TRANSLATING SURREALIST LANGUAGE: FROM THE 27 GENERATION TO FRANCISCO NIEVA

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This paper seeks to examine surrealist influences in the literature of the 27 Generation, to show the influence of this on the work of Francisco Nieva, the contemporary playwright and author of *Pelo de Tormenta,* and to comment on some of the problems encountered in translating these surrealist elements in Spanish literature.

We start with the 27 Generation as it was they who first introduced *superrealismo* into Spanish art and literature. It must be stressed that in no way do we consider the Generation to have been "surrealist" in any way which significantly conformed to Andre Breton's *Manifeste du Surréalisme.* The French surrealists sought to change the world, politically and socially, to create the "new man" in a new society. They were political and artistic radicals who flirted with communism and were fascinated by Freudian psychiatry, and indeed anything which they saw as enhancing individual freedom. Breton spoke of the aims of the movement in terms of "psychic automatism" by means of which the author could express the way the mind really worked in the absence of any control imposed by reason. His *manifeste* was first published in 1924 at a time when leading poets of the Generation were preparing the celebration of the *Centenario de Góngora* in 1927, demonstrating their admiration for the classical and highly structured works of this poet. Dámaso Alonso published *Soledades* in the same year and de Diego his *Antología Poética en honor de Góngora.*

Also, the leading members of the Generation, with the exception of Miguel Hernández who was a communist, were curiously apolitical, prior to the Civil War. Alberti participated in pro-republican demonstrations and most of the group closest to him were natural republicans, thirsty for progress and freedom. Nevertheless, at a time when Libertarian movements were in government in Catalonia and Spain was crying out for revolutionary change, during the Republic, there is little evidence of political radicalism in the work of these poets. Hernández later died in a nationalist prison and wrote politically committed poetry and Alberti's dedication to the Republican cause is expressed in his Civil War poetry.

The undoubted personal radicalism of these poets is expressed in their poetry, and the avant-garde influences, amongst which surrealism may be numbered, form part of this need to break out of the strictures of Spanish society at the time.

In 1925 Louis Aragon gave a lecture at the *Residencia de Estudiantes* entitled *Surréalisme* and it would be reasonable to suppose that Lorca, Dalí, Buñuel and Alberti may have been present. In 1928 Buñuel and Dalí produced *Le Chien Andalou.* During this period, Lorca and Dalí work together on an exhibition and Dalí produced the *Full Groc* "Manifiesto Anti-artístico Catalán". An incident which confirms the fact that the

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spirit of surrealism had taken hold of these members of the Generation took place in Madrid when Alberti gave a scandalous lecture, shocking the audience of the Lyceum Club.[1] González Muela's commentary: *"Tomemos, pues, el 'superrealismo' francés como un técnica que nuestros modernos españoles utilizaron cuando la creyeron necesaria, más que una honda confirmación de su poesía"*[2] may, in a sense, be true. It does not place deep roots in their poetry, but it does colour and, on occasions, enliven it.

The outstanding poets of the Generation were steeped in a Spanish literary tradition which was at once highly erudite and popular. *Lo Popular,* the deep-rooted sense of Spanish culture as expressed in popular songs, theatre and everyday language, alongside the classical literary tradition, combined with European avant-garde influences in the work of Lorca, Alberti, Hernández and Guillén, Diego, Salinas and others. The *poetas cultos del Siglo de Oro,* Bécquer, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Darío all leave their mark alongside the *ismos*: *ultraismo, surrealismo,* etc., although it would be beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to document the myriad influences on minds as creative as these.

The *ismo* with which we are concerned, the surreal, is present in a variety of ways in the writings of the 27 generation and continues to colour contemporary Spanish literature, particularly in the work of the playwright, Francisco Nieva. We intend to examine images taken from the work of Lorca and Alberti, as well as those from Nieva, whose play *Pelo de Tormenta* is the only work amongst those mentioned throughout which has actually been translated by the author of this paper. Working backwards, however, from Nieva to the 27 Generation, one naturally finds intertextual influences presenting similar challenges to the translator.

