

Following Neruda's footsteps: A pilgrimage to Machu Picchu

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Introduction

Machu Picchu¹ is an ancient Inca city in the Peruvian Andes, which was built around 1440 (Felstiner, 1980, p.139). It was discovered in 1911 by the archaeologist Hiram Bingham almost intact because the Spanish Conquistadors had never reached it. On October 31, 1943, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda made a pilgrimage to this ancient city on horseback from the Urubamba River. This was a journey of discovery that was to leave a permanent mark on him both as a person and as a poet and caused him to undergo a profound experience, which gave him a 'sense of being a part of the American continent' (Agosin, 1986, p.59). The fruit of this pilgrimage was the poem *Alturas de Macchu Picchu (Heights of Macchu Picchu)* first published in 1946 in *Revista Nacional* in Caracas (Santí, 2000, p.45).

Twenty-four years later, in 1967, John Felstiner, one of the translators of Neruda into English, retraced Neruda's journey, carrying a bilingual translation of the poem by the British translator, Nathaniel Tarn (Neruda, 1966), which he read the night before he reached Machu Picchu (Felstiner, 1980, p.7). This experience incited Felstiner to retranslate Neruda's poem and write a book about the process of translation entitled *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu*. Similarly, forty years later, in 1984, a photographer, Barry Brukoff, also made a pilgrimage to the ancient city, carrying Neruda's poem in his backpack (Allende, 2001, p.13).

¹ This is the usual spelling of the site, although Neruda and many of his translators and critics spell it as Macchu Picchu with an extra 'c'.

The result of this pilgrimage was a number of photos of the site which became a crucial part of the book *Machu Picchu* (2001), a combination of a new bilingual translation of the poem by Stephen Kessler and Brukoff's photographs.

This paper has two main aims. The first is to describe a research technique that involves following in the footsteps of a poet at the beginning stages of the creation of a poem, in order to get a greater understanding of it, and in the hope of producing a better translation. I will extend the concept of translation to include both interlingual translation (between two languages) and intersemiotic translation ('an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non-verbal sign systems' (Jakobson, 1992, p.145)). Thus I consider Brukoff's work to be an intersemiotic translation of Neruda's poem, from written into visual language, to accompany a new retranslation of the poem. The second aim is to explore the implications, within a theoretical framework of translation studies, of the use of this interpretation technique with regard to the overall translation strategy of both Felstiner and Brukoff, and to ascertain whether it goes beyond polarised notions of translation.

Background

Once a translation is published, the process of its composition is usually invisible within the final product. In other words, the readers are not normally made aware of the translator's work, his or her own background, the process of research into the original work and the justification of the decisions that had to be taken throughout the whole experience (Felstiner, 1980, pp.1-3; Steiner, 1975, pp.273-274). There has been, however, some research on the translator's thought processes that occur while he or she is translating a text. Many translators have recorded themselves thinking aloud while

translating and the transcripts of these recordings are called ‘Think Aloud Protocols’ or TAPS (Jääskeläinen, 1998, pp.265-269). The object of the present study, though, is not the psychological processes of the translators, rather it is the research techniques used to interpret the original text before performing a translation. More specifically, this study will look at the translators embarking on a journey of self-discovery which mirrored a similar journey undertaken by the author of the source text before composing the poem.

Neruda’s Journey

In 1943, after working in foreign countries for the Chilean diplomatic service for more than fifteen years, Pablo Neruda returned to his country. During this journey he visited Machu Picchu. The ascent to the ancient city felt to Neruda like a descent into his own roots and made him become aware of the identity he shared with the rest of the American people (Agosin, 1986, p.59). At the time he was writing a book of poems dedicated to his motherland entitled *Canto general de Chile*. However, this experience was to have such a profound effect on him that the book eventually became *Canto general* (1950) an encyclopaedic epic about the whole of the American continent organised in fifteen sections. The sequence about Machu Picchu, which is comprised of twelve cantos and was to become Section II of *Canto general*, was not written until 1945, two years after Neruda’s visit. The poem is a description of the pilgrimage of a poetic persona to the top of the Inca city, where he finds the roots of his pre-Colombian identity and his true vocation as the spokesman for the people.

