NERUDA IN ENGLISH: 
WALDEEN’S “LOST” TRANSLATIONS FROM 
CANTO GENERAL

Jonathan Cohen

Waldeen in the country outside of Mexico City, about 1950

Waldeen, thank you, for your poems of my poems, which are better than mine.
—Pablo Neruda, trans. Asa Zatz

Waldeen von Falkenstein (1913–93)—known professionally by her first name alone—was a dancer born in Texas, raised in California, and ultimately made a Mexican citizen. She became not only the celebrated founder of modern dance in Mexico during the 1940s but also an important translator of the poetry of Pablo Neruda; specifically, his Canto general. She created dance for more than half a century. While her work as a prima ballerina and choreographer is well described,1 her work as a translator, largely obscured by time, has not received much attention.
Its recovery is essential to inter-American letters. Her translations from Canto general published in the early 1950s, including her 1948 publication of the poem “Let the Rail Splitter Awake” that became part of the epic, introduced many to the genius and “expansiveness,” as Allen Ginsberg put it, of Neruda’s voice. Waldeen, however, has yet to gain the recognition she deserves for her significant contribution, through translation, to American poetry.

As the originator of a new form of modern American ballet, and as the first to translate a substantial body of Neruda’s Canto general into English, Waldeen boldly expanded the bounds of speech in both dance and poetry, two different but sister arts. They are deeply connected by music and the rhythmic phrasing, or measure, inherent in their respective artistic languages. Ezra Pound makes this connection in his ABC of Reading: “Music rots when it gets too far from the dance. Poetry atrophies when it gets too far from music.” Waldeen’s translations of Neruda are distinguished by her understanding of the essential relationship between poetry and music and their common root in dance.

In early 1939, at the age of 26, Waldeen’s career as a dancer led her to Mexico City. She moved there from New York City at the request of the Mexican Ministry of Education, which had invited her to create a national ballet and school of modern dance under the auspices of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (Fine Arts Department). It was a good time for her to go to Mexico, where her dance was much admired. The arts were flowering: The muralist movement was at its peak, and in music and literature Mexico was coming into its own as well. Her circle of friends would include the leading writers and artists of the so-called Mexican Renaissance. And it was in Mexico that Waldeen met Neruda soon after he arrived, in 1940, as Chile’s consul general (until 1943). He naturally joined her social world, and the two of them became lifelong friends.

Waldeen enjoyed several major triumphs in Mexico as both a dancer and choreographer. Her most famous ballet, perhaps, is La coronela (The lady colonel), first performed in 1940. This satiric ballet, which focused thematically on Mexico’s Revolution of 1910, was based on the popular engravings of José Guadalupe Posada, and it marked the beginning of a truly Mexican form of ballet. She achieved what she demanded of dancers: an honest success, the slowly constructed, soundly complex, aesthetically fresh art form capable of arousing enthusiasm in universal audience through its inspiration, beauty, and humanity. In Neruda’s words, her contribution to dance formed “un luminoso ejemplo de cómo, sin desprenderse de las realidades del mundo, se puede llevar el arte a su flor esencial” (a shining example of how, without being cut off from the world’s realities, art can bear its essential flower).

