Review of:

Maria Dolores Narbona Carrión (ed.), *Sophie Treadwell: Contexto teatral, biografía, crítica y traducción de su obra Machinal*, Málaga: Universidad de Málaga, 2007, paperback, 193 pp., ISBN 978-84-9747-181-7

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I

It is usually stated that significant modern American theatre begins with the work of Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), but, as with other literary forms, that generic history may also be viewed and re-viewed from a female perspective, and the present volume comes as a timely reminder of the contribution to that same American theatre made all but simultaneously by O'Neill's contemporary, the journalist, novelist and, above all, dramatist and theatre producer Sophie Treadwell (Stockton, California, 1885 - Tucson, Arizona, 1970). Consisting of diverse editorial material in Spanish and a new translation (the first-ever into Spanish) of Treadwell's best-known play, *Machinal* (1928), this book is by definition aimed at a Hispanophone public. The present review, it is hoped, may nonetheless also be of interest to English-speaking readers and scholars, as an index of the reception outside the Anglophone world of women's theatre from the US and as evidence of the capacity of Sophie Treadwell's writing to cross borders - as also of the problems and challenges involved in translating a work which, on closer scrutiny, reveals itself to be in some aspects a product of cultural hybridation (Treadwell was of part-Mexican origin, and, from today's theoretical perspectives, doubly liable to subalternhood).

The volume, edited by María Dolores Narbona Carrión, of the University of Málaga, consists of the following: an introduction and chronology, both by the editor; a study of the theatrical context of the play *Machinal*, again by the editor; a general account of Treadwell's life and work, by Miriam López Rodríguez, with a bibliography of writings by and on the author; and a translation into Spanish of *Machinal* (under the same title), by María Dolores Narbona Carrión and Ricardo Vivancos Pérez. This translation was performed on stage as part of the First Congress on American Theatre held in 2000 at the University of Málaga, under the rubric "The Political and the Personal in American Theatre and Drama".

II

The introduction begins with the proposition that the work of women dramatists such as Treadwell requires promotion as evidence that the modern US theatre was *not* the single-handed creation of Eugene O'Neill. As María Dolores Narbona puts it, the manuals of American literature tend to reinforce the view that "antes de que Eugene O'Neill se pusiera manos a la obra ..., prácticamente no existía un teatro propiamente estadounidense" ("until Eugene O'Neill put his hands to the matter ..., a genuinely American theatre practically did not exist" - 9-10)[1]. Several standard works of reference confirm that such has been the orthodoxy. Thus, Marcus Cunliffe, in his chapter on "The American Theatre" in *The Literature of the United States* (1954, third edition 1966), declares that thanks to O'Neill "American drama caught up with European drama almost overnight" and that "he did more than any other man [*sic*] to transform the American theatre ... he has, unquestionably, been America's foremost dramatist"[2]; Eric Mottram, in the entry on O'Neill in *The Penguin Companion to Literature 3: United States and Latin American Literature* (1971), states that O'Neill "created an American theatre out of nothing"[3]; and no less an authority than Jorge Luis Borges, in his *Introducción a la literatura norteamericana / An Introduction to American Literature*, co-written

with Esther Zemborain de Torres (1967, English version 1971) states that "O'Neill has renewed the dramatic technique of our times"[4]. Such is the received view which this volume seeks to question and recentre.

From the biographical and critical apparatus in this volume a picture of Sophie Treadwell emerges as a complex and multifaceted literary figure, skilled in multiple genres, within whose *oeuvre* a certain intertextuality and a degree of multiculturalism may be singled out as elements of particular interest for the study of *Machinal*, her flagship work in whatever genre. Among the key elements of her life and work, a number may be isolated and will now be enumerated.

