without this crucial layer of cultural knowledge, an American reader may not fully understand what exactly “plena mujer” or “full woman” truly means. As Verástegui states, “Neruda may have been a communist, but there is no evidence that he was a feminist” (6). To Neruda, a full woman meant that a man was there to make her complete.

Mitchell’s translation is similar – “Full woman, fleshly apple, hot moon” (Verástegui 3). He keeps the “full woman” unchanged, but he differs from Tapscott with “freshly apple” rather than “flesh-apple.” In both Spanish and English, the apple, paired with sex, has a sinful connotation. Now the woman is a sort of sexualized Eve, “who not only ate the apple, but has become the apple.” Her body is forbidden fruit – sin, temptation. “By penetrating her, the poet tastes the forbidden fruit made flesh.” Tapscott’s “flesh-apple” “equalizes” these two images. However, in the Spanish version, the manzana (apple) is being qualified by carnal (fleshy). Tapscott’s presentation of the flesh and the apple as one fails to act as a “compendium of features that modify and describe woman” (Verástegui 9). Mitchell’s “fleshy apple” does a better job of correctly describing this ripe woman of sin. But even then, “fleshy” does not have nearly as much of the dark, sinful connotation that “carnal” does in Spanish. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “fleshy” as “Rarely of persons: Given up to bodily lusts; =CARNAL.” But the *Diccionario de la lengua Española* defines carnal as “concerning or relative to the flesh,” “lascivious or lustful,” and “earthly and only concerned with worldly things” (qtd. in Verástegui 9). The slight difference in definitions creates a large difference in the description of this female as a forbidden fruit. The Spanish “carnal” gives her a darker, more sexual quality of “lascivious.” This cannot be captured in English.

Belitt translates the phrase a bit differently into “Carnal apple, woman incarnate, incandescent moon” (qtd. in Verástegui 3). In this version, the sexual connotation of “plena” or “full” is lost.

Incarnate, meaning embodied in flesh, is somewhat redundant and does not truly capture the sensual tone Neruda's original "plena mujer" encompasses (Verástegui 7). In addition, the repetition of "carnal" and "incarnate" changes the entire sound of the verse; it is an oratory repetition that Neruda did not ask for (Verástegui 7). And the movement of the woman from the first to the second clause shifts the spotlight off of her and onto the apple. Neruda had the full woman first, as the subject of the sentence and the poem. By changing that, Belitt entirely transforms the meaning.

The final clause, "luna caliente," is probably the most critical to the central meaning of this poem. This paradoxical binary explores the both English and Spanish concepts of hot/cold, sun/moon, and male/female. However, these binaries have a special importance in the "context of Hispanic culture." They "date back to the creation myths and the lore of pre-Hispanic peoples" (Verástegui 10). This, of course, is entirely lost in English translation. The moon, la luna, is a culturally feminine word and concept – more cool, gentle, and soft than the flaming sun. Yet Neruda described her as "caliente," alluding to a dynamic male presence amidst her fresh, pearly glow. Caliente is defined as "having or producing heat," "lustful, prone to sexual appetite" and "sexually aroused" by the *Diccionario de la lengua Española* (qtd. in Verástegui 11). Indeed, "luna caliente" has a sexual bite to it. Mitchell and Tapscott do an OK job of encompassing this with "hot moon." Although not nearly as sensual as "luna caliente," there is a slim shadow of sexuality that the English reader can somewhat grasp. However, Belitt's "incandescent moon," turning the woman into a luminous, shining beacon, utterly fails to capture her arousal by a warm, male presence (qtd. in Verástegui 11). The sexual connotation is completely lost, and the gorgeous Hispanic binary is as well.

Although there are many translations of Neruda's work, each varying in quality and accuracy, none of them wholly encompass the true meanings that are expressed in Spanish. No matter how hard translators try to stay true to the cultural connotations, the central meanings of the poems, and the rhythmic pulse of the prose, it is just impossible. English speakers can strive to experience the bare skeleton of Spanish poetry and song, but we will never be able to capture and comprehend the true essence of the Spanish language – especially with such deep poetry as Neruda.

"The night is star-filled and the blue stars are shivering in the distance" simply does not equal "La noche está estrellada, y tiritan, azules, los astros, a los lejos" (Neruda, Trans. Johnson). It cannot and will not ever be equal in complexity, meaning, or musicality. The dimensions of Neruda's romance will always be a mystery to those who do not speak Spanish.

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