

# “How Can You Use Two Languages and Mean What You Say in Both?”: On Translating Margaret Atwood’s Poetry into Spanish

## « Comment utiliser deux langues et penser ce qu’on dit dans les deux ? » : de la traduction espagnole de la poésie de Margaret Atwood

Pilar Somacarrera

Traductions et représentations : Parcours dans l’espace hispanique II  
Translations and Representations: Exploring the Hispanic World II  
Volume 18, Number 1, 1er semestre 2005

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/014371ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/014371ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

### ISSN

0835-8443 (print)  
1708-2188 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Somacarrera, P. (2005). “How Can You Use Two Languages and Mean What You Say in Both?”: On Translating Margaret Atwood’s Poetry into Spanish. *TTR*, 18(1), 157–181. <https://doi.org/10.7202/014371ar>

### Article abstract

Contrary to what might be expected, a Canadian literature in Spanish translation already exists and, expectedly, Margaret Atwood is one of the most translated writers. All her novels except *Life Before Man*, as well as three of her collections of short stories and three of her poetry collections have been translated into Spanish. Her work has received excellent reviews in Spain which have also praised her translators. This essay focuses on my own experience translating Atwood’s poetry—her collection *Power Politics (Juegos de poder, 2000)*—into Spanish, in an approach which compares my own project of translation or “*projet-de-traduction*,” as formulated by Antoine Berman, with that of the other translations of her poetry into Spanish. Being a university teacher and a researcher in Canadian literature, and not a specialist in Translation Studies, my approach is necessarily pragmatic and not theoretical. Bearing in mind Barbara Folkart’s contention that poetry is a cognitive activity and the multiplicity of interpretations that the poems offer, in which the feminist one is prominent, I tried to produce a translation which was as close as possible to the original characteristics of Atwood’s poetry in its tone, lineation and imagistic dimension. The first steps were the stylistic analysis, which resulted in a rhetorical study of the poems, and then the review of the existing criticism about the poems. The main problems which arose during the translation were related to the political and feminist connotations of the poems. If the political context is crucial in *Power Politics*, the cultural background is vital in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, although it has been erased in its Spanish version (*Los diarios de Susanna Moodie*, 1991, by Lidia Taillefer and Álvaro García). This is not an unusual phenomenon, since translation consists in an often insurmountable paradox which is formulated in the lines by Margaret Atwood quoted in the title of this article: trying to formulate the same idea in two languages which function differently and have completely different cultural contexts.

## *Appendice*

# **“How Can You Use Two Languages and Mean What You Say in Both?”<sup>1</sup>: On Translating Margaret Atwood’s Poetry into Spanish**

*Pilar Somacarrera*

### **The reception of Margaret Atwood’s works in Spain**

Contrary to what might be expected, a Canadian literature in Spanish translation already exists, as demonstrated by the list of Canadian books published in Spain displayed in the web page of the Canadian Embassy in Madrid which reveals over one hundred and forty titles.<sup>2</sup> One of the most represented writers in the list is, expectedly, Margaret Atwood, who already has a readership, as well as a certain literary prestige in a country like Spain, where Canadian culture still lives in the shadow of the United States. The review of *Oryx and Crake* which recently appeared in the national newspaper *ABC* describes her as “a candidate to the Nobel Prize for Literature, a prolific author whose titles are well-known to Spanish readers”

---

<sup>1</sup> These are two lines from Margaret Atwood’s “Two-Headed Poems,” in *Selected Poems*. Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 227. This article was written with the assistance of the financial aid from the Spanish Ministry of Education, Project HUM 2004-00515 FILO.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.international.gc.ca/canadaeuropa/spain/libros-es.asp>. I would like to thank the Canadian Embassy in Madrid for granting me access to their file of Spanish newspaper articles about Margaret Atwood.

(Velasco, 2004, p. 13). Although Atwood has been described as a writer who is concerned, in the words of Luis Marigómez, “with the exploration of women’s lives” (1998, p. 25), Spanish male critics who have reviewed her work do not consider her a radical feminist. Marigómez remarks that he is interested in Margaret Atwood because “although she has a feminist point of view, it is not radical.”<sup>3</sup> José Antonio Gurpegui, a professor of American Literature at the University of Alcalá de Henares who regularly writes reviews of Atwood’s novels, observes that to catalogue Atwood as a feminist author is to reduce the meaning of her work (1998, p. 18).

All of Atwood’s novels except *Life Before Man*, as well as three of her collections of short stories have been translated into Spanish. A look at the list<sup>4</sup> of Atwood’s titles which have been published in Spain reveals some significant facts. Firstly, the excellent reception which the Canadian writer has had in Catalonia, as most of her books have been published by Catalan editors, and two of her novels—*Cat’s Eye* and *The Blind Assassin*—have even been translated into the Catalan language, the last of which in two different editions. Secondly, that one of her most acclaimed novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which was the first novel by Margaret Atwood to be translated into Spanish, was reedited in 2001. Thirdly, that some of her earlier novels, like the first one, *The Edible Woman* (1969) (*La mujer comestible*, 2003) have recently been translated more than twenty years after they were first published, a fact which indicates their present relevance for Spanish readers.

Reviews of Margaret Atwood’s books started to appear regularly in the Spanish press since the mid-nineties, with the publication of *Lady Oracle* and *The Robber Bride*. Miguel Dalmau describes her as “one of the most interesting novelists in North America” (1996, p. 39), and she has also been hailed as “the grand Dame of Canadian letters” (Gurpegui, 1998, p.18). Another evident sign of her popularity among the Spanish readership is that her book

---

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Angélica Tamarro: “La cara oculta de Atwood,” *El Norte de Castilla*, February 2<sup>th</sup>, 2000, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix.

