

## ESSAY

# “Words Are Things”: Translation, Materiality, and Mario Ortiz’s *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura*

JANET HENDRICKSON

The Argentine writer Mario Ortiz opens volume 6 of his *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura* (*Language and Literature Notebooks*) with a series of categorical propositions that grant words and things a semantic and ontological equivalence:

1. Existen las cosas.
2. Existen las palabras.
3. Las palabras son cosas.
4. Las cosas son cosas.

(*Cuadernos* [2013] 135)

1. Things exist.
2. Words exist.
3. Words are things.
4. Things are things.<sup>1</sup>

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The first twelve volumes of the ongoing project of *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura* were published between 2000 and 2021, and critics have called the project an unclassifiable work—the first five volumes consist of book-length poems, while the remaining seven fluctuate between essay, memoir, narrative, philosophy, and lyric.<sup>2</sup> In addition, these last seven volumes also include photographs and illustrations of the objects that provoke the narrator to write, such as samples of typography, commercial signs, or photographs of weeds growing up around an abandoned bicycle (fig. 1; see also fig. 2). What unites all twelve volumes is a concern about language—what things and processes generate human language, what materials make up the written

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PMLA 138.3 (2023), doi:10.1632/S0030812923000548

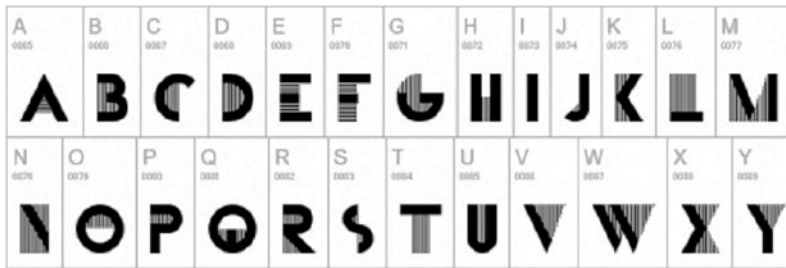


FIG. 1. Top, an example of typography studied in vol. 5 of *Language and Literature Notebooks* (*Cuadernos* [2022] 437); center, a bakery sign examined in vol. 5 (359); bottom, a scene of weeds and a bicycle used to generate language in vol. 7 (610).



Fig. 2. While images usually function as illustrations in *Language and Literature Notebooks*, this page from vol. 11 integrates them into an argument (taken from a 2022 Spanish edition collecting all twelve volumes).<sup>3</sup>

word, how the material that constitutes spoken language takes on a signifying function. These books also share the same title, and the conceit of the notebook recalls the idea of a school notebook, something Ortiz, the narrator, relates at one point to the real-life profession of Ortiz, the author, a high school and university Spanish literature teacher.

The first time I read Ortiz's *Notebooks*, I read many of the passages simultaneously in Spanish and in English translation: that is, as I read, I imagined translating the text into English. This impulse may derive from many of its passages' appearance of

clear translatability, as exemplified by the simplicity of the lines cited above. For example, the third line of the original text of volume 6—"Las palabras son cosas"—has only one clear option for translation into English ("Words are things"), given that the definite article in Spanish here denotes a general category rather than a specific set. At the same time, the text is riddled with words that might seem untranslatable—a term whose problems I address below—from philosophical keywords to instances of written language whose meaning depends on their material location. The sense of personal interpellation that I feel as a translator parallels a kind of interpellation Ortiz's first-person narrator describes as he encounters different objects and words. The way I have felt impelled to translate by these books' transparency and resistance to translation may also have something to do with Ortiz's fascination with broken objects, objects that no longer work in their original context but, in their broken state, work on Ortiz and make him write. In what follows, I read Ortiz to propose that a task, if not *the* task, of translation consists of tracing how words function precisely through the ways in which their original function breaks down. This function is revealed not only through a study of translation as a concept or a study of any particular translation, but through a study of the *tasks* that the *translator* must carry out to create the new linguistic object of the translated text.

