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THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS IN ARGENTINA: TRANSLATION, NARRATIVE, AND POLITICS IN BORGES, PUIG, AND PIGLIA

Sergio Waisman

I.

What is at stake when we consider the legacy of a text like *The Thousand and One Nights*—one generally accepted as widely influential, not only on individual writers but on entire traditions—on contemporary literatures? The very mention of a legacy forces us to rethink what we mean by influence, originality, authorship, and literary lineages and genealogies. Where do stories originate?[1] What is the best way to approach the inheritance of narrative? A major contribution toward addressing these questions, as I seek to show in this article, can be made through the study of translation. As Jorge Luis Borges has said: "Ningún problema tan consustancial con las letras y con su modesto misterio como el que propone una traducción" ["There is no problem as consubstantial to literature and its modest mysteries as that raised by a translation"].[2]

There are perhaps few texts which bring the issues of influence and of the power of narrative to the forefront as clearly as the collection *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, *The Thousand and One Nights*. Or perhaps we should say no text and its translations, for any story of *The Thousand and One Nights* and its inheritance is ultimately a story about the translation of the *Nights*. In this article, I explore the legacy of *The Thousand and One Nights* in three Argentine writers: Jorge Luis Borges, Manuel Puig, and Ricardo Piglia. In the process, I offer a way to rethink the legacy of past literatures and concepts of the Orient in Latin America, specifically in Argentina.[3] My focus is on the dialogical relation of Latin American literature with the past and with the center—by way of another periphery (i.e., the Orient)—through processes of translation. To this end, I analyze how translation from the periphery leads to reconsiderations of source and target texts and cultures,

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especially when an East-West dichotomy is used to remap the relationship between North and South. I select Borges, Puig, and Piglia in particular as writers who actively involve translation in the creation of their own work and who thus raise key issues about the role of translation in the formation of Latin American literatures.

Borges refers to *The Thousand and One Nights* frequently in his writings, claiming it as one of the first books he read as a child in his father's library.[4] The version he found there and the one he always preferred is the one by Richard F. Burton. But Borges was also well familiar with the other major European translations. This can be seen in his essay "Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*" ["The Translators of *The Thousand and One Nights*"] (1935), one of his two most important essays on the topic of translation. In this text, Borges compares only the translations of the *Nights*; he makes no attempt to refer back to the original, except through what the translators themselves have to say about it. By deviating from the traditional approach of comparing the original with the translation, Borges avoids the unproductive practice of simply listing what is lost in translation. Borges's approach, in fact, suggests a complete disregard for the concept of a "definitive text." As he says in his other key essay on translation, "Las versiones homéricas" ["The Homeric Versions"] (1932):

> Presuponer que toda recombinación de elementos es obligatoriamente inferior a su original, es presuponer que el borrador 9 es obligatoriamente inferior al borrador H—ya que no puede haber sino borradores. El concepto de *texto definitivo* no corresponde sino a la religión o al cansancio.[5]
>
> [To presuppose that every recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original, is to presuppose that draft 9 is necessarily inferior to draft H, as there can only be drafts. The concept of a *definitive text* corresponds only to religion or fatigue.] (emphasis in the original)

In "Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*," Borges points out that when we think of the *Arabian Nights*, we invariably turn to the first translation of the text into a European language; that is, Jean Antoine Galland's version of 1704–1717. Borges is drawn to the fact that the original *Nights* is a translation, and he refers to Galland as the "fundador" ["founder"]. Galland's version establishes the stories that everyone in the Occident thinks of when

they think of the *Nights*: "El hombre de Europa o de las Américas que piensa en *Las 1001 Noches*, piensa invariablemente en esa primera traducción" ["When someone in Europe or the Americas thinks of *The Thousand and One Nights*, they invariably think of that first translation"].[6]

But Galland's version contains several stories that have never been found in any original version of the *Nights*, including some of the more famous tales, such as "Aladdin" and "Ali Baba".[7] Galland's new stories then become such an integral part of the *Nights*, Borges reminds us, that none of the translators who have followed dare to omit them. *The Thousand and One Nights* is thus seen as an original—Galland's version was then translated into numerous languages, including Arabic—but one that is a translation of a previous text, which is itself a compilation of anonymous stories of unknown origin. The idea of any solid original, in the traditional sense of the term, is thoroughly destabilized.

"Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*" challenges us to rethink the relationship between source and target texts and, by implication—because Borges is writing from the margins, in Argentina—between center and periphery. In a move that anticipates reader reception theory by at least thirty years, Borges demonstrates the importance of the displacements that occur when one goes from an original to a translation and how these displacements create the potential for new and unexpected meanings. Discussing Richard F. Burton's version of the *Arabian Nights*, for example, Borges tells us that one of the main problems Burton proposed to resolve was to interest nineteenth-century British gentlemen in thirteenth-century Arabian serialized stories (Borges calls them "novelas por entregas" ["serialized novels"]). The problem lay with the difference of the two audiences, between those who would have heard the original stories in thirteenth-century Arabia and those who were to read Burton's nineteenth-century version in London, as their interpretations were bound to differ widely (OC I: 403–404).[8]

What is the best way to translate *The Thousand and One Nights*—or any work, for that matter—from one context and audience to another? How does Burton resolve his primary problem of making the *Nights* appealing to his target readership? As Borges tells us, in his version Burton makes countless substitutions; he completely rewrites the first and last stories; and he undertakes numerous alterations, omissions and interpolations. Borges then concludes, in what is the most important twist of "Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*," that these changes are actually for the best. They represent, he says: "Un buen falseo, ya que esas travesuras verbales—y otras sintácticas—

distraen el curso a veces abrumador de las *Noches*" ["A good falseness, since these verbal antics—as well as other syntactic ones—distract the sometimes wearisome course of the *Nights*"].[9] They are falsifications, made unashamedly—irreverently—which improve on the original. Paradoxically, the merit of the translation, as Borges sees it, lies in its *infidelities*.[10]

