

LATIN AMERICA AND
TRANSLATION:
Three Contributions to Knowing "The Other"

Clifford E. Landers
Jersey City State College

- THE SUBVERSIVE SCRIBE: TRANSLATING LATIN AMERICAN FICTION.* By Suzanne Jill Levine. (Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1991. Pp. 196. \$12.00 paper.)
- TRANSLATING LATIN AMERICA: CULTURE AS TEXT.* Edited by William Luis and Julio Rodríguez-Luis. Translation Perspectives no. 6. (Binghamton, N.Y.: Center for Research in Translation, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1991. Pp. 348. \$15.00 cloth.)
- O PODER DA TRADUÇÃO.* By John Milton. (São Paulo: Ars Poetica, 1993. Pp. 195.)

Latin America is both producer and consumer of literary translations, although in unequal proportions. The list of Latin American writers whose works in English translation have achieved recognition among North American and European readers in the last twenty-five years is an impressive one. In addition to reading Nobel laureates Miguel Angel Asturias, Gabriel García Márquez, and Octavio Paz, English-speaking readers have become acquainted with the works of such figures as Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges, Juan Rulfo, José Donoso, Carlos Fuentes, José Lezama Lima, Mario Vargas Llosa, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig, Isabel Allende, Jorge Amado, Alejo Carpentier, Luis Rafael Sánchez, and Ariel Dorfman. Another tier of writers who are less known but highly esteemed by critics might include Alvaro Mutis, Rubem Fonseca, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Reinaldo Arenas, Moacyr Scliar, Edmundo Desnoes, Luisa Valenzuela, Severo Sarduy, and Nelida Piñon. All of them have been translated into English, and many into other languages as well.

This roll, however striking, is tiny when compared with the many talented and original Latin American voices that are unlikely to be heard outside their native language and their country of origin. It is perhaps inevitable in the economic scheme of things that even in their original languages, many works of merit never go beyond their initial limited printing. In Brazil, for example, except for such towering figures as Jorge

Amado and Rubem Fonseca, the normal press run is a mere three thousand copies, not all of which find their way into bookstores and libraries.

Moreover, the proportion of translations is radically skewed in favor of English-language source materials. While exact figures are unavailable, one can safely estimate that for every Spanish- or Portuguese-language work translated into English, scores of English-language novels and nonfiction works are translated into the languages of Latin America.

A browse in any well-stocked bookstore in Buenos Aires, Caracas, Mexico City, or Rio de Janeiro quickly confirms this judgment. Shelves abound with translations of U.S. self-help books, computer manuals, engineering and other technical textbooks, and the latest U.S. best-sellers, whether by Joyce Carol Oates, Norman Mailer, John Updike, or less acclaimed writers. Works that might be thought too particularistic or too U.S.-oriented for an overseas audience are nevertheless translated and purchased by a Latin American readership that is apparently insatiable in its appetite for an intimate taste of anything "American." Gore Vidal's *Burr*, E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, and Stephen Birmingham's *Our Crowd* all are available. At the time this review was written (summer 1994), seven of the ten best-selling books in Brazil were translations from English.¹ The fact that they included the likes of Danielle Steel, Sidney Sheldon, and Jackie Collins tempts one to ask whether Gresham's law operates in literature as well as in currency.

The north-to-south flow of translations deserves comment. Admittedly, more titles are published each year in the United States and Canada, in absolute numbers and on a per capita basis, than in Latin America, but one still might easily conclude that while the average Latin American novel is never translated, the average U.S. novel is, at least if it was written by a well-known name, regardless of literary value. While the hemispheric net flow of capital in the past three decades has moved from the underdeveloped to the developed world, the stream of translated materials has also proceeded largely one-way, but in the opposite direction.²

Numerous reasons account for this disparity, on both sides. First, low literacy rates in parts of Latin America mean that the potential read-

1. The other three were New Age style books by the Brazilian Paulo Coelho, a self-termed sorcerer whose writings bear a distant kinship to the mystical works of Carlos Castañeda. Coelho's works have recently been translated into English by Alan Clarke. The first of these, *The Alchemist*, has attained best-seller status in Australia and found a niche audience in the United States. Some Brazilian periodicals have adopted the expedient of publishing separate best-seller lists, one for foreign writings and one for national (meaning Brazilian) works.

2. The traffic sometimes flows in both directions. For example, John Updike is said to have become interested in Brazil after reading translated works by Rubem Fonseca. Updike's 1994 novel entitled *Brazil* has in turn been translated into Portuguese and is now available in the country where it is set.

ing public (or what some refer to as the *público pensante*) is small to begin with, a situation that encourages a lowest-common-denominator marketing of fiction: Stephen King rather than Paul Theroux. As one Brazilian author said of his profession, "It's a fool's errand to be a writer in a nation of illiterates."

