

Queer Decorum: An Episode on Translation and Marginalized Sexualities

María Julia Rossi
CUNY, John Jay College

Abstract. The queer aspect of national literary histories has been traditionally obscured, and although it is gradually being recuperated, the impact of translation has been so far overlooked. Using the example of modernist fiction from England translated into Spanish and published in Argentina, I argue that translation smuggles, purposely misappropriates and resignifies alternative sexual desires and gender identities, opening spaces for local literatures to further explore these possibilities. Translation episodes from the 1940s and 1950s in Argentina are key to reconstructing the obscured history of literary queerness and I focus on one example that is perhaps the earliest, a translation of Denton Welch's "When I Was Thirteen" by José Bianco of *Sur* magazine which appeared as "Cuando tenía trece años," published in September 1944. Rather than isolated instances, such translations served to slowly transform the sentimental landscape of Argentine literature in a context where the popular imagination was prescriptively heteronormative. This article exhumes this little-known episode as one of the first cornerstones in a queer chapter of literary history in translation. Strictly related to depictions of homosexual desires, I propose "queer decorum" as an approach that affects translation strategies and decisions, subsequently affecting the translated text as a result and somehow making its publication possible.

Keywords. *Sur* magazine, queer decorum, literary translation, queer fiction, literary history, global modernism

Introduction: An Early Episode of Queer Translation

No one wants to be called a homosexual.
Leo Bersani, *Homos*

Eros and language mesh at every point.
George Steiner, *After Babel*

Only a few literary works of queer fiction were available for a monolingual reader of Spanish in Buenos Aires in 1944. The brief list included a censored version of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (*El retrato de Dorian Gray*, translated by Ricardo Baeza) and André Gide's *Corydon* (translated by Julio Gómez de la Serna), both published in 1938.¹ The seeming paucity in the publication record makes translations of queer literature into Spanish in the late 1930s and 1940s into episodes worth studying. Apparently isolated, these translations actually compose a constellation of literary artifacts that were slowly transforming the sentimental landscape in a context where popular imagination was prescriptively heteronormative.² In September 1944 in Buenos Aires, *Sur* magazine, under Victoria Ocampo's direction, published "Cuando tenía trece años," a translation of "When I Was Thirteen," a short story by Denton Welch originally published just a few months earlier in Cyril Connolly's magazine *Horizon*. This article exhumes this little-known episode as

one of the first cornerstones in a chapter of queer literary history in translation, explaining how the act of translation converted Welch's sexual landscape into one that would be acceptable to conventional Argentine culture while simultaneously smuggling covert sexuality into the highbrow literary space of *Sur*.

The original publication of Welch's short story in England was not without scandal and a whiff of taboo sexuality that made it almost unacceptable in English as later it would have been in Spanish without José Bianco's linguistic smuggling. Michael Sheldon's book on the English magazine *Horizon* registers an anecdote about its repercussions:

When Welch had difficulty in 1944 finding a magazine that would accept his story "When I Was Thirteen," which touches on the theme of homosexual love, Connolly [...] helped him out, publishing the story in the April 1944 issue. It is Welch's finest short story, but inevitably a few readers protested that it was immoral. One reader wrote an angry letter condemning both the author and the magazine, charging that *Horizon* had abandoned its standards of high literary quality. Connolly responded icily: "It seems to me it is you who have deteriorated in the last four years, and not *Horizon* for I can hardly imagine that the author of your letter can ever have been the kind of reader whom we hoped to cater for." (102)

In the refracted words of the reader, we can see what is actually at stake here. Hidden behind the matter of literary quality and intentionally intermingled—and ultimately fused—with it, there is the matter of “inevitable” moral censorship. In Connolly’s words, on the contrary, only one concern prevails: literary quality *is* the indisputable and exclusive value that moral concerns cannot subsume. What happens in that short story is key to understanding this exchange. The plot can be briefly summarized as follows: the narrator goes to Switzerland with his brother William to spend part of their holidays at a ski resort where they meet one of William’s classmates at Oxford, Archer. Although William doesn’t like him, the young narrator befriends Archer, sleeping in his cabin while his brother is away. When William returns and finds out, he becomes enraged at the unnamed narrator. With carefully written and voluptuously sensual prose—not only in an erotic sense, but sensorially mature cadence—Welch questions the relationships among language, representation and moral values, while at the same time narrating the sexual awakening of a child who, as the title states, is thirteen years old.

Sur’s bonds with Connolly, director of *Horizon*, were well-forged—he would actively collaborate with the triple issue of *Sur* devoted to English letters three years later—and European literary works were reemerging in the 1940s after difficulties caused by the Second World War.³ However, in light of the repercussions that Welch’s short story had caused in London and considering the established profile of *Sur* as a magazine that was elevated, a high-brow literary forum that subscribed to conservative Argentine ideals, publishing the tale of an affair with the theme of homoerotic desire is an unexpected gesture, one that challenged traditional norms and arguably helped foster the expansion of imaginable sexual sensibilities amongst its readership. The translation, however ambivalent and densely coded in order to throw off possible charges of obscenity, actually brings homosexuality, or at least homosociality into Argentine Spanish reading spaces. Manipulating a variety of cultural commonplaces—for example, a sense of England specifically as a site for conventional and conservative upper class cultural material—the editors of *Sur* smuggled in material that definitely was not exclusively upper class, sexually conservative, or (in the sense that Welch was himself an experimental writer) conventional literary production.