*Murder in the Dark* (*Asesinato en la oscuridad*, translated by Isabel Carrera) was included in a series of works by the most important writers of the Millennium published by the national newspaper *El mundo*. The major Spanish newspapers included notes when Margaret Atwood won the Booker Prize in 2000 for *The Blind Assassin*. When the Spanish edition of this novel was published, a full-page photograph of her appeared in the cultural supplement of one of the most prestigious national newspapers, *El País*. The coverage included an interview and a full-page review by Ana María Moix, a well-known Spanish writer, who refers to Atwood's book as "another great novel by Margaret Atwood" (2001, p. 3). Atwood's Spanish translators have also been praised. In her review of *Oryx and Crake*, the writer Ana María Moix observes that Atwood has been lucky to have excellent translators into Spanish, both for her poetry and fiction (2004, p. 8). Her Spanish translators include poets like Luís Marigómez, and University professors of literature, like Lidia Taillefer, translator of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, affiliated with the University of Málaga, and Isabel Carrera, a professor of postcolonial literatures at the University of Oviedo, and an Atwood specialist. Outside the literary and academic world, Atwood has been translated by Juanjo Estrella, one of Spain's most prestigious translators, who rendered Dan Brown's bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code* into Spanish.

### **Translating Margaret Atwood's poetry: a critical and stylistic approach**

A great deal of attention has been paid to the difficulties involved in the translation of poetry which derives from the fact that, as Barbara Folkart argues, poetry is a cognitive activity and a way of modeling the world (1999, pp. 31 and 33). When I started translating Margaret Atwood's *Power Politics* into Spanish, I felt it was essential that the original could be recognized in the translation, but I was also aware that, as David Connolly points out, the translated text had to function as a poem in Spanish (1998, p. 171), a language whose rhythmical and tonal structure is very different from English. As a researcher and a teacher of Canadian literature, I also bore in mind the multiple readings that the poems could offer. The multiplicity of interpretations of a poem corresponds to the many possible translations (Frawley, 1984, p. 4; Bassnett, 1980, p. 101).

My way into the poems was, first of all, a thorough stylistic analysis which, like Connolly, I consider a prerequisite in poetic translation (1998, p. 173).

In a second step, I reviewed the literary criticism about the poems which led me to confirm the plurality of interpretations offered by Atwood's collection, which depicts heterosexual relationships as a Foucauldian struggle for power. For a long time, the book has only been approached from a feminist point of view (Onley, 1974; Blakely, 1983), and, in fact, it has been argued that the poems can be considered a response to Kate Millett's book *Sexual Politics*, published in 1970, in which the concept of heterosexual relationships as political was first articulated (Stein, 1999, p. 30).<sup>5</sup> Although *Power Politics* has received other interpretations,<sup>6</sup> a translator cannot ignore that the fact that the collection was first published at the highest point of Second Wave feminism, fuelled by Millett's groundbreaking work which gave voice to the anger of a generation. Gayatri Spivak reminds us that the task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency (2003, p. 397), and this should be taken into account when translating a book like *Power Politics*. As Louise von Flotow argues, feminist translators working in a context and culture conducive to feminist writing are thus likely to produce work that is politically congruent with their time (1997, pp. 43-44). To support her argument, von Flotow quotes Barbara Godard: "Translation, in this theory of feminist discourse, is production, not reproduction" (1990, p. 91).

---

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the interaction between sexual and political power in the book is inescapable, and as Katherine E. Waters notes, sexual politics is a microcosm of the wider political reality of imperialism (Katherine Waters, "Margaret Atwood: Love on the Dark Side of the Moon," in Margaret Andersen, ed., *Mother Was Not a Person*, Montreal, Black Rose Books, 1972, p. 102).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Judith McCombs' gothic reading of the poems: "Atwood's Haunted Sequences: *The Circle Game*, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, and *Power Politics*," in Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson, eds., *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism*, Toronto, House of Anansi, 1981, pp. 35-54.

As a translator, I also felt it was necessary to revise the existing criticism about Atwood's poetry, which is not as copious as that on her fiction. Peter Klappert observes that for most of her career, Atwood's poetry has been spare and taut, honed on all its edges (1990, p. 218). One of the aspects that has drawn the attention of critics is the writer's voice, which Skelton describes as "unmistakable and individual" (1977, p. 107) and George Woodcock as "barely controlled hysteria" (1976, p. 59). She has also been praised for her "extraordinary assurance of tone," and for her "kind of sharp laconic discipline" (Smith, 1977, p. 144). One of my main preoccupations as a translator was to reproduce Atwood's voice and her witticism, her comic sense and her precision. As for the structure of her poems, I agree with Jean Mallinson when she observes that Atwood's poems are most often organized in terms of argument and have an implicit narrative (1985, pp. 21-22). In his overview of Atwood's poetry, Lothar Hönnighausen lists her basic poetic techniques which undergo no substantial changes from her first book of poetry through her most recent volume (2000, p. 98). Her poems have no fixed stanza forms, no rhyme and no regular meter and it is the voice which gives continuity to the lines. The fact that Atwood writes in free verse and that the poems are often very close to prose or to conversational speech makes the translator's task more approachable. Linguistic studies about Atwood's poetry are scant. Robin Skelton's article, in spite of its promising title ("Timeless Constructions: A Note on the Poetic Style of Margaret Atwood") merely states that parallelism of one kind or another is extremely common in Margaret Atwood's poems but does not analyze this feature in depth (1977, p. 116). Dennis Cooley's stylistic analysis of *Power Politics* is more comprehensive and demonstrates that the poetic voice wields great power through her control of language. In my own rhetorical analysis of the collection, I explore how parallelism, chiasmus and anadiplosis are used to encode definition, balance, and reasoning (Somacarrera, 2000, p. 147).

