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### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7h0885gj>

### **Journal**

Mester, 32(1)

### **Author**

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### **Publication Date**

2003

### **DOI**

10.5070/M3321014591

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# Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's Society of Letters in *Viajes por Europa, África, y América 1845–1847*

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Shortly following the publication of *Facundo*, the Chilean Minister of Public Education, Manuel Montt, sent Domingo Faustino Sarmiento on an official trip to study educational institutions abroad. In the second sentence of the prologue to *Viajes por Europa, África, y América 1845–1847*, Sarmiento describes the mission: “a fines de 1845 partí de Chile, con el objeto de ver por mis ojos, i de palpar, por decirlo así, el estado de la enseñanza primaria, en las naciones que han hecho de ella un ramo de la administración pública” (3). He ends the prologue by highlighting the literary work involved in writing his *Viajes* and introduces his travel account by considering his role as a reader of travel literature:<sup>1</sup>

Sobre el mérito puramente artístico i literario de estas páginas, no se me aparta nunca de la mente que Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Dumas, Jaquemont, han escrito viajes, i han formado el gusto público. Si entre nuestros inteligentes, educados en tan elevada escuela, hai alguno que pretenda acercárseles, yo seria el primero en abandonar la pluma i descubrirme en su presencia. Hai rejiones demasiado altas, cuya atmósfera no pueden respirar los que han nacido en las tierras bajas, i es locura mirar el sol de hito en hito, con peligro cierto de perder la vista. (7)

Sarmiento makes the case that reading determines readership expectations and, likewise, sets the boundaries for successful authorship. He does not question the supremacy of the European book, but in

offering to “abandonar la pluma,” Sarmiento indirectly indicates that he is the best suited Latin American to take it up. It is notable that in his assertion of the danger in aspiring to enter the ranks of admired European travel writers, he utilizes a highly literary and allusive language. He evokes Plato’s cave, the hubris of Icarus, and visions of the underworld to describe the gaze North from the “tierras bajas.” Although he begins his prologue with an official explanation of how his travels fall under the auspices of his governmental task to conduct research on public education, he ends by appealing to an “elevada escuela” as his benchmark for writing. This transition from the Escuela Normal to the “escuela elevada” offers a map to read the ways that Sarmiento moves between *públicos* — national ones and literary ones. The *pluma* becomes the locus of Sarmiento’s ideals of national community and literary communities. In his *Viajes*, true to form, Sarmiento gives us a political and a literary education.<sup>2</sup> Sarmiento uses the themes and forms of letters and translation to write a self-conscious travelogue that draws civilization in the overlay of political and literary societies. Sarmiento’s *Viajes* turns to this form of writing to make an account of nation building that imagines a unified republic, yet writes from exile; that writes the patria, yet reckons with the foreign; that grasps the literary canon, yet negotiates for authority; that finds hope in unifying the nation through the epistolary practices of mail and telegraphs, yet shows how communication is haunted by disruption; that revels in cosmopolitan ideals, yet details the burdens and joys of travel and translation that test and forge those ideals. In so doing, Sarmiento’s *Viajes* lays bare literary foundations for both the project of nation building and the construction of a cosmopolitan society of letters.

In order to negotiate this terrain, we will first consider the way that the contradictions inherent in the very form of the letter create a paradoxical discourse and, subsequently, in light of this understanding examine Sarmiento’s comparison of the recuperation of his political ideals with the invention of the specter of a friend’s voice via a letter. We will see not only how Sarmiento’s manipulation of epistolary and telegraphic missives is a cornerstone metaphor to express his unique theoretical pairing of language and nation formation, but also how he makes this metaphor more intricate by layering it with linguistic barriers cut across by translation: the ways that the United States consolidates national character in the face of its polyglot

citizenry and his personal experiences of the linguistic obstacles he encounters in his travels through the United States as a result of the limits of his linguistic adaptability, his command of Spanish and French and his rudimentary English. Sarmiento animates his *Viajes* with epistolary and translation themes and forms in order to illuminate his narratives of vernacular and utopian republics with both the complications of his experience of international travel infused with an explicit governmental project and of writing about that experience within cosmopolitan traditions of travel writing. In the end, we will see how Sarmiento founds his authority through representations of translation and epistolary communications as mediators in a worldly project of founding civilized societies.

Readers of Sarmiento's narrative must confront the flexibility of the way letters both embed and are embedded within different genres.<sup>3</sup> Sarmiento's letters come to mean differently in different contexts: literary, newspaper, and private correspondence. In this way, Sarmiento's letters move between political, literary and private spaces. His letters draw upon and are drawn within the genres of travel narrative, essay and polemic. Sarmiento's epistolary form does not exist solely on the plane of literary artifice. Sarmiento both mailed the letters to friends, published them in newspapers and, finally, published them in book form. There is an ambivalence between at least two modes of epistolary form in Sarmiento's work: a guiding organization for an envisioned totality and a practical fragmentation of personal and public missives.<sup>4</sup> The simultaneity of a letter addressed both to the public at large and one directed to one person in particular are two distinct, yet intersecting, epistolary economies in this narrative. Even as this travelogue only tracks one side of the correspondence, the addressee partially shapes the letter's content. With this in mind, we can unite the consideration of genre inherent in the flexibility of the letter form with an awareness of how the multiple functions and contexts of Sarmiento's correspondence elicit new readings, manifest new, but specific and identifiable, relations between the poles of writing and reading Sarmiento's letters.

