Interview with Sergio Waisman

María Constanza Guzmán: You are an author, a translator and a scholar. How have these three personae, these three roles that you play, come to constitute themselves and how do they relate to one another?

Sergio Waisman: The three are very closely related. I see so many connections between reading, writing and translating that the three, for me, are at times interchangeable, almost synonymous. I started doing literary translations when I was doing a Masters in Creative Writing in Boulder, Colorado. I was writing in English, but most of what I was reading was in Spanish. Around the same time I also decided to pursue a PhD in Latin American literature. When I started translating, I realized I had been translating my whole life. Not that it was easy, translation is always hard, and I always work very hard at it. It can even be painful, the work involved in moulding sentences to work in one language in a form that is analogous to how they work in the other. Still, translating for me was natural somehow, to work as hard as possible to say something that has already been said, but in the other tongue. For me, doing literary translation became a natural extension of something that had always been there in my life.

MCG: Most translators who are not theorists end up writing about translation because they have worked on a translation for several years and then feel compelled to recount their experience, or because throughout the process they write shorter pieces which add up to then become a book. But as you are both a translator and an academic, in all your work there are traces of various kinds of writing. Do you think about this? What of these forms of writing comes first, or is that question not relevant to you?

SW: I think it's relevant but I'm not sure I know the answer. Of course, there's the practical answer, which is that if one works in academia one has to produce a certain kind of writing. But that is not necessarily what compels me to write about translation. For me, practicing literary translation became an opportunity to reflect on translation. Sometimes that involves writing a Translator's Note to accompany a translation, and sometimes it involves additional research to write a separate essay, for example. In *Borges and Translation* I tried to read Argentine literature through the lens of translation. I came to it as a translator, I think of the tradition in which I am working through the lens of translation. I feel that being a translator opens a perspective that can be very productive for theory, as well as other forms of writing.

MCG: In your book *Borges and Translation*: *The Irreverence of the Periphery* you speak of a South American Babel. What were you thinking when you made that reference? How does it conform to or contest the traditional study of literature? How does this

notion of the South American multiplicity of languages conform to or contextualize the traditional understanding of South American literature as the sum of national literatures?

SW: In that book I was writing very specifically about Argentine literature, even more specifically about a certain kind of *rioplatense* literature. Part of the answer is simply that, historically, there has been a multiplicity of languages and cultures in the Río de la Plata area, because of the various waves of immigration, with much mixing and cohabitating of the various languages and cultures through time. That's why I thought it was important to think of *rioplatense* literature as a kind of literature that is always working through translation, as a South American Babel.

MCG: In your view, what other value does translation have, as an epistemological and as an aesthetic problem, to think of Argentinean and by extension Latin American literature? What is the value of studying translation within Latin American literature? For instance, in *Borges and Translation* you reflect on translation in Jorge Luis Borges and Ricardo Piglia in your epilogue.

SW: When you look at translation, you necessarily look at difference. I've been thinking a lot about this. I think that translation forces us to consider difference, differences between individuals, languages, cultures, texts and so forth. In the case of Argentine literature, and potentially in the case of Latin American literature in general, difference is fundamental. A constitutive element of a certain Argentine literature is the way that writers incorporate difference into their writings, so that what makes somebody like Borges original is not that his metaphors are new, because he always said that he uses the same three or four metaphors that have always been used in literature, but that they are formulated and circulated in a different context, a different time period, so you end up with something that is the same, but it is also other. The space, the distance and the difference between them becomes the new text, in another culture, or a new literature perhaps. I believe that translation forces you there, to look at the space in between. What's interesting about that is that the in-betweenness, the difference in a text is always in the distance between the source and the target, in their displacement and recontextualization. I believe that there is always difference in literature, and that translation can help you see it for what it is.

MCG: What can you say in general about the value of translation in Piglia's work? What do you see as similar to or different from his Argentinean predecessors? And finally, what is this idea of the "translation machine"? How do you explain it? Could we think of a north-south translation machine?

