

# The Translator's Closet: Editing Sexualities in Argentine Literary Culture

## Le placard du traducteur : l'édition d'identités dans la culture littéraire argentine

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Article abstract

This article attempts to draw a theoretical line between closeted (homo)sexuality and translation through the example of the translational activity of those who collaborated on the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Argentine literary journal *SUR*: J. Bianco, E. Pezzoni, V. Ocampo, and H. A. Murena. Through a critical reading of explicit and thinly-veiled discourses on homosexuality in works both written and translated in this period, especially when placed in the context of theoretical discourses on translation, gender and sexuality, it reveals a question all the more unavoidable for present-day discussions: Is translation a closet, and if so, when and how?

# The Translator's Closet: Editing Sexualities in Argentine Literary Culture

Christopher Larkosh

The critic composes the biography of literature, which is his own autobiography. History of its modes of access, cartography of the paths that lead him to find/produce its meaning. To reveal and to be revealed. To unfold the game of beliefs, convictions, modes of perception. To be, in and through the text.<sup>1</sup>

- Enrique Pezzoni, *El texto y sus voces*, 1986

I think that I must have only gotten to the periphery of the coterie of *Sur*, although later I learned that there was actually no center, or that it was everywhere.

- J.J. Sebreli, "Victoria Ocampo, una mujer desdichada," 1997

## Is Translation a Closet? The "Seductive Challenges" of Gender in Translation

That is to say, what 'other' questions can emerge from the private and exclusive spaces—by way of explorations behind closed doors, as well as glances through those left a crack open—of the literary culture of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Buenos Aires: a metropolis characterized by increasing international recognition not only for its fiction, but also for its culture of literary translation? As is common in the global network of literary communication, writers will invariably double as translators, most notably Victoria Ocampo, who as the founder of the literary journal *Sur* can be counted as

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1 All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

one of Argentina's most influential cultural mediators, publishing and promoting her own works and those of others within what was to become one of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Argentina's most important importer/exporter of literary culture.

She was, however, hardly alone in this enterprise: the others who translated for *Sur*, including Enrique Pezzoni, José Bianco, and H. A. Murena, also formed part of this formidable translation machine. These sentiments may find an echo in the words of Pezzoni in reference to one of his translations:

Translating the *Antimemoirs* of André Malraux for Victoria Ocampo in 1968 was a fascinating experience. (...) It could not have been anything but a seductive challenge for one who translates. But the *Antimemoirs* symbolized an even more important experience to me: that of discovering in Malraux himself the translator *par excellence*. I'm not using the term in the metaphorical sense. We are all translators really; to live in contact with the world and the world of art is an act of permanent translation. (Pezzoni, 1986, p. 312)

In working for Victoria Ocampo, Pezzoni accepts an assignment that he describes as "seductive"; the fact that he mentions explicitly whom the translation was for leads one to ask whether it was not only the work to be translated but the relationship with Ocampo which exercised such a seductive pull over him. Pezzoni's view of translation, however, extends far beyond Ocampo and Malraux; Pezzoni believes everyone is a translator, and offers a potential commentary upon the limits of translatable space by including all of the real and imaginary spaces one inhabits, past, present and future. In a memoir that refuses to be one, both anti-memoir and anti-memory, translation acts in the place of history; not only does it actively work to uncover the previously unknown, but also rewrites that which is often too well known, understood too well on the basis of its original and the interpretations which depart from it. Pezzoni's experience with translation as seduction leads one to ask: what is the relationship between literary translation and sexuality, and is it possible to explore in projects of translation the desires, politics, personal fictions and even the silences of those who undertake this task of cross-cultural literary representation?

Pezzoni was the well-known translator of such works as Melville's *Moby Dick* and Nabokov's *Lolita* into Spanish. The latter translation, however, was published under the pseudonym Enrique Tejedor (lit. 'Henry Weaver'); although the names of 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors and translators are obviously not subject to translation into modern English, it is worth noting the metaphor of translation which the translator's pseudonym suggests, that of translation as weaving; be it the well-worn metaphorical 'fabric' in the form of a literary 'text,' the Orientalist 'veil' of anonymity, or as Pezzoni puts it, as being "in and through the text" which ultimately proves to be a transparent form of autobiography as well, as part of a kind of continually expanding weblike network of literary connection which the act of translation has only begun to suggest. Pezzoni's version of *Lolita* was among 20<sup>th</sup>-century Argentina's most controversial translations, one first suppressed by the government because of its sexual thematic; this act of censorship became the impetus for protests in the Argentine press which eventually allowed the work to be released.<sup>2</sup> Pezzoni's choice of pseudonym takes on all the more meaning: that of the translator who disguises himself in order to work in a cultural climate often hostile to his professional choices.

Moreover, it hardly seems impertinent today to mention that Pezzoni was also homosexual, as was the other male editor-in-chief of *Sur*, José Bianco; it is generally recognized today that the two were lovers at one time. Given that their sexuality is seldom if ever mentioned in written discussions of Pezzoni and Bianco as writers or translators,<sup>3</sup> yet invariably mentioned in spoken discussion about them. Although neither they nor many of their friends and colleagues have chosen to write openly about it, one might still ask whether there is any relationship between their homosexuality and their literary activity as translators, just

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2 See "El Caso Lolita" in which Argentine intellectuals—Victoria Ocampo, Jorge Luis Borges, Ernesto Sabato, H. A. Murena, Eduardo Mallea and Enrique Pezzoni, among others—respond to the municipal decree that judged the Spanish version of *Lolita* to be "immoral."

