

**THE ESSENTIAL NERUDA.** Edited by Mark Eisner. Pp. 199. San Francisco:  
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### **Abstract**

In April 2004 an independent American publisher, City Lights, based in San Francisco, published a compilation of translations of fifty poems by the Chilean poet laureate, Pablo Neruda. This publication, which was part of a project to celebrate the one hundred years since the poet's birth, coincided with the National Poetry of the Month celebrations in the US. As the editor of the collection, Mark Eisner<sup>1</sup>, said the book is a complement to a more comprehensive 1000-page volume of Neruda's poetry in English translation titled *The Poetry of Pablo Neruda*, published in New York in 2003 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

**Key words:** Neruda; poetry translation; translation review; Neruda in English; Review of Neruda in English.

Neruda (1904-1973) was born in Parral, a small town in Southern Chile. He started writing poems from a very young age, winning his first literary prize in 1920 and publishing his first collection of poems, *Crepusculario*, in 1923. With the publication of *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (1924), the following year, his reputation as a great poet began to be established. From 1927 his work for the Chilean diplomatic service took him abroad to Far Eastern countries, Argentina, Spain and Mexico. In Spain he came into contact with the Spanish poets of the so-called "generación del 27". This, together with the experience of witnessing the on-set of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the assassination of the Spanish poet, Lorca, was to have a profound personal effect on him and on his development as a poet.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Sanford, John (2003) 'New translations, documentary film highlight Neruda project' in Stanford Report, March 5, 2003 (<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/news/report/news/2003/march5/neruda-35.html>). Accessed 28/02/2005.

From then on, his poetry changed from hermetic, neo-romantic and pessimistic, into direct and simple verse. Thus, he became a poet of and for the people and his poems were accessible to all. In 1945 he officially joined the Communist party and in 1949 he had to go into hiding and eventually into exile, because of having accused the government of treason for breaking their promises to the left. He returned to Chile in 1953 and continued to write poetry for the next three decades. In 1971 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for poetry while being the Chilean ambassador in France. He died of cancer in Chile in September 1973, shortly after General Augusto Pinochet's military coup, where many Chileans were murdered, including the president Salvador Allende.

Throughout his literary career, which spans from 1917 to 1974, with over thirty-eight collections of poems spanning over 4000 pages (including four posthumous publications), Neruda's poetry has undergone many changes: erotic, neo-romantic, modernist, existentialist, socially committed, epic, etc. Often different styles co-exist within the same collection or even within the same poem. This co-existence of styles and themes, together with the immense bulk of his work, makes the task of the anthologist making a *representative* selection of this poet's life's work practically impossible. As a gateway for the passage of Neruda's poems into the English-speaking world, the anthologist is responsible for producing a fair image of the author, even though it will inevitably be incomplete and partial. Mike Einser, the anthologist and editor of *The Essential Neruda*, is also one of the translators. He is a Latin American scholar at Stanford University, a writer and a filmmaker.

Both in the title and in the blurb, the readers are told that the selection is "essential", "definitive" and "crucial" and "that draws from the entire breadth of Neruda's various styles, themes and periods". Therefore, it has poems from twelve out of the thirty-eight collections, and the selection includes poems from both earlier works such as *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (1924) and from posthumous works such as *Jardín de invierno* (1973). However, Neruda's most overtly political poetry such as *Que despierte el leñador* (*Canto general*, Section IX, 1950) and *Las uvas y el viento* (1954), have not been represented. Many of the poems have been translated before and there are some all-time favourites such as "Walking around" from *Residencia en la tierra 2* (1935), which has been translated thirteen times before;

“La United Fruit Co.” and “El gran océano” both from *Canto general* (1950); and a selection from Section II of *Canto general* (1950), *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, which has been considered to be Neruda’s master piece, has been translated into English in its entirety at least eleven times, and has appeared in selections in most of the anthologies of Neruda’s translations into English.

