

DISSIDENCES

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Roa Bastos and the Question of Cultural Translatability (or how does one get to Paraguay?)

*... He de hacer que la voz vuelva a fluir por los huesos...
Y haré que vuelva a encarnarnos el habla...
Después que se pierde este tiempo y un nuevo tiempo amanezca
(Silenciarío 5, reproduced in Mauro 36)*

Y esto también es sólo una manera de decir lo indecible (Madama Sui 291)

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The recent death of Paraguayan author and intellectual Augusto Roa Bastos has produced numerous reflections on his significance both as a writer within the Hispanic canon and as a representative and defender of Paraguayan culture. Most pieces have centred on the literary and linguistic experimentation of his earlier work, the short stories and the novels *Hijo de hombre* (1960) and *Yo el supremo* (1974), contrasting this with the relative silence in which he spent his last years since his return to Paraguay, dedicating himself to the promotion of the Guaraní language and culture. His legacy thus presents itself as a dual one: on the one hand, he is perceived to have incorporated a distinctly “other” voice into the literary canon, giving the Western reader access to Paraguayan culture through a global language; on the other, his commitment to his native language and culture led him to “silently” immerse himself in its

continued survival. Here, I propose to negotiate the apparent contradictions produced by such a dual legacy, by addressing the translatability of Roa Bastos' work for the Western reader and the way in which it foregrounds the question of transculturation; the very translatability of, here Paraguayan, culture. Whilst there has been a shift towards seeing Roa Bastos' work in similar terms in recent years, as a writing that is resistant to cultural imperialism, much of this has focused on the short stories and *Hijo de hombre*, which represent most directly the experience and voices of the Paraguayan *campesino* (Michel-Nagy). I will reflect here on the later novels, primarily *El fiscal* (1993) and *Madama Sui* (1995), produced after the symbolic recognition of his work with the Premio Cervantes in 1989. As texts which enact the process of telling – understood both as ordering and narrating – the “other”, these address and deconstruct most fully the ambivalence of the Western reader of otherness.

There can be no doubt that one of Roa Bastos' major concerns in his writing was the question of how to represent Paraguayan experience, inseparable from expression in a bilingual culture produced by a history of imperial domination. On the one hand, he is faced with the dilemma of the language in which to write; with written Guaraní being accessible only to very few readers, and the increasing hybridization of Spanish and Guaraní into Yopará perceived as a symptom of the unequal power relations in Paraguayan society. On the other, he must translate what is a primarily oral culture into writing. As he himself observes:

Aparte de su carácter bilingüe, la cultura paraguaya tiene ese otro componente esencial: su oralidad dominante. Un crítico francés me decía que las narraciones paraguayas le parecían traducciones, relatos hechos “con los ojos tapados”. Y es exacto: están tapados los ojos de una lengua cuando funciona la otra, hay que traducir ese medio mundo de silencio que no llega al otro medio mundo (Roa Bastos, *Semana* 75).

His decision to “translate” into the language of domination, the *karai ñe'é* (language of the master), is one that he nevertheless recognizes as an act of symbolic violence throughout his

career, and underlies the many re-writings, deconstructions and reconstructions that characterize his output:

De ahí la difícil y denodada labor de un escritor que, como tantas veces se ha señalado, intenta formular, traducir, los aspectos esenciales del sentir y pensar de un pueblo, los fundamentos simbólicos de los modos de estructuración de una realidad en una lengua cuyos parámetros no enlazan con la original, que no alcanza cubrir todos sus dominios (Moreno 58).

Whereas on the one hand, as we shall see in examples from his novels, this enterprise is represented as one that is doomed to failure, as reflected in the theoretical writings of postcolonial critics from Said (1983) to Spivak (1993); on the other, his fictions have long been perceived as offering a privileged access to a marginalized, silenced and forgotten culture.

