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LEVINE, SUZANNE JILL. UNFAITHFUL: A TRANSLATOR'S MEMOIR. NEW YORK AND LONDON, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC, 2025, 184 PP., ISBN 979-8-7651-3373-6

Narrativizing one's life is essentially an act of translation, insofar the autobiographer displaces self and memory to become other through written language. "Just as the autobiographer is reading herself/himself otherwise," argues Bella Brodzki, "so is the translator inscribing herself/himself through an other's voice and text, into another linguistic or signifying form. *To write is to be written, to narrate is to be narrated, to translate is to be translated*" (p. 19; emphasis in the original). Brodzki's formulation of autobiography as self-translation resonates with a relatively recent interest in shifting attention away from translated texts toward the agent who produces them: the translator (Pym, 1998; Chesterman, 2009). The so-called translator's turn has been useful in reconsidering the role of women translators in history (Simon, 1996). Often, because of their status as marginal figures in both the literary field and society, our access to these women translators' lives has come through valuable feminist biographical scholarship (e.g., Hayes, 2008; Brown, 2022; Misiou, 2023). It is within this turn toward the woman translator as subject that I believe Suzanne Jill Levine's *Unfaithful* intervenes, offering a complementary perspective, in that, thanks to her cultural capital as one of the most prolific U.S. translators of contemporary Latin American literature, she can enact that very displacement that Brodzki describes in her article. With the publication of her memoir, in short, we witness a living translator staging a self-translation of her own professional and personal life into written form.

Unfaithful, however, is not Levine's first autobiographical project. Her 1991 book *The Subversive Scribe* traced her translation poetics, showing how she transformed texts of the Latin American Boom through experimental techniques that challenged traditional notions of fidelity. By casting her reflections in the first person, Levine paved the way for other U.S. translators to shape their own experiences into book-length "literary and belletristic apologia for translation" (Woods, 2024, p. 121). This later memoir, by contrast, foregrounds how her own persona - her aspirations and vulnerabilities as a young woman translator navigating a man's world of letters - was not just mediated by texts, but shaped, reshaped, and even unsettled, by the relationships that were forged while translating these works. Read together - in fact, some aspects from the first book are retold in this one - the two works complement each other: while the first articulates translation as an experimental method, adopting a more academic stance grounded in postmodernist theory, the second does it as lived experience from a more literary and narrative perspective, highlighting how translation is not only a

feminist textual intervention but also a material, shaping force forging one's own life and identity.

To appreciate how Levine enacts this self-translation, it helps to consider the memoir's two-part structure. The first, "Closed Encounters," includes six long chapters. The first two trace how Levine's early loss of her mother led her to discover a passion for Spanish in college, ultimately guiding her toward a career as a literary translator. These chapters show that language for Levine was erotically charged from the beginning (see Kellmann, 2013; Woods, 2025). Chapter 3 explores Levine's romantic relationship with Uruguayan literary critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal - perhaps the most influential gatekeeper of contemporary Latin American literature in the U.S. at that time - twenty-five years her senior. Through him, Levine is granted access to vibrant Latin American literary circles, which led to lifelong friendships with some of the authors she would go on to translate.

While the rapid international recognition of Latin American fiction writers in the 1960s can certainly be attributed to their literary brilliance, it is also inseparable from the political conditions of the Cold War. In the wake of the Cuban Revolution, Latin America became a key cultural and political battleground, and several translation initiatives fostered through U.S. state-private networks played an important role in amplifying this literature's reach (Mudrovcic, 2002; Franco, 2002; Cohn, 2012; Iber, 2015). Yet, while Levine acknowledges these dynamics as factors that shaped her entry into literary translation from a young age, she instead highlights how the theoretical underpinnings of the 1960s and 1970s sexual liberation movements informed her practice: "The war, like the world, belonged to men […]. Nonetheless, as the Sixties became the Seventies, my consciousness was raised especially around sexual politics, its impact on every individual, on the arts and every aspect of life, especially on the lives and rights of women" (Levine, 2025, p. 24). As such, Levine offers an honest attempt to explore her own identity not so much as a translator, but as a woman who finds her identity through translation at a specific historical moment marked by two episodes that are usually not studied together: the Cold War and the sexual liberation movements.

By structuring her self-translation around the lives of these male writers she translated, Levine weaves their trajectories into her own identitarian struggle, poignantly rendering identity, translation, and her autobiographical writing as inherently relational. This is particularly explored in the chapter dedicated to Monegal. It is a candid recollection of the Uruguayan critic yet is juxtaposed with poignant reflections on the asymmetries of age, gender, and institutional power that shaped their bond - an ambivalence that runs throughout the memoir. In the remaining chapters of this first part, we are

moved by the ways in which this uncertainty about her own identity gradually takes shape through translation. Thanks to her friendship with gay writer Manuel Puig, she explores her (until then secret) bisexuality, equating it to her practice: “being a translator was a creative way to deal with ambivalence, with one’s “fluidity,” […] translating meant finding ways to resolve ambivalence, at least on the written page. And with gay men, I could sidestep the obstacle of ambivalence and turn it into subversive irreverence” (pp. 85-85). She feels empowered to challenge sexist attitudes from Guillermo Cabrera Infante after revealing to him, while translating one of his books, her decision to live with a woman. Through her affair with Adolfo Bioy Casares, Levine comes to understand translation is also an intimate, erotic, encounter between translator and author. Her descriptions of these writers are nuanced, treating them with candour while showing their imperfections, but what emerges most clearly is Levine’s struggle to find her (young) voice in a male-dominated world.