The value and potential that Borges places on a translator's infidelities become even clearer when he discusses another translation of the *Arabian Nights*, the 1889 version into French by J.C. Mardrus. Mardrus claimed to be the most truthful and literal of the translators of the *Nights*. Borges, however, argues that Mardrus's greatness lies not in his supposed literalness and fidelity, but in the creative infidelities that lead to the success of his translation: "Celebrar la fidelidad de Mardrus es omitir el alma de Mardrus, es no aludir siquiera a Mardrus. Su infidelidad, *su infidelidad creadora y feliz*, es lo que nos debe importar" ["To celebrate Mardrus's fidelity is to omit Mardrus's soul, it is to not even speak of Mardrus. It is his infidelity, his *creative and joyful infidelity*, with which we should be concerned"] (emphasis added).[11]

As he presents these arguments, Borges does not at all deny that the Europeans whose translations he compares, and especially those he most highly praises, domesticate the *Arabian Nights* in their efforts to make them more interesting to their contemporaries back home.[12] The fact that Borges approves of such acculturation of these Near Eastern stories might suggest that he is taking an Orientalist position.[13] But the issue with Borges is made considerably more complicated by the fact that he is speaking from the margins, from Argentina, and not at all from the center of empire. In the history of translation into English, a translation that domesticates the "foreignness" of the original can be interpreted as part of a project of cultural imperialism.[14] In Latin America, however, such a translation represents an appropriation from the Metropolis through linguistic acculturation and a way to challenge not only the supposed supremacy of the original but also of the cultural political power of the society in which it was produced.

Borges alludes to this very issue when he discusses Enno Littmann's German translation of the *Nights* (1923–1928). According to major sources, Borges reports, it is the best one available; but again Borges disagrees:

> [Littmann] es siempre lúcido, legible, mediocre. Sigue (nos dicen) la respiración misma del árabe. Si no hay error en la Enciclopedia Británica, su traducción es la mejor de cuantas circulan. Oigo que los arabistas están de acuerdo; nada importa que un mero literato—y ése, de la República meramente Argentina—prefiera disentir.[15]
>
> [[Littmann] is always lucid, legible, mediocre. He follows (we are told) the very breath of Arabic. If the Encyclopedia Britannica is not mistaken, his is the best translation available. I understand that the Arabists agree; it does not matter at all that a mere man of letters—and one from the Republic merely of Argentina at that—prefers to dissent.]

Especially notable here is that the false modesty with which Borges expresses his objection is so closely linked with national identity. Being Argentine—and not from the Metropolis, where the *Encyclopedia Britannica* is written and where Orientalists reside—leads to a dissenting evaluation of what constitutes a good translation. As texts travel, their value is altered and geographic and political distance become as large a factor in the reading of texts as linguistic difference. Distance and displacement, as Borges illustrates, lead to transformation—and not necessarily to loss and inferior copies, as the traditional translation theories of the center would have us believe. Recontextualization toward the margins—in this case toward Borges's *argentinidad* [Argentineness]—complicates our notions of value and of our concepts of Orientalism.

In Argentine literature, the use of the Orient in the formation of a national literary identity goes back, most prominently, to the work of Domingo F. Sarmiento (1811–1888). In his foundational proto-novel *Facundo* (1845), for example, Sarmiento develops an extended parallel between the Argentine gaucho and the Arab nomad with regard to their supposedly analogous "barbarism." Sarmiento's Romantic use of the Arab/Oriental as an Other who must be dominated to construct a national subjectivity resonates immediately with the Anglo-French uses of the Orient so criticized by Edward Said. And Sarmiento's use of the Arab/gaucho analogy also appears to contrast with Borges's much less condescending use of the Orient. However, the appearance of the Orient in Sarmiento's *Facundo* is problematized by its political and historical grounding in Argentina, itself a peripheral territory. This fact is underscored by the series of mistranslations and equivocal citations that abound in the *Facundo*, a strategy that emphasizes Argentina's distance from the Metropolis and its potential to use this very distance in transformative processes.[16] This reveals, in turn, the extent to which the transformations and appropriations inherent to

translation are constitutive of Latin American literature. In this sense, what is at stake for writers from the periphery, as Borges suggests, is how they incorporate previous traditions, the legacy of the past, through irreverent rereadings and rewritings of previous texts.

II.

Borges further points to this process and makes use of it in "El Sur" ["The South"] (1953), a text in which *The Thousand and One Nights* functions as a key reference to highlight the role of translation in the problematics of identity and representation in Argentina. The protagonist of the story, Juan Dahlmann, embodies a duo-ancestry—both European and Argentine—which becomes representative of the duo-origin of the Argentine condition itself. The tension that Dahlmann enacts in the text suggests that the local and the foreign are in fact inseparable; that it is not North versus South, but rather North *and* South which defines the "Argentine." But this is established only through a reconsideration of what North and South represent, a reconsideration that includes a remapping in which a representation of the Orient plays a significant role.

In the story, Dahlmann is injured while reading Gustave Weil's German translation of the *Arabian Nights*, even as he expresses that he always felt more Argentine than European.[17] Since it is in German, the reference to the *Nights* resonates, at first, with Dahlmann's European ancestry. The reference to the German version appears to be situated in contrast to the other main literary reference in the story, José Hernández's *Martín Fierro*. However, the fact that the German text is a translation of a translation confounds our attempts at direct symbolic assignations. Instead, the presence of a German *Arabian Nights* in Argentina introduces an East-West coordinate to what is otherwise strictly a North-South cartography. This remapping problematizes the center-periphery dichotomy, revealing unexpected interdependences between center and periphery, even as it legitimizes the blurring of the two in the margins.

Commenting on the fact that, as he rides the train to the pampas and to the *pulpería* where he will meet his destiny, Dahlmann continues to read the *Arabian Nights* in translation, Beatriz Sarlo states: "In a way translation is also the problem of Latin American literature, at least from Borges's point of view: his country is a marginal space compared with the Western literary tradition, and the position of its writers is in itself problematic".[18]

Geographic and canonical marginality are problematic, as Sarlo observes, but they also represent unexpected sites of potentiality. The real danger Borges presents in the story is not Dahlmann's inevitable death at the end; rather, it is allowing the tension of Dahlmann's—and Argentina's—double origin to lead to self-hatred. Dahlmann's escape to the South, whether real or imagined, represents the other side of this danger—its potential not for self-destruction, but for self-discovery, for the production of literature in the periphery. As Dahlmann travels South, to a South made possible by a remapping that now includes a look to the Orient from South America through Europe, what he—and other Argentines with him—recover is a space that is not only geographic, but also literary and historical.

