



TRANSLATING RUSSIAN
LITERATURE IN THE GLOBAL
CONTEXT

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Muireann Maguire and Cathy McAteer (eds), *Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0340>

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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-983-5

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-984-2

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-985-9

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-986-6

ISBN DIGITAL ebook (HTML): 978-1-80064-989-7

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0340

Cover Design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme as part of the RUSTRANS academic project, 'The Dark Side of Translation: 20th and 21st Century Translation from Russian as a Political Phenomenon in the UK, Ireland, and the USA' (grant agreement no. 802437).



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

Mexico

Three Stages in the Translation of Russian Literature in Mexico, 1921–2021¹

Rodrigo García Bonillas

Introduction

This chapter offers an overview of the translation of Russian literature in Mexico during the century between 1921 and 2021. It develops three case studies of key figures in the intercultural process in question, in an attempt to provide a long-term vision of specific connections between Russian and Mexican literature from the 1920s almost to the time of writing. My methodological approach is ‘microhistorical’ insofar as my research seeks to expose the socio-cultural conjunction of personal experiences (essays, memoirs, interviews); infrastructure (state institutions, publishing houses, grants, prizes); and works (editions, collections).² Furthermore, this essay seeks to perceive all of these cases through the lens of the “sociology of translation”.³ The nature of each case study reveals characteristic stages of the uneven translation field from Russian

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- 1 This research was carried out in the framework of my doctoral project ‘Moscu por venir. Nueve escritores iberoamericanos en viaje al cosmos soviético (1920–1959)’ (‘Moscow to Come. Nine Ibero-American Writers on a Journey to the Soviet Cosmos (1920–1959)’), funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst) and carried out at the University of Potsdam (Germany).
 - 2 Jeremy Munday, ‘Using Primary Sources to Produce a Microhistory of Translation and Translators: Theoretical and Methodological Concerns’, *The Translator*, 20:1 (2014), 64–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2014.899094>.
 - 3 Johan Heilbron and Gisèle Sapiro, ‘Outline for a Sociology of Translation: Current Issues and Future Prospects’, in *Constructing a Sociology of Translation*, ed. by

into (Mexican) Spanish. Firstly, its embodiment as a state and ideological undertaking, in Vladimir Maiakovskii's view of the cultural enterprise organised by the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos (1882–1959) during the latter's service as Rector of the National University of Mexico (1920–21) and Secretary of Public Education (1921–24), which stands as the major transformation of education and culture in post-Revolutionary Mexico.⁴ Secondly, I will show translation as a conflation of diplomacy, literature, and travel, through the experience of author Sergio Pitol (who contributed to the 1955 Mexican edition of Maiakovskii's travelogue and also published an essay on José Vasconcelos). Finally, we will encounter translation as a professionalised contemporary task, methodically accomplished by Pitol's 'pupil', Selma Ancira. These three cases are distributed in the beginning, middle, and the end of the period studied; for each stage, I attempt to consider the most relevant agents that participated in the translation or circulation of Russian literary works in Mexico.⁵

Due to the relatively limited number of translators from Russian into Spanish in Mexico, the most important figures are easily distinguishable. For example, in the volume of interviews *By Trade, Translator. An Overview of Literary Translation in Mexico* (*De oficio, traductor. Panorama de la traducción literaria en México*, 2010), the only two translators from Russian into Spanish included are Ancira and Tatiana Bubnova.⁶ Ancira, in turn, refers there to Sergio Pitol as her predecessor.⁷ As we will see later, there were more translators working in this field besides Ancira and Bubnova. But by comparison with other Hispano-American metropolises (Madrid, Buenos Aires, or, after the Cuban Revolution, Havana) Mexico City did not play a prominent role in the direct translation of Russian literature into Spanish during the last century. Literary translations, either directly from Russian or indirectly through another European language, were typically, with few

Michaela Wolf and Alexandra Fukari (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2007), pp. 93–107, <https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.74.07hei>.

- 4 The National University of Mexico became the National Autonomous University of Mexico in 1929. The Secretariat of Public Education, created by Vasconcelos in 1921, is the official name for Mexico's Ministry for Education. It encompassed the fields of arts and culture until 2015, when the National Council for Culture and the Arts, formerly dependent on the Secretariat of Public Education, became a ministry in itself: the Secretariat of Culture.
- 5 For a regularly updated list of active translators of Russian literature in Mexico: 'Personas: Traductores', *Enciclopedia de la Literatura en México*, (n.d.), http://www.elem.mx/autores/f/1/a/tipo/3/tipo_lengua/INT/lengua/76.
- 6 Russo-Mexican scholar Tatiana Bubnova is the main translator and introducer of Mikhail Bakhtin in Mexico and, to an extent, in the wider Spanish-speaking world. I chose Ancira's case study instead of Bubnova's on account of the diversity of translated authors; the number of works translated from each author; and the wider network in terms of editions, institutions, and geographical zones.
- 7 *De oficio, traductor. Panorama de la traducción literaria en México*, ed. by Marianela Santoveña and others (Mexico City: Bonilla Artigas Editores and Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2010), p. 280.

exceptions, disseminated in Mexico by foreign publishing houses during the first half of the twentieth century. In Mexico's National Library catalogue, for instance, one can find pre-1950 editions of Tolstoy from publishers J. S. Ogilvie (New York), E. Dentu (Paris), Perrin (Paris), América (Madrid), Naucci (Barcelona), Biblioteca Nueva (Madrid), or E. Bauza (Barcelona). In Dostoevsky's case, there are (rather fewer) editions from Espasa-Calpe (Madrid), Nelson (Paris), Bossard (Paris), Delamain & Boutelleau (Paris), or América (Madrid). In the second half of the twentieth century, Mexican institutions like Fondo de Cultura Económica or Editorial Siglo XXI adopted this task. Also, during the Cold War era, literary, political, and economic works of Russian origin circulated widely, but these were translated in the USSR through publishing houses like Ediciones en Lenguas Extranjeras (Izdatel'stvo Literaturny na Inostrannykh Iazykakh), Editorial Progreso (Progress), or Editorial Raduga (Raduga). Even today there are no Mexican institutions or universities that hold departments, programmes, or chairs for the study of Slavic philology or for the professional training of translators from Slavic languages into Spanish, while these academic platforms can be found in other Ibero-American cities (São Paulo,⁸ Buenos Aires,⁹ Madrid, among others).¹⁰ Similarly, no Mexican publishing house is (yet) specialised in translating Russian literature into Spanish.

Nonetheless, it cannot be said that Mexican literature or Mexican writers were not receptive to Russian literature, or that Mexico did not play a significant role in key events of Russian and Soviet history. Such events include the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1924 between the Soviet Union and Mexico (the first country in the Americas to recognise the former); political and cultural exchanges realised by individuals like Aleksandra Kollontai, Maiakovskii, Diego Rivera, Sergei Eisenstein, José Mancisidor, José Revueltas, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Victor Serge, and Efraín Huerta; and the granting of political asylum to Lev Trotskii (which ended fatally). Despite the relative scarcity of channels

8 "In that time [1960s] Prof. Boris Schnaiderman established the Graduation Course of Russian Language and Literature at the Philosophy, Literature and Humanities Faculty of the University of São Paulo, originally free, but officially recognised in 1963. In 1994 the Postgraduate Program of Russian Literature and Culture was recognised by University of São Paulo authorities [...]" See Milan Puh, 'Estudos eslavos no Brasil: Constituição de uma área', *Revista X*, 15:6 (2020), 674–97 (p. 680), <https://revistas.ufpr.br/revistax/article/view/76848/42236>. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. For more on Boris Schnaiderman, see Bruno B. Gomide's essay in this volume.