Surrounded by memories of ghosts, that is, of these male writers she translated but who are no longer alive, she asks herself the following in the “Entr’acte” section dividing the memoir’s two parts:

> [L]ife sometimes seems like acting rather than being. Or seducing and being seduced, only to discover, one day, that maybe the only way to know love is to know that one is loved. Which person-I, one, she-is speaking? Like all pronouns "I" belongs to everyone and to no one. I have lived between two worlds, from my early twenties until now, between two ways of speaking: English, my first language, and Spanish, the language she translates. Which speaker is the real me? (Levine, 2025, p. 123)

Levine’s description of herself echoes Naoki Sakai’s (2009, p. 86) definition of the translator as a fractured-I, by means of which “the temporality of ‘I speak’ […] necessarily introduces […] an irreparable distance between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciated” (consider the parallels with Brodzki’s definition of the autobiographer). It suddenly becomes clear that, what might have seemed until then descriptions of male friendships, were instead a carefully constructed narrative of feminist, queer self-discovery, a “theory in the flesh” (Moraga 2002, p. 21) in which Levine uses her recollections of her own sexual and sentient body to develop a suggestive understanding of translation as erotics and translators as erotic beings. By framing her narrative through these relationships, Levine skilfully avoids the pitfalls of self-idealization often associated with autobiographical writing, allowing her identity to emerge in a nuanced manner. In doing so, her work challenges the notion of Romantic, individualistic genius, showing that one’s retelling of memories is inseparable from retelling the lives of others. While

ultimately aimed at understanding herself, the memoir never lapses into solipsism, demonstrating how translators' memoirs offer an invaluable alternative to conventional ways of writing about the self. This is further reflected in her playful, bold prose, which balances intellectual reflection with intimate, sexually charged storytelling. Her daring voice makes the memoir engaging not only for translations scholars but also for general readers, for whom Levine's style offers a direct invitation to appreciate how translators' memoirs contribute to our understanding of translators as sentient, whole persons rather than mere professionals.

This is further explored in the second section of the memoir, "Stops Along the Way." While these snapshots might have benefitted from greater detail, particularly relevant is the first one, "Sketches of Susan," where Levine's relationship with Susan Sontag not only serves to acknowledge the lack of female support among artists during that time, but also works as a symbol of the need for women to tell their own stories. Other highlights are "Carlos Fuentes on Central Park" and the memoir's epilogue, "At a Bus Stop on Sunset Boulevard." In the former, Levine reappropriates the figure of *Lolita* - a "questionable accolade" (p. 138) Carlos Fuentes gave her and which she understands as alluding both to her youth as a translator of erotically charged texts and to the age difference with Monegal - to expose how her subversively feminist translation practices were nonetheless instrumental in consecrating these older male authors. In the latter, Levine describes a rewatching of an episode of a TV series where her estranged sister Carol appeared in the 1950s to demonstrate how, in her performance, her own personality still flourished, ultimately demonstrating that, professionally, we leave intimate traces of ourselves, that we are always performing a translation in the flesh.

All these chapters allow her to reach a conclusion: visibility must not only revolve around the recognition of the translator's work. When we explore the life of a translator, it is as equally important to consider them as embodied, performative beings. By being "aware of performance," translators can "adventure an erotics of translation" (p. 158), where both the process (the self in translation) and the product of translation (the text) are charged with affect and desire. Loving the text (and the author) means also allowing ourselves to leave the rigid structures that have traditionally tended to regard translation as an objective task and identity as monolithic. If autobiography is a modality of translation, then, the memoir of a translator is doubly so: it stages the performativity of translation, translators, and identities to show that, as feminist and queer activists have continually asserted, the personal is politically (and literarily) relevant. In doing so, *Unfaithful* participates in what one hopes to be a growing list of works, arguably initiated by Kate Brigg's *This Little Art* (2017), that take autobiography to discuss the relation between self, desire, and

translation and that highlight Klaus Kaindl's (2021) invitation to consider the translators' personal lives as scholarly valuable.

Unfaithful thus becomes a perfect opening of what the new Bloomsbury series "Translated By" can offer to the field. Levine's work hopefully works to prop open a door through which more works from lesser-known translators and networks of translators that facilitated literary and knowledge circulation beyond the dominant Global North–South and the centre-periphery axes. Similarly, one hopes that the series may enhance the representational currency of other cultural mediators (Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts, 2018) who partake in the making of translations, such as editors or literary agents. Such first-person perspectives would not only expand the affective component that characterizes our field but also underscore how first-person narratives of agents of translation actively participate in producing alternative forms of cultural and intellectual contact.

In the meantime, we can rejoice in Levine's memoir, which, while somewhat brief, daringly invites us to approach translators as subjects who, by the nature of their task, embody a queer understanding of identity that is not fixed, but always in transit, continually reshaped through intimate and erotic encounters with others; translational, in sum.

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