Christopher Larkosh Lenotti

ON DECADENT FRONTIERS: THE MULTIPLE MASCULINITIES OF LUCIO V. MANSILLA

> Es indudable que la civilización tiene sus ventajas sobre la barbarie, pero no tantas como aseguran los que se dicen civilizados.
> La civilización consiste, si yo me hago una idea exacta de ella, en varias cosas.
> […]
> En que haya muchos médicos y muchos enfermos, muchos abogados y muchos pleitos, muchos soldados y muchas guerras, muchos ricos y muchos pobres. En que se impriman muchos periódicos y circulen muchas mentiras. En que se edifiquen muchas casas, con muchas piezas y muy pocas comodidades. En que funcione un gobierno compuesto de muchas personas, como presidente, ministros, congresales, y en que se gobierne lo menos posible. En que haya muchísimos hoteles y todos muy malos y todos muy caros.
> Verbigracia, como uno en que yo paré la última noche que dormí en el Rosario, que intenté dormir, para ser más verídico.
> Son precisamente las camas de ese hotel, las que me han sugerido estas reflexiones tan vulgares. (134-5)[1]
>
> Lucio V. Mansilla, *Excursión a los indios ranqueles* (1870)

Notes from a Hotel Called 'Civilization'

Are we truly prepared to entertain the notion that civilization is an expensive hotel? It is always possible, after all, that one might come to recognize in this metaphor, suggested by the Argentine author Lucio V. Mansilla (1831-1913), the stark contrast between what is ideally expected from this grand ideal and what is actually delivered. One might, for example, expect a level of comfort, quality and service which distinguishes the guest from those in more humble accomodations, and once one had become a regular guest, one's loyalty would be so unwavering that one would never want to stay anywhere else. This is, however, not always the case; in spite of the widespread conviction in the absolute value of this hotel called "Civilization" in the Argentina of the late 1860's, at the outset of its transformation into one of the most Europeanized societies outside of Europe, Mansilla is

[1] All quotes from Lucio V. Mansilla's *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles*. in this essay are taken from the edition edited by Blas Matamoro (Madrid: Ediciones de Cultura Hispánica, 1993).

by no means among this hotel's most satisfied customers. An uncomfortable bed in a Rosario hotel which has robbed him of a night's sleep seems to have awoken in him an awareness of the very inadequacies of those institutions associated with the advances of society. Such institutions--a health system, a government, cities, the armed forces, the press and those enterprises encharged with the production of urban space--seem to be created not only to ensure comfort, but also a measure of discomfort, so that the subject awaiting a more civilized society is compelled to return to its ideals, to search for what was expected.

One might even go so far as to say that his country, Argentina, is named after a set of unfullfillable expectations: after all, it takes its name from the Rio de la Plata, a "River of Silver" which is neither a river nor possessed of any great deposits of silver. Perhaps Argentina holds the dubious distinction of having the most Utopian of names, but is hardly alone among American societies who have provided the terrain for countless visions of a possible future civilization.[2] For generations of European explorers, rulers, and thinkers, America has served as precisely this kind of continually recyclable Utopia, despite the fact that there is a set of conditions—human, natural, cultural, historical, and yes, civilizational—which precede their arrival.

The contradictions inherent in these two terms—"Argentine," "civilization"—are all too fitting to describe the wide abyss which separated the lifestyles of the Buenos Aires élite of the late 19th and early 20th centuries from those others in that nascent Republic of their own invention over whom they presumed to govern. The majority of its inhabitants, whether gauchos, indigenous peoples, women, or others marginalized simply by the all-too-arbitrary nature of the exercise of power, were excluded from the model of government adopted by these men of power, property and prestige, based as it was upon a body of cultural and scientific premises which, especially in its initial stages, served to consolidate not so much a nation but an oligarchy. As is the case with any oligarchy, moreover, its primary purpose was not the universal granting of rights and liberties, but the preservation of its own exclusivity, i.e. to underscore the fact that it is by nature *not for everyone*, by separating society into a *continually developing* series of dichotomies (rich/poor, healthy/ill, soldier/enemy, masculine/feminine, civilization/barbarism, etc.). Although such distinctions

[2] For a general survey of modern conceptions of Utopia, see Saage, Richard. *Politische Utopien der Neuzeit*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991. For a study focused specifically on 19th-century Argentina, see Shumway, Nicolas. *The Invention of Argentina.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

may have organized and facilitated its exercise of power, they did not limit the ability of the ruling hierarchy to exercise power *at its discretion,* especially to eliminate perceived threats which did not presently fall into any of the existing divisions. In Argentine history, this process continually reappears as an institutional necessity: one might even think of it as an ongoing excursion.

The book *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles* (1870) departs from a related premise: a series of letters from the author to the Chilean Santiago Arcos, who had left South America to seek his fortunes elsehere, first in the California Gold Rush, then in Paris. Through this imaginary correspondence, Mansilla attempts to describe his role as representative of the Argentine Army as it sets off to finalize a series of peace treaties with Mariano Rosas, chief of an indigenous tribe on the southern frontier. It is significant that the text finds its addressee in one whose whereabouts and fate is largely unknown: "no sé dónde te hallas, ni dónde te encontrará esta carta y las que seguirán, si Dios me da vida y salud. Hace bastante tiempo que ignoro tu paradero, que no sé nada de ti, y sólo porque el corazón me dice que vives, creo que continúas tu pèregrinación por este mundo." (65) In this continuing transit between the metropolis, the frontier and beyond, Mansilla begins his narrative with an admission: much like the hotel he inhabits, his interlocutor is everywhere and nowhere, both ubiquitous and irrevocably lost.

