

Foundational Scenes of Translation

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“Para nosotros la traducción al español hecha en la Argentina tiene la ventaja de que está hecha en un español que es el nuestro...”

(Jorge Luis Borges)¹

[For us, translation into Spanish done in Argentina has the advantage that it is done in a Spanish that is ours...]²

Translation and Literature in Argentina

Translation does not usually garner the prominent role it deserves in Argentine literary histories.³ We maintain, however, that translation has always been at or near the core of Argentine literature. From the end of the colonial period, through the movements of independence and the processes of nation formation in the nineteenth century, through literary movements such as the avant-gardes of the 1920s and 30s, to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, translation in Argentina has functioned as a dynamic source for founding, developing and expanding its literary tradition. A closer study of scenes of translation in Argentina reveals that the act of translation is constitutive of Argentina’s tradition and of the multi-faceted peculiarity of Argentine identity.

The alternate history of Argentine literature suggested in this article focuses on key scenes of translation, scenes that in a variety of ways encapsulate the major issues at each corresponding point in time and have a lasting effect on the development of Argentina’s literary and intellectual history. A scene of translation, as conceptualized in this project, includes not only the results of

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the practice of translation (i.e., the translated work), but also the moment of translation itself, a theorized space at which texts, cultures and readers intersect. As Sandra Bermann suggests:

Translation might be effectively re-thought in historical and temporal terms rather than only in ontological and spatial ones... One might... think of [translation] in terms of a history of ‘instances’... or of linguistic negotiations occurring over time, each a poiesis, each establishing a new inscription and, with it, the possibility of new interpretation. (6)

The scene of translation provides a possibility for taking a new turn, for creating another draft in a Borgesian hall of reflections and refractions.

A scene of translation is precisely the site and the moment at which *both* the original and the translation emerge. There is no original, we might say with Walter Benjamin, without its translation. In much the same way as we can say that there is no text without a reader, there is no original without a translation, without the scene of translation when and at which the original is postulated—suggested, alluded to—even as the translation is “written.” Translation, in this sense, is always a double writing: it is the writing of the self and the positing of the other, at once text and pre-text, visible and invisible, duplicity in action.⁴

Why is translation so prevalent in the development of Argentine literature? Itamar Even-Zohar has posited that translation is always important in the development of younger traditions and in the emergence of peripheral literatures.⁵ But Even-Zohar focuses on the end result of translation; that is, on the translated text in the target language. In this article we want to think about the moments of translation, of that particular time and space between languages, between texts, and between cultures. We will then see how a tradition of translating emerges and is developed in Argentina’s history. As we focus on the scenes of translation themselves, what we find are critical junctures, nodes of transformational potentiality. Even-Zohar’s hypothesis partially anticipates this approach when he refers to “turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature” (23) as one of the conditions that contributes to an increased role of translation in the development of new literatures. In fact, the shape and form and the large role that translation takes throughout its history in Argentina is often connected to such functional “turning points,” or moments of “crises.”⁶ As we will see, it is at these critical junctures that translation emerges especially as a site of potentiality for renovation, for engagement and reevaluation. Translation not only inserts itself as an option where there are crises. Rather, translation—the scene of translation—itsself lays bare and underscores the crises in question. We will

see this in the opening scene of Sarmiento's *Facundo*, and also in a revealing encounter between Mitre and Mansilla. Likewise, translation is not only poised to step in when there are "literary vacuums in a literature." Rather, the scene of translation often reveals a vacuum or a lacuna in the national literature unknown as such prior to the instance of translation. This is the case in the unlikely group translation of Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* in 1947 and, again, in Piglia's translation machine at the center of his 1992 novel *La ciudad ausente*. Much like the scene of translation simultaneously formulates the original as it gives rise to the translation, the scene of translation seeks to resolve a given crisis even as it creates the turning point made possible by its intervention.

Translation involves sophisticated interactions across linguistic and temporal borders. The nation, intimately related to but ultimately different from the State, is a cultural and linguistic concept. The nation is formed, and at times dismantled and then reformed, in and through culture and language. Translation in peripheral traditions participates actively in the complex processes of the formation of nations and their subjectivities. Foundational scenes of translation surface repeatedly at moments of national crises. Or else scenes of translation create moments of crises, turning points that assume foundational characteristics. Either way, the act of translation reveals nodes of potential that bring to the forefront issues of identity and representation.

Translating toward Independence

Translation emerges as a protagonist in the formation of the Argentine nation from its very inception. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, translation serves as an important weapon of the *criollos* seeking independence from Spain. The Río de la Plata revolutionaries fighting to break free from the Spanish empire needed a new way of thinking, they were looking for new political and social models in the confabulation of a new reality; they needed a new language—in the broadest sense of the term—that would allow them to articulate the beginnings of a new nation. That break with empire, that new language, is found through and in translation. As Graciana Vázquez Villanueva explains:

La traducción... se transforma en una práctica revolucionaria tanto del lenguaje cuando se toma como referente el francés, como de la forma de pensar y de hacer política. La práctica traductora es ejercida por aquellos que gestan la independencia del reino de España... y construyen el ideal emancipatorio fundado en la nación Americana, en una 'lengua nacional', en la razón. (186)

[Translation... becomes a revolutionary practice as much in language, when the referent is French, as in the way of thinking and doing politics. The practice of translation is undertaken by those who promote independence from the Spanish kingdom... and build an emancipatory ideal founded on the American nation, on a 'national language,' on reason.]