En la palabra y escritura de Roa Bastos late el ruido de un sonido profundo, lejano y acallado; voces vencidas y propósitos renovados; el ansia de conocer el mito y la leyenda de aquellos momentos virginales de la creación en que un pueblo, el Guaraní, da nombre y sentido al cosmos, inventa su lenguaje y crea su cultura casi silenciada. Su palabra siempre está pendiente de una voz exterior, de un silbo, de unas huellas que se dibujan tenues en el tiempo. Y en ese eco y texto olvidado se recogen todas las señales, los pasos, los caminos y las palabras de cuantos indignamente han sido exterminados por los otros; pero que, a su vez, muestran su impotencia, porque siempre brota intangible un retoño pletórico de vida y salud, fuente de nueva creación y presencia. Un tiempo y un espacio poblados por los ecos de las voces nunca definitivamente acalladas por ningún tirano, pretencioso y dogmático. En su obra se presiente siempre la escucha de algo previo a la escritura (Tovar 3).

Translation as a mode of betrayal and symbolic violence, simultaneously marking and (re)producing the silence of another language and culture: these perceptions confront the inevitable failure of translation, the concept of untranslatability, with its rhetorical

persuasiveness as a figure of translatability. Together they map a particular itinerary for reading Roa Bastos' work, one which borders on recent interest in translation and its effects as a process on culture. Although I do not wish to assimilate Roa Bastos' particular configuration of translatability to that espoused by contemporary translation and cultural studies, his work does raise a number of questions as to the role of the intellectual in the construction, interpretation and representation of culture, as well as the difficulty, if not impossibility, of avoiding continued intellectual imperialism.

Let us reframe this scrutiny of Roa Bastos' work in terms of the second part of my title, as a journey; a figure which appears continuously in Roa Bastos' works and reflects the other great paradox in his status as representative and spokesperson for Paraguayan culture, the fact that most of his literary output is produced in exile, with all attempts to return frustrated. As he himself wryly admitted in interviews following acceptance of the Premio Cervantes in 1989, Roa Bastos presented one of the few ways an international readership might get to Paraguay, a place isolated temporally, spatially and culturally due to the vicissitudes of its history – so isolated, in fact, that it rarely makes much of an appearance even in histories of the Americas. His *Yo El Supremo* (1974) is more widely read than any text on Paraguayan history, much to the chagrin of Paraguayan historians, notwithstanding its overt rhetorical positioning as an anti-historical narrative. The trilogy this novel forms with *Hijo de hombre* (1960) and *El fiscal* (1993) spans the whole history of independent Paraguay, exploring how it has been shaped by the violent after-life of its colonial and neo-colonial history. Exploring Paraguay's cultural, political and economic relations with its neighbours, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil and Bolivia, as well as with the United States and Europe, his work traces the rootedness of the series of dictatorships which have ruled it to its socioeconomic conditions. In contrast, his country's cultural survival is traced to deeper, anthropological characteristics, still discernible in its unusual sociolinguistic make-up. Although his work has been read beyond these representational characteristics, as part of a utopian and universalist project to identify and critique the alienation of the modern individual (Piccini), and as a primarily literary achievement; more recently, following his own declarations in 1989 (Tovar 16-21), it has been subsumed into wider explorations of testimonial discourse, as a key to the "real" Paraguay.

La narrativa de Roa Bastos, a partir de la particular evolución histórica del Paraguay y a partir de la herencia de la cultura y del pensamiento de los antiguos guaraníes (basado en el principio de la no-contradicción y en la creencia en los dobles), se rige por la voluntad de restaurar la unidad de múltiples escisiones (oralidad-escritura, individuo-colectividad, testimonio-ficción, pasado-futuro). Una posición de compromiso con la colectividad a la que pertenece está en la base de su obra que constituye al mismo tiempo una interrogación sobre la posibilidad del individuo (escritor) de ser portavoz; es decir, la posibilidad de dar expresión a este compromiso y tener eficacia en el interior de la colectividad. Dado que la realidad del país al que pertenece ha conocido una historia trágica que lleva al escritor a hablar de realidad “irreal”, abortada, y de proceso de ruptura en la evolución de las dos vertientes de su cultura mestiza, no nombrar directamente un hecho es una necesidad impuesta...

... la escritura literaria, que pone en escena su propio génesis, puede hacer vislumbrar lo que no puede expresar directamente, gracias a la exploración de sus tareas y de sus limitaciones (Michel-Nagy 299-300).

