



Reading In/Between: Migrant Bodies, Latin American Translations

Lire en(tre): corps migrants, traductions latino-américaines

Christopher Larkosh

Volume 17, Number 1, 1er semestre 2004

Traductions et représentations : Parcours dans l'espace hispanique 1
Translations and Representations: Exploring the Hispanic World 1

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/011975ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/011975ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN

0835-8443 (print)
1708-2188 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Larkosh, C. (2004). Reading In/Between: Migrant Bodies, Latin American Translations. *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, 17(1), 107–128.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/011975ar>

Article abstract

This essay examines the role of translation in the redefinition of the relationship between authors and their respective national cultures, and in continuing discussions of gender, sexuality, migration and cultural identity in translation studies. The translation of Witold Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke* from Polish into Spanish by Cuban author Virgilio Piñera and a Translation Committee, not only calls into question the conventional dichotomy of author and translator, but also creates a transnational literary community which questions a number of assumptions about the history of translation in the West, its complicity both in the construction of literary canonicity and the maintenance of the educational institution.

Reading In/Between: Migrant Bodies, Latin American Translations

Christopher Larkosh

Introduction: Sexuality and Migration in Translation (and vice versa)

I would like to begin with the following assertion regarding the place of literary theory in translation studies: it is often the translated literary text—its sources, its destination, the physical spaces and institutional contexts it passes through in transit, or the one which the work of translation comes to define—which already holds out the possibility for theory, and in so doing calls forth a reading of the act of translation from which this new version of the work emerges. A reading of the translated text—one which extends to its adopted language as an ever-evolving part of its meaning—may suggest its own theories and possibilities for thinking about its transformation, as it continues to traverse the already unstable boundaries of languages and national cultures. Furthermore, as theories of translation are increasingly examined in connection with other theories of alterity (e.g., theories of gender, race, and ethnicity, post-colonial theory and subaltern studies), articulating a theory of translation in ‘other’ terms, in this case, those of sexuality and migration, will hopefully enjoy an enhanced receptivity in the continuing debates on the nature, if not the name, of translation studies¹.

¹ Many will recognize that I refer here to an essay often credited with founding the discipline of translation studies as we know it today, one by the translator, gay poet, linguist and translation theorist James Holmes: “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies” (1972). In it he calls into question the notion of the study of translation as a science and suggests possible future trajectories for the discipline: “while more than a few would question whether linguistics has yet reached a stage of precision, formalization and paradigm formation such

This 'cross-examination' of translation studies helps to raise a number of questions which should, in my opinion, be part of any intellectual inquiry into translation: what is the significance of translation and translators in our own and other societies, and their impact upon the potential of print and media diffusion, both in global languages with hundreds of millions of speakers, as well as those spoken by only a few million or even less? And what are the other theoretical issues, such as gender and sexuality, which give broader cultural meaning to the professional practice of translators and interpreters? As a proponent of what one might call the *theoretical imperative* in translation studies, this commitment, while partially a consequence of my background in comparative literature, is by no means anti-practice or anti-linguistic.

that it can properly be described as a science, and while practically everyone will agree that literary studies are not, and in the foreseeable future will not be, a science in any true sense of the English word, in the same way I will question whether we can with any justification use a designation for the study of translating and translations which places it in the company of mathematics, physics, chemistry or even biology, rather than that of sociology, history and philosophy—or for that matter of literary studies” (p. 70). It is this healthy measure of skepticism before any lingering scientific pretensions of present-day translation studies which might explain my return to Holmes’ survey of the discipline which, while recognizing the contributions of linguistics to the discipline, also does not attempt to devalue the role of the humanities or the social sciences such as history, sociology, literary studies or even what might one day come to be known as ‘queer theory’ in the further development of the field.

One of the translation scholars who has made the most convincing case in favor of diversity of approach in the field is Edwin Gentzler, in his book *Contemporary Translation Theories* (1991). Citing the outstanding contribution of French-Canadian feminists to the field, he goes on to suggest: “Marginalization may be an asset. Perhaps because of its being a minor discourse within larger institutions, the study of literary translation has been able to gain valuable insights into the nature of language and intercultural communication” (p. 198). Although translation studies is still set largely on the margins of the academic institution, I do believe that Gentzler’s call for openness to “new and alternative” approaches is even more essential today than it was over a decade ago. Although it is perhaps impossible to either claim or disavow one’s own marginality, I can say that it is not only his written work but his personal encouragement which has made much of my recent work in the field possible, and I would like to thank him and the Translation Center at the University of Massachusetts for providing a sense of community to me over the last year (2003-2004).

It is in this context of translation and alterity—both sexual and migrational—that I wish to propose a rereading of the works of the Polish-born immigrant to Argentina Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969) against the background of the Latin Americans and others who wrote in collaboration with him, around him, against him and after him; such a bi- (or even multi-) lingual reading provides a most compelling example of the kind of transnational conceptions of language that translation creates. Written primarily in Polish, Gombrowicz's *œuvre* has often depended on translation for its diffusion in other cultures where his own language falls noticeably outside of what I have begun to call, in the context of an Argentine literary tradition, the 'translatable foreign':² that immense corpus of foreign cultural material which is readily available to a national readership, either in the original or in translation, and thus potentially influential in the development of their world view. This 'translatable foreign' often becomes an integral part of a national literary discourse, one which in 19th and 20th century Latin America was often mediated through imported translations of foreign literary works; in this context, literature in translation can act as commerce, international politics, or even war. Here, however, foreign-language literature arrives from within, written in an incomprehensible, and at first untranslatable, immigrant language; with Gombrowicz, the Argentine reader educated solely in the languages of Western Europe can no longer read his own national literature in the original, at that point encountering the limits of control of the knowledge of self as imagined through a national canon. The dispersed body of text which surrounds Gombrowicz (articles, testimonies, letters) reminds us that there is not yet any single language in which one can read all of his work; for this reason more than any other, one should ask how well anyone really knows an *œuvre* which, in its complex web of literary and cultural reference, seems to speak a foreign language even when it is translated or left in the original.