The translation of Welch’s short story—and its publication in *Sur*—is noteworthy as an early milestone in queer Argentine literature; it opened up narrative possibilities for representations of queer desire that only a decade later would be explored by other writers in the orbit of *Sur* and beyond. This translation is not an isolated instance but evidence of an active, though surreptitious, editorial policy, mostly attributable to José Bianco as a translator but above all as editor-in-chief at *Sur* magazine.⁴ In this sense, I propose that this episode begins to answer William Spurlin’s question about the impact of translation practices on cultural perceptions of dissident forms of sexuality. Spurlin asks, “How has translation functioned as

a site of social change when dissident forms of sexuality in certain source texts, considered to be foreign to a particular target culture, become part of, and challenge, that culture’s official discourses through the dialogical processes of interlingual transfer and cultural exchange?” (“The Gender and Queer Politics” 205). Here, in the case of Welch translated anonymously by Bianco, the practice of translation played a key role in introducing a potent expansion in the available narrative repertoire for depicting sexual desire. Enjoying the relative impunity of something “coming from abroad,” Welch’s short story should be understood by literary historians as a cornerstone in the expansion of represented sexual desires both in English and, via Bianco’s queer translation, in Spanish. In what follows, a close reading of the English version will help us understand how homosexuality is portrayed in coded forms that so outraged the bad reader whom Connolly derided. Comparing translation and original in the second part of this essay identifies the tension inherent to a translation strategy that tones down images of homoerotic desire in some instances while accentuating or incorporating further sexual innuendos that are absent in the source text. Finally, to understand the struggle evidenced in these translation choices as expressions of social and moral complexities that transcended the mere literary, I reposition the publication of “Cuando tenía trece años” in its larger context of the Argentine literary tradition and social and political landscape of the time. Ultimately this reveals how Bianco’s translation of “When I Was Thirteen” used calculated restraint as a strategy that I call queer decorum to challenge predominantly heteronormative cultural and literary narratives that sought to control and censure a sexual impulse fighting to say its name.⁵

A theoretical framework to think the nexus between translation as a queer practice and the translation of scenes of queer desire in fiction enriches critical comprehension of this episode. From the standpoint of social and communication theories, Mona Baker defines “narratives” as “public and personal stories that we subscribe to and that guide our behavior” (464) and, relying on Jerome Bruner, adds that narratives are not limited to representing reality but in reality constitute it (464). After presenting the taxonomy of four types of narratives that operate at different levels—ontological, public, conceptual, and meta—Baker goes one step further to connect the cultural role of narratives with translation theory.⁶ Narratives, she points out, “exclude the experience of large sectors of society while legitimating and promoting those of the political, economic, and cultural elite” (470). Heteronormativity is one of these dominant narratives that excludes other experiences; it is against the backdrop of this narrative that alternative ones emerge—not to replace it but to challenge its hegemony. While acknowledging the roles of translators and interpreters in the transmission of narratives across frontiers, she recognizes that activist communities “elaborate alternative narratives that can challenge the oppressive public and meta narratives of our time” (467). Since a narrative “both reproduces the existing power structures and provides a means of contesting them,” translators as “language mediators [...]

are uniquely placed to initiate this type of discursive intervention at a global level" (470-471). Tracing how narratives are made, in which context they emerge and who cooperates in their birth and change, enables us to understand how even single texts and their discursive interventions can have deeper and long-lasting influences. In our case, Welch's literary exploration of non-normative sexual desire had, in Bianco's treatment, a significantly expanded impact upon a national cultural struggling with long-held regressive biases and postwar liberalism.

"When I Was Thirteen" and Sensual Queerness

Thematically, "When I Was Thirteen" deals with the awakening of homosexual desire in a child, depicting him as surrounded by copious underexamined appetites intermingled with ignorant surprise. The narrator's experiences reach us through his point of view, which combines a voluptuous attention to the sensorial world that surrounds him with a cognitive unawareness of some social and moral conventions. Symbolically, the narrative addresses homosexuality at a representational level (as well as directly through the unnamed narrator's impressions), highlighted by a semantic dilemma encountered by the narrator as he reads Tolstoy unsupervised by moral authorities who might norm or codify his responses. By removing adult supervision and depicting a lush sensuality in the young boy's reading experience, Welch's short story presents homosexual desire as something problematically depicted and detachedly stigmatized. In this story, language is the contested site of a struggle between conventional morality and homosexual experience. Characters' voracious literary appetites are a crucial element of Welch's storyline, disrupting the smooth reproduction of commonly held cultural and moral taboos about sexuality. Language is the arena, and literature, a crucial element of the storyline, becomes the prompt.

The small world depicted in the short story is almost entirely inhabited by masculine presences. This "circuit of male homosocial desire," as defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men*, is an extension of the school, a characteristically homosocial space at the time. While temporarily in a holiday spot, the characters reproduce the predominantly masculine environment, with insignificant exceptions, such as a "nice absurd woman" ("When I Was" 252) who takes pity on the protagonist when she sees him alone after William's departure. The main characters are three: the anonymous narrator, his older brother William, and Archer. It is William's disgust with his classmate Archer that ignites the narrator's interest in him; he states: "After this [noticing his brother's physical reaction before his classmate] I began to look at Archer with a certain amount of interest" (251). This interest, which begins as a challenge to the authority of his older brother, evolves with voluptuous bodily descriptions of Archer to replace narrative attention from moral concerns towards covert homosocial sensuality.

It is precisely the absence of William that allows the narra-

tor to engage in conversation with Archer. Although both of them are reading when they meet alone for the first time, the dialogue is preceded by abundant and meticulous references to appetites. While reading, Archer was "munching greedily" (252) and the narrator, eating "delicious rhum-babas and little tarts filled with worm-castles of chestnut purée topped with caps of whipped cream" and drinking chocolate—instead of tea—in a cup "covered in a rich froth of bubbles." The pleasure of reading, for the narrator, is linked with what he is eating and drinking. But it is another of the senses that allows them to begin talking: some music distracts Archer, and he talks to the narrator. They immediately begin discussing their readings.

Archer is reading *The Story of My Life* by Queen Marie of Roumania (253, published in 1933). The previous books he had read are Lady Oxford's autobiography, "a perfectly wonderful book called *Flaming Sex*" by a French woman (*Flaming Sex: A Book with a Moral; Her Own Life Story*, by Lady Edmée Nodot Owen, published in 1934), and a volume by a Crown Princess of Saxony (reference to *An Imperial Victim*, published in 1912, a memoir by Archduchess Louise of Austria, protagonist of an unprecedented royal scandal at the beginning of the century). If female characters are absent from the main plot, they have a literary existence through autobiographical writings that resist the masculine monastic world of the boys school to which they belong.⁷ Attributes of the feminine shape Archer's reading taste, adding a conflicting layer to this apparently simple character, defined, as will be seen later, by his physical roughness and coarseness in his manners. Archer is a queer element in William's world, as will be discovered at the end of the short story, but here we have a subtle hint as Archer's sentimental education is metonymically reflected through this flamboyant set of readings.