Felstiner's Journey

In his book *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu*, Felstiner mentions that he made the pilgrimage to Machu Picchu because he was accompanying his wife on a research journey to Chile and, on the way, they stopped to visit the site (1980, p.7). This means that it was not a premeditated journey in order to carry out research on Neruda's poem. Nevertheless, Felstiner did take on the trip a bilingual translation of *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, translated by Nathaniel Tarn and read it the night before they reached the top of the city. Therefore, this justifies considering the journey as a translation technique during the preliminary stages of reading the source poem, even though it was in fact the source of inspiration that motivated him to translate the poem. He equated the experience of travelling in a country in the Southern Hemisphere with the 'myths of descent in European literature: Orpheus, Odysseus, Aeneas, Beowulf, Dante, Faust ... [whose] journeys lead to a traditional underworld' (Felstiner, 1980, p.9). Thus, paradoxically, the ascent to the site reminded Felstiner of a descending movement, a feeling that also appears in Neruda's poem:

más abajo, en el oro de la geología,
como una espada envuelta en meteoros,
hundí la mano turbulenta y dulce
en lo más genital de lo terrestre. (Canto I)

and deeper yet, in geologic gold,
like a sword sheathed in meteors
I plunged my turbulent and gentle hand
into the genital quick of the earth. (Felstiner, 1980, p. 203)

Felstiner adds, however, that the poetic persona in Neruda's poem 'plunges eagerly, potently, through sensual elements, not to some supernatural realm but to a natural source' (1980, p.10), where he

actually found his roots and identity. The product of the experience was the book published in 1980, which is more than an interlingual translation since Felstiner not only translates the poem but also provides a description of the process of translation. This includes a very close critical appraisal of the poem, Neruda's biography, and the circumstances of writing the poem, together with a detailed account of what other translators have done with the poem in the past.

Brukoff's Journey

Brukoff's journey seems to have been more premeditated than Felstiner's. Besides being the photographer, he is also the editor of the book and therefore he was responsible for selecting the translator and the rest of the people involved in producing the book, such as Isabel Allende, the author of the introduction. He had previously photographed other ancient sites such as Borobudur and Stonehenge. The difference this time is that since he was carrying Neruda's poems in his backpack, his experience was influenced by Neruda's. He also planned the journey to coincide with the cycle of the moon so that he arrived at the top of the site during sunset and at full moon. The book is a beautiful combination of photographs and poems, and, as Allende claims, it 'is more than a work of art: it is a spiritual experience' (Neruda, 2001, p.14). In this intersemiotic translation, Brukoff translated the written poems into his own visual language: photography. Many may not consider this to be a translation proper, but, for the purpose of this paper, we could consider the steps he took to create his photographic product to be very similar to those taken by Felstiner. That is, he read the source poem very closely by trying to recreate the circumstances of its

writing and then translated it into another language or sign system (in his case, a visual language).²

Implications

From the above description several implications pertaining to the overall translation strategy of both Felstiner and Brukoff may be deduced. Translation strategies have also been grouped into two opposing poles, which Venuti (1995) has defined as *domesticating* and *foreignising*. These terms are based on the theories of the German scholar Schleiermacher, who in 1813 claimed that:

Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader (1992, p.42).

In other words, a foreignising strategy implies following the norms of the source culture and bringing the reader to the source text, while a domesticating strategy implies following the target culture norms and bringing the author to the target culture. Venuti advocates for the former because he believes that a domesticating strategy implies a narcissistic appropriation of the text. Nevertheless, in this paper, I will attempt to go beyond these polarised conceptions of translation, since it may be more fruitful not to consider these strategies as mutually exclusive. They both may ‘come into play, for different reasons, at different textual sites, with varying effects in the course of the translation process’ (Lane-Mercier, 1997, p.56).

Venuti discusses the idea of *simpativo* (1995, pp.273-306), which he claims is a translation strategy that has been dominant

² Below there is a discussion of the relationship between text and image in Brukoff’s book. A more in-depth analysis would be out of the scope of this paper. Readers can refer to Evans, J. and Hall, S. (eds.), 1999, *Visual Culture: The Reader*. London: Sage; and Rose, G., 2001. *Visual Methodologies*. London: Sage.

since the seventeenth century, in the Anglo-American world. As the translator Alexander Tytler stated in his book *The Principles of Translation*, this notion requires that the translator ‘must adopt the very soul of his author’ (quoted in Venuti, 1995, p.274). In other words, by making the same journey of self-discovery as Neruda, both Felstiner and Brukoff seem to have been attempting to recreate the genesis of the poem, *Alturas de Macchu Picchu* and to experience the initial spark of inspiration that Neruda felt, in order to achieve a greater understanding of the original poem. In a sense, this idea also echoes the concept of the method of interpretation developed by the German Romantics known as *Hermeneutics*:

It involves an empathic projection of the interpreter’s desire to understand into the activity s/he is attempting to understand ... [H]ermeneutics imagine themselves inside the activity, feel subjectively what it must have been like to be one of the writers from the Bible (Robinson, 2001, pp.97).

