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2018

# Minor Translations and the World Literature of the Masses in Latin America

Martín L. Gaspar

*Bryn Mawr College*, [mgaspar@brynmawr.edu](mailto:mgaspar@brynmawr.edu)

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## Custom Citation

Gaspar, Martín. 2018. "Minor Translations and the World Literature of the Masses in Latin America." In S. Bassnett (ed.), *Translation and World Literature*, Routledge: 107-127.

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## 7 Minor translations and the world literature of the masses in Latin America

Martín Gaspar

Popularity breeds discomfort in world literature studies. We can sense uneasiness with popular, conventional literature already in Goethe, the precursor most often invoked by contemporary scholars: ‘What appeals to the multitude [*Megen*] will spread endlessly and, as we can already see now, will be well received in all parts of the world, while what is serious and truly substantial will be less successful’ (Goethe [1830] 1986: 227).<sup>1</sup> An intellectual of his time, in 1830 Goethe valued literary commerce (an exchange ‘of substance’ between like-minded ‘men of letters’), and distrusted the crass, incessant forces of commercialization (D’haen 2012: 8–9). Our twenty-first century approaches to world literature, while more inclusive, still follow suit. Despite gesturing at encompassing all of literature in some of their formulations, they tend to focus exclusively on certain impactful works: on how some masterpieces bring about a new aesthetic technique or generic change (Moretti 2000, 2003), for example, or manage to secure ‘literary legitimacy’ by innovating within a system of recognition (Casanova [1999] 2007), or enter a mode of transnational circulation through which they gain (avant-gardist) significance (Damrosch 2003).<sup>2</sup> Substance, then, over volume; aesthetic achievements over crowd pleasers. Look for a worldwide popular author like Rudyard Kipling in *The World Republic of Letters* or *What Is World Literature?* and you will find his name relegated to a footnote or a marginal quote (by, significantly, a ‘world literature-worthy’ author like T.S. Eliot).<sup>3</sup> If world literary history were a novel, scholars have been constructing one in which a few heroically meaningful works move the plot forward—casting aside those that are considered popular, conventional or basic, thus destined to remain unmentioned.

While more attentive to market needs and conservative tendencies than the world literature field, translation studies tend to ultimately zero in on texts that are aesthetically innovative or politically subversive. Even-Zohar, for example, acknowledges that translated literature can hold a position ‘connected with [both] innovatory (“primary”) or conservatory (“secondary”) repertoires,’ but ultimately states:

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<sup>1</sup> D’haen translates *Menge* as ‘masses’ (D’haen 2012: 8). Opposing the (presumably *loud*) masses, Goethe describes intellectuals discussing world literature as ‘a silent, almost secret congregation [*eine stille, fast gedrückte Kirche*]’ (Goethe 1972: 429).

<sup>2</sup> These are three of the most frequently quoted voices in world literature studies. Moretti is concerned with genre, and the compromise between ‘formal influence’ (by masterpieces) and ‘local materials’ (Moretti 2000: 58). Casanova’s book includes case studies on Kafka, Joyce, and Faulkner. Damrosch focuses on *Gilgamesh*, Kafka, and Menchú, among others. The emphasis on newness and impactfulness—a continuation, seemingly, of the ‘great books’ tradition, the comparatist project (following Auerbach and Spitzer), and even the ‘canon debates’ in the 1980s—is noticeable in the world literature debate (see Prendergast’s 2004 collected volume *Debating World Literature*). Moretti’s recent experiments with big data and distant reading—in *Graph, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (2005) and *Distant Reading* (2013)—are driven by a more comprehensive approach to world literature. However, ‘lesser’ classics widely read in the twentieth century, such as the ones I will refer to in this article, have not yet received attention.

<sup>3</sup> In Casanova’s book, Kipling is mentioned just as a ‘recognised’ author in London (Casanova 2007: 153). In Damrosch’s, the quote by T.S. Eliot is, in turn, used to trace a genealogy that ends in Ishiguro, another anointed ‘world literature,’ modernist author (Damrosch 2003: 227).

It is clear that the very principles of selecting the works to be translated are determined by the situation governing the (home) polysystem: the texts are chosen *according to their compatibility with the new approaches* and the supposedly *innovatory role* they may play within the target literature.

(Even-Zohar 1990: 46, 47, my emphases)

Translation here operates in a Goethian paradigm: it renews, makes more ‘worldly’ or modernizes the importing culture by facilitating aesthetic or political commerce. Granted, scholars have noted that in the periphery (in what Even-Zohar calls ‘weak’ or ‘young’ literary polysystems) translation also introduces other kinds of texts.<sup>4</sup> But even a postcolonialist with a culturalist approach like Sherry Simon still predicates the value of translation on novelty: ‘translation no longer bridges a gap between two different cultures, but becomes a strategy of intervention through which newness comes into the world, where cultures are remixed’ (Simon 2000: 21, my emphasis). Translation, for Simon as well as for many others, is defined as a process that brings a meaningfully original aesthetic or political voice to a given cultural landscape. The recent sociological, or more specifically ‘activist’ (Wolf 2014), turn also canonizes translations that subvert or challenge norms: they are the protagonists, and only they seem to matter.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of this shared emphasis on disruption and newness, some of the best selling conventional literature has been usually left outside the purview of both world literature and translation studies. Neither field has found much to say about novels like Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*, for example. London has been translated more extensively than any other American or English novelist of the twentieth century, his work being wildly popular from Russia to Chile, China to Poland (Harte 2016; Tavernier-Courbin 1994: 28; Dyer 1997: xxiii). But while London has been, according to Doctorow, ‘the most widely read American author,’ he is also considered ‘a great gobbler-up of the world,’ who was ‘never an original thinker’ (Doctorow 1993: 14, 12). And to world literature scholars, the latter matters more than the fact that his most popular novel has been representing foreign literature in translation to significantly more readers, especially young but also old ones, and all around the world, than Joyce’s *Ulysses*. So they neglect London’s writings in their models,<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Latin American translation scholars seeking to explore the role of literary translation in illustrated magazines, periodicals, low-priced collections, and weekly literary supplements have encountered conservative tendencies —both in content and style (Willson 2004, 2011). This article follows a similar preoccupation, more specifically with understanding the role of translation as ‘background’ rather than ‘groundbreaking.’