While Archer's tastes are feminine to the point of a caricature, the narrator is reading Leo Tolstoy's last book, *Resurrection* (1899) is a novel about all kinds of hypocrisies and the denunciation of them, through a complex point of view. Although on one hand the protagonist, Prince Dmitri Ivanovich Nekhlyudov, is discovering the unfair world of privileges he lives in, the narrative voice shows him as a naïve man, easily contented with small gestures of generosity. It is this same voice that underlines dishonesties or hypocrisies and emphasizes the crucial importance of available frameworks, or narratives, to make sense of personal experiences. In a meaningful passage, *Resurrection* dismantles the unconscious application of narratives to tackle morally difficult issues. In one resonant scene, when two children in Tolstoy's novel are left to their own devices to decipher the odd sight of a passing gang of shaved and chained prisoners—a disturbing spectacle to all bystanders—and both seek frameworks in known signs (by looking at their parents' faces) or known narratives (such as religious ones) to norm their reactions. However, Tolstoy writes: "Neither the father nor the mother gave the girl and boy any explanation of what they had seen, so that the children had themselves to find out the meaning of this curious sight" (361). From their parents' expressions, the girl judges that

prisoners were “quite another kind of men and women,” different from her own family members. The boy resorts to a religious narrative to arrive at the conclusion that “having it straight from God, that these people were just the same kind of people as he was, and like all people, and that therefore someone had done these people a wrong.” Whether to feel fear like the girl or pity like the boy in front of the same scene is essentially a matter of the narrative used to make sense of it. These opposite interpretations are due to different narrative frames, something Tolstoy’s narrator seems to emphasize. The novel uses this simple scene to point towards a deeper question of how meaning is constituted in narratives—not inherently from the incidents, but through a complex comparative logical reasoning. There is a giddy lack of moral or ethical stability at the heart of Tolstoy’s novel, so that the same incident is interpreted quite differently by the two children. In Welch’s story, too, the two young boys do not have parents around to guide and mediate their voluptuous responses to what they eat, read, or feel. The narrative interest in detailing the full range of their sensorial responses, without any interest in introducing a restraining adult, also opens Welch’s story up to a kind of smuggled, illicit, but sensually overwhelming pleasure. This brief passage in Tolstoy’s novel thus illuminates what I understand to be its importance for our reading of “When I Was Thirteen”: in *Resurrection*, facts are merely described without explicit traces of condemnation, and it is the very same juxtaposition of opposite judgments and the display of the mechanisms behind how they were devised function as a trigger for the reader to revise or question some conventional assumptions taken as the norm. Welch uses a similar method to queer his narrative, opening it up to accusations of literary smut and provoking the editor Connolly’s intervention, as seen above.

The importance of the act of reading *Resurrection* in “When I Was Thirteen” is not as much the comprehension of the general plot or content of the novel as it is a precise notion the narrator of our short story finds in the book. The words “illegitimate child,” read in Tolstoy’s novel, worry and mystify the anonymous narrator. His hypotheses about this puzzling syntagm are as candid as they are macabre (they include ideas about trouble, difficulty, a terrible disease, and imbecility), and this perplexity echoes the moral ambivalence illustrated by Tolstoy’s children. After gathering courage, the narrator asks Archer what being illegitimate could mean, and with startling unaffectedness, Archer answers: “Outside the law—when two people have a child although they are not married” (253). Although simple and exact, this definition—instead of clarifying things for the narrator—confuses him even more. After spelling out his idea about the causal link between marriage and reproduction (to him, one is the precondition for the other: “The very fact of being married produced the child,” 253), he concludes that “Archer must be wrong.”

This semantic debate, internal to the narrator’s consciousness, has a symbolic dimension and suggests at least three implications for the narrative: first, that there are always inconsistencies between natural facts (such as reproduction) and conventional

norms (the institution of marriage); second, that language finds ways to express these inconsistencies, thereby exposing them; and third, that language defines the results of such inconsistencies as stigmatized identities (as it happens with the words “illegitimate child”). In some manner, “When I Was Thirteen” emulates this detached point of view by exposing the narrator’s ignorance and giving the reader the possibility of interpreting facts and words independently. It transcends dramatic irony when we as readers understand what the narrator seems to ignore or put away as impossible, turning us to question our own understanding of such a notion as “illegitimate child,” and what narratives are being used to arrive at such syntagm.

This internal debate does not seem to matter much in the short story as a whole, since it does not last more than a page and is not directly mentioned again. But if we consider that—not innocently—it marks the beginning of the relationship between the narrator and Archer, it sets a particular tone for their brief connection. It also establishes a relationship between curses and insults, which present in crude terms the moralistic tenets of conventional speech and actions. The three ideas I point out above are revisited in the ending of the short story, which is abrupt. When, after trying to physically attack his brother in a very skillful manner, “hitting a different place each time, as he had been taught as prefect at school, so that the flesh should not be numbed from a previous blow”, William insults his brother with four nouns, “Bastard, Devil, Harlot, Sod!” (265). The narrator remembers what he thought at the time. During this whole scene of homosexual panic (to borrow Sedgwick’s words again), sensorial descriptions of William’s actions over his brother’s body predominate and the narrator does not even try to make sense of what is going on or, more importantly, ask why. What he remembers thinking is that his “brother had suddenly become a lunatic and was talking gibberish in his madness, for, of the words he was using, he had not heard any before, except ‘Devil.’”