### **A pragmatic and comparative approach to the translations of Margaret Atwood's poetry into Spanish**

Following this overview of the literary and stylistic criticism about Margaret Atwood's poetry, I would like to focus on my own experience translating Atwood's poetry in an approach which compares my own project of translation or "*project-de-traduction*," as understood by Berman (1995, p. 122) with that of the other translations of her poetry into Spanish: Lidia Taillefer and Álvaro García's translation of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1999), which was the first translation of Atwood's poetry into Spanish, and Luis Marigómez's translation of *Interlunar* in 2000. As a translator, my approach is necessarily pragmatic and not theoretical. I agree with W.S. Merwin that there is no fixed way to translate a poem and that the way must be found for each particular poem as we approach it (in Weissbort, 1989, p. 139). My aim was to create a version in Spanish which followed Atwood's original poetic characteristics and her meaning.

My first translations of the poems were the result of practical necessity. I had to deliver a lecture about Atwood's poetry in 1998 in a series about English-Language Women Poets organized by the Women Studies Institutes of the two main public Universities in Madrid.<sup>7</sup> Since the lectures were held in Spanish and addressed to non-academic audiences, and I was going to use *Power Politics* as a thematic link to my lecture, I had to translate some of the poems into Spanish.<sup>8</sup> After delivering and publishing the lecture on *Power Politics*, I presented my first translations to Hiperión, one of the most prestigious publishers of poetry in Spain, and they agreed to publish the bilingual Spanish edition, which obtained a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts. Atwood herself insisted that the book should be published in a bilingual edition because she felt it was important that the readers could also have access to the

---

<sup>7</sup> My own institution, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and the Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

<sup>8</sup> The lecture, together with my first translations of *Power Politics* was published as an essay entitled "La retórica del poder en la poesía canadiense: Margaret Atwood," in Rosa García Rayego and Esther Sánchez-Pardo, eds., *De mujeres, identidades y poesía. Poetas contemporáneas de Estados Unidos y Canadá*. Madrid, Horas y Horas, 1999, pp. 177-197.

original.<sup>9</sup> She also told me that the shocking image in the initial epigram of that collection, “You fit into me,” had been inspired by the scene in the film “Chien Andalou” by the Spanish director Luis Buñuel, in which a razor blade enters an eye:

you fit into me	encajas en mí
like a hook into an eye	como el gancho en su presilla
a fish hook	un anzuelo
an open eye	un ojo abierto

(Atwood, Somacarrera, 2000, pp. 24-25)

As Jesús Munárriz, publisher of my Spanish version quite rightly pointed out,<sup>10</sup> this poem is untranslatable. Like Nabokov, I believe in the vital role of footnotes in translation (1955, p. 512), and as I explained in one, the shocking effect of this verse comes from the different meanings of the words *hook* and *eye* in the first and second couplets. Another effect which is lost in Spanish is the fact that the word *eye* in English is homophonic of “I”.<sup>11</sup>

Another difficulty I faced was to find a suitable title for the book in Spanish. Power politics is an essential topic in Margaret Atwood’s works, as it has been established by many critics.<sup>12</sup> Atwood once declared that she chose that phrase as a title because she found it both in a personal letter written to her friend and in a newspaper (1973, p. 7). I could not translate the book literally as *Políticas de poder* because it does not make sense in Spanish. Therefore, I adopted the slightly freer version *Juegos de poder*, (“Power Games”), which the publisher and the readers found satisfactory because what goes on between the two subjects of the book, the “I” and the “you” is a kind of perverse game. Politics is also a game in which the opponents want to obtain power, or want

---

<sup>9</sup> Private conversation with the writer.

<sup>10</sup> In a private conversation when he read the poem for the first time.

<sup>11</sup> See my footnote in Atwood, 2000, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> See Shannon Hengen, *Margaret Atwood’s Power. Mirrors, Reflections and Images in Select Fiction and Poetry*, Toronto, Second Story Press, 1993, p. 13.



other people to give them power, because as Atwood has remarked, “we give power to each other (or take it from one another).”<sup>13</sup> Another problem is grammatical gender. As Sherry Simon remarks, English has natural gender rather than grammatical gender, which means that gender is attributed not by form but by meaning (1996, p. 17). Since Spanish has grammatical gender, I also had to decide the gender of the pronouns *I* and *you* which is not always clear in the poems.

The poems in *Power Politics* are emphatically visual and they must be seen on the page (Grace, 1980, p. 40). Robin Skelton refers to the structure of Atwood’s poems as “modular” (1977, p. 109). This critic has discovered that in many of Atwood’s collections, there is a surprisingly large number of poems that can be read backwards, either stanza by stanza or sentence by sentence (1977, p. 109). Each module or verse paragraph seems to be built up of small units, block by block rather than created by a flowing of language. Unlike other translators of Atwood’s poetry, in my translation I have tried to be as faithful as possible to Atwood’s lineation. Adjectives are placed before the noun in English and after it in Spanish, so if there is a run-on line the translator is forced to have the noun first and then the adjective. In the following poem, for example, I was especially careful to respect the layout of the lines, which is iconic:

you sprawl across  
                  the bed like a marooned  
starfish  
                  you are sand  
coloured

te desparramas en  
                  la cama como una estrella de mar  
abandonada  
                  eres del color  
de la arena  
(Atwood, Somacarrera, 2000, pp. 46-47)

Often, Atwood’s lines in *Power Politics* are highly elliptical, and, in Klappert’s words, will strike some readers as thin and incomplete

---

<sup>13</sup> Private email correspondence with the author of this essay.

