

Huidobro/Pound: Translating Modernism

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In spite of their undeniably central role in the radical renewal of literary language and aesthetics that took place in the early twentieth century, one rarely finds the names of Ezra Pound and Vicente Huidobro together in studies of literary modernism.¹ It is almost as if North and South America had something at stake in separately mapping out their access to modernity, each focusing solely on its relation to Europe as source and as stage of the modern. This essay attempts to superimpose these maps to reveal coincidences and contrasts in the career of both poets, attesting not only to personal parallels but, more importantly, to the way in which the pattern of their explorations shows common cultural concerns and zones of tension. The main optic used to assess the “parafluency”² of these two authors will be the notion of translation, understood not only as the transfer of format or meaning from one text to another, but also in the larger sense of travel as spatial and mental displacement. I will thus focus on the activity of translating texts from and into languages other than one’s mother tongue, and also discuss the effects of displacement and contact with other contexts in the works of these writers.

The many innovations that Pound and Huidobro produced can only be understood as a result of these displacements. It is also in the context of displacement that some of Pound’s and Huidobro’s innovation appears less as pure novelty than as renewal, return of archaic or primitive attitudes and forms, thus yielding a more complex portrait of the modern and of avant-garde aesthetics than we are used to accepting, as well as suggesting a less linear historical narrative. This experience of displacement, and the destabilization of usual coordinates that it implies, is intimately related to what Antoine Berman has called “l’épreuve de l’étranger” (the experience of the foreign) in his book on the German Romantics bearing that title. This notion constitutes an encounter with the foreign that necessarily leads to a new relation with one’s own linguistic and cultural heritage, sometimes to the point that there is no possible return to anything that can be properly called “one’s own,” as is the case, for example, of Hölderlin and his relation to the Greek language.

It is perhaps no coincidence that it is only in the domain of translation that we find evidence of a possible contact between these two writers. In an interview with Ángel Cruchaga Santa María, Huidobro declares: “there is [. . .] a young English [*sic*] poet by the name of Ezra Pound, who has also become close to us, and who wishes to translate my *Horizon Carré* into his native tongue” (Huidobro, *Obra* 1637). That translation never actually took place, and the vagueness of Huidobro’s reference to Pound (assuming he is British rather than American, declaring his willingness to become a part of the Creationist school of which Huidobro was always practically the sole member) makes one doubt the concrete character (or even the veracity) of such intentions, but also suggests the possibility of some degree of mutual acquaintance, probably in Paris around 1917. It is, however, mostly in their afterlives that Huidobro and Pound’s legacies meet: in the late modernism of Octavio Paz, who names both of them as predecessors, and in Eliot Weinberger’s translation of *Altazor*, a Poundian project in its attempt to capture the poem’s vital energy rather than its mere form or content as separable entities, with a preface that also evokes the possibility of an encounter between the two poets. The many similarities of their artistic endeavors, however, have failed to give rise to a detailed examination of their works, since readers have been busy mapping out both poets’ relation to the European avant-garde movements in which they were more centrally involved. More important than an understanding of *what* they were looking at in Europe might be the fact that they were both looking *toward* it, for different reasons, and that both of them were doing so from a relatively marginal position. Young North and South American poets traveled to the “old continent” in search of something missing in their native regions, needing to establish their reputations in Europe, facing challenging changes in the process of making themselves a name in the European literary scene.

Latin American culture defined itself from very early on in opposition to its Northern neighbor, what Martí called the “other America.” On the other hand, North America tends to see the land to its South as a poor, charmingly exotic neighbor, characterized in its literature by magic realism’s exuberance and Neruda’s passionate Latin Lover / guerrilla fighter revolutionary rhetoric. In the following pages I will attempt to complicate that caricature without obliterating the important contrasts between the two authors examined here, nor denying the many obvious cultural differences at stake in their aesthetics. At the heart of this attempt is the conviction that modernism as a historical period and as an aesthetic tendency can only be understood when considered as a global phenomenon, rather than in terms of the more common, geographically restricted perspective.

A Double Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

Pound had an important role in getting James Joyce's famous *Bildungsroman A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* published serially, and also hailing it as a modernist masterpiece. The novel concludes with its protagonist, Stephen Daedalus, leaving his native Dublin for Paris, where he hopes to become successful as an artist, an ambition that everybody and everything around him seemed intent on stifling. A similar feeling of frustration must have been experienced by young aspiring writers growing up in cities far from the places where "things were happening," such as Santiago de Chile and Hailey, Idaho, or suburban Philadelphia, where Huidobro and Pound were born and grew up. A departure was thus necessary, and Europe the inevitable destination.