² The concept of the foreign—Ger. *die Fremde*—has been a prominent concern in translation studies since Schleiermacher and Humboldt; Antoine Berman's book on the role of translation in German Romanticism, *The Experience of the Foreign*, is undoubtedly the best-known example of a theoretical exploration of the concept. What interests me here are not so much the faraway spaces of the exotic as much as those foreign spaces which are in between the illusory extremes of one's own conception of identity and of incommensurable difference which complicate clear notions of self, belonging and foreignness.

Furthermore, Gombrowicz's complicated transatlantic trajectory—a northeast-southwest axis which runs from Warsaw and the Polish countryside to the port of Gdynia, past Western Europe and along the African coast to Argentina, and then back through Rio to West Berlin and Paris—seems to run 'against the grain' of the West's most conventional notions of its own historical direction, as Western studies of translation often appear to move along a well-worn line running from the land of the Hebrew Bible, through Horace, the Renaissance and the European Romantics, into the ultimate chapter, that of English as world language *par excellence*, presumably the only final chapter possible in a Western history of translation (Steiner, Lefevere, Venuti).

Gombrowicz's literary movement is an important part of his message (and here I mean 'movement' in its most literal sense, one that transits and simultaneously 'cross-examines' the boundaries of languages and literatures). This uncommon passage challenges not only the strict cultural limits within which the West imagines itself, but the very division of life and art, to the point that as he becomes an established literary figure—not only in the Polish, but also in the Argentine, and finally the Parisian literary traditions—the roles of man, writer, and semi-fictional protagonist are always intertwined. His unpredictable arrival in Argentine and world literature in translation thus allows an in-depth examination of those limits of the foreign which predicate not only the diffusion and reception of literary works across national and linguistic boundaries, but one which, especially in the works of an immigrant writer in a nation of immigrants such as Argentina, encourages a simultaneous examination of translation, sexuality and migration as parallel manifestations of the ways in which cultural institutions process and assimilate the foreign, be it in the form of imported commodities to be consumed, foreign texts to be translated or immigrant bodies to be put to work and reproduce according to the demands of the national economy. It is with the introduction of the body into a discussion of this economy of cultural exchange, as Foucault reminds us in his use of the term "bio-power," that the issue of sexuality becomes pivotal in any discussion of institutional technologies of control as constituted in the creation of a number of distinct spaces: the barracks, the workshop, the university, etc.³

³ "This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the

In this essay I would thus like to examine the relationship between Gombrowicz and the cultural institutions he encounters in Argentina as one way of proposing a theory of translation, one which engages not only the concept of migration, but also explores the ways in which this transnational movement suggests a reexamination both of conventional delineations of linguistic, cultural and ethnic identity and of sexuality.

Café Rex: Revisiting the Space of Translation

Buenos Aires in the 1940's appears as an exceptional space for thinking about literary translation; it is a time of political change and cultural conflict, and the scene for a wide range of literary expression and cultural production. It is into this literary milieu that the Polish author Witold Gombrowicz and the Cuban writer Virgilio Piñera are introduced and with which they will, at least at first, attempt to communicate and negotiate. In 1946 Gombrowicz set out to translate his novel *Ferdydurke*, first published in Warsaw in 1937, from Polish into Spanish. The circumstances of this translation were far from conventional, however; instead of having the translation contracted out by a publisher, Gombrowicz engaged the translators himself by making an open invitation to those who frequented the chess salon of the Café Rex in the Avenida Corrientes to come and help translate the novel, creating a loosely formed group of collaborators which came to be known as "the Translation Committee." Part of the novel, the chapter entitled "Filifor forrado de niño," ("Filifor Honeycombed in Childishness") had already been published in 1944 in the literary journal *Papeles de Buenos Aires*, edited by the Argentine author

adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes" (1978, pp. 140-141). As recognized by Foucault himself, there is something misleading about the use of the word "history:" "People are going to say that I am dealing in a historicism which is more careless than radical" (p. 150). He is able to foresee the reaction to any attempt which attempts to challenge the way historical events are ordered, categorized and told; in much the same way, this discussion of translation, migration and sexuality also attempts to challenge history on a number of different levels precisely at those points where institutions attempt to impose any official, univocal conception of it: its languages, its epochal moments, its sequences in the form of narrative or lineage, all come under scrutiny as history embarks on a migration which multiplies its voices, translates its moments diachronically, rewires and short-circuits its national and sexual genealogies.

Macedonio Fernández and his son Adolfo de Obieta, and Adolfo was responsible for introducing Gombrowicz to Piñera and another Cuban, Humberto Rodríguez Tomeu, who would, with Obieta, come to form the main body of this unconventional translation machine. Much like in Macedonio's novel *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna*,⁴ *Ferdydurke* creates a series of impossible spaces which push the genre and language to their very limits: in *Museo*, the characters are aware that they inhabit a fictional space, in response, they continually try to act natural, real; as the Argentine novelist Ricardo Piglia has suggested, there is something about reading these two works together which allows one to imagine them as sole representatives of a single, future multilingual literary tradition.