During an extended sojourn to pursue dance in New York City in the late 1940s, after having worked in Mexico for more than six years, Waldeen started translating poems that would form part of Neruda’s Canto general. Her friend Luis Enrique Délano, a Chilean writer and diplomat who had served in Mexico with Neruda as vice consul, asked her to translate “Que despierte el leñador” (“Let the Rail Splitter Awake”), originally composed in the spring of 1948. Her creative energy was boundless: after long days of teaching dance and doing choreography she would head home, close to midnight, to work on her Neruda. Her translation made its debut appearance that year in the October issue of Masses and Mainstream, with a special fanfare by the editors of this new monthly magazine of the Communist Party. Waldeen was also making translations of Neruda’s other new poems. But her experience in New York was less than ideal. She was still very much at odds with the dance establishment (i.e., the cold, angular style of Martha Graham). Meanwhile, her dancers in Mexico were writing to ask her to return. And so, in August 1948 she went back to Mexico, reforming her school and choreographing for a new group, Ballet Nacional, with which she would travel into remote regions of the country, dancing in rural schools, village plazas, stadiums, and fields.
In the fall of 1949 Waldeen performed a dance adaptation/translation of “Let the Rail Splitter Awake” at the closing session of the six-day American Continental Congress for World Peace, held in Mexico City. Her elaborate ballet featured a dozen dancers wearing costumes and masks, accompanied by a recorded dramatic reading of her translation. This reading had been arranged for three voices by Asa Zatz—her colleague (lighting designer and veteran of Stage for Action) and husband (1948–54, they stayed friends for life). The three readers were the Mexican actress Rosaura Revueltas, the Bolivian painter Roberto Berdecio, and Neruda himself. The recording of the translation was intercut with original music written for her ballet by Hershy Kay—the now well-known New York orchestrator—based on North American folk songs documented in Alan Lomax’s work and featuring a guitar, cello, trombone, clarinet, and percussion.

Waldeen’s translations of selected poems from Canto general were published the following year in the chapbook Let the Rail Splitter Awake and Other Poems. The original Spanish of the entire epic appeared in print the same year—the fruit of twelve years’ labor by Neruda. When he first read her translations in manuscript, he was deeply moved and wrote to her: “Gracias, Waldeen, por tus poemas de mis poemas, que superan a los mios” (Waldeen, thank you, for your poems of my poems, which are better than mine). Neruda knew Waldeen’s own poetry and liked it; in fact, he had wanted to do with her a bilingual book of their poetry, for which he would translate her poems into Spanish, but the collaboration never came about. In September 1950, six months after the publication of Canto general, Neruda gave Waldeen his formal written permission to enable her to publish her translation of the entire work. That book project, although not completed, was for a time one of her many creative ventures. Had a publisher been interested, the book in her translation might well have been done.

The widely distributed chapbook, which went through several subsequent printings in the early 1950s, featured an essay by Neruda (“Our Duty toward Life”) along with five poems from Canto general—all but “The Dead in the Square” translated by Waldeen—plus two more poems (“Song for Bolivar” and “To Howard Fast”). Its reissue in 1989 by International Publishers received little attention. New York–based Masses and Mainstream, the original publisher of the chapbook, was a well-known source of Marxist literature at the time of the first publication, and Neruda was no stranger to its audience. Leftist readers were drawn to it, along with so-called Beats.

Composed when the poet was in exile from Chile—he was forced to escape as an outlaw in early 1948, crossing the Andes on horseback by night with the manuscript of Canto general in his saddlebag—“Let the Rail Splitter Awake” invokes the figure of Lincoln as a freedom-loving hero of the Americas. It is in many ways an appeal for world peace as well as a petition to the United States for pan-American harmony during the early years of the Cold War. Neruda celebrates the common people of North America who, like the common people of South America, must struggle against the hateful policies of multinational corporations. The chant of the penultimate fifth section builds to a vision of modern America revitalized by Lincoln’s democratic spirit:

Let the Rail Splitter awake.
Let Abe come with his axe
and his wooden plate
to eat with the farmers.
Let his head like tree-bark,
his eyes like those in wooden-planks
and oak-tree boles,
turn to look on the world
rising above the foliage
higher than the sequoias.
Let him buy something in a drugstore
let him take a bus to Tampa
let him bite into a yellow apple
and enter a moviehouse to converse
with all the simple people.  

Through the force of its verbal dance and music, the translation made by Waldeen successfully brings into American English, with accurate equivalents, the colloquial image-driven language of Neruda’s verse. Her rendering of the two final sections of “Let the Rail Splitter Awake” was freely adapted by Allen Ginsberg (with poet and playwright Sidney Goldfarb) some thirty years later, titled “Adapted from Neruda’s ‘Que Dispiere [sic] el Leñador,’” and was included in his collection Plutonian Ode and Other Poems, 1977–1980. Ginsberg, who had first read Waldeen’s translation in the early 1950s when he was a young poet, was clearly moved by her Neruda with his modern bardic voice and his vision of hard realities. Ginsberg’s adaptation is a fitting tribute to Waldeen as well as an expression of gratitude for her translation.