Huidobro had already lived in Paris in 1900 (at the age of seven), in the charge of French governesses while accompanied by his family. His whole career is marked by the "mental Gallicism" (the expression is Juan Valera's, describing the poetry of Rubén Darío) that characterized the intellectual and artistic elite of *fin de siècle* Latin America. Pound, born in 1885, had first traveled to Europe when he was thirteen, together with his mother and an aunt, and returned to the old continent in 1902 (accompanied by his parents). In 1906 he made his first solo voyage, when a scholarship gave him the chance to go to Madrid to study Lope de Vega's work as part of the research for a doctoral dissertation he would never complete. But it was not until 1908 when, after being fired from his teaching position at Wabash College due to his having let a lady lodge in his private quarters, he decided to settle down in Europe. Huidobro did not reside there until 1916, when he left Chile with the (probably nominal) post of *ad honorem* civil attaché to the Chilean embassy in Italy. He was already married and the father of two children. After a short stay in Madrid, he took up residence in Paris. Before leaving Chile, he had been editor of the journals *Musa Joven* and *Azul* and published the books *Ecos del alma*, *Canciones en la noche*, *La gruta del silencio*, *Las pagodas ocultas*, *Pasando y pasando* and *Adán*, a prolific output whose titles indicate how much his early production remained within the shadow of Rubén Darío's *modernismo*.³ One could in fact argue, against what he often declared, that it was not until his arrival in Europe that his writing acquired real avant-garde traits, as opposed to the imaginary populated by nightingales, stars, butterflies, and roses that marked his first literary attempts.

Aside from the frustrations derived from being inserted in "half savage countries" (as Pound refers to his place of birth in a poem), and the feeling that their literary projects would be more likely to succeed in a less static environment, both undoubtedly share the desire to gain recognition in what Pascal Casanova calls "the world republic of letters," whose capital at the

beginning of the twentieth century clearly was Paris. But there are also important differences in their departures. Pound, like a naïve female character in a Henry James novel (for instance, Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*), was particularly fascinated by Europe's old civilization: he was especially keen on acquiring familiarity with its artistic achievements in a way that betrayed that they were not naturally his, but needed to be appropriated. He came to Europe after benefiting from a relatively complete university education (probably more complete than the one acquired by Huidobro during his years at the Universidad de Chile), and in fact his first stay there was linked to academic research in Romance philology. Pound never completely got rid of a certain academic and pedagogical bent, and even in his most Dadaist or Futurist phases he conserved a high degree of respect for history and for tradition, even if it was always a heterodox and alternative tradition.⁴ In fact, his most significant work, *The Cantos*, can be read as a portable encyclopedia of what he considered the most valuable political, ethical, aesthetic and historical knowledge, a pocket guide for a future political leader (whom he would later identify with Mussolini). In this he is perhaps most similar to Jorge Luis Borges, who chose, however, to exert his penchant for erudition in a more ironic vein.

Huidobro, in contrast, was interested above all in getting in touch with the new, with novelties and change, with continuing the *modernista* search for what Ángel Rama called “a certain isochronism, by way of which Latin American literary transformations closely follow what is going on in the world's literary centers” (36) and what Octavio Paz has described as “a doorway into the present” (“La búsqueda del presente”). The concern with inserting elements from European and universal traditions that we find in Pound's work is mainly absent from Huidobro's writing, as is Pound's constant practice of imitating, translating, citing and commenting on texts from that tradition. Huidobro, on the other hand, is concerned mostly with “catching up” and being on the cutting-edge of the latest trends in the literary field, and in general seems rather disdainful of academic inquiries—though some of his manifestos occasionally drift into a somewhat professorial tone.

This marked contrast is not only a matter of diverging personalities (in fact, in many ways Huidobro and Pound were very much alike), but has to do with their cultural and social backgrounds in ways that transcend their individual careers. At the time, the possibilities offered by a university education in the U.S. and Chile were quite different (this, sadly, is still true to a great extent). Moreover, Huidobro's upper-class background did not make it imperative for him to acquire any sort of professional training, nor did he need to earn a living; his life in Europe was most of the time quite comfortable, and he even contributed to financing the *Nord-Sud* review, living off of the money sent to him by his family. Pound, on the other hand,

after giving up on a conventional academic career, tried out several jobs, and managed to scrape together a living (complemented first by an allowance from his parents and then by his wife's income) by working as a tour guide, a musician's manager, a journalist, a private secretary, and as a lecturer. These differences, whose significance I do not intend to explore in depth here, are surely relevant to the ways in which both conceived their brand of modernism, and are also indicative of more general traits of how literary modernity operates in the U.S. versus Latin America (or at least some "varieties" of modernism).

For both writers, getting in touch with what was being done in Europe at the time required a revision and a renewal of their poetics. Pound himself condemned his early books as "a collection of stale creampuffs" from which there were "no lessons to be learned save the depth of ignorance, or rather the superficiality of non-perception" (*Poems & Translations* 1256). In a famous anecdote, Ford Madox Ford literally rolled on the floor as a sign of disapproval of Pound's abundant archaisms, criticizing a literary style exceedingly marked by his devotion to the Pre-Raphaelites and to a decadent *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics—an inheritance comparable, in many ways, to the type of language favored by Rubén Darío and his disciples, which was clearly the main influence behind Huidobro's early poetry.