(1990, p. 220). This critic adds that her early poems are mysterious and riddled with lacunæ that invite us to participate in the poetry's recreation (1990, p. 220). The translator has to take part in the poem's interpretation in the following enigmatic lines and introduce a verb in Spanish to clarify the meaning of the last question:

(What did go on in that red brick building with the fire escape? Which river?	(¿Qué pasó en aquel edificio rojo de ladrillo con la salida de incendios ¿De qué río hablas?
---	--

(Atwood, Somacarrera, 2000, pp. 74-75)

Although Atwood writes in free verse, and therefore abandons regular metrical conventions and sound patterns like rhyme, in some of the poems she plays with certain regularities. In the initial epigram, for example, the stresses are skillfully used to emphasize the main elements of the images, an effect which is lost in Spanish. However, the initial line in Spanish echoes the first line in English thanks to the same position of the same stresses, and the similarity of the pronoun *me* / *mí* in the two languages: “you fit into me / encajas en mí” (Atwood, 2000, pp. 24-25). In some lines, some of the sound effects of the original are preserved and new ones appear in Spanish. See, for example: “and purple-veined veils of old ladies” / “y en los velos de las venas moradas de las ancianas” (pp. 30-31) where alliteration and consonance is kept in the Spanish version, which adds an assonantal effect and internal rhyme: **venas** / **moradas** / **las** / **ancianas**.

Atwood's register in the poems is often very colloquial and it does not always sound appropriate in Spanish, so that in my translation I had to substitute certain colloquialisms for a more precise word in Spanish which would reflect what Atwood meant in the original. In the following example, I replaced *doing* by *sobrevive* (“survives”), being aware that survival<sup>14</sup> is one of Atwood's central themes:

& of this cactus, gathering      y de este cactus, recobrando

---

<sup>14</sup> This is the title of her well-known thematic guide to Canadian literature, which was originally published in 1972 and has recently appeared in its second edition: Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto, Anansi, 2004).

itself together	sus fuerzas
again the sand, yes tough	frente a la arena, sí, solo es corteza
rind & spikes but doing	dura y espinas pero sobrevive
the best it can	lo mejor que puede

(Atwood, Somacarrera, 2000, pp. 94-95)

In spite of my efforts, some of the ambiguities in the original are inevitably lost in Spanish. In one of the funniest poems in the collection in which going to the cinema to see bad films is compared to a degrading relationship, the speaker finally confesses an addiction not just to bad movies, but to the relationship: “Have to face it I’m / finally an addict,” “Tengo que afrontar / que me he vuelto una adicta al mal cine” (Atwood, 2000, pp. 28-29). The ambiguity is lost in Spanish, as the adjective *addict* forces the translator to introduce an object of addiction.

*The Journals of Susanna Moodie* was translated into Spanish by Lidia Taillefer and Alberto García in 1991. It is unclear whether each of the translators worked on some of the poems, or whether they worked together in the entire translation. This series of poems which is inspired by the writings of the nineteenth century pioneer Susanna Moodie constitutes a challenge for any translator because of the audacity of its images. The collection, in David Staines’ words, transcends its creative time to become a landmark of the Canadian journey into its collective past (2003, p. 149). For the Spanish translator, it has the additional difficulty of the nineteenth century English colonial context, which is unknown to most Spaniards. Taillefer and García did not translate the Afterword by Margaret Atwood in the original, which offers some essential information about the historical character of Susanna Moodie and its relevance for present day Canadians.<sup>15</sup> The translators do not include an introduction or foreword to the translations: the only extratextual help we find is a brief paragraph in the flap of the cover. Had they decided to offer a gloss to the poems, they could

---

<sup>15</sup> The Afterword of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is central to the understanding not just of Margaret Atwood’s work, but of Canadian culture in general. Therefore, I included a translation of one of its main passages, about Susanna Moodie’s schizophrenia which represents Canada’s national illness, in my own monograph about Margaret Atwood (*Margaret Atwood: poder y feminismo*, Madrid, Ediciones del Orto, 2000, p. 63).

have explained that certain words like *bush* or *wilderness*, which are central to the collection, are very difficult to translate as they refer to a specifically Canadian experience. Taillefer and García translate them as *maleza* (“undergrowth of weeds”) and *desierto* (“desert”) in Spanish. Since these words evoke completely different connotations in Spanish, a footnote explaining the Canadian meaning of wilderness as wild uncultivated land including vast tracts of forest with innumerable lakes (Howells, 2005, p. 37) would have been useful. In addition, some of the typographic signs which Atwood uses in the original are not in the translation, such as parentheses in the line “instantaneous” from “Departure from the Bush” (“Salida de la maleza,” Atwood, 1991, pp. 36-37) or the question mark after “Kingston” in “Solipsism while Dying” (“Solipsismo al morir,” Atwood, 1991, pp. 78-79). Parentheses should be kept in the translation because according to Peter Klappert they are a kind of signature in Atwood’s first five books of poetry (1990, p. 219).

Some of the poems, like “Resurrección” (Atwood, 1991, p. 89) and “Caminos y escapatorias” (Atwood, 1991, p. 23) are very close to Atwood’s original. Most of them, however, do not respect one of the characteristics which I have identified as central to Atwood’s poetic style: the run-on lines. I will just mention one of the most blatant cases in which the elimination of the run-on line cancels the effect intended by Atwood:

in upon by branches, roots, tendrils, the dark  
side of light  
as I am

por ramas, raíces y zarcillos  
y por la oscura cara de la luz  
lo mismo que estoy yo  
(Atwood, Taillefer & García, 1991, pp. 18-19)

It is important to maintain the original structure of the lines because, as R.P. Bilan points out, the line break produces a surprise, conveying Moodie’s realization that it is “the dark / side of light” (Atwood, 1991, p. 3). The oxymoron indicates that the speaker’s original Victorian categories, which make a sharp separation of darkness and light, are beginning to break down.

