

THE WASTE LAND IN SPANISH TRANSLATION (1930-2022)*

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ABSTRACT

Between 1930 and 2022, no fewer than 35 people (including professional translators, scholars and amateurs) met the formidable challenge of translating into Spanish either *The Waste Land* in full or only some of its sections. With varying degrees of success, these translations found their way into the pages of single books, anthologies, literary magazines or journals both in Spain and in Hispanic-American countries such as Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Santo Domingo. Undertaking a close analysis of all these versions not only provides an excellent opportunity to revisit T.S. Eliot's best-known poem on the centenary of its publication, but may also contribute to the study of the complex process of its retranslation over more than nine decades.

KEYWORDS: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, *La tierra baldía*, *La tierra yerma*, literary translation.

THE WASTE LAND EN ESPAÑOL (1930-2022)

RESUMEN

Entre los años 1930 y 2022 al menos 35 personas (profesionales de la traducción, del mundo académico y aficionados) afrontaron el reto de verter al español *The Waste Land* en su totalidad o únicamente algunas de sus secciones. Con diferentes grados de éxito, estas traducciones aparecieron en forma de libro independiente o se incluyeron en antologías o en revistas tanto en España como en diversos países hispanoamericanos, entre los cuales se cuentan Argentina, Chile, Colombia, México, Perú y Santo Domingo. Realizar un análisis detallado de todas estas versiones no solo ofrece una excelente oportunidad de reconsiderar en sí mismo el más famoso poema de T.S. Eliot cuando se conmemora el centenario de su publicación, sino también la posibilidad de contribuir a estudiar el complejo proceso de su traducción durante más de nueve décadas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, *La tierra baldía*, *La tierra yerma*, traducción literaria.

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The first two Spanish translations of *The Waste Land* were both published in 1930. The earliest was brought out in Spain by the Puerto Rican professor, polyglot translator, prolific editor and literary critic Ángel Flores (1900-1992). The second, by the poet and diplomat Enrique Manguía (1903-1940), was released in Mexico. T.S. Eliot's correspondence proves his eagerness to have his poem translated into a language he did not master. On 30 January 1928 Flores, then a lecturer at Rutgers University, sent his version to Eliot, who replied on 22 February regretting that his knowledge of Spanish was "not adequate for expert criticism," unhesitatingly authorizing its publication and expressing his satisfaction as follows: "I should be indeed honoured if your translation could appear in either the *Revista de Occidente* or *Gaceta Literaria*, but particularly glad if it appeared in the *Revista de Occidente* with the editors of which I have always had the most sympathetic relations" (2013, 63). However, this translation did not appear in any of the two journals suggested by the poet, but as a small volume issued in Barcelona by Editorial Cervantes, a publishing house to which Flores acted as a literary advisor. When Enrique Manguía, in an undated letter, requested permission to publish his prose version of the poem, Eliot replied with a letter dated 8 October 1930 letting him know about the former translation by Flores. Moreover, Eliot was very specific, literally requesting: "as a necessary condition to let me see a copy of it, for suggestions, before publication" (2014, 334). In fact, by that time Manguía's free rendering of *The Waste Land* had already come out in the July/August 1930 issue of the short-lived (1928-1931) Mexican cultural magazine *Contemporáneos*.

In a letter of 20 November 1930, Flores reminded Eliot that he had sent him a dozen copies of his Spanish translation a few months earlier and complained to him about the printing of Manguía's translation in *Contemporáneos*, arguing against it: "this so-called prose translation will harm you and the circulation of the Spanish edition which, incidentally, has been warmly received in Spain" (Eliot 2014, 420 n2). On 9 December, Eliot apologized to Flores for having failed to thank him in due time, praised his Spanish version (though pointing out his misinterpretation of the term 'City Directors'¹) and clarified his position as to Manguía's:

The author of the Mexican translation had some claim upon me, being introduced by a mutual friend. I could see no reason why another translation should not be made, especially as it was for a Mexican periodical, or why it should compete with