This point has been made by the contemporary Argentine novelist Ricardo Piglia in his 1986 essay "¿Existe la novela argentina?" when he states: "La extrañeza es la marca de los dos grandes estilos que se han producido en la novela argentina del siglo XX: el de Roberto Arlt y el de Macedonio Fernández. Parecen lenguas exiliadas: suenan como el español de Gombrowicz." [Foreignness is the mark of the two great styles produced in the 20th century Argentine novel: that of Roberto Arlt and that of Macedonio Fernández. They seem to be exiled languages; they sound like the Spanish of Gombrowicz,] (1986, p. 79, my translation). Such a statement from one of Argentina's most prominent authors might suffice as a starting point for anyone wishing to read the work of Gombrowicz through the optic of Argentine literature. In Gombrowicz's translated language he finds something that has come to characterize the Argentine relationship to language in literature: its foreignness. "Vivir en otra lengua, se ha dicho, es la experiencia de la novela moderna: Conrad, claro, o Jerzy Kosinski, pero también Nabokov, Beckett o Isak Dinesen. El polaco era una lengua que Gombrowicz usaba casi exclusivamente en la escritura, como si fuera una lengua privada, un idiolecto." [To live in another language, it is said, is the experience of the modern novel: Conrad, surely, or Jerzy Kosinski, but also Nabokov, Beckett or Isak Dinesen. Polish was a language that Gombrowicz used almost exclusively in

⁴ Although this work was not published in its entirety until 1967, portions had already been published in Santiago de Chile in 1940 under the title *Una novela que comienza* [A Novel That Begins]. In a 1941 letter to Gómez de la Serna, Macedonio expresses his doubt that he would be able to honor the publishing house Losada's request to publish the novel in its entirety, presumably already completed, because of its unique style and structure.

writing, as if it were a private language, an idiolect”] (p. 79, my translation).

Whether Polish really was a “private language” for Gombrowicz is debatable, given the contact he had with co-workers at the Banco Polaco where he worked, or in the Polish community in Buenos Aires, but more important and interesting than Piglia’s historical accuracy is the connection Arlt/Macedonio/Gombrowicz which he continually reiterates in this essay, as if the triad would form a sort of museum/machine which might churn out the ultimate, future Argentine novel. Piglia also delineates the linguistic limitations of most Argentine readers of Gombrowicz, tracing once more the Argentine limits of the translatable foreign when he writes, “Gombrowicz de hecho reescribió *Ferdydurke*. Hay que comparar esta versión con las traducciones en inglés o en francés para notar enseguida que se trata de un texto único. Conocemos hasta donde fue capaz de llegar Joyce cuando tradujo al italiano el fragmento de “Anna Livia Plurabelle” de Finnegan...” [Gombrowicz in fact rewrote *Ferdydurke*. One has only to compare this version with English or French translations to see right away that this is a unique text. We know the extent to which Joyce was willing to go when he translated the fragment of Anna Livia Plurabelle into Italian”] (p. 84, my translation). In this context, *Ferdydurke* is indeed unique, and by challenging the range of Piglia’s literary reference—English, French, Italian, Spanish—he delineates once again the normative limits of Argentine literature’s inner circle of the translatable foreign, limits which would no doubt resurface in any attempt at telling a history of translation in an Argentine context. It is one told simultaneously in many European languages, and at the same time it is not yet told, one still awaiting both the moment and the other languages in which it can be told.

In this context of an attempted translation which was by no means guaranteed, it might be appropriate to reexamine some of the practical reasons why certain communications—in this case, between Poland and Latin America—are often impossible, or interrupted in passage. In the case of the translation of *Ferdydurke*, for example, one of the most obvious difficulties the Translation Committee faced was the simple fact that there existed no available Polish-Spanish dictionary (Rita Gombrowicz, 1984). Given that the author did not have a native command of the Spanish language, and the translators no knowledge at all of Polish, Gombrowicz would either have to attempt to explain the word’s meaning, often choosing a word for the translation even if the

meaning was different from that in the original, simply because he liked the sound of it. The Polish original was already full of neologisms of his own creation, and as Gombrowicz writes in the Translator's Note signed by Piñera in the Spanish edition, the translation had to challenge the expressive limits of the target language in much the same way:

La lengua usada en Ferdydurke se aparta de la convención general del idioma, de sus leyes universales, de su ritmo regular y diario. Una de las sorpresas de esta obra—entre muchas que ofreció al lector polaco—fue su insólita manera de manejar el idioma. Manera que abarcaba desde la distorción de la frase o del período hasta la aportación de nuevas palabras o locuciones enteras.

[The language used in *Ferdydurke* departs from the general convention of the language, from its universal laws, from its regular everyday rhythm. One of the surprises of this work—among the many that it offered its Polish readership—was its uncanny way of using the language, one which ranged from the distortion of sentences to the inclusion of new words or entire phrases] (Piñera, 1947, no page number, my translation).

In response to this stylistic challenge, the translators also had to invent something in the Spanish language which went beyond its conventional boundaries, to create a text in which the Spanish language had to become something more than itself, for the translation to come into being. This idea may appear similar to the one expressed by Walter Benjamin in his fundamental essay on translation, "The Task of the Translator," when he states that "translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test," and that "all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages" (1969, p. 75). What Gombrowicz and Piñera are suggesting, however, seems to take Benjamin's observations about the foreignness of languages a step further; this challenge of the boundaries of national language does not necessarily begin with the act of translation, but might in some cases actually be in response to the challenges that the author has placed upon the source language in the original and which the translator is compelled to translate. In the case of *Ferdydurke*, the language of the novel had begun to become foreign long before it had begun to be translated, and begins to be translated long before it is finished. At one point in the novel, for example, the narrator laments the absence of explicit references to the body in the poem he is reading, and proceeds to "translate" the poem by replacing every word with the word "thighs" (Gombrowicz, Pol., 1988, p. 150; Sp., 1947, pp. 161-62).