The Concept of Translatability

Translatability is commonly understood as the communicative possibilities of a text, and has in recent years expanded to embrace the possibilities of cultural communication *per se* (Budick and Iser, Dingwaney and Maier): How far can a cultural text be translated for a different audience; how far can different cultures read each other at all? Thus, as a concept, it offers a different perspective on the question of how does one get to Paraguay. How is Paraguay constructed in different representations? Can other cultures understand Paraguay; is it recoverable for the Western reader, experienceable? Exactly how is its translatability figured; how do other cultures and their representatives/agents think they understand Paraguay, through discourses such as history, culture, politics and economics? Given the propensity of linking cultural translation to mapping, travel and other spatial metaphors – as ways of imagining, representing and demarcating difference – I have deliberately bracketed the question of how one gets to Paraguay, as a metaphor for cultural translatability but also as an ironically alienated one. Roa Bastos, often read in terms of a nostalgia for origins, in terms of his rootedness, as a way of getting to Paraguay and recovering its realities, also

underlines the impossibility even for him of getting to Paraguay (*El portón de los sueños*). Yet is this demarcation of its otherness, its untranslatability, in fact always already a sign of its translatability?

The process of translation between languages is one that demands negotiation of those aspects of a language that are unique to a given culture. This process can rarely take place on neutral ground, as has been observed in studies of the alternate pulls between domestication and exoticism in translation history; indeed, translation often contributes to shaping the very ground on which future negotiation will take place. Thus, as explored in Budick and Iser, the ethics of translation underpin the possibility of cross-cultural discourse. The discourse of translation, in its time-honoured use of spatial boundaries – and also gender metaphors – to express cultural processes, fits in well with recent focus on the representative but simultaneously unrepresentative nature of national boundaries, essential identities, concepts of the self, and global relations. Translation offers an understanding of culture as a negotiation process between subjects, yet as we have seen in Roa Bastos' metaphor of blindness, there can be no real subject negotiation in translation. At best it is virtual: the text in many ways is created by the reader. For Spivak (1993), translation is a rhetorical process which can only betray the voice of the other. However, although she suggests the only proper solution is for people (particularly monolingual anglophone students!) to learn more languages, her negative answer to the question “Can the Subaltern speak?” (Spivak 1985) surely also points to the inevitability of some sort of translation/representation, to the necessity of that betrayal. This is what leads to her positing of a resistant mode of translation, one of a kind of automatic writing to produce an “othering” of language (Spivak 1993).

Interestingly, this both undermines the value of her own theory – for in this version of events, reflecting otherness is intuitive, a way of suggesting a space between, bringing us back to a sense of a non-culturally constructed self – and it recalls the earlier theories of Walter Benjamin (1923). In his critique of the role of translation throughout history – “The Task of the Translator” – rooted in terms of his own practice, he raises questions which take us beyond the usual dichotomies in translation theory. Instead Benjamin offers an alternative focus on the translatability of the original text (which in some ways resembles our

own untranslatability). In fact we find ourselves in a dialectic of catachresis – so central to postcolonialism – where the sayable/unsayable are simultaneously the opposite and the same sides of the same coin, as are its translatability and untranslatability.

The originality of Benjamin's arguments for translation lies in their replacement of the notion of original meaning or essence with an alternative original translatability which underpins and is necessary to the process of translation. He suggests there is something in the source text that calls to be translated, so that in some ways the original is created by the translation at a particular historical moment. "Translation is a mode. To comprehend it as mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law governing the translation: its translatability" (Benjamin 71). Translation here is perceived as a process, a way of reading rather than a product. In order to understand it Benjamin insists it must be read dialectically, to see how the original contains the translation (its translatability), but also how the translation contains the original. On the one hand translation fixes meaning, by meaning in a particular context – the trope faces the target culture; on the other the translation is meaningless – the trope faces the source translatability, which can only be observed through translation. The translation owes its existence to the translatability of the original, but the existence of that translatability can only be observed through a rhetorical substitution based on translation. Translatability hence contains and is dependent on a paradox: the original has no meaning without translation. "The Task of the Translator", and in particular the concept of translatability, may in fact be seen as a rehearsal of Benjamin's later theories of how meaning is constituted historically, through the dialectic between past and present. Fynsk suggests that it is Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image which fully expands this historical recasting of the notion of truth, and perceives this as a move beyond the continued concern with "origins" in Benjamin's earlier essay on translation. However, if we understand Benjamin's notion of origins as a figure of persuasion itself, of the purposiveness of language, the concept of translatability moves a lot closer to the dialectical image as being "a matter of the present's capacity to define itself: to *be* and to be *historically* (from the basis of the concrete historical conditions whose truth is offered to it out of the sudden dialectic of past and present)"(Fynsk 223).