In Pound's case, the late Romantic, grandiloquent tone of poems such as "Grace before Song" (which opens *A Lume Spento*),⁵ or "Prelude: Over the Ognisanti"⁶ would in very few years be replaced by the drastic concision of his "In a Station of the Metro," the best known example of his Imagist school ("The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / petals on a wet, black bough" [287]). These are, of course, extreme and biased examples: much in Pound's early poetry announces his later achievements, and his late poetry often returns to the archaic and adorned tone he claimed to have completely abandoned.⁷ Pound himself proposed an ironic self-portrait of his literary development in his *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*:

For three years, out of key with his time,
he strove to resuscitate the dead art
of poetry; to maintain "the sublime"
In the old sense. Wrong from the start—

No hardly, but, seeing he had been born
In a half-savage country, out of date,
Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn (*P&T* 459)

It would be out of character for Huidobro to ever confess his initial belatedness. He was too proud and lacking in self-irony to paint such an unflattering portrait of himself or some alter-ego, as Pound did. In fact, he always insisted that he had already developed a highly innovative

conception of poetry before coming to Europe, and apparently even falsified the date of publication of an edition of *El espejo de agua* as a way to prove it.⁸ To put the facts in perspective, however, it is clear that even if the alleged date of publication were true, the successive changes suffered by the poems as they were translated into French for publication (in *Nord-Sud*, and then as part of *Horizon Carré*) indicate a struggle to leave behind the original poems' *postmodernismo* or late symbolism and reach out to modernity, whose signs are the suppression of punctuation marks and the insertion of capital letters and blank spaces and a "less is more" suppression of adornment. One could say that Huidobro's poetry had to change clothes in order to be presented in European society, but perhaps it would be more adequate to say it acquired a new skin, or that it metamorphosed into a new body, as we will soon see, thus contradicting Karl Kraus' aphorisms about translation.⁹

"Bottom, Thou Art Translated": Modernity and Translation

René de Costa, in his *En pos de Huidobro*, has already provided an excellent, detailed description of the changes summarily listed above, but, in my opinion, he did not emphasize enough that these changes took place in the course of a translation process, a linguistic transfer that prolonged and confirmed the geographic transfer from Santiago to Paris. Unlike Pound, who avidly translated poetry between all the languages he could learn, Huidobro seems to have practiced translation only as a way to produce French versions of his own poems. His self-centered nature in fact prevented him from becoming an importer of French novelties into the Spanish-speaking world; rather, it led him to filter all those novelties through his own work. Just like Shakespeare's character Bottom, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (the passage quoted above is an exclamation of surprise due to his magical metamorphosis into a donkey), Huidobro produced a translated version of himself, a metamorphosis of his own poems that actualized and internationalized them, dressed in the latest Parisian fashion to conceal their provincial origins and make a successful literary *début*.¹⁰ These translations were also a rite of passage, in that they marked the beginning of a period of writing in French, which situated Huidobro in the category of writers whose texts, as described by Antoine Berman:

Carry the mark of their foreignness in their themes and in the language in which they are written. Often similar to the French of French authors, their language is separated by a more or less perceptible abyss, like the one that separates our language from that of the passages in French of *War and Peace* and *Magic Mountain*. This French has a close relationship to the French in which we translate, since in the first case we have foreigners writing in French, and thus

imprinting a foreign seal upon our language, and in the second we have foreign works rewritten in French, which inhabit our language's dwelling and mark it with their foreignness. (18)

Though in this passage Berman seems to stress the negative aspect of these writers' relation to French—their use of a language they will never be able to fully master—we can also remember how in the section of Mann's novel written in French, the foreign language is described as intoxicatingly liberating, a language whose very strangeness allows the protagonist to express feelings he would never be able to express in his own language (“Moi, tu le remarques bien, je ne parle guère le français. Pourtant, avec toi je préfère cette langue à la mienne, car pour moi, parler français c'est parler sans parler, en quelque manière—sans responsabilité, où comme nous parlons en rêve” (Mann 356) [As you can very well see, I do not speak French. With you, however, I prefer this language to mine, since for me speaking French is speaking without speaking, or something of the sort—speaking without responsibility, like we do when dreaming]).

The alien medium wherein a writer using a language other than his own (if such a thing as “owning” a language is possible) is also an invitation to leave behind the dead weight of inherited habits, reflexes, and rhetorical usages. Even the simplest of words in an alien tongue can shine with the prestige, fascination, and mystery of streets in a foreign city (this was the reason, for example, why Rilke wrote in French for a while, to move away from a German with which he had become too intimately familiar). In a way, one only really leaves a place when one leaves its language: let us remember Enrique Lihn's complaint that he never left “horrendous Chile” because he never left behind “the speech that the German Lyceum / inflicted upon me on its two patios, as if in a regiment”¹¹ (53). A survey of the avant-garde writers that adopted French as literary language at some point in their careers (a list that would include Gangotena, Moro, Eliot, Beckett, Marinetti, and Ungaretti among others) would clarify much of what is at stake for Huidobro in that choice,¹² but one should also return to Darío, who wrote “En entendant du coq gaulois le clairon clair / on clame: Liberté! Et nous traduisons: France! / Car la France sera toujours notre espérance, / [. . .] / la France est la patrie de nos rêves” (*Poesías completas* 838) (Listening to the clear clarion of the French rooster / one cries out: freedom! And we translate: France! / Since France will always be our hope / [. . .] / France is the fatherland of our dreams). It is curious to observe how Huidobro's work prolongs this dream in which the word *freedom* can be translated as *France*, a translation that takes place within the scope of the adopted language, where one can speak as in a dream, “comme nous parlons en rêve” (like we do when dreaming). Ironically, it is in his poem *Altazor* that Huidobro returned to his native language (probably due to the fact that the complexity and length of this poem made it impossible for him to compose it directly in

French, as he attempted to do initially), and it is in that very same poem that he declared: “One should write in a language that is not the mother tongue” (*Altazor* 5). Ironically, this *parti pris* (which rings more like an ethical or existential imperative, rather than a mere aesthetic preference) is enunciated precisely in the Spanish to which the author has been forced to return, attracted by the mother tongue just as *Altazor* is attracted by the beloved’s eyes, or by the grave (“Better believe it, the tomb has more power than a lover’s eyes. The open tomb with all its charms” (5).

