THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS IN ARGENTINA: TRANSLATION, NARRATIVE, AND POLITICS IN BORGES, PUIG, AND PIGLIA

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I.

What is at stake when we consider the legacy of a text like The Thousand and One Nights—one generally accepted as widely influential, not only on individual writers but on entire traditions—on contemporary literatures? The very mention of a legacy forces us to rethink what we mean by influence, originality, authorship, and literary lineages and genealogies. Where do stories originate? What is the best way to approach the inheritance of narrative? A major contribution toward addressing these questions, as I seek to show in this article, can be made through the study of translation. As Jorge Luis Borges has said: “Ningún problema tan consustancial con las letras y con su modesto misterio como el que propone una traducción” [“There is no problem as consubstantial to literature and its modest mysteries as that raised by a translation”].

There are perhaps few texts which bring the issues of influence and of the power of narrative to the forefront as clearly as the collection Alf Layla wa—Layla, The Thousand and One Nights. Or perhaps we should say no text and its translations, for any story of The Thousand and One Nights and its inheritance is ultimately a story about the translation of the Nights. In this article, I explore the legacy of The Thousand and One Nights in three Argentine writers: Jorge Luis Borges, Manuel Puig, and Ricardo Piglia. In the process, I offer a way to rethink the legacy of past literatures and concepts of the Orient in Latin America, specifically in Argentina. My focus is on the dialogical relation of Latin American literature with the past and with the center—by way of another periphery (i.e., the Orient)—through processes of translation. To this end, I analyze how translation from the periphery leads to reconsiderations of source and target texts and cultures,
especially when an East-West dichotomy is used to remap the relationship between North and South. I select Borges, Puig, and Piglia in particular as writers who actively involve translation in the creation of their own work and who thus raise key issues about the role of translation in the formation of Latin American literatures.

Borges refers to The Thousand and One Nights frequently in his writings, claiming it as one of the first books he read as a child in his father's library. The version he found there and the one he always preferred is the one by Richard F. Burton. But Borges was also well familiar with the other major European translations. This can be seen in his essay "Los traductores de Las 1001 Noches" ["The Translators of The Thousand and One Nights"] (1935), one of his two most important essays on the topic of translation. In this text, Borges compares only the translations of the Nights; he makes no attempt to refer back to the original, except through what the translators themselves have to say about it. By deviating from the traditional approach of comparing the original with the translation, Borges avoids the unproductive practice of simply listing what is lost in translation. Borges's approach, in fact, suggests a complete disregard for the concept of a "definitive text." As he says in his other key essay on translation, "Las versiones homéricas" ["The Homeric Versions"] (1932):

Presuponer que toda recombinación de elementos es obligatoriamente inferior a su original, es presuponer que el borrador 9 es obligatoriamente inferior al borrador H—ya que no puede haber sino borradores. El concepto de texto definitivo no corresponde sino a la religión o al cansancio.5

[To presuppose that every recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original, is to presuppose that draft 9 is necessarily inferior to draft H, as there can only be drafts. The concept of a definitive text corresponds only to religion or fatigue.] (emphasis in the original)

In "Los traductores de Las 1001 Noches," Borges points out that when we think of the Arabian Nights, we invariably turn to the first translation of the text into a European language; that is, Jean Antoine Galland's version of 1704–1717. Borges is drawn to the fact that the original Nights is a translation, and he refers to Galland as the "fundador" ["founder"]. Galland's version establishes the stories that everyone in the Occident thinks of when they think of the Nights: "El hombre de Europa o de las Américas que piensa en Las 1001 Noches, piensa invariablemente en esa primera traducción" ["When someone in Europe or in the Americas thinks of The Thousand and One Nights, they invariably think of that first translation"].6

But Galland's version contains several stories that have never been found in any original version of the Nights, including some of the more famous tales, such as "Aladdín" and "Ali Baba." Galland's new stories then become such an integral part of the Nights, Borges reminds us, that none of the translators who have followed dare to omit them. The Thousand and One Nights is thus seen as an original—Galland's version was then translated into numerous languages, including Arabic—but one that is a translation of a previous text, which is itself a compilation of anonymous stories of unknown origin. The idea of any solid original, in the traditional sense of the term, is thoroughly destabilized.