In this final scene, the narrative again shifts from the order of things to the order of words, calling attention to the levels evidenced through the narrator’s dilemma of “illegitimate child.” Suggesting or implying the intuition that there is something else in William’s demented words signals the inconsistencies between the world and how society classifies what happens in it, as well as the stigmas derived from such inconsistencies. By labeling Archer’s explanations *wrong* or William’s insults *lunatic gibberish*, “When I Was Thirteen” is not only dismantling the process of stigmatization (as does Tolstoy’s narrator in *Resurrection*), but, what is more, is making a deliberate statement through the narrator’s innocent view.

“Cuando tenía trece años”

The translation of “Cuando tenía trece años,” like many others in the pages of *Sur* at the time, was not signed. Typically when this occurred, it was due to either one of two reasons: because the

translation was too overwritten, this is to say almost rewritten into independence, or because José Bianco, editor-in-chief and main “schemer” of *Sur* during this period, translated the text and decided to be discreet about his interest and involvement with the published text.⁸ To attribute this translation to Bianco is a reasonable conjecture. The inclusion of the short story is undeniably owed to his editorial decision, and his editing work, as well as his aesthetic affinity with the English writer and his own interest in the topic.

In Bianco’s translation practices, two different attitudes have been identified by Patricia Willson. First, when translating authors whose works awaken his aesthetic affinities, such as Henry James wherein Bianco’s translations are freer, in direct proportion to aesthetic affinity; in the second case, as with Beckett among others, Bianco’s translations are more “faithful” in terms of grammar and lexicon, as a result of some kind of alienness of sensibility. The translation of “Cuando tenía trece años” falls within the first characterization of Bianco’s translation styles, described mainly about his translations of works by Henry James. Welch’s short story is close to Bianco’s sensibilities and he took some liberties with the translation that toned down some homosexual undertones of Welch’s text while emphasizing others using idiomatic Spanish. The comparative analysis will display Bianco’s queer decorum in action, through translation strategies and their consequences and effects.

On the textual surface, the translator “cleans” the prose to obtain a tone that is terse; in order to do so, he eliminates many of the lexical items that appear in the English version, only some of which would result in dissonant repetitions if translated literally into Spanish. Although some others may seem superfluous—as the translator seems to have considered—they are particles that could have been easily included in the Spanish rendering. Thus, “a very good swimmer” is rendered as “buen nadador” (good swimmer); “most of William’s friends” as “los amigos de Guillermo” (Guillermo’s friends); “a simple Italian gentleman” as “un caballero italiano” (an Italian gentleman); and “rather breathlessly” as “jadeante” (breathless). Although this type of alteration is more frequent when it comes to modal adverbs, sometimes it reaches the extension of a complete sentence, as in: “I did not tell Archer that I thought he had made a mistake” (253), translated as “Nada dije a Archer de su error” (72, I told Archer nothing about his mistake). In this way, the translator—while translating—is editing style, altering Welch’s prose and removing some apparent rusticities and epistemological ambivalences or gaps.

This cleansing or purging impulse is not limited to the elimination of minor particles or smoothing of the prose. The translator also introduces lexical variations that affect the entire portrayal of characters. Archer stands out in the source narration for his roughness: some of his physical traits are combined with verbal expressions to display a character with coarse edges that differentiate him from the narrator and his brother. However, in the translation these features change significantly, “his meaty barbarian hands” (251) results in “manos de bárbaro” (68, barbarian hands) and, later on,

“his ham-like hands” (261) become “sus grandes manos” (82, his big hands). All meat is thus deleted. In a similar way, words pronounced gruffly by Archer—another of the key elements in his character construction—are altered: “‘I hope you haven’t put too much [wax] on [the skis], else you’ll be sitting on your arse all day,’ he said gaily” (33), is translated as “—Espero que no le hayas puesto demasiada cera [a los esquís], de lo contrario andarás todo el día sentado en el suelo —dijo sonriendo” (73, I hope you haven’t put too much wax on [the skis], else you’ll be sitting on the ground all day;’ he said smiling). Avoiding the word “arse,” in all its vulgarity, and replacing it with a more innocuous “sitting on the ground,” is the result of some sort of rectification or polishing of the roughness that defines Archer’s depiction. By doing this, the translator eliminates the distance that exists in the English version between the narrator and his brother and Archer (which can be seen as part of Archer’s appeal). These three characters are somehow closer in the Spanish version, once most of Archer’s expression of coarseness—both physical and verbal—is edited away, that is to say, deleted or disciplined. If this were all, we could just label this translation as conservative or even reactionary.

There are, however, some lexical choices that are dissonant with this cleansing tendency or inclination, pointing to the nuances of queer decorum employed by the translator, toning down some crassness that is overtly homosexual while at other times allowing in illicit sexuality through interventions that are not present in Welch’s source text. The most notable instance—though not the only one—is the repeated use of the verb “excitar,” in different variants. Archer’s description reads: “Sometimes, when he was *animated*, a tassel of fair, almost colourless, hair would fall across his forehead, half covering one eye” (251, emphasis added). The translation reads: “A veces, cuando se *excitaba*, un mechón de pelo rubio, casi incoloro, caía sobre su frente cubriéndole a medias un ojo” (68, emphasis added). Later on, the same word in Spanish is used to render another different word in English. The narrator confesses: “I was very *excited*, thankful that William was away on a long expedition” (254, emphasis added), is translated as “Me fui a la cama muy *excitado*, agradeciendo que Guillermo hubiera salido en tan larga expedición” (73, emphasis added). On the same page, the narrator, referring to Archer, exclaims: “How fresh and pink he looked! I was *excited*” (emphasis added). It translates as: “¡Qué fresco y rosado parecía! Yo estaba *excitado*” (emphasis added).⁹ When translating both “animated” and “excited” as “excitado,” the translator is adding an ambiguous and suggestive note of eroticism that, at least in these specific instances, the source text does not display. In Spanish, the most common meaning of this word—unless, maybe, when it refers to a child—is the awakening of sexual desire. This is to say that the sense of “excitado” in Spanish, meaning “sexually aroused,” is closer to “horny” than to “excited” (other possible translations with less of a sexual nuance could be “emocionado” or “entusiasmado”) and could be considered here a faux ami. In this sense, the translation is sexualizing the short story or emphasizing

its erotic content in some precise moments where that was not so evident in the source text. This tendency is in direct opposition to the translation tendency I described earlier but, concurrently, in consonance with the theme of the short story.