In a prior essay I address a possible psychoanalytical reading of the mother and father figures in *Altazor*’s “Preface,” in which this notion of writing “outside” of one’s mother tongue is at issue, by linking it to the poet’s rejection of his subjugation to “mother nature” in his well-known “Non Serviam” manifesto. For this discussion, however, perhaps another manifesto, “Le créationnisme” (written originally in French), is more relevant, namely:

Si pour les poètes créationnistes ce qui est important est la présentation du fait nouveau, la poésie créationniste devient traduisible et universelle car les faits nouveaux restent les mêmes dans toutes les langues.

Il est difficile et même impossible à traduire une poésie dans laquelle domine l’importance d’autres éléments. Vous ne pouvez pas traduire la musique de mots, les rythmes de vers qui varient d’une langue à l’autre mais quand l’importance du poème tient avant tout à l’objet créé il ne perd dans la traduction rien de sa valeur essentielle. Ainsi que je dise en français: “La nuit vient des yeux d’autrui” ou en anglais “Night comes from others eyes” [*sic*] l’effet reste le même, les détails de langue deviennent secondaires. La poésie créationniste acquiert des proportions internationales, elle passe à être la Poésie, et elle est accessible à tous les peuples et races comme la peinture, la musique ou la sculpture. (*Obras* 1332)

(If, for creationist poets, what matters is the presentation of new facts, creationist poetry is translatable and universal, since new facts are the same in all languages.

It is difficult, even impossible, to translate a poem wherein other elements are the essential. One cannot translate the music of words, the rhythm of lines, which change from one language to another. But when the importance of the poem comes from the created object, it does not lose any of its essential value in translation. So, if I say in French: “La nuit vient des yeux d’autrui” or in English “Night comes from others eyes” [*sic*], the effect remains the same, the linguistic details become secondary. Creationist poetry acquires international proportions, it becomes Poetry, accessible to all peoples and all races, like painting, music, or sculpture.)

This text’s main tenet is, of course, not true. As any student of the topic or practicing translator knows, when one translates any sentence from one language to another, transformations ensue, even in the cases of closely

related languages from the Romance or Indo-European families, not to mention the more drastic changes that happen in the case of more remote languages. As Roman Jakobson remarked in his “Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” in utterances whose main purpose is conveying a meaning, it is usually possible to find approximate equivalents where those changes are not relevant for communicative purposes. In poetry, however, when the message is precisely the way in which signifiers are grouped together, taking into account all of their material properties as well as their meaning, a translation that does not introduce important alterations is not possible. Hence Robert Frost’s famous “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.”

Only in a brief example such as the one given by Huidobro is it possible to convince the unprepared reader that what he claims is true, but even when one looks more closely at his phrase, one can see that the version he himself proposed does introduce important changes motivated by what Walter Benjamin called each language’s “mode of signifying” [*Art des Meinens*]. To give only one example, when the feminine gender of the word “night” disappears in English, the effect ceases to be the same, and the Spanish “ojos ajenos” (in implied contrast to “ojos propios”) is more specific than the English “others eyes” [*sic*], which is also not quite idiomatic.¹³ In short, even if we realize that the conception of poetry as untranslatable rests on questionable assumptions about what poetry is—and without adding to the long ongoing debate on whether poetry can be translated or not, or whether translation is possible at all¹⁴—we can confidently assert that translating always entails a certain degree of change related to a language’s phonetic, lexical, and syntactic idiosyncratic qualities, but also with respect to the complex web of cultural expectations that are part of its nature.

I do not wish, however, simply to correct Huidobro’s naïve assumption, but rather to understand the logic that lies behind his mistaken dictum. His announcement of a poetry that could be translated without any loss whatsoever—and thus universal in nature—is the exact opposite of Robert Frost’s assumption, and it can be considered in light of discussions that were at the center of the poetics of German Romanticism. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy pointed out long ago in *The Literary Absolute* that the roots of many of the motifs of avant-garde manifestos and movements can be found in the reflections of the early Romantics of the Jena group. In fact, Huidobro’s dream of a universally accessible poetry is a variation of Novalis’ idea of a “universal progressive poetry,” while it also reverses the emphasis on the mother tongue that is at the center of many Romantic poets’ and thinkers’ work. Huidobro’s position seems in fact closer to Goethe’s, who thought that all good poetry was essentially translatable because it had a prose nucleus that could be expressed in any language.¹⁵

One could also assert that Huidobro's conception bears certain resemblances to the early Wittgenstein's position: if Huidobro claims that poetry rests on new facts ("faits nouveaux"), Wittgenstein claimed around the same time (his *Tractatus* was published in 1922, *Altazor* was begun in 1919) that "the world is the totality of facts, not of things," and ultimately deduced from that proposition a logical language that was completely translatable, since it depended to a great extent on formal logic (a position his later *Philosophical Investigations* would severely revise).¹⁶ Huidobro's affirmation that he could produce a totally translatable poetry partially rested on the fact that he had already produced a number of poems in French in spite of an insufficient command of the language, because the novelty of his poetry was not based on the particularities of any given language, but on what Pound called "phanopoeia," or visual imagery conveyed vividly through words. In fact, Pound agrees that phanopoeia is the most translatable of poetry's procedures ("[it] can be translated almost, or wholly, intact"), much more so than logopoeia (which "does not translate; though the attitude of mind it expresses may pass through a paraphrase") and melopoeia (the musical aspect of poetry in terms of rhythm and sound arrangements), which is for him virtually untranslatable ("It is practically impossible to transfer or translate it from one language to another" *Literary Essays* 25).