Lawyer, journalist and politician Mariano Moreno (1778 – 1811) was the founder of the *Gaceta de Buenos Aires*, the first Argentine newspaper, where he published in serial installments Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Moreno prologues and translates the French thinker, thus undermining the Viceroyalty for which he is working and uses translation as a veil to transmit the ideas of the revolutionary movement. The importance of French political theory in South America's Independence movements is well known, as is Moreno's role as an importer, in particular of Rousseau's *Social Contract*.⁷ What we highlight here is the idea that revolution, and soon thereafter nation formation, are launched through acts of translation. Further, that it is a certain kind of translation that arises: one that is fragmented, with omissions and a strong framing prologue by the translator. Moreno's partial re-contextualized version of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, we add, anticipates the kind of *mis*-translation that will be repeated throughout the nineteenth century, where it will reach a climax with Sarmiento's *Facundo*, and then be reiterated in the twentieth, where it will reach a second climax with the work of J. L. Borges and other unexpected *dénouements* in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Moreno's project for revolution and subsequent nationfoundation depends on circulating Rousseau in Spanish in Argentina. But Moreno presents a particular, selective version of Rousseau, one that suits his radical reading of the French theorist. Moreno omits Rousseau's religious ideological explanations, delivering a version of the *Social Contract*—precisely in the translation that circulates at the time—that is more immediately revolutionary than Rousseau's original. Moreno writes a partial version of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, one with deliberate omissions heavily mediated by the translator as editor. Thus emerges the Argentine text in translation that becomes, in turn, the founding document of political thought for the Independence movement and the first few decades of the nation.

Translation and Nation Formation in Nineteenth-Century Argentina

Appearing on stage as a principal actor with Moreno's partial version of Rousseau, translation continues to grow in importance and complexity as the nation is founded and consolidated throughout the nineteenth century.⁸ Translation, and with it a certain duality, are linked, from the nation's roots, with cultural independence and the related questions of the founding of a national tradition. In 1825, upon his return from Paris to Buenos Aires, the writer, political theorist and promoter of Romanticism Esteban Echeverría (1805 – 1851) states: “El espíritu del siglo lleva hoy a las naciones a emanciparse, a gozar la independencia no sólo política sino filosófica y literaria” [The spirit of the century leads nations today to emancipate themselves, to enjoy not just their political, but also their philosophic and literary independence] (Catelli and Gargatagli 361).⁹

Soon thereafter, the members of the *Salón Literario* of 1837, which includes the most powerful statesmen of Argentina's nineteenth century,¹⁰ turn to the non-Spanish Western European traditions in their efforts at founding a new, national tradition in South America. For the *Salón Literario* of 1837, translation is a key mechanism not only in the “civilizing” project of nation foundation, but also as a constitutive element of the very national identity that is being created.¹¹ In his address to the *Salón*, the poet, historian and translator Juan María Gutiérrez (1809-1878) states that: “Es necesario que nos familiaricemos con los idiomas extranjeros, y hagamos constante estudio de aclimatar al nuestro cuanto en aquéllos se produzca de bueno, interesante y bello” [We must become familiar with foreign languages, and constantly study how to acclimate ours to what there is in them that produces something good, interesting and beautiful] (Catelli and Gargatagli 365). Translation thus functions to import other traditions and permits Argentina to join “the intellectual movement of the advanced nations of Europe,” as Gutiérrez puts it.

But the *Salón Literario* of 1837 does not want translations that simply copy the European originals and leave the target culture in a secondary, subservient position. Gutiérrez adds:

Pero, esa importación del pensamiento y de la literatura europea no debe hacerse ciegamente... Debemos fijarnos antes en nuestras necesidades y exigencias, en el estado de nuestra sociedad y su índole... Y si hemos de tener una literatura, hagamos que sea *nacional*; que represente nuestras costumbres y nuestra naturaleza...” (Catelli and Gargatagli 365; emphasis in the original).

[However, that importation of European thought and literature should not be done blindly... We must first look at our needs and exigencies, at the state and nature of our society... And if we are to have a literature, let us make it a *national* one; so that it may represent our customs and our nature...]

To found a new, national tradition, translations must import the desired civilizing agents, but they must do so through a process of adaptation and appropriation, through a re-contextualization that makes them “national”—that is: Argentine.¹²

The Sal6n Literario of 1837 conceived of translation as a form of “importation” of culture and philosophy, as a methodology by which the new Argentina might join the Occident. But the Sal6n also wanted the European texts and ideas to be “adapted” to the new reality of the new continent, so that the emerging texts and ideas would not be mere copies, so that they would not be inferior derivatives of their European models. The two impulses contradict each other; they create a duality, a split identity, which the members of the Sal6n were never able to resolve. Instead of a resolution, the efforts of the Sal6n resulted in a lasting duality, an open contradiction, which subsequent generations—especially by the time we get to the avant-gardes—were able to exploit to great literary and aesthetic ends. As Ricardo Piglia has said: “It is when the fracture [the dual register] is welded that the greatest texts of Argentine literature are produced” (“Sarmiento the Writer,” 133).

The dual maneuver initiated by the Sal6n Literario of 1837—the combination of importation and adaptation, of inter- and intra-linguistic translation processes—reaches a zenith in the nineteenth century with the work of the leading intellectual and statesman Domingo F. Sarmiento (1811-1888). In multiple letters and in his autobiographical writings, Sarmiento speaks of the importance of expanding the range of Argentine culture and language. As Carlos Altamirano and Beatriz Sarlo have said:

Sarmiento defended not just the legitimacy but the necessity of polyglotism and, concurrently, the right to contaminate American Spanish.... The Generation of 1837 claimed (and on this point Sarmiento adopted the same perspective), for the first time in the history of Argentine culture, the right to contaminate peninsular Spanish in order to make it Argentine through the use of other European languages. (161)

The most instructive scene of translation of the time is found in the opening page of Sarmiento’s *Facundo*, the most important foundational text of Argen-

tina's nineteenth century. Notably, this is also a scene of non-translation. The translation, the use that Sarmiento makes of translation and the scene itself both matter here, as well as the role that Sarmiento attributes to himself as the mediator between French philosophical and literary ideas and the local barbarism against which Sarmiento famously railed, but also toward which he clearly felt so much fascination and attraction. The scene is a turning point in Sarmiento's career and in his life; it is the moment that allows him to establish his civilizing ideas and literary ambitions.