These terms, of course, come from Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," which is also the source for an image I am reframing through Ortiz's work, that of the fragmented vessel. Benjamin's essay is relevant to Ortiz because, however immaterial Benjamin's work might be in its aspiration for "pure language," it at least metaphorically describes translation in thing-like terms. Famously, Benjamin, in Harry Zohn's translation, compares human languages to "fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel" (260). Fidelity in translation consists of "fidelity in reproducing the form" (260). Benjamin refigures traditional oppositions between "sense for sense" and "word for word" correspondence through a term that refers on a basic level to physical shape. This term, *form*, allows us to compare works made

of two different linguistic materials the way we might compare a glass and a porcelain vase, or, if we are to be more faithful to Benjamin, the way we might compare the nonidentical but matching edges of a broken vessel's fragments to see how they fit. In either case, the form of such an object determines what it can hold and how we use it.

One might ask—Who made this vessel? How did it break? Where were its fragments found? And who might put them back together again? While considering the vessel in terms of its material history might seem to stray from Benjamin, actual vessels, so to speak, matter if we are going to think of the ordinary tasks translators carry out to get their work done. My interest in taking his metaphor literally is tied to a growing critical attention to materiality and translation. Recent translation theorists have turned toward fields like media studies, reception history, and textual scholarship to cut through the impasse of an understanding of “untranslatability” that results from an impossible, naive demand that translations be equivalent to their sources, such that that the two map perfectly onto each other in terms of both meaning and form. Lawrence Venuti, for example, argues for translation as a “material practice that is indivisibly linguistic *and* cultural” and that is best understood through the contexts in which the translator's acts of interpretation take place (ix). Karen Emmerich frames translation with historic, material specificity “as a further textual extension of an already unstable literary work” through literary objects like *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, assembled in its contemporary form from deciphered fragments of ancient text (14). Karin Littau, in a special forum on translation and materiality in *Translation Studies*, draws “from media philosophy, technology studies, and book history” (83) as a corrective to “the spiritual, the phenomenal, and the metaphysical—concepts that have been core to the human-centered humanities” (82), as well as to ideas of untranslatability or even seemingly capacious notions of translation like sense-for-sense equivalence. Littau writes:

If we take seriously the entanglement of the material and the ideational, it is just as untenable to prioritize

spirit over matter or subject over object as it is to downgrade media technologies to empty shells, the sole function of which is to carry the fruits of the mind's labours. Media are not merely instruments with which writers or translators produce meanings; rather, they *set the framework within which something like meaning becomes possible at all.* (83)

From a media studies perspective, language cannot exist outside its shell or vessel. Even empty or broken, the container *is* meaning.

Returning to the metaphor, however, both the vessel and, more so, the break recur frequently in recent writing by translators on translation. Jhumpa Lahiri, for example, calls the source a “container” (28) whose design she must “rupture . . . in order to render [the sentences] at home in English” (30). Other radical translators embrace the fracture. Rather than disguise the break, the Antena Aire collaborators Jen Hofer and J. D. Pluecker declare that translation should signal it:

We are opposed to seamless translation, as it seeks to stitch innumerable disparate words and ideas and divides together as if they had always been fused. . . . We welcome errors and fissures because they are palpable, textured: those snags are as integral a part of the reading experience as the content, the form, the various kinds of information presented by the texts. . . . (Antena 2)<sup>4</sup>

While Antena's textile metaphors posit translation as a visible mending, Johannes Göransson reclaims the contested notion of translation as irreparable loss. He defiantly calls spaces of translational encounter “the deformation zone,” a term that “acknowledges that translations deform: in acts of translation, there is violence done to the original, but there is also violence done to the target culture, to the translator. This violence . . . is not something we should attempt to protect poetry from; instead we should recognize it as poetry's signature” (26). By extension, violence is translation's signature, too.