<sup>5</sup> Already in her 1996 article ‘The Meek or the Mighty: Reappraising the Role of the Translator,’ Bassnett states that the rise of Translation Studies is testament to the ‘recognition of the role played by translation in shaping the literary polysystem. [...] Translation could be documented as having been at various moments *subversive, innovatory or radical*’ (Bassnett 1996: 13, my emphasis). In many ways, her proposed reappraisal of the role of the translator has taken root, and much attention has been paid to the ‘might’ of translation since then. My chapter is, so to speak, dedicated to meek translators and their work.

<sup>6</sup> This absence is particularly glaring in the case of Damrosch’s, in which world literature is defined by translation: ‘literature stays within its national or regional tradition when it usually loses in translation, whereas works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range, as is the case with such widely disparate works as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Dictionary of the Khazars*.’ (Damrosch 2003: 289).

focusing instead on the modernist masterpiece (indeed, one might suspect that *modernism* itself is at the core of their critical projects.) Translation studies scholars, similarly, have set their sights on, say, the increasingly more erudite translations of Joyce's *Ulysses* into Spanish (Salas Subirats in 1945, Valverde in 1976, Tortosa and Venegas in 1999), which they have appraised, discussed, and close-read, time and again. No one has taken the time to analyze the many more translations of *The Call of the Wild* into Spanish.

Focusing on translations of towering masterpieces from *Gilgamesh* to *Ulysses*, on the arrival of magical realism to the world stage, and on activist translations or ideological encounters—all this creates a narrative of mastery, innovation, and renovation in which only heroes participate. Yet there must be something 'of substance' (of a *different* substance) in the many translations of *The Call of the Wild* read by the multitude. There must be something that these minor translations can tell us about how literature travels and translation functions. In other words, and to continue with the narrative analogy: If these minor translations can solicit a 'story' that is at odds with the dominant pattern of attention that focuses on major works—what story, not yet revealed to our untrained eyes, can they tell us?<sup>7</sup>

To answer this question, I will look in what follows at the margins of the margins: Latin American translations of classics for young readers. Among them, London's 1903 novel sits alongside a canon of nineteenth and twentieth century popular classics like *Cuore* (Edmondo d'Amicis, 1886), *Little Women* (Louisa M. Alcott, 1868), *Sandokan* (Emilio Salgari, 1896), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (Jules Verne, 1873), *Black Beauty* (Anna Sewell, 1877), and many others. As I will show, these very successful minor translations represented the first vision of Literature for generations of readers—one in which literature *is* literature in translation. They made a first, strong impression of what a book is, what a novel looks like, and even how it reads. And they configured for their impressionable readers a literary perception of the world and how it works: its geography, gender dynamics, power structures, and values. Of course, gauged by the gold standard of innovation, these fictions lack value; assessed by their level of aesthetic sophistication or political impact, their corresponding translations are apparently worthless. Yet, it is in this seemingly barren territory that generations of Latin American readers were formed—and with substantial consequences.

The world literature-as-innovation and the translation-as-agent-of-change paradigms focus on exceptions, not norms; major, not minor works. So our approach in this investigation of translated bestsellers for young readers will stand as a negative to the prevailing ones. Minor translations do not reveal a cultural project—such as a state trying to secularize or Westernize the nation, as in Turkey and China at the turn of the twentieth century (Seyhan 1998; Gürçaglar 1998; Pollard 1998)—or cultural agents with a manifest political agenda. So we will have to look at publishers mainly interested in selling for profit. We will not find through these works translators asserting their agency or distinguishing themselves. We will have to listen, instead, to rumors or representations about how they worked and some may still do. We will not

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Jack London's writings, as well as those by Jules Verne, Emilio Salgari, and Louisa M. Alcott should, according to Damrosch's definition, be archetypical examples of 'rangy,' world literature texts that succeed in translation. The case of London is poignant because his world fame, it has been said, seemingly 'far outranks his fame in his native country' (Tavernier-Courbin 1994: 42).

<sup>7</sup> The shape of this question is inspired by Alex Woloch's statement in *The One vs The Many*: 'narratives themselves allow and solicit us to construct a story—a distributed pattern of attention—that is at odds with, or divergent from, the formed pattern of attention in the discourse' (Woloch 2003: 41).

find *the* authoritative and influential translation of *The Call of the Wild* by a well-reputed expert. So we will be looking at many versions by anonymous translators working for different publishers. We will not find ‘mature’ readers, but novice (literally minor) ones. We will, finally, not find an evident impact of these fictions on the commerce of aesthetics and new ideas. The impact will be elsewhere: in the way these novels presented Literature to generations of readers, and in their deep and rarely seen repercussions on politics and society.

### Developing readers

When Joseph Dent thought of an ‘every reader’ as he founded *Everyman’s Library* in 1906, he imagined this collective as a sum of several groups: ‘the worker, the student, the cultured man, the child, the man and the woman’ (*Everyman’s Library* 2006). In the popular collection for this heterogeneous ‘everyman,’ translation, and in particular literary translation, was assigned an increasingly more prominent role according to the reader’s maturity. By 1935, the category ‘For Young People’ of *Everyman’s* included 103 volumes, mostly novels, of which twelve (such as an adaptation of *Don Quixote* and versions of Aesop’s fables) were in translation (roughly 11%) (Rhys 1935).<sup>8</sup> Readers would encounter more translations, the majority from French and Russian, in the ‘Fictions’ and ‘Romance’ categories (65 of 278 titles, at a rate of 23%). As readers matured, according to this progression, they would grow to become acquainted with great foreign authors like Stendhal and Dostoyevsky.