9 Such as the Chair of Slavic Literatures at the University of Buenos Aires.

10 So far, the first attempt in this direction has been the Russian Literature Seminar organised in 2021 by Mexican translators and scholars Mar Gámiz and Alfredo Hermosillo, and hosted by the Octavio Paz and Nikolai Gogol Extraordinary Chairs at San Ildefonso College (part of the National Autonomous University of Mexico) in Mexico City. See 'Seminario en Línea: Literatura rusa. Panorama crítico: desde sus orígenes hasta hoy en traducción al español', *Colegio de San Ildefonso* (2021), <http://www.sanildefonso.org.mx/literaturarusa/>.

for publication, Russian literature found various ways of circulating in Mexico, both in commercially run and publicly funded publishing houses. Moreover, at a crucial moment in Mexican history, Russian literature and Soviet strategy were a key inspiration for Mexican cultural agents, in particular for Vasconcelos, whose policies during the 1920s in the National University of Mexico and the Secretariat of Public Education forged institutions and programmes after the most turbulent years of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20):¹¹ firstly, the literacy plan launched during his time as Rector of the University; then, the creation of the Secretariat itself, which had diverse objectives, such as founding public schools and libraries, the reading-promotion campaign, updating educational programmes, arts patronage, or the publication of the book series ‘The Classics’.

Post-Revolutionary Mexico

In his foundational essay ‘On the Marvelous Real in America’ (1949/1967; see note 13), Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier outlined an East-West axis in order to unravel the concept of the “marvelous real” as a cultural feature of Latin America where the extraordinary breaks into everyday life.¹² After confessing his lack of comprehension of China and the Islamic region (in particular, Iran), Soviet Russia was the first region where he was able to understand the local culture. The overlapping of European referents—and, to a lesser extent, of certain interventions in Russia by Latin American actors like the Venezuelan revolutionary Francisco de Miranda—enabled Carpentier to access certain Russian cultural milestones:

On the way back from my long voyage, I found myself in the Soviet Union where, despite my inability to speak the language, my sense of incomprehension was entirely alleviated. [...] Pushkin made me think of *Boris Godunov*; I revised an unmusical French translation about thirty years ago at the request of a singer who had to play the role at

11 While 20 November 1910 is the exact date of the beginning of the Mexican revolution (coinciding with L. N. Tolstoy’s death), the end is harder to identify with precision. Most historians date it around 1920. See Jaime Torres Bodet, *León Tolstói: su vida y su obra* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1965), p. 9.

12 Later, in the 1975 lecture ‘The Baroque and the Marvelous Real’, Carpentier pointed out the differences between the ‘marvellous real’ as a cultural phenomenon and the ‘magical realism’ as the name of an artistic current coined by the German art critic Franz Roh in the mid-1920s. Furthermore, Carpentier also integrates the Latin American *Boom* in his conceptual history of the American baroque. Carpentier qualifies here the ‘marvelous real’ as the “unusual” or “unwonted” (“insólito”). Alejo Carpentier, ‘The Baroque and the Marvelous Real’, in *Magical Realism. Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, trans. by Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 89–108.

the Columbus Theater in Buenos Aires. Turgenev was Flaubert's friend [...]. I discovered Dostoevsky in an essay by André Gide. I read Tolstoy's stories for the first time around 1920, in an anthology compiled by the Mexican Department of Education.¹³

In Vasconcelos's lecture campaign during the 1920s, Tolstoy was one of the three main contemporary writers championed; the other two were Benito Pérez Galdós (Spain) and Romain Rolland (France).¹⁴ This is why some of Tolstoy's work was disseminated throughout Mexico and beyond, and why Carpentier obtained an anthology of his writing (presumably, his short stories, as we will see later). Like many other intellectuals from Latin America, Carpentier encountered Russian literature mainly through French intermediaries, whether writers, translators, or essayists. With France perceived as the centre of the "world republic of letters" at the turn of the nineteenth century, as Pascale Casanova asserts (following Fernand Braudel),¹⁵ Russian literature started flowing into Latin America through French channels. Tolstoy's novels were introduced to Brazil indirectly, through the translation into Portuguese of French diplomat Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé's study *The Russian Novel (Le Roman russe)* (1886).¹⁶ In the Spanish-speaking world the Spanish novelist Emilia Pardo Bazán's *The Revolution and the Novel in Russia (La revolución y la novela en Rusia, 1887)* stands as the pioneering work in this field. Unlike de Vogüé, Pardo Bazán did not understand Russian and her lectures about Russian novels were based on French translations; she also relied on de Vogüé's book as one of her main sources.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the

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- 13 Alejo Carpentier, 'On the Marvelous Real in America', in *Magical Realism*, pp. 75–88 (pp. 79–80). Parkinson Zamora and Faris explain in their 'Editor's Note' that "Part of ['On the Marvelous Real in America'] served to preface Carpentier's first novel, *El reino de este mundo (The Kingdom of this World, 1949)*; we have translated an expanded version of that prologue, which was published in 1967 in a collection of Carpentier's essays, *Tientos y diferencias (Approaches and Distinctions)*" (pp. 75–76).
- 14 Claude Fell quotes Vasconcelos: "If we examine contemporary intellectual production, we find three major figures that the University advertises to attract public attention, three visionaries whose doctrines should flood the Mexican soul: Benito Pérez Galdós, Romain Rolland, and Leo Tolstoy." See Claude Fell, *José Vasconcelos. Los años del águila (1920–1925). Educación, cultura e iberoamericanismo en el México postrevolucionario*, trans. by María Palomar (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1989), p. 34.
- 15 Pascale Casanova, *La república mundial de las letras*, trans. by Jaime Zulaika (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2001), p. 23.
- 16 Bruno Gomide, *Da estepe à caatinga: O romance russo no Brasil (1887–1936)* (São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 2011), p. 17. See also Elizabeth Geballe's essay in the present volume.
- 17 Francisca González Arias, 'La condesa, la revolución y la novela en Rusia', *Bulletin Hispanique*, 96:1 (1994), 167–88 (p. 168).

sources of many of Pardo Bazán's less original ideas were not always explicitly identified, and this provoked harsh attacks on her book.¹⁸

During the 1920s, the first cultural institutions created after the Mexican Revolution set in motion a major transformation of educational and artistic fields. Soviet and Russian thought had a significant impact on the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos (1882–1959), and consequently on the wider cultural enterprise.¹⁹ After the foundation of the Ministry of Public Education during Álvaro Obregón's presidency (1920–24) on 10 October 1921, Vasconcelos took office as Minister of Education. His work was so challenging that it has since been considered a "cultural crusade".²⁰ For a long time, Vasconcelos gained the epithet '*El Maestro*' (both 'teacher' and 'master').²¹ Sergio Pitol, who met Vasconcelos in person, also pointed out:

José Vasconcelos was the main source of the Revolution's national and international prestige: the nation's educator, an apostle of printed literature, a thinker, and, above all, the creator of an authentic and extraordinary cultural Renaissance in the country, an effort where all his gifts and distinctions came together. Even now, we are immensely indebted to the cultural renewal movement he undertook seventy years ago. Education at all levels and diffusion of books stood as a national cause during that period.²²

In the high tide of post-revolutionary cultural transformation, Vladimir Maiakovskii visited the Americas. Maiakovskii was the first outstanding figure of Russian literature to travel to Mexico and write about it.²³ In his travelogue

18 This point is thoroughly exposed in Cristina Patiño Eirín, '*La revolución y la novela en Rusia*, de Emilia Pardo Bazán, y *Le roman russe*, de Eugène Melchior de Vogüé, en el círculo de la intertextualidad', in *Estudios sobre Emilia Pardo Bazán. In memoriam Maurice Hemingway*, ed. by José Manuel González Herrán (Santiago de Compostela: Universidad de Santiago de Compostela and Consorcio de Santiago de Compostela, 1997), pp. 239–67. See also Margaret Tejerizo's essay in the present volume.

