2011

The New Task of the Translator in Contemporary Latin American Fiction: The Case of Alan Pauls' The Past

Martín L. Gaspar
Bryn Mawr College, mgaspar@brynmawr.edu

Citation
Martín L. Gaspar. "The New Task of the Translator in Contemporary Latin American Fiction: The Case of Alan Pauls' The Past." Latin American Literary Review 78 (2011): 73-92.

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The New Task of the Translator in Contemporary Latin American Fiction: The Case of Alan Pauls’ *The Past*

Translator characters are everywhere in contemporary Latin American novels. The mid-1990s saw the rise of the translator as a character type, and by now its presence has become ubiquitous.1 The literary representation of translators is of course not new in the history of Latin American letters, but their fictionalization in the role of protagonists is new, the proliferation unique, and the timing a fact to ponder. The figure of the translator as facilitator or champion of intercultural exchange, which occupies the center of translation theory’s recent revival, does not accurately describe the protagonists in these novels. They are not figures in an allegory, nor do they represent a way of engaging foreign cultures and languages; instead, they are complex characters defined by personal subjectivities, traits, dispositions, and powers.2 Rather than a cultural question (What should be translated? How should a culture approach a foreign literature?), translation in these novels is a narrative problem that seeks resolution in the realm of character.

When certain professions or activities attract literary sensibilities, they often become instrumental for the novelistic exploration of prevailing social preoccupations. In Latin America, for example, tales of ethnographers—from Una excursión a los indios ranqueles (1870) to Los pasos perdidos (1952) and El hablador (1987)—have enabled writers to stage intellectuals’ difficulty in understanding local subjects and relating to them, and “novels of the dictator” have enabled the treatment of the personal in politics through fictional biographies of political figures. Beyond the local tradition, a classic example is the ad canvasser Leopold Bloom in Ulysses. As Moretti points out, a publicist’s mind offered a paradigmatic way to navigate a modern metropolis saturated with semiotics and possibilities—a mind and temperament that had stream-of-consciousness and polyphony as formal consequences.3 My hypothesis is that similar to the way that ethnography contributed plots to Latin American fiction and advertising a style to Ulysses, the practice of translation provides the key character for Latin American novels to explore contemporary anxieties.

The interest in the translator cannot be explained on a merely biographical basis. Although many novelists in the region have been, or are, translators, they are certainly not the first translators/writers in Latin American literary history. It is more accurate to trace the rise of this character to a new place of translation in the globalized marketplace, where the need for linguistic mediations is a sorely necessary nuisance, like a yellow subtitle on the screen. The translator character is at the same time past and very present, and therefore productive for literary explorations. As Agamben (following Nietzsche) put it, contemporary conditions can only be seen through untimely and anachronic lenses.4

The current anxieties explored through the translator character are about the fluidity of contemporary subjectivities at times when interiorities and bodies are assailed by foreign languages, planned obsolescence, and "naturalized" historical processes such as globalization. Let me illustrate this point with three examples: Chico Buarque's Budapeste (2003), Mario Bellatin's Shiki Nagaoka: una nariz de ficción (2001), and Salvador Benesdra's El traductor (1998). Buarque's novel narrates the need for and difficulty in defining a cultural allegiance along linguistic and national lines through a Brazilian character that, after landing accidentally in Hungary, falls for the Hungarian language and a Hungarian woman. His identity becomes ambiguously nomadic between "Jose Costa" and the Hungarian version, "Zsoze Kósta." Mario Bellatin's novel explores the unruly body as an alternative in a suffocatingly enclosed culture: Nagaoka is born with a nose so long and foreign in his environment that translation becomes for him inevitable, productive, liberating but also alienating. In Salvador Benesdra's novel, the translator Zevi tries to connect the post-ideological era with the local labor strife in Argentina, with his relationship with his girlfriend, and with his translations of a disturbing neofascist thinker. Translation expresses the yearn for a coign of vantage to understand reality. In Buarque's, Bellatin's, and Benesdra's very different novels, translation is an operation that defines subjectivities intimately—it exceeds linguistic and cultural definitions and produces identities, bodies, and hermeneutics.

In what follows, I will examine another novel of the translator: Alan Pauls' El pasado [The Past] (2003), one of the most important and controversial Latin American narratives in the first decade of the 21st century. This novel explores the paradox (or dialectic) between amnesia and anamnesia in contemporary times.5 In other words, it produces a narrative where what Bauman calls the contemporary search for "new beginnings"—and painless endings, with an emphasis on forgetting—is in tension with an irresistible fascination with the past.6 The personal search for a new beginning, I argue, parallels a dilemma in Argentine culture: how to avoid the pull of traumatic local history without adopting an amnesic and politically reactionary approach. Translation surfaces throughout this novel as a recurrent choice that defines the protagonist's temperament, haunts the plot, and informs the narrative style and the treatment of memory. Larger conceptual questions arise from the imbrication of translation and memory in the novel: To what extent can translation and memory be analogous? What are the politics of this analogy? How can translation address a political problem, in this case through incessant commentary? Finally, I will read the phenomenon of novels of the translator as a counterpoint to current critical trends. Instead of signaling openness to the foreign in a dizzyingly globalized marketplace, translation in The Past and other novels speaks of local subjects and subjectivities.