"Los traductores de Las 1001 Noches" challenges us to rethink the relationship between source and target texts and, by implication—because Borges is writing from the margins, in Argentina—between center and periphery. In a move that anticipates reader reception theory by at least thirty years, Borges demonstrates the importance of the displacements that occur when one goes from an original to a translation and how these displacements create the potential for new and unexpected meanings. Discussing Richard F. Burton's version of the Arabian Nights, for example, Borges tells us that one of the main problems Burton proposed to resolve was to interest nineteenth-century British gentlemen in thirteenth-century Arabian serialized stories (Borges calls them "novelas por entregas" ["serialized novels"]). The problem lay with the difference of the two audiences, between those who would have heard the original stories in thirteenth-century Arabia and those who were to read Burton's nineteenth-century version in London, as their interpretations were bound to differ widely (OC I: 403–404).

What is the best way to translate The Thousand and One Nights—or any work, for that matter—from one context and audience to another? How does Burton resolve his primary problem of making the Nights appealing to his target readership? As Borges tells us, in his version Burton makes countless substitutions; he completely rewrites the first and last stories; and he undertakes numerous alterations, omissions and interpolations. Borges then concludes, in what is the most important twist of "Los traductores de Las 1001 Noches," that these changes are actually for the best. They represent, he says: "Un buen falseo, ya que esa travesuras verbales—y otras sintácticas—
The value and potential that Borges places on a translator’s infidelities become even clearer when he discusses another translation of the Arabian Nights, the 1889 version into French by J.C. Mardrus. Mardrus claimed to be the most truthful and literal of the translators of the Nights. Borges, however, argues that Mardrus’s greatness lies not in his supposed literalness and fidelity, but in the creative infidelities that lead to the success of his translation: “Celebrar la fidelidad de Mardrus es omitir el alma de Mardrus, es no aludir siquiera a Mardrus. Su infidelidad, su infidelidad creadora y feliz, es lo que nos debe importar” (“To celebrate Mardrus’s fidelity is to omit Mardrus’s soul, it is to not even speak of Mardrus. It is his infidelity, his creative and joyful infidelity, with which we should be concerned”) (emphasis added).

As he presents these arguments, Borges does not at all deny that the Europeans whose translations he compares, and especially those he most highly praises, domesticate the Arabian Nights in their efforts to make them more interesting to their contemporaries back home. The fact that Borges approves of such acculturation of these Near Eastern stories might suggest that he is taking an Orientalist position. But the issue with Borges is made considerably more complicated by the fact that he is speaking from the margins, from Argentina, and not at all from the center of empire. In the history of translation into English, a translation that domesticates the “foreignness” of the original can be interpreted as part of a project of cultural imperialism. In Latin America, however, such a translation represents an appropriation from the Metropolis through linguistic acculturation and a way to challenge not only the supposed supremacy of the original but also of the cultural political power of the society in which it was produced.

Borges alludes to this very issue when he discusses Enno Littmann’s German translation of the Nights (1923–1928). According to major sources, Borges reports, it is the best one available; but again Borges disagrees:

[Littmann] es siempre lúcido, legible, mediocre. Sigue (nos dicen) la respiración misma del árabe. Si no hay error en la Enciclopedia Británica, su traducción es la mejor de cuantas circulan. Oigo que los arábigos están de acuerdo; nada importa que un mero literato—y ése, de la República meramente Argentina—prefiera dissentir.\footnote{[Littmann] is always lucid, legible, mediocre. He follows (we are told) the very breath of Arabic. If the Encyclopedia Britannica is written and where Orientalists reside—leads to a dissenting evaluation of what constitutes a good translation. As texts travel, their value is altered and geographic and political distance become as large a factor in the reading of texts as linguistic difference. Distance and displacement, as Borges illustrates, lead to transformation—and not necessarily to loss and inferior copies, as the traditional translation theories of the center would have us believe. Recontextualization toward the margins—in this case toward Borges’s argentinidad [Argentineness]—complicates our notions of value and of our concepts of Orientalism.}

Especially notable here is that the false modesty with which Borges expresses his objection is so closely linked with national identity. Being Argentine—and not from the Metropolis, where the Encyclopedia Britannica is written and where Orientalists reside—leads to a dissenting evaluation of what constitutes a good translation. As texts travel, their value is altered and geographic and political distance become as large a factor in the reading of texts as linguistic difference. Distance and displacement, as Borges illustrates, lead to transformation—and not necessarily to loss and inferior copies, as the traditional translation theories of the center would have us believe. Recontextualization toward the margins—in this case toward Borges’s argentinidad [Argentineness]—complicates our notions of value and of our concepts of Orientalism.

