TRANSLATING THE SURREAL

TRICIA McERLAIN

University of Wolverhampton

Francisco Nieva is one of Spain's most original and innovative contemporary playwrights. Since Nieva's return to Spain in the late sixties, his work has been given recognition denied it during his many years of self-imposed exile in France and Italy. Nieva was awarded the Principe of Asturias prize last year and his plays are now regularly performed in Madrid.

This paper discusses some of the problems presented to the translator of *Pelo de Tormenta* one of his early works and seeks to show how the surrealist aesthetic is manifested in certain linguistic techniques employed by the dramatist. The problems of translating the surreal aspects of his work are also addressed and the various artistic influences in evidence in the text are explored, in particular the surreal aspects of the language.

Nieva has been described as the most European of Spanish playwrights, an assertion which is undeniably true and hardly surprising in view of the years of voluntary exile from the Franco regime and the author's exposure to and his involvement in artistic movements in Paris and Italy from the early fifties until his return to Spain during the transition.

It is perhaps in his use of language where he is best seen in a Spanish context. The colourful, baroque and frequently surrealistic use of the Spanish language enables us to place him within a Spanish literary tradition, although it is more difficult to situate him within a particular movement or framework of twentieth-century Spanish theatre. It is of particular importance to stress the Spanish influence, or rather the Spanish roots of his work, as it is in his peculiar use of language where he is at his most Spanish and even *castizo* and this is, perhaps, somewhat neglected. Translation concentrates the mind in so far as the close analysis of the discourse of the text obliges the translator to acknowledge and recognise the reality of the work, rather than to rely on pre-conception or received thinking.

The particular problems presented by the plays of the *Teatro Furioso* (a group of plays which includes *Pelo*) from the translator's point of view, are the baroque, surrealistic and absurd lexical items which are highly individualistic and original and offer few possibilities of neat equivalence in translation. The elements of the «Popular», *lo Popular*, a Spanish tradition of writing in the language of the lower classes with its use of vulgar street language and crude and earthy idiomatic expressions, is strongly in evidence throughout his work. A particularly Nievian device is the use of abrupt changes of register to shock and for humorous effect, an aspect of his work which is of central interest from a linguistic point of view and one which poses a certain challenge to the translator. Nieva's work belongs to a non-conformist

V ENCUENTROS COMPLUTENSES. Tricia MCERLAIN. Translating the surreal

Centro Virtual Cervantes

tradition of Spanish literature dating back to *La Celestina, El Quijote*, Arcipreste de Talavera and beyond and is particularly influenced by the Picaresque.

The Spanish picaresque tradition is in evidence, not only in the bizarre characterisation, but also in the characteristically picaresque use of coarse language, which in a curious way predates the surrealistic technique of violation of register in order to shock or for comic effect. The reflection of this popular cultural tradition and the way in which it combines with surrealistic techniques in the discourse of the plays is the main aspect of translation addressed by this paper.

The play discussed here is *Pelo de Tormenta*, (written in 1962). Much of the humour and interest in *Pelo* resides in the irreverent portrayal of religious characters and pompous officialdom, such as la Abadesa, el Alguacil, el Sacristán Raboso and las Sublimitas who are not rounded characters, any more than are his other characters, as the plays make no attempt at realism. The Sublime Order of Nuns, for example, the Sublimes for short, are a chorus of piping voices who recite nonsense in the form of a religious chant, evoking saints' names accompanied by irrelevancies, such as: «Saint Ignatius of the black beret». They are supposedly afraid of Mal Rodrigo, a wicked dragon who lives down a well and possesses an enormous phallic tail. One suspects, however, that the women in the play are actually quite fascinated by Mal Rodrigo and his scandalous reputation and, significantly the nuns are happy with their own Sacristan who has a long, phallic tail which is «the scandal of the kingdom».

Pelo is a *reopera* which, in the words of the author:

> A form of theatre which is open to new visual forms: dances, parades, and a changing and *efectista* (employing exaggerated effects, such as the use of outrageous phallic symbols, etc.) scenography. A rough canvass, a short script which can provide a framework for other aims and concepts. It can be set to music, changed to a song or developed by improvisation and fringe events. It aims to be a festival of variable length and can be performed equally well distanced from the audience or by being forcefully carried into their midst. It can be an overwhelming performance and its highest aspiration would be to appear as a triumphant baroque parade, complete with decorated floats. So it is important that the area of performance, whether indoors or out, should allow for a surprising and imaginative display. Having said this, read the text —squeezed to the full— complementing it where necessary as you would with a libretto. In the same way as in the libretto there is here a curious condensing of dialogue and ideas, a kaleidoscope of scenic effects, which —without being accompanied by music— could give the impression of theatre which is as yet unknown, partly aborted and partly «in need of fleshing out» (F. Nieva, p. 75).