While the fissure is often conceptualized as exterior to, even caused by the translator, it also works on and in the translator, as Erín Moure observes. What Moure calls the “intranslatable” is



a translational move that goes doubly inward, as "an 'insecession,' an infolding that cuts or secedes from the tissue of a text not 'original' but 'anterior,' a cut or infold that is yet socially inscribed via the body of the reader and its histories," including and especially via the body of the reading translator (18). Moure's term "intranslatable"—her translation of the French *intraduisible*—puts a deliberate snag in standard English through the "in-" prefix. Moure adapts her term from Barbara Cassin's *Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, and she opposes her translation to its rendering in the title of the published English version, *Dictionary of Untranslatables*.<sup>5</sup> I use the term *untranslatable* with some critical hesitation, insofar as I do not mean to propose that any given word cannot be rendered into another language. Rather, I mean to signal how the inevitable failure of exact correspondence between languages generates meaning. As Cassin, in Michael Wood's translation, writes in her introduction to the *Dictionary*:

To speak of *untranslatables* in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating. But this indicates that their translation, into one language or another, creates a problem, to the extent of sometimes generating a neologism or imposing a new meaning on an old word. (xvii)

Like Cassin, I am interested in working through difficulty to see what new language and associations emerge from translational encounter.

The break or fissure as instigation to work also brings me back to considering Benjamin's vessel beyond metaphor. Here I am informed by Kate Briggs, who frames translation as a kind of craft: the translator is a "[m]aker of wholes," she says, who writes "in a new context with very different materials" (91). These materials are concrete, and they extend beyond text to objects in the setting where the translator works. For Briggs, the translation zone is literally homely, and borders between linguistic objects can be small and quotidian. Observing her domestic workspace, she writes: "I look about me

for all the small contacts translation makes: putting one book literally in touch with another, their faces smashed against each other in the pile by my bed. Or on my desk. Or, with less pressure: the one leaning into the other, supporting the other, on my shelves" (59). The translator's daily practice articulates always-mediated words into a whole that can join but does not seal them, that could always come apart.

This recognition of the translator's relation to the material, the things with which one translates, calls attention to a gap in Benjamin's essay. Antoine Berman observes that "The Task of the Translator" might well be called "The Task of Translation," given the imperfect correspondence between the title of Benjamin's essay and what it actually discusses: "Partout où le mot 'traducteur' apparaît, on pourrait le changer par celui de 'traduction'" ("Wherever the word 'translator' appears, one could well change it for the word 'translation'"; 33). This emphasis on translation might arise from the difficulties Benjamin found in carrying out actual translation: Emily Apter notes that "[a] profound sense of technical failure informs [Benjamin's] theory of translation and grounds his notion of *Aufgabe*" (294). But a turn from translation to the translator lets us read *Aufgabe*—translated to English as "task"—in ways that allow us to work on the vessel and recognize how the vessel works on us.

Berman does this through a sort of intralingual translation, by replacing *Aufgabe* with another term in German, *Auflösung*, whose cognate is "solution." Using this term, Berman reformulates "task" (in the French original, followed by Apter's translation) as

la solution logique (d'un problème)  
la (dis)solution chimique (d'une substance)  
la (ré)solution mathématique (d'une équation)  
la (ré)solution musicale (d'un accord) (Berman 36)

the logical solution (of a problem)  
the chemical (dis)solution (of a substance)  
the mathematical (re)solution (of an equation)  
the musical (re)solution (of a chord). (Apter 296)<sup>6</sup>

We might also reread Benjamin through the Spanish translation of the title of his essay, "La tarea del

traductor.” The *Diccionario de la lengua española* (*Dictionary of the Spanish Language*) published by the Real Academia Española lists the first three definitions of *tarea* as

1. Obra o trabajo.
  2. Trabajo que debe hacerse en tiempo limitado.
  3. Deber (ejercicio que se encarga al alumno).  
 (“Tarea”)
1. Work or job.
  2. Job that should be done in a limited amount of time.
  3. Homework (exercise assigned to a student).