In Argentine literature, the use of the Orient in the formation of a national literary identity goes back, most prominently, to the work of Domingo F. Sarmiento (1811–1888). In his foundational proto-novel Facundo (1845), for example, Sarmiento develops an extended parallel between the Argentine gaucho and the Arab nomad with regard to their supposedly analogous “barbarism.” Sarmiento’s Romantic use of the Arab/Oriental as an Other who must be dominated to construct a national subjectivity resonates immediately with the Anglo-French uses of the Orient so criticized by Edward Said. And Sarmiento’s use of the Arab/gaucho analogy also appears to contrast with Borges’s much less condescending use of the Orient. However, the appearance of the Orient in Sarmiento’s Facundo is problematized by its political and historical grounding in Argentina, itself a peripheral territory. This fact is underscored by the series of mistranslations and equivocal citations that abound in the Facundo, a strategy that emphasizes Argentina’s distance from the Metropolis and its potential to use this very distance in transformative processes.\footnote{This reveals, in turn, the extent to which the transformations and appropriations inherent to...}
translation are constitutive of Latin American literature. In this sense, what is at stake for writers from the periphery, as Borges suggests, is how they incorporate previous traditions, the legacy of the past, through irreverent rereadings and rewritings of previous texts.

II.

Borges further points to this process and makes use of it in “El Sur” [“The South”] (1953), a text in which The Thousand and One Nights functions as a key reference to highlight the role of translation in the problematic of identity and representation in Argentina. The protagonist of the story, Juan Dahlmann, embodies a duo-ancestry—both European and Argentine—which becomes representative of the duo-origin of the Argentine condition itself. The tension that Dahlmann enacts in the text suggests that the local and the foreign are in fact inseparable; that it is not North versus South, but rather North and South which defines the “Argentine.” But this is established only through a reconsideration of what North and South represent, a reconsideration that includes a remapping in which a representation of the Orient plays a significant role.

In the story, Dahlmann is injured while reading Gustave Weil’s German translation of the Arabian Nights, even as he expresses that he always felt more Argentine than European. Since it is in German, the reference to the Nights resonates, at first, with Dahlmann’s European ancestry. The reference to the German version appears to be situated in contrast to the other main literary reference in the story, José Hernández’s Martín Fierro. However, the fact that the German text is a translation of a translation confounds our attempts at direct symbolic assignations. Instead, the presence of a German Arabian Nights in Argentina introduces an East-West coordinate to what is otherwise strictly a North-South cartography. This remapping problematizes the center-periphery dichotomy, revealing unexpected interdependencies between center and periphery, even as it legiti-
mizes the blurring of the two in the margins.

Commenting on the fact that, as he rides the train to the pampas and to the pulpería where he will meet his destiny, Dahlmann continues to read the Arabian Nights in translation, Beatriz Sarlo states: “In a way translation is also the problem of Latin American literature, at least from Borges’s point of view: his country is a marginal space compared with the Western literary tradition, and the position of its writers is in itself problematic”.

Geographic and canonical marginality are problematic, as Sarlo observes, but they also represent unexpected sites of potentiality. The real danger Borges presents in the story is not Dahlmann’s inevitable death at the end; rather, it is allowing the tension of Dahlmann’s—and Argentina’s—double origin to lead to self-hatred. Dahlmann’s escape to the South, whether real or imagined, represents the other side of this danger—its potential not for self-destruction, but for self-discovery, for the production of literature in the periphery. As Dahlmann travels South, to a South made possible by a remapping that now includes a look to the Orient from South America through Europe, what he—and other Argentines with him—reclaims is a space that is not only geographic, but also literary and historical.

III.

If in “Los traductores de Las 1001 Noches” Borges jumps over the role of Spain in the transmission of the Nights, there are other places where he acknowledges the importance of the Nights in Medieval and Golden Age Spanish literature and many places where he discusses the importance of the latter on contemporary Latin American writers. In “Magias afectivas del Quijote” [“Partial Magics of the Quixote”] (1949), for example, he points out some of the parallels between the narrative frames in the Nights and in Cervantes’s novel, focusing on the vertiginous mise-en-abymes found in both. There is also Borges’s version of “El brujo postergado” [“The Sorcerer Postponed”], taken from “Exemplo XII” of Don Juan Manuel’s Conde Lucanor (itself derived from an Arabic pre-text, Las cuarenta mañanas y las cuarenta noches [The Forty Mornings and the Forty Nights]). Borges’s version is a linguistic and cultural transposition from fourteenth-century Medieval Spanish to twentieth-century Río de la Plata castellano, in which the temporal and geographic displacements are foregrounded by the acroilamiento of the text. “El brujo postergado” is found at the end of Borges’s Historia universal de la infamia (1935), in a museum of translated fragments entitled “Etcétera.” Also included in this section are “La cámara de las estatuas” [“The Chamber of Statues”] and “Historia de los dos que soñaron” [“Story of the two who Dreamed”], both drawn from the Arabian Nights—not from the original (Borges did not know Arabic), but from Burton’s version of the Nights.