3 For an example of work on the translators of *Sur* that, surprisingly enough, opts not to address the topic of gender and sexuality, see Willson, 1997.

as one might ask the same of Victoria Ocampo and her own circumscribed and secretive sex life. How do the acts of editing a literary journal and the act of translation, the publishing and diffusion of other writers in another language employ mechanisms of self-separation and secrecy, in which one's own literary voice is alternately deferred or relegated to the margin: one that at times speaks most audibly when others are speaking? In short, can one speak of translation as a closet? To what extent can *Sur* be considered just this kind of literary closet for the writers and translators, regardless of the divergent sexual identities of those who were associated with it?

Despite the growing interest of questions of translation and gender throughout the 1980s and 90s to the present day, the relationship between translation and sexuality, and more specifically those forms of sexuality often considered to be beyond the limits of the normative, has still been given relatively less attention in the field of translation studies. Although George Steiner gives one vision of a possible relationship between translation and sexuality in his book *After Babel* ([1975] 1992), a book once considered by many to be the seminal critical work on literary translation, the idea is only briefly addressed. For Steiner, language and sex "generate the history of self-consciousness, the process, presumably millenary and marked by innumerable regressions, whereby we have hammered out the notion of self and otherness" (1992, p. 39). This relationship between self and other, imagined through language, is engaged in the continual process of defining "our" sexual identities through the definitions of taboos and other sexual restrictions. Steiner thus sets the limits of correct use of language in the same way that he sets the boundaries on acceptable sexual practices, culminating in a series of questions which may be viewed, at least within a paradigm of normative male heterosexuality, as an attempt to prospect on the frontiers of sexual identity:

In what measure are sexual perversions analogues of incorrect speech? Are there affinities between pathological erotic compulsions and the search, obsessive in certain poets and logicians, for a 'private language,' for a linguistic system unique to the needs and perceptions of the user? Might there be elements of homosexuality in the modern theory of language

(particularly in the early Wittgenstein) in the concept of communication as an arbitrary mirroring? (Steiner, 1992, pp. 39-40)

Steiner never goes as far as to articulate what the implications are for the act of translation if incorrect usage of language is connected to “perversions”; especially if translation appears outside of the conventional boundaries of sexual, national, linguistic identities. When the user of language goes ‘private,’ when the true nature of one’s sexual/linguistic behavior and desires cannot circulate publicly, but rather remains in the closet, is when he becomes pathological. This view of sexual perversion assumes that the user of language is keeping his private use a secret, and that s/he experiences his private practices as pathologies. In inquiring into the relationship between linguistic transgression and sexual pathology and perversion, his questions swiftly turn to homosexuality and sadism; it is assumed that it serves as an example of the general terms—“sexual perversions” and “pathological erotic compulsions”—which he has already alluded to. It is in this context, outside of the realm of normative language and sexuality, that Steiner expresses his curiosity on whether there might be elements of homosexuality in the modern theory of language, presumably departing from the knowledge that Wittgenstein was homosexual and the assumption that simply because homosexuals happen to have sex with another person of the same sex, that they must be seeking a “mirror” in sex, another way of worshipping themselves instead of attempting a relationship with another. But to what extent is the sexual partner or his/her language ever really the same? There is often little of the ‘homo’ in homosexuality beyond the initial physical similarities, as not all homosexuals choose partners of the same nationality, race, body type or physical appearance, any more than they limit themselves and their relationships on the basis of linguistic and cultural commonalities. It is this diversified and continually mutating vision of homosexuality which recalls the deceptively simple axiomatic premise of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her book *Epistemology of the Closet*: “People are different from each other” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 22). One might be tempted to add an additional corollary, however: that people are quite often (and perhaps most notably) *different from themselves* as well, both through language and over space and time. This difference,

moreover, is one that may be predicated even upon our choice of literatures, its languages of eroticism, its scenes of intimacy, and the spaces these choices create for imagining and translating between sexualities.

Such views of homosexuality as a form of narcissistic mirroring are not unknown to literary criticism in Argentina. In 1959 *Sur* published an article by the poet, critic and well-known translator H. A. Murena entitled “La erótica del espejo” [The Erotics of the Mirror], in which he equates homosexuality with the same metaphor of someone detained in front of a mirror: “the image of the mirror, a bit artificial if you will, (...) can be translated in a single word: self-idolization. But I am only interested in one of the forms of self-idolization: homosexuality.” (Murena, 1959, p. 21) For Murena, homosexuality becomes a problem precisely when it becomes articulated in language, is written down and enters the space of literature. He is especially concerned by the fact that a few years earlier a publishing house had been established in Buenos Aires to publish works written by homosexual writers.<sup>4</sup>