Sophie Treadwell emerged from a difficult family background. Her father, Alfred B. Treadwell, left his wife Nettie and their young daughter in 1890 to establish himself as a lawyer in San Francisco; later, a cycle of "reconciliations", separations and more "reconciliations" ensued, and Sophie never truly shook off the stigma and trauma of childhood abandonment. She studied at Berkeley, where she graduated in humanities (majoring in modern languages). She was married to a sports journalist, William O'Connell McGeehan, from 1910 till his death in 1933. Her production as dramatist comprises forty plays (almost as many as O'Neill's fifty), the first (*Sympathy*) being produced in 1915; in New York in 1918 she acted herself in her drama *Claws*. She also wrote four novels, two short stories, three essays on the theatre and dozens of journalistic articles. The bulk of her work, however, remains unpublished, accessible to scholars only in manuscript via her bequest lodged in Tucson in the University of Arizona Special Collections Library (many of these manuscripts are listed in the present volume's bibliography). She did, nonetheless, achieve a reasonable degree of commercial success, both on and off Broadway and also outside the US, with a number of her plays, notably but not exclusively *Machinal*. Among her other dramatic works, Miriam López Rodríguez in her survey highlights *Rights* (1921), about Mary Wollstonecraft, and *Plumes in the Dust* (1936), a dramatisation of the life of Edgar Allan Poe. As a journalist, Treadwell wrote extensively for publications including the *New York American*, the *New York Tribune* (here following in the footsteps of her nineteenth-century feminist and journalist precursor, Margaret Fuller), and its successor the *New York Herald Tribune*; she also tried her hand, without major success, at scriptwriting for Hollywood. Her feminist ideas and interest in women's issues were reflected in, notably, her membership of the suffragist Lucy Stone League. From 1956 to 1965 she lived in Spain, at Torremolinos in Málaga province, a detail which provides a direct link with the provenance of the volume under review; she returned from Spain to live in Tucson, where she remained till her death in 1970.

Treadwell's Hispanic connections are of particular interest in the present context, for not only did she spend years living in Andalusia but she was actually part-Mexican by origin. Her father, orphaned early, had been brought up by his grandmother in Mexico. He learnt Spanish and in 1897, back in California, founded *La República*, a Spanish-medium newspaper for Hispanic immigrants. For Sophie herself, Spanish, along with French, formed her modern-languages major at Berkeley. In 1920-1921, commissioned by the *New York Tribune*, she reported on the Mexican revolution as a correspondent based in Mexico City, interviewing both Pancho Villa and President Álvaro Obregón in person (she spoke to Villa at his ranch in Canutillo, Chihuahua, in 1921, the only foreign correspondent to be allowed that privilege). According to Miriam López Rodríguez, in her dispatches Sophie "criticó los aires de superioridad y falta de modales con los que los estadounidenses solían comportarse en sus relaciones con su vecino del sur" ("criticised the condescension and impoliteness which typified Americans' behaviour in their relations with their southern neighbour" - 69). This experience resulted in the play *Gringo* (1922) and the novel *Lusita* (1931), both with Mexican settings. Later, 1942 saw Sophie return to Mexico for a second, ten-month spell as foreign correspondent in the capital, this time for the *New York Herald Tribune*; this stay produced another Mexican-themed play, *The Last Border* (1942). The

Mexican/Hispanic/mestizo theme is clearly a recurrent presence in Treadwell's work, and she thus forms part of a line of US writers, including Washington Irving, Longfellow and Hemingway, who may legitimately be claimed as familiar with aspects of Hispanophone language and culture. Nonetheless, to both of her parents her father's Mexican origins appear socially to have been a source more of shame than of pride: her mother, we are told, did not understand "sus deseos de descubrir su 'lado' mexicano, algo que tanto Nettie como Alfred habían intentado mantener oculto" ("her desire to discover her Mexican 'side', something which both Nettie and Alfred had tried to keep hidden" - 61). Despite this, Miriam López Rodríguez states that there was a general recognition among critics that Treadwell "realmente conocía México y a los mexicanos y no se limitaba a presentar los tradicionales estereotipos" ("did have a real knowledge of Mexico and Mexicans and did not simply offer the traditional stereotypes" - 74).