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¹ Eliot explained: "I have only found one error myself: 'City Directors' are not political representatives like aldermen, but are directors of public limited companies, registered in the City" (2014, 420). Far from being corrected, Flores's mistranslation of "the loitering heirs of City directors" (line 180) by "los perezosos herederos de empleados municipales" remained intact in subsequent editions of his translation (Flores 1944, 378; 1973, 45; 1977, 37). Jaime Gil de Biedma mocked this blunder, which he singled out as the only memory he kept of Flores's work (1994, 356-357).



yours. I agree that there are a number of mistranslations. As a matter of fact, I had stipulated that the translation should be submitted to me before publication, and this was not done. I shall be writing to protest. (2014, 420)

Such a letter of protest may not have survived, or perhaps it was never written. In any case, there is no trace of it, nor further evidence of any correspondence regarding this matter of contention in the eight extant volumes of *The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, which have been carefully edited. Flores was only mentioned once again in these volumes, about one year later, when Eliot gave what sounds like his honest opinion in a letter of 16 December 1931, addressed to Erik Mesterton: “The Spanish translation of Flores also seemed to me good although there were a few definite mistranslations; but I was not in such close contact with Flores as with Curtius and Menasce” (2014, 778).²

As a matter of fact, while Flores’s translation has been widely circulated,³ the one signed by Munguía has remained almost unknown outside the translator’s home country, where it was reprinted in book form by the Mexican publishing house El Tucán de Virginia in 2014 and again in 2017, together with a more recent version signed by another translator, Gabriel Bernal Granados, who entitled it “La tierra baldía.” Furthermore, Flores’s version became much more influential than Munguía’s, partly because it was included in anthologies such as *Antología de escritores contemporáneos de los Estados Unidos*, compiled by John Peale Bishop and Allen Tate in 1944. Each of these two early translations made a deep impression on a different famous poet: Flores’s on Federico García Lorca (who had access to the drafts when he met Flores in New York in 1929), and Munguía’s on the seventeen-year-old Octavio Paz, although the latter would end up preferring Flores’s version to that of Munguía’s (Paz 1988a, 42).

Ángel Flores chose to translate *The Waste Land* as *Tierra baldía*, which would become the most common title of the poem in Spanish (generally with the addition of the article *La*, as omitted by Flores), whereas Munguía named it *El Páramo*, a title never to be used again.⁴ Flores had received some advice in this respect from Eliot, who in his first reply remarked that the title was not “The Wasteland,” but “The

² Eliot was referring to the versions in German (*Neue Schweizer Rundschau*, 1927) and in French (*L’Esprit*, May 1926), which were already available when the two Spanish versions came out. In a 1944 letter addressed to Kathleen Raine, Eliot called his friend Jean de Menasce “the only really first-rate French translator I have ever had” (2012, 895).

³ It was reprinted by Emecé Editores in Buenos Aires in 1954, by Llibres de Sinera in Barcelona in 1973, five times by Premià Editora in Mexico between 1977 and 1989, and by Fontamara also in Mexico in 2007, 2013 and 2016.

⁴ In his acceptance speech for the T.S. Eliot Prize awarded to him by the Ingersoll Foundation in 1987, Octavio Paz praised Munguía’s introduction, which he had come across when he was an enthusiastic seventeen-year-old reader of poetry and had not learned English yet (1988b, 40). Nevertheless, in “Rescate de Enrique Munguía” Paz not only objected to Munguía’s translation of the title and to his inability to render the tone of Eliot’s poem, but also commended Flores’s choice of the title *Tierra baldía* and celebrated his translation as “the best-to-date” version (1988a, 42).



Waste Land,” and confided to him that his French translator Jean de Menasce had found “too late to use in his version” what the poet considered was “absolutely the exact equivalent as it alludes to the same mediaeval fiction”: ‘La Gaste Lande’ [*sic*] (2013, 63). The theologian and philosopher Jean de Menasce made this discovery after he had published his version under the title of “La Terre mise à nu” in *L’Esprit*. Therefore it was too late to change it to “La terre gaste” so as to recover the allusion to the Grail legend, mentioned by Eliot in the opening paragraph of his notes to *The Waste Land* as one of his main sources of inspiration (2015, 72). The poet referred to Jessie L. Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), a book of anthropological and mythological scholarship of which most French readers would not have heard. Conversely, they would have been familiar with Chrétien de Troyes, who used the words “terre gaste” in his verse romance *Perceval, or the Story of the Grail* to describe the surroundings of Blanchefleur’s castle. Over the years Flores never changed the title he had first chosen, “Tierra baldía” (without the article), which was also adopted by Octavio Castro López (1973). However, most translators (at least 21 so far) preferred “La tierra baldía,” which has become the canonical title of the poem in Spanish (Bartra 1952; Aguirre 1965; Valverde 1978; Avantos Swan [pseud.] 1982; Álvarez Amorós 1983; Vargas 1989; Rivas 1990; Montebruno 2000; Malpartida 2001; Palomares 2005; Alvarado Tenorio 2005; Puel de Cristo 2012; Cassara 2013; Jaume 2015; Fernández Biggs, and Villavicencio 2017; Bernal Granados 2017; Caballero Cebrián 2017; Rey 2017; Doce 2018; Sanz Irlas 2020; Carbajosa 2022).