In attempting to explain the notion of translatability, Benjamin underlines the rhetorical operation of translation, as something persuasive or purposeful:

All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life, but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance. Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realising it in embryonic or intensive form (Benjamin 73, my emphasis).

Translation's purposiveness is hence presented as lying in the expression of the original purposiveness of language (itself a rhetorical act). There is the sense that the one essential thing about translation is its figuration of origins, the persuasion of a relationship between languages. This translation activity is what makes languages cease to be strangers through its focus on the activity of how meaning is made, rather than through its transference of essential meanings shared by all cultures. Purposiveness should not then be understood as a willful renaming of pragmatics or communication. It is the rhetorical act of trying to convince or persuade of the possibility of pragmatic communication.

Whereas deconstructivists might see the perception of the wholly, unembarrassedly rhetorical base for translation as a further demonstration of the deconstructive aporia of language, of the ultimate futility of any attempt to identify meaning (Derrida, De Man), recognition of the different rhetorical processes of translation can in fact lead beyond the problem in other approaches to translation of an only partial transcendence of the natural/metaphorical dichotomy. Any identification of meaning is dependent on the rhetorical figuration of that meaning through cultural translation and contextualisation.

What becomes clear in Benjamin's account is not so much what translatability is essentially – except given our more pragmatic understandings of translation in terms of communicating meaning, as something equal to untranslatability (i.e. translatability only exists when the text is not just about communicating information from one vessel to another) – but how it is, as a metaphor, more central to the translation process than the notion of original meaning.

Benjamin's at times rather messianic arguments instead offer a picture of an original fragmentation, as a series of metonymy for pure language. What translation *is* in this model is a rhetorical process which seeks to create or convince of origins, and hence of translatability. It is only through translation that we see original meaning.

Benjamin's recasting of the process of translation in terms of the play of translatability or untranslatability rather than judging the authenticity of different versions, is what might be seen to coincide with current debates in cultural theory – with their emphasis on the simultaneous transparency and opacity of alterity in cultural representation. Although we might find Benjamin's appeal to an original, pure language in translatability rather mystifying, his argument is useful in its identification of the performative aspect of language and identity, rather than essential qualities: How ultimately the very translatability of cultures is their untranslatability, and is what causes the specific problem of representation, of translating each into different contexts, of perceiving origins. Authenticity is, then, something of rhetorical persuasion and is persuaded relationally. Furthermore, as the idea of the dialectical image reveals, there are always ideological configurations involved in these relations, determining every instance of transculturation.

Roa Bastos and Translatability

To make my point, I would first like to take one particular example from Roa Bastos here. In *El fiscal*, the central character and narrator for much of the book, Félix Moral, is concerned to locate his own origins and the origins of his story (the decision to assassinate Stroessner), which he judges to be inseparable from the origins of the Paraguayan people. As an exile, he is doubly alienated; having no immediate access to the real situation, history or origins of Paraguay, he seeks them in and through European representations, showing us one of the traditionally-held functions of art, to give meaning to one's own experience via identification. This narrative process, however, can be read in a number of ways. On the one hand it can be seen as the imposition of the Western subject on the Paraguayan other, contributing to, by demarcating the other's silence, its inability to represent itself. The process of getting to Paraguay through Europe can also be seen ironically (as in my earlier bracketing, ultimately showing the limits of Western epistemologies) as a counter-appropriation of the Western

narratives which have produced the othering, as a form of writing back. Alternatively, as has been argued, it could be read as a scrutiny of the intellectual's attempt to assimilate, judge and make meaning from a position of authority. This would make Félix Moral "el fiscal", seeking to persuade of his right to represent the people of Paraguay, in overthrowing domination. Indeed, one reader points to the parallels between "el concepto de poder político ejercido por la voluntad de un solo individuo" and "la actividad intelectual concebida como transferencia de verdades que se presumen ajenas en el primero", ultimately placing the novel in the current arena of debate over alterity, caught between the two extremes of whether to "anegarse en el silencio de la otredad o inmolarsse en aras de cierta concepción de justicia absoluta" (Rohena pars. 20, 9).