*Tarea* in the first definition is a task that results in a product, or a “work,” like an artwork, as well as ongoing work, in the sense of a job. *Tarea* in the second definition is a task that must be done in a limited time. *Tarea* in definition three is the word used for schoolwork, whose synonym, *deber*, can also function as a noun meaning “duty”; as an auxiliary verb, to say that one “should” do something; and as an action verb, meaning “to owe,” as in to owe a debt. *Tarea* also carries with it the implication of *tareas domésticas*, domestic tasks—that is, household chores. These solutions largely result from human practice. Recalling Ortiz’s conceit of the notebook, one can imagine these “solutions” as student tasks: the high schooler working on algebra homework (with the instructions “solve for *x*”) or the child hitting the wrong note in piano practice until finally playing the chord right.

All of these notions of the Spanish *tarea* or “task” have some correspondence to the actual work of translation (even as translation lends itself to other corresponding terms, like *art*). Translation can result in an aesthetic work, it can be paid and have deadlines, it can be homework in a language class, and its ethics can be governed by a sense of duty or debt to the translation’s source language and the source’s author. Those ethics can be governed, too, by a competing sense of duty or debt to the target language and its readers. Additionally, as with household tasks, translation tends to yield the best results if one works at it a little every day. Translation, as

Briggs writes, is “a responsive and appropriative *practising* of an extant work at the level of the sentence, working it out” (119), and like housework or homework, it often takes place “more or less silently at home” (171). Berman’s definitions of “task” also apply to Ortiz’s *Notebooks*. While this series constitutes a literary work, they pose as school homework, and they result from a demand or debt that the language and objects of the world impose on the narrator, which he discovers as he puttters around his domestic environment.<sup>7</sup>

Turning to the context of Ortiz’s project, four areas are important to note. The first is generic. Ortiz’s work participates in a larger history of the ambiguous genre of the notebook, where public and private knowledge, empirical observation and personal introspection intersect. From the commonplace book to collections of field notes to the diaries one uses both to record life and, through writing, to discover one’s inner self, notebooks at once collect knowledge from other sources, facilitate its acquisition, and give transmissible, verbal form to a knowledge that previously was hidden or inchoate.

The second area is a historical-political context that occasionally surfaces: that of the military dictatorship that ruled in Argentina from 1976 to 1983, in which thirty thousand people were disappeared by the regime. Ortiz was born in 1965, and this period emerges through evocations of his childhood landscape. Writers of a slightly earlier generation both in Argentina and in other countries that suffered under dictatorship in the Southern Cone have written works that directly address this historical period—for example, Roberto Bolaño’s *Distant Star*—while writers of a generation born toward the end of the dictatorship or after might address this period through a kind of postmemory or through its aftereffects.

The third context, which relates to the fourth and final one, is literary. Ortiz’s project emerges from an Argentine poetry scene that, beginning in the 1990s, has emphasized the book as object in both metaphoric and material ways. Poets aligned with a movement called *objetivismo*, or objectivism, as Ben Bollig observes, “wrote in and promoted a

style that stripped away metaphorical and descriptive excesses, instead using colloquial language and quasi-cinematic techniques. . . to create poems that presented objects and were themselves objects in language" (14). The translation of the name of the North American poetic movement is no accident: the Argentine poets reached back to a lineage that includes figures like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, whose image graced the cover of the second double issue of the influential literary magazine *18 whiskys* in 1993, alongside his famous line, "No ideas but in things" (fig. 3). The Argentine writer Matías Moscardi observes that the translation that appeared on this cover—"No ideas salvo en las cosas"—itself calls attention to the material and imagistic quality of the written

word. The identical English opening to this line—"No ideas"—could be superimposed on the Spanish version with a perfect correspondence. Alternative translations—including one by the poet Sergio Raimondi published inside that same issue of the magazine that reads, "Ideas, sí, pero en las cosas"—lose the correspondence of the words' physical form (78).