This literary work, moreover, is addressed to a specifically male addressee, as evinced when the subject turns to what he identifies as the more barbaric practices of the natives, such as the traffic in wives: "Esta carta será mejor que no la lean las señoras." (373) The expansion of civilization is thus implicitly a extension of a model of normative masculinity, with barbarism its decadent 'alternative.' It is precisely this idea of normative masculinity as *alternative,* not only in the sense of a fixed choice within a strict dichotomy, but also in that this normative masculinity is continually *alternating* with other models, that the frontier of normativity can be recognized as porous and subject to continuous crossing, and the positivistic linear notions of progress are supplanted by cyclical paradigms, which allow for a simultaneously occurring set of cultural temporalities.

Even on the Ranquel frontier, Mansilla's *Excursión* is by no means the first encounter between cìvilization and its alternatives, as both natives and Europeans had been back and forth across this frontier for quite some time. Much of Mansilla's narrative appears to be dedicated precisely to chronicling the extent of this porosity, examining both what is

civilized in the behavior of the Ranqueles and what he finds barbarous in the policies of his own government and its representatives. If anyone in 19th-century Argentina could speak at length of the relationship between civilization as luxury accomodation in light of its alternatives, it was Mansilla. When he was not active as a soldier, whether fighting in the Paraguayan War of 1865-1871, or leading a military excursion to the southern frontier as in *Excursión a los indios ranqueles,* or active in the halls of Congress, he was often photographed in the rooms of these opulent hotels, if not its the literary salons, restaurants or promenades of Buenos Aires, Paris or elsewhere. In fact, many of his manuscripts are written on the letterhead from these luxurious residences, or from the other touristic destinations on the itinerary *en vogue* at the time--India, Egypt, Constantinople—which traced not only a personal route of discovery, but also one of a continuing European colonial expansion.[3] One might say that, no matter how incisive Mansilla's critiques of the hotel of civilization may have been, what perhaps galled his critics the most is that he had the audacity to write them *on house stationery*. It is this apparently duplicitous critique of civilization, emerging as it did from its most luxurious quarters, that has provoked a response from many a 20th-century literary critic.[4]

But if not from here, this grand hotel in a centuries-long process of expansion, from where might such a critique come, and were it to come from elsewhere, how might that voice from outside resonate in these halls? The importance of Mansilla is how he is able to combine these voices of opposition and complicity in response to normative models of

[3] These voyages are the basis of two early works by Mansilla: *De Adén a Suez* (1855) and *Recuerdos de Egipto* (1863).

[4] The most notable representative of this critical position is undoubtably David Viñas, whose *De Sarmiento a Cortázar* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte Editores, 1971) takes up positions against 'el mundo burgués' as reflected in the Argentine literary tradition and of which Mansilla is among its most emblematic examples. Viñas departs from a rejection of his own bourgeois origins as a starting point for his own critical project, whose main purpose is a violent overthrow of that "bourgeois" political order and the establishment of a socialist Argentine culture "with frontiers," presumably ideological. To what extent are proponents of emergent forms of subaltern representativity prepared to explore the full implications of this identitarian frontier? In this sense, Viñas goes far beyond post-bourgeois apologetics: his book *Indios, gauchos y frontera* (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1981), which deals specifically with the conquest of the South, the extermination of indigenous peoples and the marginalization of the gauchos, is written in political exile in Mexico during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship, a period in which the extermination and disappearance of political opponents in the name of "Western civilization"--not only communists, Jews, and homosexuals, or their families and friends, but also distant acquaintances and other uncategorizable casual bystanders--had once again become 'the order of the day.' For the purposes of this article, on the frontiers of decadent masculinity, one must begin by taking this argument at least one step further: how might one learn a critical language which is articulated *beyond the frontiers of one's own identity,* not only that of ethnicity or social class, but also of gender and sexuality? Especially with the rethinking of the multiple meanings of the border in Latino/American culture, above all, in the wake of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987) and Francine Masiello's *Between Civilization and Barbarism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), such discourses (socialist critique, cultural studies, postcolonial and subaltern studies, if those in gender and sexuality) can hardly be considered foreign visitors to this 'hotel.'

masculine authority in such a way that, although not without its contradictions, is nonetheless capable of inserting a measure of critique in that most univocal of institutional spaces that was the Argentine governing elite of the late 19th-century. In this fashion, one might also recognize in this model of civilization the seeds of its decay and continual reconsolidation. In this cultural context, decadence is defined as a descent from civilization into barbarism, and it is precisely on this frontier of civilization which Mansilla conducts much of his work as a cultural critic, one which allows a continual crossing over into what is beyond the limits of European models of masculinity, culture, privilege and power embodied in the bourgeois 'gentleman.' In hindsight it is perhaps too easy to recognize that this 19th-century border between civilization and barbarism, in spite of its positivistic claims to health and normativity, is ultimately a decadent one, ultimately indefensible in its arbitrariness, especially when the very extension and defense of such a border often necessitates acts of barbarism, a point all too evident as one looks back over the escalation of nationalisms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this context of conquest and extermination, which would culminate only a few years later with the 1879 Conquest of the Desert, moreover, it is all too simple to witness the inherent injustice in the violent appropriations and ordering of subalternity in the name of 'civilization.'

