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How Does Literary Theory Cross Boundaries (or Not)?

Notes on a Case Study

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Abstract

This article analyzes the obstacles that hinder the reconstruction of the processes of institutionalization and internationalization of literary studies in Argentina within the framework of the project *International Cooperation in the Social-Sciences and Humanities: Comparative Socio-Historical Perspectives and Future Possibilities*, directed by Gisèle Sapiro. These obstacles were negotiated partly through the creation of two categories: “stories” and “fantasies of nano-intervention.” The article introduces these categories, along with some examples that enable reflection on the factors that impede or condition the international circulation of literary theory.

Keywords

international circulation of literary theory – obstacles – factors – Argentina – field theory

Archives in Ruins, De-Institutionalization, Forced Internationalization

In “How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)?” Gisèle Sapiro, along with Emily Apter, analyzes the obstacles that impede the circulation of literature, making use of David Damrosch’s definition of “world literature”: “These obstacles are not only linguistic; there are many social obstacles, just as there are social factors that trigger the circulation of texts regardless of their intrinsic value” (82).

The starting point of this article are the obstacles in spite of which literary studies in Argentina is becoming institutionalized and internationalized. The issue is more thoroughly explored in the project *International Cooperation in the Social-Sciences and Humanities: Comparative Socio-Historical Perspectives and Future Possibilities* (INTERCO SSH), designed by Gisèle Sapiro. This project aims to delineate a “comparative morphology” that would take into account the institutional organization of the Social Sciences and Humanities (Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, Economics, Literature, Anthropology, and Political Science) between 1945 and 2010.

On the one hand, the principal hindrance in reconstructing the process of institutionalization of literary studies in Argentina between 1945 and 2010 is the dearth of sources, and the unreliable nature of some of the facts. This situation is partly the product of the deliberate destruction of archives, above all during the period of military dictatorship. The fractures in the institutional order caused by the dictatorial regime were such that it may be said that the field of literary studies has been marked by de-institutionalization. Thus, a reconstruction of the state of the field requires us to turn to developments in the “formations” (Williams) that, on the peripheries of the “official” order, continued to pursue research and teaching in spite of the censorship and persecution. These activities on the margins took place during the “years of lead” in the clandestine “study groups” (also referred to as “parallel university” or “the catacombs”) and around the independent centers and/or publishers formed by those expelled from state organisms (such as the mythic publishing house Centro Editor de América Latina, founded under the leadership of Boris Spivacow by a group of professors who had renounced their affiliation with the University of Buenos Aires following Onganía’s coup of 1966).

On the other hand, in our reconstruction of the process of the institutionalization of literary studies in Argentina, we have adopted the criteria proposed for the INTERCO SSH project (Sapiro et al.; Heilbron et al.). These criteria in turn are the product of decisions taken by Sapiro in her research on the French literary field (Bourdieu *Les règles*) under Nazi occupation (Sapiro *La guerre*), in which Sapiro undertakes a cartography of the literary field, and literary production, in a state of coercion. We also take advantage of her studies of the European intellectual sphere from the formation of nation states to “globalization” (Sapiro *L’espace*).

In *La guerre des écrivains 1940–1953*, Sapiro presents a description of the state of the literary field which can be compared to its condition under the Argentinian dictatorship (9). In this regard it should be noted that the activities of literary critics and professors of literature during the “years of lead” were brutally transformed, in a way that not only affected the pace of institutional-

ization but also resulted in a paradoxical and unintended internationalization through those who were exiled, with lasting consequences for training, publication, and translation.

In the first place, Sapiro's book, the title of which is a less literal version of her doctoral thesis, *Complicités et anathèmes en temps de crise: Modes de survie du champ littéraire et de ses institutions, 1940–1953*, is based on reliable sources and an extensive bibliography, which enable meaningful morphological comparisons, and contrasts between the dynamics of the French literary studies field in different periods of time. Sapiro makes use of Rémy Ponton and Christophe Charle's categories to determine the points when transformations in the field become evident, with a degree of precision that is measured in exact percentages.

