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The Slaughteryard Project

I

Esteban Echeverría's *El matadero*, written towards the end of the 1830s, is chronologically the first work of Argentine prose fiction. A fierce and outspoken opponent of Rosas' Federalist regime, the author was forced to live a long exile in Montevideo, where he died in 1851. *El matadero* remained unpublished until 1871. Owing in part to its brevity – a mere 6,000 or so words – it may be the most studied school text in all Latin-American literature. It is certainly known and acclaimed beyond the borders of Argentina.

My translation of the work was undertaken as a personal venture, a pure labour of love, a way of giving the story the closest possible reading. I mean by this that at the outset I did not entertain the idea of publication. In fact, many months were to pass before I could convince myself that Echeverría's tale could be cast into an appropriate English. Once armed with a rough draft, I waylaid my partner Susan Ashe into joining me to complete the task. Looking back, I see that I was faced with three fundamental problems. The last of these came at the end and was not a translation problem. I will discuss it farther on.

The immediate difficulty lay in the tone and fabric of Echeverría's prose. The story's early pages consist of a number of longish sentences that are heavy, sometimes even dense, with irony, sarcasm, and sardonic asides. Could such periods resonate in English with ease and fluidity in the way they do in the original

Spanish? For example, the opening page:

Despite the fact that I am writing history, I shall not copy the early Spanish chroniclers of America, who are held up to us as models, and go back to Noah's ark and the generations of his family. There are plenty of reasons for ignoring such an example, but to avoid long-windedness I shall pass over them and say only that the events of my story took place at the end of the 1830s. It was during Lent, a period when in Buenos Aires meat is in short supply, since the Church – adopting Epictetus's dictum, *sustine, abstine* – ordains fasting and abstinence for the stomachs of the faithful on the grounds that the flesh is sinful and, according to the proverb, flesh seeks flesh. And since from the beginning the Church, by God's direct command, has held spiritual sway over both consciences and stomachs – which in no way belong to the individual – nothing is more just or reasonable than that the Church should forbid wrongdoing.

Such sentences are prone to falling into clumsy, stilted English. One example should suffice. Here is the second sentence above as it appears in the translation by Angel Flores, which dates from 1959:

Numerous reasons I might adduce for not pursuing their example, but I shall pass them over in order to avoid prolixity, stating merely that the events here narrated occurred in the 1830's of our Christian era.

II

The Slaughteryard

final pages

Just then the guttural voice of one of the butchers shouted, 'Here comes a Unitarian!'

Hearing the fraught word, the entire mob stopped in its tracks.

'Look at his U-shaped beard. And he's not wearing a red ribbon on his tail-coat or a mourning band on his hat.'

'Unitarian dog.'

'See his fancy city clothes.'

'And he's using an English saddle.'

'Give him a taste of the corn-cob.'

'Or a shearing.'

'He needs taking down a peg.'

'Showing off with those holsters.'

'All these fancy-arse Unitarians are show-offs.'

'Are you up to it, then, Matasiete?'

'Well, are you or not?'

'I say he is.'

Matasiete was a man of few words and much action. When it came to violence, agility, skill with an axe, knife, or horse, he said nothing but simply acted. Now he had been provoked. Spurring his mount, he loosened his reins and rode straight for the Unitarian.

The young man, who was about twenty-five, spruce and well-turned out, had been riding to Barracas without the slightest fear of danger when the torrent of jibes spewed from those uncouth mouths. Seeing the ominous looks of that pack of slaughteryard dogs, the newcomer automatically reached a hand for the holsters

on his English saddle, but a sideways shove by Matasiete's horse knocked him over the hindquarters of his mount, throwing him flat on his back, where he lay still.

'Hurrah for Matasiete!' shouted the mob, flocking to close in on the victim like birds of prey on the skeleton of an ox slain by a tiger.