It was in *Sobre los Ángeles* that Alberti produced his first surrealist work. The surrealist elements we find are in the dream atmosphere and the sense of unreality, characteristic of the surrealists' interest in the psyche and its value in "pure poetry" and the striking use of visionary images, such as:

nieblas regidas
por humo que yo conozco
en mi enterrados
van a borrarme.

and the *Ángel de los números:*

Y en las muertas pizarras,
el ángel de los números,
sin vida, amortajado
sobre el 1 y el 2
sobre el 3, sobre el 4...
hubo luz que trajo
por hueso una almendra amarga

voz que por sonido
el fleco de la lluvia
cortado por un hacha

[1] R. Alberti: *La Arboleda Perdida:* Memorías, Barcelona, Seis Barral, 1975.

[2] Joaquín Gonzalez Muela y Juan Manuel Rozas: *La Generación Poética de 1927,* Madrid, Bella Bellatrix, 1987.

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Equally, the rain cut with an axe in the above shows the characteristic breaking with form and logical relationships characteristic of surreal poetry. The fact that the images employed are not immediately comprehensible does not necessarily mean that they are surreal as, for example, Góngora's use of imagery is so dense as to be apparently incomprehensible without the most taxing search for significance — and Alberti was the most dedicated Góngoran scholar. Nevertheless, the context of the work as a whole enables us to see the surrealist breaking with form and use of words as if in free association of psychoanalysis. The lack of rational relationship between the real and unreal, as in the use of numbers also shows the surrealist aesthetic. If we look at Bosche's paintings, we only now, after centuries of incomprehension, realise that the arcane images are related to the Masonic order. Yet with the surrealist image, we can be certain that the meaning lies in its unreality. The *almendra amarga* of the second quotation is reminiscent of images used in Lorca's *Cancionero.* Here, however, there are no rustic associations that we know of, no recurring image of bitterness, simply a light, a bone and a bitter almond.

Similarly, Federico García Lorca, in his work *Poeta en Nueva York* employs extended images which are virtually unintelligible, such as the use of an extended image involving multiplications, divisions and sums, in *New York, oficina y denuncia:*

Debajo de las multiplicaciones
hay una gota de sangre de pato;
debajo de las divisiones
hay una gota de sangre de marinero;
debajo de las sumas, un río de sangre tierna.

The implications for translating this type of image, employing techniques based on discourse analysis, lie in the lack of propositional content of the speech act — the message contained in the text is not apparent, or lies in the aesthetics of surrealism. The problem then is to decide on what constitutes the speech act. The work as a whole must be the answer in the case of a collection of poems. Multiplications, divisions and sums are, presumably, activities which Lorca sees as being carried out in an office, but the relationship between that and the drops of blood are either non-existent or exist only in the poet's mind. This being the case, leaving aside questions of meter, the lack of the prerequisites for the speech act remove the need to translate "meaning" and justifies, unusually, the translation of mere form. Equally, though, the same argument could be used where the form is changed to accommodate meter. By the same token, it is amusing to think of works of non-surrealist works of literature in translation, in which faithfulness to form has produced highly surreal images. Surrealism is perhaps the exception that proves the rule.

The river image continues in Lorca's poem:

Un río que viene cantando
por los dormitorios de los arrabales,
y es plata, cemento o brisa
en el alba mentida de Nueva York.

The use here of a standard image, such as "*el río cantando*" and the image of the river as "silver" is immediately changed by the use of "cement" and "breeze", de-

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stroying the visual reality of a singing, silver river. Arguably, the cement could have a reality in so far as it could refer to the built-up areas through which it passes. The overall context of the poem tells us, however, not to read to much reality into a poem which is part of the one truly surrealist work of the poet.