If interculturality looms large in Treadwell's work, intertextuality is also strongly present, notably through a particular, and complex, connection with Edgar Allan Poe. The story - which also involved Eugene O'Neill, a writer himself not innocent of Poe traces[5] - is unravelled by Miriam López Rodríguez (71-72) as follows. In 1918, Sophie visited the sites in Virginia and Maryland associated with Poe, already having in mind a play on the subject of his life. In 1920, she sent a copy of her manuscript, under the title *Edgar Allan Poe*, to the actor John Barrymore, in the hope of interesting him in playing the lead role. However, Barrymore never returned the manuscript, and in 1924 Sophie sent another copy to the Provincetown Playhouse, O'Neill's theatre company. The dramatist replied expressing enthusiasm for the text but saying it absolutely needed a major actor, and therefore declined it on behalf of his company. At that point, Sophie discovered in the press that Barrymore intended to star in *a new play about Poe, written by his wife*. She took Barrymore to court for unjustifiably retaining her manuscript, but lost. Her play, however, was finally produced in 1936, in Princeton, New Jersey, and then briefly on Broadway, under the title *Plumes in the Dust* (adapted from a line in Poe's poem "Ulalume"). Surprisingly in view of its potential interest for Poe scholars and enthusiasts, this play seems never to have been published and is available only in the Tucson archive.

Overall, the editorial material which occupies approximately half of the book is copious, clearly presented and informative, and offers an invaluable complement to the translated play. There is, however, a certain amount of duplication between the sections, and María Dolores Narbona's account of the context of *Machinal* could perhaps more logically have been placed after rather than before Miriam López Rodríguez's biographical sketch. The bibliography supplied is carefully-compiled and extensive. However, given that the bibliography itself cites only *three* of Treadwell's works - *Machinal* and the novels *Lusita* and *One Fierce Hour and Sweet* - in book form (i.e. available outside the Tucson manuscripts), and considering, indeed, the likely unfamiliarity of her writings to the lay reader, it could have been useful to list her works in a separate section and subdivide them for clarity into categories (plays, novels and other works); also - a common omission, alas, in author bibliographies - no attempt has been made to list the translations.

III

Shifting attention now to *Machinal* itself, we may note that Treadwell's title has been found obscure by some (the 1931 London production changed it to *The Life Machine*), and questions have been raised over its pronunciation. It refers to *machinal*, a French adjective meaning "mechanical" or "machine-like", and should therefore be pronounced ma-shin-al, with the stress on the final syllable. Among the salient facts relating to the play set out by María Dolores Narbona and Miriam López Rodríguez, we may include the circumstance that it was based in part on a real murder case followed by Treadwell as journalist, the Snyder-Gray case of 1927, in which Ruth Snyder and her

lover Judd Gray were found guilty of killing the former's husband Albert (Miriam López Rodríguez states that, although Treadwell never published a report on the case, the trial scene actually reproduces extracts from Ruth Snyder's courtroom declarations - 85). The play was premiered on 7 September 1928, with, incidentally, a young and not yet famous Clark Gable in the role of the lover. It ran for 91 nights in New York, and later had runs in London (1931), Paris and Moscow; the present Spanish version joins earlier translations into French, German, Hungarian, Russian and Arabic (74). Generically, María Dolores Narbona stresses the presence in Treadwell's text of non-realist expressionist elements recalling not only O'Neill but Brecht (38-41). The comments that follow will take account of both the translation and Sophie Treadwell's original, in the text anthologised in *Plays by American Women 1900-1930* (edited by Judith E. Barlow, 1985).

Machinal consists of nine scenes or "episodes", with no division into acts. The first words of the printed text are, in the original: "The plot is the story of a woman who murders her husband – an ordinary young woman, any woman"[6]. The presence of Treadwell's feminist ideas is patent throughout. The story unfolds in linear but discontinuous sequence, each episode corresponding to a moment in the life of the "young woman", as office worker, at home with her mother, on honeymoon, giving birth, meeting her "Mexican" lover in a speakeasy and in his lodgings, back at home with her husband, and, finally, tried and executed for murder. We may here wish to recall Brecht's concept of "epic theatre", as explicated by Walter Benjamin in 1939: "Epic theatre proceeds by fits and starts, in a manner comparable to the images on a film strip. Its basic form is that of the impact on each other of separate, sharply distinct situations in the play"[7]. The most daring episode in *Machinal* is the bar scene, in which the seduction of the young woman by the "Mexican" runs parallel with two furtive subplots, one concerning an abortion and the other a possible gay relationship. The sleazy night-joint atmosphere might seem to anticipate similar scenes in, say, Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* or J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (with Treadwell's "fairy" paralleling Salinger's "flits"), but in fact the dramatist is being *more* daring than either male novelist, since *Machinal* was, unlike those later works, composed and located in the era of Prohibition, which extended from 1919 to 1933, and the alcohol consumption represented is thus an illegal activity (as suggested by the episode's title, "Prohibited"). The woman's name is revealed towards the end as Helen Jones, but for most of the play she appears as anonymous. She is presented throughout as being treated in stereotyped and dehumanising fashion by the male characters - husband, doctor, lover, magistrates - but the virus of dehumanisation seems in this play's world to extend to the women too, for the treatment she receives at the hands of her mother or the hospital nurse appears as little better.