Waldeen offered only a glimpse of the range of Neruda’s immense Canto general in the 1950 Masses and Mainstream publication. In addition to “Let the Rail Splitter Awake,” her translation of Neruda’s masterpiece, “The Heights of Macchu Picchu,” introduced his poetry at its best. This sequence would later receive much critical acclaim. Her translation was among the first in English (H. R. Hays published his version in 1948 in The Tiger’s Eye, and Angel Flores published his in 1950 in The World’s Best); the sequence has been published in later renderings by Nathaniel Tarn (1967), John Felstiner (1980), Jack Schmitt (1991), and Stephen Kessler (2001), among others.

Waldeen’s re-creation of the dance of Neruda’s poetic language, together with fidelity to the literal meaning of his words, gives her translation its distinctive voice, as illustrated by the opening stanza compared with the Spanish:

Delairealaire, como una red vacía,
ibayoentre las calles y la atmósfera, llegando y despidiendo,
en el advenimiento del otoño la moneda extendida
de las hojas, y entre la primavera y las espigas,
io que el más grande amor, como dentro de un guante
que cae, nos entrega como una larga luna.  

From air to air like an empty net
I went between streets and the atmosphere,
through autumn’s advent with its arrival
and departure of new-coined leaves,
between spring and the tasselled wheat
as if inside a falling glove,
where the greatest of loves gives us
what is like a long moonrise.

The closing lines of the Macchu Picchu sequence, which form a statement of Neruda’s commitment to creating a voice for Latin America’s peoples, past and present, reflects Waldeen’s commitment to the same artistic mission:
Give me silence, water, hope.
Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.
Cling to me, bodies, like magnets.
Resort to my veins and my mouth.
Speak through my words and my blood.

Her translations of other parts of *Canto general* appeared in the now-defunct *California Quarterly*. They remained the only published English rendering of major parts of the *Canto* until 1991, when the first translation of the entire epic—long overdue—was issued; translated by Schmitt, it is the only complete text in English.

Most of Waldeen’s Neruda did not make its way into print in the United States for another reason, for she actually translated one-third of *Canto general* (some 500 pages long) and published only a fraction of what she had composed. The political climate in the United States during the years of the Cold War made publication of this work difficult, to say the least. Neruda, after all, had joined the Communist Party in 1945. The poetry that followed his experience in the Spanish Civil War, written after the famous love poems of his youth and the masterpieces of his surrealist verse from the early 1930s, was often marked by its partisan stamp. Neruda charged *Canto general* with his politics. “Let the Rail Splitter Awake,” for instance, surely alienated many people in the United States with its romantic passages in praise of Stalin and the Soviet Union. In addition to the poem itself being considered offensive, it earned Neruda the 1950 International Peace Prize of the Communist-affiliated World Peace Council—shared with Paul Robeson and Pablo Picasso—and Neruda’s acceptance further kept the poet at odds with both the literary establishment and the government of the United States. Deemed “subversive,” Waldeen herself was blocked from entering the United States by the notorious 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, as was Neruda.

Waldeen’s unpublished translations from *Canto general* languished in a file folder for decades. She didn’t know what to do with them, and her work in dance had upstaged them. In 1989 she sent them to the present author, who attempted to publish them in magazines on her behalf, but with no luck. At the time, other English-language translators of Neruda’s work were active with their own Neruda translations: Ben Belitt, Robert Bly, W. S. Merwin, Alastair Reid, Nathaniel Tarn, Donald Walsh, and John Felstiner, among many others.

Now, with the relatively new, growing interest in the transnational literature of the Americas (i.e., inter-American literature) in which translation figures prominently, the time has come to present a selection of Waldeen’s “lost” translations from *Canto general*. It is her intimacy with Neruda himself, with the Spanish of Latin America, with American English, and with dance as it informs the essential nature of his poetry that, together, distinguish her rendering of these poems from his epic, published here for the first time—for the record of her achievement, and for the poetic success of her work, as a translator.

