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# Walter Owen, Scottish Translator of *Tabaré*

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One of the most interesting and significant literary connections between Uruguay and Scotland is Glaswegian Walter Owen's verse translation of the great 19<sup>th</sup> century epic poem, *Tabaré*, by Uruguayan Romantic poet Juan Zorrilla de San Martín (1855-1931).<sup>1</sup> *Tabaré*, "el poema nacional del Uruguay" (García Méndez), was written between 1879 and 1887, first published in 1888, with subsequent revisions in 1892 and 1918 and published "definitively" in 1923. The translator, Walter Hubbard Owen, is –ironically– less known in his native Scotland than in Uruguay or indeed in Argentina, which boasts an Instituto Cultural Walter Owen. He was born in Glasgow in 1884, and first travelled to Montevideo at primary school age, brought there by his father's business. In those days before television, the family read Shakespeare aloud in the evenings, giving Owen an ear for metrical poetic language, and he collected "fine words and phrases" the way other boys collected stamps (*Walter Owen*, 8). He attended the Colegio Nacional in Montevideo, returning to Scotland in 1896 when his mother died, and attended Hillhead High School in Glasgow until 1901. (This school has a bust of Walter Owen, sculpted – fittingly– by Zorrilla de San Martín's son.) Owen returned to the River Plate in 1902 and published his own poetry under the pseudonym "Gauthier de Saint Ouen" in *The Standard* and privately (Walker 1992, 192). Owen's biographer dramatizes the significance of this move back to the River Plate from Scotland: "Did Walter realise the magnitude of the step he had taken in exchanging the murky Clyde for the tawny, silt-laden waters of the River Plate?" (Hartingh, 31). The transatlantic move did have a profound impact on his life, since he went on to make a significant and lasting literary contribution, not through his own poetry, but via his translations, "creative adaptations", "transformations", "transliterations" or even "psychological transvernacularisations" as he variously called them, of major works of Latin American poetry (Walker 1992, 195).

Owen's transvernacularisations include (in order of publication) José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* (1935) –which Sir Eugen Millington-Drake described as having, in Owen's version, "the raciness of an old Border ballad" (*Walter Owen*, 10); *El Fausto* by Estanislao del Campo (1943); the 16<sup>th</sup> century Chilean epic *La Araucana* by Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga (1945); and *Tabaré* (1956).<sup>2</sup> Another specifically Uruguayan connection is his translation of Fernán Silva Valdés's short poem, "Canto al hombre inglés" (1940). These transvernacularizations were explicitly intended by Owen to connect cultures, to "bridge the divisions between men that began at the

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<sup>1</sup> Owen's is not the only English translation of this work –it was also translated into unrhymed verse (Coester, 497) by North American Ralph Walter Huntington– but I shall only be discussing the Owen version. Huntington was friends with Owen (De Hartingh, 192-3), who –being more attuned in his reading to Elizabethan than Romantic poetry– at first doubted his ability to translate *Tabaré* appropriately, and so handed his notes over to Huntington, only later returning to the project.

<sup>2</sup> See Walker 1974. Owen's more (in)famous fellow River Platine Scot, Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham ('Don Roberto') was less complimentary than Millington-Drake about Owen's translation of *Martín Fierro*. He declined the request to write an introduction to it on the grounds that translating *Martín Fierro* into English was, in his opinion, 'as impossible as it would be to translate "Tam O'Shanter" into Spanish', and that 'Mr Owen was not born with any turn for versification, still less for poetry' (letter of 25 April 1934 to Basil Blackwell). This opinion appears somewhat harsh, given that most others' reactions were favourable (for example Molina Pico's letter of 30 January 1934 to Carlos Ibarguren). Correspondence in Millington-Drake Papers, Churchill Archive, Churchill College, Cambridge, Section 3, folder 2, 'Project to translate South American classics into English'. I am grateful to Ana María Rodríguez Ayçaguer for this information.