Almost the opposite is true about the role of translation in the Latin American landscape at the time, and during most of the twentieth century. Outside and often within classrooms, young Latin Americans grew up reading a vast majority of translated novels, and it was usually not until later in life that they encountered vernacular ones.<sup>9</sup> The number of collections including foreign novels for young readers was, especially during mid-century, nothing short of remarkable. Between 1941 and 1998, Argentine *Colección Robin Hood* (Editorial Acme), roughly equivalent to the ‘For Young People’ section of *Everyman’s* but dedicated exclusively to longer fiction, included a total of 237 titles, 220 of which were translations. The catalogue of a direct competitor, *Biblioteca Las Obras Famosas* (Editorial Tor), numbered sixty-three novels for young adults by 1945—and only four were not adapted translations. From the 1940s to the 1960s Editorial Sopena, a Spanish company with close ties to the Argentine market, issued its own collection of science-fiction works targeted to mass readers, all by Anglo Saxon authors. Editorial Kapelusz and Editorial Atlántida participated in the market from the 1960s to the early 1980s with two collections of, for the most part, translated fiction: *Iridium* and *Billiken*. Between 1948 and 1972 but in Brazil, *Coleção Saraiva* published 232 titles: of the 165 that can be considered for young adults, over a hundred were adapted translations. Beginning in 1920 and until the 1960s, also in Brazil, Companhia Editora

<sup>8</sup> In his ‘Introduction’ to *The Readers’ Guide*, editor Ernest Rhys mentions translation only in passing, ending with this curious statement: ‘this Library ought, if it is worth anything, to be one of the safeguards of that superb instrument the English Tongue’ (Rhys 1935: lxiv).

<sup>9</sup> In the classroom, classics like *Platero y yo* by Spanish author Juan Ramón Jiménez were read for generations in Argentina, while in Mexico translations of Verne’s *Le Château des Carpathes* and Salgari’s *Il Corsaro Nero* were assigned regularly in schools. In the case of Brazil, young readers tended to be more exposed to national and even regionalist literature, as is evident in the *Coleção Saraiva* catalogue. The pleasure of reading a fiction independently ‘for fun’ rather than as an assigned task usually came from translated novels, printed in hard cover books with attractive illustrations and colorful covers.

Nacional published three collections targeted to young adults: *Terramarear* (adventures, almost all adapted translations of authors like Edgar Burroughs, André Armandy, and Mark Twain), *Série Negra* (detective fiction, by authors like Marten Cumberland, Edgar Wallace, and Dashiell Hammet), and *Biblioteca das Moças* (Young Ladies' Library, an extremely successful collection of romances targeted to young women with all of its 176 titles in translation.)<sup>10</sup> In mid-century Chile, Editora Zig-Zag published a series for young readers called *Serie Amarilla*, with an overwhelming majority of novels by authors like Stevenson, d'Amicis, and Dickens. In Mexico, most collections of this kind were imported from Spain. Local counterparts like Editorial Tomo, Editores Mexicanos Unidos, Editorial Valle de México, and more recently Perymat and *Colección Millenium* also published novels in translation, by popular authors like Salgari, Stevenson, Conan Doyle, and Verne. Given the data available, it is safe to estimate that translation was involved in well over 70% of the fiction read by Latin American young readers until the 1980s. It is important to mention the existence of two other types of collections in which translation also thrived: institutionally sponsored anthologies of world classics destined to form 'future citizens,' and privately published collections 'for the household,' both usually conceived and prologued by eminent intellectuals.<sup>11</sup> My focus here is, however, on the more chaotic and less prestigious publications of minor translations of popular novels for young readers.

What spurred this boom of translated novels? Two major local factors seem to have played a key role, at least initially. First, the rise in literacy in the first half of the century (from 51% to 88% in Argentina, 35% to 49% in Brazil, 24% to 60% in Mexico) brought to the market new customers, new and young readers (Roser 2016). Second, internal and international migrations made cities grow rapidly—urbanization in Latin America increased in fifty years (1925–1975) from 25.0% to 61.2% due to economic and other factors (Cerrutti 2003). As a result, more consumers were directly exposed to the main publishing markets and the prospect of prosperity. And, intent on promoting reading habits that would put their children on the path of upward mobility, many found in cheap novels in translation a form of access to cultural capital. In Argentina, where this phenomenon was particularly pronounced and the publishing industry had an unprecedented boom, translated novels could be bought at most

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<sup>10</sup> In this collection of pink literature, the most popular author was M. Delli, whose *Magali* was reprinted ten times. A case study on the everyday life at a Florianópolis school from 1920 to 1960, a researcher found that the novels by M. Delli (pseudonym of the siblings Henri and Jeanne Marie Petitjean) were widely read and even sponsored by the school to instruct students on how to behave 'properly' (Santos Cunha 1999).

<sup>11</sup> The most memorable state-sponsored collection was José de Vasconcelos' 1924 *Lecturas clásicas para niños*. As part of his 'civilizing mission' Vasconcelos, then Secretary of Public Education, along with towering intellectuals like Gabriela Mistral, anthologized this two-volume collection that traced classics from the Upanishads to Tolstoy and Wilde. In Argentina, newspaper *La Nación* published the very successful 'Biblioteca La Nación' (from 1910 to 1920, considered by Willson a 'project by the elite' to educate the masses) (Willson 2004, 47–55.) The London-Buenos Aires International Society (Sociedad Internacional), published in 1910 the *Biblioteca de Obras Famosas*, a 24 volume collection that included texts from the 'oldest short-story in the world' through Greece and Rome, and ending in Argentine contemporary fiction. After World War II, there were a series of collections were destined to 'the household': usually sold by door-to-door traveling salesmen, they enriched households culturally and served as 'decoration'—some even came with furniture to hold the volumes. Among these collections we find *Colección Jackson/Coleção Jackson* (Argentina and Brazil, 40 volumes, published during the 1950s and 1960s), and *Coleção Imortais da literatura universal* by the publisher Abril Cultural (Brazil, 50 volumes, published between 1970 and 1972).

bookstores and newspaper stands, or borrowed from libraries at suburban working-class neighborhood associations (Romero 1995).

Numbers were staggering. During its ‘golden age’ (between 1930 and 1959), Argentine Editorial Tor used to sell books of its *Biblioteca Las Obras Famosas* by weight, and could print up to 20,000 copies of any given book in a day, four different books in a single week (Abraham 2012: 214). The impact of this single publisher was massive and extended across Latin America, with the sole exception of Brazil and Cuba (Abraham 2012: 43). Such was the demand for popular literature that, beyond abridged and unabridged translations of novels, there were also imported adaptations (Kapelusz, for example, published Spanish translations of French adaptations of novels originally written in English, like *Ivanhoe* and *Robinson Crusoe*) and even original writing that appeared as pseudotranslation (Tor commissioned the production of apocryphal novels with protagonists like Tarzan and Sexton Blake; in 1956, Companhia Editora Nacional, in Brazil, published seven novels with titles like *Tarzan e os homens-formiga* [Tarzan and the Ant-Men] and *Tarzan no centro da terra* [Tarzan in the Center of the Earth]).