Finally, it is the deletion of two significant excerpts that constitutes the most important difference between source and target texts. Given the fact that the two fragments allude to the same image, it is worth wondering what in them—or in the recurrent image—drives the translator to delete them and what he finds in them that is inconvenient, upsetting, and ultimately censurable. In these instances, censorship orientation can be read because it reveals something very noteworthy about the orientation of the translator's gaze. The contrast between source and target fragments, emphasizing the missing sentence, is illustrated as follows:

<p>Archer felt his hip pocket and brought out black, <i>cheap</i> Swiss cigarettes, wrapped in leaf. They were out of a slot machine. He put one between my lips and lighted it. <i>I felt extremely conscious of the thing jutting out of my lips.</i> I wondered if I would betray my ignorance by not breathing the smoke in and out correctly. (257, my emphases)</p>	<p>Archer tanteó el bolsillo de la cintura y extrajo cigarrillos suizos, negros, envueltos en una hoja. Los había sacado de una máquina automática. Puso uno en mis labios y lo encendió. Me pregunté si demostraría mi ignorancia al no saber aspirar y expirar el humo correctamente. (76)</p> <p>[Archer felt his hip pocket and brought out black, Swiss cigarettes, wrapped in a leaf. He took them from a slot machine. He put one in my lips and lighted it. I wondered if I would demonstrate my ignorance by not breathing the smoke in and out correctly.]</p>
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The whole sentence referring to the *thing* he *feels* between his lips, arousing awareness, is gone. Some pages later, a complete paragraph, though brief, disappears. It reads: "I always associated cigars with middle-aged men, and I watched Archer interestedly, thinking how funny the stiff fat thing looked sticking out of his mouth" (262). These two notable suppressions, these phallic *things*, by virtue of their extension and the coincidence of the topic, are telltale moves. They would not be as significant if other similar suppressions were present or if some edits concerned other topics. Yet these are the only two, the longest ones, and are about the same image, that is to say, the same body part with the same object or *thing* in it.

Conventional, heteronormative decorum dictates that phallic representations related to orality are deleted or suppressed. Purely

physical descriptions, that were presented by Welch without comment but that still enraged English readers, are considered doubly troubling in Spanish by the unnamed translator for being too explicit. The effect of these somewhat idiosyncratic choices culminates in a sense of queer decorum that shows but does not show, emphasizing certain forms of coded homosexual/social telling over others. Strictly related to depictions of taboo homosexual desires, queer decorum affects translation strategies and decisions, subsequently affecting the translated text as a result. The censored passages reveal a highly eroticized reading of objects that are sensual within acceptable limits of the boys-school vocabulary used in Welch's narrative. Verbs, nouns, and adjectives are sexually charged and in the deletion of all these images part of the richness of the sexual awakening of the narrator is also suppressed. His surprise and fascination awakened by fat things jutting out and sticking out of masculine lips seem to be too much for an elegant rendition of a decorous desire among Oxford boys in the Spanish version.

Although less revealing than these excerpts, it is worth examining the translation of the four words William screams at his brother at the conclusion of the short story, "Bastard, Devil, Harlot, Sod!" (265), as a challenge for the translator looking for a similar or equivalent effect. These insults serve a double purpose in the original text: to remind the reader the lexical dilemma (through the repetition of the ignored word, "bastard") and to cause a distancing effect between words and meanings, since the narrator ignores three of them and only recognizes "devil," the least specific to the context and the least sexually charged of all. The translation poses the challenge of finding words to reproduce this effect, mostly when cognates are not available or when they have a different usage. The published version reads: "¡Bastardo, Demonio, Ramera, Sodomita!" (88), where we can see the first two as almost direct options to translate with little to no alternatives. The word choice of "Harlot" in English is noteworthy, since its popularity had its peak in the 1800s but more interestingly its lowest point during the decade this short story was published, according to the Google Books Ngram Viewer. Translated as "Ramera," also meaning prostitute, the Spanish version avoids synonyms that might be closer to colloquial speech and, in that word choice, emphasizes that layer of foreignization that rarefies its effect in the narrator (incidentally, "ramera" has a similar arc in usage, having its reported peak around 1830 and its low point around the publication of the short story). The inclusion of "Sodomita," as a translation of the apocope "Sod," is provocative: while keeping the Biblical allusion, it is spelling out the cognate and including it in the short story. It was at the time an uncommon and archaic word that, unlike the more recent "homosexual" (also understood to be a more technical word at the time) and the (at the time) much more frequently used then "invertido,"²⁰ is also resonant with the effect created by "ramera" for the narrator, while also unequivocally clarifying the meaning of the insults for the reader.

By scrutinizing this translation, we have found how some of these boundaries unmistakably prove their reach where sexualized

images were toned down and provocatively ambiguous excerpts deleted. However, the impulse to resist these impositions also left traces in the text. By oversexualizing words or images that were not so in the source text and by bringing the “sodomita” to the textual surface, Bianco connects with that Benjaminian “echo,” a *decorous* one, and brings it back to his own version of Welch’s short story. Through these impulses, if not contradictory at least hesitant, we find a translator who falls prey to tensions that are not resolved. The theme of “When I Was Thirteen” is deliberately and undeniably homoerotic. The stylizing and decorous impulse that impedes the inclusion of meaty body parts, vulgar words, and phallic and oral images is at odds with the sexualizing impulse that is stimulated by some lexical elections in “Cuando tenía trece años.”