III.

If in "Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*" Borges jumps over the role of Spain in the transmission of the *Nights*, there are other places where he acknowledges the importance of the *Nights* in Medieval and Golden Age Spanish literature and many places where he discusses the importance of the latter on contemporary Latin American writers.[19] In "Magias parciales del *Quijote*" ["Partial Magics of the *Quixote*"] (1949), for example, he points out some of the parallels between the narrative frames in the *Nights* and in Cervantes's novel, focusing on the vertiginous *mise-en-abymes* found in both. There is also Borges's version of "El brujo postergado" ["The Sorcerer Postponed"], taken from "Exemplo XII" of Don Juan Manuel's *Conde Lucanor* (itself derived from an Arabic pre-text, *Las cuarenta mañanas y las cuarenta noches* [The Forty Mornings and the Forty Nights].[20] Borges's version is a linguistic and cultural transposition from fourteenth-century Medieval Spanish to twentieth-century Río de la Plata *castellano*, in which the temporal and geographic displacements are foregrounded by the *acriollamiento* of the text.[21] "El brujo postergado" is found at the end of Borges's *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935), in a museum of translated fragments entitled "Etcétera." Also included in this section are "La cámara de las estatuas" ["The Chamber of Statues"] and "Historia de los dos que soñaron" ["Story of the two who Dreamed"], both drawn from the *Arabian Nights*—not from the original (Borges did not know Arabic), but from Burton's version of the *Nights*.

Borges's references to *The Thousand and One Nights* allow us to trace a spatial and temporal map of narratives, as seen from South America in the

twentieth century, dating back to the ninth or tenth century in the Near East, at times circulating through Medieval and Golden Age Spain, at others skipping several centuries to France and Germany and across the Channel to England. A story of literary traditions, of the legacy of a medieval Arabic collection of framed tales, defined by its translations and transmutations through cultures, synchronically and diachronically.

This play with pre-established geographies and the cultural and political assumptions that accompany them resurfaces in a late essay that Borges dedicates to the *Nights*, in the collection *Siete noches* [Seven Nights] (1980). Challenging the stability of a Western center from his South American margin, Borges states: "La cultura occidental es impura en el sentido de que sólo es a medias occidental. Hay dos naciones esenciales para nuestra cultura. Esas dos naciones son Grecia (ya que Roma es una extensión helenística) e Israel, un país oriental" ["Occidental culture is impure in the sense that it is only half Occidental. There are two nations that are essential to our culture. Those two nations are Greece (since Rome is a Helenistic extension) and Israel, an Oriental country"].[22] And Borges adds:

> ¿Qué es el Oriente? Si lo definimos de un modo geográfico nos encontramos con algo bastante curioso, y es que parte del Oriente sería el Occidente o lo que para los griegos y romanos fue el Occidente, ya que se entiende que el Norte de África es el Oriente.... Al decir Oriente creo que todos pensamos, en principio, en el Oriente islámico....
>
> Tal es el primer sentido que tiene para nosotros y ello es obra de *Las mil y una noches*. Hay algo que sentimos como el Oriente ... que [yo] he sentido en Granada y en Córdoba.[23]
>
> [What is the Orient? If we define it geographically we come across something quite curious, which is that part of the Orient is actually the Occident, or what was the Occident for the Greeks and the Romans, since it is understood that North Africa is part of the Orient.... When we say Orient I believe that we all think, in the first place, of the Islamic Orient....
>
> That is the first meaning that it has for us and this is due to *The Thousand and One Nights*. There is something that we feel as the Orient ... which I have felt in Granada and in Córdoba.]

Borges shows that our definitions of Occident and Orient depend on each other, and on each other's texts and translations. The exact geographies of Occident and Orient are undeterminable, much like originals and translations are unstable and open for rewriting in Borges's conception of literature.

Significantly, Borges repeatedly connects this idea with issues of national identity:

> ¿Y cómo definir al Oriente ... ? Yo diría que las nociones de Oriente y Occidente son generalizaciones pero que ningún individuo se siente oriental. Supongo que un hombre se siente persa, se siente hindú, se siente malayo, pero no oriental. Del mismo modo, nadie se siente latinoamericano: nos sentimos argentinos, chilenos, orientales (uruguayos).[24]
>
> [And how to define the Orient...? I would say that the notions of Orient and Occident are generalizations, but that no individual feels Oriental. I suppose that a man feels Persian, or Hindu, or Malayan, but not Oriental. Likewise, no one feels Latin American: we feel Argentine, Chilean, Oriental (Uruguayan).]

The uncertainty surrounding the definitions of Occident and Orient is increased by the humorous reference to the fact that in the Río de la Plata region an "Oriental" is someone from Uruguay. Such comments underscore the subjective nature of the borders between East and West, North and South. The tension between Occident and Orient, between center and periphery, is displaced toward and reconsidered from the shores of the Río de la Plata. By redrawing geographical maps from South America, Borges redraws political and cultural maps and opens new territories for Latin American writers.

IV.

Manuel Puig and Ricardo Piglia, in very different ways, have occupied the space that Borges establishes in Latin America through his irreverent rearticulation of the legacy of past literary traditions. Puig and Piglia are also significant in the context of this article because they both have texts in which a Scheherazade-like storyteller appears as part of a crucial debate

over the importance of narrative and translation in the contentious socio-political climate of late twentieth-century Argentina.