In addition, there are some mistakes in the translation of some of the titles. “The Wereman” is translated as “El hombre que existió” (Atwood, 1991, p. 21). As *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* records, *were* is “used with names of animals to denote a human being imagined to be able to change at times into a specified animal” (2002, p. 3613). The word *wereman* makes a reference to *werewolf* (in French *loup-garou*). Therefore, I would translate the title of the poem as “El hombre lobo.” This title is more consistent with the meaning of the poem, which is about the transformation of Susanna Moodie’s husband into an animal when he is in contact with the wilderness, and maintains the folkloric connotations of *wereman*. “Dream 1: the Bush Garden” is translated as “Primer sueño: el jardín abandonado” (Atwood, 1991, p. 47). If the previous poem “Departure from the Bush” is translated as “Salida de la maleza” (Atwood, 1991, p. 35), the version “El jardín de la maleza,” would perhaps be more consistent with the earlier title and would keep the oxymoron *bush / garden* in the target language. This oxymoron is vital for the meaning of the collection, as demonstrated by the fact that it was borrowed by Northrop Frye for the title of his well-known book about Canadian literature.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most difficult poems to translate is “The Two Fires” as it contains some examples of Atwood’s penchant for ambiguities. For example, the line “Two fires in/ formed me,” (1991, p. 28) where the verb *inform* can mean “to tell” or “to give form to,” an ambiguity which is lost in the Spanish “Dos fuegos / me dan forma” (1991, p. 29). The same happens with the word *grow* which means “to become more mature” and “to produce by cultivation.” *Grow* is, in fact, the last word in the poem and crucial to its meaning:

left charred marks	han dejado unas marcas de carbón
now around which I	que ahora me rodean
try to grow	e intento cultivar
(Atwood, Taillefer & García, 1991, pp. 28-29)	

I suggest the following version for the last two lines: “y ahora a su alrededor / intento cultivar.” In this case, a footnote explaining

---

<sup>16</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto, House of Anansi, 1971).

the two meanings of the word *grow* in English would be useful because the idea of how Moodie becomes more mature after the experiences of the fires is essential to the meaning of the poem.

In “Death of a young son by drowning” (“La muerte de un hijo ahogado”), the translation of the last stanza, which is crucial for the meaning of the entire collection misinterprets the original:

I planted him in this country	En esta tierra él
like a flag	es mi bandera

(Atwood, Taillefer & García, 1991, pp. 38-39)

The significance of the flag as an element which is used in the discovery and claiming of a new land (Bilan, 1977, p. 7) is completely lost in the translation, as well as the action of “planting” which has a resonance throughout the series. I suggest the following version which is faithful to those elements of the original, and maintains the simile in Atwood’s original: “Le planté en esta tierra / como una bandera.”

Sometimes, the Spanish translators of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* leave words untranslated:

The other found a dead dog  
Jubilant with maggots  
Half-buried among the sweet peas

La otra vio un perro muerto  
y lleno de gusanos, medio desenterrado  
entre los guisantes de olor  
“The Double Voice” / “La doble voz”  
(Atwood, Taillefer & García, 1991, pp. 62-63)

The word *jubilant* is not translated and the oxymoron which is an essential figure in the collection is lost. I suggest the following version with the word *jubiloso*, which is closer to Atwood’s meaning and respects her use of the run-on line. In addition, since poetry is informed by a “musical mode” (Raffel, 1991, p. 95) or inner rhythm, the word *jubiloso*, which adds an assonant quality to the line, has the advantage of adding musicality to the Spanish version:

La otra vio un perro muerto  
jubiloso y lleno de gusanos  
medio enterrado entre los guisantes de olor

The last translation of Atwood's poetry I am going to refer to is Luis Marigómez's translation of *Interlunar* (1984) as *Luna nueva* (1999) into Spanish. Many critics like Raffel (1991, p. 88) argue that one must be a poet to translate poetry. The fact that Marigómez is a poet himself could explain his great sensibility to Atwood's style and poetic voice. He is also careful to reproduce Atwood's lineation in his Spanish version. The edition, which is not a bilingual edition, as Atwood herself would have wished, does include a short prologue which explains the thematics of the collection as well as a description of her poetic characteristics in which Marigómez identifies metaphor and paradox as Atwood's essential figures (Atwood, 2000b, p. 10). To demonstrate why I think that Marigómez's target text responds better to Atwood's poetic voice, I am going to compare his translation of the poem "Eurydice" with a version by Amparo Arróspide's which is published in *Espéculo*, an online literary Journal of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid.<sup>17</sup> First, I will quote from Atwood's original:

You would rather have gone on feeling nothing,  
emptiness and silence; the stagnant peace  
of the deepest sea, which is easier  
than the noise and the flesh of the surface.

you are used to these blanched dim corridors,  
you are used to the king  
who passes you without speaking  
(Atwood, 1990, p. 302)

Marigómez translates (*sic*):  
Deberías haberte marchado sin sentir nada,  
vacío y silencio; la paz quieta  
del más profundo mar, que es más fácil  
que el ruido y la carne de la superficie

Estás acostumbrada a estos pasillos pálidos y turbios

---

<sup>17</sup> See: <http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero13/atwood.html>

estás acostumbrada al rey  
que pasa delante de tí sin hablar  
(Atwood, Marigómez, 2000b, p. 74)

If we compare Atwood's lines and Marigómez's version, we perceive that he changes the meaning of the original in the first line I have quoted. "You would rather have gone on feeling nothing" should have been translated into Spanish as "Preferirías haber seguido sin sentir nada." Marigómez replaces the meaning of preference by a modality of obligation.