19 See Fabio Moraga Valle, 'Las ideas pedagógicas de Tolstói y Tagore en el proyecto vasconcelista de educación, 1921–1964', *Historia Mexicana*, 65.3 (2016), 1341–404, http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2448-65312016000301341#fn25.

20 The word 'crusade' was used by Vasconcelos himself (both in a political and religious sense) and it became commonly associated with his work in the early 1920s and to the educational programme he designed. See Fell, *José Vasconcelos*, p. 19, p. 83, p. 119, p. 228; Christopher Domínguez Michael, 'José Vasconcelos, padre de los bastardos', in José Vasconcelos, *Ulises criollo*, ed. by Claude Fell (Madrid: ALLCA XX, 2000), pp. 984–1066 (p. 1006, p. 1011, p. 1013).

21 Sergio Pitol, 'Ulises criollo', in Vasconcelos, *Ulises*, pp. xix–xxxiii (p. xx).

22 *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

23 See Luis Mario Schneider, *Dos poetas rusos en México: Balmont y Maiakovski* (Mexico City: Sepsetentas, 1973); William Richardson, *Mexico through Russian Eyes*,

My Discovery of America (*Moe otrkytie Ameriki*, 1926), he briefly addressed the subject of the circulation of Russian and Soviet literature in Mexico.²⁴ Maiakovskii could not understand Spanish. Hence, whatever he read about US-American or Mexican poetry would have been translated by someone else. However, some sarcastic comments on Mexican poetry and poets appeared in *My Discovery of America*. He was surprised to find that the translation of Russian literature in Mexico was a recent phenomenon:

Russian literature is liked and admired, although largely by hearsay. They are now translating (!) [seichas perevodiatsia] Lev Tolstoy and Chekhov, and of newer things I have only seen Blok's *The Twelve* and my *Left March*.²⁵

Most of the Spanish translations of Tolstoy circulating in Mexico in the years before Maiakovskii's journey to the Americas came from publishers based in Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, or Buenos Aires. There were some exceptions. *Kholstomer: The History of a Horse* (*Kholstomer*, 1886; *Kolstomero*) appeared from the Mexican publishing house Ballestá in 1910, the year of the rise of the Revolution, while *Two Old Men* (*Dva starika*, 1885; *Los dos viejos y otros cuentos*) was edited by Cvltvra in 1922, with an essay by Dominican intellectual Max Henríquez Ureña. Cvltvra was an editorial project that was created in 1916 as a consequence of the armed conflicts during the 1910s and the necessity of editorial independence from Spain.²⁶

For comparison, Anton Chekhov's writings were available from the Madrid-based Calpe publishing house (soon to merge with Espasa to become the influential publisher Espasa-Calpe) and other Spanish publishers. In 1922, Calpe published an anthology of Chekhov stories translated directly from Russian by Saturnino Ximénez, as *Historia de una anguila y otros cuentos* (*The Eel and Other Stories*).²⁷ N. Tasin (the pseudonym of Naum Iakovlevich Kagan)²⁸

1806–1940 (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), pp. 127–40.

- 24 I deal extensively with Maiakovskii's trip to Mexico in *Guerras floridas. Viajes poéticos de Vladímir Maiakovski y Efraín Huerta entre México y Moscú* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 2021).
- 25 Maiakovskii, *My Discovery of America*, trans. by Neil Cornwell (London: Hesperus, 2005), p. 18.
- 26 The information about Cvltvra comes from Freja I. Cervantes Becerril's entry 'Cvltvra', *Enciclopedia de la Literatura en México*, (2018), <http://www.elem.mx/institucion/datos/1512>.
- 27 The first short story of this anthology is 'The Fish' (in Russian, 'Nalim', literally, a burbot). The Calpe anthology can be read online: Anton Chekhov, 'Historia de una anguila y otras historias', *Wikisource* (2021), https://es.wikisource.org/wiki/Historia_de_una_anguila_y_otras_historias.
- 28 See Tatiana Gritzai Bielova, 'N. Tasin y la España de la Edad de Plata', *Repositorio Institucional de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid* (2020), <https://eprints.ucm.es/id/eprint/59312/>.

and the Mexican intellectual and diplomat Alfonso Reyes co-translated Chekhov's *Ward No. 6* (*Palata No. 6*, 1892; *La sala número 6*), also published by Calpe in 1919.²⁹ During the 1920s, Reyes was Mexican Ambassador to France. Maiakovskii met Reyes in Paris before the former's journey to the Americas; they discussed Mexican art, as Maiakovskii reported in *My Discovery of America*. He described Reyes as a "novelist", although by that point the only fiction Reyes had published was the short story collection *The Oblique Plane* (*El plano oblicuo*, 1920). Might they have talked about Chekhov's *Ward No. 6*? I have not yet found any Mexican-oriented edition prior to 1925.

In 1923, under the imprint of the National University of Mexico, a volume of Tolstoy's *Selected Short Stories* (*Cuentos escogidos*) appeared in the former's book series 'The Classics' (*Los Clásicos*) with its distinctive green covers. The name of the translator is not given; only the following footnote is added to the first short story:

From the translations published in this volume, the following ones were done directly from Russian: 'Two Deaths' [*sic*], 'Polikushka', 'The Death of Ivan Il'ich', 'Where Love is, God Is', 'How Much Land Does a Man Need?' [translated into Spanish as 'Pakhom el mújik', that is, 'Pakhom the Muzhik']. The versions of the other short stories included were carefully reviewed and checked against the Russian text.³⁰

This series was conceived and promoted by José Vasconcelos, following what he considered the most essential books for educating the Mexican reader:

In the same way that the Russians edit at that time the most relevant works of the human spirit and the artworks of their novelistic literature, Vasconcelos ascribes an ambivalent vocation to his editorial policy: to choose 'essential' books and to open the national spirit to the most recent currents of thought.³¹

It was meant to be the first attempt in Mexican history to create a state-run corpus of 'universal' works to be distributed *en masse* among the Mexican population at a low price. Besides Tolstoy's *Selected Short Stories*, an edition of the Gospels (*Evangelios*, 1923) included Tolstoy's 'What Is the Gospel?' (*Kratkoe izlozhenie Evangeliiia*, 1883; '¿Qué es el evangelio'),³² while *Exemplary Lives* (*Vidas ejemplares*,

29 Herón Pérez Martínez, 'Alfonso Reyes y la traducción en México', *Relaciones. Estudios de Historia y Sociedad*, 14.56 (1993), 27–74 (pp. 35, 70), <https://www.colmich.edu.mx/relaciones25/files/revistas/056/HeronPerezMartinez.pdf>.