Tower of Babel” (Hartingh, 12), playing a similar role in reverse to that of the late Uruguayan poet Idea Vilariño, who translated diverse authors from Shakespeare to Hudson for a Montevideo public (see Olivera). Millington-Drake, one time British Minister in Montevideo (Hartingh, 13), gave a lecture in Buenos Aires in the 1940s on “What we owe to Walter Owen”, and reiterated the message in a 1954 address at Hillhead High School, saying that Owen “will be recognized as having rendered a service comparable to that of Fitzgerald in regard to the Omar Khayyám or of Macpherson in regard to Ossian” (*Walter Owen*, 6). The mention of Ossian is apposite, since “Juan Zorrilla de San Martín, ya en 1886, señala la poesía ossiánica como una de las influencias reflejadas en su poema *Tabaré*, y publica, en 1890, la traducción en prosa de un fragmento de Ossian, *La notte*, titulándolo ‘Escena de una noche de octubre en el norte de Escocia’” (Montiel, 390). Regarding Owen’s transvernacularization of *Tabaré*, Hartingh says: “In the Romantic spirit of *Tabaré* there is a great deal that is akin to Celtic mysticism. Hence the appeal it held for Walter” (192). So both Zorrilla’s original and Owen’s translation are construed and received within a distinctively Scottish Romantic framework, and indeed we see Owen introducing a pseudo-Celtic mythology into *Tabaré* when he translates the “alegre ritmo” (Zorrilla 1956, 248) of Charrúa Indians dancing around a Spanish fort as –somewhat incongruously– a “runic rhyme” (249). *Tabaré* was Owen’s swansong as a translator, since he died the year it was finished, 1953 (Walker 1992, 194).

This essay examines Owen’s patterns of decision-making which emerge from a close comparison of the Spanish and English-language version, for which a brief summary of the plot of *Tabaré* may be helpful. The action is set, anachronistically, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. “*Tabaré*, the *mestizo* son of a [Charrúa] Indian chief and his captive Spanish wife Magdalena, is baptized when young in the river Uruguay. He later falls in love with Blanca, sister of the *conquistador* Don Gonzalo de Orgaz, because she reminds him of his white mother. When Blanca is abducted by the Indian chief Yamandú, *Tabaré* rescues her, but he is then murdered by Gonzalo, who takes *Tabaré* to be the abductor” (Ward, 558). Other characters who play a subsidiary but not insignificant role are the priest, Padre Esteban, and Don Gonzalo’s wife, Doña Luz, who is suspicious of *Tabaré* from the beginning and helps to turn her husband against him.

Since the whole work arises from the highly problematic 19<sup>th</sup> century view of the Indian question, the translation of race will be one of the focal points of discussion in what follows, looking at how the Charrúa Indians in general (with the exception of *Tabaré*) are characterized in contrast to the Spanish; descriptions of their physical appearance and social behaviour; their habitat and way of life; their language; and ultimately, their fate as a race. I explore to what extent the Charrúas and the Spaniards presented to us in Owen’s English version are different in characterization from those created in the original Spanish, which is itself, as García Mendéz points out, already guilty of “silencio selectivo” and “represión” with regard to the historical massacre of Charrúas which actually took place in the early 1830s. I shall also look briefly at the value-added “Sense of place” which is supplied by Owen through his translation for the benefit of a non-Uruguayan readership.

How much Owen’s translatorly choices might be constrained or driven by metrical considerations should not, of course, be forgotten. Owen favours iambic pentameter almost exclusively; there are just two short sections (significantly where *Tabaré* speaks to Blanca for the first time in Book II, Canto III, Section iv) which follow Zorrilla’s lead in changing metre. The original is a mixture of hendecasyllables, heptasyllables and pentasyllables. Frequently, therefore, the translation is one of addition, since the iambic pentameter lines are often rendering original lines of only five or seven syllables. Owen prefers translating into a longer metre which gives greater room for manoeuvre. Indeed, translators are generally in agreement that “blank verse has proven to be the best vehicle in English for verse translations of epic poems”, in preference to what has rather uncharitably been described as the “clip-clop Hiawatha meter” of Longfellow’s well known poem in trochaic tetrameter (Manchester, 69-70).