Still dazed, casting a furious glance at the brutes around him, the young man made for his horse, which stood a few yards off, to seek redress and vengeance in his pistols. Springing to the ground, Matasiete waylaid him, seized him by the cravat with one hefty arm and threw him down. Drawing his knife from his belt, the butcher held it to the other's throat.

A hoot of laughter and a rousing cheer once more hailed Matasiete.

What nobility of soul! What courage the Federalists had! Always in a gang, falling like vultures on a helpless victim.

'Cut his throat, Matasiete. He was going for his pistols. Slit his throat the way you slit the bull's.'

'Two-faced Unitarian. He needs shearing.'

'He has a fine throat for the violin.'

'Play the violin on his throat.'

'Make him dance in his own blood.'

'Let's have a try,' said Matasiete, leering. Pinning the young man's chest with his left knee and gripping him by the hair, the butcher drew the edge of his knife across the fallen victim's throat.

'No, don't cut his throat,' came the commanding voice of the slaughteryard judge as he rode up.

'To the counting-house!'

'Take him to the counting-house.'

'Get the corn-cob and shears ready.'

'Death to the barbarous Unitarians!'

'Three cheers for the Restorer of the Laws!'

'Three cheers for Matasiete!'

Again the chorus of spectators roared approval and shouted for death. Binding the unfortunate young man's arms behind him,

with blows and shoves, jeers and insults, they dragged him to the torture bench just as his tormentors did to Christ.

In the middle of the room stood a big heavy table that was never clear of glasses and playing cards except when they were removed to make way for torture or an execution by the slaughteryard's Federalist killers. In one corner stood another small table, laid out with writing materials and a notebook and surrounded by a few chairs, prominent among them that of the judge. One man, by appearance a soldier, sat there accompanying himself on a guitar as he sang a song highly popular amongst the Federalists about dancing in the slippery blood of a slit throat. At that moment, the throng of rabble reached the veranda and hurled the young Unitarian inside.

'You're in line for the slippery dance,' someone shouted.

'Commend your soul to the devil.'

'He's as angry as a wild bull.'

'The stick will soon tame him.'

'He needs softening up.'

'First the rod and shears.'

'Or else the candle.'

'The corn-cob would be better.'

'Be silent and sit down!' ordered the judge, lowering himself into his big chair.

Everyone obeyed. The young man, still standing, glared at him.

'Vile murderers, what do you intend to do with me?' he cried, his voice charged with indignation.

'Calm down!' said the judge, smiling. 'There's no need to get worked up. You'll find out in good time.'

The young man was beside himself with rage. His whole body seemed to convulse. His livid face, his voice, his quivering lips betrayed the pounding of his heart and the state of his nerves. His fiery eyes seemed to burst from their sockets, his lank black hair bristled. His bare throat and shirt front revealed the violent throb of his arteries and his anxious breathing.

‘You’re trembling, are you?’ asked the judge.

‘Only with rage, since I can’t strangle you with my bare hands.’

‘Would you be strong or bold enough for it?’

‘More than enough for you, you coward.’

‘Let’s have the shears for clipping my horse. Trim this fellow Federalist-style.’

Two men seized the Unitarian, one by the rope that bound his arms, the other by the head, and in a minute – to the onlookers’ noisy laughter – they snipped off his side-whiskers, which reached all the way to his chin.

‘Fetch a glass of water to cool him down,’ said the judge.

‘I’d make you drink gall, you wretch,’ the young man said.

A small black lackey stepped forward, a glass of water in his hand. The young man lashed out with a kick, and the glass smashed against a roof beam, showering the astonished spectators with fragments.

‘He’s incorrigible.’

‘We’ll tame him.’

‘Silence!’ said the judge. ‘Now you’re shaven like a Federalist, all you need is a moustache. See you don’t forget it. Let’s take stock then. Why aren’t you wearing a ribbon?’

‘Because I don’t choose to.’

‘Don’t you know the Restorer demands it?’