Amparo Arrospide's version keeps the idea of preference but alters significantly Atwood's poetic structure:

Hubieras preferido seguir sintiendo nada  
vacío y silencio; la estancada paz  
del mar más hondo,  
al ruido y la carne de la superficie,  
acostumbrada a estos pasillos pálidos y en sombras,  
y al rey que pasa por tu lado  
sin pronunciar palabra

Arrospide's grouping of the lines is different from Atwood's. In addition she changes the punctuation of the original and uses signs like parentheses and inverted commas when Atwood does not use them. As Jean Mallinson observes, Atwood's syntax is not compact, but closer to the speech norms of English (1985, p. 21). Therefore, the Spanish translator's attempt to shorten the lines widens the gap between Atwood's poetry and the new poetic product in the target text:

He wants you to be what he calls real.	te quiere "real,"
He wants you to stop light.	un cuerpo opaco,
He wants to feel himself thickening	sentir cómo se espesa
like a tree-trunk or a haunch	(tronco de árbol o ancas)

and see blood in his eyelids  
When he closes them, and the sun beating.

y el golpe de sangre tras los párpados  
al cerrarlos la llamarada solar...  
(Atwood, 1990, p. 303) (Arrospide's version)



Unlike Arróspide, Marigómez keeps Atwood's lineation and her use of capital letters at the beginning of the lines. In her overview of the poet's characteristics, Mallinson notes that she often prefers simile over metaphor because simile, requiring the preposition *like*, lengthens the line (1985, p. 21). In his version, Luis Marigómez takes into account that the image in the fourth line is a simile and translates the word *like*, maintaining Atwood's use of parallelism:

Quiere que seas lo que él llama real.  
Quiere que pares la luz  
Quiere sentirse endurecer  
como un tronco de árbol o un anca  
y ver sangre en sus párpados  
cuando los cierra y el sol golpea  
(Atwood, Marigómez, 2000b, p. 75)

## Conclusion

My project of translating Margaret Atwood's poetry into Spanish was permanently informed by the limits of my licence to make changes in the poetic text (Ilek, 1970, p. 137) of such a prestigious author. Therefore, my aim was to produce a Spanish version which was equivalent to her poetic text and her voice, and to maintain her repertoire of figures of speech, as well as the typographic layout of her poetry, including lineation and punctuation. Atwood formulates the often insurmountable paradox implied by translation in the lines quoted in the title of this article. In another verse from "Two Headed Poems," Atwood, permanently conscious of the dangers of language, seems to argue about the impossibility of translation:

We wanted to describe the snow,  
the snow here, at the corner  
of the house and orchard  
in a language so precise  
and secret it was not even  
a code, it was snow,  
there could be no translation.  
(Atwood, 1990, p. 225)

As the different projects of translation I have presented demonstrate, translating Atwood's poetry into Spanish *is* possible

and necessary but *snow* must remain *snow*, that is, the Canadian and feminist dimensions of her source text must reverberate in the Spanish versions.

## Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

### References

#### **Works by Margaret Atwood published in Spain Fiction translated into Spanish**

*El cuento de la criada (The Handmaid's Tale)*, translated by Elsa Mateo Blanco. Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1987.

*El huevo de Barba Azul (Bluebeard's Egg)*, translated by Eduardo Murillo. Barcelona, Martínez Roca, 1990.

*Ojo de gato (Cat's Eye)*, translated by Jordi Mustieles. Barcelona, Ediciones B, 1990.

*Resurgir (Surfacing)*, translated by Ana Poljak. Barcelona, Muchnik, 1994.

*Doña Oráculo (Lady Oracle)*, translated by Sofía C. Noguera. Barcelona, Muchnik, 1996.

*La novia ladrona (The Robber Bride)*, translated by Jordi Mustieles. Barcelona, Ediciones B, 1996.

*Chicas bailarinas (Dancing Girls)*, translated by Victor Pozanco. Barcelona, Lumen, 1998.

*Alias Grace*, translated by M<sup>a</sup> Antonia Menini. Barcelona, Ediciones B, 1998.

*El cuento de la criada (The Handmaid's Tale, second edition)*, translated by Elsa Blanco Mateo. Barcelona, Ediciones B, 2001.

*El asesino ciego (The Blind Assassin)*, translated by Dolors Udina. Barcelona, Ediciones B, 2001.

*La mujer comestible (The Edible Woman)*, translated by Juanjo Estrella. Barcelona, Ediciones B, 2003.

*Oryx and Crake*, translated by Juanjo Estrella. Barcelona, Ediciones B, 2004.

*Penélope y las doce criadas (The Penelopiad)*, translated by Gemma Rovira Ortega. Barcelona, Salamandra, 2005.

### **Poetry translated into Spanish**

*Los diarios de Susanna Moodie (The Journals of Susanna Moodie)*, translated by Lidia Taillefer and Álvaro García. Valencia, Pretextos, 1991.

*Luna Nueva (Interlunar)*, translated by Luís Marigómez. Barcelona, Icaria, 2000.

*Juegos de poder (Power Politics)*, translated by Pilar Somacarrera. Madrid, Ediciones Hiperión, 2000.

### **Non-fiction translated into Spanish**

*La maldición de Eva*, translated by Montse Roca. Barcelona, Lumen 2006

### **Works by Margaret Atwood translated into Catalan**

*Ull de gat (Cat's Eye)*, translated by Roser Berdagué i Costa. Barcelona, L'Eixample, D. L., 1990.