Owen has a very clear vision of the difficulties with which the translator of poetry must wrestle, and it is worth quoting this vision in full, in order to see something of the rationale for the way he operates:

A translation, especially of verse, in order to have any value as literature, should read like an original work. Clarity and ease are essential, and they are worth purchasing at the price of a certain degree of verbal accuracy. To what extent matter can be remodelled, diluted or compressed to fit the selected form, the limit where liberty becomes licence, is for the translator to determine; and on the correctness of his judgment depends his success or failure. A false note, a too unfamiliar image, a forced simile, the translation of a dead metaphor into a live one or vice-versa, a reference which plain and immediately comprehensible in the original, is too obscure in the translation for the reader's intuition to grasp immediately, a halting metre or a forced or feeble rhyme, any or all of these may be the result of a too faithful adherence to the text. They must be avoided if the authentic voice of the author is to reach the reader through the medium of another language. But the translation must remain a translation; that is, it must produce upon the consciousness of the reader an equivalent *total impression* to that produced by the original work upon readers in whose vernacular it was written. (Owen introduction to Hernández, 27-28).

Bearing in mind this aim of the "equivalent total impression", I shall now turn to how Owen shapes *Tabaré* for his English-speaking readership, beginning with how he establishes and reinforces a clear sense of place and race for a non-Uruguayan readership. He does this, for example, by frequent addition of the word Uruguay or Uruguayan where the original simply mentions hills, rivers and other geographical features without further specification. "El astro que pasea las colinas" (Zorrilla 1956, 88) becomes "The sun that walks the *Uruguayan* hills" (89).<sup>3</sup> He spells out historical details by glossing the name of San Salvador as a Spanish fortress, and clarifies that the Charrúas are an Indian race: "Es la raza charrúa" (20) becomes "The *Indian* race of the Charrúas, this" (21). Where Zorrilla has "Y una mujer en la sangrienta arena" (30), Owen clarifies "And a *white* woman on the blood-stained sand" (31). This latter addition invokes the generalizing binary white versus Indian and immediately activates a cultural framework of expectations and assumptions, which the addition of the filling adjective white at several other key points only serves to heighten. The racial division is thus simplified and emphasized.

More significant is how Owen deals with the characterization of the Charrúas as a race, and by extension of "indios" in general, given the tendency to use this generalizing category. Savagery, ferocity, barbarity, bestiality, laziness, unkemptness and devilishness are the choice array of negative traits all already attributed to the Charrúas by Zorrilla. Owen's iambic pentameter, as I have said, generally obliges him to translate by expansion and elaboration, and in expanding, he repeatedly emphasizes all these negative and barbaric descriptions of the Charrúas. "Toda la sangre de su obscura raza" (296) becomes "With the dark blood of his *barbarian* race" (297), and where the Spanish grants the Charrúas human status, the slippage from human to barbarian in Owen's translation is part of a larger pattern of dehumanizing or downplaying the humanity of the Charrúas. "Contesta el grito de una raza humana" (20) is therefore rendered as "the call / Articulate of a *barbarian* race" (21).

The Charrúas' visual impact is emphasized via the idea (clichéd and metaphorical to our modern ear) of being on the warpath. For example, "En pos de Yamandú corre la tribu" (244) becomes "Decked in their battle gear, the warpath takes" (245). Their perceived bestial nature is exaggerated in the subtle slippage from "Vuelva a buscar las fieras, sus hermanas" (160) to "Prepare for war, amid your bestial kin!" (161). The latter implies humans behaving like animals (as does "savage beasts", 243 or "beast-like savages", 331, a colourful translation of "ese infame pueblo", 330), provoking a moral judgement, whereas the original Spanish could simply suggest a spacial proximity to the company of wild animals (also derogatory but less so). Indeed, as

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<sup>3</sup> All emphases in the quotations from *Tabaré* are mine unless otherwise indicated.