‘Livery is for slaves like you, not for free men.’

‘Free men can be forced to wear it.’

‘Yes, forced by bestial violence. That’s your weapon, you scoundrels. Wolves, tigers, and panthers are also strong. The lot of you should be crawling about on all fours like them.’

‘Aren’t you afraid the tigers will tear you to pieces?’

‘I’d rather that than have my hands tied behind me while you pluck out my intestines one by one like a horde of crows.’

‘Why aren’t you wearing a mourning band on your hat for our heroine?’

‘Because I wear one in my heart for our whole country – the

country your despicable henchmen have murdered!’

‘Don’t you know the Restorer has decreed it?’

‘No, it was you slaves who decreed it so as to flatter your lord and master’s pride and pay him the tribute of cringing servitude.’

‘Insolent dog, you’ve grown brazen. Another peep out of you and I’ll have your tongue. Take down this foppish dandy’s breeches and give his buttocks a taste of the rod. Bind him to the table.’

Barely had the judge spoken, when four of his blood-spattered bullies lifted the young man and stretched him out the length of the table, holding all his limbs down.

‘Slit my throat rather than strip me, you blackguards.’

They gagged him and tore at his clothes. The young man squirmed, kicked out, gnashed his teeth. First his limbs were supple as a reed, then hard as iron, and his spine writhed like a snake. Drops of sweat big as pearls ran down his face; his eyes shot fire, his mouth foam, and the veins of his neck and forehead stood out dark, as if choked with blood, against his white skin.

‘Tie him down first,’ ordered the judge.

‘He’s fuming,’ said one of the torturers.

A moment later, turning his body over, they bound his feet to the legs of the table. In order to do the same with his arms, they loosened the rope that held his hands behind his back. Feeling them free, the young man made a sudden movement that seemed to drain him of all his strength and vitality. He raised himself first on his arms, then on his knees, and then collapsed, murmuring, ‘Slit my throat rather than strip me, you blackguards.’

His resistance gone, he was quickly tied in the form of a cross, and his tormentors continued the work of stripping off his clothes. At that, a stream of blood gushed from the young man’s mouth and nostrils, and, spreading out, poured down on either side of the table. The four who had bound him stood rooted with shock; the onlookers were stunned.

‘The barbarous Unitarian has burst with anger,’ said one.

‘He had a river of blood in his veins,’ said another.

‘Poor devil, all we wanted was to have fun with him, and he took it too seriously,’ put in the judge, frowning his tigrish brow. ‘We’ll draw up a report. Untie him and let’s be off.’

The men obeyed. The door was locked, and within moments the mob had skulked off in the wake of the judge, who rode in silence and with bowed head.

The Federalists had carried out another of their many deeds of heroism. At that period, the cutthroats of the slaughteryard were the apostles who by rod and fist spread the gospel of the rosy federation, and it is not hard to imagine the sort of federation that would spring from these butchers’ heads and knives. In accordance with the cant invented by the Restorer, patron of their brotherhood, they dubbed ‘barbarous Unitarian’ anyone who was not a barbarian, a butcher, a cutthroat, or a thief; anyone who was decent or whose heart was in the right place; every illustrious patriot or friend of enlightenment and freedom. From the events related above, it can clearly be seen that the hotbed of the Federation was in the slaughteryard.

III

The translation difficulties in the foregoing were all rooted in the story’s historical background and in a series of key terms that are obscure even to native Argentines. Complicating matters further is the fact that Echeverría’s original manuscript no longer exists. Our ur-text is the first printing of 1871, which is riddled with mistakes and discrepancies. Some of these were corrected for the second printing of the story in 1874, but at the same time fresh errors were introduced.