Second, Hollywood films and television series made in the U.S.A. often engender collateral print versions, with all the merchandising tie-ins and advertising techniques that accompany them. As a rule, virtually any pop-culture craze, from Batman to skateboards, will diffuse rapidly southward from the United States to its Latin neighbors. This trend can apply to products as diverse as novelizations of *Star Trek*, the Muppets, *Where's Waldo?*, and *The Simpsons*. Yet the marvelous Argentine comic strip *Mafalda* has never been brought to a North American audience (although it did appear in England).

Third, intellectual traffic moves mostly north to south. Translations of college-level textbooks and often the original English-language texts are routinely employed in Latin American universities in scientific and technical fields. Seminal works by U.S. scholars are made available quickly, often subsidized by U.S. agencies abroad. In the other direction, writings by Latin American thinkers are rarely translated into English. Hélio Jaguaribe or Pablo González Casanova may be read at the graduate level (even then, only when writing about their own polity), but exposure to undergraduates is close to nonexistent (although an occasional exception like Eduardo Galeano or Angel Rama can be found). Yet who has heard of a Latin American biology, chemistry, or mathematics text being translated and adopted in American universities? Finally, the impact of cultural imperialism, which some might prefer to give the more neutral name of "cultural diffusion," is as visible in literature and translation as in many other areas.

Among the fundamental differences between literary translation in Latin America and the United States, two interrelated factors stand out: economics and quality. Paradoxically, literary translation is both better and worse in Latin America than in the United States, a fact that merits an explanation. On average, a given work rendered from Spanish or Portuguese into English is probably higher in quality than one in the other language direction. The reason is easily deduced from what has already been said. With a few idiosyncratic exceptions that catch the fancy of an adventurous, dedicated, or iconoclastic U.S. publisher, only a handful of Latin American originals—the cream of the crop—see the light of day in an English version. In general, these works are translated by experienced literary translators or by academicians (categories with some overlap). Because virtually no one earns a living exclusively as a literary translator, such work is often the proverbial labor of love, carried out from a secure academic position that affords the time and the where-

withal to pursue this financially unrewarding endeavor. Thus many literary translators in the United States are professors whose reputation and self-esteem are tied up in the undertaking. As a result, it is not unusual for a translation to take two or more years to complete, a luxury unavailable to the hectored Chilean or Brazilian translator with two months to crank out the latest Barbara Cartland opus.

At the same time, a long-standing tradition in Latin America encourages the region's stellar exemplars of prose and poetry to translate great works from English, French, German, and other languages, if their mastery of the source language is up to the task. Translations done by poets of the stature of Jorge Luis Borges or Haroldo de Campos have few counterparts in the present-day English-speaking world, even fewer since the death of Anthony Burgess and virtually none among U.S. writers of the first rank. Like most such efforts, these translations too are veritable labors of love, often made commercially practicable by small print runs and the prestige that attaches to the project from the combination of a noteworthy author with a renowned writer-turned-translator.³ By contrast, few if any readers in the United States buy a book on the basis of the translator's reputation.

As a consequence, highly literate Latin American readers enjoy access to a better grade of fine literature in translation than do most readers in the northern half of the hemisphere, if quality can indeed be judged by the literary eminence of the translator. At the other end of the scale, translation of run-of-the-mill popular literature is often haphazard and sometimes embarrassingly bad.⁴

The Translator as Co-Creator

After Gregory Rabassa, the doyen of Spanish and Portuguese literary translators, Suzanne Jill Levine is the best-known and most prolific literary translator of Latin American literature. Since 1971, when *Three Trapped Tigers* appeared (translated in collaboration with Donald Gardner

3. Two examples will suffice. José Bento Monteiro Lobato (1882–1948) is considered the father of the Brazilian book-publishing industry because of his innovative marketing techniques in the 1920s. At a time when there were scarcely as many as thirty bookstores in the entire country, he sold books in pharmacies, markets, and even butcher shops. Monteiro Lobato's experience as a cultural attaché in the United States led him to translate and publish the autobiography of Henry Ford, whom he greatly admired. As a second example, in the early 1990s, Rubem Fonseca translated into Portuguese Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry* (an indirect translation from an English version), after becoming intrigued with the Russian writer while doing research for his own novel *Vastas Emoções e pensamentos imperfeitos*. Fonseca's prestige was sufficient to ensure publication of the work, which sparked a minor surge of interest among Brazilian intellectuals in Babel, who had never before been translated into Portuguese.