Critics attempting to grapple with Roa Bastos, see his work in terms of a quest for origins, for authentic Paraguayan expression – through the search for "real" language, and the recovery of "real" history. Their way of getting to Paraguay is in him getting to Paraguay. Interestingly, in a train journey represented in one of his last novels, *Contravida* (1994), a journey undertaken by Roa Bastos' alter-ego *Él*, the train is driven by a man with the voice of El Supremo, in many ways the founding father of modern Paraguay, and the central protagonist of Roa Bastos' earlier novel *Yo El Supremo* (1974). The journey is impelled (as it is represented here) by the name of the father, the patronymic, rather than in any real urge for origins. It is produced by relationships of domination. Why there is so much focus on the location of Paraguay in reading Roa Bastos, might then, as I have been hinting so far, be as much a reflection of our own problem as it is the problematic of Roa Bastos' own texts: the need to produce a clear relation between Paraguay and the rest of Latin America, such a popular object of study in our academic institutions; the need to account for the Western gap in the grasp of that culture. Here we begin to see issues of cultural translatability in terms of what they really are, a reflection of the power relationships between cultures.

Roa Bastos' texts are indeed rooted in personal history, in the exile experience and the vicissitudes of Paraguayan history; furthermore, his writings on fiction portray an urge to testimony. However, the proliferation of his narratives, his endless re-telling of the same story, suggests engagement with the bigger problem of the impossibility and the necessity of translation, the need to try to say the unsayable. Thus, in what remains of this discussion, I

would like to look at some ways in which Roa Bastos approaches the question of translatability in his work, on the level of the representation of history, the representation of self, and the representation of particular others such as Madama Sui.

The most obvious site or instance of translation in Roa Bastos' work, as he presents it, is in the relationship between Spanish and Guaraní, between oral and written culture, and its reflection of a diglossic situation. Different strategies are used throughout his work, including incorporation, agglutination and the interpolation of oral myths, and these often lead to the creation of *différance*, identified as an *avant la lettre* feature of Guaraní. This linguistic play is seen as a way of approaching what is sayable and unsayable in both languages, as a way of figuring the space between. As he writes in the preface to *Hijo de hombre*:

En la literatura de este país, las particularidades de su cultura bilingüe, única en su especie en América Latina, constriñen a los escritores paraguayos, en el momento de escribir en castellano, a oír los sonidos de un discurso oral informulado aún, pero presente ya en la vertiente emocional y mítica del guaraní. Este discurso, este texto no escrito, subyace en el universo lingüístico bivalente hispano-guaraní, escindido entre la escritura y la oralidad. Es un texto en que el escritor no piensa, pero que lo piensa a él. Así, esta presencia lingüística del guaraní se impone desde la interioridad misma del mundo afectivo de los paraguayos. Plasma su expresión coloquial cotidiana, así como la expresión simbólica de su noción del mundo, de sus mitos sociales, de sus experiencias de vida individuales y colectivas. En su conjunto, mis obras de ficción están compuestas en la matriz de este texto primero....(*Hijo de hombre*, 15-16, my emphasis).

Roa Bastos relates his own origins as a writer to this linguistic scene, hence presenting them as clearly rhetorical origins, pointing to the performative nature of identity. The same impulse can be traced in his representation of the quest for identity in his work – so central to the first part of *El fiscal*, and so mystified by critical readings. In The Log Book of *Yo El Supremo* (329-35), we find the dictator Francia seeking out his own genealogy, in parallel with a journey into the heart of darkness. He rejects the different and conflicting versions of his