SW: When I started translating Piglia, I was surprised to realize that there was so much translation incorporated into his work. That even though he was working with very Argentine material, the style and the stories seemed to be coming from somewhere

else, and being reformulated in his books. Somehow, I thought that what I had to translate was not only the stories but the fact that there was a translation machine, which had produced those stories. To a certain extent, Piglia works with what is already present, which is that literature itself can be thought of as a process of translation. Some authors hide that very well, you read some writers and you think that you're just reading stories and anecdotes. But in other writers, Manuel Puig for example, you realize right away that there's a whole process of translation in the work, of film and other elements from popular culture. In Puig you see that the stories that you're enjoying, are being translated from somewhere else. Piglia's work makes that evident as well, but he has a different take on it. At first sight the question of how to translate something that includes work with translation poses one of the biggest challenges to a translator. On the other hand, if you think of literature as a series of rewritings and versions of other stories and texts, from various languages and traditions, then you realize that this is always a challenge in translation. We're never simply translating words or sentences; there is always a cultural context and a tradition. How do you take a text and the effects of that text on the culture in which it was produced, within the translation out of which it comes, and rewrite it in another language, inserting it into another culture, where the traditions are other than in the first? Translation is very difficult, and full of potential. You are always translating a text from a specific culture and tradition, from a time period and certain synchronic and diachronic contexts, and you reproduce as much of that as you can. Part of the challenge is to recognize that there is always more than you can bring across, and yet by bringing as much across as you can you are, paradoxically, gaining, creating, reproducing, never just losing.

María Constanza Guzmán: You have translated mostly Latin American fiction. Some of the authors you've translated are living authors who are still writing today. Has collaboration been an important part of the translation process? How was your relationship with Piglia and with the other authors whose works you've translated? Has there been anything in common among these experiences? What did you expect from the author/translator relationship? What were the mutual expectations?

Sergio Waisman: I feel very fortunate in this regard. Piglia told me from the beginning that he was not going to meddle in my versions, but that he would be willing to answer any questions I might have, and that's been mostly the relationship we've had from the beginning. Piglia is a brilliant reader in English, it was nerve-wracking at first to translate his work and to wonder what he thought. From the beginning, I've had questions for him, and we've maintained a correspondence (first faxes and letters; later emails) and recorded a number of our conversations. Piglia's answers have always been educational, and sometimes they were the beginning of a dialogue that eventually became something else. Translating Piglia I wanted to be as accurate as possible, particularly in regard to historical and political references. And so, if there were things

that had to do with the 1970s in Argentina, for example, those were things that I wanted to get absolutely right. There were other things from the conversations that led me to other sorts of solutions, too. It was never "what did you mean to say," but rather, "how can the story be read." With authors who are not alive it's different, of course, but in some ways it's not. Borges said that the relationship between a translator and a writer is always one of collaboration, whether the original writer is alive or not. This aspect of translation has been described in many ways, to indicate that the translator travels a long way towards the source, and then interprets the source and decides what he or she can bring back to the target. When the author of that source is not alive, once you get as close as you can to that source, you have no one to ask. But that's not entirely true. That's where research comes in. When I translated *The Underdogs*, for example, my bookshelves were full of books about the Mexican Revolution; when I translated *Juan de la Rosa* by Nataniel Aguirre, I gathered all the books about Bolivian history and literature I could find. Not having access to the author is only a problem if you think that the author has the last word on the text, which of course we know is not true.

MCG: Some of the authors whose works you have translated are women. How would you characterize the difference in the process between translating male authors and female authors? Is there one?

SW: I'm not sure, honestly. I understand that there might be a difference, but I'm not sure how it plays out. The translator is always engaged in a process of reading and interpreting the text, and writing his or her reading and interpretation of the text in another language. Gender is always important, of course, but it's hard to know how it affects the process of translation. Each case and each situation is different.

MCG: From conversations with various authors whose work you have translated and from reading their work, what would you say is their idea—in general terms, of course—of translation and translators? How do they perceive their work in translation and you as the translator?

SW: In general I think writers are very appreciative of translators. This seems to be even more so when you're talking about Latin American writers, as often the appearance of a translator means that they might start to exist somewhere else. There's a natural alliance between writers and translators. In our case there is also this very unusual kind of relationship between Latin American writers and North American translators, which is that, for many Latin American writers, being translated into English—in addition to the symbolic value—also has very clear economic repercussions. It seems to me that the translator is always a player in a marketplace whose rules no one seems to understand—least of all the translator, at least in my experience. The importance of translation and the role of the translator are very different

in different cultures. In the U.S. there is a big disconnect, in the sense that we might be perceived as very important by the writers who we translate, but we are often all but irrelevant in the target culture in which we translate. This is interesting, and very frustrating.