Up until the 1980s—when the publishing market changed, and fiction dedicated to young adults and children in Spanish and Portuguese<sup>12</sup> became more prevalent—translations of popular nineteenth century and early twentieth century novels were a habitual presence in households. The result was that, upon reaching adulthood, a young Latin American would have potentially encountered the works of Alcott and Verne, Dickens and Stewel, Conan Doyle and Jack London. Fictions that would leave and still leave an indelible mark on readers—quintessential postcolonial subjects, one might say—that were persistently exposed to a metropolitan worldview.

In a 2009 TED talk, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie gives us a hint about the impact of these kinds of readings in the postcolony. She recalls that, when she began writing,

All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather [...] My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer, because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. [...] And for many years afterwards, I would have a desperate desire to taste ginger beer.

(Adichie 2009: 0:38–1:36)

(She would overcome this bias, she says, when she graduated into reading local literature written by Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye and ‘realised that people like me, girls with skin the colour of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature’ (2:14).) A similar perception of what can exist in literature was instilled in Latin American readers. A Brazilian young woman would

<sup>12</sup> A 1985 article about the new ‘market tendencies’ for children and young adult literature in Brazil states that from 1980 onwards (only *then*) the number of new books by Brazilian authors is larger than the number of translations (688 to 471 that year) (Sandroni 1985: 110). In Spanish, the late 1980s marked the beginning of a radical transition in the publishing industry. Small publishers were bought out by large Spanish transnational corporations, creating a lack of ‘bibliodiversity.’ Small boutique publishers now satisfy particular niches, whereas transnational conglomerates like Planeta control much of the market, including young adult and children literature (Saferstein and Szpilbarg 2014).



read a love story set in France or England, sensing perhaps an intrinsic relationship between ‘romance,’ sunny meadows, and protagonists with French names. An Argentine young man would learn to reminisce<sup>13</sup> about horses and muddy roads near English orphanages, not out in the pampas. A young man in Mexico City would read about class privilege in d’Amicis Turin, not in his neighborhood.

There is a significant difference, however, between these readers’ experience and Adichie’s: the Latin Americans were reading translations—and translations that at times sounded, for reasons I will soon explain, rather strange and distant. A case, then, of layered *ostranenie*: foreign are these fictions’ characters and diegeses—Salgari’s Malaysia; Alcott’s Massachusetts; Armandy’s Africa—and alien sounds the Spanish or Portuguese in which they are narrated. Considering that most of the literature available to her was in translation, a young reader could conclude that adventure, fantasy, and romance novels, or rather *literature in general*, could only take place in a foreign setting and sound foreign. As if ‘the novel’ had come full circle to its distant origins in translation.<sup>14</sup>

### Minor translators, invisible styles, rewarding genres

Before looking at minor translators of literature for young readers, let us glance first at an exception that highlights the rule. We find it in Brazil, where Monteiro Lobato—a towering figure in the book industry in the first half of the twentieth century—sought to indoctrinate generations of young Brazilians through his translations. As John Milton put it in his essay ‘The Political Adaptations of Monteiro Lobato’—a study firmly within the aforementioned translation-as-agent-of-change paradigm—Lobato ‘used his adaptations of children’s literature [such as his version of *Peter Pan*] in order to insert many of his political, economic and educational ideas’ (Milton 2010: 211). He is an exception in the field: a publisher, intellectual, and diplomat with a recognizable name. Most publishers of translations for young readers were motivated by profit. And most of their translators were overworked and underpaid anonymous workers.

Rumor has it that Juan Carlos Torrendell, editor and owner of the powerful Editorial Tor, used to place newspaper ads looking for translators and ask novice respondents for different ‘sample chapters’ from the same novel—then he would collate them and, having a complete translation of the work available for free, publish it (Bertazza 2012). Anecdotes like this encapsulate the world of minor translation—where rights to translations were borrowed, stolen, and unacknowledged, and where the translation was treated like any another cost to keep down. In this environment, hurried mass production was not uncommon.

Argentine writer Rodolfo Walsh’s 1967 short-story ‘Nota al pie’ (‘Footnote’) is based on the life of one of these workers: Alfredo de León, who translated for Editorial Sopena until his death in 1954. In Walsh’s fiction the protagonist, renamed as León de Sanctis, commits suicide in great part because of alienating working conditions and lack of appreciation by his editor. The suffocating story consists mostly of a suicide note—a growing ‘footnote’ on the page—in which de Sanctis (a translator of Clark

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<sup>13</sup> Many of these fictions have a deeply nostalgic undertone. It was not until mid-twentieth century that novels for young adults (and by them, like S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*) depicted adolescent life, with its troubles, angst, and sense of urgency.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Romance, [the etymological origin of French’s *roman* (novel)] derives narrowly from the verbs *enromancier* and *romançar*, meaning “to translate into the vernacular” the product of which was *romanz*, *romant*, or *romanzo*’ (Schellinger 1998: 942).



and Bradbury, among others) reveals an increasingly troubled relationship with his skills (he resolved ‘every difficulty by omitting it altogether’), his dictionary (‘Mr. Appleton looked at me sadly’), and his typewriter (Walsh 1981: 439, 441, my translation). By the end of the short story, the footnote takes over the page. The final lines read:

In this time I have translated for the [publishing] House one hundred and thirty books of 80,000 words each, at 6 letters per word. That is sixty million taps on the keyboard. Now I understand why it is worn out, why every key is sunken, each letter erased. Sixty million taps are too many, even for a good Remington. I look at my fingers in awe.

