Review Essay


Critics have traditionally remarked on the haunting presence of James Joyce among Argentine writers throughout the twentieth century by focusing mainly on Jorge Luis Borges, whose contradictory comments evince a fundamental yet ambivalent influence. Borges, who engaged in a prolonged and fascinating dialogue with Joyce, ever since his 1925 one-page fragmentary translation of the final section of *Ulysses*, repeatedly invokes the polyglot Irish writer whose verbal experiments come directly into play in his own practice of writing, while at the same time, somewhat paradoxically, he would refuse to read at length a novel that he contended contained the most tedious and chaotic pages of history. Although, in his peculiar, playful way, Borges stated that *Ulysses* was both illegible and untranslatable, he did transform the last page of Joyce’s *Ulysses* into the first page of his Spanish (Borgesian) *Ulises*, thus exemplifying his own aesthetics of irreverence, mistranslation and displacement.\(^1\) Twenty years later, in 1945, Argentina’s imaginary meeting with Joyce would reach its culmination as the first complete translation of *Ulysses* into the Spanish language, by José Salas Subirat, saw the light precisely in Buenos Aires.

Although Salas Subirat’s pioneering translation in the Spanish-speaking world was later overshadowed by the publication of José María Valverde’s emblematic *Ulises* in 1976 and Francisco García Tortosa’s acclaimed 1999
translation, with the recent publication of his *Ulises. Claves de Lectura*, Argentine writer and scholar Carlos Gamerro has decidedly undertaken the task of reclaiming the relevance of the first *Ulises* for contemporary Latin-American readers. Gamerro, who has taught *Ulysses* at the University of Buenos Aires and has conducted seminars and reading groups for twenty years, claims in his introduction that his guide to Salas Subirat’s *Ulises* is aimed at non-specialists and is designed to help “the common reader” (13). Likewise, the subtitle, “Instrucciones para perderse en el laberinto más complejo de la literatura universal” is intended as a provocative proposal to prove Borges wrong. A provocation that Gamerro makes obvious through his opening words, an invitation for readers to approach Joyce’s *Ulysses* in its entirety, “getting lost in the labyrinth yet finding the exit in the end.” (14)

The book is handily structured around the eighteen episodes of *Ulysses* appropriately renamed according to their corresponding Spanish translations in Salas Subirat’s version. Prior to that, the author frames his materials carefully in a twenty-page introduction. We find here ten brief sections through which the author stops to consider preliminary key aspects that all prospective readers of *Ulysses* should be acquainted with, namely questions concerning Joyce’s peculiar use of language and style, the novel’s mythic method and structure, and the historical context of Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century. Thus, Gamerro devotes the opening pages to explaining that the main difficulties in reading such an encyclopaedic novel lie in the identification of the complex network of quotations and allusions, as well as in unravelling the extra-textual and inter-textual references which conform to the hypertext of *Ulysses*.

Among the many merits of this guide, I would highlight the author’s effort to contextualize Joyce’s novel for contemporary readers. Gamerro infuses his manual of instructions with pertinent reflections, as when he explains that, unlike the original readers, “we have been trained” (17) and are familiar with aspects that no longer will be experienced as
shocking, or when he uses provocative similes extracted from current popular culture, like the comparison between the challenges faced by readers of *Ulysses* and the challenges presented in videogames (17), the references to films (23) and the equation of the opening of Homer’s epic narrative with the genre of the thriller (37). Because of the relevant position that Salas Subirat’s translation holds in Argentina, Gamerro claims that the work has become “part of our literary history” (18) and can be traced in the texts by Manuel Puig, Rodolfo Walsh, Ricardo Piglia and Luis Gusmán, candidly admitting that “despite its overwhelming profusion of errors” (18) this is nevertheless the translation he likes best.

Undoubtedly, Gamerro’s commentaries are strongly influenced by what he himself acknowledges as his interest in “the politics of language” (18). His attention to the language question from a postcolonial perspective enables him to establish that the linguistic frictions in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and the political tensions they are a symptom of will be re-enacted naturally in any Spanish-American translation (19). Whereas in his introduction Gamerro reveals an obvious concern with exploring the idiosyncrasy of Joyce’s novel in relation to the works of major Latin American writers, like Guillermo Cabrera Infante, whom he names “the most Joycean of all” (30), in each of the eighteen sections devoted to the different episodes his attention appropriately shifts to questions of interpretation in Joyce’s novel (mediated here by Salas Subirat’s translation) which are examined in the light of classic studies like Thornton’s *Allusions in Ulysses* (1968) and Gilbert’s *James Joyce’s Ulysses: a Study* (1958) and, of course, Blamires’s *The New Bloomsday Book* (1988) and Gifford’s *Ulysses Annotated* (1989).

In this respect, as Gamerro himself notes, although the book has no pretension to opening new ground, it can be fairly said that it does contain many insightful ideas for those wishing to read *Ulysses* in Salas Subirat’s translation. Throughout this guide, it becomes obvious that the author is a highly qualified reader and an expert commentator. Thus, as he plunges into the
apparently chaotic ocean of *Ulysses*, he aptly provides the keys to deciphering many interpretive enigmas. Gamerro’s method emerges as an eclectic combination of plot summary, stylistic commentary, interpretive precisions, critical and theoretical analysis, and personal appreciations together with erudite discussions and comments on the translator’s semantic choices. He examines Salas Subirat’s use of synonyms, as in the use of “bacía” “cántaro” and “taza” for “bowl” in “Telemachus” and appropriately concludes that the Argentine translator is amiss in doing away with Joyce’s meaningful chain of associations. Another welcome characteristic is the spontaneous and conversational tone of his text and his constant dialogue with the readers, who are addressed as if they were listening closely, thus avoiding the solemnity and dryness that often mark this type of study. Gamerro effectively gains his readers’ attention through his astute discussion of sentences, passages and occasionally mere words. He shares his vast knowledge in a clear, personal style, establishing a relationship of complicity, as if he were in front of a group of students building naturally upon parallels, invoking a varied body of sources and drawing on analogies between *Ulysses* and other texts in order to illuminate the reading of the novel in translation. There are also many occasions in which Gamerro suggestively examines Joyce’s novels in the light of theories and texts which readers of the twenty-first century should be familiar with, as when he appropriately introduces a reference to Michel Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* in his discussion of Stephen’s concern with the “signatures of things” in “Proteus”.

Considering the fact that this volume is intended mainly as an invitation to read Joyce’s *Ulysses* through Salas Subirat’s translation, the lack of clear references for the selected quotations, which are incorporated highlighted in bold in the text but without indications for page numbers, remains a major formal problem. Even so, Gamerro’s guide to *Ulises* amply fulfills the expectations raised by this type of publication. As remarked before, the author rewards readers with numerous insightful ideas as he skilfully draws connections, not only
demonstrating a clear familiarity with a major literary text of European (and world) Literature, but more importantly, providing an astute and enriching interpretation for Joyce’s Latin-American readers.

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Notes

2 The translations are all mine.