An unexpected manifestation of Scheherazade appears in Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* [The Kiss of the Spider Woman], a novel consisting primarily of the dialogue between two characters jailed in Argentina at the beginning of the "Dirty War" period (1976).[25] The cellmates are Molina, a cross-dressing homosexual, and Valentín, a Marxist revolutionary. Molina recounts the Hollywood movies that he adores to Valentín; these stories, in turn, serve to seduce and postpone an inevitable end: of life, of the relationship between the two characters and of the decision that Molina must ultimately make to resolve the fact that he is an informant. In this dynamic, Molina is a Scheherazade figure, as his narratives fill the metaphoric night that has befallen Argentina, as well as the specific darkness of the sufferings of the two men in prison. The following exchange from their dialogue illustrates the extent to which Valentín is drawn in by Molina's stories:

> Molina: ... quisiera, no despertarme más una vez que me duermo.... De veras lo único que pido es morirme.
> Valentín: Antes me tenés que terminar la película.
> Molina: Uf, falta mucho, esta noche no la termino.
> Valentín: Si en estos días me hubieses contado otro poco, ya esta noche la terminábamos. ¿Por qué no me quisiste contar más?
> Molina: No sé.
> Valentín: Pensá que puede ser la última película que me contés.
> Molina: Será por eso, vaya a saber.
> Valentín: Contame un poco antes de dormir.
> Molina: Pero no hasta el final, falta mucho.
> Valentín: Hasta que te canses.
> Molina: Bueno. ¿En qué estábamos?[26]
>
> [Molina: ... I would like to go to sleep and never wake up again.... Honestly, the only thing I ask is to die.
> Valentín: First you have to finish telling me the movie.
> Molina: Uf, there's still a long way to go, I can't finish it tonight.
> Valentín: If you had told me a little these last few days, we could have finished it tonight. Why didn't you want to tell me anymore?
> Molina: I don't know.
> Valentín: Just think, this might be the last movie that you recount to me.

> Molina: Maybe that's why, who knows.
> Valentín: Tell me a little more before we go to sleep.
> Molina: But not all the way to the end, there's still a long way to go.
> Valentín: Until you get tired.
> Molina: Okay. Where were we?]

Valentín's responses reveal that storytelling has become a way to defy death and authoritarian rule in the midst of the characters' stark reality.[27] Molina's retellings of the Hollywood movies speak of the power of imagination and narrative, even—or, perhaps, especially—in the face of the violence and repression of dictatorship.[28] In addition, the movies that Molina narrates are significant in and of themselves, as they point to a confusion of identity and a plurality of signification that drive the novel.[29] The drama of the movies, always set in liminal spaces, revolves around women, with which Molina identifies and onto which he projects his subjective desires. As the novel progresses, the "B" movie heroines function as reflective facets of the figure of the spider woman, while the stories weave a narrative web analogous to that of Scheherazade's in *The Thousand and One Nights*. But in *El beso de la mujer araña*, the stories also "provide a language," as Stephanie Merrim states, to address the condition of political and sexual repression with which the characters repeatedly clash.[30]

Furthermore, a significant factor in how language is mediated in the novel is related to the fact that Molina's renditions of the movies are far from faithful. As Echavarren argues, Molina's narratives are composed of the: "Desechos de un discurso ajeno, los productos, ya convertidos en basura, de una cultura de masas" [Remains of a foreign discourse, the products, already converted into trash, of a mass culture].[31] Molina constantly resorts to appropriating the "remains" of popular culture: the "B" movies, but also boleros and tangos and popularised versions of sexuality and psychology. But Molina's process of retelling, his appropriation and recontextualization of the original material, is clearly distorted. Molina is an unfaithful translator of popular culture; the movies and songs are important to Molina only to the extent to which he can mould them in his own words to suit his own ends. Echavarren points to the selective and interpretive aspects of Molina's versions—in other words, to his process of mis-translation—when he says: "Al seleccionar e interpretar, el homosexual pervierte, al menos parcialmente, sus finalidades originales....Su poder persuasivo reside en su carácter ficticio" [As he selects and interprets, the homosexual perverts, at least partially, its original purpose....Its persuasive power resides in its fictive character].[32] In

this respect, Molina's appropriations are analogous to the infidelities of Borges's translator/(re-)creator. For Molina's (per-)versions are a creative mis-translation of the original material. And it is in the fissures revealed by Molina's creative infidelities, to use Borges's term, that identity and representation are put into play—precisely due to the equivocal nature of narrative in mis-translated circulation. Like Scheherazade, Molina tells and retells as s(he) sees fit, translating stories that entertain and do much more than entertain. The double meanings suggested by the act of retelling multiply-mediated stories create a productive ambiguity that opens literary and political space.

But Molina is not the only seducer/storyteller in the novel. The other, we quickly realize, is Valentín, who tries to seduce Molina politically through his Marxist discourse. Ironically, this discourse is often enacted through Valentín's readings of, or subconscious projections into, Molina's stories, as the characters engage in a give and take that constitutes an exploration of sexuality and politics through the texture of the narratives themselves. While a key point of the novel is that the distinctions between Molina's sexual seduction and Valentín's political one are thoroughly blurred, it is essential to note the decisive role of storytelling and translation in this process. Molina's and Valentín's widely different frames of reference, the material that each of them gathers and reconstructs from already established discourses—the former from popular culture, the latter from a revolutionary Latin American belief system—are juxtaposed dialogically with the scientific psychoanalytic texts in the margins and with the repressive discourse represented by the official reports of the security forces and the voice of the warden.[33] All of these can be seen as different world views, as different systems of interpreting and creating meaning. In other words, they are different language systems, containing layers of mediation in a battle over representation and identity. Thus, many of the tensions of the novel result from attempts at translating conflicting modes of communication. As Francine Masiello observes:

> Whether treating a story of origins or a foreign film script, Puig reiterates a common anxiety regarding the inefficiency of one's hearth tongue to resolve matters of naming, identity, and difference. But the inefficiency also yields ambiguity and unleashes an imaginative leap. *El beso de la mujer araña* addresses this central issue, presenting translation as an opportune slippage between various discourses, a compensation for modes of self-representation that are offered in a single tongue.

In this manner, desire and ideology—which are both inverted and subversive in Puig's novel—are displaced toward storytelling, as narrative itself becomes a way to resist repressive discourses.

Molina's storytelling, the narratives of a gay male Scheherazade in drag, culminates with the sexual union between the two protagonists, and finally with the violence at the end of the novel. The magic of the storytelling and the interweaving narratives, ironically set against the reality of life in jail, postpones violence and death, at least for a time. It also creates the potential for reconstructing memory and community, through narrative and translation, at times of extreme repression and of authoritarian regimes that seek to homogenize the discourse of society and to silence any dissenting voice. In the process, Puig demonstrates the potential of narrative to imagine and recreate the nation, even from behind prison bars.

V.