The *Facundo* begins with the following epigraph: "On ne tue point les idées." Sarmiento immediately provides his own version of the phrase ("A los hombres se degüella; a las ideas, no" [Men can be beheaded, ideas cannot]), and then recounts the brief anecdote that launches his exile from Argentina as well as his writing career. Significantly, the "barbarians" in the scene, from Rosas's government, cannot read the French that Sarmiento has written on the wall with charcoal.¹³ Sarmiento interprets for us, while the "barbarians" are lost in their monolingual violence. Sarmiento, too, undertakes a violent act; his is toward the French original, for the Spanish version he provides turns out to be unfaithful in more ways than one. The scene encapsulates the potential of translation that Sarmiento appropriates for himself, and throughout the *Facundo* and his other writings, for the young Argentine nation. The scene of translation emerges as the line between civilization and barbarism, as the uncertain, risk-filled (quite literally in the case of the *Facundo*, as Sarmiento runs for his life of exile in Chile) space where something different can be created—where difference itself can be considered and experimented upon from both sides of the linguistic and cultural divide. The instance of translation, the juncture created by translation and its mis-reading, intervenes in the crisis at the time—Sarmiento's personal moment fleeing from dictatorship, the intellectuals' confrontation with Rosas's cruelty and repression—as it becomes the turning point necessary for Sarmiento and the nation to found a new tradition.

As the interpreter of the very scene that he has created, Sarmiento instigates confusion and presents himself as the agent capable of resolving the situation in favor of his civilizing project. But the entire exercise, as many have commented, is tremendously equivocal. The phrase "On ne tue point les idées" comes from Diderot. Sarmiento misquotes, mistranslates and attributes the sentence to another thinker altogether, Fortoul.¹⁴ Ricardo Piglia, for one, maintains that Sarmiento's misquotation initiates: "A line of equivocal references, false quotations, and apocryphal erudition which is a sign of Argentine culture at least up to the time of Borges" (132). We add that this line does not quite begin with Sarmiento but rather peaks with him in the nineteenth century, and that it extends beyond Borges to much of contemporary Argentine literature, including Piglia himself.¹⁵

The scene of translation at the beginning of the *Facundo* marks the difference between the Unitarians, living and writing from exile, and the Federals, painted as the barbarians who have taken over the capital. Here as throughout his cultural project, Sarmiento takes what he needs from French literature and political philosophy with irreverence and places it in a dialectical relationship with local Argentine culture to establish a new subjectivity, from an Argentine point of view. This displaces the center as a way to legitimize the literature of the periphery. Sarmiento appropriates the foreign and Americanizes it, thus setting the stage for the foundation of modern Argentine literature.¹⁶

If the opening of the *Facundo* has become, in part thanks to Piglia's reading,¹⁷ the most famous scene of translation from Argentina's nineteenth century, then perhaps the most curious one is that of Bartolomé Mitre translating Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Bartolomé Mitre (1821 – 1906) was a military leader, historian, legislator, diplomat, poet, novelist, journalist, orator, founder of the newspaper *La Nación*, president of Argentina from 1862 – 1868 and Argentina's most illustrious translator in the nineteenth century. He translated from the English, French, Italian and Latin the works of, among others, Longfellow, Byron, Victor Hugo, Horace and Dante. In 1889 Mitre published his version of the *Inferno* and in 1891 the entire *Divine Comedy*, which includes a prologue entitled "Teoría del traductor."¹⁸ In this prologue Mitre insists on the need for absolute fidelity; his translation leans so much toward the literal that Mitre often includes words that in the source text are almost certainly present mainly for form (i.e., for syllabic count and rhyme) and do not add to the content.¹⁹ Mitre seems constrained by an extreme literal commitment, as if he could not get out from under the shadow of the classical Italian text

Contributing to its legacy in Argentine tradition, Mitre's translation of the *Divine Comedy* remains a popular volume for generations.²⁰ Although it has since been supplanted by other versions, the story of the scene of Mitre translating Dante remains a part of the living canon of surprising Argentine moments of translation. According to the story, Mitre is in his office—or in a tent that serves as temporary headquarters on the battlefield, depending on the version of the story—when the younger statesman, diplomat and writer Lucio V. Mansilla (1831–1913) comes to see him. Mitre makes Mansilla wait outside; when Mansilla is finally allowed to enter, Mitre apologizes, saying he was busy working on a translation of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. To which Mansilla replies, "Hay que darle duro a los gringos, mi general" [You have to go hard on those gringos, General].

The anecdote indicates the importance of translation in Argentine history as well as its literature. It signals the confusion that the act of translation, the scene itself, creates in those who witness it. The act of translation suspends

other historical events (in this case the military and political conflicts between the provinces and the capital of Buenos Aires), as it creates a space outside of time from which to reassess loyalties. But the scene of translation also highlights difference and tension. Mansilla—sarcastically or seriously, we cannot possibly know—deduces violence from the act of translation: us against them, *criollos* versus gringos. Mitre’s scene of translation, much as the opening scene of the *Facundo*, necessarily emerges as a bellicose activity, as a question of life or death in the struggle for national identity. Mansilla—who had undertaken a kind of cultural translation himself in his 1870 novel *Excursión a los indios ranqueles* (a text that translates, as it were, Indian vocabulary and sayings into Argentine Spanish)—puts Mitre, and with him the entire nationalizing project of Argentina’s nineteenth century, at the cusp between civilization and barbarism. The scene of translation becomes the foundational space—between city and country, between the European and the *criollo*, between the foreign and the local—from which Argentine literature has spoken and will speak time and again.