Huidobro's choice of example is not unmotivated: that darkness derived from alien eyes deeply resonates with the experience of the foreign, with encountering different eyes that stare at us as strange, uncanny, unfamiliar beings. This night born from the gaze of others reminds me, in fact, of a poet apparently at the opposite end of the spectrum—Gabriela Mistral—who shared with Huidobro an acute awareness of what it meant to leave the "horroroso Chile" (horrendous Chile). She participated in the inebriating joy of newly acquired freedom, the cleansing baptism of travel by sea, but also in the experience of the ghosts that we carry with us in our speech no matter where we go, and also that of a body that's shaped in its most involuntary gestures by its mother tongue. If Huidobro's poetry focused on the thrill caused by displacement, Mistral best expressed its anguish, which also found its way into Huidobro's poetry: it is not by chance that the poem that began by proclaiming the imperative of leaving behind maternal language ends with pre-verbal or post-verbal language. If the others, in Mistral's poem "The Stranger," speak "strange tongues and not the moved / language my mother speaks in golden lands" (381), one could say that Huidobro, intent on separating himself from that loaded language and all that it entails, ended up himself adopting the unintelligible babbling of strangers for one who does not understand their language—"Ai a i ai a i i i i o ia" (*Altazor* 150)—a purely vocalic chant that leaves meaning behind in a way comparable perhaps to Hugo Ball's sound poems or Khlebnikov's Zaum language.

If one outcome of the search for a totally translatable language is a poetry based exclusively on visual imagery (or on the virtual ideograms proposed by Pound), another is poetry that seems to have reached the “condition of music” that Pater said all arts aspired to by leaving meaning completely behind—rejecting *logos* in favor of rhythm and melody, open mouths united in a single cry that takes one back to an infancy that precedes the symbolic stage.¹⁷ One possible interpretation of these impulses could emphasize the return of a Lacanian “troumatique,” a hole in the symbolic network through which the real that cannot be expressed in normally-structured language rears its ugly head and shatters imaginary projections of self. Or one could choose to compare the unimpeded circulation that Huidobro’s poetry aspires to in the context of multinational capitalism, following Rama’s shrewd analysis of *modernismo* as an adaptation of the logic of capital to the literary field. The poem that loses “nothing of its essential value” in translation, and that seems in fact to acquire surplus value in that transfer, is an entity as full of “theological niceties” and “metaphysical subtleties” as commodities according to Marx (163). Both lines of interpretation, however, risk turning Huidobro’s gestures into mere symptoms, so a reading that does full justice to them will have to wait for further development in a later project.

Postcards from Hades: A Philadelphia Yankee in Homer’s Greece

Pound never completely relinquished his native language, perhaps because English was, at the time, more of an asset in the “international republic of letters” than Spanish. He did, however, produce a small number of poems in French and Italian, and numerous prose pieces in those languages, especially the latter, during his time living in Rapallo. But more relevant than these gestures is that fact that his *Cantos* uses English only as a canvas on which to project all the languages with which he had been in contact: a typical passage of *The Cantos* can switch from Classical Greek to Chinese and Provençal within a few lines, and often the English we read is translating from some of those languages, sometimes to the point that, as was the case with Hölderlin, the target language becomes unrecognizable in the attempt to render the qualities of the source language. Such a polyglot adventure would not have been possible, however, without a highly tense relationship with his own maternal language, which we can perhaps understand further by looking closely at a passage of this work.

Most of the first poem in *The Cantos* is a translation of a section of Homer’s *Odyssey*, the *nekuia* where Odysseus interrogates the spirits of the dead about his future. Pound’s source, however, is not the Greek text. He

translates instead from a Latin version by Andreas Divus from 1538, not so much because of Pound's insufficient knowledge of Greek, but because he wished to highlight from the very start the importance of moments of transmission of poetic technique through the operation of translation, understood with all of its resonances of transformation (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are one of Pound's preferred sources) and travel (Odysseus the wanderer remains one of the central characters in Pound's poem, albeit in often barely recognizable variations). One could perhaps say of Pound that he was more interested in transmission itself than in the exact conservation of *what* was transmitted, caring more about a work's generative force than its particular form, thus privileging a work's dynamic qualities over the integrity of its textual features. He also often proposed abbreviations of texts, condensation as a way to better appreciate their living qualities and putting aside what in them had become only dead weight. As it happens with many of Pound's citations throughout *The Cantos*, this excerpt from Homer is also incorporated in interesting ways, one of which may be relevant for our argument.