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4 A more detailed account of these events can be found in Juan José Sebreli's essay “Historia secreta de los homosexuales en Argentina,” which documents how during the late 1950s in Buenos Aires all expressions of homosexuality, whether in literature, in public or even in private, were subject to widespread police repression and violence under Police Chief Luis Margaride, “figura clave en la discriminación sexual”/“key figure in sexual discrimination” (Sebreli, 1997, pp. 322-324). The ironic nickname given to him by those he persecuted, “la Tía Margarita,” later came to be used to refer to the police in general. An openly gay cultural critic and author of the classic book on life in Buenos Aires in this period, *Buenos Aires: Vida cotidiana y alienación* (1964), Sebreli was also a former contributor to *Sur*, whose 1950 article “El sentido del ser a través de Oscar Wilde” was the first to bring the topic of homosexuality out of the literary closet in Argentina. He was also involved in subsequent publications that were founded in open opposition to *Sur*, in league with his long-time ‘co-antagonists.’ First, Carlos Correas, a cultural critic, Sebreli's one-time lover and author of a short story on a homosexual relationship entitled “La narración de la historia,” which caused a scandal when it was published in the university student literary review *Centro* in December of 1959, and for which he received a six-month suspended prison sentence. Second, Oscar Masotta, the psychoanalyst best known for his seemingly irreversible transformation of Argentine

For Murena this is merely one symptom of what he identifies as the rise of a “culture of homosexuality”: “homosexuality, by narrowing the horizon of procreation, is asking for the end of humanity”<sup>5</sup> (Murena, 1959, p. 26).

In Murena's essay, homosexuality, and male homosexuality in particular, is scapegoated for everything from fascism to communism, from world war to cultural decadence. The problem for Murena is not so much that homosexuals come out of the closet to intervene in national culture, but that they do not allow the heterosexual to remain ‘discreet.’ Murena thus feels obligated to fabricate urgency and decry this “culture of homosexuality” with which he is forced to come in contact, one which does not allow him to imagine his sexuality as representative of all men within his cultural milieu; what is most disturbing for him is that this culture, one he identifies as “homosexual,” is seen to force those of all sexual identities to categorize themselves. Here it appears that the ones who are in the closet are not homosexuals, but in fact a heterosexual who imagines himself besieged, obliged

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culture through his introduction of Lacanian thought to Buenos Aires. Sebreli's open discussion of sexuality, when paired with his self-admitted institutional “outsider” status, highlights the multiple interpretations of ‘being out’ in relation to established conduits of intellectual production, but also the institutional mechanisms of surveillance and control that often accompany them, both in authoritarian and ostensibly democratic societies. For a full confessional on the intellectual foundations, sexual desires and mutual antagonisms that fueled this intellectual triad, as well as other “in's and out's” of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Argentine intellectual culture, consult Correas (1991), Sebreli (1997), as well as Goldar (1992, pp. 92-98).

5 H. A. Murena, “La erótica del espejo.” Murena repeats this idea in his book *Homo atomicus* (1961), one whose title might now take on an unintentional double-meaning more ironic than etymological for the purposes of this discussion of translation and sexuality. The professional relationship between Bianco and Murena provokes a discussion of how faithful one can or should be, as translators or as editors, in the diffusion of what, by the author's own admission, are homophobic statements, especially in the political atmosphere in which “extermination” is openly debated as a “final solution” for homosexuals (Sebreli, 1997, p. 323). Once again I ask: Is translation a closet?



to maintain an uncomfortable, if ultimately untenable, opposition in order to maintain his sense of gendered primacy, the long-granted prerogative either to imagine himself universal, or the option to ignore sexuality altogether.

### **“The Story Won’t Tell”: Bianco’s Other “Turns of a Screw”**

It seems ironic that José Bianco was editor-in-chief of *Sur* when Murena’s article appeared; in spite of this supposed “culture of homosexuality,” Bianco evidently did not consider it prudent to exercise any editorial power to keep the article from being published. After all, when it came to *not* publishing, that was a distinction which he most often reserved for himself and his own work, a selective silence which may provide one of Argentine literature’s best examples of closeted writing. As his narrator states in the novella *Las ratas* (*The Rats*, 1943): “These pages will remain forever unpublished. In order to write them, however, I feel the need to imagine a reader, a hypothetical reader, who takes an interest in the things that I am about to tell. I need to start things from the very beginning” (Bianco, 1988, p. 50). This was also how his contemporary Jorge Luis Borges chose to remember him in what came to serve as the short preface to the anthology of stories and essays by Bianco entitled *Ficción y reflexión*, noting that it is seldom that a work begins recognizing that there is indeed a reader, if only an imaginary one. Borges reserves comment on the fact that in the story he quotes, this is the voice of a secret criminal, of one who cannot tell his own story, not out of modesty, but rather out of the knowledge that his story is too horrible to be told. Of course, these pages do not remain unpublished, but were written as if they were to be, and Bianco’s own hesitation is also legible in his dedication: “To Juan José Hernández who encouraged me to re-edit this short novel” (1998, p. 48). Like his character, Bianco must start with an imaginary reader in order to write and publish, in a scene intimately connected to the idea of going public. For the homosexual in a repressive society, publishing one’s own work may appear at times to be too close to the act of “going public”; translation, on the other hand, allows for a literary activity in which someone else’s name is on the line, and if that is not enough, there is always the option of the pseudonym both for writing and translation, as Pezzoni has

already demonstrated. Each writes to someone who is beyond the present knowledge of the author, and who tests the boundaries of the ability to speak; this writing resembles, not surprisingly, the challenge to communication that accompanies the arrival of the foreigner, one who cannot imagine the “terrible secret” which is involved in telling the whole story.