Translation, Memory, and the Long Novel

The Past, winner of the reputed Premio Herralde in 2003, has been widely

read in Latin America and Spain in general, and in Argentina in particular. Eleven editions later, the novel still fascinates and annoys, the latter because of its length. Upon publication, it was accused of being "an absurdity," proclaimed "excessive," "hypertrophied," even "fat."7 The consensus was that Pauls, renowned Argentine novelist and critic, was a good writer who had spent five years on an experiment gone too long. The problem had to be qualitative, since a 550 page Latin American novel is certainly not an aberration—on the contrary, long novels have been habitual in the region since some of the "novels of the earth" in the 1940s, through the "total novel" of the 1960s, to the historical novels of the 1970s and 80s, and the expansive fictions of Roberto Bolaño more recently.8 Neither is length a particularly negative trait in the contemporary novel. "What is wanted now," complained a 2004 article in World Literature Today, "is the long book, the verbose tome, the panoramic performance, the epic, the historical" (Gunnars 21). But The Past is uncomfortable because it lacks the typical characteristics of the long format. Unlike the total novel and the historical novel, Pauls' does not exude an epic drive or a sense of historical breadth. Unlike the experimental novel, it does not defy genres—at least not in a conventionally unconventional way. Indeed, it is a restricted and focused narration that follows a rather simple structure: a translator wants to forget his former wife, but his various attempts at beginning afresh are thwarted by her presence or traces and by his own memories; in the end the protagonist returns to her. Because of this plot structure The Past was labeled, alternatively but not contradictorily, a "sentimental serial novel" and a psychological novel (Sarlo 447, Caster).9 Although serials and character psychologies need space, length in this novel originates elsewhere: myriad details, and an inordinate number of theories and explanations.

There is an abundance of "secondary" materials and what may be called "mini-histories" in the novel: the tale of the changing color and smell of an envelope; a discussion on the evolution of tennis; the biography of an obscure elementary school teacher; the story of a kind of sweater; and a fifty-five page excursus on the making and long journey of a work of art.10 Amidst this plethora, however, a puzzling silence has attracted the critics' attention: History, understood as a structure that would provide a meaningful background or somewhat account for character motivation or impact the character's life, is nowhere to be seen. With its occasional flashbacks, the novel narrates the life of a middle aged man born in 1959 (like Pauls himself), but where are the political events, where is the State, where is the social sphere? Historical context is absent: the narrator focuses instead on delicate psychological nuances, details, anecdotes, and mini-histories. In the context of Argentine letters, this absence of History has been understood as a decision: as Beatriz Sarlo put it, "Pauls programmatically explores what it would be like to write a fiction without politics and without History, that would dispense with its allegories and representations" (447, my translation).

"History" is insignificant in the novel. Prior to answering why this is the case (or even whether the question is justified), I would like to address the formal, narrative question. This is a strange, uncomfortable novel about

the occupation of memory—undoubtedly the central theme of The Past—that insistently "thinks small," and it does so by deploying two literary devices: a translator character and an obsessive narrator. The translator protagonist is obsessed with forgetting his ex-wife and finding a new beginning. The narrator, by focusing on this character, produces an exuberant narrative about subtle and "unimportant" histories. This failed desire to forget, on the one hand, and a surplus of commentary on the other, makes all past in the novel personal or limited, thus negating History as a cardinal orientation. I argue that in order to explore contemporary personal and collective preoccupations with memory, Pauls chose the translator as character and translation as a narrative model that permeates The Past: it is present in the choice of plot, the treatment of setting, and the style of the novel.

I. Translation of Plot: Transference

"For some time now, I have grown used to being dead." The Past's epigraph is taken from Wilhelm Jensen's Gradiva (1903), a narrative that survived the test of time due to Freud's 1906 analysis and what it meant to surrealism.11 The plot and theme are reminiscent of The Past in many respects, and worth recalling among the many proposed intertexts of Pauls' novel.12 Jensen's fiction narrates the archaeologist Norbert Hanold's fascination for a Roman bas-relief that portrays a walking Greek woman, Gradiva. Obsessed by the work of art, he travels to Pompeii in search of its original representation. Once there he meets Zöe Bertrang, a neighbor from his German town that at first pretends to be the ghostly Gradiva (victim of the 79 A.D. Vesuvius eruption) and then gradually reveals her true identity. Beyond analyzing Jensen's novel as emblematic of repression, Freud's objective is to praise the way in which the feminine character performs the analytic work, disclosing her identity to the archaeologist in steps, therapeutically.

The prominent position of Gradiva's quote situates The Past already in the field of translation—rather, in the case of Jensen's novel, in that of a retranslation that recuperates the original: in Freudian terms, a cure through interpretation (Traumdeutung) of the distortions and transpositions created by dreams (Traumarbeit). The novel's plot is, indeed, the narration of the passage from Gradiva to Zöe Bertrang, from Greek and Latin to German, from Pompeii to Hamburg, from representation to presence. The structure of the novel corresponds to a group of terms that need to be de-translated, un-buried, by the psychoanalytic work. And translating in order to recuperate the original is what Freud does, literally, in his analysis.13 Freud—who already in The Interpretation of Dreams associated hieroglyphic decipherment to psychoanalysis—postulates in translation terms the name, the defining attribute, and the spatiotemporal relocation of the real Zöe.14 From the Italian archeological ruin, then, to the repressed object of desire of Hanold's past. Profession here is relevant. Once he "cures" her beloved, Zöe comments that it is curious that "a person must die to become alive again; but for archaeologists that is of course necessary" (Jensen 110).