Sarmiento characterizes his disillusion, and subsequent attempt to recapture his idealism, in epistolary terms. In this way Sarmiento's narrative calls on the very form of his travelogue to offer a metaphor for the paradoxes of his ideological recuperation. As Janet Altman asserts in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, epistolary forms

generate meaning through a correspondence “marked by hiatuses of all types: spatial separation between writer and addressee; time lags between event and recording, between message transmission and message reception; blank spaces and lacunae in the manuscript” (189). She asserts that epistolary narrative generates meaning through explicit and implicit gaps and fissures: “[t]he external reader’s perception of continuity in letter sequences is generated by their seeming discontinuity” (189). With this in mind, the fact that Sarmiento’s attempt to recuperate his idealism is represented both within an epistolary form and in terms of an epistolary metaphor points to the way that the significance of his political positions are themselves produced within the distance between the author of the letter and its recipient as well as within the temporal and spatial distance that this implies. Sarmiento relies upon and works within those very breaches to figure his confrontation with “una cosa sin modelo anterior” — the United States (Sarmiento 290). Thus, for Sarmiento, epistolary forms represent and embody the distance between friends and the hope that reading might mediate that distance.

Not only by authoring an epistolary narrative, but also by figuring himself as a reader of letters, Sarmiento brings to the fore the dynamic process of meaning production in epistolary forms. Sarmiento addresses his letter about the U.S. to Alsina, a fellow Argentine exile living in Montevideo. In doing so he not only writes to a man with similar political dreams for Argentina as a nation and, thus, bridges the distance to forge national ties, but also brings an exilic consciousness to this epistolary exchange. Lying between a private and a public address, it acts as both bridge and barrier to what will become increasingly clear is Sarmiento’s desire that the missive might serve to bind national ties, even as it evidences an estrangement from the patria. At the very inception of Sarmiento’s travel narrative about the United States his words to Alsina highlight the way that letters negotiate the distance between compatriots for political aims. He creates a complicated meditation on the way that his “panorama imaginario” has been tested in the same way that the voice that we imagine for a friend known only through letters might be tested:

Quiero decirle que salgo triste, pensativo, complacido i abismado; la mitad de mis ilusiones rotas o ajadas, mientras que otras luchan con el raciocinio para decorar

de nuevo aquel panorama imaginario en que encerramos siempre las ideas cuando se refieren a objetos que no hemos visto, como damos una fisionomía i un metal de voz al amigo que solo por cartas conocemos. (290)

Sarmiento associates “aquel panorama imaginario en que encerramos siempre las ideas cuando se refieren a objetos que no hemos visto” with giving a voice to a friend we know only through letters. Sarmiento admits the fragility of his “ilusiones” and by correspondence shows how the imagined voice of a letter might find its limits were the author present *viva voce*. Yet, Sarmiento does not entirely abandon his “panorama imaginario,” but writes a letter to express the self-conscious process to “decorar de nuevo” ideas left in tatters. Thus, at the very outset of his letter to Alsina, he figures his struggle to re-imagine that “¡la república es!” in terms of the epistolary exchange (291). Sarmiento engages the economy of the letter in writing his *Viajes*, appealing to his and Alsina’s common political education under the Rosas dictatorship:

Educados Ud. i yo, mi buen amigo, bajo la vara de hierro del mas sublime de los tiranos, combatiéndolo sin cesar en nombre del derecho, de la justicia, en nombre de la república, en fin, como realizacion de las conclusiones a que la conciencia i la intelijencia humana han llegado, Ud. i yo, como tantos otros nos hemos envanecido i alentado al divisar en medio de la noche de plomo que pesa sobre la América del sur, la aureola de luz con que se alumbraba el norte. (290)

With the repetition of “Ud. i yo” Sarmiento constantly foregrounds the way that Alsina in part generates Sarmiento’s mode of address. And the seeming generic tag “mi buen amigo” is no longer simply an innocent nicety, but in light of his earlier words becomes infused with the idea of imagining the republic. By locating Sarmiento’s “Ud. i yo” in the letter economy, Sarmiento chooses Alsina as his recipient at this moment with the express purpose of creating a shared imaginary panorama “en nombre de derecho, de la justicia, en nombre de la república,” a community of exiles who could build a resistance to the existing regime. Moreover, he valorizes this vision “como realizacion

de las conclusiones a que la conciencia i la inteligencia humana han llegado.” By broadening the connection between Argentine political exiles with a general human intelligence and conscience, Sarmiento wants to tie his communities with civilization as a whole.

Sarmiento begins to forge those ties through literary traditions when he reflects on his role within the traditions of description in travel writing in his prologue by praising the “ficciones de fantasia” of Dumas. He places the effort of writing his epistolary travelogue within a modern experience of travel:

¡Cuán bellos son los países así descritos, i cuán animado el movible i corredizo panorama de los viajes! I sin embargo, no es en nuestra época la escitacion continua el tormento del viajero, que entre unas i otras impresiones agradables, tiene que soportar la intercalacion de largos dias de fastidio, de monotonía, i aun la de escenas naturales, mui bellas para vistas i sentidas; pero que son ya, con variaciones que la pluma no cierta a determinar, duplicados de lo ya visto i descrito. La descripcion carece, pues, de novedad, la vida civilizada reproduce en todas partes los mismos caractéres, los mismos medios de existencia; la prensa diaria lo revela todo; i no es raro que un hombre estudioso sin salir de su gabinete, deje parado al viajero sobre las cosas mismas que él creia conocer bien por la inspeccion personal. Si esto ocurre de ordinario, mayor se hace todavía la dificultad de escribir viajes, si el viajero sale de las sociedades ménos adelantadas, para darse cuenta de otras que lo son mas. Entónces se siente la incapacidad de observar, por falta de la necesaria preparacion de espíritu, que deja turbio i míope el ojo, a causa de lo dilatado de las vistas i la multiplicidad de los objetos que en ellas se encierran. (3–4)