Sur and gay texts: Translation efforts towards a “decolonization of desire”

In order to fully understand the translation of “When I Was Thirteen” in the context it appeared—*Sur* magazine, Buenos Aires, 1944—we should consider the role of translation in *Sur*, its impact on the Spanish-speaking audience and, subsequently, consider how gender was depicted in translations and original text through time. *Sur* worked as a sort of translation factory, as Patricia Willson discusses in her book *La constelación del Sur*. *Sur* also became, as a consequence, a factory of readers, and perhaps the most prominent figure in this dual factory was José Bianco, who functioned as translator, editor, and cultural promoter.¹¹ It is key that this crucial player favored the expansion of a repertoire of narrative possibilities for alternative sexual desires—possibilities at odds with the hegemonic heteronormative narrative that dominated Argentine public life.

One aspect to keep in mind when analyzing Bianco’s translation of Welch’s story is precisely the role of *Sur* as a key introducer of discursive possibilities in the local *milieu*. Willson, when writing about *Sur*’s translators, explains:

The fact [that a translation] makes possible the circulation of a text within a certain culture until then inscrutable because of its foreignness is evidence of its ethnocentrism: to a certain extent, all translations domesticate, and they are intelligible for a reader when this reader recognizes himself or herself, identifying vernacular values that are inscribed in it through certain discursive strategies [...] On the other hand, domestication not only consists in the rewriting of a foreign text in a comprehensible and acceptable language for the importing culture, but also in the ways in which the literary institution selects, according to certain criteria, what it will take from the foreign tradition after imaginarily measuring up against it. (13, my translation)¹²

Primarily interested in national, aesthetic and political problems symbolically presented through translation strategies, Willson offers analytical insights that can be resignified as tools for queer reading—something especially relevant to Bianco’s translation of Welch’s story. Does the queer theme add a new layer of foreignness to the translated text? How do strategies of domestication work when dealing with alternate sexual desires? Does making a text “intelligible” for a reader in a “comprehensible and acceptable language” imply toning down homoerotic innuendos? Does the literary institution undergo any significant change by incorporating “morally controversial” topics? Is there any imaginary relationship between the “immoral” and the foreign, as two phenomena happening out of bounds?

“Cuando tenía trece años” hinges on the subtle imagined relationship between the immoral and foreign. In the case of Denton Welch’s story, in which even within the source culture this piece portrayed a dissident form of sexuality, translation doubles the stakes. With “Cuando tenía trece años,” Bianco challenges boundaries he knew too well. The fact that when translating “When I Was Thirteen” Bianco feels the need to refine the prose of a more than sophisticated short story suggests that he was aware he had to maneuver this dare to heteronormativity carefully. The resulting decorous depiction of homoerotic desire—and this cannot be emphasized enough—came from England, a site that oozed refinement, class, manners and cleverness in the Argentine symbolic horizon at the time.¹³ Bianco decolonizes desire precisely by linking beauty (an English, gentlemanly beauty) and homosexual attraction. Following the rules of decorum rigorously—and even stating them—he embraces this possibility of new sites of heterogeneity and difference and renders them in an obsessively polished prose. Hegemonic narratives can and should be challenged; dissident desires must find room to be heard and read; and highly elegant prose, though suggestive and ambiguous, decisively fulfills these requirements.

In *Sur* and elsewhere, the intersection of gender and translation is a uniquely fertile ground to study how the discourse of sexual desire and the narratives that portray it travel and—this is key—are mediated as they travel. Some translations and debates are crucial to picture the precise context when Welch’s short story appeared in Spanish. One of the most salient translations of a fundamental book on discussions of gender was Borges’s rendition of *A Room of One’s Own*, which appeared in four installments in *Sur* magazine between 1935 and 1936. Leah Leone argues that “[o]n both syntactic and semantic levels, the Spanish [Borges’s translation of *A Room of One’s Own*] reveals translation practices that tone down, alter or even eliminate many of the most salient feminist elements of Woolf’s essay” (47). In terms of narrative, Borges’s translation followed and nurtured a dominant narrative that remained unchallenged by one of the texts that, in its original version, makes challenging such hegemony a priority.

In 1948, four years after Welch’s story appeared in *Sur*, the pub-

lication of Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes*, translated by José Bianco and Silvina Ocampo (Victoria's sister), was also noticed for its homosexual themes that broadened the arena of literary sexuality within the Argentine avant-garde scene. Contrary to Welch's translated story, *Les Bonnes* aroused an agitated response at the time due to its polemic theme and approach. In the issue that followed its publication and an introductory study, Victoria Ocampo, the director and owner of *Sur*, published a vociferous piece, "A propósito de *Las criadas*," where she questions the literary quality of the theatrical piece. To argue that "literary quality" overrides all other values is something that we have already heard in Connolly's defense of the publication of Welch's story; while Ocampo's priorities resonate in principle with Connolly's, we can sense how pliable the argument about literary quality can be. As this series—Borges's translation in the thirties, Bianco's translation of Welch in 1944, his later co-translation of Genet in the late 1940s—suggests, gender issues were not unproblematic, but years were to pass before they could be openly discussed for what they were.²⁴

Ten years later, in 1959, Genet's piece was published as a book by *Sur* publishing house, which demonstrate that the cultural landscape around sexual mores had somewhat changed, and also that Genet's prestige was well established to counter any conservative attacks.²⁵ In 1958, another milestone in this story of translated homosexual fiction took place: *Olivia* was published by *Sur* publishing house, in José Bianco's translation. This novella, written by Dorothy Strachey, was anonymously published under the pen name Olivia in 1949 by Hogarth Press, the publishing house founded by Leonard and Virginia Woolf, and depicts a suggestive female homosocial environment in which Olivia, the English protagonist, is immersed when attending a Parisian finishing school. This novella, based on autobiographical accounts, also deals with sexual desires outside the norm and was controversial at the time of its publication, as the need for a penname suggests.