García Méndez points out, one of the two paired ideologies around which *Tabaré* operates is that in which “Los charrúas se oponen a los españoles como la bestialidad se opone a la humanidad”, or put more simply, “los indios son bestias, los españoles son hombres” (García Méndez, pp. 4, 6), and Owen’s translation heightens this opposition. He also makes explicit Zorrilla’s implicit linking of the Charrúas with the devil: “los malditos” (170) become “the devil’s spawn” (171) and their “siniestra danza” (170) is no less than a full-blown “infernal dance” (171). Owen picks up the dance theme again later on, overlaying the topos of mysterious tribal rituals with the sinister associations of a *danse macabre*.

The Charrúa language is another aspect of the poem which throws up interesting patterns of choice in Owen’s translation. Much is made by Zorrilla of the unintelligibility of their language, a prejudice which is common to many 19<sup>th</sup> century travellers’ accounts of tribal cultures. We can take, for example, Florence Dixie’s characterization of the Tehuelche language in terms of “inexpressive grunts” (Dixie, 84), an attitude underlying Owen’s translation. Zorrilla singles out “[...] algunas voces, / En medio a [sic] la incoherencia / De la grito salvaje, con esfuerzo / Acaso se comprendan” (224), as though a few voices can be picked out and perhaps understood amidst the general clamour. In the English, however, it’s at the level of individual words that this minimal degree of comprehension takes place, implying that the rest of the language is gibberish: “Amid the inarticulate jabbering / Of the vociferous savages, a few / Stutter some words that others understand.” (225). The Spanish original at times poeticizes the strangeness of the Charrúa language, implying an otherworldliness, an eloquence which cannot belong or have significance in “reality”: “Sus palabras parecen alaridos / De una ruda y fantástica elocuencia” (230). The English resorts once again to the derogatory catch-all label “barbarian” and the negative connotations of a harangue (231). In the final two examples, a different strategy is in operation, but one which rather than demonizing, patronizes and belittles. The Charrúas are rendered less fearful by comparison with small birds, Owen glossing “esos pequeños gritos” (248) imaginatively as “tiny chirps and cheeps like nestling birds” (249); they are also made to blend into a mythical world beyond the human, when their “Indefinibles gritos o palabras” (282) become “elfin pipings, cries and babblements” (283), which sound distinctly celtic, and unthreatening.

Particular features of the Charrúas’ appearance are emphasized in the translation, for example Owen translates “Los labios gruesos y cabellos rígidos” (248) as “[...] *blubber* lips, and lank, *disordered* hair” (249), and any possibility of their individualization (with the obvious exception of the “hero” Tabaré) is eroded, making them all seem indistinguishable. In the following example, Zorrilla’s general comment on Charrúa man is amplified to spell out their lack of individual identity: “Del espíritu extraño y concentrado / Que al parecer, lo anima desde lejos” (90) becomes “Spirit that like a tribal genius, / Seems to *unite them in a single soul*” (91). Negative traits applied to one by Zorrilla, are extended to all by Owen: “Con su eterna indolencia” (208) is rendered as “With inborn laziness *as all his race*” (209).

Tabaré’s individuality is thus heightened by contrast with this undifferentiated mass identity, and his difference is underlined by Owen, who freely translates “¿Qué tiene en esos ojos? / [...] ¿Quién es?” (100) as “[...] Why does he / Look different from the others? Who is he?” (101). Zorrilla paints Tabaré wearing a tiger skin (“La blanda piel de un tigre / Ha ceñido su cuerpo”, 94), a description Owen embroiders to Tabaré’s advantage, saying the skin “Covers the body *of the graceful youth*” (95). Likewise, his lack of warpaint (“No se ha pintado el rostro”, 94) becomes a positive distinguishing feature in Owen’s hands: “No paint his face *disfigures*” (95). Tabaré for Owen is not merely “Bravo como el aliento de su raza” (100) but superlatively the “*Bravest* of all the Indians of his tribe” (101). In Homeric vein, the epithet “good Indian Tabaré” (179) is prefixed to his name, and in the task of carrying Blanca home safely at the end, Owen adds the detail that he is unwearied, thereby emphasizing his noble heroism. Finally, and most importantly, Tabaré’s blue eyes, a feature which comes from his white Christian mother, to

whom his difference of character from the other Charrúas is also attributed, are repeatedly referred to in the translation where the original simply mentions his gaze.