In his writings Mansilla appears continually conscious of this inconsistency, even in those moments when he is most compromised by his relationship with the institutions of power. He is thus both *different and indifferent*, and if this continual alternation of distancing and return, however limited it may appear, is the basis of what could be labeled 'decadent' in his character, it is also that of his interest as a writer. In this visit to an indistinct frontier where identities overlap (if only to be eventually subsumed into an all-encompassing vision of the West as the dominant political, economic and literary culture of modernity), I wish to revisit the image of decadent masculinity presented in this particular case of 19th-century Argentine literary activity, no doubt to question the inherent prejudices and limitations there, but also perhaps to reveal thereby its potentially regenerative capacities of the alternatives it suggests, especially in ways of imagining national and literary identity, as we continue to read into the 21st century..

Mansilla's Many Hats

In 1907 Mansilla was photographed at the Whitcomb studios in Buenos Aires, in what were to become the most famous photographic images made of him. This series of portraits was created using two mirrors set at such an angle to the other so as to create the illusion that five Mansillas are talking amongst themselves, each image reproducing the features most often associated with him: the elegant attire of the 19th-century dandy, complete with top hat, tails, monocle, a cane, his trademark long, white beard, and a cigar (Fig. 1) This photograph has on occasion given rise to the comment that when Mansilla conversed, as in the series of literary tertulias which were to form his collection of essays *Entre nos: Causeries del jueves* (1889-91), it was first and foremost *with himself.*[5] Perhaps it can indeed be read in this image that Mansilla was his own favorite interlocutor, a view which might find support in the *Excursión* in his choice of an addressee who has disappeared, and with whom Mansilla can only converse in a sort of extended soliloquy. Nonetheless, this seems to be a criticism that could be made of too many writers and intellectuals of any historical period to be limited solely to Mansilla, simply because he alone chose to allow this interior monologue with a set of imaginary 'other selves' to be represented in a photograph.

This is, after all, not the only photograph in the series; in another, he stands in the opposite direction, with his back to his reflections, facing outward, each Mansilla ignoring the others to engage what is perceived as external. (Fig. 2) This too is Mansilla; the emphasis which could thus be placed on this series of images is not one of mere self-absorption and interiorized dialogue, but rather an implicit recognition of one's own cultural multiplicity, a wearing of many 'hats' which is the result of a continual crossing and recrossing of cultural frontiers. The continual shifts in cultural positionality which Mansilla can be seen to represent serve to challenge those officialized dichotomies instrumental in the consolidation of institutional power.

If hardly convinced of the model of European imperial conquest and colonialism as the sole paradigm capable of national consolidation, he nonetheless finds something

[5] Lanuza, José Luis. *Genio y figura de Lucio V. Mansilla.* Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1965, p. 72. The photos of Mansilla in this essay are also taken from this volume.

necessary in this enterprise when first surveying the landscape to which he is assigned to bring its benefits:

> Hermosos, seculares algarrobos, caldenes, chañartes, espinillos, bajo cuya sombra inaccesible a los rayos del sol crece frondosa y fresca la verdosa gramilla, constituyen estos montes, que no tienen la belleza de los de Corrientes, del Chaco o Paraguay.
>
> […] La vegetación pujante renovándose siempre por la humedad; […] y tantas otras cosas que revelan la eternal grandeza de Dios, ¿dónde están aquí? Me preguntaba yo, soliloqueando por entre los carbonizados y carcomidos algarrobos.
>
> Y como siempre que bajo ciertas impresiones levantamos nuestro espíritu, la visión de la Patria se presenta, pensé un instante en el porvenir de la República Argentina, el día en que la civilización, que vendría con la libertad, con la paz, con la riqueza, invada aquellas comarcas desiertas, destituidas de belleza, sin interés artístico pero adecuadas a la cría de ganados y a la agricultura.
>
> […]
>
> No he visto jamás en mis correrías por la India, por África, por Europa, por América, nada más solitario que estos montes del Cuero. (153-5)

Looking out over this supposedly deserted, forbidding landscape and recognizing its shortcomings, especially when compared to more fertile climates further north, he is able to set aside the criticisms of civilization which he expresses at various other points in the text. It is precisely here, when faced with the incomparable solitude of this terrain, he is, if only for a moment, able to allow himself to be “invaded” by the spirit of this grand national vision, of a future accompanied by a retinue of Utopian ideals: liberty, peace, wealth. Such a glorious vision might even be capable of suppressing any lingering doubt that this

civilization, here presented in the singular,[6] is not alone in its virtues and ideals. Ironically, perhaps it is only on this desolate frontier, with no visible alternatives in sight, that the vision can be transmitted with this kind of celestial clarity. In this instant, with internal and external interference at zero, Mansilla allows himself to be convinced.