30 Lev Tolstói, *Cuentos escogidos* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1923), p. 4.

31 Fell, *José Vasconcelos*, p. 485.

32 Cortés Bandala includes the titles of Tolstoy's writings, which appeared as an appendix to Juan de Valdés and Casiodoro de Reina's translation of the

1923), written by Romain Rolland, featured a *Life of Tolstoy* (*Vie de Tolstoï*, 1911; *Vida de Tolstói*) together with Rolland's lives of Beethoven (1903) and Michelangelo (1907). Other authors in the series (there were seventeen in total) included works by Homer (three volumes), Aeschylus, Euripides, Plutarch (two volumes), Plato (three volumes), Plotino, Dante Alighieri, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Rabindranath Tagore.³³ It is not clear whether Maiakovskii had these editions in mind when he wrote about the Mexican translations of Tolstoy in the making back then, but, given the scope of Vasconcelos's project, it is highly likely that he meant some of the green 'Clásicos' editions, which local intellectuals probably presented to him as part of the new reading campaign. The Mexican painter Diego Rivera was Maiakovskii's guide during his Mexican journey. In his company, the Soviet poet visited Rivera's murals at the Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico City. This building used to be Vasconcelos's office until 1924 and also the epicentre of Mexican 'muralism': some of the masterpieces of this nationalist, state-funded and internationally acclaimed public art movement were painted on its walls. The Secretariat itself sponsored the works. Maiakovskii considered it "the world's first communist mural".³⁴

In its turn, the reading campaign spearheaded by Vasconcelos had been inspired by the projects of Maksim Gorky and Anatolii Lunacharskii.³⁵ Years later, Vasconcelos evoked that time:

In cafes and in humble diners we spent long hours discussing Lenin's methods or the novelties in education that Lunacharskii had introduced. I copied one of them when I had to direct education in Mexico: the edition of [literary] classics [...]³⁶

Gospel: 'What Is the Gospel?' ('¿Qué es el evangelio?'), 'What Does the Gospel Announce?' ('¿Qué anuncia el evangelio?'), 'God's Kingdom' ('El reino de Dios'), 'The Evil's Temptation' ('La tentación del maligno'), 'Bible and Gospel' ('Biblia y Evangelio'), 'Do Not Resist the Evil, Forgive' ('No resistáis al mal, perdonad'), 'All as Brothers' ('Todos hermanos'), 'The True Life' ('La verdadera vida'), 'Be like Children' ('Sed como los niños'), 'Jesus and the Sinner Woman' ('Jesús y la pecadora'), 'Conclusion' ('Conclusión'). The translator's name does not appear in this edition. See Yazmín Liliana Cortés Bandala, 'Análisis del proyecto editorial vasconcelista (1921–1924)' (unpublished master's thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2009), p. 210.

33 For an electronic facsimile edition of the books: 'Clásicos verdes', *Gobierno de México* (1921), https://www.conaliteg.sep.gob.mx/clasicos_verdes.html?fbclid=IwAR0iqrs-9KsLhu0d9itYn2ZggVpbEKFPZcn1q0A7uXQFOhrQ5yeRUPUqbr0. See also Fell, *José Vasconcelos*, p. 490.

34 Maiakovskii, *My Discovery*, p. 17.

35 See Fell, *José Vasconcelos*, p. 21; Cortés Bandala, 'Análisis del proyecto', pp. 148–59.

36 Vasconcelos, *La creación de la Secretaría de Educación Pública*, ed. by Carlos Betancourt Cid (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de las Revoluciones en México, 2011), pp. 19–20, <https://inehrm.gob.mx/work/models/inehrm/Resource/493/1/images/vasconcelos.pdf>. Also quoted by Cortés Bandala, 'Análisis del proyecto', p. 148.

With regards to Soviet-era literature, Aleksandr Blok's 'The Twelve' ('Dvenadsat', 1918) was published in 1922 by Cvltvra, in Salomon Kahan and Gabino A. Palma's translation and prologue, collected in the same volume with *The Song of the Hawk* (*Pesnia o sokole*, 1895) and *The Song of the Stormy Petrel* (*Pesnia o burevestnike*, 1901) by Maksim Gorky. This is probably the Blok edition to which Maiakovskii refers. Kahan himself published two versions of poems by Maiakovskii—'Our March' ('Nash marsh', 1918) and 'March to the Left' ('Levyi marsh', 1918), also co-translated with Gabino A. Palma—and an article, 'Russian Poetry of the Revolution versus "Aesthetic" Poetry (On the Occasion of Maiakovskii's Poems)'.³⁷ Kahan's translations and this article appeared in the August issue of Vasconcelian magazine *Torch* (*Antorcha*),³⁸ one month after the Russian poet left Mexico. It is therefore plausible that Maiakovskii and Kahan had met, or at least that a mutual acquaintance had informed Maiakovskii about Kahan's translation of 'The Twelve'.

The initial print run of Vasconcelos's Classics series was between twenty and twenty-five thousand copies per title. It was a large number by Mexican standards of that time,³⁹ and it allowed the still largely illiterate Mexican population mass access to so-called 'universal literature' through public libraries. Nevertheless, in the case of books imported and translated from other languages and cultures, the source editions and their translations were not always clear. Copyright was often violated: "The first volumes of 'The Classics' series (Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, Plato, Plutarch, Dante) were published using translations from Spain and a little bit [*sic*] pirated".⁴⁰ If Lunacharskii's policies were "copied", translations were often used without paying attention to copyright, due to the urgency of the task.⁴¹

Sergio Pitol

My second case study is the dissemination of Slavic and Russian Literature in the Spanish-speaking world by Mexican writer and diplomat Sergio Pitol

37 Maiakovskii, 'Nuestra marcha', 'Marcha a la izquierda', both trans. by Salomón Kahan and Gabino A. Palma in *Antorcha. Revista Mexicana de Cultura Moderna*, 2:1 (August 1925), 21 and 21–22 respectively; and Salomón Kahan, 'La poesía rusa de la Revolución frente a la poesía "estética" (con motivo de los poemas de Vladímir Mayakofsky)' in *Antorcha. Revista Mexicana de Cultura Moderna*, 2:1 (August 1925), 17–20. See also Schneider, 'Dos poetas rusos', pp. 24–28.

38 Claude Fell, 'Un premier bilan culturel de la Révolution mexicaine: la revue *La Antorcha* (1924–1925) de José Vasconcelos', *América. Cahiers du CRICCAL*, 4–5 (1990), 97–110, https://www.persee.fr/doc/ameri_0982-9237_1990_num_4_1_973.

39 For information on the print run of the series: Fell, *José Vasconcelos*, pp. 488–89.

40 Claude Fell, 'L'État, le livre et la lecture au Mexique, au lendemain de la révolution', *América*, 23, 37–50 (p. 44).

41 Cortés Bandala also discusses this point: see 'Análisis del proyecto', pp. 131–32.

(1933–2018) in the last decades of the twentieth century.⁴² Pitol belonged to the so-called Mid-Century Generation, during which the country's modernisation also affected its literature, towards the end of the 1940s. This generation was a turning point in relation to Mexico's Revolutionary ideology in the cultural realm:

Interest in the revolutionary strife and related social topics had started a definitive decline in the diverse artistic spheres—painting, music, literature. [...] 1950 [...] was a crucial year, we can say that it was a watershed in Mexican culture. It is the moment when certain openly avant-garde lines start to be strongly defined at the expense of the nationalist discourse that marked the previous decades.⁴³

After his unsuccessful campaign in the presidential elections in 1929, Vasconcelos went into exile. The members of the Mid-Century Generation matured in an era of political change during the 1930s and 1940s. The nationalist policies conducted by President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40) were reversed by Miguel Alemán's openness to foreign capital investment and his efforts to modernise the country in the early 1940s.