This shaping of the figure of Tabaré in translation brings him further into line with sentimental ideas of the “noble savage”, and linked to this is a certain exoticization and enhancement of the Indian point of view, seeing various events or images through a (Westernized notion) of their perspective, in an attempt to “ventriloquize” the other. For example, the first encounter between Charrúa and Spaniard is dramatized, imagining the native perspective: “Los hombres blancos de la raza nueva” (30) become “Men with pale faces, *never seen before*” (31). The Spaniards’ “bandera” (30) is seen as “the banner *of their tribe*” (31), whilst their weapons are defamiliarized to capture the terror of the unknown: “Los que matan los indios, con los rayos / Que el astro les prestó” (238) – “They who kill Indians with the thunderous rays / *From iron tubes*; rays lent them by the sun” (239). A native view of death is created by Owen’s paraphrase of the concept in language which has the flavour of a literal translation (or perhaps a transvernacularization, to use his term) from a different culture: “¿Queréis matar al extranjero?” (238) is elaborated and made strange: “Would you the *white-skinned* strangers give *the sleep / Icy and never-waking?*” (239).

Nevertheless, despite these few attempts to bring out, in a ventriloquized way, the Indian point of view, Owen’s translation repeats Zorrilla’s basic message with regard to the question of the extinction of the Charrúa race. The main thrust of Zorrilla’s text is that their “disappearance”, as it is euphemistically expressed, is a logical necessity. To quote García Méndez once more, “su degradación a la bestialidad [...] habrá hecho necesaria su destrucción”, or as Dorothy McMahon puts it, referring to the Indian in Romantic literature in general, “either the Indian must be integrated, or he must be exterminated” (17). Thus, Charrúa bonfires are seen, which: “Se avivan, se repiten o se apagan” (82); in Owen’s hands, these fires “brighten, throb, grow dim, and die away” (83), the syntactical sense of climax and ebbing away making the dying out of the race seem a narrative inevitability. Furthermore, he expands the phrase “La última gota de una sangre fría” (306) to “The last drop of a blood *already* cold” (307), the addition of “already” making it seem like a foregone conclusion and thereby displacing the recent guilt. Zorrilla had done this by setting the extinction of the Charrúa in the 16th century, rather than locating it in the more recent –and therefore more troubling– historical memory of 1831-2. Zorrilla uses a metaphor of the Indians as dead leaves “from an unsound branch”, making the process of their extinction appear part of a natural, organic process: “Hojas perdidas en su tronco enfermo, / El remolino las arrastra enfermas” (24). Owen reinforces the fact that not only will they die out, but also be forgotten: “Lost leaves the wind stripped from an unsound branch, / And that the whirlwind *to oblivion* bears” (25). Where Zorrilla underlines the pathos that the Charrúas were once alive in the phrase “Esas llamas sin luz marcan la ruta / Por donde corren *los que fueron vivos*” (199, original emphasis), Owen changes the emphasis to a certainty that they will never return, or be “reborn”: “And those ones here and there that shed no light / Mark the dark route of them *who come no more*” (199, my emphasis). Owen’s translation even seems to imply a passive acceptance of their fate on the part of the Charrúa victims, when he renders “las tribus / Que mueren fugitivas” (200) as “flying tribes that *lay them down* to die” (201), and this poetic turn of phrase also makes it seem as though their death is coming at the end of a natural span of life, a suggestion which belies the more bloody truth. When Zorrilla depicts the Indians “Tendidos allá están en las colinas” (200), Owen’s version, “They that lie *sleeping* on the *wind-swept* hill” (201), smacks both of the Elizabethan language in which he was steeped from his childhood collecting of “fine phrases” and of bleakly romantic images of final tranquillity and a return to nature. (We might think of the line “Sleep is a reconciling” from John Dowland’s “Weep you no more sad fountains”, or even, in a more recent context of “Let us sleep now” from “Strange meeting” by Owen’s more famous namesake, Wilfred). But implying harmony and resolution of conflict in this sleep of death, too easily brings closure to a racial situation which remains in dispute.