Perhaps it might have been better if the selection included poems that are still not available in the English-speaking world. Nevertheless, in the introduction to the anthology written by Einsler, we are told the reasons why it was decided to retranslate certain poems: “the salient poets from any period deserve retranslating for each ear of each new generation” (XVIII) and “ [t]here can be no ‘definitive’ translation” (XVIII). However, it is questionable whether it may not have been more rewarding to the reader to have access to poems by Neruda that had not been translated before.

Regarding translation strategies, in the introduction we are told that it was a collaboration between scholars and translators; that sometimes they revisited old versions of the poems (which is acknowledged at the end of each poem); and that they “all felt it was critical that this book be bilingual” because their “translations can never aspire to exactly replicate the rhythms and colours of Neruda’s words” (XX). Ideologically, the fact that the volume is bilingual may have the effect of devaluing the translations and giving supremacy to the original poem. From the Sixties onwards, however, this seems to have been the norm, since most of Neruda’s translations into English have been in bilingual form, with the notable exception of the translation of *Canto General* (1991) by Jack Schmitt<sup>2</sup>.

The task of translation was shared by eight poet translators: Mark Eisner, John Felstiner, Forrest Gander, Robert Hass, Jack Hirschman, Stephen Kessler, Stephen Mitchell, and Alistair Reid, whose names appear in big capital letters in the blurb. This gives them prominence since they are all poets in their own right and, possibly known by the intended readership. According to Gregory Rabassa<sup>3</sup>, translator of Gabriel García Márquez, translating one poet into several different voices is right for

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<sup>2</sup> Neruda, Pablo (1991) *Canto General*. Translated by Jack Schmitt. California: University of California Press.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *The Essential Neruda* (2004).

translating Neruda, since he can be “several poets according to where he is and when and what his mood might be”. Conversely, other critics think that this may be a source of confusion since an individual translator may have been able to offer “a certain consistent interpretation of a particular poet”<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, with several translators the reader is not limited to just one, partial, interpretation.

Regarding the individual poems, Neruda wrote mainly in free verse, with added stylistic devices such as the frequent use of enjambment, leaving double spaces between the lines, having a particular number of lines for each stanza, but without following a particular pattern, and breaking off the lines belonging to the same verse. As a result, certain words have more weight and emphasis than others. In this collection, all these devices have been maintained. Thus, for example, in the last stanza of “Explico algunas cosas” (I explain some things), a poem composed after the on-set of the Spanish Civil War, Neruda writes:

Venid a ver la sangre por las calles,  
venid a ver  
la sangre por las calles,  
venid a ver la sangre  
por las calles!

rendered by Einser as:

Come and see the blood in the streets,  
come and see  
the blood in the streets,  
come and see the blood  
in the streets!

Another aspect, at the level of the individual poem, is the frequent use of Latin cognates instead of an Anglo-Saxon equivalent. Thus for example in “Galope muerto” (from *Residencia en la tierra* (1933), Einser translates “sumergida”,

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<sup>4</sup> Pettingell, Phoebe (2003) ‘The Many Voices of Pablo Neruda’, *The New Leader*, 7/01/2003.

“confuso”, “intimamente”, “multitudes”, by “submerged”, “confused”, “infinitely”, and “multitudes”, whilst John Felstiner<sup>5</sup> previously had rendered them as “sunken”, “blurred”, “endlessly”, and “crowds”. The effect of the use of Latin cognates may be that a greater Spanish flavour has been brought to the translation, thus signalling to the readers that they are actually reading a foreign work. This unfamiliarity with certain terms, which may make the readers work slightly harder to understand the poem, may also allow them to experience a culture alien to them.

All in all, this is a good introduction to the poems of one of the greatest poets “ever, in any language” as García Márquez said.<sup>6</sup> It will appeal both to those who are already familiar with his work in translation and to those that have never experienced him. It is a beautiful collection of poems, both in Spanish and English.

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<sup>5</sup> Felstiner, John (1980) *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Pp. 66-69.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in the blurb of Pablo Neruda (1991) *Canto General*. Translated by Jack Schmitt. California: University of California Press.