The second most popular choice presents variants which include the term *yermo* (derived from the Latin word *eremus*, meaning ‘uninhabited’ or ‘uncultivated’), with overtones ranging from the eremitic life of the Desert Fathers of the Christian monastic tradition (*Padres del Yermo*) to the barrenness of the protagonist of García Lorca’s *Yerma* (1934). This term also evokes what Eliot actually had in mind: the land laid waste by knightly warfare, a literary image to be found in many chivalric narratives of Arthurian fiction. Significantly, in Martín de Riquer’s Spanish translation of *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* (*Perceval, or The Story of the Grail*), the protagonist, who had lived with his mother in a “Yerma Floresta Solitaria” (Troyes 25), rode on until he caught sight of a castle and noticed how outside its walls there was nothing but “sea and water and wasteland,” that is, “mar, agua y tierra yerma” (Troyes 63). Accordingly, if Eliot endorsed Jean de Menasce’s rendition of the English title by the exact words employed by Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth-century French original (*terre gaste*), then there is no reason to object to the use of *tierra yerma*, since they are the corresponding words in the Spanish translation of *Perceval*.

Seven translators of *The Waste Land* selected one of the following three variants: “El yermo” (Manent 1948; Álvarez 1987; Eslava Galán 1991), “La tierra yerma” (Rodríguez Palomero 1979; Girri 1988; Rodríguez 1988) and “Tierra yerma” (Núñez Nava 2008). The other five Spanish titles, each chosen by a different translator, were: “La tierra estéril” (Tello 1962), “La tierra desechada” (Levine 1964), “La tierra devastada” (Revol 1976), “Tierra Asolada” (Álvarez 2008), and “La tierra agostada” (Silva-Santisteban 2010). All the translators maintained their initial choice of title, with the exception of José María Álvarez, who switched from “El yermo”



(1987) to “Tierra Asolada” (2008), following the preference of Jorge Luis Borges.⁵ Only one translator, Rolando Costa Picazo, kept the title in English both on the book cover and above the epigraph, although he referred to the poem as “La tierra desolada” in his preface to the volume (2012).

I had an opportunity to address the controversial issues faced by any attempt to translate the title of *The Waste Land* when, back in 1987, I presented a paper at the XI AEDEAN Conference in which I compared most of the Spanish translations of the poem available at that time (Gibert 1989).⁶ Apart from the title of the poem, I approached other topics which had also caused important divergences among the translators: proper nouns (e.g., names for people, churches, streets, rivers and cities) in English and in other languages, personal titles, quotations in languages other than English, onomatopoeia, allusions, abbreviations, idiomatic expressions, lexical choices, and the rendering of various types of speech register. Some readers interpreted the title of my paper as an indiscriminating and harsh condemnation of all the translators who had contributed to the poem being “rudely forced.” Actually, I made clear distinctions between, on the one hand, occasional minor lapses or small inaccuracies and, on the other, recurrent major flaws, which in one instance had already been exposed by an indignant reviewer (Dietz 1983). One of the most surprising oversights I spotted was the failure to provide the Spanish equivalent of one of the most common examples of animal onomatopoeia, *quiquiriquí*, in accordance with the spelling of the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*. Leaving *co co rico co co rico* (line 392) untranslated creates an undesirable comic effect, because the sound evokes the call of a street vendor selling “delicious coconut” (Castro 1973, 138; Bartra 1977, 25; Álvarez 2008, 31). As to gross faults, one of the most stunning occurred when lines 308-311:

Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord Thou pluckest me
burning

became:

abrasando, abrasando, abrasando, abrasando
Oh, Señor Tú, me estás desplumando
Oh, Señor Tú, desplumas
abrasando

⁵ Although Borges did not publish a translation of *The Waste Land*, he called it *La tierra asolada* in his contributions to *El Hogar* (1986, 142).