This empathic reading of the source poem is related to the translation approach, defined by Venuti (1995) as *transparency*, which he relates to the idea of *simpatico* and to domestication. By using this approach the translators become like a pane of glass, creating the illusion that the source text is unmediated. The translation is thus transparent and the reader is kept unaware that the book originated in another culture, which according to Venuti could ‘be viewed as cultural narcissism’ (1995, p.305). At this point it is necessary to look at the books in order to decide on the overall translation strategy used by both translators.

The translations

At the interpretation stage, both Felstiner and Brukoff have chosen a technique usually associated with the transparency approach, which results in a domestication and an appropriation of the source text into the target culture. However, this does not mean that they chose the same technique at other stages in the translation process.

Felstiner's book

The first part of the title of Felstiner's book, *Translating Neruda*, calls attention to the status of the book as a translation. There are also five chapters dedicated to the critical close interpretation of the source poem and to the process of translating it. In addition the translation is bilingual, with the Spanish original running parallel with the English version, acting as a constant reminder to the reader that the text originated in a different culture. All of these override the illusion of transparency that a domesticating translation would involve. The translation itself, which occupies only forty of the 273 pages that make up the book is made more clear by reading chapter five, where Felstiner analyses the source poem and justifies his choices. He follows the source text closely regarding stanza division, punctuation and tense structure, which in Neruda tends to be full of meaning. Thus, for example, Felstiner in Canto VI renders 'Ésta fue la morada, éste es el sitio:' into 'This was the dwelling, this is the place:' (1980, pp.214-15). In this case, according to Felstiner:

The past tense balanced against the present and the matching half-lines divide Macchu Picchu's genius equally between the city that people formerly dwelt in and the natural site a poet now announces (1980, p.169).

Regarding lexis he tends to select words from a Germanic origin rather than Latin cognates. For example *última*, *palpitante*, *transparente*, *cavidades* and *intersticios* is translated by *final*, *pulsing*, *clear*, *deep pits*, and *gaps* rather than *ultimate*, *palpitating*, *transparent*, *cavities* and *interstices* as other translators have done. Finally, he emphasises sound and rhythm over content and imagery (1980, p.29). For example in the last verses of Canto IV, Neruda creates a particular rhythm with the repetition of the conjunction *y* (and) and the preposition *sin* (without):

entonces fui por calle y calle y río y río,
 y ciudad y ciudad y cama y cama,
 y atravesó el desierto mi mascara salobre,
 y en las últimas casas humilladas, sin lámpara, sin fuego,
 sin pan, sin piedra, sin silencio, solo,
 rodé muriendo mi propia muerte.

then I went street after street and river after river,
 city after city and bed after bed,
 and my brackish mask crossed through waste places,
 and in the last low hovels, no light no fire,
 no bread, no stone, no silence, alone,
 I roamed round dying of my own death. (Felstiner, 1980,
 p.211)

As we can see, here Felstiner, in order to maintain the rhythm, has rendered *y* alternatively as *and* or *after* and *sin* as *no*, rather than *without*. In addition the alliteration of the sounds /r/ and /m/ of the last line has been reproduced by the alliteration of /r/ and /d/.

All this shows that Felstiner goes beyond polarised conceptions of translation since at times he uses techniques traditionally associated with a domesticating strategy: the close empathic reading of the source text and the avoidance of Latin

cognates. At other times, the techniques used are associated more with a foreignising strategy, which reminds the readers that they are dealing with a translation and brings them closer to the foreign text: the title (*Translating Neruda*), the use of a parallel bilingual translation, the content of the five chapters of the book previous to the translation proper and the close following of the text regarding stanza division, punctuation, and tense and sound structure.

The value of the journey as a translation technique was perhaps merely complementary to other techniques used by Felstiner, such as using three recordings of Neruda reciting the poem (1980, p.151), analysing the available translations in English, researching Neruda's life and works and also studying the work of Neruda as a translator himself in order to justify or facilitate a lexical choice.³ The value of Felstiner's book with respect to other available translations may lie in the close analytical reading of Neruda's poem canto by canto in chapter five, where he points out particular difficulties for translation and compares his choices with those made previously by other translators. In this way readers are given the chance to interpret the source text for themselves, by being shown different alternatives.