Renovation and Innovation in Twentieth-Century Argentina

Twentieth-century Argentina is filled with numerous translators and writer-translators who contribute to the constant expansion and renovation of its literature.²¹ These translators and writer-translators publish in a wide array of journals and presses that are thoroughly committed to publishing translations as well as Argentine writers. They work to broaden the number and kinds of texts available in Spanish in Argentina and, by extension, in the Spanish-speaking world at large. In addition, because presses and journals commonly publish foreign and national authors side-by-side, they also establish a dynamic dialogue between Argentine and other literatures.

During the avant-garde period, translation of European letters and ideas played a major role in nearly every single publication, regardless of its ideological or aesthetic position. The translation politics and practices of periodicals such as *Proa* and *Martín Fierro*, as well as the specific approaches of their writers and translators, demonstrate the ways in which translation can function as a site of renovation in the margins. Partially a continuation of a practice initiated in the nineteenth century in periodicals like *Nosotros* and *La Nación*, which often included a traditional “European letters” section, the manner in which publications during the 1920s and 30s approached foreign literature completely changed the terms under which Argentine intellectuals dialogued with the European. Argentine publications, writers, translators and writer-translators now began to

incorporate the foreign into local polemics and to re-contextualize fragments of other traditions to renovate their own.

In the 1920s and 30s translation and the relationship of the Argentine tradition to foreign literatures were a major makeup of the cultural context of the nation, and especially of the capital Buenos Aires. As Beatriz Sarlo has said: “Podría decirse, sin exagerar, que en los años veinte y treinta los escritores argentinos eligen de todas partes, traducen y el que no puede traducir lee traducciones, las difunde, publica o propagandiza” [One could say, without exaggerating, that in the 1920s and 30s Argentine writers select from everywhere, that they translate and if they cannot translate they read translations, they disseminate, publish or publicize them] (*Una modernidad periférica*, 43).

Starting in 1931 with its journal and two years later with its press, Victoria Ocampo with her *Sur* project takes advantage of the space established by the avant-gardes and raises it to another level. The translations and original writings of the “*Sur* Constellation,” as Patricia Willson aptly describes it, that appear on the pages and books of *Sur* shaped the literature of Argentine and large parts of Latin America for the better part of the twentieth century. By displacing texts from the Metropolis to the margins, by appropriating through translation, by re-contextualizing within a framework of the South—literally and figuratively—*Sur*'s politics of cultural importation contributed to re-creating a center in the circumference.²² The *Sur* project, led by Victoria Ocampo, includes such notable writer-translators as Victoria Ocampo herself, Silvina Ocampo, José Bianco, Adolfo Bioy Casares and Jorge Luis Borges.

No study of translation and Argentine literature would be complete without a consideration of the central role of Jorge Luis Borges. Elsewhere I have studied the importance of translation in Borges's work, as well as the importance of Borges's work for translation theory.²³ Borges is, without question, Argentina's most important and influential author; he is one of Latin America's most important authors and one of the most important twentieth-century authors in the world. Borges is clearly central to Argentine literature; and translation, as I have argued, is central to Borges. It follows, and literary and historical evidence confirms, that translation is central to Argentine literature.

Borges dedicates two major essays to translation: “Las versiones homéricas” (1932) and “Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*” (1935). In these as in his other texts that deal directly or indirectly with translation,²⁴ Borges argues that translations are not necessarily inferior to originals, that the concept of a “definitive text” is a fallacy, and that the merit of a translation resides unexpectedly in its “creative infidelities.” In the process, Borges challenges many of the basic tenets of traditional translation theory as he destabilizes the concepts of originality and authorship. Borges's radical insights into the potential of translation shed light

on a specific kind of *mis*-translation that makes use of creative infidelities to displace and re-contextualize fragments of the original into the target language and culture. This *mis*-translation, in turn, has a special value and significance for the literatures of the periphery, as it allows writer-translators to challenge the supposed primacy of the center, from where the original comes, and expands the potential for writers in Latin America to create new literatures.

Translation also plays a key role in many of Borges's own *ficciones*. In the stories in *Historia universal de la infamia* and in "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*," "El inmortal," "La busca de Averroes" and "Tema del traidor y del héroe," for example, translation is not only thematized as an exploration of difference and representation, it also serves to propel reflections about originality and the production and transmittal of meaning, and often as the mechanism for the production of the story itself. In Borges's narratives, rewriting, *mis*-reading and *mis*-translating become thoroughly interconnected, often synonymous practices of literary innovation. In the *ficciones*, which he began composing in the 1930s, Borges develops a poetics based on a practice of *mis*-translation, an irreverent use of creative infidelities that takes advantage of spatial and temporal displacement to create new texts. In many of his *ficciones*, Borges takes a fragment with irreverence (whether the fragment be a direct citation, a translation proper, or a historical or literary reference or allusion) and displaces it toward the shores of the Río de la Plata, where it is re-inscribed to enact its potential. In the process of displacement, Borges suggests that literary texts and traditions, as well as history itself, can be reevaluated and rewritten from the periphery.