⁶ I had no chance to correct the numerous misprints which appeared in the conference proceedings, most of which seem to be due to overzealous copyediting by someone unfamiliar with *The Waste Land*. For instance, the name of Philomel in Spanish, *Filomela*, was systematically replaced by *Filomena*. On a more positive note, I should add that the difficulties of access I mentioned in my 1987 conference paper 35 years ago no longer exist, so that at present most of the published versions are available to any researcher in this field.



It is most unfortunate that “Thou pluckest me out” was translated by “Tú me estás desplumando,” which literally means “Thou pluckest my feathers,” and figuratively “you fleeced me” (Flores 1944, 388; 1973, 59; 1977, 48-49). The image conveyed in Spanish is that of a chicken complaining about being scalded and plucked by hand in a grotesque scene befitting a joke or a fanciful tale. Rather than amusing, this blatant mistake is irritating because it destroys the dignified atmosphere underscored by the quotations from Buddha and St. Augustine at the end of “The Fire Sermon.” Similarly, the translation of “The jungle crouched, humped in silence” (line 398) as “La jungla se acurrucó, se jorobó en silencio” (Valverde 1978, 92) or as “La selva se dobla y se joroba en silencio” (Alvarado 2005, 69) is wrong, because *jorobar* is a colloquial verb meaning *bother* or *pester*, and *jorobarse* is a rather vulgar equivalent of *grin and bear it* or *lump it*. This regrettable blunder would have been easily avoided by resorting to the verb *encorvarse*, as most translators did.

Some errors are not the result of carelessness but illustrate the tremendous pitfalls along the translator’s path. Expertise is put to the test, for instance, when confronting the term *dull* in “dull roots” (line 4) and “dull canal” (line 189). In 1994 Fernando García de la Banda devoted an entire conference paper to a deep analysis of the dissimilar renderings of the word in these two contexts, comparing seventeen translations into different Romance and Germanic languages. He explained that he had chosen this example because it seemed to him a case of “impossible translation” (1995, 285) though he ended up proposing a couple of alternatives to satisfy those who are ready to accept one distinct word for each of the two contexts, “yertas raíces / turbio canal,” and those who insist on using the same word on both occasions, “yertas raíces / yerto canal” (296). The disparities in the case of the seven Spanish translations he examined are the best evidence that discrepancies are inevitable whenever there is an almost insurmountable problem. Translators with various cultural backgrounds, linguistic skills and literary tastes only coincide when there are no difficulties.

One of the hardest passages to translate is the conversation in the pub (lines 138-172). Translators should resort to effective strategies to indicate that the English text deviates from standard speech. They must re-create the degree of (in)formality and resolve any conflicting demands between form and content to preserve the register of the original. For instance, formal expressions such as “se lo dije sin subterfugios” and “se lo dije sin ambages” should be avoided when translating “I didn’t mince my words” (line 140). On the contrary, using slang may be risky because colloquialisms tend to become soon outdated, so that what is easily understood at one point in time may sound awkward or utterly antiquated at another, and then be completely misunderstood or even incomprehensible some years later. Additionally, we should bear in mind that not all Spanish-speaking readers share the same cultural context. The adoption of a particular translation strategy may be suitable in one social or geographical context and completely inadequate in another. When Jaime Tello translated the crude cockney talk reported by Lil’s female friend in the pub, he resorted to the *voseo* paradigm, which consists in addressing somebody as *vos* instead of using the informal second-person pronouns *tú* and *tí*. Thus, “And if you don’t give it him” (line 149) became “Y si no lo divertís vos” just