Borges’s references to The Thousand and One Nights allow us to trace a spatial and temporal map of narratives, as seen from South America in the
Borges shows that our definitions of Occident and Orient depend on each other, and on each other's texts and translations. The exact geographies of Occident and Orient are undeterminable, much like originals and translations are unstable and open for rewriting in Borges's conception of literature.

Significantly, Borges repeatedly connects this idea with issues of national identity:

¿Y cómo definir al Oriente...? Yo diría que las nociones de Oriente y Occidente son generalizaciones pero que ningún individuo se siente oriental. Supongo que un hombre se siente persa, se siente hindú, se siente malayo, pero no oriental. Del mismo modo, nadie se siente latinoamericano: nos sentimos argentinos, chilenos, orientales (uruguayos).24

[And how to define the Orient...? I would say that the notions of Orient and Occident are generalizations, but that no individual feels Oriental. I suppose that a man feels Persian, or Hindu, or Malayian, but not Oriental. Likewise, no one feels Latin American: we feel Argentine, Chilean, Oriental (Uruguayan).]

The uncertainty surrounding the definitions of Occident and Orient is increased by the humorous reference to the fact that in the Río de la Plata region an "Oriental" is someone from Uruguay. Such comments underscore the subjective nature of the borders between East and West, North and South. The tension between Occident and Orient, between center and periphery, is displaced toward and reconsidered from the shores of the Río de la Plata. By redrawing geographical maps from South America, Borges redraws political and cultural maps and opens new territories for Latin American writers.

IV.

Manuel Puig and Ricardo Piglia, in very different ways, have occupied the space that Borges establishes in Latin America through his irreverent rearticulation of the legacy of past literary traditions. Puig and Piglia are also significant in the context of this article because they both have texts in which a Scheherazade-like storyteller appears as part of a crucial debate
over the importance of narrative and translation in the contentious socio-political climate of late twentieth-century Argentina.

An unexpected manifestation of Scheherazade appears in Manuel Puig’s *El beso de la mujer araña* [The Kiss of the Spider Woman], a novel consisting primarily of the dialogue between two characters jailed in Argentina at the beginning of the “Dirty War” period (1976). The cellmates are Molina, a cross-dressing homosexual, and Valentín, a Marxist revolutionary. Molina recounts the Hollywood movies that he adores to Valentín; these stories, in turn, serve to seduce and postpone an inevitable end: of life, of the relationship between the two characters and of the decision that Molina must ultimately make to resolve the fact that he is an informant. In this dynamic, Molina is a Scheherazade figure, as his narratives fill the metaphoric night that has befallen Argentina, as well as the specific darkness of the sufferings of the two men in prison. The following exchange from their dialogue illustrates the extent to which Valentín is drawn in by Molina’s stories:

Molina: ... quisiera, no despertarme más una vez que me duermo....
   De veras lo único que pido es morirme.
Valentín: Antes me tenés que terminar la película.
Molina: ¡Uf, falta mucho, esta noche no la termino.\)
Valentín: Si en estos días me hubieses contado otro poco, ya esta
   noche la terminábamos. ¿Por qué no me quisiste contar más?
Molina: No sé.
Valentín: Pensa que puede ser la última película que me contés.
Molina: Será por eso, vaya a saber.
Valentín: Contame un poco antes de dormir.
Molina: Pero no hasta el final, falta mucho.
Valentín: Hasta que te canses.
Molina: Bueno. ¿En qué estábamos?\)

[Molina: ... I would like to go to sleep and never wake up again....
   Honestly, the only thing I ask is to die.
Valentín: First you have to finish telling me the movie.
Molina: Uf, there's still a long way to go, I can't finish it tonight.
Valentín: If you had told me a little these last few days, we could
   have finished it tonight. Why didn't you want to tell me any-
   more?
Molina: I don't know.
Valentín: Just think, this might be the last movie that you recount to
   me.