Significantly, as Borges was developing his ideas about translation and beginning to incorporate various practices of *mis*-translations in the creation of his own *ficciones*, Borges was himself actively involved as a literary translator. In both subtle and at times overt ways, as a literary translator Borges practiced the same kinds of creative infidelities, of *mis*-translation, that he valued in other translators about whom he wrote. Such is the case of Borges's version of the last page of James Joyce's *Ulysses*,²⁵ or his version of William Faulkner's *Las palmeras salvajes*,²⁶ or of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* or *Un cuarto propio*.²⁷ It is also true of his anthologies in collaboration, such as *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (1940, prepared with Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo), or the anthologies of U.S. or French poetry prepared for *Sur*. We maintain that Borges's foundational translations are as significant to Argentine—and, more broadly, Latin American—literatures as his foundational *ficciones*. In other words, we posit that Borges's importance to Argentine letters, and to Latin American literature in general, comes not only from his *ficciones*, but also from his irreverent translations of English and French works.

If Borges is, broadly speaking, the most important practitioner of translation (translations, essays about translation, translation in his own *ficciones*) in Argentina's twentieth century, then by far the most bizarre scene of translation in Argentine history—and surely one of the strangest anywhere—is the collaborative translation of Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* from Polish to Spanish through French in a cafe in Buenos Aires in 1947. The Polish modernist Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969) lived in exile in Argentina from 1939 to 1963.²⁸ While in Buenos Aires Gombrowicz had a group of writers who did not know Polish translate his novel *Ferdydurke* into Spanish. The group was led by another visitor, the Cuban writer Virgilio Piñera; they worked at times through French and with Gombrowicz's broken Spanish. This story presents an incredible scene of confusion and creation, of adaptation and transformation, which emerges as emblematic of the innovative role of translation in Argentina.

The translation of Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* in Buenos Aires is paradigmatic of the complex role of translation in a developing target culture and in Argentine letters in particular.²⁹ But the scene of a group of devotee readers seeking to translate an untranslatable text from a language far from anything they knew, led by the writer who inaccurately knew the target language, is also paradigmatic of how a scene of translation can reveal a lacuna of which no one was previously aware. The scene of translation inserts itself into the interstices of a national literature and opens a space that would be mined by future writers such as Manuel Puig, Copi, Ricardo Piglia, Juan José Saer, and Sergio Chejfec, among others. As the participants themselves have recounted, the scene of translation involved numerous violations, breaking syntactic and semantic rules that were in keeping with *Ferdydurke* in Polish but which also produced a new version, in Spanish, unlike any other.³⁰ This translation has become legendary not only because of the convoluted, nearly conspiratorial way the final product came about, but because the Argentine *Ferdydurke* has become part of the Argentine literary tradition. An Argentine novel that is and is not Argentine, a foreigner working with another foreigner and a group of fanatical local readers to re-imagine, through a nearly-impossible process of translation, Argentine literature.

Commenting on the scene of the translation of Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* in the Café Rex, Piglia states:

Un escritor que escribe en una lengua que no conoce o que conoce apenas y con la que mantiene una relación externa y fascinada...
 Un gran novelista que explora una lengua desconocida, tratando de llevar del otro lado los ritmos de su prosa polaca. La tendencia de Gombrowicz, según cuentan, era a inventar una lengua nueva.
 (“¿Existe la novela argentina?” 14)

[A writer who writes in a language that he does not know, or that he barely knows, and with which he has an external and fascinated relationship... A great novelist who explores an unknown language, trying to bring across from the other side the rhythms of his Polish prose. Gombrowicz's tendency, supposedly, was to try to invent a new language.]

Piglia points at the potential of the undertaking to invent a new language, which is to say a new version of Spanish in translation. Juan José Saer, for his part, adds that Gombrowicz's position as an outsider itself personifies Argentine literature: "Esa perspectiva exterior es el modo que tiene la cultura argentina de relacionarse con Occidente" [That external perspective is the way that Argentine culture has of relating to the West] (17)³¹.

The major authors of Argentina's twentieth century, not unlike those of the nineteenth century, never seem to stray very far from the practice of translation, from rereading and rewriting in and across languages and cultures. Even Roberto Arlt who, although the son of immigrants (Italian and German), did not handle foreign languages so as to translate into Spanish, includes translation in a number of his *aguafuertes* and stories. Arlt also makes ironic comments about the circulation of Joyce's *Ulysses* in Argentina in his prologue to his 1931 novel *Los lanzallamas*, comically and astutely revealing the value of translation for the production of literature in Argentina.³²

Julio Cortázar, for his part, famously worked as a translator and an interpreter, and incorporated a certain multilingualism and many moments of cultural and linguistic translation into his stories and novels.³³ We can think, for example, of the "gíglico" invented in *Rayuela*, as well as the oscillation between Paris and Buenos Aires found in this and many other Cortázar's works. One could also imagine Argentine literature locking itself up, in the figure of Cortázar, for a few months in 1953 in a poor studio in Paris to undertake the complete translation of the stories of Edgar Allen Poe. An unexpected turning point in Argentine literature, especially on the heels of Borges's *ficciones* and leading soon to his own *Rayuela*, Cortázar's work as a translator, much like the entire "Sur Constellation," opens new ground where no one realized that such an opening was necessary, or even possible.

In addition to working as translators, as specific agents of cultural importation (selective, re-contextualizing, at times actively adapting and rewriting, always expanding Argentine literature and dialoguing with the outside), a number of writers incorporate translation in significant manners in the production of their own works. We already saw this in Sarmiento, in the opening of the *Facundo*. We see it repeatedly in Borges, where translation becomes a springboard for

innovation as well as ethical and metaphysical explorations, and in Arlt and Cortázar, among others. Toward the second half of the twentieth century, translation—in addition to its role in canon formation and innovation—emerged in writers such as Manuel Puig and Ricardo Piglia as a possible form of cultural political resistance.