María Constanza Guzmán: You have probably had extensive correspondence with your authors. What would you say is the usefulness of those materials for researchers? What would they learn, from reading your exchanges, from looking at that *translator's archive*, about the relationship between translators and authors? Do you keep that correspondence?

SW: I keep everything. I definitely think that correspondence between authors and translators is a valuable resource, for future readers. I know that I find it interesting and useful for myself. I think that that could be part of what translation studies is about.

MCG: You retranslated *Los de abajo* by Mariano Azuela. Why did you choose to translate that novel? Was there something you wanted to bring into the translation? Something about the language or about the novel's Mexicanness that you wanted to bring in?

SW: I wanted to translate *Los de abajo* in part because it was for Penguin Classics, and I was very interested in the question of what constitutes a classic in Latin American literature. I'm interested in the role of translation in determining what is a classic and why. Also, I always really liked that novel. I learned a lot about Mexican history, which was fascinating. I had to learn as much as I could about idiomatic expressions of Mexican Spanish in the early twentieth century, too, which was very useful when I was working on the translation, but not so much anymore. I had always thought something about that novel that I tried to incorporate into the translation, which is that *Los de abajo* can be read as an avant-garde novel that leads directly to Juan Rulfo. That's how I read *Los de abajo*; and in the translation I tried to write that reading. In other words, I tried to write a translation that I saw as a key precursor of Juan Rulfo's work. That's part of what I tried to bring into my version of *The Underdogs.*

MCG: You have written translator's prefaces and introductions for the editions of translations you have done. As a translation scholar, what do you think are the textual spaces where translators can speak for themselves? How do you approach paratexts?

SW: I think that these paratexts are very important. On the one hand, the translator can try to anticipate the context in which a work might be read in the target, and so contribute, in part, to its reception. In the introduction I wrote for *The Absent City* by Piglia, for example, I thought it was crucial to introduce a little bit about recent Argentine history, as well as how Piglia works with tradition, because that novel itself calls for that

kind of context. Similarly with *The Underdogs*, there's the context of the Mexican Revolution, and a number of historical references that help give the novel meaning. Translator's notes are important, too, because it's the most obvious way to make yourself visible. We are naive to pretend that the translator is invisible; if translators are present in our translations anyway, we might as well say a few words about how we read as a way to present the translation—which is to say, our reading of the original.

MCG: In their introductions or prefaces some translators analyze the work they have translated as critics but don't talk about it as being a translation. There was something that I particularly liked about your introduction to *The Underdogs,* the fact that you spoke explicitly about it and its challenges as a project for translation. I thought that was a way of educating the audience.

SW: I think that if you want someone to read a Mexican novel in translation, like *The Underdogs,* then what you should say to the potential reader is: here is a Mexican novel *in translation*. You wouldn't just say here's a Mexican novel, as if you had something to hide. It should be interesting and worthwhile because it's a Mexican novel; and it should be interesting and worthwhile because it's in translation. Readers' preconceptions are different in each case. And then we can speak about what we mean when we speak of translation as a process. In many ways, a translator says explicitly in a Translator's Note what they say implicitly in the translation itself: their reading of the text, their rewriting of the same text in a different language, and all the transformations that necessarily accompany the creative task of saying the same thing, again, but differently, in another tongue, feigning to hide that difference, and so on.

MCG: Can you talk a bit about your translation process? Usually how do you approach it? Where do you work? Do you use a computer? What is this process like for you?

SW: It has changed a lot through the years. I used to translate in the library, usually in the reference room, to have dictionaries nearby. Now you can get most of the dictionaries online, and do all kinds of searches to help find options. I still make use of the library because, for me, a lot of research always goes in to the process of translation. This was especially the case with *The Underdogs,* and also with the titles from the 19th century that I translated for Oxford's Library of Latin America. I always go through a process of educating myself as thoroughly as possible about everything related to the historical and cultural context of the text that I'm translating. I don't usually read biographies, and I try not to read other translations if they exist. But I always have the Spanish dictionary open and now I have the OED online and then I have a couple of bilingual dictionaries at an arm's reach, too. When I first started I used to do my translations longhand and write out all the possible options that arouse as I was translating, and then I'd edit down to the final version. Now, on the computer of course, I

keep a lot of footnotes as I translate, which are mostly notes to myself of different variations or questions that arise. These notes mostly end up only being interesting or useful for me, but sometimes they find their way into the translation, or a Translator's Note, or they work as further issues to explore in an essay, for example.