Sarmiento’s rhetorical pirouettes revolve around the history of travel literature, its intersection with what he characterizes and, thus, generalizes as a modern, civilized perspective on the written experience of travel. Specifically, he explores the poles of novelty and monotony, the way that a certain fatigue of the genre corresponds with a certain fatigue of travel. Sarmiento suggests a discrepancy between these

travel narratives and the actual experience of the modern traveler, creating an ironic distance. At the same time, he hints that Nature is a copy of “lo ya visto i descrito.” Even Nature, in a certain sense the epitome of mutability, becomes tedious since the knowledge of the “hombre estudioso” might trump the experience of “inspeccion personal.” In this context, Sarmiento states that the difficulty of writing a travel narrative is even more troublesome “si el viajero sale de las sociedades ménos adelantadas.” He describes the problem of assimilating the traveler’s landscape using the same verb “encerrar” as he did when relating the disjunction between how he imagined the political landscape (“aquel panorama imaginario en que encerramos”) and how he experienced it in the U.S: “Entónces se siente la incapacidad de observar, por falta de la necesaria preparacion de espíritu, que deja turbio i míope el ojo, a causa de lo dilatado de las vistas i la multiplicidad de los objetos que en ellas se encierran.” Even as Sarmiento observes that the *pluma* finds its limit in expressing any novelty in “la vida civilizada,” Sarmiento’s type of meta-consciousness itself constitutes a conformity with the very type of travel literature he admires.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, he inserts himself into a civilized horizon of understanding, even if he characterizes his vision as faulty.<sup>6</sup>

Sarmiento turns to a consideration of his choice of the epistolary genre<sup>7</sup> as a way of marking out a space of authority for himself:

Si hubiera descrito todo cuanto he visto como el Conde del Maule, habria repetido un trabajo hecho ya por mas idónea i entendida pluma; si hubiese intentado escribir *impresiones de viaje*, la mia se me habria escapado de las manos, negandose a tarea tan desproporcionada. He escrito, pues, *lo que he escrito*, porque no sabria cómo clasificarlo de otro modo, obedeciendo a instintos i a impulsos que vienen de adentro, i que a veces la razon misma no es parte a refrenar. Algunos fragmentos de estas cartas que la prensa de Montevideo, Francia, España o Chile han publicado, dan cumplida muestra de aquella falta de plan que no quiero prejuzgar; si bien me permitiré hacer indicaciones que no serán por demas, para escusar su irregularidad. Desde luego las cartas son de suyo jénero literario tan dúctil i elástico, que se presta a todas las formas i admite todos los asuntos. No le está prohibido lo



pasado, por la asociacion natural de las ideas, que a la vista de un hecho o de un objeto despiertan reminiscencias i sujieren aplicacion; sin que siente mal aventurarse mas allá de lo material i visible, pudiendo con propiedad seguir deducciones que vienen de suyo a ofrecerse al espíritu. Gústase entónces de pensar, a la par que se siente, i de pasar de un objeto a otro, siguiendo el andar abandonado de la carta, que tan bien cuadra con la natural variedad del viaje. (4–5, Sarmiento's emphasis)

Sarmiento hopes to avoid repeating “un trabajo hecho ya por mas idónea i entendida pluma.” He at first identifies his work not as a group of letters, but as “*lo que he escrito*.” Sarmiento not only asserts a personal style, but, interestingly, bases his choice of form, his authority, on a double gesture of ignorance and uniqueness: “no sabria cómo clasificarlo de otro modo.” Sarmiento thus attempts to escape through invention the constraining force of canonical classifications, even as he likewise bases the authority of his choice of genre on his canonical competence. Sarmiento offers a sophisticated double awareness that in the history of epistolary exchange the letter is flexible in both content and form. In this fashion, Sarmiento juxtaposes ignorance and invention against canonical knowledge and imitation, doubly founding his authority as he negotiates the canonical history and context of epistolary narratives with his own desire for ingenuity and originality.

As many critics have noted, in his debates with Andrés Bello and the Generation of '37 during his exile in Chile Sarmiento exhorts people to mine the uniqueness of Latin American Spanish and to expose themselves to foreign literatures in order to write in such a way as to foment the expression of modern ideas and to distance themselves from the metropolis, the heritage of Spanish colonialism.<sup>8</sup> Sarmiento ties nation formation with literary formation. Sarmiento will take it one step further when he writes about the way his contested ideals of nation and republic constantly run up against an experience of translation that mediates the epistolary dualities informing his narrative. Certainly, Sarmiento's actual experience of the conflicted nature of identity, communication and translation during his travels in the U.S. belie any facile taming of linguistic difference as evidence of or in the service of a unified republic. Indeed, his very inside/outside status as a traveler —

distanced from and, yet, traversing this national space — brings to light a whole host of fraught linguistic moments that both complicate his self-knowledge and question any simple equation of nation and language in the United States. Sarmiento must navigate foreign territories — national, linguistic and literary.