A single word, *mazorca* – which is sometimes capitalized – stands at the heart of the problem. Unless the translator is aware that the term has multiple meanings, some crucial distinctions are lost

and details of the story turn into nonsense. In the above excerpt, there are three references to ‘the corn-cob’. In the Flores translation, the term is translated as ‘gibbet’. But in the context, how a gallows can figure in the proceedings defies the imagination. In another English version, by John Incledon, published in 1983, the translator seems to recognize the existence of a problem here but he manages only to turn the gibbet into a pillory, which is still unsatisfactory, and a pillory-table, whatever that may be. My research into these mysteries, the fruit of long and extensive reading, revealed that the *mazorca*, or corn-cob, was both the symbol of Rosas’ terrorist organization and the instrument of torture and humiliation used for the anal rape of its victims. This makes perfect sense. To confuse matters – and what probably misled the other translators – Echeverría himself, with his typical sarcasm, punned on the word *mazorca*, spelling it *mas-horca*, meaning ‘more gibbets’. He was, in other words, accusing the Rosas regime of more hangings, more assassinations.

More difficult were Echeverría’s references to playing the violin on the victim’s throat and making him dance in his own blood. The lore here is very complicated. Incledon deals with this clumsily and not entirely accurately in a footnote. (Footnotes in the translation of fiction are a cop-out.) His lines, “He’s got a nice long neck like a violin.” and “Play the violin.” are somewhat wide of the mark. Flores fumbles and fudges. He has it: “He has a good neck for the ‘violin’ – you know, the gibbet!” and “Better use the Slippery-One on him!” While the former is forced, the latter is utterly incomprehensible. Echeverría gives a graphic account of all this himself in his long narrative poem *Avellaneda*. There, in end notes, he informs us that ‘The *Resvalosa* is a sonata of throat-cutting, and, as the word indicates, it enacts the sliding movement of a knife blade across a victim’s throat....’

IV

My third basic problem, mentioned at the outset, was how to publish in book form a text that comes to no more than thirty-or-so pages. My work on *The Slaughteryard* broke down in equal measure between translation and research. As the work progressed I kept turning up information and material that I felt should be shared with my readers. First off, I compiled a substantial glossary that serves to illuminate the text without intruding on it. This details the significance of costume and hair styles and riding apparel. I then put together seven appendixes that ranged from the foreword to the story written by its first editor and publisher, Juan María Gutiérrez, in 1871, to accounts by five different English travellers in Argentina of the nineteenth century, including Charles Darwin, and excerpts from Federalist broadside verses of the day as well as passages from poems by Echeverría and Hilario Ascasubi. In the end, since I had so much difficulty tracking down the original printed version of the text in the National Library of Argentina, I decided to include it in another appendix, exactly as it appeared for the first time, warts and all, in the *Revista del Río de la Plata*. In itself, this version of the text is instructive of the vagaries of Argentine publishing and editorial standards in the latter years of the nineteenth century. As yet, I have approached no publisher with my little book, which now contains more than 180 pages but still lacks an introduction.

Incidentally, the Flores translation is titled *The Slaughter House* and Incedon's *The Slaughterhouse*. Yet most of the story takes place on open ground in a huge yard containing a corral. All this is closely documented in a description of one such *matadero* written in English by Emeric Essex Vidal, in 1820. Vidal called the four open-air Buenos Aires *mataderos* of his day 'public butcheries'. Unfailingly, Spanish-English dictionaries translate the word *matadero* as 'slaughterhouse', while the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy speaks of a *sitio*, or place, where animals are slaughtered. House to me smacks of a modern refrigerated meat-packing

plant, which did not exist in the Argentine in Echeverría's time. Translators should try harder.

If there is any lesson to be learned in what I have written here it is that the translator should, first and foremost, apply common sense when trying to solve problems. There was no imaginable reason for there to be a gallows or a pillory in a Buenos Aires abattoir in the 1830s or for that matter in the 1930s. Common sense. Plainly the word *mazorca* had another meaning. Find that meaning and when the right term has been found all the pieces drop in and fit together like any bit of clockwork.