Waldeen’s translations of Neruda are a brilliant demonstration of the mid-twentieth-century flourishing of Latin American poetry in English. They fit squarely in the decade of interest in this vibrant literature that occurred in the United States during and immediately after the Second World War, but that the proponents of the Cold War (anticommunists) and the New Criticism (formalist academics/critics) largely rejected for both political and literary motives. The study of inter-American literature requires an appreciation of its history, dating back to the early nineteenth century, and of the distinct cycles of interest in Latin American poetry in translation.
that finally established itself in the wake of the so-called Boom of the late twentieth century and
the significant parallel growth of the Hispanic population of the United States. Waldeen’s work,
long ignored, merits attention now for its effective translation poetics that derive vitality from
verbal music and dance and for its influence on the new American poetics that slowly developed
in the 1950s and then exploded in the 1960s, constituting a successful literary revolution against
New Criticism strictures—a sweeping revolution in the very definition of poetry.

Neruda’s poetry in translation, in fact, became a significant part of the literary scene in
the United States during this period, although in the 1960s Waldeen’s published translations all
but faded into obscurity because of the profusion of more contemporary translations of Neruda.
Hers were ahead of their time. Anne Sexton, in an interview in 1970, emphasized the point about
Neruda’s impact: “We [U.S. 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.”

Waldeen’s translations present Neruda’s images with clarity, directness, and simplicity,
using for the most part colloquial language, like his, that is melodic and sensual in keeping with
the Spanish, much like the language, or style, of the modern dance she created that made her
famous in Mexico. She well understood the physicality of the language of his poetry, and how
palpably the experience of reading it, or hearing it, is determined by sounds and rhythms. Not
only that, Waldeen’s translations received Neruda’s direct approval (he knew English well enough
to read it, even to translate Whitman and Shakespeare into Spanish) as representing with accu-

geracy his poetic voice in English. In an interview in 1970 Neruda himself observed the challenge
of translating his poetry into English: “It seems to me that the English language, so different from
Spanish and so much more direct, often expresses the meaning of my poetry but does not con-
voy its atmosphere.” In this regard, in terms of conveying both the literal meaning and the
poetic atmosphere of Canto general, Waldeen’s translations do succeed admirably, with great
aplomb and flair.
Vegetation

Upon nameless numberless lands
wind descended from other domains,
rains brought celestial strands,
and gods of impregnated altars
restored lives and flowers.

Time expanded in the midst of fertility.

The jacaranda uplifted foam
of transmarine splendor,
the araucaria of bristling spears
was magnitude against snow,
the primeval mahogany tree
distilled blood from its top,
and to the South of larch pines,
the thunder tree, the red and thorny
trees, the mother tree, vermilion
ceiba, the gum tree, were earthly
amplitude, sound,
were terrestrial entities.

A new aroma was engendered
filling the interstices of earth,
converting breath into smoke and fragrance:
wild tobacco lifted its rosebush
of imaginary air.
Like a spear ending in flame
corn appeared, and its stature
was threshed and grew anew,
its grain disseminated, dead
were laid beneath its roots,
then from its cradle it beheld
the emergence of vegetal gods.
In crevice and extension, the wind’s seed
scattered over plumes of the cordillera,
dense radiance of the germinal sprout and stalk,
blind dawn suckled by earthy balms
of relentless rain-drenched latitudes,
of close streaming nights,
of matutinal pools.
And still upon the plains
like laminas of the planet
beneath a fresh hamlet of stars,
the ombú tree, king of grasslands
halted the free air in its murmurous flight,
mounted and subdued the pampa
with its reins and roots of branches.

Wild grove of America,
thicket between seas,
from pole to pole you balanced
your green treasure, your dense luxuriance.
The night germinated within cities
of buckthorn shrubs, in resounding
woods, spreading leaves that covered
the germinal stone, the births.
Green uterus, seminal American coverlet,
abundant storehouse, a branch
was born like an island, a leaf
took the form of a sword,
a flower became lightning and Medusa,
a cluster circumscribed its own sum,
a root descended into darkness.
Some Beasts

It was nightfall of the iguana.