Sarmiento speaks of the exponential growth of Buffalo, likening it to the promised land, comparing the juxtaposition of different languages among immigrants to a Babelic confusion, one which the nation, the republic, might conquer or subdue under the unity of one tongue:

Un camino de hierro, que desde Albany atraviesa sin pre-tension alguna cinco grados de longitud, derrama en sus calles todos los dias, una avenida de hombres, que desde Europa i remontando el Hudson, vienen a escojerse, entre los bosques intermediarios, algun pedazo de tierra donde fijar una nueva familia, como aquellas razas de Sem i de Jafet, que partian desde la Babel antigua a repartirse entre sí la tierra despoblada. Igual confusion de lenguas entre los que llegan, si bien la tierra les imprime la suya a poco andar, i como el agua frotando las superficies angulosas de diversas piedras conforma los guijarros cual si fueran una familia de hermanos, así reuniéndose, mezclándose entre sí estas avenidas de fragmentos de sociedades antiguas, se forma la nueva, la mas jóven i osada república del mundo. (295–96)

There is a striking interweaving of the “camino de hierro,” “calles,” and “avenida de hombres” — suggesting that the people themselves become byways for expansion — engaging a perennial theme of Sarmiento that geography is destiny. It is important to note that although Sarmiento’s vision of the U.S. population moving West is heterogeneous linguistically it is decidedly homogeneous in origin — that is European; he entirely erases the American Indian presence in figuring the West as “tierra despoblada.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Sarmiento casts the land as protagonist in taming the confusion of tongues; it is the land that imposes a unified language upon the new inhabitants: “la tierra les imprime la suya a poco andar.” Sarmiento’s phrasing not only asserts the relative brevity of this process, but also implies that

the movement across the land plays a key role. Sarmiento's pairing of language and nation is one of the cornerstones of his philosophy about independence, nationhood and republic, but one which, as will become increasingly clear, is put into question in light of his travel experience of translation.

Sarmiento does not rest with a national tongue rising from, naturalized by, the land itself, but asserts that human technological advancement, specifically new modes of communication, plays a comparable role in unification:

La libertad emigrada al norte da al hombre que llega alas para volar; ruedan torrentes humanos por entre las selvas primitivas, i la palabra pasa muda por sobre sus cabezas en hilos de hierro, para ir a activar a lo léjos aquella invasion del hombre sobre el suelo que le estaba reservado; del espíritu envejecido i esperto sobre la material inculta aun, i esperando desde abinicio, que se la dé forma. Franklin, como Ud. sabe, fué el primero que tomó en sus manos el terrible rayo, i lo esplicó al mundo asombrado. Partiendo del descubrimiento de Franklin (hablo en el sentido práctico del parrarayos, con que él dotó a la humanidad), Volta, Oersted, Alexander, Ampere, Arago, habian escrito i tentado mucho sobre la telegrafía eléctrica, cuando Morse, norte-americano, hizo sus ensayos mediante los 30,000 pesos que el congreso de los Estados-Unidos dió para costearlos. ¿No es singular que haya cabido a los Estados Unidos la Gloria de haber inventado el pararayos i el eter sulfúrico para ahorrar dos grandes males a la humanidad, e impreso a los movimientos del hombre rapideces planetarias, con la aplicacion del vapor hecha por Fulton, i en la telegrafía eléctrica por Morse? [...] En los Estados-Unidos habia en los momentos de mi salida: de Nueva-York un círculo que liga en Washington, Baltimore, filadelfia, i vuelve a Nueva York, 455 millas; otro anillo que liga a Nueva-York, New-Haven, Hasford, Springfield, Boston, i vuelve a Nueva-York, 452 millas. Una línea a Albany que parte desde el mismo centro, 150, i de allí estiende un brazo a Buffalo, 250 millas. Otra a Rochester, 252; otra a Monreal, 205. La diligencia que

lleva diariamente la correspondencia por toda la Union  
recorre 142, 295 millas. (296)

Sarmiento's admiration for great men of science, casting his beloved Franklin as a Zeus figure, emphasizes that the ideal human purpose in populating the wilderness is intimately linked with science for Sarmiento, his vision connecting the two forms of "progress."<sup>10</sup> Sarmiento acknowledges the place of culture, here a culture of science and progress, demonstrating the way that people also impose their will upon the land, not only the land upon the people (something we might also see in Sarmiento's famous portrait of the four types of gauchos in *Facundo*). Sarmiento's choice of the word "hilos" to describe the wires carrying messages into the wilderness is rhetorically charged. The "hilos" also appear at a key moment of Sarmiento's prologue in a self-conscious reflection upon his choice of genre and expression in letters as a negotiation between technology and literature, between center and periphery (4). Few can read the word "hilo" without conjuring up the trope of the thread of a story, the weaving of a narrative, any in a whole host of classical to modern examples of textuality from Ariadne to the present. In the prologue, Sarmiento subtly hints at the relationship between technology and techne, of production and writing, placing the monotony of the thread of civilized travel narrative in the context of mechanical reproduction. Thus, by choosing the word "hilos" to describe his idealized vision of the telegraphic wires reaching across the wilderness, he is at least partially placing technology in a textual — even literary travel — economy, weaving the threads into his foundational fiction.

At this point, another wrinkle appears in the historical context of Sarmiento's letter writing. He writes in a time of transition between communication mediums: letters and telegrams. He finds himself at a crossroads between modes, a period of historical overlap.<sup>11</sup> Sarmiento self-consciously utilizes knowledge of this transitional space in his account of his attempt to send a telegraph to craft a literary exploration of the interstitial space between epistolary and telegraphic practices. He not only explores the way that technologies of writing confront, aid and extend one another in a telling fashion, juxtaposing and relating the network of mail and telegraph wires with national progress, but also, by extension, fashions his own literary missive in the context of technological transition and nation formation.<sup>12</sup>

Sarmiento values communication highly, adding mail and telegraphs to the railroad. In his last message to the Argentine National Congress at the end of his presidency, Sarmiento chronicles the improvements and progress he achieved during his tenure, echoing in style and content his comments about the U.S. He says, in part:

En ferrocarriles, líneas telegráficas y caminos carriles, nuestro país marcha á la vanguardia de esta parte de América. [...]