What is being translated here is by no means the poem's literal meaning, but one which departs from the text's suppressed "parts," body parts which fill in the shape and message of the poem; this is translation at its most radical and extreme, one which acts with the purpose of derailing literature from its traditional aesthetic, its dominant images, and its previous stylistic engagements.

Do uncommon places of translation have an impact on the translation itself, on its terms and stylistic choices? The Café Rex permitted a heterodox group to assemble around the project of translation, with a membership which was by no means exclusive; even though much of the work was completed in Piñera and Rodríguez Tomeu's apartment, the translation was carried out at least partially in a public space, and was left open to the interventions of those who chose to pass through it. The Spanish language resulting from the translation was a hybrid of literary language and Argentine colloquial speech, one whose contact with public life allowed it to assume a porosity that few translations can claim. It would be idealistic to assume, however, that this translation came into being within a context that attempted to ignore the common points of reference that a cosmopolitan literary culture provided for Gombrowicz, Piñera and the other translators of the Café Rex. There were many moments, for example, in which the French language served as a sort of literary *interlingua* between author and translator, mimicking the more common way that many literary works from cultures whose languages were unfamiliar to Spanish-language translators reached Latin American readers: through second-hand versions of French translations.

In this light, the translation of *Ferdydurke* is one which attempts an almost impossible line of communication between two points on the margins of the cosmopolitan literary culture of its time, acting ultimately to subvert the very notions of literary center and periphery. Piñera, in his introduction to the Spanish translation, goes as far as to state: "It is difficult to foresee the fate of this message among us, especially when it does not arrive from Paris." Latin America and Poland, cultures which at first may seem to have very little to do with one another, perhaps find a great deal of commonality in the ways in which national, 'site-specific' cultures attempt to negotiate with the metropolitan literary cultures in the foreground of that period, ones which dominate academic notions of 'interdisciplinary' studies such as comparative literature, literary theory, theories of gender and sexuality, and translation studies to this day. This alternative vision of the culture,

not determined by the specific point on the compass, one of multilingual enclaves which challenge official conceptions of linguistic realities, literary activity, or cultural authority, supplement those studies which focus on Western sites of power and cultural hegemony in a colonial or postcolonial context. In the Café Rex, one can dwell for a moment on those spaces often neglected when speaking generally of ‘East and West’ or ‘North and South’ in the context of the politics of translation. It is possible to recognize how such a dialogue is able to call the West’s very knowledge of itself—to say nothing of a series of Others—into question. The question of whether presumably ‘Western’ language, culture or traditions such as Spanish or Polish are ever clearly hegemonic or subaltern is thus debatable, given that each national tradition is implicated in a series of consolidations and exclusions in order to establish and propagate itself among those subjects in contact with it, whether or not they can be said to ‘belong’ to it. In the works of Gombrowicz and those of his translator Piñera, there seems to be something recurrent about the way in which the nation and its cultural institutions are represented, as if there were something visibly and inescapably artificial, imaginary, fictional or ephemeral about them, and in the literatures of countries such as Poland, Cuba or Argentina in the 1940’s, this preoccupation with metropolitan institutions may also be precisely what is most eminently translatable between them.

***Ferdydurke*: National Literature Translated as Classroom**

Ferdydurke narrates the impossibility of re-encounter between a young author who is no longer young and those cultural institutions which have shaped him: the school, the modern family or the ancestral estate. Gombrowicz explores how national subjects arrive at identity, not only through their encounters with cultural institutions, but also how they are shaped by those around them who are engaged in this institutional encounter as well. It is personified in the beginning of the novel by the elementary school teacher Pimko, whose job it is to bring the wayward author back to school and refamiliarize him with its terms, most notably that of translation as pedagogical tool, employed in conjunction with citation and rote learning.

The classroom scene to which Gombrowicz is reintroduced in *Ferdydurke* is perhaps one that those who are institutionally invested in literary studies have undoubtedly encountered at least once. In this class, as Professor Pimko elaborates it, the lesson plan is deceptively

simple: “What are we doing today... ah yes... ‘Explain and clarify for the students why the great poet Slowacki awakes in us love, admiration and delight.’” This project hopes to ensure a perfect transmission of national ideals which are supposedly encapsulated in the works of these great authors, and ensure the “correct” if not completely tautological response: “because he was a great poet.” This literary figure, in this case the Polish Romantic poet Juliusz Slowacki (1809-1849), is one of the supposedly ‘site specific’ points of reference by which the nation continually rereads and redefines itself with each generation. There is, however, a problem with this method; when Pimko asks one student, Kotecki, the question, and Kotecki cannot answer, for he does not in fact feel what the teacher says he is supposed to feel when he reads this work:

What if it doesn't enchant me? I can't read more than two lines and even that bores me. God help me, how does it enchant me, if it does not enchant me? [...] Honest to God, it enchants no one. How can it if no one reads it beside those of us in school, and that is only because we are forced to? (Pol. p. 43; Sp. p. 47, my translation)

The idea of a unitary, ‘correct’ response by which literary canons are often established, maintained and renewed in the academic institution is by no means limited to Poland; as Kotecki reminds us, especially in the Spanish translation, there is no need to actually know these works of Polish Romantic poetry or their equivalents in the Spanish literary tradition. What is important is knowing how to react to them when they or their counterparts in the canons of other national traditions are mentioned: “with love, admiration and delight.”

