Suzanne Jill Levine. *Unfaithful: A Translator's Memoir*. New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2025, 184 p.

Suzanne Jill Levine—New Yorker, Jewess, baby boomer, movie maniac (p. 5), motherless child, Juilliard-trained pianist with *le feu sacré* (p. 7), ambivalent academic, and translator of the most writerly of the icons of the Latin American Boom—has written a tell-all (p. 113) about a picaresque (p. 158) heroine, herself. What is there to tell? A lot. Specifically, her personal experience of "an erotics of translation" (*ibid.*). She really means it. I've used the Chinese word 爽 (*shuǎng* in Mandarin), which typically refers to sexual ecstasy, to describe my own personal experience of literary translation, but I've never had *that* much fun between the sheets, so to speak.

In a topic sentence in a chapter about a Spanish sojourn in college, she describes "the pillow" as "the best teacher of any language" (p. 20), but the rest of the paragraph is about the nightlight in Madrid. The pillow comment is her being coy. Coy is not a word you'd use to describe her by the time you get to the end of the book.

Levine's is the first in Bloomsbury's new "Translated By" series, "a space for translators to be recognized for the full range of their activity in literary networks." One first has to become a node in such a network, by networking. Levine studied under Gregory Rabassa, translator of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as a graduate student at Columbia University. Rabassa sent her to the Center for Inter-American Relations, where she found herself on a margin of the Latin American Boom.[1] If Rabassa set her on the path

1. I was wondering in what sense the Boom—*el Boom* in Spanish—was a boom. An economic boom of avant-garde writers? The metaphor seems somehow inappropriate;

to becoming a literary translator (p. 28), she wouldn't heeled so far down it had she not, at the Center, caught the eye of the Uruguayan literary critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal, a student of F.R. Leavis and practitioner of close reading. Dressed "like a French ingénue in a 1960s Godard film with straight bangs and miniskirt" (p. 30), she arranges to meet Emir at his hotel. She's early 20s and nubile, he's late 40s and married. She goes to get him in his hotel room, taking him aback. Then lunch. A few pages later she's sitting on his lap, then they're in bed. Along the way we're treated to gratuitous literary references. "A fearful symmetry" (p. 37)? I don't think it was quite what William Blake had in mind. *Progrès en amour assez lents* (*ibid.*)? Jean Paulhan's *Progrès en amour assez lents*, which she would receive from another lover, Argentine writer Bioy Casares, had come out in 1966. And things have proceeded quite briskly, it seems to me. Over the next decade Monegal takes her everywhere in western Europe and Latin America, introducing her to everyone who's anyone who lives there. Talk about "access," the theme of the book's only, extremely unkind review on Goodreads (Call, 2025).

This is a crowded memoir. "So many people!" I wrote in the margin a third of the way through, right after a description of lunch with an ancient Roman Jakobson. There are two Joes on p. 29, and two Lydias on p. 150. Levine excels as a somewhat formulaic word-painter of all these people. The formulaic part is comparison to actors in classic films. Emir for instance reminds her of Emil Jannings[2] and Bela Lugosi (p. 32). But I was seriously impressed by some of the character sketches. At some party for cool kids that Levine attended, Susan Sontag was "lounging against a window with her long legs crossed and resting casually on a windowsill. She was wearing her classic black turtleneck and jeans, and of course had her thick black hair with the famous white raccoon streak" (p. 125). Levine also captures Sontag's strong personality, her preference for "abrupt probe[s]" over "idle chitchat" (p. 126). "Is [Manuel] Puig queer?" asks Sontag at the buffet. Levine couldn't think of what to say. "I think I only managed to reply blandly 'of course' with my usual non-referential friendly

maybe it should have been called the Bloom. Or were they blowing up what had come before? That would be a way of making it new, as Ezra Pound put it. Reading *Betrayal* I kept hearing dull echoes of a literary explosion from more than half a century ago.

2. Who? you may wonder, if you belong to my generation. Never fear, the author includes enough in-text notes. And there's always Wikipedia and YouTube, where I whiled away a considerable amount of time during the composition of this review.

smile," she writes, "trying to show I was unflappable, but she had the air of expecting a more elaborate comeback from a supposedly clever translator of edgy avant-garde writers" (p. 126). If Levine doesn't present quite as strong a personality, she's very good at describing them. Wait a minute! What's Susan Sontag doing in the middle of this memoir by one of the foremost translators of Boom writers? Other than the fact that she's a feminist icon and inspiration to millions of women, it was Sontag who recommended that Levine write more about her "affairs" (p. 128) with edgy avant-garde Latin American writers than she had done in the more academic *The Subversive Scribe*.

Part One, "Close Encounters," ends with three chapters about three such affairs: one with the Cuban Guillermo Cabrera Infante and two with Argentinians, Manuel Puig and Adolfo Bioy Casares. Manuel Puig was the only one of these writers I'd heard of, and Levine didn't translate the only work by Puig I'd heard of, *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*. As she puts it, "the writers I chose to translate, or was chosen for, were unknown, like myself, and were probably not for large audiences" (p. 75). Levine flirts with Infante, and helps him colloquialize his *Tres Tristes Tigres*, trillingly co-translated (with Donald Gardner) as *Three Trapped Tigers* (p. 55). A fag hag (p. 89), she has a foursome with the supposedly queer Puig. Was he a bisexual? More like an omnisexual, just like Levine sometimes seems to be herself. Just when you thought things couldn't get any more complicated, she has a final affair with Casares, over thirty years her senior, whose wife had had an affair with his mother.