Brukoff's book

Brukoff's photographic images do more than just accompany the poem, since they frame the whole book. Alongside the poem they tend to be organised in groups of three or four after each of the twelve cantos and often the content of the images corresponds to the content of the poem. For example, just before Canto VI when the poetic persona is about to reach the top of Machu Picchu, there are four photographs of different stairways taken from the site (Neruda,

³ For example he justifies translating *entraña* for *womb* because Neruda himself translated *womb* for *entraña* (p.185).

2001, pp.58-61). All of the previous photos are of the lower levels and the reader is not allowed to see the summit until after Canto VI (although photos from the top level appear on the cover and also accompany Allende's introduction, showing therefore that all the images form an integral part of the whole book, and not just the poem). Another example is the last line of Canto VIII where Neruda mentions the condor, which is followed by three photographs of 'The condor stone' from different angles (see figure 1).

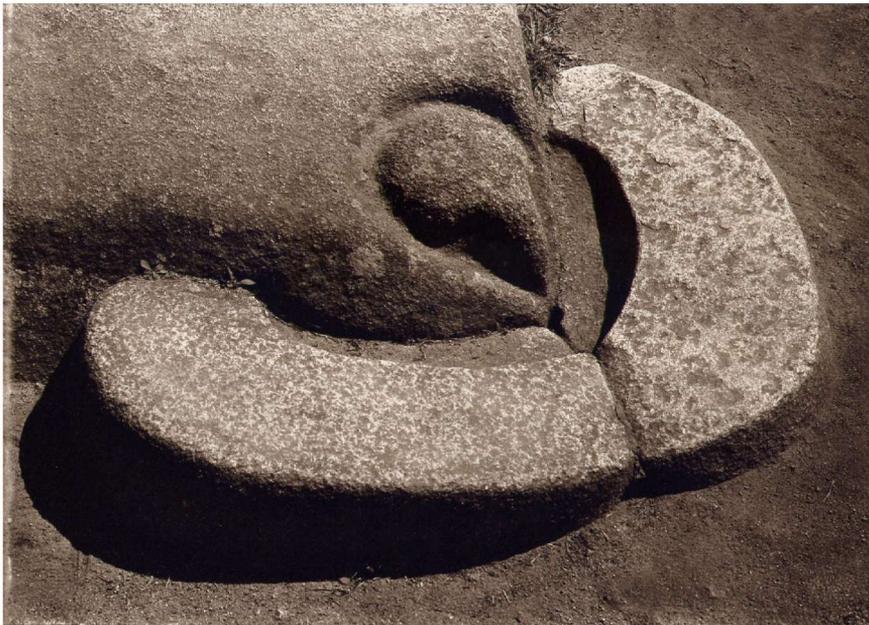


fig.1: The Head of the Condor (Neruda and Brukoff, 2001, p.84)

On the other hand, the photographs do not express the sense of loss present in the first five cantos, where the poetic persona is wandering aimlessly:

Del aire al aire, como una red vacía,
 iba yo entre las calles y la atmósfera, llegando y despidiendo,
 (Canto I)

From the air to the air, like an empty net,

I went through streets and thin air, arriving and leaving behind, (Felstiner, 1980, p.203)

Neither do they depict the Marxist message present particularly in Cantos X-XII, where the poetic persona addresses Machu Picchu demanding it to allow him to look beyond its splendour in order to find out how the Indians that built the city lived and died, offering to become their spokesman and to tell of their sufferings:

A través del confuso esplendor,
a través de la noche de piedra, déjame hundir la mano
y deja que en mi palpite, como un ave mil años prisionera,
el viejo corazón del olvidado! (Canto XI)

Through the dazing splendor,
through the night of stone, let me plunge my hand
and let there beat in me, like a bird a thousand years
imprisoned,
the old forgotten human heart! (Felstiner 1980, p.235)

In a way it could be said that the photographs may actually accentuate this splendour, and distract the reader from the message Neruda is trying to convey.