The following year, 1959, the *Lolita* translation, published by *Sur* and banned by the government, spurred a sensational debate on pornography, censorship and moral issues in literature. *Sur* magazine summoned very renowned writers to reflect on these topics and offered a prominent issue on pornography and censorship. The same year, the article "La erótica del espejo" ["The Erotics of the Mirror"], by Héctor Murena, appeared on the pages of the magazine, presenting a very combative homophobic argument. When published in *Sur*, it was not innocently juxtaposed with an ambiguous short story by Juan José Hernández, "El disfraz" ["The Costume"], which purposefully portrays lesbian desire. The following year, Giorgio Bassani's *Gli occhiali d'oro* (1958), a novel about a homosexual doctor in the small Italian town of Ferrara in the 1930s, was translated as *Los anteojos de oro* (1960), by Roberto Bixio, and published by *Sur* publishing house. All these heterogeneous texts show that *Sur* had become by the mid- to late-1950s and 1960s an inescapable cultural stage where narratives of sexual desire and gender identities were ever battling, now in the open. These

significant textual milestones illustrate the tensions I am thinking about when understanding *Sur* as a groundbreaking public literary arena in which heterogeneities were cautiously given visibility over decades after World War II. Over time, homophobic opinions and openly gay texts came to coexist in the journal. By being open to controversy, the magazine paved the way for voices on alternative sexualities to be heard, and the publication history of Welch's story is an early episode of this process. When considered in light of the history of the following decades, Bianco's translation of Welch's story becomes an opening salvo, a precursor in *Sur* magazine that introduced the possibility of an alternative sexual desire. It was not until the late 1950s that homosexuality was openly discussed, by the time "Cuando tenía trece años" was itself thirteen years old.

Translation & Queer Narratives

Translation is, in essence, an act of reading. And what makes it different from mere reading is that it also affords others the opportunity to read. While it implies an egalitarian move (making accessible works that otherwise would be unavailable), it also entails restrictive ones (choosing what to translate and, more subtly, how to do it). It is a practice that moves within a certain culture and within a literary landscape within that culture in which certain narratives prevail, generally heteronormative ones. So in a broader sense there are not only cultural but also ethical consequences to translation choices, which brings us first to a discussion on the intersection of translation and queer studies and, second, on how translation participates in the creation, limitation or expansion of available narratives for different communities.

Language itself functions as a vehicle for all sorts of boundaries, determining what is acceptable or decorous or even understood as "correct" in certain contexts. As José Santaemilia points out, "through language and discourse, society tries to impose moral and ethical boundaries on both fields, thus establishing what is 'decent,' 'appropriate,' 'acceptable,' 'moral,' 'original,' and so on" (104). Thus translation, as a tool that produces a social impact, either preserves tradition (by reproducing it) or introduces changes. Olga Castro argues that translation and gender intersect in a manner that allows the first to actually impact the second and emphasizes either the oppressing or emancipating effects it might have: "Language and translation inevitably are tools for legitimizing the *status quo* or for subverting it; tools for gender oppression or liberation" (6). For William Spurlin it is mostly the second: "By attempting to inhabit the otherness of the source text when we work across languages and cultures, by bringing to light the slippages of signification that cannot be accommodated in accordance with the predominant cultural values of the target language, translation becomes a transgressive practice that disrupts and challenges, producing new, unassimilable circuits of linguistic and cultural difference" ("The Gender and Queer Politics" 204).²⁶ Finding specific instances of this impact will

recover often marginalized voices that reveal a hidden part of translation and literary history.

An episode of this decolonization of desire with impactful consequences is described in Keith Harvey's "Gay Community, Gay Identity and the Translated Text." In a personal account on how translated texts on gay desire became essential for him to model his own, Harvey explains that "'gay writing' is, perhaps above all, a literary genre that explores the parameters of gay experience in order to *validate an identity position* and create an interactional space for the formulation and reception of *gay voices*" (140, original emphasis). Furthermore, he explains that translation invites the recognition of otherness—sexual and linguistic—and that many times (such as translations of Genet in England in the 1970s), broadens a horizon of possibilities for the sensible.

To translate literature that somehow involves queer content (depiction, voices, identities, characters, desires, communities) is then to take a deliberate position with concrete consequences for a monolingual readership. Both as editor and translator, Bianco uses the magazine to feed a representation—an elegant one—of homoerotic desire. As Walter Benjamin states in "The Task of the Translator," Bianco finds that particular intention that reverberates in the echoes of his translation, riddled with tensions. Preventing

reactions such as the one we saw in *Horizon's* reader of "When I Was Thirteen," its translation "Cuando tenía trece años" introduces a portrait of queer desire as intrinsically beautiful, forging a graceful image of queer desire, where beauty and taste seem consistently unambiguous. Sedgwick points out that "'queer' can refer to 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically'" (Sedgwick *Tendencies* 8). So, by removing queer features this translation is modeling a monolithic idea of the queer itself, in other words, unqueering the queer. But publishing this short story in the mid-1940s is nothing less than an audacity that transcends the literary realm precisely due to the dutiful implementation of this queer decorum. The bigger gesture here is that this short story was translated and printed in the pages of a literary magazine too often accused of taking up conservative positions, politically and intellectually, and of being regressive sexually. In this context, Bianco began the slow process of expanding acceptance of a sexual sensibility that dared speak its name in the face of the apparent heteronormativity that dominated Argentine public life.³⁷

NOTES

¹ Andrea Pagni provides an inventory where she only needs one single paragraph to list all available works—besides stating that there were no works by Argentine writers on homosexuality since José González Castillo's play *Los invertidos* from 1914, when it premiered and was banned ("Traducir el deseo" 101). The social and political context were not welcoming to queer visibility. Since 1932, a police edict in contradiction with the Civil Code and the Constitution would send homosexuals to jail (Bazán 217) and in 1942, "El escándalo de los cadetes," a report about men of different social backgrounds caught in parties where they fraternized with military cadets was in all the newspapers. Media coverage of these events reveals the degree to which popular imagination was prescriptively heteronormative and classist (see Bazán 219-23 and Demaría). For medicolegal approaches to homosexuality before 1914, see Salessi.