The spirit of surrealism, rather the use of surreal images as a mere literary device, colours much of the work of the 27 generation and writers thereafter. In the work of the dramatist, Francisco Nieva, we find evidence of similar influences as those commented upon earlier: *Lo popular,* the Spanish literary tradition and the European avant-garde movements. In Nieva's work, which dates from the sixties when he lived in Paris and Italy, intertextual elements proliferate and include opera, silent movies and plastic art. To document all of these influences is irrelevant to our present purpose, but what is important is to situate him in that tradition of Spanish letters which continues to break down barriers and cross frontiers and, above all, to create unique works of art. Nieva, in a prologue to *Nosferatu,* one of his two *reoperas*, (the other being *Pelo de Tormenta*) compares the work to García Lorca's *teatro de vanguardia.*

Translating drama obviously presents a series of challenges which differ in many respects from those presented by poetry. However, the surrealist and expressionist elements in Nieva's plays, characterised by the use of baroque and absurd lexical items, violation of register, language intended to shock, either for its unexpectedness or for its irreverence, as well as by the dramatic action and scenic effects, may be analysed in a similar way to the poetic images discussed previously. *Nosferatu* opens with a dialogue between *La Aurora,* goddess of the dawn, and *El Agonizante*, the dying one. The following examples are taken from this dialogue:

> LA AURORA.— *¡Ganas tenía de atrapar a un tipo como tú, sombreado en castaño! ¡Y qué pestañas de periodista!*
> EL AGONIZANTE.— *¡Periodista...! ¡Un fracasado! Yo sólo me ocupo en imprenta de los perros atropellados. El resto se me va en hacer el amor y mirar el lavabo de mi cuarto para encontrarme un nombre de mujer ideal. En confianza te lo digo. A todos os engaño con el lavabo. Él se ha tragado mi mejor bilis de todas las mañanas.*
> LA AURORA.— *Bésame, mameluco. Yo soy tu lavabo. Tengo la garganta llena de pelos húmedos y con un gorgorito de otras habitaciones.*

The image in the first line, "*un tipo como tú, sombreado en castaño*" (a guy like you, shaded in brown) translated formally sounds "odd", much as it sounds in the original Spanish. The problem with reading an "odd-sounding" English version is that the oddness is attributed to poor translation rather than avant-garde language. This can either be ignored or the target text can be "hyped-up" so that the oddness is flagged, as it were. The following utterance "*Y qué pestañas de periodista*" is distinctly Nievian in that it employs a real plane item "eyebrows" and changes it to something unreal by the addition of the qualifying *de periodista,* "journalist's eyebrows'. The speech act is, however, viable as the propositonal content and the illocutionary force are discernable, despite the strange imagery. The dialogue, however, becomes increasingly unreal as the dying one refers to his *lavabo.*

The word *lavabo* is literally a washbasin, but could refer to the lavatory in general, in much the same way as the word "loo" might be used. The dying one talks of having looked at his *lavabo* every morning in search of the ideal woman's name. He also refers to having deceived women with his *lavabo* by giving it his best bile. The lexical

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item chosen to translate *lavabo* decides the degree of outrageousness of the English rendering. Clearly, such decisions are taken within the context of the play as a whole and in accordance with prior decisions as to intentionality, register, tone, aim of the text (text-to-be-read, performance text) artistic aesthetics and so on. Aurora's response, in which she claims to be the dying one's *lavabo* and asks to be kissed as she has damp hairs in her throat , depending on the English lexical item chosen, could be merely odd or absolutely outrageous, depending on the degree of strength desired in the target text. If we decide that the play as a whole is entirely surrealist, which it is undoubtedly not, we could justifiably use the most shocking item possible. Equally, it would be possible to opt for the more absurd items. The decisions, as ever, depend on judgements made about the play as a whole, rather than by examining isolated utterances.

Such decisions are not exclusive to these outlandish examples of the surrealist language used, on occasions, by Nieva but are common to a variety of translational problems. The mixture of styles found in Nieva's writing in itself presents a problem. Were the plays or the poetry under discussion wholly surrealistic, the decisions would be simplified, but we are dealing in each instance with complex works, employing a whole range of poetic and dramatic devices, influenced by a variety of avant-garde literary movements and rooted very strongly in a Spanish literary tradition dating back to the Arcipreste de Talavera, to Cervantes and to *La Celestina.* The elements of the *lo popular* are equally present in Lorca, Alberti and Nieva and present a further challenge to the translator.

Clearly, the complexity of the works under discussion calls for in-depth analysis of the discourse, complemented by sensitivity to and awareness of the intertextual influences deriving from a range of literary sources. Traditional techniques of literary analysis, approaching the text intuitively, complement the discourse analysis approach in helping us produce a target text free of misconceptions and reflecting the spirit of the original.

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