Perhaps an even more unusual version of Scheherazade is at the center of Ricardo Piglia's 1992 novel *La ciudad ausente* [The Absent City].[36] At stake in Piglia's text, as in Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña*, are questions of language and representation, memory and community, and of the role of narrative and translation in drawing the stage where such issues can be played out. Piglia's text deals with these issues in more recent times, as we now find ourselves in the aftermath of dictatorship and the transition to democracy, in a society facing the forces of neoliberalism. The novel is composed of disparate but interrelated stories; these narratives constitute the textual space of the novel and the geographic, historical and literal space of the nation itself.

Everyone in *La ciudad ausente*, including Junior, an investigative journalist seeking to decipher the stories as he travels through them, is obsessed with tracking the narratives, seeking their origin and center. But originality and centrality are as elusive as meaning in this text, as the stories continually circulate, often illicitly and in clandestine fashion, in copied mechanical fragments, as if to create counter-plots to the larger, authoritative discourses of the State or the Market.[37] As Piglia has remarked, "You could say that *The Absent City* is a novel in which I imagine a society controlled by stories, that it is like a realist novel of a society in which what really exists is spoken stories, machines that tell fragmented, Argentine stories".[38] But we

are left with the questions of where these stories originate and what it means to say that they are "Argentine."

Increasingly, Junior and the reader realize that the stories come from Elena—the Scheherazade figure in the novel—who used to be a woman but is now a machine.[39] The stories Elena produces, however, are themselves not original, as she channels an irreverent combination of past literary and historical references, both Argentine and foreign. It is precisely this irreverence and appropriation, enacted through processes of mis-translation, that turn the narratives into "Argentine stories." The productivity of mis-translation begins with the machine herself, even before others get a hold of her stories, because the first story—where one might expect to find an origin—is itself a mis-translation. The machine takes the fragments that appear lost and transforms them into something else:

> Primero habían intentado una máquina de traducir. . . .Una tarde le incorporaron *William Wilson* de Poe para que lo tradujera. A las tres horas empezaron a salir las cintas de teletipo con la versión final. El relato se expandió y se modificó hasta ser irreconocible. Se llamaba *Stephen Stevensen*. Fue la historia inicial. . . .Queríamos una máquina de traducir y tenemos una máquina transformadora de historias. . . . Usa lo que hay y lo que parece perdido lo hace volver transformado en otra cosa. Así es la vida.[40]
>
> [At first they had tried to make a machine that could translate texts. . . . One afternoon they fed it Poe's 'William Wilson' and asked it to translate it. Three hours later the teletype began to print the final version. The story was stretched out and modified to such a degree that it was unrecognizable. It was now called 'Stephen Stevenson.' That was the first story. . . .We had wanted a machine that could translate; we got a machine that transforms stories. . . .It takes what is available and transforms what appears to be lost into something else. That is life.]

This mis-translation, this transformation, is the process through which the past—whether it be past literary traditions, past historical experiences, or both—can be reconsidered and re-articulated. And the "machine that transforms stories" at the emptied center of *La ciudad ausente*—emptied as originality is revealed to be a fallacy—is a testament to the power of narrative, as seen in this contemporary, Argentine version of Scheherazade.[42] In

this sense, translation—as a reconstruction of a lost utopia—is an ideal metaphor for the process of rebuilding a collective, lost memory.

Transformation in *La ciudad ausente*, as Masiello argues, reveals how Latin America can be "an active site for the reinvention of literary forms and discourse" (168). This is largely achieved through variations on the practice of mis-translation, which multiply and confuse meaning and open the way for a number of muted characters to find a voice. Through a series of reproductions, images, and simulacra, narrative becomes the site of political and aesthetic resistance. The optimism found in Piglia's novel is thus specifically related to the potential of mis-translation to transform the past, including what was believed to have been lost, into something different—a possible future for a nation reconstructed through narrative.

As the various governmental agents in the novel are unable to get at the origin of the voice they wish to disconnect, the State becomes unable to silence Elena or to stop the stories from circulating. In her monologue at the end of the novel, Elena, a postmodern, mechanical Scheherazade, reaffirms the perseverance of storytelling, even as she awaits a confirming ear that can only come from the future:

> Estoy llena de historias, no puedo parar, las patrullas controlan la ciudad y los locales de la Nueve de Julio están abandonados, hay que salir, cruzar..., extraigo los acontecimientos de la memoria viva, la luz de lo real titila, débil, soy la cantora, la que canta, estoy en la arena, cerca de la bahía, en el filo del agua puedo aún recordar las viejas voces perdidas, estoy sola al sol, nadie se acerca, nadie viene, pero voy a seguir, enfrente está el desierto, el sol calcina las piedras, me arrastro a veces, pero voy a seguir, hasta el borde del agua, sí.[43]
>
> [I am full of stories, I cannot stop, the patrol cars control the city and the locales below Av. Nueve de Julio have been abandoned, we have to get out, go across. . . , I pull events out of live memories, the light of the real quivers, weakly, I am the singer, the one who sings, I am on the sand, near the bay, I can still remember the old lost voices where the water laps ashore, I am alone in the sun, no one comes near me, no one comes, but I will go on, the desert is before me, the stones calcined by the sun, sometimes I have to drag myself, but I will go on, to the edge of the water, I will, yes.][44]

The conclusion to Piglia's novel recalls the final affirmation of Molly Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses*. The machine in *La ciudad ausente* is also reminis-

cent of the final chapter of *Ulysses* in that she, like Penelope, is constantly weaving and unweaving stories, stories that come from the memory of others, from other texts, and are transformed into something different. In this sense, the machine is also like Molina in *El beso de la mujer araña*, the spider woman weaving and unweaving her web of seduction, which turns out to be a web in which identity and representation must be reconsidered. In both Puig and Piglia we see the storyteller again as Scheherazade, created by circumstance and recreating herself and those around her through narrative. Scheherazade, an entire tradition and its legacy, appropriated through mis-translation and resituated on a new map to create unexpected meanings as needed in the socio-political context of contemporary Argentina.