From rainbow crest
its dart-like tongue
sank into verdure,
monastic ant-hills
trod the forest
on melodious feet,
the guanaco, rare as the oxygen
on vast dun-colored heights
went shod in boots of gold,
while the llama opened candid
eyes amid the delicacy
of a dew-filled world.
Monkeys wove a chain
interminably erotic
along the shores of dawn,
demolishing walls of pollen
and startling the violet flight
of Muzo butterflies.
It was night of alligators,
night pure and swarming
of jaws upthrusting from the mire
and from somnolent marshes
the dense clamor of scales
returned to its earthly origin.

The jaguar brushed leaves
with his phosphorescent absence,
the puma speeds through bracken
like devouring fire
aglow with the alcoholic eyes
of the jungle.
Badgers scratch the feet of rivers,
niff at nests whose pulsing delight
they attack with reddish teeth.

And on the floor of massive water
like the very circle of earth,
lies the giant anaconda
covered with ritual clay,
religious and all-devouring.
Orinoco
Orinoco, let me be on your shores
of that hour without hour:
let me go naked, as then,
enter your baptismal mists.
Orinoco of scarlet water,
let me dip my hands so they may return
to your maternity, to your course,
river of races, motherland of roots,
your wide murmur, your savage lamina
come from where I come, from the poor
and imperious solitudes, from a secret
like a blood stream, from a silent
clay mother.
Tequendama

Tequendama, do you remember
your solitary passage along the heights
without witness, thread
of solitude, slender willfulness,
celestial line, platinum arrow,
do you remember step by step
opening walls of gold
until tumbling from the sky onto
the earthbound theater of vacant stone?
The Impaled Head

Balboa, you brought death and claw to the corners of the gentle midlands, and among hounds of the chase, yours was your soul: lion cub of bloody nether lip who caught the fleeing slave, sank Spanish fangs into pulsing throats, and martyr’s flesh hung from canine nails while jewels fell into bags.

Cursed be man and dog, the infamous howling in virginal forest, the prowling footstep of iron and bandit. Cursed be the spiky crown of wild blackberry bush that leapt not like a hedgehog to defend its ravaged cradle.

But among the bloodthirsty captains there arose in the shadows justice of daggers, the harsh branch of envy.

And upon your return, astride your path stood the name Pedrarias like a hangman’s rope.

They judged you amid barking of savage Indian dogs. Now that you are dying, do you hear the pure silence riven by your goaded greyhounds?

Now that you are dying at hands of the vicious captains do you feel the golden breath of the sweet ravaged realm?

When they cut off Balboa’s head it was impaled upon a stick. The lightning of his dead eyes decomposed and descended the lance like a splash of abomination that disappeared into the earth.
The Rain (Rapa Nui)

No, may the Queen never recognize your face, it is sweeter thus, my love, far from effigies, the weight of your hair on my hands, do you remember the Mangareva tree whose blossoms fell upon your hair? These fingers resemble not those white petals: look at them, they are like roots, like stone carvings over which lizards glide. Fear not, let us wait for the rain to fall, naked both, the rain, the same that falls over Manu Tara.

While water hardens its traces on stone, it falls over us carrying us softly towards darkness, far below the river-mouth of Ranu Raraku. Because of this disregard the fisherman and his water-jar. Bury your breasts of twin fire in my mouth, and let your hair be my own small night, a blackness whose moist perfume covers me.

At night I dream that you and I are two plants that uprose together, roots entwined, and that you know earth and rain as you know my mouth, because we are made of rain and earth. At times I believe that in death we will sleep below, in the hollows of the idol’s feet, watching the ocean that brought us to build and to love.

My hands were not harsh when they knew you, the waters of another sea slipped through them like a net; now water and rock contain secrets and seeds.

Love me asleep and naked, be like an island to the shore: your confused love, your startled love, hidden in the cavern of dreams, is like movement of the sea surrounding us.