What happens to literature when the translator, in this case, the homosexual translator, begins to write his own text, and becomes an author? One might say that the translator has always been writing in a sense, or repeat the well-worn cliché that “the best writers are usually good translators.” But what about those who continue to be known primarily as translators, who dedicated most of their literary activity to translating, and in which the writing of fiction appears as the lesser activity? José Bianco is one of those writers who questions the secondary nature of translation, a questioning which is legible not only in the fact that his translated work far exceeds in volume that which he wrote himself, but also in the inclusion of the act of translation as a legible thematic which he explores in literature. Borges describes Bianco in the following manner in the brief introduction to *Ficción y reflexión*:

José Bianco is one of the premier Argentine writers and one of the least famous. The explanation is simple. (...) He dedicated more time to the disinterested and subtle task of translating. He has translated some 40 texts into Spanish; I remember his admirable version of the most famous of Henry James' stories: the title is, literally, *The Turn of the Screw*: Bianco, faithful to the complexity of this artist, gives us *Another Turn of the Screw*. (Borges, in Bianco, 1988, p. 9)

Borges suggests through his mention of Bianco's translation of Henry James that the translator's versions of foreign literary works put another “turn” upon the original, one which continues the unfinished task begun by the author, also when one remembers that translations are often referred to as “versions,” lit., the act of turning: “the translator's turn”<sup>6</sup> may follow that of the author,

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6 See Robinson (1991) in which the author examines the tropics and ethics of translation, departing from the multiple meaning of the word

but is not necessarily secondary. This second turn of the screw, completed through translation, leads one to wonder what it is in Henry James that one returns to when reading him in the context of José Bianco. Steiner, when writing of *The Turn of the Screw* in *After Babel*, says that this duplicity is what makes the work “untranslatable,” but I would argue the opposite, that in fact this undercurrent that appears to escape rearticulation is precisely that which makes this story eminently translatable, as the imagined “misery” of translation, this eternal fantasy of loss, collaborates in the reader’s inability to read the story: “‘The story won’t tell, (...) not in any literal vulgar way.’ ‘More’s the pity then. That’s the only way I’ll ever understand’.” (James, 1981, p. 5)

Sedgwick did well to begin with James in her study of closeted writing, for in this story as well, the writing is closed off, inaccessible: “The story’s written; it’s in a locked drawer. It has not been out for years.” It comes as no surprise that Bianco succeeds in translating not only this story which cannot be told, but the irresistible attraction of the inscrutable space which encloses it, one removed from the public eye; in Bianco’s turn, one may witness the translation as a doubly enclosed literary closet. One is reminded of his story “El límite,” in which the narrator talks about his rapport with the other students:

In boarding school we took special care not to confide too much in others. Although there was solidarity among the students,

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“turn”: “In the tropics of translation, these ‘turns’ are tropes (from the Greek for turn), active modeling patterns for the interpretive shaping first of the SL text, the ‘original,’ the text from which the translator translates, and then of the TL text, the translation, the text the translator creates. In the ethics of translation, the ‘turns’ of my title are versions (from the Latin for turn), active modeling patterns for the shaping of purpose with respect to the TL receptor. Traditionally, translators (have been taught to) imagine their ethical task as one of introversion, self-effacement (...) What happens when the translator conceives his task differently, as conversion, for example, or subversion or perversion, or inversion, or reversion?” (Robinson, 1991, pp. xv-xvi) Here Robinson allows the possibility for the translator’s turn to be one that turns away not only from the original and its language, but also the tropes that have traditionally governed it, making other versions of sexuality in translation possible.

that which concerned one's private life, family or loved ones outside of school remained a secret place, walled off by silence, irretrievable to those outside. With a certain not unmiserly fervor, each one kept to himself this treasure that the memories of his mother, his sisters or his girlfriend represented for fear of inciting the mockery or indiscretions of others. I, who had a superficial relationship to my classmates, became good friends with Jaime Meredith, an English boy. (1988, p. 14)

In this enclosed society, the students must build their own cells to protect themselves from one another. Solidarity is superficial, one that pretends that there is nothing to tell, creating a series of walled off spaces where stories cannot circulate. One might go so far as to say that it is a closeted style, in which everyone has built a 'closet of one's own,' one that never gives clues to the private life, yet allows a reading of its sexuality throughout, owing to the simple fact that simply by pointing at its door, there is already sufficient evidence as to where the closet is.