Valentín’s responses reveal that storytelling has become a way to defy death and authoritarian rule in the midst of the characters’ stark reality. Molina’s retellings of the Hollywood movies speak of the power of imagination and narrative, even—or, perhaps, especially—in the face of the violence and repression of dictatorship. In addition, the movies that Molina narrates are significant in and of themselves, as they point to a confusion of identity and a plurality of signification that drive the novel. The drama of the movies, always set in liminal spaces, revolves around women, with which Molina identifies and onto which he projects his subjective desires. As the novel progresses, the “B” movie heroines function as reflexive facets of the figure of the spider woman, while the stories weave a narrative web analogous to that of Scheherazade’s in *The Thousand and One Nights*. But in *El beso de la mujer araña*, the stories also “provide a language,” as Stephanie Merrim states, to address the condition of political and sexual repression with which the characters repeatedly clash.

Furthermore, a significant factor in how language is mediated in the novel is related to the fact that Molina’s renditions of the movies are far from faithful. As Echavarren argues, Molina’s narratives are composed of the: “Desechos de un discurso ajeno, los productos, ya convertidos en basura, de una cultura de masas” [Remains of a foreign discourse, the products, already converted into trash, of a mass culture]. Molina constantly resorts to appropriating the “remains” of popular culture: the “B” movies, but also boleros and tangos and popularised versions of sexuality and psychology. But Molina’s process of retelling, his appropriation and recontextualization of the original material, is clearly distorted. Molina is an unfaithful translator of popular culture; the movies and songs are important to Molina only to the extent to which he can mould them in his own words to suit his own ends. Echavarren points to the selective and interpretive aspects of Molina’s versions—in other words, to his process of mis-translation—when he says: “Al seleccionar e interpretar, el homosexual pervierte, al menos parcialmente, sus finalidades originales. ...Su poder persuasivo reside en su carácter ficticio” [As he selects and interprets, the homosexual perverts, at least partially, its original purpose....Its persuasive power resides in its fictive character].
In this manner, desire and ideology—which are both inverted and subversive in Puig’s novel—are displaced toward storytelling, as narrative itself becomes a way to resist repressive discourses.

Molina’s storytelling, the narratives of a gay male Scheherazade in drag, culminates with the sexual union between the two protagonists, and finally with the violence at the end of the novel. The magic of the storytelling and the interweaving narratives, ironically set against the reality of life in jail, postpones violence and death, at least for a time. It also creates the potential for reconstructing memory and community, through narrative and translation, at times of extreme repression and of authoritarian regimes that seek to homogenize the discourse of society and to silence any dissenting voice. In the process, Puig demonstrates the potential of narrative to imagine and recreate the nation, even from behind prison bars.

V.

Perhaps an even more unusual version of Scheherazade is at the center of Ricardo Piglia’s 1992 novel La ciudad ausente [The Absent City]. At stake in Piglia’s text, as in Puig’s El beso de la mujer araña, are questions of language and representation, memory and community, and of the role of narrative and translation in drawing the stage where such issues can be played out. Piglia’s text deals with these issues in more recent times, as we now find ourselves in the aftermath of dictatorship and the transition to democracy, in a society facing the forces of neoliberalism. The novel is composed of disparate but interrelated stories; these narratives constitute the textual space of the novel and the geographic, historical and literal space of the nation itself.

Everyone in La ciudad ausente, including Junior, an investigative journalist seeking to decipher the stories as he travels through them, is obsessed with tracking the narratives, seeking their origin and center. But originality and centrality are as elusive as meaning in this text, as the stories continually circulate, often illicitly and in clandestine fashion, in copied mechanical fragments, as if to create counter-plots to the larger, authoritative discourses of the State or the Market. As Piglia has remarked, “You could say that The Absent City is a novel in which I imagine a society controlled by stories, that it is like a realist novel of a society in which what really exists is spoken stories, machines that tell fragmented, Argentine stories”. But we
are left with the questions of where these stories originate and what it means to say that they are “Argentine.”