And when I too fall asleep within your love, naked, let my hand lie between your breasts so it may palpitate at one with your nipples glistening in the rain.
The Sling-Thrower (1919)

Love, perhaps love tentative, insecure:
nothing but blow of honeysuckle against the mouth,
nothing but braids whose movement rose
into my solitude like a black bonfire,
and then the rest: nocturnal river,
sky signals, brief moist springtime,
the lonely lunatic brow, desire
lifting its cruel tulips in the night.
I stripped constellations, wounding me,
sharpened my fingers by contact with stars,
threading strand by strand the icy fabric
of a castle without doors,

    oh starlit loves
whose jasmine retains its transparency in vain,
oh clouds that on a day of love flow
like a sob among hostile grasses,
naked solitude bound to a shadow,
to an adored wound, an indomitable moon.
Call me, I may have said to the rose-trees:
to them perhaps, shadows of confused ambrosia;
each tremor of the world knew my footsteps,
the most secret corner awaited me, and the sovereign
statue of a prairie tree:
all crossroads converged at my delirium
scattering my name throughout the Spring.
And then, lovely face, sunburnt day lily,
you who slept not within my sleep, untamed,
medallion pursued by a shadow, beloved
without name, framework of pollen texture,
of all the wind ablaze above impure stars:
oh love, disentangled garden that consumes itself,
in you my dreams uprose and spread
like the leaven in tenebrous bread.
Love

Spain, among your gifts you gave me sturdy love.
There came to me an expectant tenderness,
and for company, she whose fathomless kiss
is for my mouth.

Storms
could not separate her from me,
distances could not add earth
to the love-space we have won.
Before the conflagration, when you appeared
amid the ripe Spanish grainfields, I became
twofold idea, duplicate light, and bitterness
slipped from your face
to fall upon lost stones.
Out from sorrow, as from spiked harpoons
I flowed into your waters, love,
like a horse a-gallop through fury
and death, suddenly welcomed
by matutinal apples, by tremulous
sylvan waterfall. Since then, beloved,
the wild plains that shaped my conduct
have come to know you, and the dark ocean
that pursues me, and the chestnut trees
of immeasurable Autumn.

Who has not seen you my sweet,
loving me through the struggle,
a vision at my side who wears
all the marks of a star? Who,
searching for me among multitudes,
since I am a grain in the human granary,
has not found you, embracing my roots,
upraised in the song of my blood?

Who knows, my love, if I shall find again
time and place to draw the fine shadow
you cast across my pages, wife:
these are radiant days and hard,
and the sweetness we cull from them
is kneaded with eyelids and thorns.
I know not how to recall your beginnings:
before love, you were,
you came
with all the substances of destiny,
and before you, solitude was yours,
perhaps was your sleeping hair.
Now, cup of my love, I hardly name you,
adored title of my days, and in space
you occupy like the day, all
the light of the universe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR


NOTES

1. Cohen, “Waldeen and the Americas” (see also the revised and expanded version at http://www.uhmcsunysb.edu/surgery/waldeen.html); Delgado Martínez, Waldeen; Smith, “Waldeen”; Smith, Terpsichore’s Daughter.
4. As quoted in Delgado Martínez, Waldeen, 120.
5. Waldeen said Délanó had asked her to translate Neruda’s poetry before she met him, according to Smith, Terpsichore’s Daughter.
6. The collection includes “Let the Rail Splitter Awake,” “The Fugitive,” “To Miguel Hernandez,” and “The Heights of Macchu Picchu,” translated by Waldeen, along with other work by Neruda translated by various translators. Bernstein et al., Let the Rail Splitter Awake and Other Poems.
10. Here is the Spanish of the opening stanza of “Alturas de Macchu Picchu,” followed by the translations of it made by Hays, Flores, Tarn, Felstiner, Schmitt, and Kessler:

   Del aire al aire, como una red vacía,
   iba yo entre las calles y la atmósfera, llegando y despidiendo,
   en el advenimiento del otoño la moneda extendida
de las hojas, y entre la primavera y las espigas,
   lo que el más grande amor, como dentro de un guante
   que cae, nos entrega como una larga luna. (Neruda, Canto general, 25)