The feminine character plays a similar role in Pauls' and Jensen's novels. The Past tells the story of Rímini, a translator who seeks to escape from under the weight of his personal past with his ex-wife, Sofía, but returns to her in the end. Sofía insistently invades the translator's present to remind him of the original past, and in order to do so she becomes somewhat spectral or dead very much like Zöe (at one point, Pauls' novel was titled The Zombie Woman.) The narrative in The Past begins, in fact, with a ghostly reminder of Sofía's presence. She mails Rímini a photograph, and when "he brought the photograph closer [...] he could see the reflection of the flash, the small automatic camera, and finally, like a crown of shining light, the great blond halo of Sofía's hair" (7). (That Rímini smells and observes the minutest details in the envelope and then performs a visual "blow-up" of the photograph are typical gestures in the novel—we will return to this later.) Through questions, notes, appearances and apparitions, then, both Sofía and Zöe guide the male protagonists to the recovery of a memory that has been repressed—unconsciously, in the case of Hanold, intentionally and desperately in that of Rímini—utilizing a method that Freud called first "cathartic" and then "analytic."15 A translational model informs the plot of The Past just as it does Gradiva's. Pauls', like Jensen's, is a novel of repression.

But with a major difference. In Gradiva, translation leads to decipherment, motivates action and brings the novel to an end. In generic terms, the narrative is close to a detective novel: there is a conclusion that brings sjuzhet to fabula—translation-Traumdeutung casts light on the riddle, closing it up.16 In Pauls' novel, on the other hand, translation protracts the end (Sofía, after all, is always there.) The economy of desire in the Jensenian schema of translation is conservative—it solves and, reaching a zero balance, recapitulates and ends—while in Pauls' it is generative and inflationary—it deviates and postpones. The plight of the translator character at a personal level produces more narratives and the possibility of more memory, generating a structure similar to the cultural "surfeit of memory"17—to borrow Charles Maier's phrase—that is evident in Argentine and Southern Cone studies on the "task of mourning," "the art of not forgetting," the "state of memory," and the presence of "thresholds and catastrophes."18

II. Translation of Setting: History

Jensen's novel is deeply rooted in History, both local and universal. Together with the romantic tale, Gradiva also narrates a transference of settings: from early 20th century Germany to Greece through Pompeii and back. This route had been trodden in the German tradition —in early 19th century, the Jena Romantics sought in ancient Greece and Rome a way to bypass the powerful French influence; Nietzsche, half a century later, famously praised the manner in which Romans translated "Greek antiquity" into "Roman present", calling on Germans to adopt the Roman lead (67). The novel is an affirmation of local value: look at a Greco-Roman beauty and you will soon find your Hamburg neighbor.

In Pauls' novel, the signifier "past" is microsocial or personally "geological," non-Historical.19 For some Argentine critics like Sarlo, as we have seen, this was understood as "programmatic"—a push for an autonomous space for literature. Following the 2007 translation of the novel, however, French and British critics tried out an indexical reading of the absence of History, intimating that the author's decision "against" History was a search "of." Ben Bollig's review is paradigmatic:

> There is a strange absence in this novel, hinted at with references that may remain unnoticed or inexplicable to the general reader. A Ford Falcon, vehicle of choice of the military's hit squads, brings back 'past memories' for Rímini.20 After his wife gives birth, Rímini is assailed by the strange fear that their child will be kidnapped or lost. 1976 reoccurs as a gap, and the chaos and violence before and after the coup d'état is inexplicably absent, despite (sic) the lovers' Riltsechasing school holiday in Europe that luckily allows them to be absent while the country descends into chaos.

This review follows a well-known interpretive horizon, according to which the collective merges with the individual in every Latin American fiction (the review blurb reads: "The Past examines an Argentinean couple's attachment to both personal and collective memory"), and Argentine novels are always somewhat "about" historical trauma, the disappeared, and state terrorism. Normally this kind of reading can be dismissed for its stereotyping, but in this case it is validated because Beatriz Sarlo, a major Argentine critic, remarks and explains as a purposeful absence what Bollig calls an "inexplicable" one. She reads the novel through History, remarking that Pauls' project was to not include it.

The main problem with Bollig's allegorical or indexical reading is that it does not account for the meaningful fact that there is no menacing State or anything "social" in broad terms in the novel.21 Also, a reading of History as the key to the novel remains limited to certain elements, casting aside large portions of the text. It is, in sum, unconvincing: the novel contains intriguing data (the years 1959, 1976, and 1989, a car model) that, if anything, debunk allegorical readings. For example, if the end of youth in 1976 is some sort of national loss of innocence, how do we account for the lack of a State-induced feeling of persecution in the narrative? The question will remain whether, as Sarlo points out, this is an active and programmatic attempt to write against the Argentine tendency to place History as a center of signification.