It could thus be said that the main defect of civilization is its inability to recognize the values it claims to uphold in any other system of governance, and it is precisely this encounter on the frontier which tests this conviction of unique worth. Mansilla's dilemma, however, is quite a different one; although he harbors reservations regarding the benefits of this system, he seems nonetheless resigned to it, and is often able to suppress criticism in order to fulfill his assigned role of the moment. This is the key to Mansilla's multiplicity: while he may at times differ with himself, he is indifferent to his own criticisms expressed at other moments when the time comes to wear the officer's hat. While he is aware of the limitations to what any system of order might bring to this frontier, he also remains all too aware of the official ideology regarding "civilization" and his duties as an officer.

One example that suggests that Mansilla had been singled out as somewhat of a challenge to a fixed and stable national identity can be seen in his own family history. Mansilla was the nephew of Juan Manuel de Rosas, a caudillo who ruled Buenos Aires, and by extension, given the province's hegemonic power and influence, the rest of Argentina in the period prior to Europeanization (1829-1832, 1835-1852). Mansilla's best known encounter with his eminent uncle came after his return from abroad at a lunch in which the dictator served his nephew seven plates of *arroz con leche*, a simple but typical national dish, in order to cure him of his foreign affectations, if not to interupt his narration of those other places. This playful misencounter with a powerful (if not potentially murderous) figure of authority illustrates his uneasiness before a form of national identity which is usually considered simple and easily digestible, even if not in the enormous portions served here. Perhaps that is why he envies those whose identities seem more flexible, such as the Brazilians who need only place an ad in the newspaper to change their name (162), allowing a selective break with the debts incurred by one's personal past and family background, if not one's ethnicity, nationality or native language.

[6] This tendency to speak of civilization in the singular is not uncommon in 19th-century European descriptions of the frontier, as Tsvetan Todorov notes in his book *Le morali della storia* (Trad. Frediano Sessi. Torino: Einaudi, 1995) in a discussion of European depictions of mid-19th-century Bulgaria: "ciò che non viene detto ma che è pesantemente

This ability to change names as easily as one's wardrobe suggests a novel way of imagining the nascent national community: "Nos van haciendo un pueblo de zarzuela. Tenemos que hacer todos los papeles, menos el que podemos" (308) The nation appears here as a light opera in which all the roles are acted by a reduced number of players often unsuited for their parts. The operatic metaphor is timely: this is the moment in which Buenos Aires receives its world-class opera house, appropriately named Colón, evoking both the discoverer and, obliquely, the colony. In this cultural context of wholesale cultural importation, the Argentine oligarchy would be hard-pressed to launch a critique of the dilettantism, theatricality, voyeurism and decadence associated with the dandy, a literary poseur too concerned with his own appearance, one more suited to expressing the superficial impressions of a tourist than those of a prominent literary figure. Even in a period of Argentine literature dedicated primarily to the more masculine project of national consolidation on the European model, however, the dandy should be recognized as an inseparable part of that package, if "contradictory" from the outset. At the frontier, however, the lettered dandy embodied in Mansilla is the normative masculine model only by default, as he is acting simultaneously as soldier and government representative: in short, a gentleman. Here masculinity is also a *zarzuela:* it must be multiple, travel between and survey numerous sites, as its role is, precisely, to fulfill numerous roles.

But how does one define the dandy on excursion? One might take a cue from the definition given by Oscar Wilde: "Dandyism is the assertion of the absolute modernity of beauty." Or for that matter, what is an aphorism when on excursion? An aphorism usually relies on the unexpected inversion of commonplaces, its terms reversed to challenge normative constructions of logic and common sense. On the frontier, however, there are no 'common places,' and if the dandy asserts here that beauty is absolutely modern, presumably in response to a 19th-century gentleman's assertion that *modernity is absolutely beautiful*, it is because the dandy must also play the gentleman to fulfill his duty. Thus, is he not saying both things at the same time? These models of masculinity, whether translated into political programs of expansion and presumed modernization, or projects which pursue ideals of artistic beauty, are intertwined in a continual exchange of vocabularies, semantics

sottaciuto, è che la *nostra* civilizzazione è *la* civilizzazione, e che ne esisteuna sola, non essere come noi, significa non essere civilizzati; è come non esistere." (26)

and images, some realized, some suppressed, some displaced, and the subtle frontier between normative and non-normative may often be indistinguishable.