Increasingly, Junior and the reader realize that the stories come from Elena—the Scheherazade figure in the novel—who used to be a woman but is now a machine. The stories Elena produces, however, are themselves not original, as she channels an irreverent combination of past literary and historical references, both Argentine and foreign. It is precisely this irreverence and appropriation, enacted through processes of mis-translation, that turn the narratives into “Argentine stories.” The productivity of mis-translation begins with the machine herself, even before others get a hold of her stories, because the first story—where one might expect to find an origin—is itself a mis-translation. The machine takes the fragments that appear lost and transforms them into something else:

Primero habían intentado una máquina de traducir… Una tarde le incorporaron William Wilson de Poe para que lo tradujera. A las tres horas empezaron a salir las cintas de teletipo con la versión final. El relato se expandió y se modificó hasta ser irreconocible. Se llamaba Stephen Stevenson. Fue la historia inicial… Queríamos una máquina de traducir y tenemos una máquina transformadora de historias… Usa lo que hay y lo que parece perdido lo hace volver transformado en otra cosa. Así es la vida.40

[At first they had tried to make a machine that could translate texts…. One afternoon they fed it Poe’s ‘William Wilson’ and asked it to translate it. Three hours later the teletype began to print the final version. The story was stretched out and modified to such a degree that it was unrecognizable. It was now called ‘Stephen Stevenson.’ That was the first story. ..We had wanted a machine that could translate; we got a machine that transforms stories….It takes what is available and transforms what appears to be lost into something else. That is life.]

This mis-translation, this transformation, is the process through which the past—whether it be past literary traditions, past historical experiences, or both—can be reconsidered and re-articulated. And the “machine that transforms stories” at the emptied center of La ciudad ausente—emptied as originality is revealed to be a fallacy—is a testament to the power of narrative, as seen in this contemporary, Argentine version of Scheherazade.41 In this sense, translation—as a reconstruction of a lost utopia—is an ideal metaphor for the process of rebuilding a collective, lost memory.

Transformation in La ciudad ausente, as Masiello argues, reveals how Latin America can be “an active site for the reinvention of literary forms and discourse” (168). This is largely achieved through variations on the practice of mis-translation, which multiply and confuse meaning and open the way for a number of muted characters to find a voice. Through a series of reproductions, images, and simulacra, narrative becomes the site of political and aesthetic resistance. The optimism found in Piglia’s novel is thus specifically related to the potential of mis-translation to transform the past, including what was believed to have been lost, into something different—a possible future for a nation reconstructed through narrative.

As the various governmental agents in the novel are unable to get at the origin of the voice they wish to disconnect, the State becomes unable to silence Elena or to stop the stories from circulating. In her monologue at the end of the novel, Elena, a postmodern, mechanical Scheherazade, reaffirms the perseverance of storytelling, even as she awaits a confirming ear that can only come from the future:

Estoy llena de historias, no puedo parar, las patrullas controlan la ciudad y los locales de la Nueva de Julio están abandonados, hay que salir, cruzar…, extraigo los acontecimientos de la memoria viva, la luz de lo real titila, débil, soy la cantora, la que canta, estoy en la arena, cerca de la bahía, en el filo del agua puedo aún recordar las viejas voces perdidas, estoy sola al sol, nadie se acerca, nadie viene, pero voy a seguir, enfrenté está el desierto, el sol calcina las piedras, me arrastro a veces, pero voy a seguir, hasta el borde del agua, sí.42

[I am full of stories, I cannot stop, the patrol cars control the city and the locales below Av. Nueve de Julio have been abandoned, we have to get out, go across…, I pull events out of live memories, the light of the real quivers, weakly, I am the singer, the one who sings, I am on the sand, near the bay, I can still remember the old lost voices where the water laps ashore, I am alone in the sun, no one comes near me, no one comes, but I will go on, the desert is before me, the stones calcined by the sun, sometimes I have to drag myself, but I will go on, to the edge of the water, I will, yes.]43

The conclusion to Piglia’s novel recalls the final affirmation of Molly Bloom in Joyce’s Ulysses. The machine in La ciudad ausente is also reminis-
cent of the final chapter of *Ulysses* in that she, like Penelope, is constantly weaving and unweaving stories, stories that come from the memory of others, from other texts, and are transformed into something different. In this sense, the machine is also like Molina in *El beso de la mujer araña*, the spider woman weaving and unweaving her web of seduction, which turns out to be a web in which identity and representation must be reconsidered. In both Puig and Piglia we see the storyteller again as Scheherazade, created by circumstance and recreating herself and those around her through narrative. Scheherazade, an entire tradition and its legacy, appropriated through mis-translation and resituated on a new map to create unexpected meanings as needed in the socio-political context of contemporary Argentina.