El correo condujo en 1868 cuatro millones de impresos ó manuscritos, mientras que en 1873 ha trasportado “siete millones setecientos ochenta y siete mil cuatrocientos treinta” por la distancia de “ochenta y un mil leguas recorridas”. La estafeta ambulante ha puesto en movimiento un millón de cartas.

En 1870 se enviaron seis mil cuatrocientos, cuarenta telegramas por líneas que recorrían 129 millas; en 1873, “ciento setenta mil setenta y nueve” por 2618 millas que funcionan hoy. (Mabragaña 364)

Sarmiento, in the rhetorical repetition, maintains an ideal link between his representation of communication advances in Argentina and his utopian vision of U.S. civilization. Yet, the technological and bureaucratic apparatus is ordered within the paradoxes and intersections of distinct historical, rhetorical and geographical discourses. Sarmiento's figuration of the link between Yankee ingenuity, technological advances, and nation building in the U.S. as a model for Argentina becomes remodeled in the repetition.<sup>13</sup> Technology is figured differently in the Argentine national imaginary. Communication technology in Argentina is not self-generated and, thus, not ideally self-perpetuating of the nation in the way that Sarmiento envisions it to be in the U.S context.<sup>14</sup>

In the context of Sarmiento's rhetorically complicated vision of civilization and barbarism, he very clearly ties the telegraph and mail with overcoming barbarism in the U.S.:

La posta diaria es la que mas sensiblemente obra. La posta sonará a las puertas de cada aldea lejana i depositará en ella, en algun papel público, un tópico de conversacion, i

una noticia de las novedades de la Union. Usted concibe que es imposible barbarizarse donde la posta, como una gotera diaria, está disolviendo toda indiferencia nacida del aislamiento. No olvide que esta posta recorre 134,000 millas, i que en partes tiene por ausiliar el telégrafo. (344)

This excerpt sets forth the amazing assertion by Sarmiento that where there is mail or telegraphic cables, there is civilization; they combat barbarism. Here he bases civilization not in technology, but in the utopian vision of communication overcoming isolation. Certainly, the epistolary form of Sarmiento's *Viajes* cannot be divorced from this national context. In his 1873 "Mensaje" he explicitly states this connection: "El telégrafo es una forma de la correspondencia epistolar cuya trasmisión es función nacional" (Mabragaña 351). As discussed earlier, the paradoxical connection between letters and the building of a civilized nation informs the very structure of Sarmiento's travelogue, charging it with the task of representing a nation-building communication that, as we will see in his mad chase to catch up with his travel companion, is haunted by disruption, fraught with image, imaginary and imagination, and burdened with the task of translation.

Sarmiento's rudimentary English often made traveling difficult. We might think of the famous dispute over a bunk where rather than hiding in shame at not understanding that he was the object of ridicule he places himself in plain view and speaks out in French, translated into Spanish in his text:

Si hai entre vosotros alguno que entienda español o frances, hágame la gracia de manifestarse, porque necesito esplicarme, dar i pedir inmediatamente una satisfaccion! Un profundo silencio se habia hecho en el intertanto. Los que no sabian el frances en que hablaba, para no dar materia nueva al ridículo con mi mal inglés, se miraban unos a otros, miéntras que allá en el fondo oí quedo repetir mis palabras traducidas al inglés. (394)

Sarmiento turns to French for the authority he lacks in his poor English and his marginalized Spanish.<sup>15</sup> Sarmiento distinguishes himself through an assertion of difference that depends upon an act of translation, someone rendering his declaration of difference in English. It

is then that the yankee, “bueno de corazon,” manifests himself, at the point where the language gap is, at least partially, bridged (394).

Toward the end of his travels, Sarmiento begins to have money difficulties and experiences one of the more anxious times in his trips. After spending an extra day in Washington, he loses his travel companion, Arcos, who is also carrying Sarmiento’s funds. He then begins a frantic chase to catch up. In the process, Sarmiento engages in the problematics of translation, technology, missives, identity and communication. To begin with, upon finding himself in Chamberburg with no sign of Arcos, Sarmiento experiences the way that language might mask national identity:

despues de recorrer las posadas con inquietud creciente, nadie supo darme noticia de la persona por quien preguntaba, tanto mas cuanto que hablando Arcos el inglés con una rara perfeccion, i gangoseándolo por travesura cuando se dirijia a norte-americanos, nadie, ni los mismos que habian hablado con él, me daba noticia del jóven español por quien yo preguntaba en un inglés que hacia estremecer las fibras a los pobres yankees. (414)

The expectation of a correspondence between language and nationality keeps even “los mismos que habian hablado con él” from identifying Arcos. Arcos’ performance of the yankee, the way he passes in America, renders him unrecognizable as the “jóven español” even to those who spoke with him. Of course, this is contrasted with the way that Sarmiento’s own English marks him as foreign.

Sarmiento’s communication woes continue as he spins a tale that represents the negotiation of identity in terms of missives and translation. He persists in his attempts to catch up with Arcos:

Al fin me sujirieron escribir a Arcos por el telégrafo eléctrico, lo que hice en cuarenta palabras o valor de cuatro reales, i en los términos mas sentidos. No obstante aquel laconismo telegráfico, “no sea Ud. animal”...era la introduccion de mi misiva, i le contaba lo que por su indiscrecion me sucedia. — ¿Dónde está el sujeto a quien se dirije? — En el *United States Hotel*, contesté yo, dudando ahora si en Pittsburg habria un hotel de aquel

nombre; i para no darme un nuevo chasco, indiqué que se la buscasse en todos los hoteles mas aparentes de la ciudad.