Rímini is born in 1959, the year the Cuban Revolution takes place, Sofía's "youth" ends in 1976, and their separation coincides with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. While mentioning this information, The Past devalues and refunctionalizes History. An image of what the narrative does appears in the novel as a metaphor, again, of translation. The Past is, like the relation between Rímini and Sofía before the breakup, a place "where the upheavals

of the world outside only filtered through in the gentle accents of the local dialect" (36). Tellingly, a salient reference to the grand histoire of global events is subtly present through the petite histoire of a marital dispute, and only through it: "while [Rímini] was packing his bags in Belgrano, Buenos Aires, in Berlin a mob of wildly excited Germans had started taking pickaxes to the most significant piece of masonry of the twentieth century" (146). The narrative does not forget History completely, but mentions it—pushing it not to the background or to oblivion but to the sides. In the center, there are obsessively focused commentaries.

III. Translation in Character: Debt

In the novel feeling in debt is a major leitmotif. Even before the breakup, Rímini feels indebted to Sofía and "enraged at his own weakness": while he lives among doubts and anxieties, she is strong and knows (45). The separation marks both a materialization and an exacerbation of debt, that becomes incarnated in photos that throughout the novel become as indestructible as the past they represent.22 Sofía speaks of Rímini's obligation to divide them in terms of a debt: "'Remember, you owe me something.' 'I owe you something…?' 'You owe us something. The photos." (52). Rímini feels incapable of withstanding the "sentimental quantity" in them and he refuses to do it. The debt increases: "the photos were still there [...] like magic charms which, being no longer in circulation, have nothing better to do than store up energy and meaning" (49). Whenever this debt is about to vanish and prescribe, it returns with spectral insistence (147). The photographs incarnating debt are always hovering over the plot: Rímini classifies them in the final scene of the novel.

In order to detach himself from his former wife and his debt to her, Rímini seeks shelter in translation: he begins to translate furiously and addictively, thus generating a different kind of debt. Escaping is synonymous with replacing in this novel. Rímini replaces the addiction to Sofía's notes ("Every message was [...] the tiny dose with which the ultimate drug—his love for Sofía—confirmed his addiction") with cocaine, a drug he buys with the explicit condition that it does not generate him debt: "He paid for exactly as much as he bought. His one rule was: don't get into debt" (11, 63). It is remarkable here that while Rímini is careful not to enter into an uncontrolled addiction with drugs, he does not take precautions when it comes to translation. Rímini dedicates himself absolutely and exclusively to translate in order to disappear in and through his job.

Far from an opening to new cultures, for the protagonist of The Past translation is first a tool for introspection, second a tool for depersonalization. The psychology of the translator offers this strange possibility. As Douglas Robinson points out, the notion of "emptying oneself out" is in the ethic of the profession: "the true inner substance that the translator-subject is supposed to represent is precisely the absence of self, the emptying-out of self —the invisible self" (Robinson 157). In the novel, the translator hero takes drugs,

masturbates, translates and seeks to be absent. The relationship between drugs and translation forms a closed and introspective circle: Rímini takes drugs to translate, and translation is his drug. “The drug, the real drug, was translation: that was the real addiction, desire, the promise” (84). This is a promise of alienated speed, emptiness and presentness: “He was translating three books at the same time, for three different publishers: he managed forty pages a day. He was no longer choking: he was a happy workman” (64).23 The fact that neither his translation method nor what he translates are given much attention underlines the most mechanical side of the profession as an activity devoted to the speed of production.

Rímini seeks a way, then, of distancing himself from the past—as he translated “everything was of the moment” (64)—but in the narrative one debt is replaced with another that is equally overbearing: the debt to the text in a foreign tongue. This is a contractual and ethical debt with the original that the translator faces, and that Derrida finds linked to the term Aufgabe in Benjamin’s essay: “the task (Aufgabe), the mission to which one is destined (always by the other), the commitment, the duty, the debt, the responsibility” (“Des Tours” 175). The task of the translator, in Benjamin’s sense, is to open up the original to the possibility of a pure language (reine Sprache) imprisoned in it. The translator’s obligation originates, then, in the incompleteness of an original: “The translator must redeem (erlösen), absolve, resolve, in trying to absolve himself from his own debt, which is at bottom the same —and bottomless” (232, my emphasis). The debt is unpayable but the translator is obliged “by law” to try to pay for it: “Already at stake is a law, an injunction for which the translator has to be responsible. He must also acquit himself, and of something that implies perhaps a fault, a fall, an error and perhaps a crime” (175). Here is the key word injunction, which explains how Rímini feels committed to translate as he had felt committed to Sofía.

Attentive to the calling of the original, Rímini takes on a debt that is initially not his and he submits to the task of redeeming it. This strange solidarity with the foreign text is significantly doubled as narrative style in this passage:

> [Rímini] would literally devour books with his translator’s hunger, finishing them off but at the same time coming under their spell, as if something hidden in the folds of their lines forced him to bear witness, to tear them out of one language and put them into another, so that even then he had discovered that translation is not something freely entered into, chosen calmly and collectedly, but a compulsion, the fatal response to an order, a command, an entreaty buried deep in the heart of a book written in another language. The simple fact that something was written in another language, one that he knew but which was not his mother tongue, was sufficient to awaken in him the idea —a completely reflex one— that this book, article, short story or poem was somehow in debt,

> a debt so huge it was incalculable and therefore impossible to repay but which he, Rímini, the translator, had to take responsibility for by translating. (85)

This tellingly arduous passage is one of the very few instances of free indirect discourse in the novel. The narrator, who throughout The Past is always able to explain the minutest detail, in this case cannot stop adding synonyms: "freely entered into/chosen calmly/collectedly"; "a compulsion/a fatal response"; "an order/a command/an entreaty." These enumerations reveal a need to be comprehensive, to be precise and peruse through possible equivalents in order to find the right word in a given semantic field.24 An obsessive translator who is incapable of accepting imprecision would, like the narrator of The Past, refuse to decide on one and pile on words (or footnotes, in Nabokov's schema)25 to no end.