This implicit fusion of image and text has overt antecedents in the work of the mid-twentieth-century visual and concrete poets of the Southern Cone. For example, the visual poem depicted in figure 4, by the Uruguayan artist Clemente Padín, titled "Noigandres," is a nod to both Pound and the Brazilian Concrete poets—Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, who

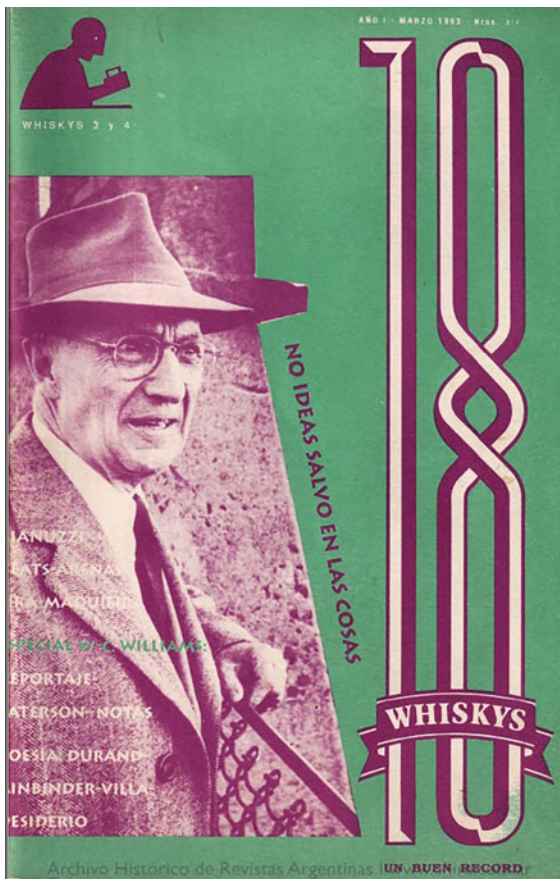


FIG. 3. Cover of *18 whiskys* magazine, March 1993, reproduced from the Archivo Histórico de Revistas Argentinas (Cousido).

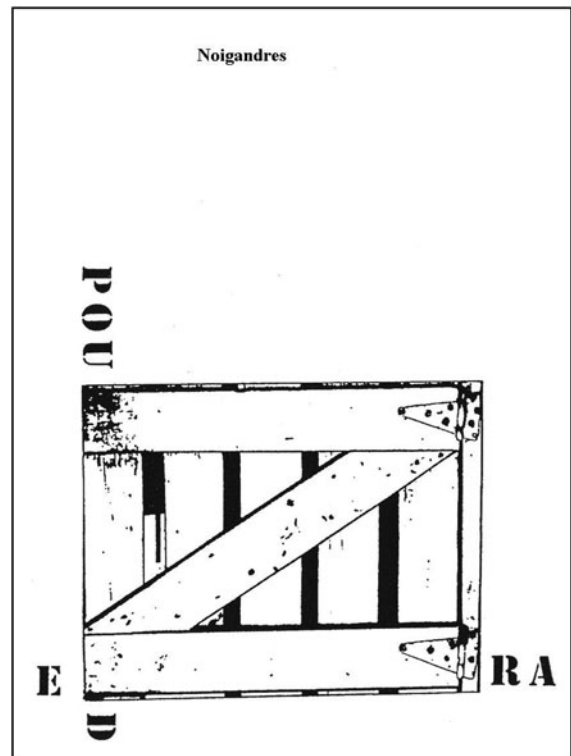


FIG. 4. "Noigandres," by Clemente Padín, from his *Poemas visuales*.

identified themselves as a group with this same title.<sup>8</sup> The attention this poem draws to the formal qualities of the letters *N* and *Z*—which allow each letter to be read as a simultaneous and plastic translation of the other—emphasizes the correspondence between the material composition of words and their referential significance.<sup>9</sup> Media, returning to Littau's framework, include the written letter, and Pound is a central influence for Ortiz. In an interview I conducted with him while visiting Bahía Blanca, Argentina, he cited Pound's notion of the poem as an artisanally constructed object. Padín's image appeared in a 2005 book titled *Poemas visuales* published in collaboration by two small presses: Asunto Impreso, located in Buenos Aires, and VOX, which also published the first volumes of Ortiz's *Notebooks*. VOX, "one of the most active and influential small presses specializing in poetry" in Argentina, is located in Bahía Blanca, an industrial port city that is also home to many contemporary poets, including Ortiz (Bollig 103).