1. (Walsh 1981:446, my translation)

A worker like the protagonist of Walsh’s story translates, first and foremost, to make a living. His idiosyncrasies and moments of rebellion are, much like the translator in Deszö Kosztolányi’s ‘Le Traducteur cleptomane,’ minor and inconsequential (Kosztolányi 1994). Walsh’s story exemplifies the internalization of a submissive behavior that, it has been argued, is at the root of the secondariness of translators (Simeoni 1998). In this respect, it is revealing that the translator in the story does not even engage the original text, or its author, but rather speaks humbly and posthumously to his *editor*—through a note that, the narrator tells us on the top part of the first page, the intended recipient will never read. Not merely a work of imaginative fiction, Walsh’s story represents the working environment and *habitus* that surrounded the production of minor translations.

Partly as a result of this often exploitative employment, the style of some of these quickly translated and poorly revised Spanish versions of classics ends up being at times very homogeneous (every author reads the same), or, conversely, quite strange and unfamiliar sounding. Some translators would, like De Sanctis, resolve difficulties through omissions, or flatten metaphors with conventional turns of phrase to speed up the process. Some made their work sound rather strange because of certain stylemes: an abundance of archaic terms; hackneyed expressions; false cognates; purisms; and even a whimsical use of translator’s footnotes. The Spanish vocabulary and expressions are stretched between two poles: some translators bleached regionalisms to construct a ‘neutral’ Spanish; others used local expressions freely, not expecting their work to be legally or illegally exported or reused by a foreign publisher.

Yet no matter how odd, simplified or foreign the prose is, the plot of these novels is seemingly immune to mistranslations. This is because unlike modernist fictions that revel in ambiguity and experimentation, adapted translations of popular novels for the young reader are positivistic, straightforward, and orderly. They are, then, ideal for inculcating certain values and belong to genres (adventure, romance, fantasy, *bildungsroman*) that, much like children’s books, stand ‘firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socializing their target audience’ (Stephens 1992: 8). *Bildungsromane* tend to embrace the value of perseverance and sacrifice, while other genres can serve as ideal compensatory fantasies for a class whose role is to sustain the systems in which heroes—the aristocrat, the detective,

even the pirate, in any case, the well-off—can reach their goals.<sup>15</sup> These are all genres, significantly, in which progress is never questioned: every tap in the translator's typewriter is a penny earned; every page advances a plot that leads to a satisfying or meaningful ending. Every page, every novel bought and read brings the reader closer to becoming 'cultured.'

One of these novels was *The Call of the Wild*: an emblematic celebration of virtues that are expected from the young (male) reader: courage, determination, dignified action, and even good health habits.<sup>16</sup> Various conflicts in an unforgiving arctic setting, encounters with wicked antagonists, some mystery (the location of the 'Lost Cabin'), and the progressive maturation of a personality (from easy domestic life, to conflict with others, to love and loyalty, and finally to self-relying adulthood) complete the picture. The plot is conventional in its blend of adventure and *bildungsroman*. Conventional and minor are, too, the novel's many translations.

### *The Call of the Wild* and its minor translations

What can we learn by reading comparatively translations of *The Call of the Wild*? Little, according to the paradigm of innovation we are revising. The original is neither experimental nor subversive of a genre or politics—it does not introduce 'newness' in the translating culture. Fittingly, it was translated and retranslated a large but nebulous number of times and sold as a well-known conventional commodity to generations of readers.<sup>17</sup> Because of that, however, these popular and cheap minor translations can reveal an all important aspect of translation and world literature: the manner in which generations of readers were presented Literature as an institution and encountered 'literary language' as a distinct form.

For the purpose of this brief case study, I will look at thirteen Spanish translations published between 1958 and 2012. For the sake of brevity, and to give a flavor of these different minor translations of *The Call of the Wild* and what we can read into them, I will focus on four textual elements: the various translations of the word 'wild'; the opening lines; the handling of a case of euthanasia in the novel; and the treatment of Manuel, the originator of the protagonist's troubles.

### Taming the wild

Having finished the novel, the young reader would have found something odd in the title of the book, translated in many versions as *La llamada de la selva*. Because why does the translation refer to a *selva* (*jungle* or *rainforest*), if the novel is set in the frozen Arctic? The dreamy sequences in which Buck recalls the naked 'hairy man squatted by the fire' (37) might suggest the presence of a primordial jungle, but *selva*

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<sup>15</sup> A children's books critic summarizes this Marxist reading thus: 'The success of adventure and sentimental novels has been attributed to the fact that their genres offer a condensed and digested compensation to sectors of the population [that] support the capitalist system of production. The romantic heroine and the gallant knight have worked as safety valves for these sectors' (Alvarado 1993: 49).

<sup>16</sup> Harte explains that London 'came into his own as a writer in an age when "manliness" was in vogue' (Harte 2016). Health, in this understanding of manliness, is essential. We read in *The Call of the Wild* that, 'Hunting and kindred outdoor delights had kept down the fat and hardened [Buck's] muscles; and to him, as to the cold-tubbing races, the love of water had been a tonic and a health preserver' (London 1995: 5).

<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, these translations are not preserved in public or research libraries or catalogues; on the other, the rights to certain versions (and even their prologues) were (and are) bought, borrowed, or stolen from publisher to publisher, who very often do not indicate the translators' names.

is clearly a mistranslation of the terms ‘wilderness,’ ‘forest,’ and ‘the land of streams and timber’ elsewhere (PY, OR).<sup>18</sup> Also, why *llamada* and not *llamado* (much more habitual in Latin America)? A Brazilian reader could have encountered, up until 1975, various options: *O grito da selva* [The Scream of the Jungle] (Lobato, 1935); *A voz da selva* [The Voice of the Jungle] (Eca Leal, no date); *O apelo da selva* [The Call of the Jungle] (Bagao e Silva, 1963); *Chamado selvagem* [The Wild/Savage Call] (Monteiro, 1972) (Daghlian 1975: 22). In Spanish, the title remained consistent. For most of the twentieth century, it was either *La llamada de la selva*—in imported peninsular Spanish editions (EC, GC, ED, PY, OR GV)—or *El llamado de la selva*—by Latin American translators (EA, GR, PD, AC). It was not until late in the century when other options started to appear: *El llamado de la naturaleza* (SP, in 1984), and *El llamado de lo salvaje* (PP, in 2000). The latter is seemingly a better alternative, as ‘lo salvaje’ captures the abstract notion of ‘the wild.’ But most translators (or their editors) chose ‘la selva’ to follow early translations—or perhaps to suggestively echo Kipling’s *El libro de la selva* [The Jungle Book].