Expanding Frontiers, *Weltliteratur* and the Art of Strategic Quotation

One might also recognize this multiple identity in the use of literary language, which adheres to a model of multilingualism popular for much of the 19th century. Here the language of expansion and conquest is not limited to that of officialdom (Spanish), but extends to encompass the other major Western European literary languages (English, French, German and Italian). Although *La excursión* is presumably concerned primarily with the official encounter with indigenous peoples at the frontier of a Latin American republic, the texts abound with passages in other languages in a seemingly effortless show of linguistic code-switching which would not be out of places in the most sophisticated literary salons of the period, whether in a discussion of the discussion of the "quatorzième," the multilingual dinner guest hired to avoid a table of thirteen (162), or of the yapaí, a native toast explained as the equivalent of the English colonial custom of "the pleasure of a glass of wine with you." (281) As Mansilla's multilingual vademecum illustrates, these "citas *ad hoc*, en idiomas que poseo bien y mal, anécdotas, cuentos, impresiones de viaje, juicios sobre libros, hombres, mujeres, guerras terrestres y marítimas" (316) cannot truly be considered 'foreign languages' for the educated Argentine ruling class, if not in the sense of an accessible or "translatable foreign"[7], as they constitute the very foundation on which this élite culture is constructed, i.e., a multilingual vision of European civilization which, on this frontier, assumes the form of a literary library of strategic reference evoked repeatedly over the course of Mansilla's narrative. It goes without saying, especially in the liminally academic context of this essay, that *the art of strategic quotation* is rarely apolitical in the network of world literature; whether on its frontiers or in the halls of its central institutions, it is fundamental in its ability to map out alliances and dissent. The act of non-quotation? Even more so, as it forms the very frontier of any literary vision, one no less determined by the all-too-human constraints of time, literary taste and cultural politics than by those of ignorance or neglect.

[7] I have employed this term in a number of essays on Argentine culture to elaborate upon the various levels of perceived foreignness, most recently in the essay "Translating Woman: Victoria Ocampo and the Empires of Foreign Fascination" (in Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler, Eds., *Translation and Power*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

The principal figures of national literary traditions—e.g., Dante, Shakespeare, Manzoni, Goethe, and Hugo--are joined in this imaginary frontier tertulia by authors from the Argentine literary tradition known as "Los Hombres del 37" ("the Men of '37"), a name which again underscores the extent to which this model of national identity has doubled as a model of masculinity. He quotes Esteban Echevarría, author of the poem "La cautiva" (1837), which tells of a European woman adbucted by frontier natives, and dialogues with many of the ideas first advanced in the work of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, who has become President of the Republic by the time Mansilla is sent to the Ranquel region. Sarmiento's *Facundo* (1845) is the seminal Argentine political and sociological treatise of the period, providing not only a critique of the "barbarism" of the regime of Rosas and the other caudillos, but also many of the models for the push towards civilization which characterize the subsequent era. Mansilla also makes reference to gauchesque poets such as Hilario Ascasubi and Estanislao del Campo, whose style attempted to capture the oral poetry of the gaucho in a literary form at the moment in which the Gaucho way of life was coming to an end, pushed to the margins by government policies of European immigration, land redistribution, technological advancement and improved transportation/communication networks. From Greece and Rome by way of Romantic Europe and Buenos Aires, this 19th-century world literary canon is an inseparable part of that interconnected body of technology which transports Mansilla to the frontier.[8]

One might attribute this continual citation of the eminent names of *Weltliteratur* as one more cultural weapon, one which attempts, as has been noted above, to fill a perceived void in this endless extension of land with little or no perceptible meaning. Many of these quotes, however, seem to have precisely the opposite effect, to provide a counterpoint to the act of expansion, as in a quote from Byron's "Ode on Venice," which Mansilla evokes after having a vision, in which the nation's founding fathers are gathered around a meal of human flesh: "There is no hop [sic] for nations! Search the page/ Of many thousand years—the daily scene;/ The flow and ebb of each recurring age,/The everlasting to be which hath

[8] For a detailed Italian-language overview of the Argentine literary tradition in a Hispano-American context, see Blengino, Vanni. *Storia della letteratura ispano-americana* (Roma: Tascabili Economici Newton, 19971998.). Blengino is also the author of a detailed study of the conquest of Patagonian frontier in Argentine literature: *Il vallo della Patagonia: Nuovi conquistatori: militari, scienzati, sacerdoti, scrittori* (Reggio Emilia: Edizioni Diabasis, 1998). As well as placing Mansilla's work in the context of a larger corpus addressing the national preoccupation with its southern frontier, it also provides a critique of the motives and forces which govern the conquest and transformation of this space, if not a explicit critique of the overlapping models of normative masculinity (as the title suggests) which shape it from beginning to end.

been,/ Hath taught us nougth [sic] or little." (475) Mansilla goes on to translate the quote into Spanish for the reader, yet his translation appears emblematic of the transferral of the models of European civilization to the frontier. The need for translation ensures difference, however minute, in the transferral of meaning, as the myth of equivalence cannot obscure the fact that translation will invariably exhibit a measure of stylistic and semantic difference which cannot be reduced to 'loss' or 'imperfection.' Even if one sets the typographical errors aside, which over a century of Spanish-language editors (including those of recent editions) have apparently not been overly concerned with correcting (but perhaps this can also be read as a sign of "national consolidation"), Mansilla's translation departs from the English original most visibly in the penultimate line: "the everlasting to be which hath been," which he renders as "la eterna repetición de los acontecimientos," or literally, "the eternal repetition of events." It is no doubt an adequate, if loose, translation, but the key element missing here is the idea of the future, more specifically, the countless number of possible imagined futures already lost to oblivion, indeed, the patent futility of constructing utopian visions of nation. Perhaps Mansilla does not recognize that when Byron alludes to what is "to be," he refers to the *future* and not the present, that it is the very idealism of the national project that is futile, its futurity, and not merely its imperfect realization as reflected in present "events"[9]

The question thus arises: why does one embark on the colonial foray again and again, in spite of the knowledge that it is ultimately futile? For this fundamental question Mansilla has no direct answer, if not one which might be found obliquely in his impressions on tourism and travel:

> Ni todos viajan del mismo modo, ni por las mismas
> razones, ni con el mismo resultado.
> Se viaja para gastar el dinero, adquerir un porte y un
> aire chic, comer y beber bien.
> Se viaja por lucir la mujer propia, y a veces la ajena.
> Se viaja por instruirse.
> Se viaja por hacerse notable.

