

Gorica Majstorovic\*

## ➤ From Argentina to Spain and North Africa: Travel and Translation in Roberto Arlt

It is 1935 and Roberto Arlt writes from Morocco to his reading public in Argentina: “Aquí está Marruecos. El Marruecos que ustedes conocen, señores: El de la película de von Sternberg.” *Morocco* is Paramount Pictures’ success of the time, and with Marlene Dietrich and Gary Cooper in the main roles, the film was widely viewed in Arlt’s native Argentina. After establishing a connection between the North African country and the popular 1930 Hollywood film, Arlt directs a question to his reading public across the Atlantic: “¿Recuerdan ustedes esa calle donde cruzan los legionarios del film? [...] Está aquí, en Tetuán, en sus frescas siluetas vegetales y se llama la calle de los Tafirín” (Arlt 1981: 333). Arlt writes indeed from the Tafirín street in Tetuán, but Josef von Sternberg’s *Morocco* was not shot on location. The picturesque street captured in one of the film’s first images was actually shot at Paramount Studios in Imperial County, California. As Arlt indicates, this film largely informs the popular view of Morocco and of the Orient in 1930s Argentina. In fact, it is through the triangulation of imaginaries – those of Hollywood, of Argentina, and of the author himself – that Arlt creates a travelogue that is later called *Aguafuertes españolas*.

As the information travels across the Atlantic, Arlt both follows these popular views and deviates from them while fulfilling his journalistic duties. In his Spanish and North African texts, written on a daily basis, he evokes both the voice of a journalist writing for the Buenos Aires daily *El Mundo*, and that of a storyteller writing short stories for the weekly *El Mundo Argentino*. Furthermore, the testimonial quality of parts of Arlt’s Spanish and Moroccan writings, documenting the political turbulence throughout Spain and the rivalry of the colonial powers in North Africa, points to his 1935 role as witness.

Due to the growing political tensions in Spain of 1935, Arlt was forced to return to Argentina shortly before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Once on the other side of the Atlantic in Buenos Aires, he subsequently published his travel writing in the collections titled *Aguafuertes españolas* and *Aguafuertes gallegas*. A section titled “Marruecos” figures prominently in *Aguafuertes españolas*. It is situated between travel accounts

---

\* Gorica Majstorovic is an Assistant Professor of Hispanic Studies at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. She has published “An American Place: Victoria Ocampo’s Editorial Politics, the Foundation of Sur, and Hemispheric Alliances”, in *Matters of the Market: Texts & Contexts in Spanish and Latin American Literature*. She is also the author of: “Latin American Literature in an International Context: Questions of Language and Travel in Literary Criticism and History”, in *Latin American Research Review*. E-mail: Gorica.Majstorovic@stockton.edu.

from various locations in southern Spain. The Moroccan travelogue is positioned after the Spanish sections on Cádiz, Barbate, and Vejer de la Frontera and the detailed description of *Semana Santa* in Sevilla. Following Arlt's description of his visit to the city of Tetuán and its surroundings in northern Morocco, *Aguafuertes españolas* returns to Spain and concludes with Arlt's visit to Granada. Just as the author's initial arrival in Cádiz did not follow the tones of Albéniz's music, Arlt's portrayal of Granada also diverted from the embellished narratives of Washington Irving. Arlt is not interested in focusing on Granada's gypsies, for example, as romanticized objects of the tourist gaze. What strikes him is the inversion of tourist narratives in one of the tourist "must see" sights. As he visits the hills surrounding Granada, Arlt notices an installment of a telephone line in what is supposed to be a "primitive" gypsy cave. This and other scenes of "staged authenticity," to borrow John Hutnyk's term, inform Arlt's views of 1935 southern Spain and Morocco.

At home in Argentina, Arlt lived by the pen and worked for a number of Buenos Aires newspapers and magazines, of which *Crítica* and *El Mundo* had the highest circulation. Before his trip to Spain and North Africa as a correspondent for *El Mundo*, Arlt was well known to the Argentine reading public as the author of novels (*El juguete rabioso* [1926], *Los siete locos* [1929], *Los lanzallamas* [1931], *El amor brujo* [1932]), short stories, plays, and the widely read *Aguafuertes porteñas* (1933). As yet another testimony to his North African voyage, Arlt wrote a play titled *Africa*, which was staged at the Teatro del Pueblo in March of 1938.