In the translated passage, Ulysses sacrifices a bull to attract the shadows of the dead—that of Tiresias, in particular, whom he wants to interrogate about the outcome of his journey (finding out whether or not he will be able to return to Ithaca). As soon as the blood starts to flow into a pit dug for that purpose, the shadows of several dead people come up, but Odysseus pushes them away from the blood until Tiresias comes. The passage is worth quoting at length:

Here did they rites, Perimedes and Eurylochus,
 And drawing sword from my hip
 I dug the ell-square pitkin;
 Poured we libations unto each the dead,
 First mead and then sweet wine, water mixed with white flour.
 Then prayed I many a prayer to the sickly death's-head;
 As set in Ithaca, sterile bulls of the best
 For sacrifice, heaping the pyre with goods,
 A sheep to Tiresias only, black and a bell-sheep.
 Dark blood flowed in the fosse,
 Souls out of Erebus, cadaverous dead, of brides
 Of youths and at the old who had borne much;
 Souls stained with recent tears, girls tender,
 Men many, mauled with bronze lance heads,
 Battle spoil, bearing yet dreory arms,
 These many crowded about me; with shouting,
 Pallor upon me, cried to my men for more beasts;
 Slaughtered the heards, sheep slain of bronze;
 Poured ointment, cried to the gods,
 To Pluto the strong, and praised Proserpine;

Unsheathed the narrow sword,
 I sat to keep off the impetuous impotent dead,
 Till I should hear Tiresias. (*The Cantos* 3-4)

After this passage comes a dialogue with Elpenor, a former member of Odysseus' crew, recently deceased in an accident at Circe's island, who asks that his body be buried, and next—followed by the “And” that characterizes the work's paratactical style—are the following lines:

And Anticlea came, whom I beat off, and then Tiresias Theban,
 Holding his golden wand, knew me, and spoke first:
 “A second time? why? man of ill star,
 Facing the sunless dead and this joyless region?
 Stand from the fosse, leave me my bloody bever
 For soothsay.”
 And I stepped back,
 And he strong with the blood, said then: “Odysseus
 Shalt return through spiteful Neptune, over dark seas,
 Lose all companions.” And then Anticlea came. (*The Cantos* 4-5)

There are several remarkable features of this passage, but I would like to focus on the two mentions of Anticlea and what they condense—and by condensing, hide. Anticlea is Odysseus' mother: in the original poem, she is mentioned as one of the shadows that appear, eager to drink from the bull's blood. Upon seeing her, Odysseus, who did not know that his mother was dead, breaks into tears, but he still keeps her away from the blood until Tiresias drinks and speaks. At that point, Odysseus asks his mother for the cause of her death, and she answers that it was the sadness caused by his absence.

This is a typical case in which Pound sacrifices a passage for the sake of concision and speed, but in this situation (as in many others) one can suspect that the omission is linked to the tensions and unconscious drives inherent to his aesthetic project. Without purporting to make the author lie down on the analyst's couch, we can read this act of textual selection and censorship as a way to screen or block a conflictive relation to a maternal figure that could be associated with his native language and region. As with many other conflicts, Pound seems to refuse to deal with the consequences of his leaving behind his own language, family, and country, in what seems like a repressed version of Lihn's “fear to lose, along with the mother language, / all of reality” (53). These types of contradictions haunting *The Cantos'* polyphonic texture are not so far from Huidobro's charged relationship to Spanish, to his country of origin, and to the traditions he supposedly left behind in his rebellion against “Mother Nature,” whom he decided to serve no more (in the manifesto “Non Serviam”).

Returns and Detours: Two Versions of the Traveler

Looking in parallax at these two writers' careers and their efforts to free themselves from inherited modes of thinking and writing, as well as leaving behind the "dead weight of night" that any such inheritance inevitably entails,¹⁸ one can only marvel at the agility with which they adapted themselves to a new environment's fashions and quirks, not only learning to play by new rules but often outdoing their masters. For both, translation was not just a means to become better known abroad, nor a way of appropriating foreign mannerisms—it was a formative experience by way of which the two poets learned the tricks of their trade. Huidobro transposed and thereby refined his own early poetic attempts, believing that nothing was lost or destroyed in that process, while Pound expanded the possibilities of English as a literary language by making it conform alternatively to the alliterative patterns of Anglo-Saxon, to the elaborate rhyming patterns of Provençal, or to the apparent lack of syntactical links of Chinese. It seems, in principle, that Huidobro is more of an exporter, following the advice given in Oswald de Andrade's "Brazil-Wood Poetry" manifesto advocating a poetry that could be exported, a conceit that seems well-suited to the heir of a family of wine makers. Pound, by contrast, seems in principle more of an importer, focused on bringing into English all sorts of foreign merchandise, in the form of techniques, themes, and visions, like Oswald advocated in his later "Cannibalist Manifesto," where he proposed that Brazilian (and, by extension, Latin American) poets should "devour" all of Europe's cultural heritage as a way to appropriate it. Pound's voracity led him to perhaps bite off more than he could chew, but it also drastically expanded the horizon of poetry in his own language and on the international stage, producing a vision of European and world cultures that enriched these cultures' vision of themselves. For both Pound and Huidobro, trafficking in translation was a key moment in their adventurous journeys. They also both experienced, probably thanks to translation, the limits of language, the moments in which language comes close to just being a series of musical sounds, unintelligible babble, or exceedingly dense discourse exceeding the comprehension of most readers.