[9] *The Works of Lord Byron.* Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994, pp. 102–103. The quoted passage continues in the original to underscore the condradictory nature of this enterprise: "still we lean/on things that rot beneath our weight, and wear/Our strength away in wrestling with the air. For tis' our nature strikes us down…" Byron thus

Se viaja por economía.
Se viaja por huir de los acreedores.
Se viaja por olvidar.
Se viaja por no saber qué hacer. (126)

This is not, after all, an ordinary voyage, but a military expedition in the service of a project of expansion and ultimate extermination, and the dandy's voyage is ultimately co-opted by that of military conquest. Moreover, if one substitutes the word 'viajar' ('travel') with 'conquistar' ('conquer') one might arrive at some surprising conclusions regarding the nature of this enterprise, but none more so than the last: "por no saber qué hacer" (lit.,"not knowing what to do," or loosely, "for nothing better to do")? Could it be that European conquest may not always have such glorious motives as 'glory' or 'patriotism' or any of the other *'mots d'ord(u)re'* which adorn its banners, but ones as banal as *ennui*? In the end, it may well have been as pervasive a 19th-century cultural motif as any other.

Even in his most opulent imperial fantasies, such as the one in which he breaks with his Argentine compatriots to envision himself as Lucius Victorius Imperator, absolute ruler of an independent state, complete with crowds of cheering Indians and triumphal arches. Such a vision of Empire on this most desolate of landscapes seems the very quintessence of decadent masculinity, a desert empire at the end of the world, doomed to ruin, an avatar not only of decadent Rome, but also of the equally influential Spanish colonial visions of El Dorado, or as it was known in these parts, *Tierra de los Césares* (lit., "Land of the Caesars"). And that is the problem: Mansilla feels compelled to style himself the representative of a presumably triumphant civilization, the value of which he is unable to convince himself completely. He already knows too much, too aware of events in the history of civilization which do not follow the linear, positivistic models of continual perfection and progress. Its oft-quoted narratives of the rise and fall of empire—from Vico's concept of *corso e ricorso* to the cryptic words from the Book of Daniel which presage the fall of King Balthazar— are all too present for him to be a convincing "Caesar."

That is the beginning of "decadence": a recognition of the limits of one's own civilization as finite. This might explain how his library ends up getting "burned" on this

stresses not only our inability to rise to the heights of our own visions, but, in true Romantic fashion, how even that awareness of our own limitations does not keep us from the returning over and over again to make yet another attempt.

frontier, not no much as one might imagine on the frontier, through a bonfire or raid, but by his own frequent expressions of scepticism which mark the limits of his literary faith: "hay más cosas en el cielo y en la tierra de la que ha soñado la filosofía" (122), "se me quemaron los libros" (253), "*Ek te biblion kubernetes*" ("not everything can be learned in books," 319). There is, however, a substantive difference between simply stating, as in the first example, that books and the knowledge they impart have their frontiers, and making the point with a quote from Ancient Greek. Once more, the art of strategic quotation seems to contradict stylistically the very premise it expresses in content; if this were not enough, Mansilla continues to trace of the frontiers of one's own erudition in the insistent statement which follows it: "yo también he estudiado griego."

Let us, however, take Mansilla at his word: if literature can truly be set aside, if only temporarily, who or what will accompany Mansilla on this excursion? At this point, the frontier of literature is not barbarism, it is life itself: that of human bodies, facing one another or lying face down, each one different, possessed of a substance and story incapable of being contained within the cover of a book or in the testimony of another. What can be learned from reading and writing must thus be suspended to make the encounter with the present moment possible. But is this refusal of literature truly possible for Mansilla? Perhaps it is here on this uncertain frontier that this frame of literary reference becomes all the more necessary.

Between Language and Subalternity: The Final Frontier?

Indeed, such expressions only serve to underscore how in fact one is never far from literature in Mansilla, especially in this encounter in which others appear as reflections of the self, the self a reflection, if not an appropriation, of the other. The markers of élite education, wealth, power and privilege legible throughout his work are counterposed with the wide range of subjects with which he comes in contact and attempts to represent. Whether involved in or awaiting yet another encounter with difference, this multiple Mansilla--author, literary protagonist, social subject, military authority, political collaborator--cannot but provoke a discussion on the politics of representation: how does an author's perceived cultural, class and gender identity enable or entitle him to represent others in or beyond the communties which he inhabits? Given this topic's continuing popularity in contemporary literary and cultural studies, this may well be one of the areas in

which Mansilla's work will continue to find relevance: in contemporary debates on cultural contact, hegemony and subalternity.