as “You *are* a proper fool” (line 162) became “Vos *sos* una perfecta idiota” (1962, 51). Tello’s procedure was easily understandable for the readers of *Zodiaco*, a journal published in Caracas, since the sociolinguistic phenomenon of *voseo* is well known not only in Venezuela, but across the whole of Hispanic America, though its usage differs greatly from country to country. In some of them, *voseo* tends to be restricted to rural areas and is a marker of social class in urban areas, whereas in others it is accepted by all social classes. Whether it is considered contemporary standard or else substandard, and whether it is privileged over *tuteo* or not, *voseo* is commonly used to express familiarity rather than formality in all the Latin American dialectal varieties which have incorporated it. In contrast, *vos* disappeared in Spain over time, and its contemporary usage as a deferential form of address is restricted to extremely solemn occasions or as an archaism when deliberately recreating the language of the past. Thus, the role of *voseo* in *The Waste Land* is likely to be misunderstood in Spain, where Lil’s friend could be identified as an Argentinian speaker. In Walter Cassara’s version, published in Buenos Aires, Lil’s friend also sounds Argentinian when she says “hacete una linda dentadura,” “pensá en el pobre Albert” and “hacé lo que quieras” (2013).

Other examples can be put forward to demonstrate how critical assessment can go in the opposite direction, illustrating a negative perception from the other side of the Atlantic. Applauding the adverse criticism by the Mexican poet Roberto Vallarino, Octavio Paz objected to José María Valverde’s translation, in which he believed there were too many typical features of the kind of Spanish spoken in Spain, and more specifically in the center of Madrid (1988a, 42).⁷ If we judge by the number of reprintings, Valverde’s version was highly successful, although it has also been attacked in Spain, albeit for different reasons. The case deserves to be looked into because it is unique in the history of *The Waste Land* in Spanish translation. In 1978, Valverde’s version of the poem was brought to light by the prestigious publisher Alianza Editorial in a volume of Eliot’s collected poems. The following year, Luisa Fernanda Rodríguez Palomero published her own translation, preceded by an introduction focusing on those general aspects of Valverde’s version she found fault with. In order to express her views more precisely, she added 156 notes in which she quoted words or lines from her predecessor and commented upon the amendments she had explicitly referred to in her subtitle: “Enmiendas a una traducción.” Although such amendments would have greatly improved the version submitted to such a careful scrutiny, Valverde disregarded all of them.⁸ In this sense, the case is far from being exceptional, as attested by Flores’s uncorrected mistranslation of “City directors” mentioned above. What is most striking in the

⁷ Octavio Paz’s exact words were: “empedrada de españolismos y madrileñismos que convierten a Eliot en un poeta castizo de la Puerta del Sol” (1988a, 42). Paz did not give any examples, and I cannot find any.

⁸ In 1996 Emilio Barón Palma called attention to the fact that Valverde did not modify his text in the following editions of his work (99).



instance of Flores is that Eliot himself had pointed out the mistake long before the same translation was sent to press again and again.

The subsequent editions of most Spanish versions prove that they are generally reproduced with no revision. Perhaps it was this negligent attitude on the part of certain translators that dampened Eliot's willingness to help those who, at first sight, seemed to him not rigorous enough. In the preface to his Spanish version of *The Waste Land*, José María Aguirre recalled the letter he addressed to Eliot, fearing at the time that the poet would deem his queries too "silly" (Aguirre 1965, 57). According to Aguirre, Eliot's reply confirmed that his fear was well founded; only a couple of his questions were answered, and these were the least interesting for him. Eliot ended his letter by saying that Aguirre was trying to understand an area in which understanding was not pertinent (57). As a result, the translator decided to qualify his own notes to the poem as "impertinent" when he entitled the last section of his book "Notas impertinentes a *La tierra baldía*" (57-90).