A generation before Puig and Piglia, Borges developed an aesthetics based on practices of mis-translation that legitimize the margin by, among other things, rearticulating the legacy of past traditions and challenging our notions of North and South, East and West. Taking advantage of the space created by Borges's redrawing of geographic and literary maps, Puig and Piglia rework the tradition of Scheherazade, creating irreverent versions of the classic storyteller: in one case a transvestite Scheherazade who narrates to seduce but also participates, unwittingly, in a foundational dialogue from behind prison bars; and in the other, a female machine that mis-translates the material fed to her to create new stories that help define the nation in the transition from dictatorship to democracy, while defying the discourses of the State and the Market.

Through various processes of translation, in the broadest sense of the term, Borges, Puig, and Piglia show that Latin American writers can transform the original, including the values of the center where it was produced. This move destabilizes concepts of originality, authorship and influence, creating major cultural political implications for the periphery and its literatures. Stories within stories, laden with desire, interrupted and postponed to extend life and question meaning: such is the role of narrative and translation in Argentina today.

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**Notes**

1. In *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: Allen Lane, 1994), as part of an overview of the influence of the *Nights* on world literature, Robert Irwin states: "There is scarcely a tale in the whole of the *Nights* which does not have its precursors, derivatives or analogous versions. Tales evolve into other tales and they replicate, elaborate, invert, abridge, link and comment on their own structure in an endless play of transformation—but was there ever the first version of any story? It is almost always impossible to tell when a story was first told and when it was first written down, or how it was transmitted, and impossible too to say what the last telling and final version of a story will be. Good stories pay little attention to cultural or linguistic frontiers" (64–65).

2. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, 4 vols. (Barcelona: Emécé Editores España, 1996) 1: 239. This and all other translations in this article are mine.


5. Borges, vol. 1, 239. In *Las versiones híbricas* Borges also compares only translations (in this case of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) amongst each other and not with the original.

6. In a sense, Borges's entire work can be said to be an illustration of the principle that the concept of the "definitive text" is a fallacy, and of the unexpected potential of this principle for Latin American writers. For further considerations of the implications of "Las versiones híbricas" and "Los traductores de Las 1001 Noches" on translation theory, and on Borges's own poetics and aesthetics, see Sergio Waisman, "Theorizing Translation: Borges, Displacement, and Irreverence," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2000.


8. Borges's astute distinction focuses the discussion on the importance of the context in which a text exists, and on the relationship between meaning and time. In other words, on the diachronic nature of how texts are read. As George Steiner states in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): "One thing is clear: every language—act has a temporal determinant. No semantic form is timeless. When using a word we wake into resonance, as it were, its entire previous history. A text is
embedded in specific historical time; it has what linguists call a diachronic structure" (24). The issue becomes how to transpose a text from one context to another. As is evident by Borges's argument, it is the context (including class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, time period, historical, political, and cultural conditions), and not just the language, that changes as one goes from an original to a translation.

10. The issue of fidelity, as a number of critics have observed, is the basic underlying question in just about every theory of translation and remains one of the major issues in the field today. As Steiner has said: "It can be argued that all theories of translation—formal, pragmatic, chronological—are only variants of a single, inseparable question. In what ways can or ought fidelity to be 'achieved'? What is the optimal correlation between the A text in the source-language and the B text in the receptor-language? The issue has been debated for over two thousand years?" (275). By valuing mis-translations Borges develops a formulation by which the question of fidelity need not be inescapable.


12. Borges says, for example, that Galland "domestica of his Arabs... para que no descontenaran irreplicablemente en Paris" ("domesticated his Arabs... so they would not be irreplaceably out of tune in Paris") (Vol. 1: 399; emphasis added).


A few critics have recently condemned such domesticating translations in the history of U.S. and U.K. literatures. Lawrence Venuti, in particular, argues in The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) against translations that read fluently in the target language, which try to make it seem as if the text were written in English, and not in another language. He argues that such "transparent translations" efface "the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text... [and] perform a labor of acculturation" that becomes part of a cultural imperialism (4–5). In his more recent The Sandwich of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), Venuti begins to consider translation from the perspective of peripheral nations, where the same methods as those used in the center can have completely different effects.