Moreover, by taking the image of the turning screw out of James' original and using it as a means to talk about its translation, Borges suggests that strategies of literary translation may follow a metaphor for translation derived from a trope embedded in the original. Whether this metonymy consciously guided Bianco's translation of James is unknown, but with it Borges illustrates how translations suggest a rereading of the literary work, at the same time that the literary work allows a preview of its translation. One might expect the imminent arrival of the translator when the call to the translator is already being made from the original.<sup>7</sup> This idea of translation as a work whose image can be seen in the reading of some fragment of the original even before the act of translation is begun, is one which disregards even the convention of temporal sequence between original and translation as first and second, and thus gives a typically Borgean reading to another

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7 Although this idea is discussed at length most recognizably today throughout the philosophical writings of Jacques Derrida, and not only those that explicitly address questions of translation (1982), the writings of the German tradition of translation studies—Schleiermacher, Humboldt and Goethe—also provide additional historical perspective for the exploration of this idea, as Berman's work ([1984] 1992) affirms.

activity which he attributes to Bianco: reflection. Reflection in this context is not only that of thinking over the ideas before the reader, but also one which suggests the act of translation as mirroring, although Murena's treatment of homosexuality as a sort of mirroring may lead us to question if this homosexual translator really finds himself when he translates, or whether he had even set out to "find" himself to begin with. On the contrary, in a literary milieu in which the open expression of his sexuality is met with hostility, the closeted translator may translate to do exactly the opposite, to escape unwanted attention, finding in the conventionally most desirable characteristics of the translator—self-effacement, modesty, deference—the ultimate literary refuge: in the acceptance of one's place, dutifully turning the screws of this increasingly all-consuming translation machine.

In this study of translation and sexuality, I have up to this point concentrated on the role of translated literature in the remaking of a literary tradition. In Bianco's work, however, the translator assumes an additional place: that of a fictionalized character in the literary work itself. Bianco's novella *Sombras suele vestir* (1941) is read, both explicitly and figuratively, as a *fiction of translation*, i.e., a literary work that reflects upon the act of translation by depicting translators as fictional characters or narrators of a story. Much like that of his precursor James (as the choice to translate an author may be one of the most explicit ways of, as Borges puts it, choosing one's precursors), Bianco's style is one which tells the story by not telling it, suppressing important details, leaving to interpretation the story's secrets. Like the title of his story, his style is one that dresses itself in shadows, exploring in this literary obscurity scenes of translation that illustrate at times the range of its promise and potential for degradation.

*Sombras suele vestir* has as its female protagonist Jacinta, a working-class woman who enters into a romance with a Swiss-Argentine businessman, Bernardo Stocker, a man living between the European culture of his father and that of the city of his birth, Buenos Aires. His father had not been a particularly religious man, but was nonetheless especially interested in the theological debates related to the translation of the world's most

translated work, the Bible, known in German as “der Bibel-Babel Streit” (Lehmann, 1990). This is only one of the levels in which translation makes its appearance, however; Jacinta, in the attempt to support her family, is compelled to perform different tasks which, when compounded, contribute to her growing sense of “degradation”:

She did not deplore her encounters in the house of María Reinoso. They allowed her to become independent of Doña Carmen, to support her family. Furthermore, they were non-existent encounters; silence annihilated them. Jacinta felt free, clean of her acts on an intellectual level. But things changed from that afternoon onwards. She felt that someone was recording and interpreting her actions; now it was the silence itself that seemed to preserve them, and the desirous and distant men to whom she prostituted herself began to weigh strangely upon her conscience. Doña Carmen was making another image of Jacinta emerge, a Jacinta degraded and one connected to the men; perhaps the true image of Jacinta, a Jacinta created by others and for that reason, one who escaped her control. (...) She abandoned all aspirations of changing her lifestyle. She made no further efforts. She had started to translate a work from English. They were chapters of a scientific book, partially unpublished, which appeared simultaneously in a number of medical journals all over the world. Once a week they handed her thirty pages printed on mimeograph paper, and when she returned them translated and retyped (she bought a typewriter in an auction at the Banco Municipal); they handed her more. She went to the translation agency, gave back the last chapters, and did not take any more.

She asked Doña Carmen to sell her typewriter.  
(Bianco, 1988, p. 24)

In this story, the protagonist appears as both prostitute and translator, as living lover and haunting apparition. Her work takes her from sexual acts which at first seem to have nothing to do with the intellect but which slowly reveal their effect upon the conscience, to the translation of a scientific book of global circulation. The economy of this translation seems little different from that of prostitution; it is that of the *entrega*, a word that in Spanish is literally “delivery” but also connotes giving oneself over to another’s pleasure. When juxtaposed with the act of

prostitution, the resulting metaphorization of translation may reveal an uncomfortable parallel with those compromising situations in a translator's career from which one departs in a hurry, having consented only out of economic necessity; in the case of Jacinta, however, they are ones from which distance is ultimately impossible, as she continues to initiate contact with either the other bodies implicit in these sexual encounters, while abandoning her typewriting machine, whose characters she had touched in order to survive through translation.<sup>8</sup>

Here we are at the very limit of the translator's degradation, and perhaps, for this very reason, at the furthest point from Victoria Ocampo as the privileged "translating woman" (Larkosh, 2002), complete with the elaborate cultural and literary translation machine that she built around herself. Bianco speaks openly in the interviews that form part of *Ficción y reflexión* about how many of the translation jobs he performed over the years were not the satisfying literary projects he had hoped they might be, but were in fact at times extremely displeasurable. There was, however, never any explicit mention to homosexuality in his fiction, and it is this open secret that he and many of those around him maintained, at least in print, until the very end.

