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Review/ Reseña

Marechal, Leopoldo. *Adam Buenosayres*. Translated and edited by Norman Cheadle, with the help of Sheila Ethier. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014.

The Back of the Tapestry: Translation and Investigation

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[M]e parece que el traducir de una lengua en otra, como no sea de las reinas de las lenguas, griega y latina, es como quien mira los tapices flamencos por el revés, que aunque se veen las figuras, son llenas de hilos que las escurecen, y no se veen con la lisura y tez de la haz; y el traducir de lenguas fáciles, ni arguye ingenio ni elocución, como no le arguye el que traslada ni el que copia un papel de otro papel. Y no por esto quiero inferir que no sea loable este ejercicio del traducir; porque en otras cosas peores se podría ocupar el hombre, y que menos provecho le trujesen.

(El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha, II)

A first reading of this passage of *Don Quixote* will very likely conclude that Cervantes does not think very highly of translations, as he seems to equate translated works with the dull reverse of a tapestry. The

translation may reveal the general shape of the original, but that shape is obscured by the threads that go into the making of it. A second, more careful reading, however, tells a slightly different, more entangled story. The passage does not refer to the translation itself as the back of the tapestry, but rather to the act of translation itself and to the translator who peeks behind the tapestry in a kind of transgressive investigation that lays bare the making of the work of art: “es como quien mira los tapices flamencos por el revés...” This transgressive operation is in direct contrast to the characterization of translation that follows, as the uninspired work of the copyist: “ni arguye ingenio ni elocución...” The first phrase shows the translator in detective mode, investigating the very making of the work of art, while the second shows the translator as a scribe, incapable of invention, wit or elocution (not to mention eloquence). Untangling these distinct characterizations of the translator within the textual economy of *Don Quixote* would mean a serious investigation into the novel’s framed tale (Cide Hamete, translated author of the *Quixote*) and the relationship between translation and fidelity, and fidelity and honor, but that is not the subject of this review. Rather, I would like to focus on Norman Cheadle’s recent translation of Leopoldo Marechal’s magnum opus, *Adán Buenosayres*, originally published in 1948. This translation is a superb embodiment of Cervantes’s notion of peeking behind the tapestry to reveal the making of the work of art, and it clearly belies the notion of the translator as copyist.

Published in 1948 but begun years before (perhaps as early as 1926), *Adán Buenosayres* is one of the most important novels of 20th century Argentina. According to noted novelist Ricardo Piglia, it is more than that, being “uno de los mejores libros que se han escrito en esta lengua” (xvi). Why then did it have to wait until 2014 to be translated into English? Part of the answer to this lies in the critical reception of the novel in Argentina and Latin America more generally. In his excellent introduction to the translation—looking behind the tapestry—, Cheadle examines the historical context in which the novel was written and published, specifically the Argentine “culture wars” of the 1930s and 1940s, which ultimately determined the chilly reception the novel received from

the literary establishment. While Marechal was a close friend of Borges and an important part of the literary group that rallied around the avant-garde literary review *Martín Fierro* in the mid 1920s, by the 1930s Marechal had distanced himself somewhat from the liberal group, having undergone a spiritual crisis that led him to join the *Cursos de Cultura Católica*, an institute that became a bastion of Catholic nationalism (xvii). With the rise of Peronism in the 1940s, Argentine society became even more polarized than before (a polarization Cheadle traces back to the 19th century conflict between *federales* and *unitarios*). With Marechal now a Peronist functionary, he was “at loggerheads with the now alienated liberal literary establishment, whose leading light was Jorge Luis Borges. Hunkered down, as it were in the fortress of SADE (Sociedad Argentina de Escritores; Argentine Society of Writers), the liberals, guerilla-style, maintained a coded war of words against what they hyperbolically called the “Nazi-Fascist-Peronist dictatorship” (xvii).

This is the context in which the novel was published, so it should be no surprise that the early reviews were so negative. The fact that the novel is a *roman-à-clef*, albeit set in the 1920s, and that it depicts a number of the most important members of the Buenos Aires literary world (including, among others, Borges, the painter Xul Solar, writer Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz, and the poet, Jacobo Fijman), did not smooth its reception. One review, in particular, by Eduardo González Lanuza, published in *Sur* in November 1949, was damning in the extreme. This general reaction within Argentina was duplicated by two of the critics who became most influential in the North American academy: Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Enrique Anderson-Imbert. (Anderson-Imbert’s 1960 anthology of Latin American literature, co-authored with Eugenio Florit, was a standard text in universities and introduced generations of North American students to the literature of the region. Marechal is not in the anthology.) Despite a few contemporary laudatory reviews (the young Cortázar’s 1949 review in *Realidad: Revista de Ideas* is notable among them), the novel had to wait until the mid-1960s for a reappraisal, with the change in attitude due in part to the success of Marechal’s second novel, *El banquete de Severo Arcángel* (1965). With Argentina so conflicted about the novel’s worth, it is

perhaps understandable that no Anglophone translator would attempt translating the novel before the Boom. But why has it had to wait through the Boom, the post-Boom, and on into the 21st century?