Nieva touches upon a key point here and, unusually for an author, gives carte blanche for a free interpretation of his writing, which is comforting to the translator. If, as Bell[1] would maintain, all communicators are translators, whether monolingual or bilingual, the former only differentiated from the latter in the re-encoding process and the difference being one of degree rather than of kind, then a play invites a further layer of interpretation, or even two or three; the producer, the actor and the audience, all of whom will interpret the meaning of the production according to

[1] Roger Bell: *Translation and Translating: Theory and Practice*, London, Longman, 1991.

V ENCUENTROS COMPLUTENSES. Tricia MCERLAIN. Translating the surreal

Centro Virtual Cervantes

their capacity to decode, encode and interpret the performance, understand the cultural references and so on. The translator of the work is somewhere in the middle facilitating the whole process. It is not enough to understand the word on the page but to really attempt to get inside the author's mind and to try to understand his philosophy and his background — which is why the whole play or work could be regarded as a single speech act and the intentionality can only be provided by a great deal of reading and understanding of the author's life and thoughts.

Bell's nine steps in the process of communication are carried out between the playwright as sender and the translator as receiver in bilingual communication and then repeated between translator and producer and producer and actor in monolingual communication.[2] Anyone who has ever played the game whereby a message is whispered between various members of a group and in which the final message is compared to the original will realise how distorted messages may become.

Nieva recognises as valid, and indeed invites, further interpretations and additions to his *reopera* sees it as a «rough canvass» on which other artists can work. The translator need not concern his/herself with the future interpretations of the work as such, but rather in the process of decoding and encoding or of deconstructing and reconstructing the message in question, in this instance the play, which will facilitate any future interpretation.

The dramatic structure, as opposed to the linguistic elements of the reopera, aids comprehension and facilitates communication. There is, however, a close link between the two. If we consider a speech act to involve paralinguistic elements, then these elements within a theatrical context are highlighted and have a more stylised effect than in normal speech. Lighting, music, costume, scenography and the general semiotics of theatre form part of the ultimate speech act in question. Part of the interpretation of the message is reliant upon the indications given by the dramatists's stage directions and instructions on the settings.

Pelo forms part of the *Teatro Inicial* or early works of the author. As Becker comments[3] the early works of the dramatist are important as they contain what is to become characteristic of the work in general. Aspects of the early work, such as *Pelo*, are further developed in other plays belonging to the *Teatro Furioso*. The more recent works, however, such as the *Teatro Italiano*, while maintaining certain aspects of the surreal, are less extravagant and outrageous.

The following plays form part of the *Teatro Inicial*:

— *Nosferatu* (Madrid, 1961),

— *Pelo de tormenta* (Paris, 1962),

— *Es bueno no tener cabeza* (Dublin, 1966).

They contain the seeds of the *Teatro Furioso*, this being the period which interest us from the point of view of translation. Bousoño, in his introduction to *Teatro Furioso*,[4] stresses the originality of Nieva's work and ...*La fuerza excepcional de su lenguaje, incesantemente creador hasta un punto pocas veces alcanzado, el caudal*

---

[2] *Ibid.*, 1.2.

[3] Francisco Nieva: *Teatro Completo*, 2 vol., Servicio de Publicaciones de la Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha, 1991, 15.

[4] ***Ibid.***, p. 261.

V ENCUENTROS COMPLUTENSES. Tricia MCERLAIN. Translating the surreal

Centro Virtual Cervantes

que parece inagotable de un humor totalmente personal , cuyo índole de nunca usada luz, resulta en todo momento pasmosa...

Bousoño[5] goes on to emphasise the importance of text in Nieva's work, *El texto surge ahora con una fuerza que habría que llamar irradiante y que tiene carácter explosivo.... El verbo ostenta tonalidades satánicas y nos quema su maravilla.*

Nieva calls the TF plays «apocalyptic» and comments on their possible inspiration in a scatalogical tendency within Spanish consciousness. Coterillo[6] quotes from Bright's history of Israel:

> Apocalypse means revalations. It aims to reveal in esoteric language the final happenings which were about to occur at any moment... They aimed to describe the strange visions in which nations and historic individuals appear in the form of mysterious beasts.

Esoteric language and strange creatures in Nieva perhaps form part of an apocalyptic vision, as Coterillo suggests, but they do so in a humorous and «tongue-in-cheek» way which somehow suggests that any new order they might impose would be an anarchic and fantastic one. Nieva's plays are not political in any strictly ideological way, but rather pleas for greater freedom from restrictions of all kinds. In this sense they belong to an anarchic Spanish tradition which can also be found in Spanish surrealist painting and the cinema of Buñuel.