Pitol was born in the city of Puebla in 1933 and spent his childhood within a bilingual community of Italian immigrants in the state of Veracruz. Contact with foreign languages and literature played a significant role for him during these years. Before coming of age, he moved to Mexico City and, some years later, he entered the National Autonomous University of Mexico to study law. There, in university circles, he met some of the intellectuals and artists who would form the Mid-Century Generation. In 1955, Pitol and some of his colleagues published Elvira Nieto's translation of the Mexican section of Maiakovskii's travelogue in the left-wing magazine *Course (Cauce)*. Nationalist ideologues harassed them for this publication since, in *My Discovery of America*, Maiakovskii harshly criticised Mexican reality.⁴⁴ This situation was symptomatic of the intergenerational conflict prevalent in the intellectual field during the 1950s. At the end of that

42 See *Victorio Ferri se hizo mago en Viena. Sobre Sergio Pitol*, ed. by Teresa García Díaz (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 2007).

43 My information about the Mid-Century Generation comes from: Armando Pereira's article 'La generación del medio siglo: un momento de transición de la cultura mexicana', *Literatura Mexicana*, 6:1 (1995), 187–212 (p. 192, pp. 196–97), <https://revistas-filologicas.unam.mx/literatura-mexicana/index.php/lm/article/view/178/178>.

44 For more research on this episode and the short life of *Cauce*, see Mario Alberto Carrillo Ramírez Valenzuela, 'El traductor en fuga. La práctica traductora y el pensamiento traductor de Sergio Pitol' (unpublished master's thesis, El Colegio de México, 2019), pp. 24–25, <https://repositorio.colmex.mx/concern/theses/vq27zn76k?locale=es>; and José Luis González Baena, 'El episodio *Cauce*: nacionalismo, guerra fría y literatura en México, 1955', *Revista Iberoamericana*, 87: 276 (2021), 835–51.

decade, Pitol published his first collection of short stories in Mexico: *Enclosed Time* (*Tiempo cercado*, 1959).⁴⁵ In 1960, he joined the diplomatic service and went to live abroad for the next twenty-eight years.

Pitol's most celebrated publications between the late 1950s and the 2000s comprised Spanish translations of dozens of literary masterpieces written originally in English, Italian, Polish, Chinese, Hungarian, and Russian. In addition to translating Chekhov, Boris Pil'niak, and Vladimir Nabokov, he wrote several essays about Russian writers and a book of memoirs devoted to his Russian experience, *The Journey* (*El viaje*, 2000),⁴⁶ in which he conflates his personal experience with certain dramatic episodes of Russian history (for instance, Marina Tsvetaeva's biography). In 2005, Pitol received the Cervantes Prize—the most important literary award in the Spanish-speaking realm—for his literary achievements. That year he published the autofictional book *The Magician of Vienna* (*El mago de Viena*), his last masterpiece and the final volume in his internationally acclaimed *Trilogía de la memoria* (*Trilogy of Memory*).

Pitol's case is exceptional for Mexico in that he combines the activities of translation and writing, impressing Spanish-speaking readers with his high-quality work.⁴⁷ In this sense, his essays build a bridge with the linguistic communities from which he translates. In 1989, for instance, he included notes on Pil'niak in his collection of essays *The House of the Tribe* (*La casa de la tribu*), edited by the Mexican publishing house Fondo de Cultura Económica. There, Pil'niak is portrayed as "the first and most original great narrator of the Revolution".⁴⁸ His narrative is deeply analysed by Pitol not only in terms of plot and historical context, but also in terms of its style and structure. Therefore, a reflection on these topics made by one of the greatest Mexican narrators of the last century exposes the internal mechanisms of Pil'niak's narrative. Pitol's knowledge of this mechanism was obtained not only from close reading, but also from translating some of Pil'niak's works. Ultimately, this sort of knowledge would influence his own writing: "I do not know better teaching to structure

45 Sergio Pitol, *Tiempo cercado* (Mexico City: Editorial Estaciones, 1959).

46 For the English version of the book, see Sergio Pitol, *The Journey*, trans. by George Henson (Dallas, TX: Deep Vellum, 2015).

47 Other writers of the Mid-Century Generation also translated relevant works of literature from French, English, and German: "Juan García Ponce translated, to name a few, Herbert Marcuse and Pierre Klossowski; Salvador Elizondo translated James Joyce, Malcolm Lowry, Ezra Pound, Ernest Fenollosa, Paul Valéry; Tomás Segovia translated Victor Hugo, Gérard de Nerval, Rimbaud and Bonnefoy; Ulalume González de León translated Lewis Carroll, e.e. cummings, Elizabeth Bishop; Esther Sellingson translated E. M. Cioran and Robert Musil" (see Carrillo Ramírez, 'El traductor en fuga', pp. 23–24).

48 Sergio Pitol, *La casa de la tribu* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), p. 51.

a novel than translation”, he said once.⁴⁹ The affinities between the works he used to translate as a ‘freelancer’ and those that influenced his writing led the Mexican poet and translator Francisco Segovia to this conclusion:

[...] he surely proposed the works [to be translated] to the editor, and not the other way around. This explains that Pitol became very soon not only the translator, but also the promoter of a series of writers little-known, poorly known, or [completely] unknown in the Spanish-speaking world, especially some Slavic-language writers from Eastern Europe, and more particularly Poland.⁵⁰

Pitol worked at the Embassy of Mexico in Moscow from 1977 to 1980.⁵¹ In Russia, he learned the language, wrote short stories, and started translating Pil’niak’s *Mahogany* (*Krasnoe derevo*, 1929) and Chekhov’s *The Shooting Party* (*Drama na okhote*, 1884).⁵² His immersion in Russian culture led him to meet intellectuals like Viktor Shklovskii, “whom he visited many times”,⁵³ and to deliver an impressive corpus of lectures on literature and theory: Russian Formalism, Angelo Maria Ripellino’s essays on Slavic literature, Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (*Tvorchestvo François Rabelais i narodnaia kul’tura srednevekov’ia i Renessansa*, 1965), as well as every major Russian author. After he moved to Czechoslovakia in 1983 to serve as Ambassador for Mexico, Pitol increased his knowledge of Slavic literatures and languages. In *The Journey* he recalls:

When I arrived at Prague, I looked for a Russian teacher. A formidable Czech lady was recommended to me. I read literary texts, I talked with her in that language and we did translation exercises.⁵⁴

During his time in Prague, Pitol published his translations of Chekhov’s *The Shooting Party* (*Un drama de caza*, 1985) and Pil’niak’s *Mahogany* (*Caoba*, 1987) with the Spanish publishers Alianza Editorial and Anagrama respectively. As one of Mexico’s most widely translated authors himself, Pitol’s own work was already available in Russian by the 1980s. In the Soviet Union, one of his short stories ‘Amelia Otero’ (1959) was translated for the 1982 volume *Mexican Short Stories* (*Meksikanskii rasskazi*), which included fiction by Juan Rulfo and Juan José

49 Quoted by Francisco Segovia, *Detrás de las palabras (reflexiones en torno a la tramoya de la lengua)* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2017), p. 107. Luz Fernández de Alba pointed in this direction (Carrillo Ramírez, ‘El traductor en fuga’, p. 127).

50 Segovia, *Detrás de las palabras*, p. 103.

51 Carrillo Ramírez, ‘El traductor en fuga’, p. 50.

52 Alejandro Herмосilla Sánchez, *Sergio Pitol: las máscaras del viajero. Caleidoscopios, lentes fractales y territorios asimétricos de la literatura mexicana: la danza en el laberinto* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 2012), p. 74.