As the lesson continues, the act of translation is enlisted in the instruction of a foreign language, in this case Latin. But what is actually being taught through requiring the student to translate? The exercise is not only one of demonstrating mastery of the foreign language in question, but also to what extent the student has incorporated the text into his own language, participated in its transculturation and found equivalents for its cultural messages in his or her own language: he has completed “the mission of transmission.” It is no coincidence that the star student, Syfon (lit. “Siphon”) who can spot translate perfectly from Latin into Polish is the same one who can recite by heart the verses of the great poet Slowacki, and in so doing, even brings the recalcitrant Kotecki over to his camp of principled, idealistic ‘true believers’ who understand the significance of ‘great’ literature and its role in instilling traditional values. Through his

translation of Julius Caesar, he demonstrates to his peers not only his own translation skill in this exercise, but also illustrates Caesar's implicit message to these young men, in the classroom at the frontier of Rome's cultural domain:

...it is necessary to punish the excessive liberty and audacity of those who think they know more than their officer about victory and the result of one's actions, one must desire in the soldier discipline and self-control as much as valor and magnanimity... (Pol. p. 59; Sp. p. 64, my translation)

This passage is one on obedience, which addresses not only the relationship between officer and soldier, but in this classroom context, also that between teacher and student. In the Café Rex, moreover, Caesar's words take on yet another meaning, illustrating the relationship between author and his translators, his will to maintain control, and the constant threat of license, infidelity or insubordination. Gombrowicz participates in his own translation with a group of others who are by no means ordered to the task; if they are bored, they can leave. On the other hand, Piñera, the so-called President of the Translation Committee, was known to have intense arguments with Gombrowicz over the choice of words, style etc., yet in the end, Gombrowicz's choices usually prevailed, in spite of the fact that he often was unable to grasp the nuance of the choices presented to him. In the presence of the author, what if any authority does a title such as 'President' hold? Although this regime of translation employs the terminology of the nation, this republic of translators is by no means democratic; ultimately, the author still establishes his own dictatorship, no matter how *laissez-faire* it may appear at first glance: his subjects are allowed a voice in the text's conversion, but always in the presence of the author, their suggestions accepted insofar as they yield to the often arbitrary demands of his ultimate authority. Nonetheless, unconventional spaces for translation such as the Café Rex still suggest distinct models, not only for theories of translation, but also for relations of power in the process of transculturation, ones which might challenge those based solely on conventional notions of a single author and translator.

La carne de René: Transculturation in the Flesh

This literary contact of translation, mimesis and doubling with Gombrowicz was to have a profound effect on Piñera's own work in the years to come, and vice versa; Piñera published his first novel, *La*

carne de René, in Buenos Aires in 1952, and many parallels with Gombrowicz's translated novel are apparent. Like *Ferdydurke*, *La carne de René* is also about a young man who arrives with his family in an unspecified South American country after a prolonged migration in Europe. Here Piñera explores, perhaps more explicitly than anywhere in the writings of Gombrowicz, the effects of migration on the body, and how movement acts as a carnal stimulant as it participates in the articulation of a language of the flesh implicit in all national language. This is not a simple emigration/immigration with a single origin and destination, but rather one which is a recognizable part of a much longer story of migration, each stop on this itinerary implying a separate linguistic, cultural and institutional initiation. This American country of butcher shops is anonymous; there is no local color, no exotic "tropical flavor" to create a facile image of a cultural milieu; in fact, the very opposite appears to be the case, as such "paisajes llenos de mariposas doradas, de mujeres sonrientes, de lindos rayos de sol..." [landscapes full of golden butterflies, smiling women, pretty rays of sunlight...] (Piñera, 1952, p. 15, my translation), much like the one in *Ferdydurke*'s translated poem, exist only in fantasies, whereas in the reality of this novel, there is only *carne*, an exiled, migrant body which is, first and foremost, a commodity. This America is populated with a number of other exiled migrants as well who do not appear to suggest some sort of stereotypical "sensual Latin" aesthetic: a Pole by the name of Powlawsky⁵ and a German, Nieburg. It is not difficult to see something of Piñera's contact with Gombrowicz in Buenos Aires in these characters, and of his own exodus from Cuba, one like that of René, not enforced by any manifest act of institutional violence, yet still an act of exile.

As for René's father, Ramón, he is connected to a secret order of chocoholics called *chocolatófilos*, which is in perpetual war with an opposing faction which has prohibited the use of this commodity, each attempting to wrest control of a country from which each is alternately exiled: a situation which sounds, strangely enough, like the situation in Cuban politics in the late 40's and early 50's, when Miami received

⁵ It does not concern me so much that this name is not an 'authentic' Polish name; what is more interesting is the way the names change in migration so that they are no longer native in any country, subject to how the name sounds and can be written and pronounced by the authority who processes the immigrant; this is the basis of the confusion of *rusos*, *polacos* and others which continues to reappear in Argentine literature and beyond.

more than its share of exiled former Cuban presidents and their families. As Ramón tells his son, “what we defend is the idea of chocolate: not chocolate in itself” (Piñera, 1952, p. 39). It is not the commodity in itself that is defended, but the national monoculture that has grown up around its use, one that only allows the conception of identity in the terms of a single product in circulation. One might also find resonance in the warring literary factions of *enternecientes* and *hilarantes* in Macedonio’s *Museo de la novela de la Eterna*, or in the duel in *Ferdydurke* between synthesis and analysis, as embodied in the Dr. Prof. Filidor and his archnemeses the Prof. Anty-Filidor (Sp. Filifor, Anti-Filifor). Piñera suggests that it is the *idea* of flesh as commodity, both human and animal, which forms the basis not only of the way subjects imagine themselves and their place in society, but also war, cruelty, and other forms of political conflict. René is to be the successor to his father’s *chocolatófilo* crusade, and it is this grooming for a future service to the cause which the novel charts in the continuing passage of René’s flesh through a familiar series of cultural institutions: the family, religion and its iconic images. Above loom two emblematic visual representations: that of the tortured, perforated body of St. Sebastian, and a cutaway of the internal organs in a medical book of anatomy, both of which double for René’s body.