*L'assací cec (The Blind Assassin)*, translated by Mercè López Arnabat and Albert Subirats. Barcelona, Proa, 2001.

*L'assací cec (The Blind Assassin)*, translated by Mercè López Arnabat. Barcelona, Summa de Lletres Catalana, 2003.

## Works Cited

ARRÓSPIDE, Amparo (1999). "Margaret Atwood en el corazón de las tinieblas." *Especulo. Revista de estudios literarios*. Universidad Complutense de Madrid  
<<http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero13/atwood.html>>

ATWOOD, Margaret (1973). "Notes on *Power Politics*." *Acta Victoriana*, 97 (2), pp. 7-19.

— (1990). *Selected Poems 1966-1984*. Toronto, Oxford University Press.

— (1991 [1970]). *Los diarios de Susanna Moodie/ The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, translated by Lidia Taillefer and Álvaro García. Valencia, Pre-textos, 1991.

— (2000a [1971]). *Juegos de poder / Power Politics*, translated by Pilar Somacarrera. Madrid, Ediciones Hiperión.

— (2000b [1984]). *Luna Nueva /Interlunar*, translated by Luís Marigómez. Barcelona, Icaria.

BASSNETT, Susan (1980). *Translation Studies*. London and New York, Routledge.

BLAKELY, Barbara. (1983). "The Pronunciation of the Flesh: A Feminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's Poetry," in *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System*. Sherrill Grace and Lorraine Weir, eds. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, pp. 33-51.

BERMAN, Antoine (1995). *Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne*. Paris, Gallimard.

BILAN, R. P. (1977). "Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*." *Canadian Poetry*, 8, pp. 73-90.

CONNOLLY, David (1998). "Poetry Translation," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. Mona Baker, ed. New York, Routledge, pp. 170-176.

COOLEY, Dennis (1994). "Nearer by Far: the Upset 'I' in Margaret Atwood's Poetry," in *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity*. Colin Nicholson, ed. New York, St Martin's Press, pp. 68-93.

DALMAU, Miguel (1996). "La dama de Canadá" (review of *The Robber Bride and Lady Oracle*). *La Vanguardia*, 12 de diciembre de 1996, p. 39.

FOLKART, Barbara (1999). "Poetry as Knowing." *TTR*, XII, 1, pp. 31-56.

FRAWLEY, William (ed.) (1984). *Translation: Literary, Linguistic and Philosophical Perspectives*. London and Toronto, Associated University Press.

GODARD, Barbara (1990). "Theorizing Feminist Discourse / Translation," in *Translation, History, Culture*. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevre, eds. London, Pinter Publishers, pp. 87-96.

GRACE, Sherrill (1980). *Violent Duality. A Study of Margaret Atwood*. Montreal, Vehicule Press.

GURPEGUI, José Antonio (1998). "Review of *Alias Grace*." *La Razón*, December 27<sup>th</sup>.

HÖNNIGHAUSEN, Lothar (2000). "Margaret Atwood's Poetry," in *Margaret Atwood. Works and Impact*. Reingard M. Nischik, ed. New York, Camden House, pp. 97-119.

HOWELLS, Coral Ann (2005). *Margaret Atwood*. London, Macmillan.

ILEK, Bohuslav (1970). "On Translating Images," in *The Nature of Translation. Essays on the Theory and Practice of Literary Translation*. James S. Holmes, ed. The Hague, Mouton, pp. 135-138.

KLAPPERT, Peter (1990). "I Want, I Don't Want: the Poetry of Margaret Atwood," *The Gettysburg Review*, 3 (1), pp. 217-230.

MALLINSON, Jean (1985). "Margaret Atwood," in *Canadian Writers and their Works*. Robert Lecker *et al.*, eds. Toronto, ECW Press, pp. 17-81.

MANDEL, Eli (1983). "Atwood's Poetic Politics," in *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System*. Sherrill Grace and Lorraine Weir, eds. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press.

MARIGÓMEZ, Luís (1998). "Seducción de la desgracia ajena" (review of *Alias Grace*). *ABC Cultural*, September 19<sup>th</sup>, p. 25.

MOIX, Ana María (2001). "Margaret Atwood, la fuerza de la escritura" (interview and review of *The Blind Assassin*). "Babelia," cultural supplement of *El País*, pp. 1-3.

— (2004). "Hacia la catástrofe final." "Babelia," cultural supplement of *El País*, June 26<sup>th</sup>, p. 8.

NABOKOV, Vladimir (1955). "Problems of Translation: Onegin in English." *Partisan Review*, 22 (4), pp. 496-512.

ONLEY, Gloria (1974). "Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle," *Canadian Literature*, 60, pp. 21-42.

(2002). *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

RAFFEL, Burton (1991). "The Translation of Poetry," in *Translation: Theory and Practice, Tension and Interdependence*. Larson, M. ed. ATA Scholarly Monograph Series, vol. V. Binghamton, New York, State University of New York at Binghamton.

SIMON, Sherry (1996). *Gender and Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*. London, Routledge.

SKELTON, Robin (1977). "Timeless Constructions: A Note on the Poetic Style of Margaret Atwood." *Malahat Review*, 41, pp. 107-120.

SMITH, Rowland (1977). "Margaret Atwood: The Stoic Comedian." *Malahat Review*, 41, pp. 134-144.

SOMACARRERA, Pilar (2000). "Barometer Couple: Balance and Parallelism in Margaret Atwood's *Power Politics*." *Language and Literature*, 9 (2), pp. 135-149.

SPIVAK, Gayatri (2002). "The Politics of Translation," in *The Translation Studies Reader*. Lawrence Venuti, ed. London, Routledge, pp. 397-416.

