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## «Lo que se pierde»: The Nostalgic Translator

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«The translator is a nostalgic person, experiencing her own language as missing what the original work promises to provide. At the same time, the original work can never entirely rest in the translator's language; its home is in the original language, and so the translator is not so much at a loss with the language she doesn't possess, the original's language, but is always confronting or experiencing the difficulty of the language in which she supposedly belongs.»<sup>1</sup>.

Citing Maurice Blanchot's remarks in my book *The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction*, I was intrigued by this image of the translator, both as a general statement relevant to translators everywhere (especially in the Americas, lands of immigrants) as well as to myself as a native-born New Yorker and the grandchild of Eastern European immigrants. Like many from a similar background, I knew relatively little about my roots. Translation dramatizes but also has compensated perhaps for me the condition of loss or nostalgia, this not being quite satisfied in one's own language, in my case English, but not quite knowing my original origin, and then my impulse to absorb or immerse myself in another language and culture, Spanish, even though, on the face of it, I am totally at home in English. The condition of loss or at least lack is what often leads writers to write, and is a place shared by creative translators and writers alike, that is, the foreignness of language, turning it into an escape, a playground, as in the cases of James Joyce and Guillermo Cabrera Infante. Translator and writer, in this view, are both subverters, in their own language and conventions, «criminal» in one's own language, as Tim Parks put it in «Perils of Translation.»<sup>2</sup>. Rather than stressing the negative here, Parks says that

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Derrida interview «Roundtable on Translation, II in Christie V. MacDonald (ed.) *The Ear of the Other*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (New York Schocken Books, 1985), 155.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Parks, «Perils of translation,» *New York Review of Books* (January 20, 2000), 53-54.

just as writing is a way of finding one's own voice, translation can be seen as «a way in again»: a choosing to translate writing that is an elective affinity, writing that gives one access to one's own personality, but even more so, renewing one's own «native» speech through one's particular usage of language.

My affinity for Latin American writers had been, it now seems, an affinity for a certain rootless spirit; Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Manuel Puig, Severo Severo, for example, were displaced or exiled, writers with a cosmopolitan spirit, from big cities Buenos Aires/Havana, which shared much in common with New York as with Paris.

Puig and Cabrera Infante in particular shared a grand passion for the movies, particularly Hollywood movies, capable of giving us all from different corners a kind of home away from home we could share in common. Cinephiles such as Henri Langlois, founder of the Paris Cinemateque, have often observed that their love for film is motivated by nostalgia; Cabrera Infante and Puig both associated the movies with their respective childhoods, a replacement for home, that is, a place of safe haven, a place to recapture, momentarily, an idealized paradise of childhood and adolescence –adolescence itself being a place of yearning. Puig spoke of his early failed career as a filmmaker as a way to return to the «paradise» of his childhood adventures at the movies; Cabrera Infante's principal books are strongly motivated by the nostalgia for the country of his past as well as his childhood idylls in the moviehouses of his home town and of Havana. The cinema for many spectators, myself included, serves also as a substitute for a desired past, as well as a longed-for present or even future. With Cabrera Infante I was a fellow spectator as well as fellow punster, and with Puig, even more of a fellow spectator sharing, in a way, his feminine gaze.

Here I have been speaking of the spectator's nostalgic fascination for cinema, but one can also see nostalgia as the filmmaker's motivation, as well, even as a stimulus for entire film movements. A clear instance is the French New Wave of the late 50s and early 60s with its fond replays of the moody North American *film noir* of the late 30s and 40s –the term *film noir* was coined by French critic Andre Bazin as early as 1946. The film that perhaps most typifies this European homage to old Hollywood was Godard's 1959 classic *Breathless*, in which a young virile moody Jean-Paul Belmondo addresses his thoughts and reflects himself in the cigarette-smoking trench-coated image of Humphrey Bogart, or Bogie, particularly in his role as a tough-skinned tender-hearted Rick, American expatriate in Paris and Casablanca.