The space of initiation into the regime of the flesh is embodied in the school of Dr. Mármolo. This school exhibits little of the innocence of the jovial and innocuous Dr. Pimko: in this instance, the academic institution, whose motto is “sufrir en silencio” (“suffer in silence”), is depicted at its most graphically violent. Here the benches are not simply supplied with inkwells to provide ammunition for schoolboy pranks and books to be read and translated, but are equipped with a pedagogical tool much more convincing: electrodes which emit shocks, punctuating the lessons of literature and ancient history with a physical torture constantly increasing in intensity. The institution intervenes in the education of the students at the corporeal level, preparing the body as well as the mind for suffering, perhaps in the spirit of a “well-rounded education.” This physical education is one which teaches with pain, to prepare the body for an ever-increasing level of physical pain, an institution which insists on leaving its mark on the body of every student which passes through it: “¡Se va a marcar la primera res, señores! ¡Si su carne sufre la prueba sin prorrumpir en grito o gemido alguno la reconoceremos apta para el servicio del dolor!” [“The first of the cattle will now be branded, gentlemen! If his flesh suffers the test without breaking into any screams or moans we

will consider it worthy of the service of pain!"] (Piñera, 1952, p. 145, my translation). René's flesh distinguishes itself in this respect, as it is the only one that resists the mark of the institution by refusing to participate in its rituals of initiation into an economy of continual physical pain and disfiguration. As in Pimko's classroom in *Ferdydurke*, the voice of a single student who declares its inability or unwillingness to understand is all that is necessary to threaten the entire discourse with collapse.

In this connection of thematic and institutional commonplaces, the literary relationship between Gombrowicz and Piñera begins to look surprisingly like that between another Pole and another Cuban writing, and in contact with each other in the 1940's: the anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Fernando Ortiz, the latter authored the seminal work on the Cuban culture of sugar and tobacco, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, from which arises the concept of transculturation so fundamental to contemporary Latin American discussions of translation and cultural exchange. This term was coined by Ortiz to replace the concept of acculturation, thereby allowing a conception that recognizes the mutual nature of intercultural relations. Ortiz evokes Malinowski in the context of his idea of the "embrace of cultures," (1978, pp. 96-97) a cultural exchange imagined through the metaphor of sexual intercourse. Indeed, the concept of transculturation unmistakably carries some of Malinowski's features, a relationship which at first bears all the marks of, in the words of Ortiz, *la cópula*. Perhaps Ortiz realizes what he is implying by invoking the embrace in this context; at the end the relationship is reduced to one more innocent, collegial, that between a father and his chosen godfather, but this is also an intercultural and intellectual copulation, and one not without offspring; not surprisingly, although there is a father and a putative "padrino" in Ortiz's "family romance," there is no mother in sight. Perhaps naming Malinowski "godfather" is just a euphemistic way of concealing that his child has two fathers, as in the field of metaphor which Ortiz has created, it appears as the product of an interethnic same-sex marriage; and in naming their Polish-Cuban baby "transculturation," neither one can continue in this relationship without being transformed. Their child, of origins both migrant and native, continues to intervene in discussions on the interactions of translation, migration and sexuality in Latin America.⁶

⁶ The relationship between the concept of transculturation and translation has already been suggested in the book by Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *The Cuban*

The relationship of translation, intercultural contact and writing between Gombrowicz and Piñera in Argentina also exhibits this concept: a project of literary rebirthing which, as stated in the introduction of *Ferdydurke*, brings yet another Polish-Cuban baby into the world, one both genderless and all-gendered, and born to extend its reach over all of Latin America. Both works end up bearing the markings of their contact, and both assume a measure of the other's foreignness into their artistic vision, style and content. Here the commodities in transit are not material goods such as tobacco and sugar, but rather the (im)migrant body, its languages and literature and the sexual rumor that creates an illegible nexus between the two.⁷

Condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989. Although the book's title highlights the issue of translation, the book is more about transculturation than translation, strictly speaking. Piñera, along with Juan Marinello and Jacques Derrida, provides one of the epigraphs at the beginning, but aside from that one quote, "yo soy tú alucinado," left without comment, there is no further mention of Piñera as translator. Piñera and Pérez Firmat are indeed very different in their approach to the issue of translation; for one to be the other, each would indeed have to be hallucinating, as this discourse on translation continues to serve the construction of nation, "for us," translation as a politics of Cuban identity much like that of Schleiermacher, one still operating under an enforced heterosexual optic of literary reproduction. For example, for Pérez Firmat, Ortiz is the "father" not only of transculturation but of Cuban identity itself, simply because Ortiz names Malinowski the "godfather," perhaps the kind of Mafia godfather who wields some sort of invisible yet indisputable patriarchal power. As same-sex parents of transculturation, their difference is inscribed not in gender, but, as the word transculturation implies, in culture.

⁷ One of the most notorious rumors which has circulated about Gombrowicz's and Piñera's corporeal complicity as bodily commodities in transit is revealed in the final work of the Cuban author Reinaldo Arenas' *Before Night Falls* (Trans. Dolores M. Koch, New York, Viking, 1993); here I quote the book's title first in English, as the anecdote, which deals with Gombrowicz and Piñera prostituting themselves in the bathhouses of Buenos Aires, appears only in the English translation, but is curiously absent from the Spanish "original" *Antes que anochezca*; since this book was the result of recorded dictations made in New York with his soon-to-be English translator Dolores Koch, who "assists" (and I mean this in both the Spanish and English sense of the word) at/in the book's inception. Is there something about translation, the endless multiplication of versions, which follows the model of a rumor, and if the rumor is precisely that which cannot be repeated in 'serious scholarship' (if not relegated to an obscure footnote), what might that say about the potential role

Piñera's writing complicates the geographical network of the migrant body begun in the work of Gombrowicz, making its terms more explicit and visible and its relevance to a Latin America of multiple languages, ethnicities and cultures all the more legible.