MCG: Let's talk about Latin American literature. The so-called Boom of Latin American literature of the sixties and seventies was said to offer replenishment to U.S. letters. What does Latin American literature mean in the States today?

SW: One of the challenges as a translator of Latin American literature is that that's how it's usually received, as Latin American literature, and not as a novel from a particular country and tradition. Texts that become Latin American literature once they are translated into English often don't begin as such. You could almost say that there's no such thing as Latin American literature. What I mean by that is that Latin American literature is a category that is often created in translation, and there is plenty of literature from Latin America that belongs to other categories, to other traditions really. If translation is always a dialogue, a dialogue in two languages in which two sides are reminded that they see the world very differently, then it follows that the dialogue affects both sides. Especially if we don't try to erase or skip over the differences. We almost always think about how translation might affect the target culture, but often translation affects the source culture as well. I think there is a lot of pressure for a work from Latin America in translation to be marketed as Latin American literature, as if that were one, single homogenous thing. We don't usually see each work in translation, in the U.S., as having been written by a writer from a particular tradition, from a certain kind of Spanish or Portuguese, from a culture that is different and local even if it's in contact with the global. I think that the translator has an opportunity to show that different culture and tradition in the translation. National literatures and local traditions remain very much alive and vibrant, even as they respond to, are influenced by, and seek to engage with the global. Often, in translation, you end up with only the global, which is the version in English. How to also bring across the local, how to also make the different culture present in the translation, when that difference is so connected to the language of the source—that is a real challenge for translation. The fact that you make this jump from another language into English should not mean losing what is in that other language. But there's no formula for how not to lose it (not the original text *per se*, but the difference in that original text). This is a challenge every time you sit down to translate. We love to translate, we want the writers who we work with to be read in English, but the biggest risk is that by doing so we risk erasing the very difference that makes them interesting and worthwhile in the first place.

MCG: You have addressed the question of sources of funding and politics. Could you speak of translation from that angle? Do you find that in the literary translation industry

today there are institutions and structures that support it and make it possible while others make it difficult, either directly or indirectly?

SW: Most of the translation projects I've done have been published by small, independent presses, or by university presses, which have the false advantage of not participating too much in the marketplace. The translation for Penguin Classics was different in this sense, but fortunately Penguin took care of all the marketing aspects for *The Underdogs*. Lately, the issue of the marketplace has grown much more complicated for me, because Piglia's fame and sales have increased significantly since I first started working with him over twenty years ago. But success abroad (in the Spanish-speaking world and in several European markets, in the case of Piglia) unfortunately is no guarantee of success in the U.S. Whether one wants to or not, the translator ends up being implicated in the market, and usually with a very small voice. Ideally the translator would be immune from market forces, but realistically that doesn't happen, just like it doesn't happen for a writer. So I think that a translator ends up asking him or herself the same questions that a writer would have to ask him or herself. I want to be in a situation where my answer means something, and in order for that answer to mean something, people have to buy my books. But as soon as you say that, it becomes that much harder to criticize the way that the market affects what you have to say. Basically, I see the marketplace as an unavoidable trap. Even if you fall in the trap, as one inevitably does, you have to remain true to your ideals. The marketplace must be questioned, from inside or out.

MCG: North American translators are subject to certain standards and norms of English writing which, as Lawrence Venuti has explained, turn out to be an imposition. Venuti proposes a program for Anglo-American translators to resist that imposition toward the domestication of foreign literature. Where would you place your translations in relation to his views, or in general, how do you negotiate market and institutional demands on the translated text itself, in terms of readability, fluency, and visibility? What would you or what wouldn't you compromise? What is important for you in your translations? Is there a voice that is your voice or a style that really marks your work?

SW: I'm a big fan of Venuti's work, but I don't think it's meant to be prescriptive. Venuti's cultural and political insights about translation are crucial. But there is a tremendous difference between what theoreticians like Venuti say about translation in the U.S., and what practitioners of translation in the U.S. actually do. You are very unlikely to find an editor, or a practicing translator, recommend that your translation be ugly if necessary in order to be foreignizing, and full of footnotes. That's very unlikely to happen, and it's even less likely that such a translation will be published. Venuti points to a larger issue having to do with translation, authorship, market, politics and power relations. The problem is that his ideas have, at times, been interpreted as a recommended

methodology. In terms of a translator's approach, it's unrealistic to expect the translator to always take the moral high ground with every project. There's a danger of being too absolutist. I guess the way I approach translation is simply look at the source text and try to figure out its place and its effect in the source culture and language, and try to recreate that place and those effects in the target context and language.