As María Dolores Narbona points out, there are clear non-realist and expressionist elements in *Machinal* which parallel similar phenomena in the theatre of O'Neill. This may be related to the theme of dehumanisation. In the office scene, the young woman's co-workers bark out stock responses and short phrases like automata; throughout the hospital scene, there is a constant noise from a steel riveter. Devices like this recall the tom-toms that beat through O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, or the clanging and grinding noises in the stokehole scene in the same dramatist's *The Hairy Ape*. Treadwell also uses song, not as in the musical genre as something inherent to the form, but rather, paralleling O'Neill or, indeed, Brecht, as a disturbing influence[8]. As across O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* trilogy snatches of the traditional song "Shenandoah" act as a disorienting element, in *Machinal* a similar role is played by the Mexican song "Cielito Lindo", whose tune sounds on a hand-organ in the background in the young women's intimate scene with her lover and part of whose lyric is self-consciously sung and commented by him. Intertextuality, meanwhile, is openly signified, specifically with a writer known to interest Treadwell, namely Edgar Allan Poe. In the gay sub-episode, the seducer declares: "Poe was a lover of amontillado"[9] as he offers his companion a glass of the Andalusian speciality, in an obvious reference to "The Cask of Amontillado"; and in the trial scene, the woman's sudden breakdown and confession ("I did it! I

did it! I did it!"[10]) owes something to the similar gestures of Poe's murderer-protagonists in "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Imp of the Perverse".

The play's narrative construction is generally clear and strong, but if one aspect appears as problematic it is the figure of the lover (with whom the young woman plots to kill her husband, and who later betrays her). He acts as if a Mexican, telling the young woman tales of life and adventures south of the border, and quoting and translating from "Cielito Lindo" for her. However, he says he was born in Los Angeles, and in the court scene is said to have given the American authorities an affidavit signed by him in Guanajuato, Mexico – the defence lawyer suggests, under duress and out of fear of being extradited back to the US. To confuse matters further, he is named as "Richard Roe", a conventional label used in the US judicial system to indicate anonymity which would suggest, a priori, less a Mexican than an unnamed, average *American*. All in all, this key character appears as a shadowy figure, somewhere between Mexican and American and never clearly defined, and - despite Treadwell's undoubted personal knowledge of Mexican society and cultural hybridation - the vagueness surrounding his identity and motivations does not come over as the play's strongest point.

IV

At all events, and independently yet also determinantly of the Hispanophone reader's or spectator's assessment of the play*, Machinal* is offered in this volume in a Spanish translation that has already stood the test of performance. The rendition accomplished by María Dolores Narbona and Ricardo Vivancos Pérez generally comes across as clear, competent and adequate to the play. The title, "obscure" or not, is retained, though presumably adapted to Spanish pronunciation. The present reviewer has not noted any mistranslations as such, though there are some cases of undertranslation, as when in the trial scene "speakeasy" is rendered as "taberna" (184), a term not connoting the Prohibition-era *clandestinity* of the American-English designation ("antro" might have been more evocative) - or, in the honeymoon scene, "boardwalk" is translated by the somewhat bland "paseo" (126) rather than by a more atmospheric term such as "malecón". Meanwhile, some of the solutions chosen by the translators to particular cruxes raise issues of interest and relevance to translation in general.