A generation before Puig and Piglia, Borges developed an aesthetics based on practices of mis-translation that legitimize the margin by, among other things, rearticulating the legacy of past traditions and challenging our notions of North and South, East and West. Taking advantage of the space created by Borges's redrawing of geographic and literary maps, Puig and Piglia rework the tradition of Scheherazade, creating irreverent versions of the classic storyteller: in one case a transvestite Scheherazade who narrates to seduce but also participates, unwittingly, in a foundational dialogue from behind prison bars; and in the other, a female machine that mis-translates the material fed to her to create new stories that help define the nation in the transition from dictatorship to democracy, while defying the discourses of the State and the Market.

Through various processes of translation, in the broadest sense of the term, Borges, Puig, and Piglia show that Latin American writers can transform the original, including the values of the center where it was produced. This move destabilizes concepts of originality, authorship and influence, creating major cultural political implications for the periphery and its literatures. Stories within stories, laden with desire, interrupted and postponed to extend life and question meaning: such is the role of narrative and translation in Argentina today.

George Washington University

Notes

1. In *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: Allen Lane, 1994), as part of an overview of the influence of the *Nights* on world literature, Robert Irwin states: "There is scarcely a tale in the whole of the *Nights* which does not have its precursors, derivatives or analogous

versions. Tales evolve into other tales and they replicate, elaborate, invert, abridge, link and comment on their own structure in an endless play of transformation—but was there ever the first version of any story? It is almost always impossible to tell when a story was first told and when it was first written down, or how it was transmitted, and impossible too to say what the last telling and final version of a story will be. Good stories pay little attention to cultural or linguistic frontiers" (64–65).

2. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, 4 vols.(Barcelona: Emecé Editores España, 1996) 1: 239. This and all other translations in this article are mine.

3. A broader consideration of Latin American Orientalism would include, among others, an analysis of Octavio Paz, Gabriel García Márquez and Severo Sarduy. On this topic, see Julia Kushigian, *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition: In Dialogue With Borges, Paz, and Sarduy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991). I particularly agree with Kushigan's argument that, in contrast with Anglo-French Orientalism, Hispanic Orientalism "Reflects not so much a political posture toward the Orient rendered in innumerable oppositional structures but is, rather, a more thoughtful approach that values a dialogue of discourses, reflecting an antithetical denial of and openness to the Other" (10). On representations of the Orient in Argentina, see Christine Civantos "Between Argentines and Arabs: The Writing of National and Immigrant Identities," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1999. On the Orient in Sarduy, see César Rodríguez de Sepúlveda, "La imagen de oriente en las novelas de Severo Sarduy," *Inti: Revista de Literatura Hispánica* 43–44 (Spring-Autumn 1996): 135–145.

4. Borges mentions the *Arabian Nights* in a number of "Prologues," from *Evaristo Carriego* to *El informe de Brodie*; throughout *Historia universal de la infamia* and *Historia de la eternidad*; and in numerous poems and stories, including "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," "El sur," "El inmortal," and "El zahir," just to name a few. I only touch on some of the most significant Borgesian references to the *Nights* in this article. For a complete list of references to the *Nights* in Borges' work, see Daniel Balderston, *The Literary Universe of Jorge Luis Borges: An Index to References and Allusions to Persons, Titles, and Places in His Writings* (New York and Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986) 219; for a list of references to Burton, see Balderston 25–26. For a discussion of Borges' references to the *Nights* in interviews and in his "Autobiography," see Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978) 71–72.

5. Borges, vol. 1, 239. In "Las versiones homéricas" Borges also compares only translations (in this case of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) amongst each other and not with the original.

In a sense, Borges's entire work can be said to be an illustration of the principle that the concept of the "definitive text" is a fallacy, and of the unexpected potential of this principle for Latin American writers. For further considerations of the implications of "Las versiones homéricas" and "Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*" on translation theory, and on Borges's own poetics and aesthetics, see Sergio Waisman, "Theorizing Translation: Borges, Displacement, and Irreverence," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2000.

6. Borges, vol. 1: 397. The same might be said about readers in the Orient in modern times as well, as the text has "reentered" the Arab world through fairly recent translations of the European versions. See, for example, Christopher Knipp, "The *Arabian Nights* in England: Galland's Translation and its Successors," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 5 (1974): 47–48; or Samuel G. Armistead and James T. Monroe, "Celestina's Muslim Sisters," *Celestinesca* 13.2 (November 1989): 7.

7. Irwin 17.

8. Borges's astute distinction focuses the discussion on the importance of the context in which a text exists, and on the relationship between meaning and time. In other words, on the diachronic nature of how texts are read. As George Steiner states in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): "One thing is clear: every language-act has a temporal determinant. No semantic form is timeless. When using a word we wake into resonance, as it were, its entire previous history. A text is

embedded in specific historical time; it has what linguists call a diachronic structure" (24). The issue becomes how to transpose a text from one context to another. As is evident by Borges's argument, it is the context (including class, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, time period, historical, political, and cultural conditions), and not just the language, that changes as one goes from an original to a translation.

9. Borges, vol. 1: 405. Borges's position is in stark contrast with accepted scholarship, which has traditionally criticized Richard F. Burton's version of the *Nights*, focusing on his alleged plagiarism, his inconsistent style, and his nearly pornographic rendering of some of the stories. See, for example, Knipp 49–51. Borges, for his part, always praised Burton, including the alterations and the peculiar and disparate vocabulary and neologisms that abound in his version of the *Nights*. In fact, Borges can be said to "create" Burton as his precursor (in terms of "Kafka y sus precursores"), as a translator/re-creator who rewrites an original to end up with a version capable of supplanting it.

10. The issue of fidelity, as a number of critics have observed, is the basic underlying question in just about every theory of translation and remains one of the major issues in the field today. As Steiner has said: "It can be argued that all theories of translation—formal, pragmatic, chronological—are only variants of a single, inescapable question. In what ways can or ought fidelity to be achieved? What is the optimal correlation between the A text in the source-language and the B text in the receptor-language? The issue has been debated for over two thousand years" (275). By valuing mis-translations Borges develops a formulation by which the question of fidelity need not be inescapable.

11. Borges, vol. 1: 410. Not surprisingly, Borges's praise of Mardrus's infidelities, like his praise of Burton's infidelities, contrasts with accepted scholarship. See, for example, Irwin's discussion of Mardrus' version (37–40).