SULLIVAN, Rosemary (1977). "Breaking the Circle," *The Malahat Review*, 41, pp. 30-98.

STAINES, David (2003). "Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*. Eva-Marie Kröller, ed. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

STEIN, Karen F. (1999). *Margaret Atwood Revisited*. New York, Twayne.

VELASCO, Lola (2004). "En ningún lugar" (review of *Oryx and Crake*) "Blanco y Negro Cultural." *ABC*, October 16<sup>th</sup>, p. 13.

Von FLOTOW, Louise (1997). *Translation and Gender. Translation in the "Era of Feminism."* Manchester /Ottawa, St. Jerome Publishing / University of Ottawa Press.

WEISSBORT, Daniel, ed. (1989). *Translating Poetry: the Double Labyrinth*. London, Macmillan.

WOODCOCK, George (1976). "Playing with Freezing Fire." *Canadian Literature*, 70, pp. 42-60.

**ABSTRACT: “How Can You Use Two Languages and Mean What You Say in Both?”<sup>18</sup>: On Translating Margaret Atwood’s Poetry into Spanish** — Contrary to what might be expected, a Canadian literature in Spanish translation already exists and, expectedly, Margaret Atwood is one of the most translated writers. All her novels except *Life Before Man*, as well as three of her collections of short stories and three of her poetry collections have been translated into Spanish. Her work has received excellent reviews in Spain which have also praised her translators. This essay focuses on my own experience translating Atwood’s poetry—her collection *Power Politics* (*Juegos de poder*, 2000)—into Spanish, in an approach which compares my own project of translation or “*projet-de-traduction*,” as formulated by Antoine Berman, with that of the other translations of her poetry into Spanish. Being a university teacher and a researcher in Canadian literature, and not a specialist in Translation Studies, my approach is necessarily pragmatic and not theoretical. Bearing in mind Barbara Folkart’s contention that poetry is a cognitive activity and the multiplicity of interpretations that the poems offer, in which the feminist one is prominent, I tried to produce a translation which was as close as possible to the original characteristics of Atwood’s poetry in its tone, lineation and imagistic dimension. The first steps were the stylistic analysis, which resulted in a rhetorical study of the poems, and then the review of the existing criticism about the poems. The main problems which arose during the translation were related to the political and feminist connotations of the poems. If the political context is crucial in *Power Politics*, the cultural background is vital in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, although it has been erased in its Spanish version (*Los diarios de Susanna Moodie*, 1991, by Lidia Taillefer and Álvaro García). This is not an unusual phenomenon, since translation consists in an often insurmountable paradox which is formulated in the lines by Margaret Atwood quoted in the title of this article: trying to formulate the same idea in two languages which function differently and have completely different cultural contexts.

---

<sup>18</sup> These are two lines from Margaret Atwood’s “Two-Headed Poems,” in *Selected Poems*. Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 227.



**RÉSUMÉ : « Comment utiliser deux langues et penser ce qu'on dit dans les deux ? » : de la traduction espagnole de la poésie de Margaret Atwood** — Contrairement à ce qu'on peut imaginer, des traductions espagnoles d'œuvres littéraires canadiennes existent déjà, et, comme on peut le prévoir, Margaret Atwood figure parmi les écrivains les plus traduits. L'ensemble de ses romans, à l'exception de *Life Before Man*, trois de ses recueils de nouvelles et trois de ses recueils de poésie ont été traduits en espagnol. Ses œuvres ont reçu d'excellentes critiques en Espagne, qui ont aussi fait l'éloge de ses traducteurs. Cet article porte sur mon expérience personnelle en tant que traductrice de la poésie d'Atwood – son recueil *Power Politics* (*Juegos de poder*, 2000) – vers l'espagnol, suivant une démarche qui consiste à comparer mon propre « projet-de-traduction », tel que formulé par Antoine Berman, à celui des autres traducteurs espagnols de sa poésie. En tant que professeure d'université et de chercheuse en littérature canadienne, et n'étant pas une spécialiste de la traductologie, ma démarche est nécessairement pragmatique et non théorique. Tenant compte à la fois du concept de Barbara Folkart selon lequel la poésie est une activité cognitive, et de la multiplicité d'interprétations offertes par les poèmes parmi lesquelles l'interprétation féministe est saillante, j'ai tenté de produire une traduction qui, dans son ton, sa linéation et sa dimension imagiste, se rapproche le plus possible des caractéristiques premières de la poésie d'Atwood. La première étape a été l'analyse stylistique, qui a pris la forme d'une étude rhétorique des poèmes, ensuite vint l'étude de l'état de la critique des poèmes. Les principaux problèmes qui ont surgi pendant la traduction étaient reliés aux connotations politiques et féministes des poèmes. Si le contexte politique est crucial dans *Power Politics*, l'arrière-plan culturel est vital dans *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, même s'il a été effacé dans la version espagnole (*Los diarios de Susanna Moodie*, 1991, par Lidia Taillefer et Álvaro García.). Ce phénomène n'est pas inhabituel, car la traduction constitue souvent un paradoxe insurmontable qui est formulé dans les vers de Margaret Atwood cités dans le titre du présent article : tenter de formuler une même idée en deux langues qui fonctionnent de façon différente et qui évoluent dans des contextes culturels différents.

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood, English Canadian literature in translation, literary translation, poetry translation, translation analysis.

**Mots-clés :** Margaret Atwood, littérature canadienne-anglaise en traduction, traduction littéraire, traduction de la poésie, analyse des traductions.

**Pilar Somacarrera: Departamento de Filología Inglesa,  
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Autónoma de  
Madrid, 28049 Cantoblanco (Madrid)  
Email: pilar.somacarrera@uam.es**