Here it will be relevant to invoke a binary frequently resorted to in translation studies, namely the domestication / foreignisation opposition as popularised, especially, in the influential work of Lawrence Venuti. For Venuti, a translation should not read as if it were an original, but should bear the visible signs of its translatedness. His essay of 2000, "Neoclassicism and Enlightenment", historically contextualises his position as regards translation into English, arguing that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries "witnessed the decisive emergence of *fluency* as the most prevalent strategy" (with Pope's Homer as the supreme example). Translators' "overriding project", he states, "was to make the foreign recognisably, even splendidly English": "Translation strategies were rarely wedded to a programme for preserving the foreignness of the foreign text. On the contrary, they were guided primarily by domestic values that were assuming cultural dominance"[11]. Elsewhere, in a text of 2004, Venuti defines his bipolar terms as follows: "Fluency masks a domestication of the foreign text that is appropriative and potentially imperialistic … It can be countered by 'foreignising' translation that registers the irreducible differences of the foreign text"[12]. He believes that "domestication" remains the dominant mode today, notably in Anglophone cultures, despite the efforts of a minority to advance the rival cause of "foreignisation".

It may nonetheless be argued that in a world where languages are in reality in a constant process of interaction that inevitably throws up multiple forms of hybridation, so absolute a distinction between the "domestic" and "foreign" is in fact *not* an adequate model for covering all cases,

whether for translators or translation scholars[13]. There are elements in *Machinal* which, at least up to a point, call the domestication/foreignisation antithesis into question and suggest that attempts to apply it universally may be over-simplistic. These relate to the play's Spanish/Mexican aspects, and here we may recall Treadwell's own ethnically hybrid origins, which, even more so since she knew Spanish, constitute those aspects as *not* necessarily or irremediably "foreign" to the author herself. These components of the text are the reference to Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" and the song "Cielito Lindo". The Spanish translation of *Machinal* has been carried out in Andalusia, Spain, from an original by a "foreign" author partly of Mexican origin and a onetime Andalusian resident, for an audience and readership in the first place from Spain but potentially extensible to the entire Spanish-speaking world, including Mexicans and Hispanics in the US. Given so complex an intertext of interculturality, it is dubious whether any crude binary opposition of "domestic" and "foreign" can explicate the issues thrown up by, at least, these particular aspects of the Spanish translation. In cases such as these, the translator into Spanish is not so much domesticating the foreign as reappropriating domestic (Andalusian) or quasi-domestic (Mexican) elements appropriated in the "foreign" text – though with the further complication that those elements may have been exoticised or subject to stereotyping during (or prior to) the source text's act of appropriation.

In the case of the Poe reference, the amontillado theme may be read as a reappropriation of Poe's motif by Spain, and indeed Andalusia, from whence hails that celebrated fortified wine. In his murder tale set in Venice, Poe uses amontillado as a signifier of the refinement and connoisseurship that, exploited by his rival Montresor, lead the aristocrat Fortunato to his death. Since the story is set in Italy not Spain, Poe could be charged with exploiting a Spanish theme as a general indicator of exoticism, rather than a properly researched indicator of Spanish (albeit he did set "The Pit and the Pendulum" in Toledo, and in his writings shows a degree of knowledge of Cervantes and Calderón). At all events, the term *amontillado* will *not* connote foreignness to a Spanish audience, and it is in this context of redomestication that the translator's choices have to be made. In the bar scene, the "fairy" says to his companion: "Real amontillado is sunshine and orange groves – it's the Mediterranean and blue moonlight and - love!"[14]. This is all very close to cliché, and indeed it is not entirely clear whether the "Mediterranean" stereotyping originates with author or character. The translators render the sentence: "El amontillado auténtico es un rayo de sol, una arboleda de naranjos, es el Mediterráneo y la luz celeste de la luna y ….¡amor!" (140). The translation is here both more concrete (evoking not a general image of "orange groves" but a more particular "arboleda de naranjos") and more poetic ("celeste" rather than just "blue") than the original. This might be dismissed as re-exoticisation of an already-exoticised domestic, but the translators' strategy could also be seen as contributing to interculturality and interconnectedness, precisely by reinforcing the connotations of "Spanishness".