Nieva's own words on the passion he feels may underlie his art are interesting in this respect:

> *...me atraen las grandes fuerzas reprimidas de este país que me gustaría escribir en algarabía morisca, si pudiera y se me entendiera; con palabras de fuego y de humo de todos los «equivocados», según la ley de la forma que se quiso dar a España. Tanta forma que se quiso dar que negó la novedad del espíritu, hasta llegar a dudar inquisitorialmente de sus místicos, porque sus arrebatos se salían de la cuadrícula de los buenos sentimientos. Y, efectivamente, se salían. Nuestro destino de nación ha sido demasiado testarudo* (Nieva, 1975, p. 33).

The word *forma* appears twice in the sense of structures which are imposed on the Spanish people and the Spanish psyche and which are mentioned in the context of the Inquisition and the damage it imposed on the spiritual, mystical side of the Spanish nation. Sympathy bordering on passion is expressed for the *equivocados* (author's inverted commas) those who were «wrong», who did not fit into the structure. An analysis of the language of the plays reveals a reflection of this passionate need to break out of confined structures and to occupy greater artistic space both linguistically and dramatically.

According to Edward Lucie-Smith[7] the Art of the post-war period was not completely innovatory, but had its roots in the Modernist movements dating from the beginning of the century. Andre Breton, in the *First Surrealist Manifesto* in

---

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 261.

[6] Francisco Nieva: *Teatro Furioso*, ed. M. Pérez Coterillo, Madrid, Ayuso, 1975, 33.

[7] E. Lucie-Smith: *Movimientos artísticos desde 1945*, Barcelona, Thames & Hudson, 1993, 69.

V ENCUENTROS COMPLUTENSES. Tricia MCERLAIN. Translating the surreal

Centro Virtual Cervantes

1924, spoke of the aims of the movement in terms of «psychic automatism» by means of which it was necessary to express verbally or in writing the way the mind really worked, in the absence of any control imposed by reason:

> *El Surrealismo se basa en la creencia de la realidad superior de ciertas formas de asociación marginadas, o en la omnipotencia del sueño.... Tiende a destruir los otros mecanismos psíquicos y a ocupar el lugar de estos en la solución de los principales problemas de la vida* (Richter, 73).

If we analyse the discourse of the plays and in particular certain scenes where seemingly random disjointed utterances are employed such as the following, the surrealists' interest in random association as used in pshycoanalysis is appparent:

> *Sor Juana de la Coz (cae y se revuelca en trance de gritos y quejidos taladrantes):*
> *¡El demonio y la carne!... ¡Los enemigos de la mujer! ¡Los cuatro jinetes del apocalipsis! ¡Como tú me deseas! ¡El acorazado Potemkin!... ¡Roma, ciudad abierta!* (91, p. 187).
>
> Las Sublimitas: An inane chorus of nuns who chant meaningless litanies in liturgical form (translated as «The Sublimes»):
> *Tremendas jaculatorias, diabolescas máximas ¿Qué mala magia le inspira? ¿Quién le ha puesto en la cabeza tan confuso repertorio? ¡Oh!, cuánto espíritu malo acecha entre el rebaño de los negros* (p. 187)
>
> Extraordinary outpourings! Diabolical maxims. What evil spell inspires her? Who has filled her head with this confused repertoire.
>
> Sor Juana de la Coz: Chaplin, Lubitsch, Abel Gance! Buñuel, Losy Von Ströheim! (p. 187).

Analysing these utterances in speech act terms, we find it difficult to find the illocutionary force or propositional content of this outburst, which raises the question of what constitutes the speech act (The single utterance? The play as a whole? And who are the performers of this act; the author, the character?). The intentionality lies in the author's aesthetic.

The leading figures of the Surrealist movement, including Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, André Masson and Peggy Guggenheim, left Europe for New York where Gorky had already lived since before the war. Antonin Artaud, who was later to exercise a great influence on Nieva, was connected with the movement at this time. The surrealist movement in painting was divided between the meticulous detail of Magritte or Dalí and the art of Miró where form is hinted at, rather than represented by real objects. The movement was characterised by its audacious technique and the freedom with which they used materiales and played around with forms.[8]

This playing round with forms is also much in evidence in *Pelo de Tormenta* and in Nieva's use of language generally:

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

V ENCUENTROS COMPLUTENSES. Tricia MCERLAIN. Translating the surreal

Centro Virtual Cervantes

¡A la jota jota, jota de la mala pata... a la pata pata pata de la poca lacha de la mucha panza... a la panza panza panza de la mala jota...!