4. In a Mexican translation of a U.S. political science text on government, I once encountered the phrase "*rudos guerreros*." Only from the context of U.S.-Soviet tensions was I finally able to deduce that the translation was referring to "cold warriors."

and Guillermo Cabrera Infante), she has produced close to a score of book-length translations of some of the most linguistically challenging works in contemporary Spanish-language fiction. Such seemingly untranslatable works as Manuel Puig's *Boquitas pintadas*, Severo Sarduy's *Cobra*, and Cabrera Infante's *La Habana para un infante difunto* have all yielded to her singular and single-minded attack on the barriers separating two languages and two cultures.

The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction is neither a how-to manual (although literary translators will pick up countless pointers) nor a work of traditional literary criticism (despite a liberal admixture of more conventional lit-crit concerns such as reception theory and semiotics). Levine's book is above all a personal statement of one practitioner's approach to the formidable task of conveying meaning and preserving the unicity of the artistic vision of those she translates. Here one learns much about contemporary Latin American writing (especially Cuban works) and almost as much about Levine and her dealings with the men whose novels she has translated. Drawing on excerpts from her extensive correspondence with Cabrera Infante and interviews with the writers, Levine lays bare private aspects of the creative process that later became part of the public discourse. This revelation is both enlightening and almost voyeuristic, as the reader comes to experience something akin to eavesdropping when the once solitary act of creation becomes public, even though these revelations were made with the consent and foreknowledge of the writers themselves.

Some critics have downplayed Levine's accomplishments by pointing to her special relationship with authors in what is surely one of the most intimate creative partnerships since Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. In the view of such detractors, few translators are given the chance to approach a difficult source-language text virtually *ab initio* and create (in the case of Cabrera Infante's works) an adaptation rather than a translation, in effect finessing the most intractable cultural and linguistic referents that defy rendition in the target language. But such caviling misses the point. It is true that Levine has been blessed with an exceptionally flexible and tolerant author in Guillermo Cabrera Infante, who was willing, even eager to rewrite his *Tres tristes tigres* to make it more accessible to a U.S. audience. And for Levine's U.S. English version of *Boquitas pintadas* (retitled *Heartbreak Tango*), author Manuel Puig restructured the text by replacing many of the tango epigraphs with thematically equivalent slices of dialogue from Hollywood movies of the 1930s and 1940s, which are far more meaningful to non-Argentines. Understandably, Levine made the most of opportunities to persuade the authors that their interests would be best served by such adaptability.

The Subversive Scribe offers a fascinating glimpse into the mental gyrations of a first-class literary translator at work and reaffirms the

desirability, even the necessity, of a thorough grounding in the source culture before attempting literary translation. The work is full of tidbits about the central role of such popular culture staples as the tango in Puig's works and Cuban *choteo* (biting satire or irreverent wit) in those of Cabrera Infante. The book thus reinforces the thesis that the main raw material of a literary translator is not words or even ideas but cultures.

At one point, unfortunately, Levine falls into a trap common to translators and authors. In referring to John Updike's negative review of *Three Trapped Tigers* in the *New Yorker* (entitled "Infante Terrible"), she succumbs to the temptation to rebut:

John Updike panned our punful *TTT*, labeling the book derivative in contrast with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, an original Latin American book: "one might . . . conclude that the novel was derivative, that its excitement derived from the translation of the methods of *Ulysses* into Cuban idiom, and that, restored to Joyce's mother tongue, it shows up as a tired copy. . . ." Updike's complaint (who needs another Joyce?) masks an ideological prejudice. How dare this Cuban author appropriate words, language, and avant-garde narrative structures, when he should be chronicling oppression and revolution? . . . Updike's review exhibits not only blindness to the book's intentions but a canonical caveat handed down to those marginals who cross over. (P. 94)

The Many Approaches to Translating Culture

Translating Latin America: Culture as Text makes an important contribution to a subject that normally receives little attention in the academic world. Editors William Luis and Julio Rodríguez-Luis have compiled previously unpublished papers read at a conference at SUNY Binghamton. This volume is the first to focus specifically on issues relating to translation of Latin American literature. As is often true of works by multiple authors, the level of individual writings is uneven, although the overall standard here is high.