The second half of the book consists of sketches of writers she didn't have affairs with. Pablo Neruda very considerately cuts her mango, Carlos Fuentes very unkindly calls her Lolita of the Boom at a party attended by Rip Torn, Lillian Hellman, and Shirley MacLaine, and Reinaldo Arenas goes skinny dipping with her. Other writers make even more marginal appearances, including Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Julio Cortazar, and Jorge Luis Borges. At lunch one day, she sits like a hyphen between the two Bs, Borges and (Adolfo) Bioy (Casares) (p. 103).

An epilogue, my favorite chapter in the book, turns to her elder sister Carol, a bit-part actress who died relatively young, at the age of sixty, of lupus and chagrin. Levine hadn't seen her in eighteen years until she did one last time, right before the end. Jill had replaced Carol as the baby of the family and then lost touch with her after the

latter went to Los Angeles to try to make it as an actress. Carol's story is Jill's or all sorts of women's, decades before the #MeToo movement (p. 159), punctuated by fraught, fate-defining encounters with powerful men. Carol's most public such encounter was on a witness stand in an episode of *Perry Mason*. That was the high point of her career. She met her second husband, a fellow down-and-out actor, at a bus stop. This sets up the most devastating line in the entire book: "People who are doing well in Hollywood don't meet at bus stops" (p. 156).

The central metaphor of the book is infidelity, in at least three senses. Levine is of course unfaithful in the conventional translator's sense: she takes liberties, prioritizes sound over sense (p. 50) and cut-to-the-chase (p. 52) American colloquialisms over "fidelity." She is also unfaithful in the sexual sense: to the wives of Emir and Bioy. Maybe she's also unfaithful in some way to her sister Carol. The reason the epilogue is so poignant is the sense of it being too late to compensate. But the other betrayals do get atoned for. In any translation, what gets lost is the flip side of what is gained (p. 158). The authors must have been gratified for their works to appear in print in English, thanks to Levine. Including the ghost of Adolfo Bioy Casares's wife Silvina Ocampo, two of whose book-length works of fiction were translated by Levine for publication in the 2010s, two decades after Ocampo's death.

How much does *Unfaithful* tell or teach us about literary translation? I like the neologism "closelaborations" (p. 65), invented by the first of her closelaborators, Guillermo Cabrera Infante. Translation indeed involves collaboration, close reading, labor, and love. Levine's account of her acquired identity in terms of gender and sexuality is eloquent:

> being a translator was a creative way to deal with ambivalence, with one's "fluidity," a better term for bisexuality, less categorical, more experimental. What I mean is, a translator is constantly resolving or reconciling the problem of how two languages are not the same, do not match each other perfectly and yet the art of translating means finding ways to resolve ambivalence, at least on the written page. (pp. 85-86)

Otherwise, she is reminding us of aspects of literary translation that we've felt or thought about. Yes, we can be envious, wanting to be like the writers we read and translate (p. 30). Yes, we can find literary translation the next best thing to original literary composition, a lot better than desiccated (p. 50) genres of academic writing. Like

Levine, I, once upon a starry night, imagined I could be a bridge between two hemispheres (p. 12). I, too, "came from a translated world as, in a way, do all exiles or immigrants" (p. 7). Levine translated herself to the West Coast (p. 65), as many of us have translated ourselves into different languages, cultures, and places. I'm no actor, and neither is she, but any translator has to be a bit of one, in her case "the ghost of an actress" (p. 158), in order to do the police in different voices, as T.S. Eliot put it, channeling Dickens.

Levine ends one of her chapters with a remark about the "stoic acceptance" implied by the phrase "character is destiny" (pp. 97 and 113). I found that puzzling. Here I thought the phrase implied a resistance to fate that Levine seems to have demonstrated in her gutsy and mostly successful attempts to cross cultures and bend genders. Reading her story, I often felt envious. What a life she's had! Having started out as the Lolita of the Boom, she's become its Mnemosyne. *Unfaithful* masterfully evokes[3] the ghosts of writers many of us grew up reading. With its focus on the personal history of a literary translator in her network, it rises to the challenge of the series it augurates. The next memoirist in the series has some pretty big shoes to fill.

Levine is in a romantic and retrospective mood in this book. She probably produced half her translations on a typewriter and the rest on a PC (pp. 165-166). There's nada about the technologies that revolutionized the translation profession in the 20th century, let alone about DeepL or ChatGPT.

The book would have profited from a more assertive copy editor. Emir's role in the Boom is compared to Edmund "Bunny" Wilson's in literary modernism twice. Neruda is the great thrice bard twice. Marquez is a diplomat's son twice. Fifty-seven people, places, or things are famous. It's her prerogative to jump around in time, but I got tired of seeing "as mentioned."

Levine is a part of the "glamorous fauna" (p. 34) of sandy, sun-kissed beaches (pp. 117-118, 151-152). She frolics on one on Fire Island with an anonymous boyfriend, on another in the French Riviera with Casares, and on yet another in Key West with Arenas. The appeal seems to be partly of the sea, symbol of what it feels like to be free, including to be oneself. That's what she has apparently

3. The word "evoke" turns out to originate in soul summoning. See https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/evoke.

tried to do, all her life, however difficult it can be (p. 152). I picture her gazing west on Leadbetter Beach in Santa Barbara, enjoying a blissful retirement.

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