The function of the photographs seems to be more than just accompanying the poem. Thus on the front cover we have a photo of ‘The watchman’s hut’, where we can see the summit of one of the mountains, which indicates both the subject matter of the book and perhaps also invites the readers to undertake the journey themselves (see figure 2).



fig.2: The Watchman's Hut at Dawn (Neruda and Brukoff, front cover and p. 126)

Similarly, some of the photos placed before the poem could be interpreted as symbolising the ascent to the city that the reader is about to undertake, as for example the images on the inner front and back cover, depicting a close-up of steps occupying two pages; or the photograph accompanying the table of contents, taken from a very low angle and showing the hill where the watchman's hut is, which can just be discerned at the top (see figure 3). Moreover, an interesting technique used by Brukoff is positioning the viewer in front of a doorway or window, which gives the image a realistic 3D effect. This may also function as an enticement to go further and may bring the reader closer to experiencing the journey (see figure 4).



fig.3: Untitled (Neruda and Brukoff, p.6-7)

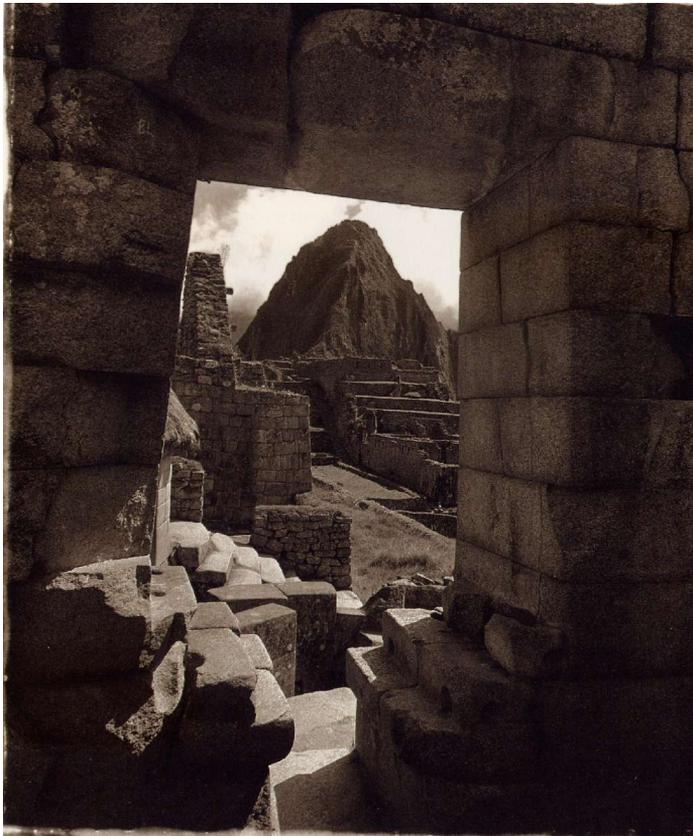


fig.4: Huayana Picchu from the Kings' Group (p. 16)

As in Felstiner's case, even though following in Neruda's steps as a translation technique is associated with domestication, the fact that the whole book is bilingual and that the photos are of a foreign city, continually reminds the reader of the status of the text as a translation. Furthermore Brukoff's book is more than a translation of the original poem, and consequently, it goes beyond questions of polarised translation strategies. It could be considered rather as a translation of the experience of Brukoff's journey, in a similar way that the original poem was a translation into written language of Neruda's experience. Possibly it was not just the journey that added value to Brukoff's work but the experience of it influenced by Neruda's poem with the subsequently added focus and structure. The final product is an interdependent combination of words and images which takes the reader as close as possible to experiencing the pilgrimage to Machu Picchu, which in a way may be more effective than any of the other versions of the poem or other books published about the site, with or without photographs.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described three pilgrimages to the ancient city of Machu Picchu. I have attempted to explore the implications of following in the steps of the source text author, and of trying to imagine what it must have been like being him at the moment of inspiration, in order to gain a richer understanding of the text. This idea of having to adopt the soul of the author as a way of interpreting the text has been present in the Anglo-American world since the seventeenth century, and it is usually associated with a domesticating translation strategy, which entails an appropriation of the text into the target culture literary system. However, at other points in the translation process, both Brukoff and Felstiner used

other techniques that remind the reader of the foreign provenance of the text and of its status as a translation. In other words, they both go beyond polarised notions of translation since they used techniques associated with both poles of the spectrum, from domestication to foreignisation. In addition, the pilgrimage undertaken by both translators has added value to their texts since they are more than just translations of Neruda's poem. Felstiner's book is a detailed critical text that provides the readers with enough background information to interpret the poem and indirectly recreate the journey. Brukoff's book, in a slightly different way, takes the readers through the pilgrimage, and his combination of text and images perhaps allows them to get closer to the site.

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