Mirta Arlt, the writer's daughter and a literary critic, recalls that her father studied English from an English translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*, hoping that *El Mundo* would send him as a correspondent to the United States. His premature death in 1942 in his native Buenos Aires forever postponed this and other travel plans. It is curious, though, that Arlt chose to study English not from an original work in English, of which plenty were in circulation in the anglophile intellectual circles of Buenos Aires, but from a translation. Even more interesting, the translation is of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which contains a heterogeneous mix of languages and cultural traditions, with Arabic translated into English and disseminated in a Spanish-speaking context. This mix resonates with Argentine cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo's reading of Buenos Aires in the 1920s and 30s. According to Sarlo, Buenos Aires "proposes itself as a stage for cultural crossings where, hypothetically, all meetings and loans are possible" (1993: 168). These cultural crossings define the urban modernity of Buenos Aires with a principle of heterogeneity, a heterogeneity that Sarlo describes in a twofold way, as "una mala heterogeneidad" and "una heterogeneidad deseable" (1996: 173). Both of these models of heterogeneity are defined with regard to their interdependencies on language and translation. In addition, as Sarlo exemplifies by contrasting the writers Victoria Ocampo and Roberto Arlt, both of these interdependencies are socially defined in the following way:

Una línea visible separa a los escritores que pueden leer (escribir, hablar, traducir) lenguas extranjeras de quienes están condenados a leer traducciones, como es el caso de Roberto Arlt. La relación con la lengua extranjera no responde a un esquema simple: por el contrario, en el caso de Arlt, un apellido centroeuropeo impronunciable, cómo él mismo tematiza cómicamente en una "Aguafuerte", no le ha otorgado ni una lengua extranjera prestigiosa (ya que la lengua de origen fue traída por inmigrantes pobres y no por institutrices) ni la posibilidad de trabajar a partir del plurilingüismo. Arlt está anclado en malas traducciones y

no puede ser traductor. Victoria Ocampo no lee traducciones sino originales y puede ser traductora o empresaria de traducciones (1996: 174).

In *Aguafuertes españolas* and *El criador de gorillas*, Arlt's role in the observation of North African life points to the understanding of travel writing as translation and, to some degree, of an epistemological quest. Whether within "una heterogeneidad deseable" or "una mala heterogeneidad," the ultimate goal of this translation lies in Arlt's desire to acquire the knowledge of the "Other" and subsequently transmit this knowledge to his reading public in Argentina. For then Arlt is not only empowered as a cultural transmitter, but also as a mediator, a bridge between the knowledge of 'the things North African' and his audience in Argentina. In this light, *El criador de gorilas* is primarily a narrative of encounters, encounters between Arlt the traveler and the North Africans he meets. Moreover, it is also a narrative of encounters between Arlt the newspaper correspondent, who refers to the Hollywood hit *Morocco*, and his readers, whose Orientalist expectations were largely based on the film. Following Sarlo's notion of heterogeneity, it is here as well that we can observe a heterogeneous mix of influences, to which we shall return, coming from both the real, i.e., the historical, and the Orientalist, i.e., the fictitious.

The short stories that Arlt wrote for *El Mundo Argentino* were compiled in 1941 in Chile under the title *El criador de gorilas* and published in Zig Zag's collection titled *Aventura*. In Arlt's Orientalist "adventures," however, the prominent role is not his. Rather, it belongs to the African "Other.' Arlt's narrator situates himself as an observer of the life that surrounds him. The narrator informs the reader that he is merely *translating* into Spanish the stories that the people he has encountered on the North African streets and in its coffee shops have told him. The translation that Arlt refers to is yet another heterogeneous chain of modifications, as the words, meanings, and interpretations travel from Berber and Arabic languages to French and to Spanish. There must have been a local mediator in this process who assisted Arlt as the author 'translated' while writing in Spanish. A similar kind of cultural 'detour' takes places with Arlt's texts, as information about North Africa is passed on, or rather 'detoured,' to the reading public across the Atlantic in Argentina.

"Aborrezco los detalles superfluos," the narrator says in one of the stories entitled "El cazador de orquídeas" as he rushes to point at an exaggerated occurrence (1991: 135). Exaggeration is expected in tales from the Orient. The exaggeration in Arlt's coverage of North Africa is also of a practical nature, as he was obliged to tell his stories in a limited number of pages written for the weekly newspaper *El Mundo Argentino*. Consequently, he condenses a 'repertoire of things Oriental' and focuses on one sensational incident. In these stories, he also includes commentaries on various animals and plants spectacular to the eye of a Western visitor. In "La factoría de Farajalla Bill Alí," for example, there are human-like monkeys, whose exaggerated profile culminates in the story "Los hombres fieras." In addition, supernatural orchids, which in their interior contain a poisonous black snake, are the source of narrative suspense in "El cazador de orquídeas."