Aguirre's notes are clearly detached from his translation of those appended by Eliot (36-41), and the two sets are even separated by a section devoted to an analysis of the poem (45-56). The extreme opposite is exemplified by Jaime Tello, who caused a confusing effect by mixing Eliot's notes with his own. Most translators include the Spanish version of Eliot's notes at the end of the poem. The omission of such notes is sometimes briefly justified by the translator, but on other occasions it goes unexplained. Apart from Eliot's notes, some Spanish versions provide scholarly introductions and editorial notes written either by the translator or by another author. The Mexican philosopher and literary scholar Octavio Castro López, for example, prefaced his translation with a lengthy study of Eliot's poem, so that his book was appropriately entitled *Examen crítico de T.S. Eliot. Tierra baldía* (1973). Viorica Patea's 2005 bilingual edition of *La tierra baldía* has been rightly acclaimed by reviewers such as Mário Avelar, an experienced translator and a professor of English and American Studies, who praised this "remarkable work of scholarship" consisting of a 163-page introduction and a good number of extensive footnotes. In the 2022 edition of the book, Patea's introduction, bearing the title "Eliot, *La tierra baldía* y la épica de la modernidad," has been updated and enlarged to 208 pages. For the sake of readability, the former footnotes have been turned into 167 endnotes, improved and adapted to the new translation by Natalia Carbajosa, which has replaced that of 2005. No other edition of *The Waste Land* in Spanish contains such a detailed and comprehensive critical apparatus to facilitate a close reading of the poem. Some editions are not bilingual, and many lack any guidance on how to approach the text. Most of them present *The Waste Land* in full, but at least five translators have published only some of its sections (Manent 1948; Revol 1976; Álvarez Amorós 1983; Rodríguez 1988; Doce 2018). In 2020 Piero Montebruno translated the lines which Eliot had deleted from the final version of *The Waste Land* and which were included in the 1971 facsimile transcription of the original drafts. Ten years earlier Ricardo Silva-Santisteban had translated the typescript, which he published alongside his Spanish translation of the definitive text (2010, 71-129).

Apart from book reviews, some academic research has been conducted on the Spanish translations of *The Waste Land*. Howard T. Young (1993) did not focus



exclusively on this poem, but also on others by the same author which were translated into Spanish between 1927 and 1940. Both in this article and in his introduction to *T.S. Eliot and Hispanic Modernity, 1924-1993*, Young drew special attention to the impact of Eliot's poetry upon the creative works of his early translators, who included some of the most famous writers of that time. Margarita Garbisu (2017) surveyed the role played by Eliot in the publication of the first two Spanish translations of *The Waste Land* into Spanish. In *DA / Datta: Teaching "The Waste Land"* (a special double issue of *CIEFL Bulletin*) I gave an account of my use of Eliot's poem in translation workshops (Gibert 2001). It was a very enriching pedagogical experience, one in which I tried to encourage students to concentrate on their own efforts at practicing the art of literary translation and test their skills rather than wasting their energy on the facile condemnation of the flaws of others. In trying their own hands at translating such a difficult text, they learned to become spontaneously respectful towards those who had previously attempted this arduous endeavor, even if their struggles had not always been rewarded by success.

Respect and generosity are needed to analyze the work of those who have met the formidable challenge of translating *The Waste Land* into Spanish. We can safely assume that each act of re-interpretation and re-creation was undertaken with the best of intentions. The enormous task involved in all the retranlations⁹ was presumably attempted with the expected aim of improving the quality of the previous ones by overcoming their deficiencies, correcting their mistakes, avoiding their failures and offering better solutions to the problems inherent in the translation of such an intricate source text. However, the poem has generally been retranslated without prior achievements and shortcomings being taken into account. Perhaps translators feel the need to break away from their predecessors in order to gain freedom. As a result, they refrain from reading preceding versions lest they are led to unconsciously repeat the same renderings, or for fear they may be constrained to look for different ones so as to avoid similarities with already published versions.

Since I presented my 1987 conference paper, many other Spanish versions have been published. At this moment in time, my long-term objective is to reappraise the extant versions with a view to ascertaining to what extent they differ, and to determine how far they have progressed in the never-ending goal to achieve the "great translation" –the optimal version which should make all future retranlations superfluous. Yet, while pursuing the endless, unattainable goal of perfection, one must be aware that there can be no definitive translation, because although the source text remains unaltered, both the target language and the readers' cultural context keep on evolving. The best we can hope for, therefore, is a relatively accurate rendering that suits each community of readers, who will judge each new

⁹ I am using the term 'retranslation' not in the sense of a mere revision of a former translation, but as defined by Kaisa Koskinen: "a new translation produced in the same language where a previous translation of the same text already exists" (2018, 317).



version of the translated poem and eventually accept or reject it according to their own criteria.

SPANISH VERSIONS OF *THE WASTE LAND*

TRANSLATOR NAME ORDER

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