The style of this passage about translation reveals a latent demand. Like memory, the ethical injunction of translation has an obscure and remote origin ("hidden in the folds") and ill-defined contours. The translator character wants to escape from his past by disappearing into a mechanical version of the profession—and this renegotiates the debt, because a replaced obsession is not a satisfied one. The narrator, as an obsessive translator, wants to be all too present and generates countless clarifications and commentaries with his own dedicated focus.

IV. Translation as Style: Commentary

In The Past the narrator insists on thinking small and is seemingly unable to lift his head from details. He constantly adds. As Steiner pointed out,

> Being methodical, penetrative, analytic, enumerative, the process of translation, like all modes of focused understanding, will detail, illumine, and generally body forth its object. […] To class a source-text as worth translating is to dignify it immediately and to involve it in a dynamic of magnification (subject, naturally, to latter review and even, perhaps, dismissal). The motion of transfer and paraphrase enlarges the stature of the original. (316-7, my italics)

Rímini and his story, obsessive loci of attention in the novel, are enlarged by this disposition. But the magnifying glass produces a distortion. Commentaries are potentially infinite, and erudite references imply that more could be said, and more conscientiously. In translation, extremely scrupulous precision is called obscuram diligentiam: too much clarification ends up obscuring.26 And this obscurity is compounded, in The Past, with complex syntax.

Sentences become long and convoluted, making the reading slow and difficult. A reader accuses Pauls' prose of being "weighed down" by "the abuse of long parentheses in between dashes and by the unresolved complexity of

some phrases" (Pérez, my translation). Interruptions are as conspicuous as the seemingly endless explanations that combine the drive of epic similes, an encyclopedic thrust, and lengthy digressions. In the following exemplary passage the narrator deploys a remarkable series of stock plots and commentaries to describe how solid the matrimony between Rímini and Sofía felt to their friends prior to the breakup:

> eternal like a rock that sun, wind and water polish and sculpt until it glows a little more with each passing day, went on through time, piling up the years and falling out of fashion, as though the membrane which protected it was also a preserving fluid keeping it intact, separate from everything else, untouched yet ancient, somehow defeated, like those characters in science-fiction movies who manage to reach atomic shelters a split second before the catastrophe and spend years cut off there, speculating on the privilege of being the only survivors, only to return finally to the surface once they think that the danger has passed and the world has returned to normal, and find that the catastrophe never happened, that if they had never been aware of this it was due directly to being hermetically sealed in the depths of their bunker, and that the world now, many years since they had last formed part of it, was unrecognisable, disfigured and different, and looked on them with the sort of amused bewilderment with which in only a few years from now the world's children will look upon all of today's icons. (38)

This fragment of an even longer, intricate 24-line sentence insists on adding clarifications and comparisons. Each membrum of the period seems to look for more precision: the rock; the membrane that covers the rock; the cover that is like a bunker in a science-fiction film; the film that is about a catastrophe that never takes place in the world; the world that will be obsolete and bewildering; the bewilderment future children will feel. So the novel grows. Although the rhythm is carefully crafted in this paragraph, fluidity is not prioritized.

The narrator bodies forth the novel while undermining the procedure itself. There is little distance between this narrator and Pauls' own characterization of the translator: "The translator is a kind of double, an erudite shadow, a very strange kind of reader, because he is at the same time very precise and blind. I like translators a lot: they are freaky, they talk too little or too much, and they always seem to know more than they say" (qtd. in Castro, my translation). Very precise and very blind, this myopic narrator, as a translator, makes comments, adds mini-histories. And commentary is always asymptotic: the more it approaches its object, the more there is to see in it. Self-eroding, every commentary is superfluous and none sufficient. By including mini-histories and opposing the monopolizing thrust of larger structures like History and politics, The Past subscribes to small thinking.

V. Translation as Memory: Politics

The translator has to think small to be precise, but this precision, if obsessive, precludes abstractions and "big pictures" from taking form. If too much detail is remembered, no panoramic image can be formed. Translation ends when the "reasonable horizon of the drive to translate" is reached (Ricoeur 19, my translation). If the horizon is constantly pushed further by insistence, there is no satisfaction—as Bergson speculates, a translation that is absolutely precise would be infinite.27 The process is analogous to the workings of memory: a single phrase can, through translation, originate a number of translator's notes; a single event can, through memory, originate a series of histories. Funes, the great Borgesian anamnesic character, provides an example of what happens when memory (and, I argue, translation) finds no horizon:

> We, in a glance, perceive three wine glasses on the table; Funes saw all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine. He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only once, and with the lines in the spray which an oar raised in the Rio Negro on the eve of the battle of the Quebracho. (112)

According to the narrator, Funes sees not just the wine but also its past, not a shape but the same shape repeated. His myopia seems to interfere with the possibility of abstractions—among them, the abstraction of historical emplotments: the "battle of the Quebracho" is present only to point to a particular time. The mini-history of the wine, or a repeated shape—all seemingly superfluous elements—take over Funes' mind. Indeed, Funes' comment to his interlocutor—"My memory, sir, is like a garbage heap" —is reminiscent of critical attacks on Pauls' novel. But Funes is wrong. There is an order in his memory: he either diachronically follows the history of the wine or synchronically the shape of clouds.