In the case of Argentina we do not possess equally reliable or abundant data, nor is it possible to build on previous research that would enable similarly exhaustive comparative work on the field of literary studies. As a result, in order to gather at least a minimal part of the missing data on institutionalization (specifically in relation to teaching faculty in the Humanities and Letters departments), as well as data on the process of internationalization, we have relied on information obtained from a partly structured survey of one hundred agents, in its first stage, from which we have extracted qualitative information that complements the quantitative data obtained from the curriculums. This work is supplemented by twenty biographies (of deceased agents) based on diverse sources (curricula, anthologies, dictionaries, etc.).

The division of agents into age groups (in line with the methodological practices employed by Sapiro in *La guerre*) takes into account limitations imposed by the political order (the military dictatorships) and the economic order (the emergence of the neoliberal order in the 1990s that led to the social collapse of 2001) which had some impact, more or less direct as the case may be, on research practices and on the processes of internationalization. The survey questions are intended to complement the data from the curricula on the following elements of analysis: 1. Migrations; 2. Cooperation; 3. Publications; 4. Translation. Each one of these dimensions in turn contains its own separate indicators and variables (Gerbaudo).

It should be pointed out that it is the results of these surveys that are analyzed in terms of "stories" and "fantasies of nano-intervention." Both categories will be defined below, along with some examples that illustrate why these concepts were necessary in order to make it possible to apprehend the key practices in the field of literary studies that have left no traces in archives (whether because these practices were dismantled by state terrorism, or because they were clandestine).

“Stories” and “Nano-Interventions”: Conceptual Appropriations

In the first place, with Avital Ronell (“Derridémocratie”; “Entretien”) we term “nano-interventions” those mundane operations (in the Derridean sense of the term (“*Mochlos*” 397)) that are the obverse of “the spectacular,” limited to “simple tasks,” performed wherever there is a breach that leaves some room for action whose purpose is defined in the uncertain terrain of reception. A fabric in which the “to-come” is interwoven with “happening” (Derrida “Comme si”), along with the unforeseeable that throws off all predictions and prior designs, while impeding any judgement that is exclusively personal, deliberate, or individual, of that which is dissolved in collective action, and which depends, precisely, on its consequences. If politics is “the activity, or group of activities undertaken in this space of tension that appears in the cracks of any order precisely because no order itself exhausts all of its meanings, nor does it satisfy the expectations that the different actors have of it” (Rinesi 23), thinking of actions in terms of “fantasies of nano-intervention” accentuates the boldness of every movement still dependent on the power of decision of those who react. To include the non-response as a possible response underlines the mitigators with which Derrida has tirelessly sought to weaken the preponderance of intention. This is a position reinforced by the combination of the term “nano-intervention” with “fantasies” that, as Slavoj Žižek has indicated, do not refer to a “fantasy scenario that obscures the horror of the situation” (15) but, on the contrary, are those that sustain the “sense of the real” that enables action (“nano-interventions”) aimed at effecting a reorganization of the sociocultural fabric precisely in the spaces where the “cracks” appear.

On the other hand, the notion of “stories” is inspired by Rossana Nofal’s work on texts that occupy the zone between testimony and literature. Nofal speaks of “stories of war” in relation to accounts of the revolutionary armed struggle in 1970s Argentina. We undertake a methodological shift that would include reading stories within interviews, surveys, as well as in books, articles, theses (introductions, epilogues, and offprints tend to be spaces where these self-images are inserted) by agents who animate the field of literary studies. Analyzing these accounts as “stories” with their “characters,” their stereotypes, their projection of self-images (heroic, condescending, culpable, implacable, etc.) are useful for two reasons: firstly, because it prevents them from being confused with sources that prove, simply by being reported, the “truth” of what is being reported; secondly, because it permits the detection of articulations, accretions, evasions, assertions, insistences, etc., with regard to the practices to which they allude. This differentiation between documentary sources (for instance, academic programs, lecture transcripts, books, articles, etc.) and the

narrative reconstructions read as “stories” (also contained in books, class transcripts, theses, but especially in interviews and surveys) enables more sophisticated treatment of the research material because it exploits, on the one hand, what the uncovered documents reveal in terms of the operations of the “agents” (Bourdieu *Choses*), and, on the other, what the stories reveal in terms of “fantasies of nano-intervention” about these actions. Briefly put, with the aid of an example: a distinction is made between interventions upon theoretical imports and appropriations, conceptual inventions, etc., and stories told retrospectively with regard to the desires and the postures that impelled these actions. These stories tend to come back in a distinct form to the same event at different moments in the temporal arc; these variations are analyzed especially when they may constitute indicators of a fluctuation in the field.