genealogy in order to make way for self-origination. This we can see as an allegory of how Francia (and/as El Supremo) imposes himself as the patronymic of Paraguayan culture, seeking to contain, represent and assimilate everything – to stand for complete transparency. It is an urge that is shown to be only possible through a process of domination and exclusion, underlined in the texture of the novel through recourse to counter-arguments in the margins of the Supremo's texts, the inclusion of alternative versions of the same events, and in the dialogic nature of His conversations with other protagonists. As such, this quest for total representation reflects on Augusto Roa Bastos' writing of the novel itself, hence his need to position himself rhetorically as a compiler. In *El fiscal*, too, the reader is drawn to the rooted nature of the quest, in terms of the exile experience. The narrator's search for traces of his experience in age-old artifacts is not the categorical search of the anthropologist; instead we see the origins of the quest for the assassination of the dictator linked to his quest for origins in various myths. We glimpse the origins of Félix Moral's psychosis, perhaps; his (self)-containment in a narrative nightmare of history. Origins (and they are rhetorical ones) in *El fiscal* are linked to endings, both quests being frustrated in this novel. Félix Moral's quest to stand for the people of Paraguay, as his (mis)understanding of his role as a committed intellectual (Kraniauskas), to translate their needs, is set against the position of Jimena, his ideal partner, with her commitment to oral testimony. She is constructed as the ideal reader in the novel, as the only one capable of reading between the lines of Félix's narrative. She completes his narrative; hence, symbolically, her position is to be seen as one of complicity with the "other", as the only possible way of recovering "otherness".

Vio en la adolescencia llegar en París el frustrado mayo del 68. Viajó a México y vio los muertos que ese mismo "mayo" mexicano tumbó a balazos en la plaza de Tlatelolco. ... Optó por seguir su propia peregrinación. Se internó en el pasado legendario de los nahuas. Aprendió la lengua con los naturales, siguiendo el vía crucis de los códices de P. Sahagún, saqueados, fragmentados, destazados, dispersos, como si hubieran sido sometidos al potro de los descuartizamientos de Hernán Cortés. Se sabía casi de memoria los principales cronistas del imperio. Mejor conocía los relatos de los cronistas naturales que hablaban de otras historias; de esas historias que sólo pueden ser contadas en voz alta – solía decir Jimena -. Y mejor aún si lo son por la voz colectiva (*El fiscal* 63, my emphasis).

In some ways Augusto Roa Bastos' trilogy is more about scrutinizing foundational narratives, the kind of imagined community we see critiqued by Bhabha (1990 and 1994); to show how they seek to contain difference, and, further, to recover the hidden histories they obscure. In this, Roa Bastos' work can be linked to the aims of the testimonial form, in trying to recover the voices of the silenced and the oppressed, and represent them, which he does by enacting a process of "othering" himself – a position validated in the representation of Jimena.

Pasó al Paraguay y aprendió guaraní. Le deslumbró la cara oscura de la gente campesina que no habla español ni es ya indígena. Le impresionó ese misterio racial, no personal, de las mujeres descalzas más fuertes que la fatalidad, silenciosas, como envueltas en una emanación protectora de algo mudo y oscuro que no les impedía la risa y el humor mientras fumaban... Jimena vivió dos años con una anciana del lugar, dejándose penetrar por el magnetismo de la tierra, de la gente, del tiempo inmóvil, aprendió a hablar y amar la lengua vernácula y a odiar con toda su alma la ciega perversidad y abyección de los hombres. (*El fiscal* 63-4)

Where this process has been most clearly embraced, surely in response to the scrutiny of political domination and its corollary in intellectual imperialism in the trilogy, is in *Madama Sui*, although this would also be a way of reading *Contravida* (the counterhistory of the trilogy from the perspective of *ÉL*). Roa Bastos' last novel presents a focus on the relationship between knowledge, power and violence exposed in his other novels, through the medium of sexual oppression and domination. Thus, it both presents Woman as a key to the experience of modern Paraguay, and allows observation of modes of domination. For this reason there are different levels of "translation" to be observed in the novel. On one level *Madama Sui* is overtly about recovering the voice of a figure from popular memory, that of a child ostracised by her community because of her overt sexuality and mixed background, a child who was prostituted and died by the age of twenty: supremely "other". The reader is presented with the idea that Sui's own voice can be recovered through her notebooks, but there is rhetorical emphasis on the need for a reader (resembling the Jimena, perhaps, of *El fiscal*) to fill in the gaps. On another level Sui is to be seen as a representative of the suffering, oppression and domination of the Paraguayan people:

En la dicotomía, no siempre bien definida entre lo individual y lo colectivo, el relato de la historia de un personaje representativo envuelve siempre como trasfondo el panorama de una época, el modo de ser colectivo de una sociedad, sin lo cual la sustancia del personaje - la carnadura de su historia - carecería de un soporte real verosímil. Quiéralo o no, el narrador siempre presenta o representa en la ficción ese lugar de la Mancha, “del cual no quiere acordarse” (*Madama Sui* 12, my emphasis).