The narrator in The Past follows details that carry their own—unhistorical, micro historical—logic. It is tempting to fault the novel for escapism on the grounds of this myopia. But shortsightedness is motivated attention, not lack of awareness or disregard for it. The narrator in Borges' tale seems incapable of understanding this. While recognizing that Funes' world was "overly replete," he sees it as impoverished. There is, however, lucidity in the intolerable exactness of a mind that does not want to see the forest but instead witness, painstakingly, the presence of individual trees. It is a different kind of allegiance, comparable to that of the translator. The translator takes on, in Benjamin's and Derrida's views, a debt that is not his. He treats the trivial with intense focus and seriousness, displacing "proper" History

from center stage. In a culture with necrophilic tendencies where History is so much present that it needs little resuscitation (Überleben), small pasts, delicate details, the obscure obsession of a tireless translator becomes both a cautionary tale and a political alternative.

Since El pasado (2003), Pauls seems to have reneged on this project by producing a series of novels entitled Historia del llanto (2007) Historia del pelo (2009), and Historia del dinero (forthcoming.) In this trilogy, national history appears rather prominently—albeit mediated by mini-histories and personal, always unheroic quests. The translator returns in Historia del pelo, where Argentine politics filters through an obsessive translator's search for a perfect haircut that leads the plot, eventually, to a key historical event in Argentine 1970s history. The Historias (that play from the very title on the ambiguity history/story) do seem to espouse a "programmatic" attitude towards History: although Barthesian, low-key, and subtle, these novels reveal that the pull of History remains unavoidable.

In Pauls' The Past, the occupation of memory—as obsessive for the Argentine society as it is compulsive for the translator-hero and the narrator—elicits the insidious, potentially infinite temporizing of translation. This is one of several novels where the translator character and temperament are deployed to address narratively local preoccupations. In three Brazilian novels—generally more open to the cosmopolitan experience— the character travels and enters into a different kind of dilemma. That is the case of Buarque's Budapeste, and João Gilberto Noll's Lorde and Berkeley em Bellagio, where names, identities and bodies of writers are translated when faced (and eluded) by the foreign. Projects like Mario Bellatin's, and certain novels by Jorge Volpi and Andrés Neumann, reveal a style marked by translation: it constitutes in them a negative response to the demands of local and regional attributes. But why has translation, a crucial cultural operation in Latin America, become such a prominent narrative device these days?

The answer may be that now there is an overwhelming need to grapple with the act of translating, a fact of everyday life in the region—whereas before translation was a consequence of a more or less consistent experience of the foreign qua foreign. Translation used to be a way of incorporating or positioning oneself and one's culture in the world, but in contemporary times it constitutes that position. Local anxieties (like the problem of memory in Argentina) become reconfigured as translational ones. Contrary to the contemporary translation turn in literary criticism, these novels seek in translation not routes but, paradoxically, roots.

Notes

1 In 1998, Ian Barnett's article "Translator as Hero" celebrated the publication of three novels about translators in Argentina: Salvador Benesdra's El traductor , Pablo de Santis' La traducción , and Néstor Ponce's El intérprete . Novels with translator heroes were just beginning to appear at the time. Before, there were Marcelo

Cohen's El testamento de O'Jaral (1995), in which a lunatic translator searches for an epiphany in a futuristic world, and El cangrejo (Graciela Safranchik, 1995) in which the translator is in search of a perfect woman. Vargas Llosa's Travesuras de la niña mala (2006) narrates the adventures of a UNESCO interpreter; Roberto Bolaño begins his 2666 (2004) with a commentary on a translator-critic; the protagonists of two novels by Alan Pauls (El pasado , 2003 e Historia del pelo , 2009) are addictive and obsessive translators; the one in Pedro Mairal's dystopy (El año del desierto , 2005), a lone survivor; one of the characters in Historia del Abasto (Mariano Siskind, 2007), does subtitles; the erudite protagonist of El viajero del siglo (Andrés Neuman, 2009) is an itinerant German translator. Then also prolific authors like César Aira (La princesa primavera , 2000) and Mario Bellatin (El jardín de la señora Murakami and Shiki Nagaoka: una nariz de ficción , 2001) write their own novels of translation during these years. In Brazil, the alienated protagonist of Feriado de mim mesmo (Santiago Nazarian, 2005) is a lonely translator of children's books, while the enigmatic protagonists of Budapeste (Chico Buarque, 2003), Berkeley em Bellagio and Lorde (João Gilberto Noll, 2003, 2004), are characters that translate themselves (their names, their identity) when they switch languages.

2 Oksenberg Rorty summarizes her distinction between character and figure as follows: "Characters are delineated; their traits are sketched; they are not presumed to be strictly unified. They appear in novels by Dickens, not those by Kafka. Figures appear in cautionary tales, exemplary novels, and hagiography. They present narratives of types of lives to be imitated" (537-8).