Here repetition, alliteration and internal rhyming devices are employed to show a playful enjoyment of sound, with little regard to content.

According to Breton,[9] art should be beyond aesthetics and ethics. The Surrealists experimented with different techniques, created absurd objects, provoked challenging situations and generally followed their instincts of the moment. They were concerned with the dynamics of Art and frequently dabbled in ephimeral art forms which were not able to be housed in a museum. *En el fondo y no en la forma se es surrealista.* According to Bonet-Correa Surrealism is not so much an art form concerned with literature and painting as a new way of looking at life. The aim of the Surrealists was to change society and a whole way of life. They saw themselves as visionaries or mediums of a different reality. Anything was permissible as long as it «...provoked emotion and awe in the face of mystery, opened the door to dreams...» Nieva's dragons, dwarfs, tailed sacristans and so on certainly accord with this vision.

Surrealism was introduced into Spain around the time of Nieva's birth, which is to say that his early readings and his childhood interest in theatre would have allowed him to absorb surrealist artistic ideas from Lorca, Buñuel and Dalí. He is more a product of surrealist influences than a surrealist as such, as obviously this was a pre-war movement. He describes himself as identifying more closely with Expressionism, which perhaps lacks the overtly political commitment and ideological conviction of the Surrealist movement, which espoused communism at a time when it was considered revolutionary.

In 1925 Louis Aragon gave a lecture at the Residencia de Estudiantes de Madrid. The Residencia was founded as part of an educational experiment by the Spanish educationalist, Giner de los Ríos, and based on the Oxford College. Amongst the famous writers and artists known as the '27 Generation', García Lorca, Alberti, Dalí and Buñuel passed through the Residencia and were likely to have been present at this lecture. That year marked the beginning of a series of publications in Spain on the subject of Surrealism which continued until 1936.

In painting the term Surrealism was associated with Dalí's work, exhibited in 1927. The close friendship between Lorca and Dalí at the time and the former's later association with the School of Vallecas, whose work soon began to show elements of Surrealism, marked the beginning of the surrealist movement in Spain. The close association between the visual arts and literature within the movement is clear from Lorca's drawings and Luis Buñuel's *Chien Andalou*, first shown in 1929. In 1928 the *Full Groc*, or Catalan anti-artistic manifesto was published mentioning the work of Chirac, Miró, Desnos, Breton, Aragon y Lorca.[10] All round the time of Nieva's birth, so obviously he was not involved in the movement but must have become aware of it as a child, although it wasn't really until the postwar years with *el Postismo* that a direct link with surrealist artistic movement is established when he

[9] Antonio Bonet-Correa: *El Surrealismo*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1983, 12.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 213.

V ENCUENTROS COMPLUTENSES. Tricia MCERLAIN. Translating the surreal

Centro Virtual Cervantes

joined this avant garde theatre company in Madrid prior to leaving for France.

Surrealism sought to express two realities: the interior and the exterior and believed, influenced by psychoanalysis, that the vitality of art derived from the subconscious sources. Faced with the reality of a society which destroyed itself, Dada sought to employ the absurd to destroy this society, Impressionists, Expressionists and Surrealists destroyed or removed the visible reality of the objects they portrayed. Form was not to be respected or adhered to. The imagination should rule over reason and logic.

Nieva's writing reflects this rejection of «form for form's sake» and the surrealist aesthetic aids our understanding of certain aspects of the text in for example: violation of register, use of neologisms, use of language to shock, violation of form-as in the litanies. The following exerpts from *Pelo* exemplify these techniques:

The Sublime's Chant

Santa Casilda con la camisa hueca,
San pedro con su gallo,
San Jorge vestido de guardia,
preservadnos del desastre
en este reducto colmado de vírgenes,
rogad por nos ante el trono del padre.

The normal form of the liturgy is violated by the farcical irrelevence of the clauses modifying the saints. Inappropriacy is used to humorous effect and the reader's predictions are not met as the expected collocations are replaced by vacuous expressions.

El ciego: the blindman who acts as a mixture of chorus and master of ceremonies, breaks with custom in addressing the audience as *tú*, as in:

Público respetable que vienes a ver y oír esta festosa reopera...

and later:

Fijaos en lo desierto de las calles...

using the familiar plural and then later employing the polite form:

Miren, miren, como ya protesta...

The TV distinction has to be made in English by employing a variety of devices, such as in the use «polite» modals and other distance markers or, obversely, by their omission. Again the customary form of address is altered in order to prevent the reader from the suspense of reality which typifies Realist drama.