For decades, readers must have concluded that the prominent word *selva* was either a poetic license or a vestige of some unfamiliar source. Unable to ‘domesticate’ the wild in the original, these translations make the translation process conspicuous. Not out of an ethical, purposeful resistance to the normalizing erasure of the source—we can hardly call this ‘foreignization’—*El llamado de la selva* nonetheless foreignizes or, as Venuti puts it, ‘signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language’ (Venuti 1993: 61). An accidental disruption, surely absent in the translator’s intentions but present in the text. Is this, a reader may wonder, a literary use of the word *selva*? Or is this place *selva* what other people identify with wilderness or the wild? Originating in these translations rather than in London’s work, these questions in the readers’ minds suggest to them that Literature may play a language game of its own.

### A matter of reading

The opening clauses of the novel—‘Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known that trouble was brewing...’—affirm the power of reading, which the second half of the sentence turns into something of a joke: ‘not alone for himself, but for every tidewater dog, strong of muscle and with warm, long hair, from Puget Sound to San Diego’ (London 1995: 3). Some minor translators decided to take advantage of this beginning to impart a lesson. One version opens with what reads like an admonition: ‘Si Buck hubiera leído los periódicos’ [‘Had Buck read the newspapers...’] (ED, 3). Others point squarely at Buck’s illiteracy, or even disability: ‘Buck no leía los periódicos. De poder hacerlo se hubiera informado...’ [‘Buck did not read the newspapers. If he had been able to, he would have learned/informed himself...’] (PD, 3). These versions turn the humorous beginning into a teaching moment. Indeed, some of these translators felt they were educating, to the point that their role often overlaps with that of a teacher. Some versions preserve the humor of the original’s beginning (AC, GC, GR, GV) but in many others ambiguities are hard

<sup>18</sup> PY refers to the ‘Perymat Edition.’ Refer to the key to each version in the Bibliography. Clear misuses of the word ‘selva’ (jungle/rainforest) appear in the PY edition when the word is used in these contexts: ‘John Thornton [...] was unafraid of the wild’; ‘With a handful of salt and a rifle he could plunge into the wilderness’ (65); ‘deep in the forest’ (62). ‘[T]wenty moose had crossed over from the land of streams and timber’ (79) is translated, also in Perymat’s edition, as ‘Unos veinte alces habían cruzado la zona desde la *región de las selvas*’ (119). The thought of moose crossing a rainforest can only strike a jarring note in the mind of the reader.

to come by, smirks turn into laughter, puzzlement into certainty, and irony vanishes. *The Call of the Wild* can start off lightly, with tongue-in-cheek joke, or somberly. Different minor translations can make reading feel like a pleasure or a duty.

### Linguistic and other laws

Beyond the oddities resulting from mistranslations or calques, minor translators usually play safe. Adjectives, like Homeric epithets, are paired with certain situations or nouns and can never appear near others. At the end of chapter four, we reach one of the saddest moments in the novel. The dog Dave, old and exhausted but dignified, needs to be euthanized. This happens, as it were, offstage: ‘A revolver-shot rang out,’ reads the original, ‘The man came back hurriedly. The whips snapped, the bells tinkled merrily, the sleds churned along the trail; but Buck knew, and every dog knew, what had taken place behind the belt of river trees’ (London 1995: 37). One translator found it objectionable that the man would come back ‘hurriedly’ under such a gloomy circumstance, and turned the adverb into ‘tan lentamente como se había ido’ [‘as slowly as he had left’] (EC, 62). Others wondered why the bells would tinkle ‘merrily’ in such a sad scene. So they chose to omit the adjective (PY, EC). One of them went further, feeling compelled also to explain exactly why euthanasia is acceptable, expounding: ‘Buck sabía, y los demás perros también, qué es lo que había sucedido detrás de ellos. Se había cumplido la ley del Norte: el débil debe morir para no ser un estorbo. Es una ley que todos acatan’ [‘Buck knew, and the other dogs knew, what had happened behind them. *The law of the North had been followed: the weak must die so as to not be hindrance. It is the law that everyone obeys*’] (PY 66). Again, as this instance suggests, depending on how the translator conceives of the reader’s maturity, the same novel can be overtly instructive and provide explanations, standard phrases, commonsensical adjectives, and *the norm*. Or it can be more ambiguous, and expose the reader to exceptions and puzzling realities.

### Manuel’s help

In the first chapter we are introduced to Buck’s aristocratic privileges in Judge Miller’s Santa Clara mansion. Canine life is segregated across racial (or breeding) lines: there are kennel-dogs (fox terriers), house-dogs (both ‘foreigners’: Toots, a Japanese pug; Ysabel, a Mexican hairless, both ‘strange creatures that rarely put nose out of doors or set foot to ground’), and there is Buck, who has inherited the mastery over the entire territory from his St. Bernard father Elmo (London 1995: 4). In the novel, humans are also somewhat organized in this manner. Every character with an English or French name is in a position of power: Miller early on; the ruthless Druther (a Southerner?) who teaches Buck that ‘a man with a club was a lawgiver’ in the middle; the ambitious Hans and Pete later; the loving John Thornton, ‘the ideal master’ towards the end; then there are two characters with names of French extraction (Perrault and François) who are, in turn, associated with calm administration of justice.