To demonstrate the usefulness of these concepts in analysis, some examples are given. These stories are interesting for what they reveal not only in terms of the fantasy of nano-intervention with regard to the process of internationalization, but also because they enable the recovery of information not found in any archive. This information is necessary for interpreting the dynamics of the field: “any European who sees our curriculum would be surprised at the lacunae,” Sarlo claims in an interview in 2009. There are certain kinds of information (for example, about the clandestine activities which are, obviously, not recorded in any archive) that may only be reconstructed through the accounts of the protagonists. Accounts elicited through surveys and then treated as “stories.”

In this sense it’s worth lingering over a self-image that Sarlo projects in various recent interviews. Her stories reveal her stance on internationalization:

I am a domestic traveller. In this sense I am merely continuing a tradition among Argentine scholars. My cosmopolitanism is that of intellectuals who cannot afford to be cosmopolitan, who cannot afford to be intellectuals beyond the city limits, beyond Buenos Aires, or Argentina and Brazil.

But being a strictly domestic traveller has one advantage, it gives one the confidence of being rooted in a particular terrain. I never aspired to go further, and by now it would be impossible anyway. As a traditional kind of cosmopolitan, speaking and writing in two languages in addition to Spanish, I came to know the world very late, I ventured into the world only after turning 40.

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Nevertheless, aside from her stories and her stance on internationalism which they reveal, she is one of the most translated Argentinian critics. A sample of

her books will suffice: *Una modernidad periférica* has been translated into Portuguese and Italian (with a preface by Raúl Antelo), *La imaginación técnica and Borges, un escritor en las orillas*, into English, *Tiempo pasado* into Portuguese and Turkish, *Escenas de la vida posmoderna* and *La pasión y la excepción* into Portuguese.

On the other hand, the references in her stories to “intraduction” are evidence of an active importation of theories, an uninterrupted flow of ideas in literary studies despite the restrictions imposed by the military governments, or the successive economic crises. It should be noted that during the dictatorship, not only the conditions were different, but also the motives behind the practices: what predominated then was the urgent desire to disseminate texts and theoretical postures that would challenge the hegemonic ideologies. This burden obviated all legal and professional concerns, to the extent of erasing even the translator’s name: something that was not always justified by the urge to self-preservation. For example, in the March–June 1980 issue (no. 8) of *Punto de vista*, Sarlo translates an excerpt from an article by Bourdieu published in 1977 in *Actes de la Recherche en sciences sociales*; and two years later, in the August–October 1982 issue (no. 15), a fragment of *Leçon sur la leçon*, the “inaugural lecture” given on Friday, April 23 of the same year at the Collège de France.

In an interview we asked Sarlo whether Bourdieu was ever aware of this virtually instantaneous diffusion of his works in Argentina (it should be pointed out that this was a time before the internet). We also asked her how she was able to acquire these materials. Two trips stand out in her story: one in the late 1970s, the other in 1981. The real purpose of both trips was to acquire the most recent publications in the field. Also prominently featured in her story were the bookstores of Buenos Aires, and her role in the diffusion of theory in the city under the dictatorship: “Although it’s hard to believe today, *Leçon sur la leçon* was available in Buenos Aires, in the Fausto bookstore (where I also purchased Barthes’ *Leçon*)” (“Interview”). Almost immediately, Sarlo returns to the self-image tinged with a certain self-deprecation: “I did not know Bourdieu, although I knew of him [and his work] fairly early on. I’m not great at networking. I am a domestic intellectual, a *criollita*.” (“Interview”).