Tardaba la respuesta a mi impaciencia i a mi miedo de no dar con aquel calavera, i no despegaba los ojos de la maquina que con golpecillos redoblados indicaba a cada momento el paso de misivas a otros puntos, i que no se anotaban allí, por no venir precedidas de la palabra Chamberburg i la señal preventiva i convencional para llamar la atencion del oficinista. Voi a preguntar, me dijo; i tocando a su vez su aparato, se sucedieron los golpecillos, con cuya mayor o menor duracion trazaba el punzon magnetizado mismo aquellos caractéres que consisten en puntos i líneas, obrados por la presion en la superficie blanca del papel. Concluida la operacion, tomó la tira de papel i leyó: “No se le encuentra en ninguna parte. Se ha mandado de nuevo a buscarlo.” — Dos horas despues nueva interrogacion, nuevo martirio de aguardar un sí o un nó de que dependia el sosiego o la desesperacion, i nuevo i definitivo... no hai tal individuo...! (415-16)

To begin with, Sarmiento, in characteristic fashion, bucks against the telegraph's demand for condensation, finding space to reprimand his travel companion. Indeed, this telegraph seems not to act as it ought. Instead of instantaneous communication and relief for Sarmiento's troubled soul, he sits in angst for hours, eyes glued to the “maquina,” trying to decipher the dots and dashes. Sarmiento's powers as a reader, as a translator, reach their limit. This little demiurge which represents for Sarmiento the progress of the republic, communication as connection, fails to establish contact with his companion and, thus, continues the theme of absence inherent in the trail of notes announcing that his companion has gone on without him. Indeed, the telegraph utterly fails to find Arcos, even places his very existence in doubt — “no hai tal individuo...!” The message that is meant to join men under a positivistic and providential design — “la palabra [que] pasa muda sobre sus cabezas en hilos de hierro” (296) — short-circuits here, withholding not only communication, but also Sarmiento's “sosiego.”

To further tie-up the tropological knot between geography, distance, communication and identity, the telegraph operator has been



sending for Arcos in Philadelphia, rather than Pittsburgh. In response, Sarmiento's rage flares up in a flood of Spanish:

Quedé punto ménos que si me hubiese caído un rayo. Entónces, interesándose en mi suerte i haciendo conjeturas el hostelero, nombró a Filadelfia. ¡Cómo Filadelfia! le interrumpí yo; es en Pittsburg donde está Arcos i donde han debido buscarlo. — Acabaremos, me respondió; como es en Filadelfia donde se paga la dilijencia, el oficinista del telégrafo ha creído que es allí a donde Ud. recomienda que le tomen pasaje; *but no matter*, voi a corregir el error; i dirijiéndose a la puerta se detuvo, i señalando a la oficina me dijo: ya cerraron, hasta mañana a las ocho...Las grandes pasiones del ánimo no pueden desahogarse sino en el idioma patrio, i aunque el inglés tiene un pasable *goddam* para casos especiales, preferí el español que es tan rotundo i sonoro para lanzar un ahullido de rabia. Los yankees están poco habituados a las manifestaciones de las pasiones meridionales, i el huésped, oyéndome maldecir con excitacion profunda en idioma estraño, me miró espantado; i haciéndome seña con la mano, como para que me detuviera un momento ántes de morderlos a todos o suicidarme, salió corriendo a la calle, en busca sin duda de algun alguacil para que me aprehendiese. ¡Esto solo me faltaba ya! i aquella idea me volvió repentinamente la compostura que en mi afliccion habia perdido por un momento. Minutos despues volvió a entrar acompañado de un sujeto que traia la pluma a la oreja i que con frialdad me preguntó en inglés primero, en frances en seguida, i luego alguna palabra en español, la causa de mi turbacion, de que lo habia instruido el posadero. (416, Sarmiento's emphasis)

It is key that the highest moment of indecipherability also becomes a moment of translation awareness. For the first time in this scene, Sarmiento introduces English phrases. In the context of his angst, Sarmiento manages to make the "*but no matter*" resonate with irony. Moreover, Sarmiento evidences sensitivity to the subtleties of translation when he points to the inadequacies of the English "*goddam*"

to express his emotions. Interestingly, he leaves unwritten what was actually said in Spanish, allowing us to approximate it with the recognition of the inadequacy of English. Sarmiento's realization that English imperfectly expresses his experience is not purely semantic; it prompts an identification between his passions, his language and his patria: "Las grandes pasiones del ánimo no pueden desahogarse sino in el idioma patrio." Moreover, his discourse locates and determines difference geographically: "Los yankees están poco habituados a las manifestaciones de las pasiones meridionales." Difference crystalizes around the figure of translation. The recognition that "goddam" is insufficient for Sarmiento signals part of the complex process of identity-formation that occurs by way of translation in this text.<sup>16</sup> Sarmiento re-constitutes his identity in a moment of translation. Importantly, against his own ideal descriptions to the contrary, Sarmiento's assertion of national identity occurs not in the context of communication, but in the threat of its disruption. When the epistolary, telegraphic economy breaks down, he compensates and mediates the dissolution — the disillusion — with translation. The process of identity formation by way of translation is a simultaneous process of consolidation and augmentation. Moreover, Sarmiento's identifications are vexed, in many ways as much cosmopolitan as Argentine; indeed, in his earlier reaction to Arcos' absence he feels more at home expressing himself in French. When he finally receives word by way of a note left with the post, he curses in French: "Al fin supe que habia dejado en la posta una esquila, en que me repetia lo de Harrisburg: 'Lo aguardo en Pittsburg.' ¡*Malheureux!* exclamé yo acongojado." (414–15, Sarmiento's emphasis). Given Sarmiento's linking of language with national identity, especially strong in the emotional outburst in Spanish, his exclamation in French splits that identity by charging it with a cosmopolitan context.