The Spanish reader is to identify with Buck (in OR ‘Buck,’ in quotation marks), another English sounding name. And he will notice, amidst this sea of foreign names, two in Spanish: Mercedes and Manuel. Their roles are limited but meaningful. Mercedes is the only woman in the text—and she represents the most chauvinistic gender stereotypes.<sup>19</sup> As to Manuel, he effectively ends the possibility of a civilized

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<sup>19</sup> Buck first sees her in a scene of chaos: ‘Buck saw a slipshod and slovenly affair, tent half stretched, dishes unwashed, everything in disorder; also, he saw a woman. “Mercedes” the men called her. She was Charles’s wife and Hal’s sister—nice family party’ (London 1995: 62). And chaos is what

life for Buck. The only Spanish-named male in the novel, Manuel was ‘an undesirable acquaintance’: a gardener’s helper who played Chinese lottery (London 1995: 4).<sup>20</sup> Manuel gambled with a system, which ‘made his damnation certain. For to play a system requires money, while the wages of a gardener’s helper do not lap over the needs of a wife and numerous progeny’ (London 1995: 5). Seemingly driven by two vices (gambling and reproduction), Manuel kidnaps and sells Buck to work in the Klondike gold rush. At the end of the second chapter, and after Buck had set foot on snow for the first time, Manuel is mentioned again: ‘[Buck] came because men had found a yellow metal in the North, and because Manuel was a gardener’s helper whose wages did not lap over the needs of his wife and divers small copies of himself’ (London 1995: 19). From ‘numerous progeny’ in chapter one to ‘copies of himself’ here, Manuel’s children were the source of trouble. But troubling is also the fact that he was not paid enough—and here London’s socialist leanings seem to come into play. Notice, however, that while *Manuel’s* greed is put into question, it seems unnecessary for the narrator to explain the (white) *men’s*—taken as a mere fact of life. How did minor translators negotiate this ideological minefield? One translator created more trouble, as he mistranslated Manuel’s profession—correctly rendered as ‘ayudante de jardinero’ (*gardener’s* helper) in chapter one—as ‘ayudante de cocinero’ (*chef’s* assistant) in chapter two (EO, 4, 25). Among the other translators, some skipped over the landmines, dealing with the difficulty of translating ‘copies of himself’ by omitting it altogether and erasing the family from the equation: Manuel, a translator writes aseptically, ‘recibía un salario que no bastaba a cubrir sus necesidades’ [‘earned a salary that was not enough to meet his needs’] (PY 36). Yet another decided to explain what this business of ‘copies’ meant: ‘[su] salario no cubría las necesidades de su mujer ni de las réplicas de sí mismo que eran sus hijos’ [‘his wages did not meet the needs of his wife nor those of the many copies of himself *that were his children*’] (VV 39). None of the translators reviewed cared to translate ‘small’ in ‘*small* copies of himself,’ making Manuel’s age indefinable. Then there is the matter of the wages. The original expresses poverty twice with an old fashioned expression: ‘[Manuel’s] wages did not lap over the needs.’ Translators simplified the matter by writing ‘cubrir las necesidades’ (an equivalent to ‘meet the needs’ in English.) But they disagreed on how to express this scarcity: to some translators the wages he was paid ‘were not enough’ (‘no bastaba’; ‘no cubría’) (EA, GR, VV) to others they ‘were barely enough’ (‘apenas lo necesario’; ‘apenas lo suficiente’; ‘escasamente cubría’) (GV, GC, PY, EO). A small detail that nonetheless speaks to the degree of justification for Manuel’s kidnapping of Buck.

We can only wonder how a Spanish reader (whose name could be Manuel) would react to finding this name associated with treacherous help, scarcity, gambling, excessive children, and (quite literally) the end of civilization. She may not recognize racial stereotyping at all. Because races, like breeds of dogs and disabilities, operate as shorthands to prefabricated roles in many nineteenth and early twentieth century

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she brings about. She ‘continually fluttered in the way of her men and kept up an unbroken chattering of remonstrance and advice.’ And when it is time to get rid of superfluous items, she turns into a hysterical ‘tornado’ (translated as ‘huracán’ in most Spanish versions.) Even when Mercedes shows some positive traits by pleading the men to not whip Buck and the other dogs, she is the *source* of the punishment: the dogs cannot make progress if they are to carry her belongings.

<sup>20</sup> It has been argued that ‘the comment that Manuel’s faith in a system points not to his own sin but to a larger faith in a machinelike capitalist establishment that exists for the betterment of men like the Judge, based on the labor of poor workers like Manuel’ (Reesman 2009: 80).

This apologetic reading is both dubious and certainly unavailable to the young reader of this novel.

novels. A Chihuahua dog could never be the protagonist in the same way as a blind human or dog would inevitably be associated with abnormal behavior. A Spanish-named character in this type of fiction can be either loyal or disloyal—but never a protagonist, and rarely a partner or worthy enemy.

*The Call of the Wild* is a novel about the recuperation of an ancestral voice: it begins with newspapers and ends with ‘the song of the pack’ (London 1995: 74). But in its trajectory, some readers of these translations may be admonished to read (read the newspapers, and keep on reading this novel, or else!) and others may picture for a second a funny image of a dog wearing spectacles. They would be exposed to an unusual use of language (why *selva*?), foreign-sounding phrases and words (*llamada*?), and inconsistencies (gardener’s helper or chef’s assistant?) Depending on the version, a reader would have to imagine what happened to Dave behind the trees, and face the fact that sometimes bells tinkle ‘merrily’ in moments of sadness. Another would be instructed about the ‘law of the North’ (the North!). Some readers would empathize a little with Manuel (Manuel wasn’t paid enough, so he had to gamble) or not (Manuel earned barely enough, but he wanted more.) The plot of *The Call of the Wild* might be simple, but ideology is in the details.

London’s best-known novel still lacks a definitive Spanish version. Not even the matter of the title is quite settled.<sup>21</sup> In a sense, while many readers know the story, not everyone knows the same one—and this dilution of authority is a sign of strength and richness. Translators from below—well-trained some, unskilled others, commonsensical, faithful, pedagogical—all of them were formative to the young reader. Minor translations, like minor characters in the background, can be heard like an insidious cacophony of voices, each talking about a different kind of adventure, instructing, explaining and adapting, in a process akin to storytelling.<sup>22</sup>

A bookcase of literature in translation in Latin America is made of masterpieces on a high bookshelf, and a colorful set of minor translations for developing readers on a lower one. If we talk about cultural and political widespread impact, it may well be that the lower bookshelf takes the prize. We pick up a book from that shelf: it is *The Call of the Wild* or *White Fang*. Appended to the longer fiction, we notice ‘other short stories’—surely added to make the book more voluminous. One of them is titled ‘Encender una hoguera’ (or ‘Para encender una hoguera’ or ‘Encender un fuego,’ depending on the version.) And a story born in the world literature for the masses slowly materializes.