Both writers also started their careers writing in a style that they would soon describe as out of date, passé, and both would work hard to get rid of that style without eliminating all of the traces of it. In both cases, the battle against hardened traditions was fought under the banner of freedom, especially in the case of measured verse, which they attacked with a passion that suggests far more than counting feet and syllables was at stake. In fact, in announcing a poetry that did not define itself by means of regular line divisions corresponding to the page's limits, they laid the groundwork for an exploration of *images* as poetry's true medium, and understood the

consequences of such a conception for translatability. Their initial production after this “liberation” was characterized by a certain ascetic condensation, an impulse to get rid of adornments and reach a sort of classical or even primitive simplicity. Both then turned to more elaborate modes of expression, to longer formats that they perhaps did not entirely master, as attempts to produce larger works in an era when experience had stopped being transmissible, and the possibility of narrating was in crisis.¹⁹ Perhaps it was also an acute awareness of this crisis that pushed them to propose the highly self-confident and even cocky theories put forth in their various manifestos, whose sometimes simplistic principles, stated forcefully as self-evident truths, cannot really account for the complexity of their poetic praxis.

For both, the moment of the *nostos* (the Homeric return journey) was far from a triumphant reclaiming of their own territory, over which they could rule peacefully as a modern Odysseus. Like Homer’s protagonist, both seemed intent on returning at some point but also seemed to know that the justification of the journey lay less in reaching their destination than in delaying the moment when travel ends (“Mon âme telle qu’Ulysse est lente à revenir” (My soul, just like Ulysses’ returns slowly) writes Huidobro at the end of “Ombres chinoises,” and his *Altazor* is a poem composed in the vertigo of a freefall whose final destination seems to be the grave). They also knew that, if travel had actually been a transforming experience, there was no real going back to the same point of departure, since place and self had been transformed by time. Pound was brought back to the U.S. from Italy, charged with high treason because of his pro-Mussolini broadcasts from Rome during the Second World War (it was his first aerial trip over the ocean). Huidobro returned to Chile seriously wounded during his participation as press correspondent in the same war, and shortly thereafter died from these wounds. Pound’s career ended instead in Europe, to which he returned after more than ten years of seclusion in an insane asylum, to which he had been sent after being declared mentally unfit for trial as a way to save him from the death penalty that his wartime activities might have earned him.

Considering these biographical aspects, it is not surprising that both poets’ late works share a certain tone of disappointment for the failure to make good on many of their youthful promises. In both, memories from happier times alternate with traumatic evocations of the horrors of war and its aftermath, and with the constant affirmation of levels of experience that transcend those horrors, particularly erotic love. One of Huidobro’s posthumous poems reads:

Éramos los elegidos del sol
 Y no nos dimos cuenta
 Fuimos los elegidos de la más alta estrella

Y no supimos responder a su regalo
 [. . .] Ahora somos una tristeza contagiosa
 Una muerte antes de tiempo
 El alma que no sabe en qué sitio se encuentra
 El invierno en los huesos sin un relámpago
 Y todo esto porque tú no supiste lo que es la eternidad
 Ni comprendiste el alma de mi alma en su barco de tinieblas
 En su trono de águila herida de infinito. (*Obra poética* 1279)

(We were the sun's chosen ones
 and didn't realize it
 we had been chosen by the highest star
 and did not know how to respond to its gift
 [. . .] Now we are a contagious sadness
 a death before the time has come
 A soul that does not know where it is
 Winter in the bones without lightning
 And all of this because you did not know what eternity is
 Nor did you understand my soul's soul in its dark ship
 In its throne of an eagle wounded by infinity.)

And Pound, returning in one of the final fragments of *The Cantos* to the language that brought memories of his days traveling in the South of France, writes,

M'amour, m'amour
 what do I love and
 where are you?
 That I lost my center
 fighting the world.
 The dreams clash
 and are shattered –
 and that I tried to make a paradiso
 terrestre. (*The Cantos* 802)

These biographical and stylistic traits are, of course, not exclusive to these two authors, insofar as they are the result of their idiosyncratic temperament as much as of the encounter of that temperament with historical circumstances shared with many others. The central importance of physical and cultural displacement is also not a unique trait in Pound's and Huidobro's oeuvre—in fact, Raymond Williams proposes that this lack of fixed roots is among the causes of the formal features of modernism's language. According to Williams, artists moved constantly between large cities, and their constant border-crossing (especially after the First World War),

worked to naturalize the thesis of the *non*-natural status of language. The experience of visual and linguistic strangeness, the broken narrative of the journey and its inevitable accompaniment of transient encounters whose self-presentation was bafflingly unfamiliar, raised to the level of universal myth this intense, singular narrative of unsettlement, homelessness, solitude and impoverished independence: the lonely writer gazing down on the unknowable city from his shabby apartment. (34)

Give and take a few points, this portrait may apply not only to the two authors on whom I focused above, but also to the Neruda of *Residence on Earth*, most of which was written abroad, and whose syntax shows traces of the English the author spoke as a consul in Rangoon. Even more literally, it is often said of Oswald de Andrade that he discovered Brazil by looking out the window of his apartment at the Place Clichy in Paris, and his explorations of his country's primitive features is heavily indebted to the gaze of the foreign tourist.²⁰ But this does not apply exclusively to Latin or Anglo-American authors; the same could be said of many European authors—let us think of Rilke and his relationship with Russia and France, Ungaretti writing in French from Africa, or Pessoa initiating his work with poetry written in an English characterized by echoes from Spenser and Shakespeare.