12. Borges says, for example, that Galland "*domesticaba* a sus árabes... para que no desentonaran irreparablemente en París" ["*domesticated* his Arabs... so they would not be irreparably out of tune in Paris"] (Vol. 1: 399; emphasis added).

13. By "Orientalist position" I mean the sense that "Orientalism" has gained since Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York : Pantheon Books, 1978) . The implications of such Orientalism are especially well illustrated by the translators of the *Arabian Nights*, particularly by Richard F. Burton. For further critiques of Burton's Orientalism, see Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient*, (London: Pandora Press, 1988); and Ovidio Carbonell Cortés, "Orientalism in Translation: Familiarizing and Defamiliarizing Strategies," *Translator's Strategies and Creativity: Selected Papers From the 9th International Conference on Translation and Interpreting, Prague, September 1995*, ed. Ann Beylard-Ozeroff, Jana Kralova, and Barbara Moser-Mercer (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1998) 63–70.
A few critics have recently condemned such domesticating translations in the history of U.S. and U.K. literatures. Lawrence Venuti, in particular, argues in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) against translations that read fluently in the target language, which try to make it seem as if the text were written in English, and not in another language. He argues that such "transparent translations" efface "the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text... [and] perform a labor of acculturation" that becomes part of a cultural imperialism (4–5). In his more recent *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), Venuti begins to consider translation from the perspective of peripheral nations, where the same methods as those used in the center can have completely different effects.

14. This critique against Anglo-American domesticating translation is studied in depth by Venuti in *The Translator's Invisibility*. Other critics have also studied this tendency in more specific cases; see, for example, Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992); E. Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from* The Tempest *to* Tarzan (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1991); or Clayton Eshleman, "Addenda to A Note on Apprenticeship," *Translation Review* 20 (1986): 4–5.

15. Borges, vol. 1: 411.

16. On Sarmiento's mis-translations and their importance for twentieth-century Argentine literature, see Ricardo Piglia, "Sarmiento the Writer," *Sarmiento: Author of a Nation*, ed. Tulio Halperín Donghi et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 127–144. For a discussion of the role of the Orient in Sarmiento, see Civantos (23–81).

17. It is worth noting that Borges's only comments about Weil's version (dated 1839–1842) in "Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*" have to do with Weil's infidelities, which Borges of course praises. He states: "Sus interpolaciones me merecen todo respeto" ["His interpolations deserve all my respect"]; and after giving several brief examples of these, he adds: "Esas buenas apocrifidades no son indignas de Burton o Mardrus" ["These good falsifications are not unworthy of Burton or Mardrus"] (Borges, vol. 1: 410).

18. Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (London and New York: Verso, 1993) 47.

19. Surprisingly, there has been relatively little work done on the influence of the *Nights* on Medieval Spanish literature. Important exceptions to this include Juan Vernet Ginés, *Las mil y una noches y su influencia en la novelística medieval española* (Barcelona: Real Academia de Buenas Letras de Barcelona, 1959), in which Vernet Ginés argues that the origin of the picaresque novel resides in *The Thousand and One Nights*; and Armistead's and Monroe's study of the parallels between the *Nights* and the *Celestina* ("Celestina's Muslim Sisters" 3–27). See also Fernando Toro-Garland, "La Celestina en Las mil y una noches," *Actas del Congreso Internacional de Hispanistas* (México: Colegio de México, 1967) 627–634; and Irwin 92–95.

20. Borges, vol. 1: 342.

21. I disagree with Thomas Montgomery's assessment, in "Don Juan Manuel's Tale of Don Illán and its Revision by Jorge Luis Borges," *Hispania-A Journal Devoted to the Teaching of Spanish & Portuguese* 47 (1964), that Borges's "adaptation, considered as a part of Borges's writing, does not stand out" and that "the tale still belongs to the Infante [Don Juan], as it always has, for he, for his part, was highly independent in his use of sources. Borges's adaptation amounts to a very warm appreciation of his model" (464). Montgomery admits that the "modernization is of interest" (464). I would argue that this "modernization," combined with the taking of one "Exemplo" out of the *Conde Lucanor* and recontextualizing it within Borges's own book, actually represents a violent displacement from the past and the center toward the present and the periphery. Variations need not be enormous for their effects to be felt as such. This lesson is most clearly learned from Borges's "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*," a discussion of which falls outside the scope of this study. For an analysis of "Pierre Menard" and translation, see Steiner 73–76; Sarlo 78–82; and Waisman, "Theorizing Translation" 90–118.

22. Borges, vol. 3: 235.

23. Borges, vol. 3: 235–6.

24. Borges, vol. 3: 236.

25. Manuel Puig, *El beso de la mujer araña* (Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 1976).

26. Puig 239.

27. It is useful to keep in mind Peter Brooks' formulation, in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1984), that: "The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is [...] desire for the end, but desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative" (104). Also relevant is Brooks' observation that it is crucial for the text to reach its end "correctly," and not too soon; in other words, of the "danger of short-circuit: the danger of reaching the end too quickly, of achieving the improper death" (103–104).

28. As Roberto Echavarren states in "*El beso de la mujer araña* y las metáforas del sujeto," *Revista Iberoamericana* 44 (1978): "Quizá el aspecto más característico [de la novela] sea la distinción tajante que se ofrece entre la situación de los protagonistas, encerrados en el calabozo, 'muertos' para la sociedad, simples objetos del sistema represivo-carcelario, y el

diálogo, que pone en juego su imaginación y *les permite seguir viviendo*" ["The most characteristic aspect of the novel may very well be the sharp distinction presented between the situation of the protagonists—locked up in prison, 'dead' to society, simple objects of the repressive-jail system—and the dialogue, which puts into play their imagination and *allows them to go on living*"] (66; emphasis added).

29. As Francine Masiello observes in *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001): "Molina's stories have double meanings and show signs of equivocation especially as he glides between movie screen images and his own fantasized reconstruction of what he believes he has seen. In effect, the novel is plotted on doubleness of this kind and supplies the marshy groundwork for allowing the reader to think about the organizing principles of identity" (86).