Co-editor Rodríguez-Luis notes correctly in his introduction,

Latin American culture has to be translated if it is to be understood, especially outside its own environment. . . . By translation I mean here interpretation, of course, the re-codification of a text into other languages, including the linguistic systems usually called that. . . . The actual translation of texts is an essential tool of that interpretation process, but always it has to proceed accompanied by the translation of the culture or risk becoming an isolated effort without repercussions, if not, unfortunately, a contribution to the misunderstanding of . . . Latin America. (P. 2)

That is, even in printed form (as opposed to, say, audiovisual formats like film and videotape), the translation of another culture is only partly verbal. The complex web of mores and folkways, unconscious cues, popular imagery, informal usage, gestures, music, art, and a myriad of other elements that constitute a society can never be rendered in their fullness in printed form. Only a complete immersion in the culture can provide

the totality of the experience. In a written translation, however, the manifold nonverbal aspects must perforce be represented in a stream of words (assuming that the translator forswears drawings and other visual material). Several of the contributions to *Translating Latin America* recognize this fact in dealing only peripherally with translation in the traditional sense. Yet this fact in no way diminishes the volume's usefulness for Latin Americanists or students of translation theory and practice.

Translating Latin America never loses sight of the reality that the countries south of the Rio Grande are truly terra incognita for most U.S. citizens, less remote physically than Asia or Africa but obscured by a pseudofamiliarity that geographic proximity paradoxically augments. Because those living in the United States think they know Latin America through images fostered by the popular media, it becomes more difficult to surmount the stereotypes and prejudices that separate hemispheric neighbors. Gregory Rabassa gets to the heart of the difficulty in his essay in *Translating Latin America*, "Words Cannot Express . . . : The Translation of Cultures": "[C]ultures do not translate easily. To make Martín Fierro a cowboy is to ruin the poem. . . . It is the culture that matters, and culture is most often made up of the lesser details: squatting and sipping *mate* or drinking black coffee, wearing *bombachas* or chaps, relying on the pistol or the long knife. These small things add up to make the similarities disappear. . . . [T]o translate gaucho speech into cowboy dialect would be to ruin the effect" (p. 42). A similar sentiment was expressed earlier by Jorge Luis Borges: "For me, knowledge of two languages doesn't mean the possession of a repertory of synonyms; it doesn't mean knowing that in Spanish you say '*ancho*' and in English '*wide*' or '*broad*.' What is important is to learn to think in two different ways, and to have access to two different literatures."⁵

Translating Latin America is nothing if not eclectic. Its thirty-seven contributors range from academicians (avant-garde and traditional) to active creators of fiction like the Puerto Rican novelist Luis Rafael Sánchez. His essay entitled "La literatura como traducción de una cultura" is a nostalgic appreciation of *lo soez* in Puerto Rican popular culture (radio, in this case) in his boyhood, when "Superman . . . reigned on earth and in the skies as Tarzan reigned in the jungle. . . . Tarzan outfitted with biceps and pectoral muscles as the forerunner of a centerfold in *Playgirl*" (p. 24). Suzanne Jill Levine is represented by her translation of a Bioy Casares story, "Flies and Spiders." In "The Latin American New Novel in Translation: Archival Source for the Dialogue between Literature and History," historian Frederick Nunn provides a useful interface between disciplines that have too long been separated by often arbitrary barriers. Especially

5. Rita Guibert, *Seven Voices: Seven Latin American Writers Talk to Rita Guibert* (New York: Vintage, 1973), translated by Frances Partridge, 112.

helpful is his suggested list of several such novels, grouped under topical categories such as military-civilian relations, authority and subordination, and history and the search for national identity. In "Mermaids and Other Fetishes: Images of Latin America," Geoffrey Fox mixes personal narrative (his experiences in Sandinista Nicaragua) with reflections on "the Other" as exemplified by foreign perceptions of Latin American reality: "Those of us who write of Latin America for an English-language audience face the same challenge as Columbus in 1493: to name and explain something strange, in a vocabulary freighted with the falsely familiar. . . . [T]he clusters of associations around each word, the assonances and puns, the grammar itself . . . shape courtship rituals, ideological constructs, interpretations of disaster, or any other action or expression that develops from the free play of the imagination" (p. 138).

Real-world applications of translation also form an integral part of *Translating Latin America*. Steven White provides an interesting perspective on the integration of literature into the political struggle in "Translation in Nicaraguan Poetry as a Literary Weapon against Imperialism." Javier Sanjinés brings anthropological and sociological acumen to bear on the testimony of a woman of the mines in "From Domitila to Los Relocalizados: An Essay on Marginality in Bolivia." Alicia Ríos contributes an insightful piece entitled "La idea de nación y cultura nacional en las primeras constituciones venezolanas."

Nor is what most people think of as translation—the literary version—neglected. A section entitled "Interpreting and Translating: Translation Traditionally Defined" includes several provocative essays: "Translating Vowels and the Defeat of Sounds" by José Quiroga, "The Translation of Interlingual Texts: A Chicano Example" by Rogelio Reyes, "Translating Translation: Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Chambacú*" by Jonathan Tittler, and the invaluable "Heightened Access to Literary Texts through Comparison of SL and TL Versions: Cortázar's *Rayuela* and Rabassa's *Hopscotch*" by Lydia Hunt.