### **V.O. and T.E.: Landscapes and Machines in Translation**

If the literary activity of Bianco and Pezzoni can be characterized by an apparent silence with respect to both their own homosexuality and that of others, this is not the case in the literary activity of Victoria Ocampo. Not only does she address the topic directly in her own writings, one may even detect a measure of identification with the literary personages of varying sexual orientations whom she chose to represent and translate.<sup>9</sup> T. E.

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8 The relationship drawn here between translation and prostitution, if not other forms of what Sebreli calls "submissive courtesanship to tyrannical power" (Sebreli, 1997, p. 15), is discussed further in Larkosh (2004, pp. 184-187).

9 As in a 2002 article on Victoria Ocampo, I am less interested in Lawrence than in how Victoria reads his work; i.e., in the ways her representation of and identification with Lawrence is mediated by the act

Lawrence was undoubtedly one of Victoria's most beloved heroes; not only did she translate his work, but she also translated her own work about him as well, in the form of a book originally written in the language she was most comfortable in, French, and eventually published in Spanish and English translations. 338171 *T. E.*: this encoded title alludes to the anonymity Lawrence sought behind a serial number by enlisting in the Royal Air Force after his involvement in the British campaign on the Arabian peninsula during World War I. Again the act of literary interpretation is linked to the desire to diminish one's own importance in the presence of the deceased literary master, one who in this case has made the quest for self-effacement his *raison d'être*.

This may be part of what Victoria is able to grasp and convey in her writing on Lawrence, a dedication to her subject so complete that it draws the attention of his brother in the introduction to the English edition of the book: "[T]his dead man exerted an obsessive fascination upon her. It had induced her not merely to read but to memorise everything relevant to understanding him, and she fitted together all the fragmentary information with the accuracy of a computing machine." (In Ocampo, 1963, p. 15) Lawrence's brother is impressed that a woman from a culture so different from that of his brother might understand him so well ("the most profound and best balanced portraits of my brother," p. 13). The only reason he can think of for this improbable instance of transcultural understanding is the fact that Victoria's Argentine pampa has often evoked the same limitless expanse as did the Arabian desert (p. 17); this is by no means a forced comparison, as this is in fact a recurrent parallel in Argentine literature thanks to Sarmiento's classic work *Facundo* ([1845] 2004). There were many other similarities, however; Lawrence was both a man of action and a man of letters; *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926) is a war narrative, one bound and sold to a limited number of subscribers in a luxury volume replete with color illustrations, in a way reminiscent of Burton's *1001 Nights*

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of (self-) translation. It would be impossible to overlook Silverman's 1992 study on Lawrence through the double lens of film and psychoanalysis, and I would go so far as to suggest that female subject positionalities could also be approached here from the same cross-identificatory gender perspective.



(Borges, 1989, p. 403), were it not for the fact that Lawrence, although enlisted in the British Armed Forces, fought not only for Britain but presumably for a country that existed only in his own imagination; as Ocampo writes, “the ideal country for which he wanted to fight was one for which the human spirit had never found a name” (Ocampo, 1963, p. 63). This unwavering sense of mission, however vague in its alliances, was evidently another source of Victoria’s admiration for him.

In the statement made by T.E.’s brother, the recurrent metaphor of the translation machine reaches a higher level of technological progress; as a “computing machine,” it echoes the desire of postwar technocrats for a greater automation of the art, one in which the translation machine’s human element might even be eliminated entirely.<sup>10</sup> This “computing machine” serves the project of translation, while operating simultaneously in a war zone.<sup>11</sup> Ocampo’s self-deployment on Lawrence’s literary battlefield of British imperial expansion raises the question of whether it is truly possible to act in between conflicting cultural loyalties, fighting not only for one’s fatherland and the liberation of a loved one, but also for an imaginary empire?

If the act of empire building can be imagined a labor of love between two men, a myth of empire as old as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, it is one that Lawrence eagerly affirms: “I liked a particular Arab and thought freedom for the race would be an acceptable present.” This Arab, known by the abbreviation S. A., is also presented as “an imaginary person of neutral sex.” It occurs to Victoria as an afterthought that his enlistment in the R. A. F. made any explicit mention of homosexuality out of the question. Victoria addresses the issue of Lawrence’s homosexuality in her book. One should remember that this was written in Argentina in 1942, and in this context her treatment appears extraordinarily empathetic, especially in light of the fact that few if any homosexuals dared to write as openly on the topic as she did. Victoria, although presumably heterosexual, was no stranger to

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10 A prime example of this sentiment is elaborated in Mounin (1954).

11 Two other translation theorists who have elaborated upon this issue in a contemporary context include Apter (2005) and Baker (2006).