For instance, on the first leg of this excursion, the *lenguaraz*, Mansilla's interpreter, is a 25-year-old *china* (female of gaucho culture) named Carmen. Although her function is to translate and repeat what others say, she for her own part says nothing in this narrative. For most 19th century readers, including Mansilla, the name Carmen might invite associations with the eponymous 1845 French novel by Prosper Merimée, and the act of interpretation viewed through the lens of this literary character reopens a series of translational metaphors: seduction, loss, betrayal, the exercise of colonial power. Aligned with one of 19th-century popular culture's best known *femmes fatales*, both are recognizable as cultural border dwellers, with Andalusia as a proto-Pampa, the point of contact between Spanish Europe and Arab Africa, and a conquest which was to become one of the many recurrent models for subsequent colonial expansions in Argentina. Both are also reputed experts in their ability of "seduction" (67), especially with regard to that epitomé of normative masculinity in uniform, whether named José or Lucio. Mansilla is aware, nonetheless, of his place in a historical continuum of male soldiers with a female interpreter; he states that he must take care not to give in to her, so as not to play Hernán Cortés, Spanish conqueror of México, to her Malinche, his native interpreter and lover, in this latest chapter in a drama of New World conquest, continually redubbed for a native audience.[10]

These overlapping narratives of colonial encounter, whether experienced through his own travels or in his readings, provide an eclectic model for Mansilla's foray, which has left

[10] One place where one might note this same overarching tendency to identify with and represent a wide range of subaltern identities is in the liberation philosophy of the Argentine Enrique Dussel in the essay "La razon del otro. La 'interpelación' como acto de habla." (In Enrique Dussel, ed. *Debate en torno a la ética del discurso de Apel. Diálogo folosófico Norte-Sur desde América Latina.* México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1994): "Teníamos la conciencia de ser la 'otra-cara' de la Modernidad. En efecto, la Modernidad nace en realidad en 1492 con la 'centralidad' de Europa (el 'eurocentrismo' se origina al poder Europa envolver el mundo árabe que había sido el centro del orbe conocido hasta el siglo XV). El 'yo,' que se inicia como el 'yo conquisto' de Cortés o Pizarro, que anteceden prácticamente al *ego cógito* cartesiano por un siglo, produce el genocidio, la esclavitud del africano, las guerras coloniales del Asia. La mayoría de la humanidad presente (el 'Sur'), es la 'otra-cara de la Modernidad.' (59) As a philosophy which claims to be "popular, feminista, de la juventud, de los oprimidos, de los condenados de la tierra, condenados del mundo y de la historia" (59), Dussel's cross-identicatory drive is nearly as expansive as Mansilla's, even while taking up theoretical position firmly on the "other" side of humanity. Even if each of us might not find the terms of his/her own subalternity in this outline of late 20th-century otherness (and if one were simply to place an ellipsis there at the end of that always incomplete list, what would become of the division between these two distinct "faces"?), it is nonetheless clear that the goal for Dussel is no longer simply to explore the multiplicity of subaltern identity, but to provide, through philosophical observations grounded in an ethical imperative, the theoretical means for the oppressed to convert consciousness into liberatory action. But what if it were to come not by 'choosing a face,' but, as in Mansilla, by affirming the "anyoneness" ("qualunquità") of one's own sense of identity and community, as the contemporary Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben proposes in his book *La comunità che viene.* (Torino: Einaudi, 1990)?

a mark on his sense of style, borne out in his choice of attire: a red Algerian officer's cape and white gloves. These choices underscore the parallel nature of so many of these colonial encounters, and explains why, in Mansilla and other writers of the period the Argentine experience at the frontier is so often understood in terms of an encounter with the Orient, especially the French conquest of Algeria of 1830. Both gauchos and Indians are compared to Arabs in the course of Mansilla's book: "Camilo es como un árabe, habla poco" (132) "no es tan fácil llegar hasta hacerle un *salam-alek* a Mariano Rosas" (268); "para los indios, como para los árabes, no había habido insulto mayor que llamarles perro" (332); "…como el árabe en el fresco oasis" (439). In the Argentine context as well, much like the "gaucho lindo" (402), that gaucho/dandy whose attention to detail makes him the epitomé of frontier fashion, Mansilla's frequent costume changes allow him to imagine himself a dashing character: "marqués en París y un guaraní en Paraguay" (58). But isn't it really the other way around? Mansilla was actually much more inclined to play the Parisian on the frontier and the exotic in Paris, insisting on his own *difference* by exceeding every cultural milieu, and his preprogative to assume and discard alternately a multiplicity of masculinities. At the same time, he claims to be *indifferent;* they are all the same to him, as equally assimilable alternatives, be they Turks or Arabs, Gauchos, Paraguayans or Ranqueles. Although Mansilla may make note of specificities in each of these cultures, they appear most clearly as a single character: that indistinct adversary of European expansion. That Europe advances here in the name of an Argentine Republic is of little importance. It is here, on this desolate frontier, that a unified Europe, "que nos da la norma en todo" (466), as Mansilla states (although, to his credit, not without more than a touch of irony), appears most clearly as a single entity: where it can find not only the frontier (if it ever does), but its most elusive, if already decadent, sense of self.