In her book quoted above, Pascal Casanova proclaims the city of Paris to be the capital of a republic of letters that is relatively independent from political or economic power structures, and that all writers at the beginning of the twentieth century who wished to be taken seriously had to be recognized first in that capital. She is obviously too eager to turn the importance of Paris as the place of obligatory rite of passage in the avant-garde into a conceptual elaboration of Gallic supremacy in the world of letters, but her analysis nevertheless provides several interesting clues for a global understanding of modernism and modernity, as well as a challenge to again attempt to understand cultural productions in terms of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*. Perhaps her centripetal reading of the republic of letters needs to be corrected by a centrifugal reading that focuses not only on the ways writers from the margins were drawn to the center, but also an attempt to understand how the center was affected by these writers' presence. We might also think about how writers from the center were nevertheless irresistibly attracted by peripheral places and cultures in an overview of modernity that does more justice to Yeats' sharp diagnosis that "things fall apart, the center cannot hold." In the process of modernity, where all things melt into the air, the practice of translation is always at the center of these highly charged exchanges between places, times, subjectivities, and languages.

Notes

1. A first version of this essay was written for Professor David Lenson's seminar on Ezra Pound and Anglo-American Modernism at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. A longer version was presented at the ACLA Conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 2002, and then published, in revised format, in *Taller de Letras* 40: 2007. I have made several modifications and revisions for this version of the essay.
2. The notion of "parafluence" comes from Julie Chiu's paper "Pound and Chinese Modernism: Influence, Refluence, or 'Parafluence,'" presented in the 16th Biennial Conference Ezra Pound, in 1995 (qtd in Robert Hughes' *Cavalcanti: A Perspective on the Music of Ezra Pound* [132]).
3. I will use the Spanish *modernismo* to refer to the literary period that precedes the avant-garde in Hispanic literary history, which must not be confused with modernism. Perhaps the very terminological difference is indicative of some of the differences and points of contact between both traditions.
4. For an excellent assessment of Pound's relations to the academic world and to pedagogy in general, see Gail McDonald's *Learning to be Modern: Pound, Eliot, and the American University*.
5. "Lord God of heaven that with mercy dight / Th'alternate prayer wheel of the night and light / Eternal hath to thee, and in whose sight / Our days as rain drops in the sea surge fall" (*P&T* 21)
6. "High dwelling 'bove the people here, / Being alone with beauty most the while / Lonely? How can I be, / Having mine own great thoughts for paladins / Against all gloom and woe and every bitterness?" (*P&T* 69)
7. I must thank professor David Lenson for pointing out the extent to which Pound returns to a language clearly influenced by the poetry of the Rhymers' Club (including authors such as Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Victor Plarr, and Arthur Symons) whenever he wants to express a deeply felt personal emotion throughout his *Pisan Cantos*.
8. For a detailed discussion of the history of this polemic, see Goic's notes to *El espejo de agua* in his superb edition of the *Obra poética*, as well as Waldo Rojas' "El fechado dudoso de *El espejo de agua*."
9. Karl Kraus writes: "A linguistic work translated into another language is like someone going across the border without his skin and putting on the local garb on the other side." And also: "One can translate an editorial but not a poem. For one can go across the border naked but not without one's skin, for, unlike clothes, one cannot get a new skin" (Zohn 160).
10. See Waldo Rojas's essays "En torno a *Automne régulier* y *Tout à coup*" and "Huidobro, Moro, Gangotena" for an excellent discussion of Huidobro's insertion in the French literary milieu.
11. The complete poem reads: "Nunca salí del horroroso Chile / mis viajes que no son imaginarios / tardíos sí—momentos de un momento—/ no me desarraigaron del eriazó remoto y presuntuoso / Nunca salí del habla que el Liceo Alemán / me infligió en sus dos patios como en un regimiento / mordiendo en ella el polvo de un exilio imposible / Otras lenguas me inspiran un sagrado rencor: / el miedo de perder con la lengua maternal / toda la realidad. Nunca salí de nada" (*A partir de Manhattan*). One might wonder whether Huidobro left anything at all, and suspect that he never got rid of the arrogance of the heir of an aristocratic family. Nevertheless, his defiance of the fear of losing all reality with one's maternal language is admirable, in contrast to Lihn's fearful confession.

12. See my “Antes de hablar: El ‘Prefacio’ a *Altazor*.”
13. Huidobro was probably thinking “other’s eyes,” which would still be a rather unusual phrasing in English, where one would probably say something like “another’s eyes.”
14. For a lucid discussion of the (im)possibilities of translation, see Emily Apter’s *The Translation Zone*.
15. See Berman for a more detailed discussion of Goethe’s notion of translation.
16. See North’s *The Return of the Modern* for an interesting discussion of Wittgenstein’s troubled relations to translation. Waldo Rojas, in his “Huidobro, Moro, Gangotena” proposes that Huidobro’s assumptions about translation rest on an idea of language less as system than as nomenclature.
17. The image of the gaping mouth as a state that precedes articulate language and anticipates the oral delights of poetry comes from Abraham and Torok’s *The Shell and The Kernel*. My “Antes de hablar” elaborates more on this perspective as a way of discussing *Altazor*.
18. The phrase “el peso de la noche,” originally used by Diego Portales, is the title of a famous novel by Jorge Edwards, where it represents the dead crust of values that resists any attempt at change or renewal in a society.
19. I am referring to the central idea of Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The Storyteller.”
20. Paulo Prado wrote in the preface to his *Poesia Pau-Brasil* that Oswald “in a trip to Paris, from the height of an atelier at the Place Clichy—belly button of the world—discovered with amazement his own country” (67).

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