Laura Grindstall (a film scholar at UC Davis), in her essay «La Femme Nikita and the Textual Politics of the Remake», examines Hollywood remakes such as *Breathless* within «the circuit of exchange between France and the United States, who stand in particular historical relation to one another regarding the matter of «original» and «copy». [ms.] As her title indicates, she

focuses on a more recent example in which the homage is inverse: the North American copies of the French «Femme Nikita,» which are both the Hollywood movie «Point of No Return» (with Bridget Fonda) and the television series «Femme Nikita». Grindstall speaks of the remake here as translation, beginning with the argument that the remake is undertheorized (though one might argue with her that translation is more theorized than the remake is): that remakes are simply seen as offspring of consumer culture, and judged esthetically (or resented economically) as negative phenomena, or at least as secondary and derivative. Critics normatively say, she observes, «why mess with a good thing?» and that «the remake [is the] most explicit gesture of a culture that can only express itself thru a quoten –as if quoting and creating were two entirely unrelated activities. Grindstall remarks that French critics have dismissed the 1983 Hollywood remake of *Breathless* with Richard Gere (and which, most will agree, cannot hold a candle to Godard's 1959 original) in a mindframe that Grindstall feels is implicitly if not explicitly anglophobe. These critics were not so much concerned with economic exploitation as with the «inherent failure of American remakes to respect the aesthetic and moral content of the original films, which are a part of France's overall superior» artistic culture. This point of view, Grindstall corrects, disregards an important phenomenon: the «aller retour» of cultural influence and exchange: classic Hollywood films of 1930s created, after all, the «fundamental narrative myths of the screen». We have here a labyrinth of return trips that spirals even more vertiginously when we realize that many of those old Hollywood filmmakers were Eastern Europeans who fled the pogroms and Nazism, of course: the border crossings are infinite. In a sense Grindstall concludes that what the current Hollywood remake is about –aside from economic exploitation– is Hollywood's nostalgia for its own past, reappropriating its «shadow» by remaking remakes. The chauvinism that ignores this «aller-retour», one can also subsume from her argument, corresponds to the same ideology that regards translation as loss.

Loss or «what gets lost» is a parlance that has been ever-present in the history of translation discussions: some say «sense is what gets lost» but, in poetic translation, how can sense and form be separated; Walter Benjamin felt the greater loss was the «form»: the seed or nucleus of a text best defined as the very element that cannot be translated: «thus the most frequent discussion in translation theory concerns the faithful reproduction across linguistic barriers of something essential about an original impossible to convey «because the specificity of the two signifying systems are at stake». (Grindstall). At the same time, following Benjamin. «a concern with faithfulness or accuracy is not simply a static feature of translation process but varies according to the status of the originary text, far more pressing when the original is canonized within cultural tradition than when it derives from popular culture». Benjamin also argued, most of his interpreters agree, that good translation renews form

in the target language through «a sensitive absorption of the poetic riches and innovations» in the source text. Or that translation involves more than mechanical reproduction of meaning or transfer of information, but ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages, the great motif of reversing the disaster at Babel, «of integrating many tongues into one true language...» (Grindstall).

By countering the ideology of Fidelity with a practice of Fertility, we see the remake in the same light that we would see films based on novels or that we would see creative translations as «interplays» –in one case between literary forms of one period with cinematic forms of another– in which the novel is given new life within cinema; and in which the translator is seen not as a poor rival but as the writer's collaborator or ally. As Larry Venuti wrote in «*Simpatico*» which also follows a thought expressed my first sentence in *The Subversive Scribe* «You often seek in the foreign what you are drawn to in the familiar, the translator becomes aware of his intimate sympathy with the foreign writer only when he recognizes his own voice in the foreign text. This narcissistic urge is also, or should we say firstly, that of original writers.

As we well know, the «aller-retour» is a phenomenon that characterizes the rich history of Hispanic culture, and a phenomenon that all writers, regardless of nationality, are always experiencing: Aside from GCI & Puig and the many others I have translated, Jorge Luis Borges the writer I have most recently translated, was exemplary in this manner, and perhaps the most fascinating (and impossible) subject of translation particularly because of the polyglot nature of his rhetoric. As we know, Borges and fellow poets subverted the poetics and rhetoric of their day to create an Argentine idiom in part by returning to a former rhetoric –the Spanish Baroque. By the time this rhetoric had evolved into the rhetoric of the late nineteenth century, young Borges and his confreres decided that Spanish prose was tired, or worse. degraded; with *el ultraísmo*, the poetic movement which he and an older Spanish poet, Rafael Cansino-Assens, began in Spain in the late teens and early 1920s; the *ultraistas* set out to renew poetic language by cleaning or compressing syntax and reinventing metaphor, by taking the classic rhetoric of the Baroque poets and renewing their inventions. In English one tries to mimic Borges by returning to an English rhetoric of a former period, dense with paradox, reminiscent of Swinburne and Oscar Wilde, at the same time, we are of our age, as Borges was of his, hence the contemporary translator's language has to take into account the concision of today's post-Hemingwayan spare and tight use of language.