In all of the roles he plays, plus everything not included there, or even in those masculine roles which remain beyond the frontier of European civilization, whether Indian, gaucho, Paraguayan, or that subject known in 19th-century military parlance as the "subaltern," in few moments is the desire to assume other masculine roles more evident than in his description of the military campfire, or *fogón:* "El fogón es la delicia del pobre soldado, después de la fatiga. Alrededor de sus esplendores desaparecen las jerarquías militares. Jefes superiores y oficiales subalternos conversan fraternamente y ríen a sus anchas." (89) For Mansilla, the *fogón* is "la tribuna democrática de nuestro ejército." (156)

There is, nonetheless, something disingenuous in this fantasy of democracy, as it creates the illusion that there are no frontiers between the élites and their subalterns, and this is perhaps the essence of this exercise of power, to pretend that one is really not in power, that it is *the others* who are truly in control. It is hardly coincidental that these letters, presumably written to another *excursionista* like himself, are in fact being published in a Buenos Aires newspaper which is called "La Tribuna," at a time when the Argentine oligarchy was busy establishing those institutions which would give the appearance of a democratic system while keeping power in the hands of the very few. But who is truly being fooled here? The *jefe* may believe that the subaltern truly enjoys the fogón and its show of fluid exchange between the ranks, but perhaps that expression of enjoyment is also part of the act; perhaps the subaltern is on to his game to make hierarchy seem supple and light, when in fact he is fully aware of what his role is there on the frontier, and what would happen were he to cross the line.

This example, embedded in the lower ranks on the 19th-century Argentine military frontier, makes manifest how closely the original and 20th-century Gramscian definitions of subalternity overlap and are indistinguishable.[11] Both definitions of subalternity are clearly marked by race, ethnicity and social class, and in both, the subaltern is appropriated yet marginal, native yet strangely foreign, especially when viewed through the lens of élite culture. It is in this way that much of this transit in and out of subalternity in which Mansilla imagines himself is ultimately revealed to be a fantastic journey. Even around the *fogón*, the secrets of the subaltern are never fully appropriable into civilization, as if they were, the entire dichotomy on which it is constructed would collapse. What Mansilla's *Excursión* bears out, nonetheless, is the extent to which this imaginary crossing between various subaltern identities, whether actual subaltern subjects or those interiorized in his own reflections, truly allow for a multiplicity of positions both within and beyond the monolithic models of 'civilized' subjectivity. This fantasy of the foreigner within, often revisited by contemporary theorists—"l'étranger nous habite; il est la face cachée de notre identité"[12]--is exemplified in Mansilla's term for the Ranqueles and other frontier peoples: "indios argentinos," (196, 568) which, although no doubt a presumptuous wish before the

[11] The importance of Gramscian theories of subalternity as a point of departure for a discussion of 19th-century Argentine political and literary culture has been already suggested by Josefina Ludmer in her book on the gauchesque entitled *El género gauchesco: Un tratado sobre la patria.* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1989).

[12] Kristeva, Julia. *Étrangers à nous-mêmes.* Paris: Folio Essais 1988, p. 9.

conquest is even completed, it is undoubtedly less negating than the all-too-common alternatives of marginalization, absorption or outright extermination which have marred the history of cultural contact in the West and beyond. [13]

But does this conception of frontier subalternity suggest something more? Subaltern social groups speak not merely as an abstract singular through a series of lettered mediators, but also in the first person, singular or plural, through their overwhelming multiplicity of experience. While it is necessary to recognize the ways in which personal experience determined by class origins, ethinicity and gender can shape one's ability to identify and speak about how social injustice and inequality is articulated in the ideologies of state, society and culture, these are by no means the only ways in which such discourses are authenticated and legitimized. The injustices which result from the arbitrary exercise of power are at times too subtle to be reduced to a set of readily identifiable categorical reasons (ethnicity, class, gender, etc.) For do the political and cultural institutions which exercise power really need a clear reason? Often it may be no more so than that for taking an "excursion": "por no saber qué hacer." That is, if they give one at all.

Despite his often purely literary outings into subalternity, Mansilla becomes aware of his inability to remain the sole arbiter of knowledge on this frontier, ceding to the other not only dominion over a body of native knowledge, but even the possibility that he may in fact be surpassed by the native's knowledge of European language and science. For example, when his second *lenguaraz*, Ramón, makes a requisition list, it includes the word 'atíncar.' Mansilla at first imagines it to be a indigenous word, and asks for the equivalent in Spanish, to which Ramón replies that it *is* a Spanish word. Upon returning to 'the world of books,' Mansilla looks up the word in the dictionary, where he finds out that it is, indeed, an alternative word for borax (656-7) Perhaps this deceptively simple frontier exchange suggests another, by no means final, alternative excursion: in which one both claims and cedes protagonism, recognizing one's own subjectivity as incomplete, reappearing and receding in alternation with others, and leaving space for 'them,' whether it is 'I' or 'the others.' And if it appears, for a moment, to be 'all the same,' 'I' may never be 'the same' again.

[13] For recent work on the surviving indigenous peoples of the Pampa, Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego and the struggle to reassert their cultural identity "on the edge" of the 21st century world, see Claudia Briones and José Luis Lanata, *Contemporary Perspectives on the Native Peoples of Pampa, Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego: Living on the Edge.* Westport, Connecticut and London: Bergin and Garvey, 2002.

Turin, January-February 2003.

Reference: Pustianaz, Marco and Luisa Villa (eds), *Maschilità decadenti: La lunga fin-de-siècle*, Bergamo, UP, Edizioni Sestante, 2004.