'forbidden love'; her relationship with Julián Martínez is perhaps an example of the "closeted" side of her own love life, one which ironically could have made her understanding of the presumably open secrecy of Lawrence's closeted homosexuality all the more possible. In this way T. E.'s male 'homosexuality' and Victoria's perhaps more outwardly subtle form of "female masculinity" *avant la lettre* (Halberstam, 1998) intersect in this act of literary cross-identification as one is translated into the other:

In literature, homosexual relations are always the subject of detailed grandiloquent justifications and scientific reflections, or of obscure twisted explanations, clouded by feeling of guilt or sickly weakness which passes from lament to bragging. He who does not ask forgiveness, praises himself; that is, when he doesn't do both at the same time. (Ocampo, 1942, pp. 79-80)

What Lawrence's brother called Ocampo's "obsessive fascination" could also be conceived in terms of a literary fantasy of the foreign, one performed through the refashioning of his work in Spanish translation and a retelling of his story in her own words. In effect, what does Victoria want from 338171 T.E.? Adventure, action, glory? Does she want to accompany him on his journey, be with him or, closer yet, imagine herself as him, perhaps even play the title role in this narrative through her own translation? After all, Victoria had always wanted to be on the stage, and now she has the institutional position of power to make it possible. And he had a life, a death, and the story to go with it.

For this reason, one might go so far as to say that nowhere in Ocampo's work are the conventional divisions of gender and sexuality called into question as explicitly as in this scene of the translating, 'presumably heterosexual' woman, approaching the translated, avowedly 'out' homosexual man with all the exactitude of a machine in her attempt to capture and retransmit the "very essence" of the warrior Lawrence (an act that, at a later historical moment, might well raise questions, however dehistoricizing they may ultimately be, regarding the "essentializing" nature of this sort of translational project across sexuality and gender). For instance, in one section of her book, she focuses on what she perceives as two areas of traditionally masculine activities, that of war and of machines:

Lawrence was right in thinking that women cannot comprehend machines; for women are excluded from the idolatry of machines, and because men can take refuge in the temples in which these machines are adored with the certainty that there they will not be bothered by the presence of women.

With machines there is no possible transformation or transposition. A connecting rod is a connecting rod, a boiler a boiler, a screw a screw. (Ocampo, 1942, p. 100)

It is unclear who is speaking at this point as the voice of the critic weaves in and out of that of her translated author, the signal blurred most noticeably in the use of the third person plural—"they"—to refer to women, as if her interpretation had allowed her to cross over to another position of gender. The voice translates here as the male perception of woman, and underscores the way in which she is 'cross-dressing her language,' as if it were that of Lawrence, much in the same way he dressed up to cross the boundaries of culture and to pass into another relationship with the limits of Western notions of homosexuality.

As for Ocampo's own relationship to technology, remember that this is a woman who drove a car in Argentina when it was still considered improper for women to do so; she was certainly not about to accept the idea that women were incapable of understanding machines, yet she was undoubtedly willing to recognize that they have all too often been denied the necessary access to the knowledge which allows an understanding of technology. If her interpretation is indeed like a machine, functioning well enough to convince T.E.'s brother of her "high fidelity" in relaying Lawrence's message, then perhaps, before this masculine machine of language, a screw is *not* always a screw, as she, in her subtle irony, is giving it yet another turn.

This apparently male machine is not completely impenetrable; after all, it is into this very territory of war and machines which Ocampo at first imagines forbidden to her sex that she ultimately dares to enter through the acts of writing and translation. One factor not taken into account in this vision of technology is that machines *do* change as does the language which describes them, each age providing a series of technological advances and corresponding technological metaphors which

attempt to interpret the age through its latest developments: the railroad, the telegraph, the radio, the telephone, cinema. Twenty years after Victoria's initial publication of the book, one can witness how T. E.'s brother has already stepped far ahead of Victoria's earlier discussion of the machine with his introduction of the computer onto the scene of interpretation; here the translator herself is implicated and "translated" in this machine of war and language as the imperial narrative continues to imagine, chronicle and add to its own victories.

Through the act of literary translation, Ocampo's fascination with Lawrence's imperial adventure continues; she would later translate *The Mint* (*El troquel*, 1955), the narrative of his complete submission to the war machine and the voluntary erasure of his individuality. She voluntarily enlists in a project of translation that she nonetheless describes as a "horrible experience," one to which, once having visited it, she does not wish to return. What, however, could be a more fitting reason to translate the disagreeable and the degrading but in the same way that Lawrence chooses them: voluntarily? As one of 'the freest of all translators,' those with the luxury of translating for pleasure, Victoria ironically takes on the ultimate narrative of institutional degradation, perhaps precisely because there is no one to assign her these tasks, as she is too powerful within her own apparatus of cultural production to take assignments from anyone.

In attempting to understand Ocampo's desire to understand and translate (and perhaps thereby experience both vicariously and intensely) Lawrence's degradation, it should be borne in mind that understanding does not always result merely from two people being similar, sharing a common nationality, language, culture, sexuality or race; this elusive and rare sort of understanding, one which is the result not of a comfortable similitude but often of an irreconcilable difference. Out of such an apparently different relationship to other cultures, Ocampo was nonetheless able to understand T. E.'s relationship to the foreign, one that developed out of this long-standing 'close encounter' with another people, as well as their language, customs, and culture. Lawrence attempts to explain his relationship to this other culture of the Arabs in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*:

Pray God men reading the story will not, for love of the glamour of strangeness, go out to prostitute themselves and their talents in serving another race.