Certainly the writers of the so-called Latin American Boom and Post-Boom were profoundly influenced by North American modernism (Faulkner, Hemingway, Dos Passos) and translation played no small role: the works of Faulkner and Hemingway were often translated not by professional translators

but by original writers. Two prolific translator-writers were Borges and the Galician-born Cuban Lino Novas Calvo: their translations were, in turn, read by the likes of Juan Rulfo, Garcia Marquez, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante. Guillermo Cabrera Infante, more than any of his confreres, explored in his fiction the connections between translation and writing, and in the following interview with me, discusses this background:

*SJL: Would you say that Faulkner's literary vision had a greater impact on your work than Hemingway's?*

**GCI:** I would separate impact from influence. I read Faulkner when I was 16, 17, 18 and he was for me the epitome of the American novelist. But that influence disappeared very soon. What is certain is that I wasn't as keen reading Hemingway as I was when I was reading Faulkner. So there is a great difference between an influence and the fun of a fan. I was (and I am) a great fan of Alfred Hitchcock but I don't think he has influenced my writing.

*SJL: I can't help thinking about the resonances...*

**GCI:** There are bits of Hemingway here and there. Such as the format of *Así en la paz como en la guerra*, which comes from Hemingway's first book. But even in this first book of mine there are certain short stories that are closer to Faulkner than to Hemingway. For instance, «Un rato de tenmeallá» at a first reading will look much more Faulknerian than Hemingwayesque, with the device of having a child for a narrator of the solecist soliloquy, as in *As I Lay Dying*. Though of course the total lack of punctuation comes from Joyce. By the way I hadn't read him when I wrote my monologue.

*SJL: I'm wondering if you read these writers in translation or in the original English. Did the translations produce a different effect upon you as a reader?*

**GCI:** I read them in both translation and the original, though I first read Faulkner in Borges's translation, *The Wild Palms* in 1946. After I read it in the original, years later, I considered it to be a better book in Spanish than in English. Because it's organized by Borges, a classic who is much different than the kind of loose romantic Faulkner was. It is like Baudelaire translating Poe in fact. Faulkner was, you might say, a very unkempt writer –the total opposite of Borges. Then I read *Light In August* –which by the way means giving birth in August: an impossible pun in Spanish–, and then I read *Sanctuary*. Or perhaps *Sanctuarv* first. Both in translation. Then all of a sudden there were available in Havana the Signet paperbacks, a treasure trove. That's how I met *Intruder in the Dust* and the short stories in *Knight's Gambit*. By the time I was 20 I had read all the Faulkner I cared to read. As it happens with *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (a book I wouldn't want to have to read again in my life!) so it happened with most of Faulkner's books –with the exception again of *The Wild Palms*, in Spa-

nish in the Sudamericana editions. Because to read it was to read a master, Borges, reorganizing the world of a very loose kind of poet in prose –which is what Faulkner was, after all. But then I read other books by Hemingway, such as *The Sun Also Rises*. It's very funny, I read *For Whom the Bell Tolls* first and *The Sun Also Rises* after. It should have been the other way around.

*SJL: In English or in Spanish?*

**GCI:** In English. I read «The Killers» in Spanish, because it wasn't available in English at the time. Then when I got married in 1953, a man, a Spaniard where I worked, the old librarian in *Carteles*, gave me as a present *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine*, the collected short stories by Hemingway. But before that, I had read in English in *Life Magazine* «The Old Man and the Sea». It wasn't until many years later that I read the Lino Novás Calvo version. I was surprised that Hemingway considered him his best translator, because right at the end, not exactly in a secluded cove, was Lino Novás's flagrant mistake with the lions: calling the lions on the beach sea lions. That really struck me as curiouser, first for being a translation by Novás, authorized by Hemingway who apparently knew Spanish. The times I met Hemingway in Havana he always spoke English, not Spanish. Once he tried to speak Spanish and it was like Inspector Clousseau speaking English! From that you could infer that he really didn't even read the Spanish version of «The Old Man and the Sea», though he recommended it.