53 Carrillo Ramírez, ‘El traductor en fuga’, p. 50.

54 Sergio Pitol, *El viaje* (Mexico City: Era, 2000), p. 9.

Arreola, Elena Poniatowska and Rosario Castellanos, and even Vasconcelos.⁵⁵ Three years later, the Soviet publishing house Raduga published another anthology, *The Mexican Novel: The 1980's*, where Pitol's novel *Floral Games* (*Juegos florales*, 1982) was included with three stories by the authors Carlos Fuentes, René Avilés Fabila, and José Emilio Pacheco. The foreword to the anthology states that Pitol "during his diplomatic service, [...] lived in many European countries, dedicating himself to literary translation".⁵⁶

In 1988, Pitol left diplomatic service and moved back to Mexico permanently. There he finished his translation of Nabokov's *The Defence* (*Zashchita Luzhina*, 1930; *La defensa*), published in 1990 by Anagrama, with whose founder, Jorge Herralde, Pitol had a good relationship. Over the next decade, he kept writing and received several important literary awards, including the National Prize for Arts and Sciences (Literature and Linguistics) from Mexico in 1993, and the Mazatlan Prize for his book *The Art of Flight* (*El arte de la fuga*, 1996) in 1997. Both his fiction and non-fiction were praised; his translations were well received in Mexico, Spain, and other Spanish-speaking countries. In terms of the quality of his versions, the diversity of the languages which he translated from, and the wide-ranging impact on his readers, Pitol represents an unusual type of translator in Mexican literature. In this respect, Mario Alberto Carrillo Ramírez's thesis (see note 44) presents a comprehensive history of Pitol's translations based on Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory and compares Pitol's "scarce reflexions on translation" with those of other relevant Mexican translators (most of them, central figures of the Mexican literature from the twentieth century): Aurelio Garzón del Camino, Alfonso Reyes, Octavio Paz, Juan García Ponce, and Salvador Elizondo. However, extensive research on Pitol's translation techniques from Russian into Spanish is yet to be undertaken.

In a point-by-point comparison between the Russian text of *Mahogany* and Pitol's translation, we note that Pil'niak's prose style is often enhanced in Pitol's version with more elegant vocabulary, the use of additional words to translate a single term, and occasional additions to the original. For instance, this sentence from *Mahogany* reads:

[E]ti krendeli ukrashali byt so dnei vozniknoveniia Rusi, ot pervykh tsarei Ivanov, byt russkogo tysiachelet'ia.

Vera T. Reck and Michael Green translate the sentence into English this way:

55 *Meksikanskije rasskazi*, ed. by Vera Kuteishchikova (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1982).

56 *Meksikanskaia povest', 80-e gody: sbornik*, trans. by M. Bylinkina and others (Moscow: Raduga, 1985), p. 3.

[T]hese sugar cakes have adorned everyday life from Russia's very beginnings, from the time of the first Tsar Ivans, the everyday life of Russia's thousand years.⁵⁷

Pitol translated the same passage in a very peculiar way:

[T]ales especies han sido el condimento de la vida rusa desde sus orígenes, desde los tiempos del primer zar Iván y han engalanado un milenio de vida nacional.⁵⁸

I will try to render here Pitol's into English as literally as possible:

[S]uch species have been the spice of Russian life since its origins, since the time of the first Tsar Ivan, and they have embellished one millennium of national life.

Some of Pitol's lexical choices are inaccurate: "species" avoids a precise equivalent for the Russian-baked product "krendeli" while "have been the spice" is more awkward than "have adorned" (the latter being closer to the original, although it is likely that he had tried here to hint at the *krendel's* salty taste). The plural "Ivans" is also lost in Pitol's translation; thence, the historical reference to multiple rulers is compressed by the translator's focus on just one Tsar with that name, perhaps the notorious Ivan IV (the Terrible). He introduces an alien word ("engalanado", that is, "embellish", more semantically related to "ukrashali") in the last phrase, while the adjective "Russian" ("russkii") is not reiterated, but translated as "national". Other passages from Pitol's Spanish version of *Mahogany* also betray his grandiloquent personal style.

Pitol's fame increased after receiving the Cervantes Prize in 2005. From 1992 onwards, Pitol held a researcher position at the University of Veracruz's Institute of Linguistic-Literary Research, where he taught at the Department of Spanish Literature.⁵⁹ In 2007, the University launched the 'Sergio Pitol, Translator' ('Sergio Pitol Traductor') book imprint, which now includes twenty Pitol translations. Authors translated in this series include Jerzy Andrzejewski (twice), Jane Austen, Kazimierz Brandys (twice), Chekhov, Joseph Conrad, Tibor Déry, Ronald Firbank, Ford Madox Ford, Robert Graves, Witold Gombrowicz (twice), Lu Hsun, Henry James (three times), Malcolm Lowry,

57 For the Russian text, see Pil'niak, *Krasnoe derevo* (Berlin: Petropolis Verlag, 1929), p. 7. For the English version: Pil'niak, *Chinese Story and Other Tales*, trans. by Vera T. Reck and Michael Green (Norman, OK and London: University of Oklahoma, 1988), pp. 103–50 (p. 117).

58 Boris Piln'iak, 'Caoba', in *Pedro, Su Majestad, Emperador*, trans. by Sergio Pitol (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 2013), pp. 95–160 (p. 97).

59 Carrillo Ramírez, 'El traductor en fuga', p. 51.

Luigi Malerba, and Pil'niak.⁶⁰ According to articles and reviews analysed by Carrillo Ramírez, Pitol's reception as a translator differs radically. Some scholars like Rodolfo Mendoza, who manages the imprint,⁶¹ consider Pitol an accurate translator because he conveyed the essence of the original; others, like Agustín del Moral, argue that Pitol's style overshadows the original text. Taking into account Lawrence Venuti's translation theory and his reflections on the "invisibility of the translator", Carrillo Ramírez concludes: "[t]o Del Moral, Pitol is a translator that becomes visible in his translations, while to Mendoza [...] he becomes invisible".⁶² In view of the passage from *Mahogany* analysed above, Del Moral's opinion seems apt.

Ancira's Russian 'Odyssey': 1984–2021

My third case study concerns the industrious translation endeavour of Selma Ancira (b. 1956), which has now been maintained for forty years and which includes more than seventy titles, making her today's most prominent Russian-to-Spanish Mexican translator. Many of Tolstoy's and Tsvetaeva's complete works are now available in Spanish thanks to her labour.⁶³ Her translation corpus includes books by Aleksandr Pushkin and Nina Berberova, Osip Mandel'stam and Mikhail Bulgakov; and a personal anthology: *Capricious Landscape of Russian Literature (Paisaje caprichoso de la literatura rusa, 2012)*, published by Fondo de Cultura Económica.⁶⁴ In an essay praising Ancira, Segovia observes her exceptional situation in the landscape of literary translation:

[N]o translator that I know has had the fortune of earning a living by translating just what pleases him or her. [...] Usually, those who translate for pleasure do not translate professionally, and those who

60 For the series catalogue, see 'Libros. Catálogo general. Sergio Pitol Traductor', *Universidad Veracruzana*, (n.d.), <http://libros.uv.mx/index.php/UV/catalog/series/SP>.

61 For Mendoza's testimony on the conception of this collection, see Diego Salas, 'Entrevista con Rodolfo Mendoza, director de la colección Sergio Pitol Traductor', *Tierra Adentro*, (2016), <https://www.tierraadentro.cultura.gob.mx/entrevista-con-rodolfo-mendoza-director-de-la-coleccion-sergio-pitol-traductor/>. There Mendoza claims: "As far as I know, there is no other collection, at least in Spanish, devoted to the work of a single translator, although we have such skilled translators in Spanish".