MCG: You published the novel *Leaving* in 2004. When did you begin to write literature and how has translation been a form of apprenticeship for you? How does your translation work relate to your writing?

SW: I don't see them as very different, at least for me. My novel *Leaving* is a translation in many ways, in part because I tell family stories and memories that happened in another language, often in Spanish, sometimes in Yiddish or French, and I tell them in English. Although sometimes they can only be told in Spanish, so there's one fragment that appears in Spanish in the middle of the story, which is otherwise being told in English. I guess for me one isn't necessarily an apprenticeship for the other, it's more that they are both learning processes that occur together. Of course, they'll be read very differently, but then that has more to do with authorship and reception and how texts circulate in different markets. My novel will be read as mine, even though much of it is my grandmother's stories. Piglia's novels in English will be read as Piglia's, even though he says the translations are mine.

MCG: Conceptually, what was the role of translation in your novel? I'm thinking of the story "Translation is a Contamination." In it, as well as in other parts of the novel, you made clear that translation and language are part of your being. What was important for you in this regard when you wrote the novel?

SW: When I wrote *Leaving* I was very interested in the relationship between the narrator and the interlocutor. *Leaving* is structured around that relationship, there is a main narrator (who is both like me and not like me) who is telling a second person a series of stories. Those stories are translations and the relationship between the speaker and the listener progresses and the listener at times can speak and the speaker gets to listen, tries to learn how to listen and it becomes more and more apparent that the relationship between them is a translation, a series of differences which must be addressed or crossed or traversed somehow, through communication or, in the context of the novel, love.

MCG*:* Would you say that your novel is between the north and the south?

SW: That's a difficult question for me. A novel is always where it's read, right? I think it depends on where it's read. I am very interested in that uncertain space in-between,

and I believe I was thinking of that when I wrote *Leaving*. The question gets another turn, too, because I translated *Leaving* myself, and it came out as *Irse* in Argentina.

MCG: And could you talk about the process of self-translation? Had you ever translated your own work before? Would you do it again?

SW: I loved doing the self-translation. One of the challenges was that, in the north, *Leaving* is about how I and my family stories got here, to the U.S. In the south, the book is about how we left Argentina and how rewriting *Irse* was a form of going back, in a way, to tell the same stories which for some reason weren't told in Spanish in the first place. Translating *Leaving* as *Irse* became this unexpected kind of back translation into something that had not been originally written in Spanish, but which might have been conceived in Spanish at some point. It was fascinating, it was difficult. In terms of how it was transformed in the process, a few things are different. *Irse* has a few extra pages at the end, which were not there in the original. The new sections, which exist only in Spanish now, are related to *Leaving* in English.

MCG: What does it mean for you that your work circulates in Argentina, both Marcelo Cohen's translation of *Borges and Translation* and your own translation of *Leaving*?

SW: Having Marcelo Cohen translate my book on Borges was incredible; he's a great translator and writer. I don't think I could've done nearly as good a job as he did. Translating *Leaving* into *Irse* myself was an experiment, and I'm very happy that I did it, and fairly satisfied, too, with the results. Having my work circulate in Argentina means everything to me. I often feel like a stranger in both places (in Argentina, in the U.S.) and I very much want to write in that intersection of languages and cultures that has always defined my life. Translation is my point of departure, and also my eventual destination.

MCG: What are you working on now?

SW: I am very happy because my translation of Ricardo Piglia's *Blanco nocturno* is about to be published as *Target in the Night* by the exciting, new press Deep Vellum. I am also working on a new novel of my own, part of which includes a small collaboration with Piglia. I have a couple of other translation projects which I'd love to finish in the coming years: Roberto Arlt's short stories, and Sergio Chejfec's first novel, *Lenta biografía* [Slow Biography]. I've also been translating some poetry recently, namely of the Argentine poet Yaki Setton, who writes these small, beautiful, gripping lyric poems. I'm translating his book of poems *Educación musical* [Musical Education] now.