The final translatorly patterns which emerge are instances where Owen either gives different translations of the same word in different contexts, or cases where by translating two different Spanish words with the same English word, a connection is made in the English which is not present or is only latent in the Spanish. For example, the word “bizarro” when applied to the Indians is translated as “hardiest” (63), but as “brave and gallant” (85) in reference to the Spaniards, except when underlining that the Spaniard is equal in bravery to the most feared of Indian tribes (171). Conversely, a new and poignant associative connection is introduced into the English version by the recurrence of the key words “pluck” and “heart” in the following pairs of examples:

“Monstruoso engendro a quien feroz la gloria / Para besarlo, el corazón arranca?” (80)

“The monstrous birth that glory stooped to kiss / And from whose bosom *plucked* the bleeding *heart?*” (81)

“Porque sus flores tengan quien recoja / La esencia de sus almas” (88)

“So that its flowers should have some hand to *pluck* / Out of their *hearts* the essence of their souls” (89)

The first example refers to the doomed Charrúa race, and the second to this “mundo americano”’s expectations of the fair Spanish maid, Blanca, that she will empathize with them and understand them. The link in the English established by the recurrence of “pluck” and “heart” only a few pages later, will make the reader associate Blanca’s empathy specifically with this vanishing Indian race, not merely with the “mundo americano” in general.

Likewise, Owen’s decision to translate both “hombros” and “brazos” with the same phrase “brawny shoulders” brings into parallel the description of the way Yamandú and Tabaré both carry the body of Blanca. In the Spanish, the abductor Yamandú seems more ruthless, carrying her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes: “[...] Lleva, en los hombros, / A la exánime Blanca” (272), whilst Tabaré –who bears her in his arms– seems more protective and gentle, like a lover: “Y, con Blanca en los brazos” (308). Owen equalizes the bodily references in English: “[...] he shifts / His load from arms to brawny shoulders’ spread” (273) [Yamandú] and “Upon his brawny shoulders Tabaré / Still Blanca bears” (309) [Tabaré]. Owen thereby flattens out Zorrilla’s distinction in their treatment of Blanca at this point in the narrative, but on the other hand, shows Tabaré to be identical in strength and physical stature to the “bad” Indian Yamandú. Furthermore, it makes for heightened dramatic poignancy and irony at the end, since it is precisely because Don Gonzalo stereotypes all Indians as identical in their desire to brutally kidnap white women that Tabaré is killed, in the very act of carrying Blanca to safety. So for the reader of Owen’s version, the contrast in character between Yamandú and Tabaré is all the more marked since it is seen to be at odds with the superficial similarity in their physical stature.

Through all these patterns of translatorly choices outlined above, Owen clearly magnifies the representation of savagery and bestiality in regard to the Indians, though tempering this with attempts to see some things from their point of view. Tabaré is thrown into greater relief as a hero, by the exaggeration of his outstanding qualities and by the reduction of the rest of his tribe to an undifferentiated mass, apart from Yamandú who Tabaré clearly equals and indeed exceeds in strength and valour. Owen also undoubtedly reproduces the dominant ideologically charged message of Zorrilla’s text: “Forma imposible de la estirpe muerta!” (14) becomes more definitively distant from history and living memory in the translation “Imagined figure of the vanished race” (15). Owen’s text is enriched in dialogue with the tropes of 19<sup>th</sup> century travel accounts, and with an added emphasis on place for a non-Uruguayan audience. Nevertheless, what comes across most of all (and which cannot be illustrated in such brief examples) is Owen’s primary impulse to create something poetic in English, which would match the enduring popularity of the Romantic descriptive sections which are such a remarkable feature of the

original poem. In this he has succeeded; his translation reads like an original work in English, and communicates an “equivalent *total impression*” to that produced by Zorrilla’s classic, for which his English-language readers may be very grateful.

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