62 Carrillo Ramírez, 'El traductor en fuga', p. 81; Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 2008).

63 See Óscar Garduño Nájera, 'El punzante camino de la traducción: Selma Ancira', *Nexos* (2019), <https://cultura.nexos.com.mx/el-punzante-camino-de-la-traducion-selma-ancira/>.

64 *Paisaje caprichoso de la literatura rusa*, ed. and trans. by Selma Ancira (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012). For the catalogue of Ancira's translations: 'Perevody', *Selma Ancira*, (2010), <http://ancira.ucoz.ru/publ/>.

translate professionally do not choose what to translate. That is what is extraordinary about Selma: even though it helps her to survive [financially], her work is not governed by necessity, but by pleasure.⁶⁵

Segovia compares Ancira's journey from Russia to the Spanish-speaking world and back (since her labour has also been recognised in Russia) as a form of odyssey. The Homeric allusion is particularly appropriate because Ancira's second language for translation purposes is Modern Greek. She received the Pushkin Medal in 2008 for her "great contribution to the study and preservation of cultural heritage";⁶⁶ Spain's National Prize for the Work of a Translator in 2011 for the entirety of her translations;⁶⁷ and the Tomás Segovia Translation Prize in 2012 for her "dissemination of literature" and her "career as a translator".⁶⁸

Born in Mexico City in 1956, Ancira studied Russian Philology at the State University of Moscow and Modern Greek Language and Literature at the University of Athens,⁶⁹ and received her doctorate from the first of these universities, with a thesis on Dostoevsky.⁷⁰ In the early 1980s, she started translating Russian literature into Spanish. Her first published translation was Marina Tsvetaeva, Boris Pasternak, and Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters from the Summer of 1926* (*Cartas del verano de 1926*), which the renowned Mexican publishing house Siglo XXI edited in 1984 (this translation had later editions). After graduating, she had offered Arnaldo Orfila, founding editor of Siglo XXI, her translation of the book by Tsvetaeva, Pasternak, and Rilke.⁷¹ His acceptance marked the first step in her successful career.

Ancira claims Pitol as one of her leading mentors: "... [he] was cultural attaché in Moscow when I was studying [there]. When I told him that I was translating, he was incredibly generous: he gave me advice that I still take into consideration, he supported me, he guided me".⁷² In 1988, she moved to Barcelona, where both the location (between Russia, Greece, and Mexico) and the active publishing industry suited her work. As a professional translator,

65 Segovia, *Detrás de las palabras*, p. 97.

66 Iurii Nikolaev, 'Medal'iu Pushkina nagrazhdena meksikanskaia perevodchitsa Selma Ancira', *RIA, Novosti*, 23 October 2008, <https://ria.ru/20081023/153686793.html>.

67 'Selma Ancira, galardonada con el Premio Nacional de Traducción', *El País*, 23 November 2011, https://elpais.com/cultura/2011/11/23/actualidad/1322002807_850215.html.

68 Marta Eva Loera, 'Selma Ancira recibe el Premio Tomás Segovia', *Universidad de Guadalajara*, 26 November 2012, <https://www.udg.mx/en/noticia/selma-ancira-recibe-el-premio-tomas-segovia>.

69 'Selma Ancira', *Enciclopedia de la Literatura en México*, (2018), <http://www.elem.mx/autor/datos/2533>.

70 Guadalupe Alonso Coratella, 'Selma Ancira: "Cada libro te pide algo distinto"', *Milenio* (2019), <https://www.milenio.com/cultura/laberinto/libro-pide-distinto-selma-ancira-traductora-tolstoi>.

71 See Garduño Nájera, 'El punzante camino de la traducción'.

72 *Ibid.*

Ancira moves between languages and spaces for the sake of the quality of her versions. Rather than achieving mere mechanical transfer from one language to another, Ancira insists on capturing “details”, often travelling to the country of the source language to research the diverse aspects involved in each project.⁷³ From 2007 to 2015, Ancira also co-organised the International Congress of Russian Literature Translators in Iasnaiá Poliana, where translators of Russian literature into various languages met on several occasions to discuss their work.⁷⁴

Ancira’s career is therefore a case study in both methodical and heuristic translation, which through professionalisation and institutional support enabled her to devote themselves to lengthy projects. For instance, most of Tsvetaeva’s writings have already been translated by Ancira into Spanish, and published mostly in Spain, but often in Mexico too: *The Poet and Time* (*Poet i vremia*, 1932; *El poeta y el tiempo*, 1990); *The Devil* (*Chert*, 1935; *El diablo*, 1991); *Earthly Signs* (*Zemnye primetye*, 1922; *Indicios terrestres*, 1992); *My Pushkin* (*Moi Pushkin*, 1937; *Mi Puskin*, 1995); *History of a Dedication* (*Istoria odnogo posviashcheniia*, 1932; *Una dedicatoria*, 1998); *The Tale of Sonechka* (*Povest’ o Sonechke*, 1937; *La historia de Sónchka*, 1999); *A Captive Spirit* (*Plennyi dukh*, 1934; *Un espíritu prisionero*, 1999); *Natalia Goncharova* (*Natalia Goncharova*, 1929; *Natalia Goncharova*, 2006); and *A Living Word about a Living Man* (*Zhivoe o zhivom*, 1932; *Viva voz de vida*, 2008).⁷⁵

In contrast with Pitol, Ancira rarely writes about her own translations.⁷⁶ Some examples of her own writing, however, can be found. Her brief “Translator’s Note” to *A Captive Spirit* is a good example of her sharp insights into literature:

Marina Tsvetaeva’s literary style is concise and sonorous. It pulverises words, swaps forms, plays with the music of language. And it is precisely music that her controversial use of dashes recalls. For her, the dash is a way to make her ideas more emotionally precise. It is a pause, a sign that is equal to the silence in the musical score. Educated in the universe of sounds, what happens in the prose and poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva is what happens in vocal scores, where syllables are separated with dashes in order to fit together with the cadence of melody.⁷⁷

Hence, what appears to be a technical comment is revealed as a discussion of the musicality of writing. Firstly, Tsvetaeva’s use of the dash—with which Ancira

73 See *ibid.*; Juan Carlos Castellanos C., ‘Selma Ancira y su arte de la traducción’, *20 Minutos* (2019), <https://www.20minutos.com.mx/noticia/844835/0/selma-ancira-su-arte-traducci-oacute-n/>.

74 Santoveña (ed.), *De oficio*, pp. 166–67.

75 For this list: ‘Katalog perevodov proizvedenii M. I. Tsvetaevoi’, *Selma Ancira*, (2010), http://ancira.ucoz.ru/publ/spisok_po_avtoram/rus/404/5-1-0-17.

76 Segovia, *Detrás de las palabras*, p. 101.

77 Selma Ancira, ‘Nota de la traductora’, in Marina Tsvetaeva, *Un espíritu prisionero*, trans. by Selma Ancira and Ricardo San Vicente (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg and Círculo de Lectores, 1999), p. 33 (p. 33); see Santoveña (ed.), *De oficio*, p. 15.

has long been familiar and which her editors used to reject—is here explained to prepare the reader for the Russian poet's unconventional punctuation;⁷⁸ and, secondly, this theme serves to remind the reader of those features lost in every translation: the original “melody”, “sound”, “music”, “cadence”, “melody”, etc. But even more than a technical comment or a brief theory of Tsvetaeva's punctuation, Ancira's remarks are a rhetorical device to make the reader trust the translator's expertise and acuity, to share her sense of closeness to the late author, and to show that a written text can sound like a musical score—and, eventually, come to life through the voice. Let us look at an example from Tsvetaeva's ‘A Captive Spirit’:

Andrei Belyi—tabu. Videt' ego nel'zia, tol'ko o nem slyshat'. Pochemu? Potomu chto on—znamenityi poet, a my srednikh klassov gimnazistki.