In his next utterance the blindman changes the tenor and uses a more intimate tone in which he imparts confidences concerning the sublimes:

Aquéllas son las sublimes almidonadas en su fábrica de rezar y hacer mermeladas, que se

Those are the Sublime order of nuns who live in their jam and prayer factory, trem-

V ENCUENTROS COMPLUTENSES. Tricia MCERLAIN. Translating the surreal
Centro Virtual Cervantes

mueren de mieditis, a pesar de que al Mal Rodrigo no le gustan las tocas impolutas, sino las pecheras levantadas y las faldas de mucho vuelo.

bling with fear, although they needn't worry Mal-Rodrigo prefers low-cut dresses and billowing skirts to chaste headdresses.

The Surrealist desire to shock and shake people from their complacency is evident, especially if we place the work in the context of the dictatorship. It may seem mild to us at present, but in an historical context it was impossible to perform in the Spain of that period.

The use of popular language is in evidence in the blindman's exchange with the *alguacil*: (townguard from golden-age theatre C16-17th)

Aquí llegan los alguaciles que espían, sin poder evitarlos, los actos y movimientos del M. R.,...
...Ugh los tales me hacen estornudar con la humedad de sus terciopelos. En ellos se mean en cuanto salen de su alcaldía.

Here come the town-guards who spy on the goings on of M.R., without being able to do anything to prevent them...
...Ugh they make me sneeze with their damp uniforms - they even piss in them, you know, when they're away from their normal duties.

The use of the coarse «mear» in favour of the more polite «orinar» marks the change of register to *lo popular*, which continues during the exchange with the alguacil or town guard:

A ver si te callas ciego verboso... ¡Fuera de aquí¡ Lárgate, si no quieres probar el sello de mi mano.

Why don't you shut up you verbose bat... Get out of here. Piss off unless you want to feel the back of my hand.

The use of the latinate «verbose» in English is justified here for its literary connotation, also present in Spanish. «Blind bat», being the only insulting epithet for a blind person that came to mind, was shortened to maintain the sharpness of the original.

The blindman replies in the same tone:

¡Vete a la mierda Pilatos, zapatón de la justicia! Haz tu guardia y no quieras encaramarte sobre este ciego modesto y más decente que tu madre.

Whereas *vete a la mierda* can fairly easily equate in strength to «piss-off» or something similar in British English, the reference to the mother, a dire insult in Spanish, is less meaningful in English.

Piss-off, don't come the heavy hand of the law round here. Get on with your guard duties and don't try it on with me. I'm just a poor decent blindman, more decent than your mother was that's for sure.

The problem with the use of the equivalent colloquial street language in English is that British idioms tend to adhere to a kind of «street fashion» and could date very easily. They therefore tend perhaps to give a very modern flavour to the

V ENCUENTROS COMPLUTENSES. Tricia MCERLAIN. Translating the surreal
Centro Virtual Cervantes

dialogue, which is lacking in the original.

The problems of translating the surrealist elements of Nieva's work have been approached primarily by using as a rule of thumb Bell's 'six honest serving men', taken from a poem by Kipling and referring to the «wh» interrogatives:

«What?» is the message contained in the text; the propositional content of the speech acts. The question here, in relation to the plays is what constitutes the speech act, as previously discussed.

«Why?» orients us towards «the intention of the sender» the illocutionary forces of the speech acts which constitutes the underlying structure of the text. In order to understand the intention of the dramatist as sender we have found it necessary to develop an understanding of the artistic movements which have influenced his work.

«When?» is concerned with temporal setting which, in the case of *Pelo*, is interesting as it takes place, we are informed (TF, p. 48) by the blindman, *en un pasado desconocido que llevas dentro* and provides us with one of the first clues as to the surrealist elements in the text.

«How?» can refer to:

— manner of delivery: the tenor, which in a performance is subject to the interpretation of the actor;

— medium of communication: the mode of discourse, the channels, which in the case of the play is a combination of spoken language written to be both performed and read.

«Where?» is concerned with the place of communication, the physical location of the speech event, which in the theatre would comprise the stage setting with all that implies for non-verbal communication.

«Who?» refers to the participants involved in the communication, the sender and the receiver, which we can interpret as being the characters in the play or even the writer and the public or the reader.

Only this continual quest for information about the entire process of translation authorises us in some small degree to undertake the responsibility of translating a work of art. Only painstaking research into the work and its author can validate our decisions and overcome our shortcomings as creative artists as we attempt to act as communicators between different cultures.

V ENCUENTROS COMPLUTENSES. Tricia MCERLAIN. Translating the surreal

Centro Virtual Cervantes

Centro Virtual Cervantes