17. It is worth noting that Borges's only comments about Weil's version (dated 1839–1842) in "Los traductores de Las 1001 Noches" have to do with Weil's infidelities, which Borges of course prays. He states: "Sus interpolaciones me merecen todo respeto" ("His interpolations deserve all my respect"); and after giving several brief examples of these, he adds: "Esa buena particularidades no son indignas de Burton o Mardrus" ("These good falsifications are not unworthy of Burton or Mardrus") (Borges, vol. 1: 410).


19. Surprisingly, there has been relatively little work done on the influence of the Nights on Medieval Spanish literature. Important exceptions to this include Juan Vernet Ginés, Las mil y una noches y su influencia en la novellística medieval española (Barcelona: Real Academia de Buenas Letras de Barcelona, 1959), in which Vernet Ginés argues that the origin of the picaresque novel resides in The Thousand and One Nights; and Armistead's and Monroe's study of the parallels between the Nights and the Celestina ("The Celestina's Muslim Sisters" 3–27). See also Fernando Toro-Garland, "La Celestina en Las mil y una noches," Actas del Congreso Internacional de Hispanistas (México: Colegio de México, 1967) 627–634; and Irwin 92–95.


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diálogo, que pone en juego su imaginación y le permite seguir viviendo" ("The most characteristic aspect of the novel may very well be the sharp distinction presented between the situation of the protagonists—locked up in prison, 'dead' to society, simple objects of the repressive-jail system—and the dialogue, which puts into play their imagination and allows them to go on living") (66; emphasis added).

29. As Francine Masiello observes in *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), "Molina's stories have double meanings and show signs of equivocation especially as he glides between movie screen images and his own fantasized reconstruction of what he believes he has seen. In effect, the novel is plotted on doubleness of this kind and supplies the marshy groundwork for allowing the reader to 'thicken about the organizing principles of identity'" (66).

30. In "For a New (Psychological) Novel in the Works of Manuel Puig," *Novel* 17 (1984), Stephanie Merriam states: "Like dreams, the movie-stories Molina tells provide a language for what has been repressed, which manages to get past the 'censor' because the real circumstances and concerns are translated into the frivolous language of grade 'B' movies. 'Everything [in the novel] is mediated,' states Puig: examined closely, each of the six movies-stories proves to be a spider's web, a dream-like weave of concrete and psychosexual information that has entered the tale through the dream-work of displacement and condensation" (149). The quotation from Puig to which Merrim refers is from Danubio Torres Ferrero's "Conversación con Manuel Puig: la redención de la cursilería," *Eco* 28 (March 1975): 508.

31. Echavarren 66. Echavarren also sees Molina as a *bricolage*, a useful model in understanding the formulation of Molina's discourse: "Es legítimo equiparar la utilización del material cinematográfico de Puig al *bricolaje*" ("It is legitimate to equate Puig’s use of cinematicographic material with *bricolaje*") (68).

32. Echavarren 68.

33. Significantly, the psychoanalytic texts—from Freud to Marcuse, with their oftentimes subversive ideas about homosexuality—are relegated to the margins, much as they are in society at large. As a result, the dialogical relationship between these texts and the dialogue in the main part of the novel is that we come to see the interactions between the two characters as an experimentation with, and enactment of, the theories presented in the margins. On this process, see Elías Miguel Muñoz, "El discurso utópico de la sexualidad," *Revista Iberoamericana* 52.135–136 (April–September 1986): 361–378.

34. Masiello 87.

35. I agree, on this, with Merrim's conclusion that the "tragedy" of *El beso de la mujer araña* is "Molina and Valentín's inability to conceive of true liberation" (157). I believe that the emphasis should rest with the role of mediated stories in defying dictatorship and repression. The point is that sexual and political liberation are put into play through the circulation of the mis-translated narrative itself—and not necessarily whether such liberation is actually achieved. The ending of the novel, in any case, remains purposefully ambiguous on this matter.


37. Significantly, in *La ciudad ausente* the potential of reproduction and translation becomes a site of resistance in the face of an overpowering neoliberal market. As Masiello observes: "Piglia... situates this relationship between the original and its copy, between the source text and its translations in the heart of the mass-media age and the problem of globalized consumption. It is the 'delirium of simulation' (15) that motivates characters of *La ciudad ausente*.

The novel is composed through different copying machines: cassettes, walkmen, radios, television monitors, maps, and mirrors—even tattoos—reproduce in miniature the larger representations of life and feelings" (166). See also what Piglia says about paranoia, politics and memory in literature in "El último cuento de Borges," *Formas breves* (Buenos Aires: Temas Grupo Editorial, 1999) 59–68.

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