To represent her voice, the narrator feels impelled to write as a woman:

Por todo lo que antecede con respecto al drama de las mujeres en un país casi desconocido de América del Sur, he tratado de escribir la historia de Madama Sui tal como la hubiera escrito una mujer. Quiero decir: he tratado de hacerlo con la sensibilidad y la noción del mundo, con el estilo y el lenguaje propios de la mujer, a quien su capacidad de engendrar vida, de asegurar la continuidad de la especie, de preservar lo esencial de la condición humana, le otorga la intuición natural de saberlo todo aun no sabiendo que lo sabe. Don casi siempre negado a la imaginación masculina’(*Madama Sui* 14);

whilst Sui is also to represent the changing role of women in contemporary culture.

También la mujer, hacedora de vida, se está haciendo a sí misma. O sea, se está *transformando*, en procura del lugar que le corresponde en la vida social, en la que a pesar de sus progresos sigue estando sometida a la normas de un mundo construido por el hombre a imagen de sus privilegios; del hombre dominador y a la vez eunucoide, cuya virilidad no es más que brutalidad (*Madama Sui* 13).

This is all part of a basically humanist project, suggesting that the ultimate translatability of Madama Sui is as follows:

Ambos, mujer sacrificada e incompleta, hombre sumido en su barbarie primitiva, no han comprendido todavía... que lo esencial para un ser humano es convertirse en un ser humano, en el equilibrio de la igualdad y respeto de las diferencias, cualesquiera sean sus razas, sus costumbres, sus religiones, sus ideas (*Madama Sui*: 13).

However, this “original” translatability is placed in question throughout the novel, in the gaps and discontinuities of the text, but also in the discussion between Doria and the narrator of the responsibility of the artist and, in particular, the narrator’s responsibility to Sui.

-¿Cómo piensa usted escribir la historia de esa muchacha?

Yo iba a contestar sin saber a ciencia cierta lo que iba a decir....

-Si lo hace alguna vez... hágalo como si escribiera la historia de su propia vida, aunque la suya no sea tan interesante como la de Sui. Me refiero sólo a la actitud moral frente al compromiso con la verdad. Cuando se describe o se trata de interpretar la vida de una criatura semejante no caben el sarcasmo, la compasión. Menos aún, la moralina maníquea que divide a los seres humanos en buenos y malos.

Puede un novelista presumir de ser un testigo omnisciente del misterio humano, incluido por supuesto el propio, indescifrable para él mismo. La omniscencia del autor es una de las convenciones fraudulentas ... Más eficaz... es utilizar la energía multidimensional de los símbolos, que dicen más por lo que ocultan, que por lo que revelan, en su manera de decir que dice por la manera. O contar únicamente lo que se sabe sobre algo o alguien, pero sin pretender, como Dios, saber todo de todo (*Madama Sui* 165-66, my emphasis).

Ultimately there is a sense of failure to fill in the story: it is another one of Roa Bastos’ spectacular ruins, as is constantly hinted throughout the text.¹ The greatest gap comes in the narrator’s failure to recover the truth of Sui’s relationship with ÉL, her true love, which he takes to stand as the sign of her innocence throughout her time as Stroessner’s favourite prostitute. Is ÉL the narrator, or one of his classmates? The text remains ambiguous on this matter. It is on this level that I would like to suggest that Sui has become a vehicle for the exploration of translatability more than anything else. Sui – a representation of innocence, who never thinks nor tries to distance herself or resist until her return home from Asunción (and the text even marks her first moment of thinking!) – becomes one of Stroessner’s concubines, is prostituted, made into an object, othered. But underneath, her “authentic” self, that which the narrator is attempting to mediate, remains true to ÉL. Who is ÉL – the other – that she is able to contain? Metaphorically, this idea is presented as “una isla rodeada de tierra” (*Madama Sui* 31, 202): Sui’s body representing Paraguay and ÉL the Paraguayan