Translation is found throughout the novels of Manuel Puig, where it is combined with the power of storytelling in a struggle for the survival of the individual in the face of traumatic personal and societal events. Puig's novels are filled with multiple references to and quotations from Hollywood films and other sources of popular culture. As Francine Masiello has said:

A lo largo de toda su obra, Puig subraya la acumulación de frases hechas, el uso de los refranes, la cita de guiones de cine, el artificio de la conversación. Es decir, insiste en que el idioma es trabajo de *bricolage*, con el cual armamos puentes para transportar la materia prima del idioma de un espacio a otro (Masiello, "La manta robada..." 348).

[Throughout all his work, Puig underscores the accumulation of set expressions, the use of proverbs, quotations from film scripts, the artifice of conversation. In other words, he insists that language is the work of *bricolage*, with which we build bridges to transport the raw material of language from one space to another.]

The 1975 novel *El beso de la mujer araña* [Kiss of the Spider Woman] consists primarily of a dialogue between two characters jailed in Argentina immediately prior to the "Dirty War" period. Molina, a cross-dresser who likes straight men, recounts the Hollywood movies she adores to Valentín, a Marxist revolutionary. As the novel progresses, Molina's stories, her recreations of the Hollywood films she recalls, serve to seduce and postpone an inevitable end. Molina is not necessarily a master at remembering films and stories—Molina is no Funes, after all—but she is a master storyteller, as she combines suspense with development, displacement with transference.

A significant factor in how language is mediated in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is related to the fact that Molina's renditions of the movies are far from faithful to their original. Much like Gladys' artwork in *The Buenos Aires Affair*, Molina resorts to appropriating the "remains" of popular culture: the "B" movies, but also boleros and tangos and popularized versions of sexuality and psychology. But Molina's process of retelling, her appropriation and recontextualization of the original material, is clearly distorted. Molina is an *unfaithful translator* of

popular culture; the movies and songs are important to Molina only to the extent to which she can mould them in her own words to suit her own ends, ambivalent and conflicted as they may be.³⁴

Puig's work contributes in an important manner to our understanding of the constructions of cultural and national identities. In a recent interview, Sylvia Molloy states:

What does it mean to write in (from) *another* place? How are the subtle relationships between author, language, writing and nation interwoven? When does the foreignness of a text begin? In its geographic displacement, in the use of another language, in the strangeness of the anecdote, in the effect of translation? (“En breve cárcel” 30)

Writing “in (from) *another* place” creates the possibility—and perhaps the need—to explore the interactions with that “other” place, including the “other’s” culture and language. For many Argentine writers, this exploration is often in implicit as well as explicit dialogues between Argentine and European and U.S. traditions.

One of the most salient of such literary dialogues is found in Puig's 1980 novel *Maldición eterna a quien lee estas páginas* (1982).³⁵ This novel, like *Kiss*, is written mainly in the form of a conversation between two characters, in this case between señor Ramírez, an old Argentine union lawyer, ex-political prisoner, who is suffering from amnesia and has been sent to recuperate in an asylum in New York, and Larry, a young American history professor who is working as his aide, pushing him around in his wheelchair. *Maldición eterna* is in every way a dialogue: between the two characters, but also between their respective cultures, histories and languages. Decoding secret, “other” languages becomes the key, as the entire novel underscores the (im)possibility of reading/interpreting/translating the language, history and culture of the “other.”

The genesis and writing of *Maldición eterna* itself brings these issues to the forefront. Puig wrote the notes and most of the manuscript for the novel originally in English, as the story is based on a series of conversations that Puig had with a neighbor in New York in the late 1970s. Puig then translated the text “back” to Spanish, so to speak, (re)writing the manuscript into novel form, playing with and expanding the potential relationship between English and Spanish, exploiting the productive potential of translation, and complicating notions of originality and North-South relationships. As Jorge Panesi states:

Puig adds a new paradox here to the idea of the original and its expansion: which language is expanded? English? Spanish? Be that as it may, the place of the writer in *Eternal Curse* is a territory of linguistic borders and cultural exchanges. It is related to a movement of expansion and Puig's attempt to internationalize his literature and his novelistic world: everything that he seeks to expand must pass through translation. (155)

Puig passes through translation in more than one sense: it is through translation that Puig achieves international recognition, achieving what must at first have seemed impossible coming out of a town like General Villegas. But Puig's work also passes through translation precisely because it is a sort of coming out: because translation—all manner of translation, including re-readings and rewritings and reinterpretations, translation that is a recycling of found, discarded objects considered meaningless until they are shown to be the matter of culture and life themselves—allows Puig to constantly seek and try new styles, and to give a voice to the very voices that might have impeded his coming out in the first place.

These examples point at a series of connections between translation, betrayal, and tradition that underlie most of Puig's work, as well as that of much of contemporary Argentine literature. In Spanish the connections are even clearer at a phonetic level: *traducción, traición, tradición*. To underscore alliterative associations of this triplet we could say: translation, treason, tradition. Through treason one betrays a national tradition, a national tradition that at first fought hard to exclude Manuel Puig, a national tradition that Puig broadly expanded precisely by being unfaithful to it, by betraying it, by revealing how it was itself a betrayal to anyone on the margins of its hetero-normative borders. A treason boldly undertaken through the paradoxes of translation and recycling.