*SJL: We were talking about aspects of famous foreign writers, which did, or did not, have an impact on your own life and work. You have often spoken about your affinities with English culture, like Borges, and, speaking specifically of Joyce, you recently translated *Dubliners*. «The Dead», which you translated as «Los muertos» –the dead in plural–, has been considered one of the greatest stories in the English language. Besides its incredible musicality, what strikes you most about this story?*

**GCI:** That's because «El muerto» (in singular) sounds funny in Spanish.

*SJL: It's also the title of a story by Borges. Your choice of the plural seems most appropriate because the story is not only about one dead boy...*

**GCI:** «The Dead» is the most autobiographical of Joyce's stories. He was very jealous of a past love of his wife, a man, or rather a boy who died young. Joyce's wife Nora laughed at his jealousy over the dead, but for Joyce it was very real, and that young man is the Michael Fury in this story. Of course, the dead are more than just Michael Fury; it is also dead illusions and the past and the author himself.

*SJL: Very much, I suppose, like the Havana of a Dead Infante.*



Who gets read in what historical period and which regions are particularly drawn to the literatures of another linguistic culture: why Faulkner for example? We know of course that there were many compelling reasons why Faulkner had such an impact on Ibero-American writers; for one thing, as Garcia Márquez put it, Faulkner's South had much in common with the Caribbean world, ethnically, geographically, even socio-politically. Translation. Like film versions and remakes bring up for us questions –partially illuminated in Cabrera Infante's observations– about which texts and literatures get translated or remade, hence which texts get chosen to be «perpetually renewed».

Translation plays a significant role, in this regard, in the struggle between rival ideologies within and across national cultures, since what gets translated is often a function of the work's centrality or marginality in its original culture, and how it gets translated often depends on the political economy of textual production and reception in the target culture. A Marxist paradigm for translation posits it as «a way one culture appropriates and/or naturalizes what belongs to another; a way one culture deappropriates another by depriving it of its own proper meaning(s) and values and turning it into an indeterminate, exotic or inferior "Other"»<sup>3</sup>.

Another insight –a politically correct version of neo-nationalism– would again take for granted that such appropriation is unidirectional and top-down. Latin American literatures, for example, are seen as appropriated by Europe and North America; but, then again, Spanish-speaking writers seek actively, aggressively, mimetically, to be translated because of their economic or cultural marginalization but also, consequently, because they want a piece of the grand pie. It is true that «magical realism» –at first a marginal trend from marginal cultures– became a powerful or at least dominant cultures form not only given an exotic and distorted importance in exterior perceptions of Latin American culture, but it is also true that magical realism became a standard of creativity desired by writers and imposed on readers in the so-called developed nations. I make these observations not in judgment but rather in an effort to define the mutuality of the cultural moves within which translation is an instrumental player.

One of my motivations to translate Cabrera Infante, Sarduy and Puig was because they were marginal writers, and did not conform, precisely, to a dominant or fashionable mode, but rather brought to my reading a quirky originality, a new newness; their marginality and newness connected to something in me as a young woman from a marginal position within the mainstream. The translator, when not motivated by necessity, I do believe is compelled by elec-

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<sup>3</sup> Eve Tabor Bannet, «The Critic as Translator». *Postcultural Theory: Critical Theory after the Marxist Paradigm*. NY: MacMillan, 1993.

tive affinity: the remaker, the translator, operates with a strong identification, almost as a double.

This doubleness continues to hold sway over my latest move, as a biographer, not only translating Spanish American writers who renew their regional languages by transforming them into literary forms marked by postmodern sensibilities, but that, particularly in the case of Manuel Puig, I have stepped beyond recapturing the text, to recapturing the life. I began this work shortly after we lost Manuel Puig, the real person, to an early death in July 1990. Biography, like going to the movies, is another form of recapturing the past. A strong degree of identification (on my part as fellow movie-lover and as a sexual nonconformist) with Manuel influenced my choice to research and write this biography. Like translation, biography is yet another activity considered secondary, symbiotic, producing a text always to be measured against an original; in the case of literary biography, there are two originals: the author's life and works.