In the same interview, Sarlo tells a story about lost translations produced during the dictatorship in Argentina: groups in the “university of catacombs” were tasked by Roberto Raschella with translating Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Tynyanov, who had been translated into Italian. These translations into Spanish were circulated furtively on cassette tapes. There are at least three facets to analyze here. In the first place, the story reveals the intellectual rigor that presided over that clandestine labor, in spite of the precarious circumstances:

Sarlo chooses an eminent translator for what were “at that time the best translations available” (“Interview”) of articles by the formalists. Secondly, it speaks to the relations between stances taken and acts of resistance, including migrations, although brief and self-funded: Sarlo obtains the works published by *Edizioni Dedalo* in 1981 during her trip to Italy. Thirdly, it yields more information about the crucial role of particular agents operating in various formations at the same time, reinforcing the ambit of each one of the practices in question (at the time, Sarlo was a participant in the mythic publishing concern founded by Boris Spivacow, while editing the prestigious cultural journal *Punto de vista*).

Finally, the stories of formal and clandestine teaching of theory reveal a great deal about the importation and appropriation of theory: “with Sarlo we read Bakhtin and the formalists in Italian, Williams’ *Marxism and Literature*, without covers to make it easier to photocopy and circulate,” explains Graciela Montaldo in an interview, recalling the clandestine groups that gathered around Sarlo during the dictatorship. She adds: “We didn’t read foreign languages very well, but we were full of passion for deciphering that which we did not know” (Montaldo). These stories confirm the cosmopolitan inclinations and the feverish desire to stay current, translated into educational practices. The fruits of this traffic in theories are evident in the early diffusion of certain texts and schools of theory in higher education, in the immediate aftermath of the dictatorship: Czech Structuralism (Panesi “Lecture transcripts”), Itamar Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory (Romano Sued “Estética”), Mikhael Bakhtin’s trans-linguistics, Yuri Lotman’s semiotics (Pezzoni “Lecture transcripts”), and Edward Said’s concepts (Sarlo “Literatura”), as well as those of Jacques Derrida and Pierre Bourdieu (Ludmer *Clases*). The precocious adoption of the most up-to-date approaches into teaching practices was possible thanks to research undertaken either in exile or clandestinely during the final years of the military dictatorship in Argentina. Some of this research even led to original conceptual and methodological contributions. That was the case, among others, with the studies of translation carried out in German exile by Susana Romano Sued, inspired by the polysystem theory of Itamar Even-Zohar in combination with Bakhtin and Lotman. In this case the story punctures the idyllic versions of the experience of exile (the same register is noted in the stories of David Viñas, among others):

The title of my thesis was *Die Poetische Übersetzung. Dominante Faktoren und Verfahren der Übersetzung am Beispiel Von Gottfried Benns Morgue Zyklus und ihre Übertragung ins argentinische Spanisch*. I wrote it in exile (during the first years I worked as [a] hairdresser in order to survive). It



was published at the end of 1986, with the help of the German academic exchange service. In 1995 I published a version [of it] titled *La Diáspora de la Escritura, una poética de la traducción poética*

Romano Sued "Interview"

■ non-matching quotation mark

Partial Synthesis, Works in Progress, and Contributions

Working on the institutionalization and the internationalization of literary studies in Argentina obliges one to gather information about clandestine groups, exiles, self-directed private and group initiatives operating outside of state institutions during the period of the dictatorship, yet all of which are at the same time impossible to conceive of as separate from the university, which was the source of their scientific capital and, in some cases, where they transferred their symbolic capital. Thus for example, during the 1980s, the prestige acquired by literary studies at the University of Buenos Aires benefited from the renown gained by David Viñas' publications before and during his exile, as well as Sarlo's work in *Punto de vista* (and, along with Susana Zanetti, in the Centro Editor de América Latina), and the cultural goods put into circulation by Sarlo, Ludmer, and Nicolás Rosa in the clandestine "study groups," all of them members of the academic staff in the Faculty of Letters between 1984 and 1986. Even this limited set of data, added to what may be gleaned from the production of Argentinians resident abroad, underlines the relevance of Sapiro's question ("Le champ") about the extent to which fields are confined by national boundaries, or at the very least, regarding how a field articulates itself based on movements and transfers which overflow the limits of a territory without ignoring economic, political, social, and cultural factors (Sapiro "How Do Literary Works") that condition its formation (in Argentina: military coups, economic crises, neglect of the archives even under democratic regimes, the erratic nature of public funding of higher education and research, etc.).