A number of other major writers in the late twentieth and now in the early twenty-first centuries in Argentina have been working actively with translation in their own writings. First among these is Ricardo Piglia, who established the importance of translation in his own work as early as 1975 in *Nombre falso*, then incorporated a discussion about the role of translation in Argentine literature in *Respiración artificial* (1980), and placed translation and the reproduction and circulation of stories at the center of his 1992 *La ciudad ausente*. What is missing, Piglia seems to say in *La ciudad ausente*, is a mechanism for listening to the missing (i.e., the voices of the past who have disappeared; the dead) and circulating their stories as a way to rethink tradition at a time of social and economic crisis. In *La ciudad ausente* that mechanism is Piglia's—or perhaps Argentina's—translating and reproducing machine. In his texts, Piglia constantly

works with the practice of and reflections about rereading and rewriting—seen as variations of the translation machine—in the formation of a re-imagined tradition that always has something to say about our current political and cultural debates. Other contemporary writers continuing and expanding this tradition include César Aira, Sylvia Molloy and the poets Mirta Rosenberg, Arturo Carrera, Diana Bellessi and María Negroni. Also notable are the efforts of the *Diario de poesía*, which naturally places translation at the center of and in a dynamic dialogue with Argentine and other Latin American poetry.

An Alternate History of Argentine Literature

It is usually assumed that translation leads to inferior, secondary copies of the original. This traditional view, which maintains a nearly sacred privileging of the source, assumes that there is always a loss associated with translation. Such devaluing of translation is especially problematic for Latin American writers, whose national literary traditions emerge and develop as reflections and refractions—as a series of distorted translations—of Western Europe and its traditions. It is precisely by going against such assumptions that a long line of Argentine cultural agents have found innovative ways to put translation to use during moments of nation foundation (in the nineteenth century), of intense innovation (in the first half of the twentieth century), and as a form of cultural political resistance from the periphery (in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries). The groundwork that nineteenth-century writers and men of letters laid in terms of the foundational potential of translation for the new Argentine nation has been expanded by numerous editorial projects and translators throughout the twentieth century,³⁶ including very significantly by Jorge Luis Borges. By the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, with Manuel Puig, Ricardo Piglia and others, translation becomes not only a source of nation formation and literary renovation, but also a cultural political force in the reformulation of new narratives and identities.

Translation is a highly equivocal exercise. You write a text that is and is not yours, you dedicate yourself to the text of an-other, you write a text, but sign with the name of an-other. Being faithful is impossible, it is a fallacy; being unfaithful is the only option, but this is considered an act of betrayal. This paradox, as Borges teaches us and as Puig and Piglia and others constantly enact, cannot be resolved, but it can be exploited. The question becomes whether the betrayal that translation represents—the translator's infidelities—are productive and fortuitous. Translation has completely different cultural and political implications for “younger” literatures than for “older” ones; the motivations

and effects of translation are fundamentally different for writers in the margins than for those in the center. Furthermore, in Argentina, the scenes of translation are themselves turning points in the development of that nation's tradition, critical junctures at once opened by and intervened upon by a transformative exercise—that is: translation—that becomes constitutive of the literature itself. The act of translation in Argentina—the act of translation in the periphery—is never a mere literary activity. Rather, the act of translation in the periphery has the potential to play a major role in processes of nation-foundation, in canon and identity formation, and in questions related to that tradition's relationship to the center. Translating in Argentina, as Borges states in the quotation that serves as the epigraph to this essay, has the advantage of translating into a Spanish that is Argentine. To translate in Argentina, as history shows, is to write Argentina.

NOTES

- 1 “El oficio de traducir”, 322.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, this and all other translations in the essay are mine.
- 3 This is the case even in the recent and otherwise thorough project *Historia crítica de la literatura argentina* in twelve volumes directed by Noé Jitrik.
- 4 See Catelli and Gargatagli 14 -15.
- 5 Even-Zohar theorizes three main conditions that create a situation in which translation is likely to play a major role in a “literary polysystem”: “What then are the conditions which enable a situation of this kind? It seems to me that three major cases can be discerned: (a) when a polysystem has not yet been crystallized, that is to say, when a literature is ‘young,’ in the process of being established; (b) when a literature is either ‘peripheral’ or ‘weak,’ or both; and (c) when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature” (23).
- 6 A more thorough critique of postulates ‘a’ and ‘b’ of Evan-Zohar’s hypothesis falls outside the scope of this study. Although ‘a’ and ‘b’ remain in critical currency (see, for example, Willson 30 – 35; and Venuti 186-189), we will focus in this study primarily on item ‘c’: “when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature” (23).
- 7 See Shumway 24 – 46; and Halperín Donghi.
- 8 As Vázquez Villanueva observes, “La faena traductora ocupa a los hombres de Estado durante el siglo XIX” [The work of translation occupies statesmen throughout the XIX century] (187); see also Dornheim.
- 9 As Beatriz Sarlo states: “The fact that [Argentine writers] do not recognize a cultural fatherland in Spain leads them to connect their national literature with those of other European countries. But the fact that there is also a local cultural tradition does not simplify this connection... Mixture is at once indispensable and problematic” (*Jorge Luis Borges* 47-48).