3 For Moretti's discussion of the sociology of literary form in Ulysses, see chapter 6 in Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez .

4 For a discussion of this paradoxical nature of the contemporary, see Agamben's "What Is the Contemporary?"

5 Andreas Huyssen speculates that there might be a dialectic between the emphasis on amnesia and the desire for memory: "The ever increasing acceleration of scientific, technological, and cultural innovation in a consumption and profit oriented society produces even larger quantities of soon to be obsolete objects, life-styles, and attitudes, thereby effectively shrinking the chronological expansion of what can be considered present in a material sense. The temporal aspect of such planned obsolescence is, of course, amnesia. But then amnesia simultaneously generates its own opposite: the museal culture as a reaction formation" (254).

6 With Bauman, I define here the concept of "new beginnings" as a preoccu pation with endings: "Liquid life is a succession of new beginnings—yet precisely for that reason it is the swift and painless endings, without which new beginnings would be unthinkable, that tend to be its most challenging moments and most upsetting headaches" (2).

7 The consensus of critics that have found The Past too long is that Pauls is a good author and there is value in the novel. Andrés Rivera wrote that the length of the novel was "an outrage" while considering Pauls an excellent writer (qtd. in Rivera 55). Ignacio Echeverría, in more aggressive terms found "first quality lard" in a novel that is otherwise good: "The energy and attraction in this novel are buried […] by layers upon layers of [...] narrative 'lard.' It is first quality lard of the kind that usually helps cook good novels [...] But its accumulation (no doubt a result

of the years Alan Pauls spent writing it) ends up deforming The Past's figure, that presents the reader with the spectacle of a beauty ravished by bulimia" ("Gordura", my translation). Indignation is not a hyperbolic term to refer to some of these reactions. One blogger concluded: "the novel becomes a monotonous series of better or worse evoked quotidian events that lead the reader to monotony and, after hundreds of pages, to indignation" (Pérez, my translation).

8 Alegría's Broad and Alien is the World (1941) is 435 pages long; Guimarães Rosa's The Devil to Pay in the Backlands (1956), 570; Cortázar's Hopscotch (1963), 570; Vargas Llosa's The Green House (1966), 440; Donoso's The Obscene Bird of Night (1970), 440; Cabrera Infante's Three Trapped Tigers (1967), 650. Among the historical novels of significance, we should note Carlos Fuentes's Terra Nostra (780 pages) and Augusto Roa Bastos' sequence I, the Supreme, Son of Man , and The Prosecutor (467, 280, and 352 respectively). Roberto Bolaño's Savage Detectives (1998) is 609 pages long, and his posthumous, five part 2666, 1150.

9 In a subtle justification of length, Caster called The Past "[a] novel that conveys consistent character psychologies and engross the reader from first page to last" ("El pasado," my translation).

10 I refer here to the so-called "Riltse section." In 55 pages, the narrator traces the sordid details and the outrageous journey of "The Bogus Hole," a work by an artist admired by the protagonist and his ex-wife. The narrative focus moves away from the protagonist, causing readers to complain of the length of this detour. As one critic put it: "Why so long? One, two, five, ten pages, ok. But fifty-five?" (Zunini).

11 Freud read the novel following Carl Jung's advice, and he found it attractive to analyze Jensen's imaginary dreams. The result of Freud's study, "Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva ," is often included in editions of Jensen's novel. The Freudian reading of Gradiva became a key text for surrealism. As Whitney Chadwick explains: "The cult of the erotic female lies at the heart of Surrealist theory and practice of the 1930's. The most concentrated expression of this idea is the image of Gradiva, drawn from Freud and frequently recurring in the paintings and writings of Breton, Masson, Dalí, Eluard and others" (415).

12 Apart from debating on the novel's length, critics have also focused on a related topic: its many intertexts. The most original one qualified the novel as a "summa of the last fifty years of Argentine literature" (Sarlo 449, my translation). Sarlo finds quotes and familiarities between The Past and works by Cortázar, Guebel, Fogwill, Chitarroni, Bioy Casares and Aira. A new wave of readers brought about by the 2007 English translation identified other intertextual references. To Martin Schifino of Times Literary Supplement, Proust is the biggest influence and inspiration. The critic of The Guardian finds that "alongside the novel's internal echoes and ricochets, there are a great number of literary and artistic references, including to Victor Hugo, Althusser, Marx and Freud" (Bollig). At The Independent , the reader said "Pauls' allusive novel invokes Proust, Nabokov and, more locally, Cortázar's Hopscotch ", and resorts to Voltaire to describe the protagonist in the novel: "Rímini is a Candide witnessing late modernity in its Buenos Aires versions" (Wilson). While no list of intertexts can be exhaustive, the novel evokes them constantly.

13 In fact, Freud's analysis is just a reproduction of Jensen's philological ploy: "[B]

ehind the impression ‘from life’ and the fancy about the Greek traits, is hidden the memory of her name, Zöe, which, in Greek, means life; Gradiva is, as the man finally cured of the delusion tells us, a good translation [from Latin] of her family-name, Bertrang, which means splendid or magnificent in walking” (“Delusion and Dream” 201).