In my case, the effort for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the west and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me. At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin: it was an affectation only. Easily was a man made an infidel, but hardly might he be converted to another faith. I had dropped one form and not taken on another, and was become like Mohammed's coffin in our legend, with a resultant feeling of intense loneliness in life, and a contempt, not for other men, but for all they do. Such detachment came at times to a man exhausted by prolonged physical effort and isolation. His body plodded on mechanically, while his reasonable mind left him, and from without looked down critically upon him, wondering what that futile lumber did and why. Sometimes these selves would converse in the void; and then madness was very near, as I believe it would be near the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments. (Lawrence, 1935, pp. 31-32)

This warning against "serving another race" is an extremely pessimistic one, as the taking up of not only another culture's external appearance, its dress, language and customs, but also of its political aims and ambitions. The external and internal cannot be so neatly distinguished, as such cultural contact, unless it is met with a complete resistance, is never completely external, as the other eventually 'gets inside'; this may be why Lawrence, like Bianco, presents translation as a form of cultural prostitution, with the intercultural migrant cast as the receptive partner in a violent sexual act. One is reminded of the passage in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* made famous by the director David Lean in his famous 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*, where the title character is captured by the enemy and raped by the Bey: this Ottoman overlord attracted not by any bodily similarity, but by difference that Lawrence's white skin represented, as it was, at least according to his own account, that attribute which made him sexually attractive. When he affirms, "I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin," the skin acquires, through its physical appearance, a sense beyond touch. This acquired sensibility is

precisely what brings on those acts of torture and abuse which his dark-skinned Arab 'comrades-in-arms' would presumably not be subjected to; in this context, the metaphor of rape and penetration often invoked in studies of translation and war "after Babel" is hardly a metaphor, but rather just one more instance of imperial power and colonial domination—here Ottoman, and elsewhere no doubt under a banner of a different color—exercised in the form of violent and ultimately traumatic acts. Lawrence describes his own body after this contact; as it adopts the characteristics of the machine, it is reduced to yet another commodity changing hands at the border of empires.

### **Tentative Steps Toward A Way 'Out'**

Once again: Is translation a closet? For those still seeking straight answers to the speculative questions of translation theory, the answer would be, somewhat predictably: yes, especially if the translator wants it to be, and there are enough readers and collaborators embedded in his or her social milieu willing or otherwise compelled to play along. Ultimately, however, when one talks about the in/betweenness which results from intercultural contact, one which ultimately allows no definitive return to one's native culture without the continual critical intervention of that knowledge obtained on the outside, one might do better to question whether it is necessary to leave one's own culturally determined enclosure in order to arrive at this ability to reflect upon the self and its increasingly penetrable limits; women, homosexuals, ethnic minorities and colonized subjects have often had little need to leave their own societies in order to encounter models of power and control from which they find themselves excluded, and with which they must continually negotiate nonetheless. Whether in the closet, out, or on the threshold (for does not the alternating current of secret and revelation that emanates from each of us continually detain us here, once again, in/between?), these compromised figures often negotiate the terms of this encounter as a means of survival.

From their own positions of varying power and influence, Ocampo, Bianco, Pezzoni and other Argentine literary 'fenómenos,' both native and translated, thus attempt this critical encounter with the foreign, testing thereby the limits of their

own identities and those of others. These translators appear not only as faithful or closeted subjects, but also as cultural double agents, darting in and out of their assigned spaces and identities, simultaneously mediating between and calling into question dominant models and societal formations, even as they continue to be subject to them. And at the same time, they continue to look back into literature, both in the original and in translation, as a means to imagine and express their own personal visions of self and other, ones that by now, inside or 'out,' have become inseparable parts of that shared tradition.

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**ABSTRACT: The Translator's Closet: Editing Identities in Argentine Literary Culture** — This article attempts to draw a theoretical line between closeted (homo)sexuality and translation through the example of the translational activity of those who collaborated on the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Argentine literary journal *SUR*: J. Bianco, E. Pezzoni, V. Ocampo, and H. A. Murena. Through a critical reading of explicit and thinly-veiled discourses on homosexuality in works both written and translated in this period, especially when placed in the context of theoretical discourses on translation, gender and sexuality, it reveals a question all the more unavoidable for present-day discussions: Is translation a closet, and if so, when and how?

**RÉSUMÉ : Le placard du traducteur : l'édition d'identités dans la culture littéraire argentine** — Cet article vise à tracer une ligne théorique entre l'(homo)sexualité du placard et la traduction à travers l'exemple des activités traductrices de collaborateurs de la revue littéraire argentine du vingtième siècle *SUR* : J. Bianco, E. Pezzoni, V. Ocampo et H. A. Murena. Par une lecture critique des discours explicites et voilés sur l'homosexualité dans des œuvres écrites et traduites pendant cette période, surtout dans le contexte des discours théoriques sur la traduction, le *genre* et la

sexualité, une question s'avère encore plus incontournable pour la discussion actuelle : la traduction est-elle un placard, et si oui, quand et comment?

**Keywords:** Argentina, literary culture, (homo)sexuality, closet, SUR Group.

**Mots-clés :** Argentine, culture littéraire, (homo)sexualité, placard, Groupe SUR.

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