- 10 The members of the *Salón Literario* include Juan María Gutiérrez, Esteban Echeverría, Juan B. Alberdi, Bartolomé Mitre, and Vicente Fidel López. See Halperín Donghi's *Proyecto y construcción de una nación* and *Una nación para el desierto argentino*.
- 11 As Catelli and Gargatagli explain, "Aquí, la traducción no sólo es vehículo de civilización sino condición para la existencia de un idioma nacional, una literatura nacional, un cielo nacional" [Here, translation is not just a vehicle of civilization, but a condition for the existence of a national language, a national literature, a national sky] (361).
- 12 Catelli and Gargatagli correctly note that: "Para la tarea intelectual de América: no sólo hay que escapar de España, sino que para ser americanos, hay que convertirse en lectores y traductores distintos" [For the American intellectual task: it is necessary not only to escape Spain, but to be American one must become a different kind of reader and translator] (369).
- 13 On the relevance of Sarmiento's charcoal/graffiti writing of this phrase, see Concha.
- 14 Sorensen Goodrich—commenting on Sarmiento's "error," which underscores what she calls the "process of transformation typical of cultural annexations"—has tracked down the probable original source, and found that: "The closest one can get to the phrase is Diderot's 'On ne tue pas de coups de fusil aux idées,' a maxim which [Sarmiento] might have encountered in the *Revue Encyclopédique*, read by the members of his generation as a source of European culture. The phrase reached [Sarmiento] in a characteristically mediated way, as the epigraph of an 1832 article written by Charles Didier entitled 'Les doctrines et les idées'" (85).
- 15 Molloy also discusses Sarmiento's misattribution in the epigraph of the *Facundo*, and calls Sarmiento's translation of it "the most digressive of translations"; see *At Face Value*, 29-32. Additionally, we note that Sarmiento's "errors" are not at all limited to this one instance of the beginning of *Facundo*. As Molloy details, one of the epigraphs of *Recuerdos* also has a misattribution, and is accompanied by a "very free translation," both of which turn out to have significant implications (29).
- 16 There is also the other line of Argentine tradition in the nineteenth century, the line that seeks to found Argentine literature through an intra-lingual process of translating local speech, traditions, and customs. In other words, the *gauchesque*, culminating in José Hernández's *Martín Fierro*. But even here there are some interesting crosses, such as Estanislao de Campo's parodic *Fausto criollo* (1866).
- 17 Piglia makes this argument in his essay "Sarmiento the Writer." Emilio Renzi, Piglia's character, makes the same argument in Piglia's novel *Respiración artificial*. Fiction and criticism, translation and so-called original writings, in Piglia (as in Borges before him) become inseparable literary productions.
- 18 See Vázquez Villanueva, 187.
- 19 See Bellini; and Waismann.
- 20 Mitre's translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* was re-published in its entirety as late as 1940 by Editorial Losada.
- 21 See Willson.
- 22 See King; Willson; and Sarlo's *Una modernidad periférica*.
- 23 Waisman, *Borges and Translation*.

- 24 Borges's other essays on translation include "Las dos maneras de traducir" (1926); "Sobre el *Vathek* de William Beckford" (1943); "El enigma de Edward FitzGerald" (1951). His most important *ficciones* on translation are "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*" (1939) and "La busca de Averroes" (1949). On these, see Waisman, *Borges and Translation*; and Arrojo.
- 25 See Waisman's "J. L. Borges's Partial Argentine *Ulysses*"; and Willson 117 – 132.
- 26 See Willson 161 – 182.
- 27 See Willson 132 – 160; and Leone's "A Translation of His Own" and "La novela cautiva."
- 28 For an analysis of Gombrowicz, his work, and his presence in Argentina, see Larkosh's *The Limits of the Foreign*; and García's *Gombrowicz, el estilo y la heráldica*. During his exile in Argentina, Gombrowicz also wrote *Transatlantyk* (1953), a novel written in Polish which is as much about Argentina as it is about Poland, and which constantly works with issues of identity and language in marginal literatures. On the translation of *Ferdydurke* in Argentina see, for example, Riccio.
- 29 As Willson says, "*Ferdydurke* es, por cierto, un caso paradigmático" (12).
- 30 See the "Prólogo para la primera edición castellana" (1947) and the "Nota sobre la traducción," both included in *Ferdydurke*.
- 31 Saer also points out that an important element of Argentine literature is written in languages other than Spanish: "Buena parte de nuestra literatura –desde sus orígenes, pero sobre todo en el siglo XIX y a principios del actual– ha sido escrita por extranjeros en idiomas extranjeros: alemán, inglés, francés, italiano. Cuando todavía no teníamos literatura, ya viajeros europeos marineros, científicos, comerciantes, aventureros, incluso espías repertoriaban en informes, cartas, relatos, memorias, las características de nuestro suelo, de nuestro paisaje, de nuestra sociedad, de nuestras primeras diferencias con el resto del mundo" [A good part of our literature—from its origins, but primarily in the 19th century and the beginning of our current one—has been written by foreigners in foreign languages: German, English, French, Italian. Before we had a literature, European travelers, sailors, scientists, businessmen, adventurers, even spies, were already reporting in reports, letters, stories, memoirs, the characteristics of our ground, of our landscape, of our society, of our early differences with the rest of the world] (15).
- 32 See Majstorovic.
- 33 Although some work has been done on Cortázar and translation (e.g., Pagano; Cobo Borda), a complete analysis of the role of translation in the work of Cortázar remains to be done.
- 34 As Francine Masiello has said: "Whether treating a story of origins or a foreign film script, Puig reiterates a common anxiety regarding the inefficiency of one's hearth tongue to resolve matters of naming, identity, and difference. But the inefficiency also yields ambiguity and unleashes an imaginative leap. *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* addresses this central issue, presenting translation as an opportune slippage between various discourses, a compensation for modes of self-representation that are offered in a single tongue" (*The Art of Transition*, 87).
- 35 Puig lived twice in New York: first in the 1960s, and then as an exile from 1976-1979.
- 36 As Willson notes and demonstrates throughout her book: "Es posible conjeturar que algunas de las traducciones clásicas al español del siglo XX, las grandes traducciones

a esa lengua, aquellas que han tenido un impacto duradero en las literaturas de habla hispana en su conjunto, fueron realizadas en la Argentina durante el período de apogeo de su industria editorial” [It is possible to conjecture that some of the classic translations into Spanish in the twentieth century, the great translations into this language, those that have had a lasting impact in Spanish-speaking literatures in their entirety, were undertaken in Argentina during the period of the height of its publishing industry] (39).

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