Russkikh—i detei—i poetov—fatalizm.⁷⁹

Ancira translates this passage into Spanish thus:

Andréi Bély era un tabú. Verlo era imposible. Sólo se podía oír hablar de él. ¿Por qué? Porque él era un poeta famoso—y nosotras—alumnas de clases secundarias.

Fatalismo —ruso—de niños—y de poetas.⁸⁰

Meanwhile, in an English version by J. Marin King, one finds:

Andrei Bely was taboo. You can't see him, only hear about him. Why? Because he is a renowned poet, and we are secondary school girls in the middle grades.

The fatalism—of Russians—and children—and poets.⁸¹

On the one hand, in the Russian version we can observe the typical use of the dash for the ellipsis of the verb “byť” (“to be”) in the present tense (i.e. in nominal predicates). While King decides to avoid the ellipsis by adding the verb (“we *are* secondary school girls”, italics mine), Ancira keeps it (“nosotras—alumnas de clases secundarias”). On the other hand, both King and Ancira

78 Ancira stated recently: “For example, little by little I'm giving back to Tsvetaeva the dashes that the editors took from me. [...] Because they took Tsvetaeva's dashes from me and left me with fifteen percent of them”. See Santoveña (ed.), *De oficio*, p. 215.

79 Marina Tsvetaeva, ‘Plennyi dukh (moia vstrecha s Andreem Belym’), *Russkaia klassicheskaia literatura*, <http://tsvetava.lit-info.ru/tsvetava/proza/plennyj-duh-1.htm>.

80 Tsvetaeva, ‘Un espíritu prisionero’, in *Un espíritu prisionero*, pp. 97–171 (p. 101).

81 Marina Tsvetaeva, ‘A Captive Spirit’, in *A Captive Spirit: Selected Prose*, trans. by J. Marin King, pp. 99–169 (p. 101).

translate the dashes of the last sentence into their target languages and adapt the declension of the genitive adjective (“russkikh”, that is, “of Russians”) and nouns (“detei” and “poetov”, that is, “of children” and “of poets”). King even retains the coordinating conjunction typical of Russian (“and children—and poets”). In this brief comparison we can see that Ancira (similarly to King, although with unique final decisions) chooses to maintain both some syntactic structures specific to the Russian language (the verbal ellipsis of the verb “to be” in the present tense) and the stylistic use of the dash in Tsvetaeva’s work. Her translation presents the Spanish-speaking reader with a prose style that does not exclude or neutralise particularities from Russian, while remaining highly efficient as a literary device in the target language.

Conclusion

The translation of Russian literature in Mexico or by Mexicans has changed in most respects during the last century, except one: there is still no national facility for training professional translators from Russian into Spanish. This fact has shaped the dissemination of Russian literature in Mexico during this period. In post-Revolutionary Mexico, translations of Russian literature were often carried out via an intermediate language, like French, or else imported from publishing houses in Madrid, Barcelona, or Buenos Aires. This dependence on foreign institutions and expertise, nonetheless, did not prevent Mexico from enjoying a significant reception of Russian literature and figures. For political reasons, Russian writers were prominent during the 1930s and 1940s. This did not necessarily guarantee personal safety from Stalinist attack or economic security: some—like Serge between 1941 and his death in 1947—struggled to make a living in Mexico and to survive Stalinism. On the other hand, Vasconcelos’s admiration for Tolstoy had a long-term impact: as late as 1965, the Mexican poet and civil servant Jaime Torres Bodet dedicated an essay to Tolstoy, *Leo Tolstoy: His Life and Work* (*León Tolstói: su vida y su obra*), in which he recalled his “Master”, Vasconcelos: “[w]hen Vasconcelos (whose footprint in Mexican education will be indelible) founded the Secretariat of Public Education, he professed an unrestrained admiration for Tolstoy. He ordered Tolstoy’s name to be inscribed on his office’s frieze”.⁸²

Later in the twentieth century, Sergio Pitol’s essays and translations inaugurated a new approach to Russian literature. Texts directly translated from Russian ceased to be only discrete intellectual productions by Spanish or Mexican translators. For the first time, they acquired a new role as constituent elements within new fictions that are now considered among Mexican ‘classics’ of recent

82 Torres Bodet, p. 75. Torres Bodet was Vasconcelos’s personal secretary at the Secretariat of Public Education during the early 1920s and would himself assume the role of Secretary during the 1940s.

decades: from *The House of the Tribe* to *The Journey*. Pitol's autobiographical texts often include fragments of his own translations. In a Borgesian turn, Elizabeth Corral suggests that some translated fragments from Nabokov or Pil'niak form an inseparable part of Pitol's *The Journey*.⁸³ While Pitol learned to translate from Russian in a stay motivated by professional reasons, Ancira is the one of the first relevant Mexican translators to obtain a university degree in philology in order to translate from Russian. Pitol's fame as a translator owed much to his existing celebrity as a writer. Selma Ancira, by contrast, belongs to a time where translators are becoming noteworthy in their own right. She made her name in the publishing industry, enabling her to dedicate time and energy to her long-term projects. After years of translating for both public and commercial publishing houses, since 2009 her work has been honoured with prizes and grants: for instance, the grant by the National System of Art Creators in the area of Translation, which the Mexican government awarded her three times in 2009, 2014, and 2017. This generous grant has a duration of three years in each case and enables the holder to develop an artistic project within that period.⁸⁴

Through these three case studies, I have traced the slender thread in the transfer of literature from Russia into Mexico throughout the last century. Further research on this topic should consider case studies of translators less visible than those described here, either because they are less productive (Ancira's diverse and prolific output naturally attracts more attention), or because of the lack of institutional platforms. In this respect, the Russian Literature Seminar from August 2021 to March 2022 was the first attempt to bring together translators from Russian into Spanish with specialists on Russian literature from both sides of the Atlantic, within a Mexican framework. Some Mexican translators like Alfredo Hermosillo, Mar Gámiz, Indira Díaz, and the Colombian-born Jorge Bustamante García, participated in this Seminar; most of them have lived in Russia for a long time and have published translations of their own. It is likely that a new stage in the translation of Russian literature *in* or *out of* Mexico is now in the making, characterised by intensive collaboration and exchanges with fellow translators in Latin America and Spain.

83 Elizabeth Corral states: "[...] [Borges] forecasts joyful times when translation would be considered worthwhile in itself. For Pitol, that day came long ago. [...] Here, the translation, the foreign voice, is incorporated organically and harmonically into Pitol's writing, it turns into an essential element of the new textual weave, with which the condition desired by Borges is surpassed." 'Sergio Pitol, traductor', *Literal Magazine*, 11 (2012), <https://literalmagazine.com/sergio-pitol-traductor/>.

84 For the official results of the National System of Art Creators since its foundation in 1993, see 'Sistema de Apoyos a la Creación y Proyectos Culturales. Resultados: Sistema Nacional de Creadores de Arte', *Secretaría de Cultura*, (n.d.), <https://foncaenlinea.cultura.gob.mx/resultados/resultados.php>.