### Building a fire

In 1902, when Jack London was commissioned to write a short story by the weekly *The Youth’s Companion*, he created the first version of ‘To Build a Fire’: a tale of a man who foolishly traveled alone with his dog in the Yukon, and ends up barely surviving death by hypothermia. Years later he revisited the story, creating the more famous version that came out in August 1908 in *The Century Magazine*. In this one the protagonist dies in the end, and his dog walks away from him to find new food

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<sup>21</sup> In the prologue to his own translation entitled *La llamada de la selva*, Colombian translator Javier Escobar Isaza proposes *Lo salvaje llama* (The Wild Calls) as a better alternative (Isaza 1991: 31).

<sup>22</sup> According to Walter Benjamin, a storyteller concerns himself with what is useful to the community of listeners: ‘The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers’ (Benjamin 1969: 101). Not unlike a storyteller, a minor translator of these fictions often imparts knowledge while holding the reader’s hand.



and fire providers. The story was written for the masses: *The Youth's Companion* had a circulation of over half a million, and *The Century* was the leading American periodical at the time (Baer 2007). Relatively soon, Jack London's short stories and novels entered world circulation—the first translation of *White Fang* into Spanish possibly being the one published by Gustavo Gili in Barcelona in 1925. In Latin America, 'To Build a Fire' was not his best-known short story (that was 'The Concentric Deaths,' often anthologized as detective fiction), yet it was certainly available in the 1940s, along with *The Call of the Wild* or *White Fang*.

At the time, would-be revolutionary Ernesto Guevara was in his teens, fighting bouts of asthma and leading a life of relative privilege in Buenos Aires, while would-be cosmopolitan writer and youth icon Julio Cortázar was teaching in rural schools in the lazy pampas. They were both avid readers, and they certainly ran into minor translations of Jack London's work. Two decades later, in 1961, Che Guevara published *La sierra y el llano*, in which he recounts the guerrilla fights with Fulgencio Batista's forces prior to taking over the government. At one point during a fierce battle he is wounded, by the look of one of his comrades fatally:

I saw in his eyes he considered me as good as dead. [...] I immediately began to think about the best way to die, since in that minute all seemed lost. *I remembered an old Jack London story in which the hero, aware that he is about to freeze to death in the Alaskan ice, leans against a tree and prepares to die with dignity.*

(Guevara 2006: 19, my emphasis)

When *La sierra y el llano* came out, Julio Cortázar was living in Paris, somewhat aloof from political commitment and the revolutionary struggle. His jazzy masterpiece *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*, 1963) must have been in the works. Guevara's memoir came to his hands and, somewhat displeased with its lack of literary value, decided to write a story called 'Reunión' [Meeting] (1964) inspired by the revolutionary's near-death experience.

The epigraph to the story is the italicized sentence above, in which 'old Jack London' is mentioned. The plot is a lightly veiled refraction of Guevara's memoir: an asthmatic doctor-turned-revolutionary and his comrades fight their way to a meeting with 'Luis' (Fidel Castro); he is wounded and, on the verge of death, lies against a tree and *sees* a quartet that contains his hopes and ideals. According to critics, this story signals Cortázar's attempt to reconcile his support for the Cuban revolution with his non-Sartrean views on aesthetics (Pérez-Abadín Barro, Standish, Orloff.) Read closely we notice the tentativeness of such attempt, since the short story reveals a poignant avoidance: Cortázar, by turning Jack London's *literature* (a source of inspiration to Guevara) into Mozart's *music* (a soothing hallucination for his protagonist), bypasses the question of the role of literature in the revolution.

Years later Cortázar refers to an episode involving 'Reunión' that took place in the mid 1970s in Chile. Pinochet had taken over the government, and censorship was in full swing. Cortázar, in an imaginary dialogue with himself (this is an essay written as a 'self interview'), writes:

And by the way, I guess you know that the Chilean Junta burnt a little pocket book that included ‘Reunión’ and other short stories, and that was going to be sold at newspaper stands for a few pennies, as part of a formidable effort by the [recently deposed] government to support popular culture. When I read that they were also throwing Jack London books into the bonfire I was shocked, but then I remembered that my story has an epigraph from *La sierra y el llano* in which Che thinks about a London character, and I inferred that between him and myself we had sent poor Jack to the flames—go figure, the atrocities that perfidious Marxist literature is capable of.

(Cortázar 1973: 45, my translation)

Cortázar’s, Jack London’s, and naturally Che Guevara’s books, all burning together. The image suggests another path for world literature. A path that began in a minor translation. London’s ‘To Build a Fire’ is both an indictment of the foolishness of a man who defies nature and a reaffirmation of the (conventional?) importance of dignity. We cannot, of course, affirm that Guevara internalized this value simply by reading translations of this story or of Jack London’s works at large. But I think we can say that literature in translation was the place where many of the certainties that would guide his life were (re)presented to him. If we look at the constellation of values that Guevara praises in his writings time and again, we will find a correlative in minor translations: sacrifice (to the point of martyrdom), loyalty, dignity—D’Amicis *Cuore*; Sewell’s *Black Beauty*; London’s ‘To Build a Fire’? It may all seem too commonplace, and perhaps it is and that is the point. There can be no *ironist* (to borrow Richard Rorty’s term) in the revolution.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most lucid critics to explore the London-Guevara-Cortázar connection, Ricardo Piglia, traces the life of the revolutionary, who died in Bolivia eight years after the battle that brought ‘To Build a Fire’ to his mind. When Che Guevara died, Piglia writes, he did it ‘with dignity, like the character in London’s short story. Or, rather, he died with dignity, like a character in a *bildungsroman* lost in history [un personaje de una novela de educación perdido en la historia]’ (Piglia 2006: 138, my translation). Guevara as a character in a *bildungsroman*. He may have thought of that himself, as a young reader enjoying the pleasures of a minor translation.

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<sup>23</sup> In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty distinguishes two kinds of readers. ‘Ironist’ readers, addressed by modernist fictions, continually doubt their final vocabulary and are then open to exploring differing vocabularies. Commonsensical readers, on the other hand, expect solidity: ‘To be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in [the final vocabulary to which the non-ironist is habituated], suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies’ (Rorty 1989: 74).

[www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en) [Accessed March 2017]

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