Johan Heilbron, Nicolas Guilhot, and Laurent Jeanpierre have signaled the importance of research and analysis of the intentionality of actors in the reconstruction of these processes (332). In order to carry out this work, we have created the concept of "fantasies of nano-intervention," a category that makes it possible to reconstruct the expectations of agents when they seek to introduce or disseminate a given theory or text in the field of literary studies through education, translation, reviews, etc. This category also places in relief the stances taken, or postures adopted by, the agents. For example, the incipient professionalization of literary scholarship appears in tandem with a non-hegemonic

interest in internationalization. Until not too long ago, the impetus was quite different: the dominant preoccupations in the field revolved around opportunities for teaching and research within official institutions in Argentina. A case in point is a 1985 exchange, that is to say in the immediate wake of the restoration of democracy, between Walter Mignolo (already established in the United States), and Josefina Ludmer (then in charge of the seminar “Some Problems in Literary Theory” at the University of Buenos Aires). It represents a paradigmatic example of this issue, as well as of the gap which then existed between the opportunities for professional development available to those who had left the country, and those who had stayed during the dictatorship, especially in some of the subfields (Bourdieu *Science*) of literary studies. At the time, Ludmer emphasized that “[w]e are here, in Argentina. We lack all kinds of resources. We are simply unable to engage in any sort of international discussion, in what Mignolo calls the disciplinary community” (“Lecture transcripts”). Dismayed by the stark contrast between North and South, which some years later, when she was established at Yale University, would inspire her self-designation as a Latin Americanist, Ludmer rejoined: “We do not have a disciplinary community. Our community is constantly upended by political vicissitudes: we enter and leave the university. We are kicked out, or we are not. In the last years we have been totally at the mercy of the political situation” (2). She is firm in her conviction that to “[e]xclude our discourse from the [general] cultural and also political circumstances of the country does not seem appropriate. I believe that we have to include this in our theoretical reflections” (2).

Johan Heilbron and Yves Gingras have argued that there are certain products of research that, due to the language in which they circulate, the objects of study, and the stances taken by agents with regard to the places of diffusion, appear designed to remain within the “local and national” order (379). This question is inseparable from the postures adopted toward internationalization, intersected in many cases with political activism indissociable from the fantasies of nano-intervention of agents who, for example, choose not only to write exclusively in Spanish (“one of the languages of knowledge,” insists Daniel Link (“Interview”)) but in a variant of the local *rioplatense* dialect, or an inflection shot through with traces of the local indigenous languages, or in a “creole” register (Camblong *Ensayos; Habitar*). Or agents who elect to publish primarily in book format, and who moreover transfer to this format their blogs or Facebook posts (Link *Textos*; Giordano), diaries (Ludmer *Aquí*), or their travel journals (Sarlo *Viajes*). Agents unconcerned with the mainstream. Agents who choose to pay a high price for this stance. This is perhaps illustrated by the case of Ana María Barrenechea: her magisterial revision of Tzvetan Todorov’s theory of the fantastic, written in Spanish, was never acknowledged for what it

was, which is to say, as theory. It was not enough for her projection in the international field of literary studies that her formulations were published in a prestigious Pittsburgh-based journal, and in a book published in Madrid. It is hard to say what would have happened if Barrenechea had written in English. We may however describe how her Spanish-language texts have functioned, and continue to function in the field of theory, and in the international circuits in which ideas circulate. Here is a case that, along with others, raises the question whether theory travels across boundaries, and under which conditions (determined by language, the institutional locus of its iteration, the agent's placement in the field, etc.). Or not.

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