The angst-ridden situation is resolved by a translation figure, sporting a "pluma" behind his ear. The "pluma" implies a literary writing device and contrasts strikingly with Sarmiento's experience of technological missives. In Sarmiento's narrative, this interpreter comes to represent a community of learned men, a society of letters. In the end, he chivalrously pays Sarmiento's passage, offering Sarmiento an angelic salvation: "En la primera noche se me apareció mi ángel custodio, cargado de libros; traíame un tomo de Quevedo, otro del Tasso en italiano i uno o dos mamotretos en frances para que

me distrajese. Consagróme algunos momentos hablando alternativamente en español i en frances; díjome que conocia el latin i el griego, inquirióse sobre algunos detalles de mi viaje i me deseó buena noche al retirarse” (417). This American polyglot brings knowledge and civility to Sarmiento’s world. They communicate via a *lingua franca* to form an idealized, cosmopolitan bond based on books, courtesy and culture. To resolve the less than ideal reality of communication by letter, by telegraph, Sarmiento introduces a translation figure who mediates the epistolary dualities of presence and absence. Sarmiento’s angel acts as interpreter, translating between Sarmiento and English speaking Americans. Additionally, he appeals to Sarmiento on the basis of an international literary community, sharing books from his library. He tucks Quevedo in among the French and Italian literature. In this way, Sarmiento reiterates and mitigates his stance that Latin Americans must mine the uniqueness of Latin American Spanish and expose themselves to foreign literatures in order to write in such a way as to foment the expression of modern ideas and to distance themselves from the metropolis, the heritage of Spanish colonialism. Indeed, Sarmiento’s illusions might be seen as bookish illusions. He attempts to repopulate his imagination by the literary production of an epistolary narrative, a letter sent out to a community of men who, like Sarmiento, might also be translators, interpreters. In the context of the canon, Sarmiento’s form is far from innocent. As a letter, it harbors the possibility that it might not arrive. It at once unmask and props up the ideological underpinnings of canonical practices, even as it proposes translation as a mode that might mediate the availability of culture, knowledge, and power — especially literature and literary authority — in the center and in the periphery. Sarmiento initiates an epistolary exchange with a society of letters and proposes that translation might allow for a dialogue which in its very form — epistolary, translation — might interrogate the distance between ideal and reality, presence and absence, nation and world, imagining or imaging a face and a voice for Sarmiento by way of his literary missives.

## Notes

1. In terms of contemporary debates about western canonical travel literature, “western,” “canonical,” and “literature” are all contested terms, unstable over time, and informed by hegemonic and hierarchical valuations; moreover, in light of “travel” they evidence a unique multivalence in relation to the emerging and changing landscape of travel, traveler and writing about travel. Sarmiento’s self-conscious analysis of his relation to travel literature evidences the way that he reads, transforms and translates the canon as a result of his perspective as an Argentine exiled to Chile, and in light of his travels to Europe, Africa and the United States. Furthermore, Sylvia Molloy’s observation that “the canon, by the mere fact that one is reading it from Spanish America, translated into a Spanish American context, is no longer the same” (22) complicates our notion of the way questions of the canon relate to Sarmiento, even as the awareness of this difference, for Sarmiento, does not escape his ordering tropes of civilized and barbarian, progressive and backward. Furthermore, William J. Kennedy notes in his consideration of Kant in “Interest in the Canon: Kant in the Context of Longinus and Adorno” that translation presupposes not only the anteriority of a foreign canon but also its alien difference that requires the later writer to act out and work through its strangeness” (55). This has a profound effect on a writer’s rhetorical identity, at once consolidating it in relation to what is foreign and augmenting it by the incorporation of the historical, cultural and linguistic specificities of a foreign canon.

2. My argument builds on Richard Morse’s observation in *Prospero’s Mirror* that Sarmiento’s “journey led him to clarify earlier confusions and to shift the civilization-barbarism antinomy to political foundations now more keenly perceived or deeply sensed. [ . . . ] Civilization he now defined as a political culture based on the egalitarian principle and a protean capacity for private association” (115–119).

3. In *Epistolary Practices*, William Decker notes the “letter’s capacity to assimilate other genres (poem, essay, travel narrative, confession), and [...] the letter’s own susceptibility to assimilation (verse epistle, epistolary novel, travelogue, polemic)” (10).

4. William H. Katra writes: “Es probable que desde el principio de su largo viaje, Sarmiento tuviera la intención de publicar sus impresiones en forma de libro. Novedosa fue la decisión de escribir sus comentarios en forma de cartas dirigidas a sus amigos en Chile y Montevideo. La forma epistolar era un artificio útil; cumplía con el propósito literario de ofrecer

al autor un medio conveniente de expresar libremente sus ideas. Durante los dos años y tres meses de ausencia, mandaba copias de estas cartas a sus amigos en Chile, quienes las publicaban en los periódicos locales. La carta correspondiente a su visita a los Estados Unidos identifica a Valentín Alsina como su destinatario, una carta que con toda probabilidad Sarmiento la habría despachado desde Panamá o quizás al llegar cerca del destino final, Santiago de Chile. A los dos años de volver a Chile, publicó la primera entrega de todas estas cartas bajo el título *Viajes por Europa, África y América* (1849), completadas en 1851.” (854)

5. For only one such example, one might think of the way that Fanny Trollope creates a space for enunciation in the preface to *Domestic Manners of the Americans*.