   In and out of air, like an empty net,
   I walked among streets and atmosphere, arriving and departing.
   At the coming of autumn the coins of the leaves
   are spread out and, between spring and the wheatears,
   something greater than love, as if within a falling
glove, delivers us, like a long moon. (Hays, “The Heights of Macchu Picchu,” 112)
From air to air, like an empty net,
between the streets and the atmosphere, I arrived and bade farewell,
with the advent of autumn, to the lengthened coin
of the leaves, and, between the spring and the tassels,
to that which the greatest love, as if within a glove,
delivers us in falling like a long moon. (Flores, “Summits of Macchu Picchu,” 356)

From air to air, like an empty net,
dredging through streets and ambient atmosphere, I came
lavish, at autumn’s coronation, with the leaves’
proffer of currency and—between spring and wheat ears—
that which a boundless love, caught in a gauntlet fall,
grants us like a long-fingered moon. (Tarn, The Heights of Macchu Picchu, 3)

From the air to the air, like an empty net,
I went on through streets and thin air, arriving and leaving behind,
at autumn’s advent, the coin handed out
in the leaves, and between spring and ripe grain,
the fullness that love, as in a glove’s
fall, gives over to us like a long-drawn moon. (Felstiner, “Heights of Macchu Picchu,” 203)

From air to air, like an
empty net
I went between the streets and atmosphere, arriving and departing,
in the advent of autumn the outstretched coin
of the leaves, and between springtime and the ears of corn,
all that the greatest love, as within a falling
glove, hands us like a long moon. (Schmitt, Canto General, 29)

From air into air, like an empty net,
I wandered between the streets and the atmosphere, arriving and saying good-bye,
in the coming of autumn with its scattered coins
of leaves, and between spring and the ripe wheat,
what the greatest love, as inside a falling
glove, hands over to us like endless moonlight. (Kessler, “Heights of Machu Picchu,” 29)

Together, these various translations reveal the range of possibilities of bringing Neruda’s verse, in
particular the subjective surreal imagery that distinguishes it, into English. Comparison with the
Spanish and with these translations by others demonstrates that Waldeen produced an effective
poetic paraphrase in which her English re-creates with greater accuracy the literal meaning and the
natural colloquial speech of the original Spanish and, at once, the lyricism and flowing cadence that
shape the poetry.

12. Bernstein et al., Let the Rail Splitter Awake and Other Poems, 75.
13. Ibid., 91.
Conquistadores,” Canto III, sections 1–3, 7, 8, 10–12).
15. Not included here are Waldeen’s unpublished section 3 of “Lamp in the Earth” (Canto I) and sections 4–6 and 13 of “The Conquistadores” (Canto III).


17. Guibert, Seven Voices, 36.

18. Comparison of Waldeen’s translation of the closing stanzas of “La lluvia (Rapa-Nui)” with the original Spanish and with Anthony Kerrigan’s rendering of them shows a striking difference in the two translations that, perhaps, may derive in part from the gender difference of the translators:

Amame dormida y desnuda, que en la orilla
eres como la isla: tu amor confuso, tu amor
nombrado, escondido en la cavidad de los sueños,
es como el movimiento del mar que nos rodea.

Y cuando yo también vaya durmiéndome
en tu amor, desnudo,
deja mi mano entre tus pechos para que palpite
al mismo tiempo que tus pezones mojados en la lluvia. (Neruda, Canto general, 386)

Sleeping and naked, love me: on the shore
you are like the island: your love confused, your love
astonished, hidden in the cavity of dreams,
is like the movement of the sea around us.

And when I too begin falling asleep
in your love, naked,
leave my hand between your breasts so it can throb
along with your nipples wet with rain. (Kerrigan, “Rain [Rapa Nui],” 239)

In her translation of the final stanza Waldeen not only shows a greater awareness of the female body as depicted by Neruda but she also maintains a greater fidelity to the telluric texture of the verse in Spanish, using polysyllabic Latinate versus Anglo-Saxon English where indicated; that is, “palpitate” (hers) versus “throb” (his). In this way, her word choice facilitates the conveyance of both the meaning and atmosphere of the poetry.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