The archive of Arlt's Oriental knowledge also includes stories of black magic, superstition, revenge, hypnosis, and other exotic practices. Arguably the most sensational story in *El criador de gorilas* is titled "El accidentado paseo a Moka," featuring gigantic

boas capable of killing a man and situated in an unidentified jungle in Equatorial Africa. At the beginning of this story, Arlt expresses nostalgia for what he perceives as the ‘lost Africa’:

—¡Cuánto, cuánto ha cambiado todo esto! África ya no es África. África ha muerto, mi querido joven (1991: 95).

The story subsequently proposes to recuperate the values perceived as lost in Africa. Arlt’s comment on the ‘death of Africa’ brings to mind the opening passage of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*:

The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes, remarkable experiences. Now it was disappearing; in a sense it had happened, its time was over. Perhaps it seemed irrelevant that Orientals themselves had something at stake in the process ... the main thing for the European visitor was a European representation of the Orient and its contemporary fate (1994: 1).

Although to a certain degree a ‘belated Orientalist,’ to use Ali Behdad’s term, Roberto Arlt is by no means a privileged Western European visitor to North Africa. He is, rather, a working-class journalist from Argentina, a country itself marginal to the Western European metropolis. Unlike Victoria Ocampo and other writers who come from privileged social and economic backgrounds, Arlt reads literature in translation, not in the original language. He moves from one margin to another while traveling from Argentina to North Africa. Having said this, we are recognizing Arlt’s multiple marginalities, both traveling and at home in Argentina. And yet, “the telling must be on home ground,” for as Steve Clark points out in *Travel Writing and Empire*, the traveler’s narrative is frequently aimed at earning entitlement and status within one’s own culture (1999: 17). Indeed, status and recognition within the home literary culture mattered a great deal to Roberto Arlt. At ‘home’ in Buenos Aires, Arlt continuously attempted to attain a more central position in Argentine literary circles that were traditionally reserved for the members of privileged classes. Although not entirely ill adapted to certain intellectual circles, especially those of Argentine journalism, Arlt was undoubtedly a misfit in the milieu of Argentine belles-lettres. Much of Argentine travel writing has been written, in fact, not about travel but about home. Following Georges Van Den Abbeele’s analysis, Silvia Rosman discusses the notion of travel as investment: “an activity linked to a series of gains and losses, at the center of which stands the figure of the home” (1998: 20).

In his North African short stories, Arlt endeavors to harmonize the usually discordant notions of exoticism with those of history. Part of Arlt’s ‘invisible baggage,’ to use Leo Spitzer’s term, did indeed rely on the imagery and set of preexisting conceptions from the Oriental archive of exoticism that European culture has been constructing since antiquity. And yet the fabulous and the fantastic in these stories do not make them merely a part of a series of exotic adventure books. This may be said because *El criador de gorilas* contains a fantastic story about “Los hombres fieras,” and, at the same time, a story about an artillery exercise, clearly indicating a sudden ‘intrusion’ of history into the exotic.

“El ejercicio de artillería” is situated within the context of the Spanish colonial domination. In this story, Spanish troops punish a Moroccan moneylender (from whom sixteen Spanish officers borrowed money they could not return) by bombing the Moroc-

can's house. The event is supported by the cruel irony of justification on two accounts. In the first account, the Spanish military commander claims that the bombardment was in effect a justifiable mistake common in artillery exercises. In the second account, the local *Califa* denies the relevance of the bombing to his community because Muza, the moneylender, is not a Moroccan but an Algerian. The disturbing encounter of travel and history underscores the pages not only of "El ejercicio de artillería" but also of "El cadena de ancla," "El hombre del turbante verde," and "Los bandidos de Uad-Djuari."