“other”; the oppressed, persecuted *apátrida* with whom Roa Bastos is often identified and identifies. In some ways, then, Sui’s body represents the desire for translatability of the narrator, reflects its inseparability from representation in a new context. However, the structure of the text draws attention to the rhetorical nature of that representation and to the other side of the coin: the complete effacement of the self in turning to the source translatability (which is the untranslatability of the original). This is represented in the silences of the text, but also in the completion of the ruins in the death of Doria (*Madama Sui* 181), Sui’s visit to the ruins of Hiroshima and her final identification with the suffering of ÉL in her self-immolation in the tarumá tree at the end of the novel (*Madama Sui* 181,259,290). It is a call for an imaginative leap out of the self, hard for any of us to do, and surely even harder to convince anyone else of it. There is no perfect closure; we are left with “sólo una manera de decir lo indecible” (*Madama Sui* 291).

In this textual marking of silence we are forced to confront the concept of a “space between”. Indeed, *Madama Sui* enacts all the types of transposition of “otherness” explored in Budick and Iser (298). The narrator’s disconcerting encounters with the traces of Sui produce in the reader a heightened sense of difference through awareness of a duality. His incorporation of the visit to Japan, and the resulting assimilation of the ruins of Hiroshima to those of Paraguay, lead us to ponder the politics of cultural relations. The bracketing of the suffering of the *pueblo* as the ÉL contained within Sui’s mind and body allows for the exploration of difference that leads to such disparity. The very appropriation of Sui as “woman, giver of life” appears as a way of overcoming the deficiencies of the current social and political order. The narrator’s reflection in Sui, as and through ÉL, entails a process of confrontation and scrutiny of the self, whilst his recognition of the “other” as primordial generates an ethical call to commitment.

As we have seen, to a great extent Paraguay only really appears as an object of knowledge in relation to other cultures, reflecting and representing a wider problem, that of continued economic imperialism. Roa Bastos himself made this clear in the following comments on the current particular situation of Paraguay:

Es un momento de transición. Por eso, a pesar de estar ingresando lentamente a la era moderna, todavía somos países primitivos. Las estadísticas hablan de nuestra relación con los centros de poder mundial, donde el gran poderoso, EEUU, empuja hacia un determinado lugar. Tal es el caso de Inglaterra en el pasado, el país que propulsó la guerra de la Triple Alianza ... fue producto del imperialismo inglés (y, a ese imperialismo, los latinoamericanos deberíamos contestar con humanismo. Ese poder fue la fuerza que empezó la opresión y el atraso de nuestro pueblo (Roa Bastos and Sábato par. 7).

We might want to debate further the humanism Roa Bastos appeals to here as the originating point for his cultural representations and translations. Like Doria and the narrator of *Madama Sui*, we might say that “Era un ardiente defensor de la quimera de la utopía, de las empresas inasequibles, de la construcción de ruinas flamantes” (*Madama Sui* 181). Yet we are also reminded here that translatability clearly depends on the position from where you start: how one gets to Paraguay depends on who one is, where one comes from. Thus, Paraguay’s simultaneous transparency and opacity alert us to the dual translatability of culture, and Roa Bastos’ constant deconstruction of his “ruinas flamantes” reveals modes of resisting domination. None the less, his relative silence on the international market after the publication of *Madama Sui* and the *Metaforismos* of 1996 might suggest a more pessimistic conclusion to his scrutiny of the intellectual’s ability to translate “otherness”.

1. The “ruinas flamantes” of Doria (*Madama Sui* 181) enact a “living metaphor” within the text, as architectural traces that are both there and may never have existed; the product of an artistic imagination that sought to translate a singular image from memory (in this case, an image from European cultural heritage) whilst simultaneously recognising and celebrating the utopian impossibility of such an enterprise. Given the proliferation of such “living ruins” within the text, it is tempting to see them as a metafictional key to Roa Bastos' oeuvre, encompassing both the “flaming ruins” of the original version of *El fiscal*, which was supposedly burned due to its anachronism, and the obsessive deconstruction and reconstruction of his narratives throughout his career.

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