The inherent difficulties of the text itself may provide an answer, at least in part. Borges, enjoying a position of literary prestige since the 1940s at least, became popular in English in the early 1960s due to the success of James Irby's 1962 collection, *Labyrinths*, published by New Directions. Borges's terse, almost oracular prose, did nothing to prepare Anglophone readers for the opulence of *Adán Buenosayres*. In fact, it may have actually worked to put them off to Marechal, whose complexity in *Adán Buenosayres* is reminiscent of Joyce. (Much has been made of the Joyce-Marechal connection, and Cheadle does a fine job of elucidating it in the introduction.) Cortázar spoke of this complexity as "diversa desmesura," an excess that undermined the link between form and content (xxi), while Angel Rama underscored the parodic back-and-forth between high and low culture (xxi). The novel practically begs for a Bakhtinian analysis that might grapple with its heteroglossia, the rich mix of styles and languages that meet in Marechal's Buenos Aires. All of which poses real stumbling blocks for the translator and may have also contributed to the late arrival of the novel into English.

We can speculate as to why it took so long for a translator to attempt this novel, but must be grateful that Cheadle has produced the long-awaited translation the novel deserves. The fact that he opted to translate the novel and provide at the same time a useful critical apparatus—and that he convinced the publisher to allow him to do this—makes the translation so much more valuable. The translation includes a substantial introductory essay—alluded to above—that contextualizes the novel within Argentine, Latin American and world literature, while also providing a useful discussion of the process of translation and some of the more global decisions. Eight pages of photos, sketches, and the cover art of the original publication complement the introductory essay. The seven books of the novel are followed first by a glossary of terms from Argentine Spanish, which were left untranslated in the text, and then by numerous and at times lengthy endnotes. These are based on a wide variety of

sources, but are heavily indebted to Pedro Luis Barcia's 1994 edition and to Javier de Navascués's critical edition. They are absolutely key to a more complete understanding of the novel and represent a tremendous amount of work. The final section is comprised of an extensive bibliography of first editions and of the works cited in the introduction and notes. All in all, the critical apparatus (especially the notes section) takes the translation to the next level and makes the edition truly useful. By explicating concepts and passages from the work, the notes make explicit the novel's embeddedness in early 20th century Argentine culture.

Catherine Porter, among others, has argued strongly that translation should be taken seriously as scholarship and rewarded during tenure and promotion cases, and the MLA has recently issued guidelines to that effect (MLA). Who can deny the logic of this argument, especially when faced with such a monumental task as that completed by Cheadle?

Far too many book reviews in translation isolate discrete translation decisions to second-guess or, worse, ridicule the translator. This is the hallowed tradition of seeking out the translation blunder or "howler," as a way of undermining the translator's authority and casting him or her as an imperfect copyist. I won't do that here, in part because Cheadle's work is far too careful and creative, in part because I reject the notion of the translator as copyist, flawed or otherwise. Nevertheless, there are a few translation decisions that bear discussion, in particular those having to do with tone and register. *Adán Buenosayres* is a veritable cauldron seething with languages and registers and it is the task of the translator to replicate this heteroglossia in the target language. While much of the novel revolves around literary and philosophical discussions in quite learned Spanish, there are many contrasting scenes when these same characters use the language of the popular classes, or when the poor of Buenos Aires (immigrants and poor of the suburban shantytowns) themselves take the stage. In general, Cheadle captures these changes in register with skill, and he seems to have a particular gift for creative transposition of curse words (always supremely difficult to translate) and slang. Nonetheless, the characters do read at times as abstruse and somewhat pretentious. This is particularly true of the title character, the mopey poet and spurned lover,

Adam Buenosayres. While this may be intentional, I would say that a little Latinate English goes a long way; ultimately, the original Spanish does not seem quite as sophisticated (over-the-top, parodically sophisticated) as does the translation. One other issue of register merits discussion. In chapter 3, Adam and his literary buddies go on a drunken nocturnal expedition out into the *arrabal*, the zone where city meets wilderness “in an agonistic embrace, like two giants locked in single combat” (149). These are some of the most humorous and thought-provoking pages of the novel, as they allow the author to take on the *criollista* deification of the land and the gaucho. None of these pages is more compelling than when the group meets up with the mythical gaucho, famous in story and poem, Santos Vega, el *payador* (defined in the glossary as “gaucho troubadour; popular country-style singer,” 621) and the gaucho devil incarnate, Juan Sin Ropa. This is an important, defining moments of the novel and it is somewhat disconcerting when Juan Sin Ropa speaks with the accent of a North American cowboy and even seems to elicit the same from Adam: “Looking back and forth between the group and the troubadour fading into the distance, the figure laughed again: —At yer service, pardners, he assented in his odious, sarcastic drawl. But Adam Buenosayres, full of wrath, shouted right into his face. —You lie, varmint!” (177). Where the English version seems to invoke a John Wayne comedy set in the Old West, the original Spanish harkens back to *Don Segundo Sombra* or even to the *Martín Fierro*: “Mirando alternativamente al grupo y al trovador que se alejaba, la figura volvió a reír. —Pa lo que gusten mandar, aparceros— asintió con su retintín odioso. Pero Adán Buenosayres, lleno de ira, le gritó en sus propias barbas: —Mentís, trompeta!” (156). There is an odd tension revealed here: where the critical apparatus does everything it can to make Argentine society and literary traditions available on their own terms to the careful reader, exhibiting the threads that make up the tapestry, the translation itself, at least in this instance, domesticates the original, naturalizing it within the target language to the point where cultural particularities (the differences between gauchos and cowboys) are eroded, if not obliterated. Juan Sin Ropa is striking and sharply imagined in English, but disconnected somehow from the contextual weave of the work.

Nonetheless, this translation of *Adán Buenosayres* is and will be the definitive one for many years to come. The issues of register and tone do not diminish the novel's stylistic verve and this is, ultimately, a highly successful English version—one that has been long overdue. *Adam Buenosayres*, in Cheadle's version, has much to offer the inquisitive reader, at least those readers willing to peek with the translator behind the tapestry.

Works Cited

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