Travel is thus read as both an aesthetic and an ideological and political discourse in Arlt's stories from Africa, a feature he playfully shows in "Los bandidos de Uad-Djuari," a parody of tourism. The main characters in this story are two tourists to Fez who meet in the Hotel Continental. As they admire the beauty of Fez's streets and squares, they repeatedly encounter a young boy who greets them politely every time he sees them. The young boy, the narrator says, never approaches them to sell guitars made of the authentic "caparazón de tortuga," but which were synthetically made in Germany, nor does he sell hand-made "Moorish bags" made in Catalonian factories, or other 'home made' products usually offered to tourists. One day, the two tourists decide to ask the boy his name. He responds that his name is Abbul and that he works as a tour guide. His specialty is a tour to "La Casa de la Gran Serpiente," situated at the outskirts of Fez. They decide to follow him and visit the spectacular Casa. All of a sudden, a group of road bandits attacks them. The tourists are captured and taken to a nearby house. After much melodramatic suffering by the kidnapped tourists, a French man comes to talk to them. He greets them pompously and then explains the nature of this "attack": the terrific experience of being kidnapped was in fact generously 'offered' to the visitors of Fez. The Frenchman and his group of false bandits charge two hundred francs for the orchestration of this splendid event which the tourists would then proudly recount upon their return home. A return trip to the hotel is included in the price, and adds a final touch of irony to this story.

Through the portrayal of the production and distribution of fake Oriental souvenirs and the parody of an Oriental tourist adventure in "Los bandidos de Uad-Djuari," Arlt critically examines the archive of knowledge of the Orient. In doing so, he shows how the 'native Other' in collaboration with the French mediator comes to subvert and to respond to the tourists' Oriental imaginaries. Although Arlt contributes to the continuity in the production of the Oriental archive in several stories, he also shows the archive's limitations through the use of parody. Following the Greek roots of the word parody, par- ("beside" or "subsidiary") and -ody ("song," as in ode), Arlt's narrator shows that in this story the tourist narrative stands beside its mock version. Thus, Arlt underscores the ideological underpinnings that are always at work in a seemingly 'neutral' travel prose.

Brian Musgrove reminds us that travel is not only an over-determined site that embraces colonial agencies, but it is also frequently a site of indeterminacy. The processes of transition, Musgrove points out, "were always anthropologically theorized as modes of 'unsettlement' rather than transcendence or occupation" (1999: 39). By introducing parody as a critical tool that points at both settlement and unsettlement in the discourses of Orientalism, Arlt's North African stories reveal a narrator whose position is both that of a belated Orientalist and of an Orientalist misfit. In other words, Musgrove's notion of 'unsettlement' supports the idea that Arlt's Spain and North African travel texts are sites of distress and unraveling, of both settlement and unsettlement, in the discourses of Orientalism.

## References

- Arlt, Roberto (1981): *Obra completa*, Vol. 2. Buenos Aires: Carlos Lohlé.
- (1991): *El criador de gorilas*. Madrid: Alborada.
- Behdad, Ali (1994): *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Clark, Steve (1999): "Introduction". In: Clark, Steve (ed.): *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*. London & New York: Zed Books, pp. 1-19.
- Clifford, James (1992): "Traveling Cultures". In: Grossberg, Lawrence/Cary, Nelson/Treichler, Paula (eds.): *Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Hutnyk, John (1999): "Argonauts of Western Pessimism: Clifford's *Malinowski*". In: Clark, Steve (ed.): *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*. London & New York: Zed Books, pp. 45-63.
- Morocco* (1930): Von Sternberg, Josef (Dir). Paramount Pictures.
- Musgrove, Brian (1999): "Travel and Unsettling: Freud on Vacation". In: Clark, Steve (ed.): *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*. London & New York: Zed Books, pp. 31-45.
- Rosman, Silvia (1998): "Of Travelers, Foreigners, and Nomads: The Nation in Translation". In: *Latin American Literary Review* 26, 51, pp. 17-29.
- Said, Edward (1994): *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Sarlo, Beatriz (1993): "Modernity and Cultural Mixture: The Case of Buenos Aires". In: King, John/López, Ana M./Alvarado, Manuel (eds.): *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*. London: British Film Institute, pp. 164-175.
- (1996): "Oralidad y lenguas extranjeras. El conflicto en la literatura argentina durante el primer tercio del siglo XX". In: *Orbis tertius: revista de teoría y crítica literaria* 1, pp. 167-178.
- Spitzer, Leo (1998): *Hotel Bolivia: The Culture of Memory in a Refuge from Nazism*. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Van Den Abbeele, Georges (1992): *Travel as Metaphor: From Montaigne to Rousseau*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.