It is hard to imagine a student of Latin American culture or anyone interested in the problems of translation who would not benefit from acquaintance with *Translating Latin America*. This collection makes a significant contribution to understanding of an infrequently examined subject.

Latin American Translation through Anglo-Saxon Eyes

John Milton (who must rue or revel in sharing a name with one of the English language's most illustrious writers) is an Australian professor who teaches English at the Universidade de São Paulo. *O Poder da Tradução* is characterized by analytical rigor and insights gained from living in a culture that for all its literary verve and originality still suffers from linguistic isolation. No less a figure than Eça de Queiroz, Portugal's lead-

ing nineteenth-century novelist, called Portuguese “the sepulcher of ideas.”

Milton’s study, based on his dissertation research at the Universidade de São Paulo, investigates approaches to translation by departing from the premise that “the debate between literal translation and freer translation has been the major preoccupation among commentators on the literary tradition from Cicero and Jerome up to the present day. Nevertheless, in recent years, study of literary translation has broadened its horizons. . . . [T]his study will make a comparison between the traditional efforts to tackle the subject and the contemporary ones” (p. 13). Chapters dealing with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Augustan era in England (focusing on John Dryden), the *belles infidèles* of the same historical period in France, and Ezra Pound’s impact on twentieth-century thinking about translation will be of interest to students of translation theory. But it is Milton’s final chapter, “The Theory of Literary Translation in Brazil,” that warrants attention in the present context.

Translation theory in Brazil has normally been the province of academicians, while practitioners have more often busied themselves with actual execution of their trade. Milton cites a statement by the late Paulo Rónai that typifies the pragmatic approach of many translators in both Brazil and the United States: “By natural inclination of my temperament, abstract speculation holds little appeal for me. . . . [I]nstead of inquiring into the philosophy and metaphysics of translation, I prefer to stick to its specific problems” (p. 172).

If a coherent approach to translation can be said to exist in Latin America, it is that fostered by the critic, essayist, and poet Augusto de Campos and his brother Haroldo, a respected poet in his own right. Their influence on students of translation in Brazil would be difficult to overstate. Even those who do not agree with the Campos approach acknowledge their boldness in tackling untranslatable texts and their dedication to pushing back the frontiers of translation. As Milton explains, “They translate only authors whom they believe to have changed, affected, or revolutionized poetic style: first Pound, Cummings, Joyce, and Mallarmé; and later Mayakovski, Khlebnikov, Valéry, Poe, the Provençal troubadours, Goethe, Octavio Paz, Lewis Carroll, Keats, Edward Lear, John Donne, and John Cage. They often cite Mayakovski’s adage emphasizing the importance of new forms: ‘Without revolutionary form, there is no revolutionary art’” (p. 163). The Bible, concrete poetry, Joyce’s verbal conundrums—none of these challenges daunt the Campos brothers’ sense of mission, their belief that the content of poetic translation is subordinate to form, or their concern with lexico-morphological innovation and syntactical renewal. Milton also points out their predilection for poets “who write on unorthodox subjects. Examples are John Donne’s ‘The Flea,’ . . .

the nonsense poems of Lewis Carroll, and the poems of e. e. cummings that emphasize the visual format" (p. 165).

While Milton may occasionally overstep the line between objectivity and admiration in his treatment of the Campos brothers, *O Poder da Tradução* affords useful analysis of a hitherto unexplored area that is winning the struggle to be taken seriously in the academic arena. The study will also be of value to those interested in translation theory in Latin America as much for its thorough compilation of competing approaches as for its unique perspective, that of an Anglo-Saxon scholar who has chosen to cast his lot with Latin America and make his career there.

All these works achieve one of the foremost goals of literary translation, that of serving as a bridge between cultures. Although literary translation cannot end inequality and deprivation in a hemisphere of countries often divided internally between the fabulously wealthy and the ineffably poor, translation can make a significant contribution to the understanding of "the Other" that must precede any long-term efforts at amelioration.



LATIN AMERICAN RESEARCH REVIEW

**Cumulative Index to LARR
Volumes 1-30 1965-1995**

Forthcoming in 1996

Articles, Review Essays, Research
Reports and Notes indexed by:

**Author-Title
Subject
Country**

For additional information, contact

**Linda L. Kjeldgaard
Latin American Research Review
Latin American Institute
801 Yale N.E.
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131**

Telephone: (505) 277-5985
FAX: (505) 277-5989