Gombrowicz would go from translating into Spanish back to writing works in Polish, some of which address directly the issues of migration and exile. In 1951 the first sections of the novel *Trans-Atlantyk* were published in Paris, and two years later it was published in its entirety; unlike *La carne de René*, it would be two decades before these editions would be available to an Argentine readership in Spanish translation. The novel is an account of Gombrowicz's 1939 arrival in Argentina from a semifictional perspective; Gombrowicz the author and Gombrowicz the literary character are alternately conjoined and separated. In his encounter with the Polish community, the Argentine literary elite, and sailors and other drifters who frequent the area of the city called Retiro, he finds beside him a familiar presence. Gonzalo is the first and only explicitly homosexual character to appear in Gombrowicz's work; in this character one might recognize much of Gombrowicz's descriptions of Virgilio in his *Diary*. At first it appears that Gombrowicz wishes through the exaggeration of Gonzalo's features to keep this image separate from his own. In comparison to such an image of a man (like Gonzalo, Virgilio made no attempt to hide his homosexuality⁸), the Gombrowicz of the novel might not appear to be identifiably homosexual, as his own character has no visible qualities whatsoever, the typical Central European "Mann ohne Eigenschaften"; on the contrary, he appears to chart a course among caricatures in a conscious attempt to remain nondescript, but then again

of the study of translations in destabilizing academic conceptions not only of respectability but of normativity?

⁸ Here I am indebted to the Cuban writer Roberto Pérez León, who was kind enough to share with me a xeroxed copy of the typewritten manuscript which was to form part of Piñera's autobiography, and whose continued work on Piñera has been collected in the recent study *Virgilio Piñera: vitalidad de una paradoja* (2002), in which he gives further credence to the assertion that Piñera's translation and editing of Gombrowicz was as important to him, if not more so than his own work as an established author: "Ni la publicación de *Cuentos fríos* ni la de *La Carne de René*, debieron haber excitado tanto a Piñera como la salida de *Ferdydurke*." [Neither the publication of *Cold Tales* nor that of *René's Flesh* must have excited Piñera as much as the release of *Ferdydurke*.] (Pérez León, 2002, p. 98, my translation)

it might be precisely this lack of qualities which might raise the most questions. It might appear comfortable for Gombrowicz to imagine the flamboyant transvestite as Latin American, as in comparison it deflects any suspicions as to his own sexuality, but the literary body double named Gonzalo is not only a literary characterization of Piñera, but might also be read as a personification of what Gombrowicz most fears reflected onto himself. As a foreigner to this cultural and linguistic climate, Gombrowicz's own literary transvestism, however closeted, is nonetheless still visible in the ambivalent attempts at self-translation and cultural assimilation that mark his migration through Latin America and its literature.

Even though *Trans-Atlantyk* deals with the problems of assimilation as a recent arrival in an Argentina where the idea of the intellectual immigrant was officially discouraged, Gombrowicz was in no hurry to translate this work into Spanish, given the tepid reception of his earlier attempts at introducing his work in translation to Argentine readers. From this point onward, his point of dialogue is no longer Buenos Aires, but ironically the one of which he has been so critical for so long: Paris. As for Piñera, he would eventually return to a revolutionary Cuba which would subject him to many of the same institutional machinations which he envisioned long before in *La carne de René*: surveillance, violence, and eventual internal exile in La Habana until his death in 1979.

Conclusions: For Translators In/Between Bodies and Institutions

In this essay, I have attempted to reexamine the connections between national and sexual identity in Gombrowicz's work as it relates to Argentine conceptions of literary translatability, transcultural migration and sexuality. *Trans-Atlantyk* offers a conception of national identity based on not one but a set of radically different terms, under which traditional conceptions are challenged, claims to absolute validity are removed, and new spaces are created for translation, discussion and critique. In the following years, other writers in Argentina, such as Ernesto Sábato, Osvaldo Lamborghini and Ricardo Piglia, would do much to establish Gombrowicz's importance in contemporary Argentine literature; in their works one may well find the most detailed examples of the return of Gombrowicz to Argentina and its literature. Here one can discern a previous reading of Gombrowicz in Spanish translation, in the Polish characters that abound in their best-known works: especially Vladimir Tardewski in Piglia's *Respiración artificial*.

As one may suspect from a Polish character named Vladimir, the distinction between Poland and Russia remains unclear, as these fictional “Poles” do not appear very convincing, but in this space of immigration they are probably not meant to be completely authentic, and much as in the literary “Poland” of Calderón or Jarry, national identity is invariably subject to modification in translation. Whether in Piglia’s Tardewski or Lamborghini’s Marqués de Sebregondi, Jansky or ex-Galewski, one is once again reminded of Gombrowicz, not merely because of the Polish surnames, but because these characters, like Gombrowicz, test the limits of the translatable foreign and question national literary norms and institutions. In Argentina and beyond, the works of Gombrowicz underscore how the language of the migrant, the refugee and the outsider is already at work within the major linguistic registers of institutional power and literary canonicity.