² What I call "translation episodes" include editorial decisions and translation strategies that are intricate and involve many actors; I am interested in their episodic aspect since they were not articulated as part of a single intention or decision but can be read retroactively as integrating a shared impulse whose effect will impact the literary landscape in subsequent decades. In my larger research project, I revise several of these translation episodes to argue that they can be understood as a single force that smuggles, (mis)appropriates and resignifies alternative sexual desires and gender identities, opening spaces for local literatures to further explore these possibilities later on.

³ Literary magazines at the time were platforms with international circulation for new voices to be read and discovered.

⁴ Bianco introduced many literary novelties that were considered morally problematic at the time. His commitment to the homosexual cause took different shapes over the decades, including many texts in *Sur's* pages and catalogue, and he would translate texts for the Frente de Liberación Homosexual decades later, along with his partner the Argentine writer Juan José Hernández (see Fernández Galeano, 613-14).

⁵ Welch will be considered first and foremost a homosexual writer among the most homophobic members of the *Sur* group, as a reference in Bio Casares's diaries from 1956 shows: "Johnny [Wilcock] habla del libro de un admirable pederasta inglés, una especie de Arturito [Álvarez], pero más genuino y cuyos escritos 'tal vez te parezcan desagradables'. Título del libro: *Brave and Cruel*. Imagino el mohín del pederasta luego de formular el título que tan terriblemente lo define" (75-76).

⁶ Baker emphasizes the agency of translators as when she states that "narratives do not travel across linguistic and cultural boundaries and do not develop into global meta narratives without the direct involvement of translators and interpreters" (464).

⁷ In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf discusses how women had been systematically written out of the Anglo-European canon and notes that conventional, moralistic autobiographies were often the only recourse for women attempting to support themselves through their writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Welch attributes almost comical literary tastes to Archer, perhaps to make a connection with Woolf's popular treatise (lecture 1928, pub. 1929). Woolf's lecture is a cornerstone of feminist and queer thought delivered by the author while she was in the midst of a passionate affair with Vita Sackville-West. It is tempting to imagine that Welch might be pointing towards this biographical detail as well.

⁸ Although Bianco is often described as a humble and discreet character, his letters demonstrate how much he worked to be portrayed as such. Bianco's self-erasure as translator in the pages of *Sur* might also respond to a particular sense of elegance as synonym of discretion (see Bianco).

⁹ I did not provide back translations for the last three sentences because they would be almost identical to the original, with the exception of the highlighted word "excitar" in all its forms.

¹⁰ The legal documents examined by Gonzalo Demaría in *Cacería* show the overwhelming prevalence of "invertido" both as a neutral and pejorative word in the mid-1940s. "Uranista" is referred to belong to a previous generation (111) and "homosexual" rarely appears and is mostly employed in the final statement by the accused's defense attorney as a technical term (if with medical origins). Unusual, "sodomita pasivo" is present only a couple of times, along with "pederasta," which shows its existence among lawyers as well as its lack of popularity among witnesses and prosecuted men.

¹¹ *Sur* translations in the Spanish-speaking world were transcendental, not only because of *what* was translated but also because of *who* the translators were and how long-lasting their translations ended up being. Most books translated by *Sur* members, either published by the magazine and publishing house, or by other publishers, were highly influential not only at the time of their first editions, but later on and for a long time. Spanish-speaking readers accessed translated versions of Beckett, Genet, Camus, Faulkner, Greene, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, among many others thanks to translations by Borges, Bianco, Wilcock, and Victoria Ocampo.

¹² "El hecho de que [una traducción] haga posible la circulación en determinada cultura de un texto antes inescrutable en su extranjería es un índice de su etnocentrismo: toda traducción, hasta cierto punto, domestica, y es inteligible para el lector cuando éste se reconoce a sí mismo, identificando los valores vernáculos que están inscriptos en ella a través de determinadas estrategias discursivas. [...] Por otra parte, la domesticación no consiste únicamente en la reescritura del texto foráneo en lengua comprensible y aceptable para la cultura importadora, sino también en el hecho de que la institución literaria seleccione, según ciertos criterios, aquello que tomará de la tradición extranjera luego de haber medido fuerzas imaginarias con ella" (13).

¹³ Equally important to the prestige attached to most European writers is the fact that England was not France or, more specifically, Paris. Paris was elegant, but it was also bohemian and decadent. The prestige of English writers is different from French ones. France was a land of sophistication, but also of cocottes, excesses, and depravity.

¹⁴ For an analysis of the "Las criadas' affair," see Mancini; for debates about value and literature in *Sur*, see Podlubne, Gramuglio, and King.

¹⁵ Sartre's book on Genet, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, published in 1952, was key in this process.

¹⁶ Elsewhere, Spurlin finds essential similarities between "queer" and "translation" and argues that their combination multiplies their potential. "Both 'queer' and 'translation' mediate between hegemonically defined spaces, and their critical conjunction offers the possibility of new sites of heterogeneity and difference as a vital heuristic for the work of comparative literary and cultural studies. [...] Both are invested in setting aside understandings of our own cultural worlds and in creating critical discursive spaces for others to speak and to be heard. Queer is not simply about sexual rights in the same way that translation is not simply about seeking equivalences between one language and another, and the critical conjunction of translation studies and queer studies offers broadened opportunities for civic engagement and citizenship in a transnational world, as well as an important tool for knowledge production about sexual difference and for the decolonization of desire" ("Queering Translation" 307).

¹⁷ This article is part of a larger research project, titled "Not So Foreign: Translating Queer Desires in Latin America," recipient of PSC-CUNY Awards in past years. This piece benefitted from exchanges with several colleagues and friends. Athena Alchazidu, Fernando Degiovanni, Enrique Chacón and Mariela Blanco invited me to present different versions of this paper in their institutions. I owe them a great debt of gratitude for the comments and questions I received on each occasion. Ernesto Montequin was essential to my archival findings. This manuscript also benefitted from the careful revision of Ria Banerjee and the generous feedback of several readers: Sarah Hoiland, Megan Behrent, Alison Curseen, Allison Better, Matt Brim, Daniel Balderston, Kathleen Collins, and Martín Gaspar.

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