30. In "For a New (Psychological) Novel in the Works of Manuel Puig," *Novel* 17 (1984), Stephanie Merrim states: "Like dreams, the movie-stories Molina tells provide a language for what has been repressed, which now manages to get past the 'censor' because the real circumstances and concerns are translated into the frivolous language of grade 'B' movies. 'Everything [in the novel] is mediated,' states Puig: examined closely, each of the six movie-stories proves to be a spider's web, a dream-like weave of concrete and psychosexual information which has entered the tale through the dream-work of displacement and condensation" (149). The quotation from Puig to which Merrim refers is from Danubio Torres Fierro's "Conversación con Manuel Puig: la redención de la cursilería," *Eco* 28 (March 1975): 508.

31. Echavarren 66. Echavarren also sees Molina as a *bricoleur*, a useful model in understanding the formulation of Molina's discourse: "Es legítimo equiparar la utilización del material cinematográfico de Puig al *bricolaje*" ["It is legitimate to equate Puig's use of cinematographic material with *bricolaje*"] (68).

32. Echavarren 68.

33. Significantly, the psychoanalytic texts—from Freud to Marcuse, with their oftentimes subversive ideas about homosexuality—are relegated to the margins, much as they are in society. A result of the dialogical relationship between these texts and the dialogue in the main part of the novel is that we come to see the interactions between the two characters as an experimentation with, and enactment of, the theories presented in the margins. On this process, see Elías Miguel Muñoz, "El discurso utópico de la sexualidad," *Revista Iberoamericana* 52.135–136 (April-September 186): 361–378.

34. Masiello 87.

35. I disagree, on this, with Merrim's conclusion that the "tragedy" of *El beso de la mujer araña* is "Molina and Valentín's inability to conceive of true liberation" (157). I believe that the emphasis should rest with the role of mediated stories in defying dictatorship and repression. The point is that sexual and political liberation are put into play through the circulation of the mis-translated narrative itself—and not necessarily whether such liberation is actually achieved. The ending of the novel, in any case, remains purposefully ambiguous on this matter.

36. Ricardo Piglia, *La ciudad ausente* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1992).

37. Significantly, in *La ciudad ausente* the potential of reproduction and translation becomes a site of resistance in the face of an overpowering neoliberal market. As Masiello observes: "Piglia... situates this relationship between the original and its copy, between the source text and its translations in the heart of the mass-media age and the process of globalization. It is the 'delirium of simulation' (15) that motivates characters of *La ciudad ausente*. The novel is composed through different copying machines: cassettes, walkmen, radios, television monitors, maps, and mirrors—even tattoos—reproduce in miniature the larger representations of life and feelings" (166).
See also what Piglia says about paranoia, politics and memory in literature in "El último cuento de Borges," *Formas breves* (Buenos Aires: Temas Grupo Editorial, 1999) 59–68.

38. Ricardo Piglia, *The Absent City*, trans. Sergio Waisman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) 144.

39. Elena is the (dead) wife of Macedonio Fernández, who is a major presence in *La ciudad ausente*, primarily in the conception of the novel as a museum. For a discussion of Macedonio Fernández's work see, for example, Germán García, *Macedonio Fernández, la escritura en objeto* (Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo, 2000). For an analysis of the role of Macedonio Fernández in *La ciudad ausente*, see Evelia Romano Thuesen, "Macedonio Fernandez: Su teoría de la novela en *La ciudad ausente* de Ricardo Piglia," *Alba de América: Revista Literaria* 12.22–23 (July 1994) 213–226.

40. *La ciudad ausente* 44–45.

41. *The Absent City* 37.

42. Piglia himself, discussing the interweaving stories that constitute *La ciudad ausente*, refers to Scheherazade and her legacy in modern fiction: "I have always liked novels that have several juxtaposed story lines. This intersection of plots correlates with a very strong image that I have of reality.... I sometimes have the physical sensation that one goes in and out of plotlines, that throughout the day, as one circulates with friends [...], an exchange of stories occurs, a system akin to doors that one can open to enter into another plot—something like a verbal net in which we live—and that the central quality of narrative is this flow, this apparent fleeing movement toward another story line.[...] As I thought about interruptions, I had in mind certain references, such as Scheherazade, and a series of texts within this tradition, until we arrive at a novel by Italo Calvino that drew my attention, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. That is, a tradition that conceives of the novel as a genre founded on interruptions" (*The Absent City* 141).

43. *La ciudad ausente* 178.

44. *The Absent City* 139.

45. The main Joycean text in *La ciudad ausente* is actually *Finnegans Wake*, the Modernist text of the night which can be said to be written in all the languages of the world. A full discussion of the parallels between Piglia and Joyce falls outside the scope of this study; for us, the relevant point of contact is *The Thousand and One Nights*, an important precursor to both *La ciudad ausente* and the *Wake*. See Masiello 163–168 and Sergio Waisman, "Ethics and Aesthetics North and South: Translation in the Work of Ricardo Piglia," *MLQ (Modern Language Quarterly)* 62.3 (September 2001): 259–283.

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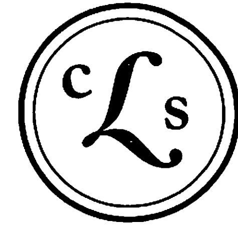

VOL 40, NO. 4, 2003

CONTENTS

The Thousand and One Nights in Argentina: Translation, Narrative, and Politics in Borges, Puig, and Piglia — 351
Sergio Waisman

Masculinity, Femininity, Solidarity: Emilia Pardo Bazán's Construction of Madame de Staël and George Sand — 372
Denise DuPont

Representing the Other: Ercilla's *La Araucana*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the New World Encounter — 394
Craig Kallendorf

Spenser and Du Bellay: Translation, Imitation, Ruin — 415
Hassan Melehy

BOOK REVIEWS

Rachel Langford and Russell West, eds., *Marginal Voices, Marginal Forms: Diaries in European Literature and History* — *439*
(*Virgil Nemoianu*)

Marc Berley, *After the Heavenly Tune: English Poetry and the Aspiration to Song* — *441*
(*Paul Friedrich*)

Charles Ferrall, *Modernism Writing & Reactionary Politics* — *445*
(*Karen Leick*)

Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* — *450*
(*Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal*)

Michel W. Pharand, *Bernard Shaw and the French* — *452*
(*Julie A. Sparks*)

Eleanor Kaufman, *The Delirium of Praise: Bataille, Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, Klossowski* — *456*
(*Allan Stoekl*)