In the end, is there really such a thing as a ‘native’ language? The study of literature in translation, as well as that of translation in literature, not only questions the borders between languages, but also those of identity, especially the idea that we are ‘native’ to language, as in the beginning even our ‘mother’ tongue was first encountered, like all others, as a foreign language. *Ferdydurke* presents an example of why reading literature in translation is not necessarily some sort of second-rate literary experience in comparison with reading in the original. Translation reminds us that Gombrowicz, especially when read in connection with Latin American writers such as Piñera, Macedonio, Ortiz, Piglia or Lamborghini, transcends those facile readings based on a nation’s canonical determinism, in which the work of one great national author continually teaches us how to read his progeny. To reread this work in Spanish translation actually makes another Gombrowicz legible: that literary migrant in exile who struggles with translation of his ideas into another cultural and linguistic milieu. The act of translation becomes a narrative in itself: one of immigration, the loss or complication of national, linguistic and sexual identities, and the necessity to negotiate with a new and foreign set of elite cultural and literary institutions. Such a rereading of *Ferdydurke* might ultimately lead one to ask: who is the better translator? The one who faithfully submits to the directives of the canonical curriculum, or the one who rebels, seeing nothing but the uselessness of an unquestioning submission to the pedagogical project of preceding generations? The answer may well be neither, that the translator cannot accept either one, but rather must negotiate much more subtly in order to ensure his ability both to translate the assigned

texts at hand, and to ensure a tenuous survival in/between the institution and the numerous cultural others for whom he or she is compelled to mediate.

University of Connecticut

References

BENJAMIN, Walter (1969). "The Task of the Translator." From *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York, Schocken Books.

BERMAN, Antoine (1992). *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*. (Fr. *L'Épreuve de l'étranger*.) Trans. S. Heyvaert. Albany, SUNY Press.

FERNÁNDEZ, Macedonio (1982). *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna*. Caracas, Ed. Ayacucho.

FOUCAULT, Michel (1978). *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York, Random House.

GOMBROWICZ, Rita (1984). *Gombrowicz en Argentine*. Paris, Denoël.

GOMBROWICZ, Witold (1947). *Ferdydurke*. Trans. Virgilio Piñera and the "Translation Committee." Buenos Aires, Argos.

— (1970). *Trans-Atlantyck*. Trans. Dzieła Zebrane, Tom II, Paris, Instytut Literacki.

— (1971). *Transatlántico*. Trans. Kazimierz Piekarec and Sergio Pitol, Barcelona, Ed. Barral.

— (1988). *Ferdydurke*. Krakow, Wydawnictwo Literackie.

GENTZLER, Edwin (1991). *Contemporary Translation Theories*. London and New York, Routledge.

HOLMES, James S. (1972). "The Name and Nature of Translation Studies" in *Translated! Papers on Literary Translation and Translation Studies*. Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1988.

LAMBORGHINI, Osvaldo (1988). *Novelas y cuentos*. Barcelona, Ediciones del Serbal.

LEFEVERE, André (1990). "Translation: Its Genealogy in the West," in Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, (eds.). *Translation, History, Culture*. London and New York, Pinter.

ORTIZ, Fernando (1978). *Contrapunteo cubano de tabaco y azúcar*. Caracas, Ed. Ayacucho.

PÉREZ FIRMAT, Gustavo (1989). *The Cuban Condition: Translation and Identity in Modern Cuban Literature*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

PÉREZ LEON, Roberto (2002). *Virgilio Piñera: vitalidad de una paradoja*. Caracas, CELCIT Colección Estudios.

PIGLIA, Ricardo (1980). *Respiración artificial*. Buenos Aires, Ediciones Pomaire.

— (1986). "¿Existe la novela argentina?" in *Literatura y crítica*. Santa Fe, Universidad del Litoral, pp. 79-85.

PIÑERA, Virgilio (1947). "Nota del traductor" in Gombrowicz, Witold. *Ferdydurke*. Buenos Aires, Argos (introduction unpaginated).

— (1952). *La carne de René*. Buenos Aires, Siglo XX.

STEINER, George (1975). *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. London, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press.

VENUTI, Lawrence (1995). *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London and New York, Routledge.

ABSTRACT: Reading In/Between: Migrant Bodies, Latin American Translations — This essay examines the role of translation in the redefinition of the relationship between authors and their respective national cultures, and in continuing discussions of gender, sexuality, migration and cultural identity in translation studies. The translation of Witold Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke* from Polish into Spanish by Cuban author Virgilio Piñera and a Translation Committee,

not only calls into question the conventional dichotomy of author and translator, but also creates a transnational literary community which questions a number of assumptions about the history of translation in the West, its complicity both in the construction of literary canonicity and the maintenance of the educational institution.

RÉSUMÉ : Lire en(tre): corps migrants, traductions latino-américaines — Cet article examinera le rôle de la traduction littéraire dans la redéfinition du rapport entre auteurs et leurs cultures nationales respectives, ainsi que dans les discussions de genre, sexualité, migration et identité culturelle en traductologie. La traduction du roman de Witold Gombrowicz, *Ferdydurke*, du polonais à l'espagnol par l'auteur cubain Virgilio Piñera et un Comité de traduction, ne remet pas seulement en cause la dichotomie conventionnelle auteur/traducteur; elle engendre également une communauté littéraire transnationale qui interroge certaines préconceptions sur l'histoire de la traduction en Occident, et sa complicité tant dans la construction de la canonicité littéraire que le maintien de l'institution éducative.

Keywords: Latin America, migration, sexuality, Gombrowicz, Piñera.

Mots-clés : Amérique Latine, migration, sexualité, Gombrowicz, Piñera.

**Christopher Larkosh: Dept. of Modern and Classical Languages,
University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269.**

E-mail: larko@rocketmail.com