A similar embedded "Hispanicness" is present in the original in the song "Cielito Lindo", in the tryst scene with the young woman and her lover. This song was composed in 1882 by Quirino Mendoza y Cortés (1859-1957) and is perhaps best known in the version by Pedro Vargas. It is considered a symbol of Mexicanness, but also achieved great popularity in its day in Spain - and, it seems, in the US: Treadwell's stage directions introduce it, a shade confusingly, as "'Cielito Lindo', that Spanish [*sic*] song that has been on every hand organ lately"[15]. The misnomer is not corrected in the translation, which has "canción española" (153).

Treadwell's original here throws up a translation problem when the young woman's lover sings her part of the lyrics in Spanish and then begins to translate them into English. She asks him the meaning of the title, and he translates it as "Little Heaven"; he sings the lines "De la sierra morena viene, bajando viene, bajando; un par de ojitos negros - cielito lindo - de contrabando". In response to her "what does it mean?", he translates the first few words, as: "From the high dark mountains"[16].

The conversation then moves on, but the translation difficulty is clear: how to render in Spanish the lover's reproduction-and-translation of words that are already in Spanish in the original? Here, the translators have chosen to replicate literally the dialogue from the original. When the "Mexican" mentions the title "Cielito Lindo", the young woman responds with the words "¿Qué quiere decir?", and he replies "Pequeño cielo", paraphrasing the title. The same interaction is repeated with his quotation of the song's opening words: to her "¿Qué quiere decir?" he responds with a paraphrase of "de la sierra morena", namely: "de unas altas montañas oscuras" (154). Since in the translation, unlike the original, *everything* takes place in Spanish, the result is a rather awkward incongruity: the young woman comes over as strangely obtuse, as if she could only understand a simple utterance the second time and through a paraphrase. What may be the translators' concern to avoid domesticating the text, by literally following the sequence of the original, has in this case ended up vitiating the sense. The present reviewer ventures to suggest that the problem could have been avoided by replacing the two occurrences of "¿Qué quiere decir?" by the less literal "¿A qué viene eso?" ("what's the point of that"?), which would have better motivated the paraphrases without seeming to cast aspersions on the young woman's intellectual capacities. At all events, both this and the amontillado episode serve to point up the complexities that can arise in translation between two languages with a history of mutual contact like Spanish and English. This in its turn suggests that translation is by its nature an activity of hybridation and that, *pace* Venuti and his disciples, two-legs-domestication-bad / four-legs-foreignisation-good formulae will *not* guarantee the concrete resolution of every translation problem.

V

As the issues thrown up by the translation suggest, one major virtue of this volume is, indeed, its presentation of Sophie Treadwell's life and work and of *Machinal* as products of cultural hybridation, an aspect thrown into prominence by the circumstance of the book appearing in Spanish. This element in Treadwell may, indeed, be of as much interest to readers as the more visible and obvious feminist dimension. This generally well-produced, carefully-worked and enlightening volume should certainly prove of use and value to readers and specialists in the areas of the US theatre, American feminism, translation studies and, last but not least, of the complex, dynamic and changing relations between two major cultural systems, the Anglophone and the Hispanic.

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[1] Parenthetical page numbers refer throughout to the volume under review. Translations into English are the reviewer's.
[2] Cunliffe, *The Literature of the United States*, 311, 315.
[3] Mottram, entry: "O'Neill, Eugene", in Bradbury, Mottram and Franco, eds., *The Penguin Companion to Literature 3: United States and Latin American Literature,* 199-200 (200).
[4] Borges and Zemborain de Torres, *An Introduction to American Literature*, 75.
[5] O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, with its conjunction of ape and sailor, inevitably recalls Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue".
[6] Treadwell, *Machinal*, 173.
[7] Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre?", 21.
[8] Cf. Benjamin in "What is Epic Theatre?": "The songs, the captions, the gestural conventions differentiate the scenes" (21), the Brechtian use of song being not to naturalise but to estrange the on-stage actions.
[9] Treadwell, *Machinal*, 214.
[10] Treadwell, *Machinal*, 247.
[11] Venuti, "Neoclassicism and Enlightenment", 55.
[12] Venuti, "1990s and Beyond", 334.
[13] For these issues, cf. Rollason, "Beyond the Domestic and the Foreign: Translation as Dialogue".
[14] Treadwell, *Machinal*, 208.
[15] Treadwell, *Machinal*, 219.
[16] Treadwell, *Machinal*, 220.