6. In “Viajes alrededor del modelo: para una política estética de las identidades,” Adriana Rodríguez Pérsico sees this characteristic of Sarmiento’s vision in terms of the *flâneur*. I would argue that although the traveler might have characteristics in common with the *flâneur*, they are culturally and historically distinct phenomena. We might think, for example, about the way that the *flâneur* is spatially determined by the city, whereas the traveller’s relation to space is defined much more broadly, engaging a different economy of home and foreign.

7. Although many scholars at least give passing reference to the epistolary form of *Viajes*, there exist two studies which specifically target the question of genre in relation to Sarmiento’s *Viajes*. Ana María Barrenechea in “La epístola y su naturaleza genérica” undertakes an historical and theoretical exploration of the epistolary form as a genre, illustrating her stances with Sarmiento’s letters, both personal and those found in *Viajes*. Barrenechea admits that her analysis of *Viajes* is cursory: “No continuaré con el estudio pormenorizado de la forma epistolar en los *Viajes* [. . .] pues esto merece un artículo aparte por su importancia y la extensión que demanda” (62). See also Elena M. Rojas’ “Texto, texturas y formas” for a rigorous linguistic analysis of the macro and micro structures of Sarmiento’s narrative. She thoroughly catalogues the epistolary markers.

8. See Rojas Mayer, “Los *Viajes* de Sarmiento: Su interés por la cultura europea a través de la lengua,” 381; Fernández Bravo, 143; Kristal, “Dialogues and Polemics: Sarmiento, Lastarria and Bello,” 66; Kristal, “La herencia española y la americanidad: Bello Sarmiento y Lastarria; Sierra, Hostos, González Prada y Varona”.

9. See Shumway for an analysis of the role of race in Sarmiento’s, and other prominent Argentine intellectuals’, nationalistic rhetoric. See also

Kristal, "The Degree Zero of Spanish American Cultural History and The Role of Native Populations in the Formation of Pre-Independence National Pasts," and "Captive in the Wilderness: An Argentine Adaptation of an Anglo-Saxon Image."

10. I do not agree that the telegraphic missive might be seen as a metaphor for Sarmiento's writing in quite the literal way that David Viñas suggests in detailing Sarmiento's admiration for Morse: "Morse is tied specifically to the writing style of Sarmiento. Particularly if we consider three fundamental aspects: velocity, economy and penetration. Sarmiento is tantalized by the mighty seduction of these long and frenetic sheets of perforated paper, the product of Morse's telegraph" (214–215). Instead, from my point of view, Sarmiento uses the metaphoric connections of modernity, progress and nationhood to weave meaning between his descriptions and utilizations of various modes and technologies of writing. As we will see later, these "few dots on a sheet of paper" become for Sarmiento a problem of translation (Viñas 214).

11. Although in *Epistolary Practices* William Merrill Decker is speaking about the historical and literary practices of letter writing in the U.S. in the 19th century, his insights about the effect of this transitional space gesture toward the complex context of Sarmiento's narrative: "Except where beginnings and endings are heralded by abrupt and cataclysmic change, eras of human experience resist confinement to neat chronological boundaries. Especially when we define a period by the prevalence of specific practices, the determination of the point at which one era ends and another begins is complicated by the fact that the continuation of old ways may long overlap with the inception and establishment of new. [. . .] Given the lengthy coexistence of different orders of communications technology, the overlap of eras certainly characterizes the history and periodizing of letter writing." (229–230).

12. Sarmiento actualizes this stance as President of Argentina and several times makes the link between the expansion of telegraphic communication and the expansion of civilization in service of the nation explicit in his "Mensaje al abrir las sesiones del Congreso Argentino." See, for example, his statement in 1871:

El uso del telégrafo se ha introducido tan pronto en nuestros hábitos y su ejercicio diario ha llegado á ser de tal importancia, que la dotación actual de telegrafistas es insuficiente, siendo de toda necesidad triplicar en muchas de sus líneas los hilos conductores, á fin de que no se paralice ó sufra demora la correspondencia.

Esta celeridad de las comunicaciones está ejerciendo ya una grande influencia civilizadora, moral y política en los pueblos. Sirve los intereses del comercio y desenvuelve al mismo tiempo sentimientos de fraternidad. (Mabragaña 337–338)

13. Nicolas Shumway in *The Invention of Argentina* details the way that Sarmiento, and fellow Argentine intellectuals, intended to cure the self-diagnosed malady of Argentina's technological backwardness by imitation and importation: "their mission was less one of creation than of re-creation" (156).

14. Nicolas Shumway points to a parallel phenomenon within the context of foreign investment: "To combat the barbarism of distance, they brought in foreign, mostly British, investors and engineers to criss-cross the country with telegraph lines" (Shumway 165).

15. Esther Allen, in "The Paradoxes of Admiration: Sarmiento, Tocqueville, and the United States," emphasizes difference in this scene: "His solution to the crowd's mockery is to underscore his difference from them in the most dramatic possible way. However, he could have established that he was a foreigner simply by speaking French: his insistence in showing the crowd his face, "perfectly illuminated" by the light of the lamp, suggests that he wants them to perceive something more fundamental. In this land of faceless collectivities where all men are *el yanqui*, he is an individual: he is a man with a face." (71)

16. George Steiner theorizes this process in *After Babel*:

The frontiers between languages are 'alive'; they are a dynamic constant which defines either side in relation to the other but no less to itself. This is the enormously complex topology which lies behind the old tag that knowledge of a second language will help clarify or deepen mastery of one's own. To experience difference, to feel the characteristic resistance and 'materiality' of that which differs, is to re-experience identity. One's own space is mapped by what lies outside; it derives coherence, tactile configuration, from the pressure of the external. 'Otherness', particularly when it has the wealth and penetration of language, compels 'presentness' to stand clear. (381)

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