14 Freud considers translation and analysis as two related hermeneutic activities: “The productions of the dream-work, which, it must be remembered, are not made with the intention of being understood, present no greater difficulties to their translators than do the ancient hieroglyphic scripts to those who seek to read them” (qtd. in Derrida’s Writing and Difference 103).

15 Freud explains: “The procedure which our author has his Zöe follow for the cure of the delusion of the friend of her youth, shows considerable resemblance, no, complete agreement, essentially, with a therapeutic method which Dr. J. Breuer and the present writer introduced into medicine in 1895 […]. This method of treatment, first called the ‘cathartic’ by Breuer, which the present writer has preferred to designate as ‘analytic’ consists in rather forcibly bringing into the consciousness of the patients who suffer from disturbances analogous to Hanold’s delusion, the unconscious, through the repression of which they have become ill, just as Gradiva does with the repressed memories of their childhood relations” (235-6).

16 For an analysis of the detective novel from this perspective, see Moretti’s Signs Taken for Wonders , chapter 5: “Clues.”

17 Already in 1993, Maier wondered if there was an excessive attachment to the glorification of past glories and, especially, tales of victimization in European culture. Pauls referred to something very similar in a 2005 interview: “Argentina is a very necrophiliac country that, unfortunately, has witnessed many appalling political tragedies, like the military regimes, that resulted in a sort of ‘inflation of memory’” (Romero 58).

18 These are all borrowed phrases from the literature of the times: Tununa Mercado’s En estado de memoria [In State of Memory] (1990), Idelber Avelar’s The Untimely Present: Post-dictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning (1999), the collection Umbrales y catástrofes: La literatura argentina de los ’90 [Thresholds and Catastrophes: Argentine Literature in the Nineties] (2003), and Nora Strejilevich’s El arte de no olvidar: Literatura testimonial en Chile, Argentina y Uruguay [The Art of not Forgetting: Testimonial Literature in Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay](2006).

19 “Our love”, writes Sofía, “is geological. The separations, encounters, fights, everything that happens and is visible, everything that has a date, like 1976: all that is as insignificant as a cracked floor-tile compared to the quaking that has been making the center of the earth tremble for thousands of years” (437).

20 Bollig refers to this passage: “as he walked by the Ford Falcon he took a quick look inside, doubtless attracted by the historical character that car model had for him” (437 in Spanish, my translation). Why “for him”? The narrator focuses on Rímini as a single and isolated subject that should not be automatically rendered collective.

21 There are also some odd interpretations in Bollig’s reading. For example: “Rímini is assailed by the strange fear that their child will be kidnapped or lost”. On the one hand, it cannot be said that such fear is “strange.” On the other, Rímini’s fear is clearly not related to state terrorism: “He had often imagined [his son] in danger,

at the mercy of some illness, an evil electrical socket or rabid dog, but in all of these macabre scenes Rímini always burst in near the end, just before tragedy struck, like the comic superheroes who had ruled his emotional life as a child" (249).

22 "By the way, do you know what the only thing was that wasn't ruined in the flood? […] The photos, Rímini. That collection of portraits of dead people you've sentenced me to live with since we separated. I counted then: there are one thousand, five hundred and sixty-four of them. […] Please let me be. Give me my life back" (263,4).

23 Rímini, an alienated worker by choice, follows a process of "self-liquidation" that Adorno described as symptomatic of the "negative epics" of modernist fiction (35). Pauls' novel offers a 21st century take on a prominent intertext from the 20th century: Rodolfo Walsh's short story "Nota al pie." In Walsh's story, class relegates a translator to suicide and his voice to a posthumous footnote. In Pauls' novel, a bourgeois takes up translation as a way to participate in the kind of alienation that is in principle unavailable to his class, namely, the one produced by time-wages.

24 We read the resulting saturation of signifiers already in another Argentine novel, Juan José Saer's Cicatrices [Scars] , where a character's translation reads: "He was trying to reunite (put together) (accumulate) (baste) (thread) (traverse) the scarlet (red) (reddish) threads (pieces) (fragments) of his life, and find a shape in them, so that he could find a way through the bloody (bleeding) labyrinth of passion that (through which) he was passing (through)" (196, my translation). In The Past these "options" are not discarded, forming metonymic sequences. Attentive to all options, the narrator does not opt but accumulates and juxtaposes them.

25 For Nabokov an ideal translation would be constantly interrupted by footnotes, disruptions to clarify, perfect, and account for everything that has been lost: "I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity" (127). These skyscrapers, toppled, create many of the pages in The Past . The fact that they appear syntagmatically levels hierarchies.

26 The phrase was coined by Perrot d'Ablancourt, translator from Latin, who borrowed the expression from a poem by Terence as he wrote: "How well 'obscuram diligentiam' articulates the defect of scrupulous Translations, which require one to read the Original to understand the Version!" (36).

27 Bergson illustrated the relationship between the absolute and the infinite through the idea of a perfect translation: "If I wish to explain to someone who does not know Greek the simple impression that a line of Homer leaves upon me, I shall give the translation of the line, then the comment on my translation, then I shall develop my commentary, and from explanation to explanation I shall get closer to what I wish to express; but I shall never quite reach it [… W]hat lends itself at the same time to indivisible apprehension and to an inexhaustible enumeration is, by definition, an infinite" (189).

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