The fourth and final contextualization of the relationship between poetry, image, and material object in Ortiz's milieu has to do with Bahía Blanca. In the last several decades, the city has emerged as a center of poetry in Argentina in which writing practices engage local history and are often bound to physical place. From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Bahía Blanca was home to a group—that included Ortiz—called the *poetas mateístas*, or maté drinker poets, who published flyers, murals, and graffiti poetry that served as a way of writing on and writing from that physical environment and that, through their public display, called into question traditional modes of poetic circulation (see fig. 5; Bollig 103; Moscardi 207). In conversation, Ortiz told me that this movement was, in part, a response to the end of the dictatorship. Bahía Blanca has a reputation as a conservative city, even today, with a military base nearby. As the repression of the dictatorship lifted, Ortiz and other young poets and painters framed their public, plastic poetry through the lens of liberty of expression. Ortiz's fellow *mateísta* and *bahiense* poet Raimondi recalls this movement as a form of occupation that participated in the public sphere:



FIG. 5. *Mateísta* mural, from *Poetas Mateístas*.

Había algo en el *mateísmo* que tenía que ver con lo público, con ocupar espacios públicos. Ver la poesía no como un libro que se lee en un dormitorio o en un salón sublime de escuchas selectos, sino puesto en la pared por donde pasa todo el mundo. El *mateísmo* de algún modo conllevaba una intervención en el espacio público de la ciudad, y en ese lugar sí se puede pensar tal vez como parte de la genealogía por la cual estamos acá.

There was something in *mateísmo* that had to do with the public, with occupying public spaces. Seeing poetry not as a book one reads in one's bedroom or in a sublime room filled with select listeners, but rather put on the wall that everyone passes by. *Mateísmo* in some way entailed an intervention in the public space of the city, and in that case one can think of it perhaps as part of the genealogy of why we are here.

The coincidence of *mateísta* poetry with its environment is also part of a larger lineage of making poetry from objects located within it.

More recently, local poets have intervened in the cultural life of Bahía Blanca through projects that address the city's labor history. Among the most notable is the Museo Taller Ferrowhite, located in the port zone (figs. 6 and 7). This museum and art workshop, developed with the participation of local literary figures including Raimondi and Carlos Mux, the coeditor of VOX, is housed in an abandoned, castle-like power plant, built by Italians in the 1930s. It displays tools recovered by





FIG. 6. Exterior view of the Museo Taller Ferrowhite. Photo by the author.

workers after the privatization and partial breakup of the railroad industry in the 1990s, accompanied by politicized texts, many from local poets. Ortiz, in dialogue with his North American influences, cites Williams’s idea of the poem as machine. The functionality of this metaphor, however, grows complicated in the decaying industrial environment



FIG. 7. Interior view of the Museo Taller Ferrowhite. Photo by the author.

in which Ortiz writes, one populated by broken machines. The particular function of their brokenness, and the artisanal work that succeeds their industrial use, become central to the discussion of machines in volume 6 of *Language and Literature Notebooks*.<sup>10</sup>

For reasons of space I will not summarize the entirety of Ortiz’s *Notebooks*, but it is important to observe a few things about volumes 5, 6, and 7, which were published together as a single book by one of Argentina’s major independent publishers, Eterna Cadencia, in 2013. Volume 5 analyzes the role of handwriting and typography in the formation of the written word. Volume 7 poses as a pseudo-scientific study—a “treatise on phytolinguistics”—that shows how objects generate words in the mind of the person who sees them. At the heart of this study lies the narrator’s experience of looking at some ordinary weeds growing in his neighborhood that helps him snap out of depression and writer’s block. Much of the essayistic power of this volume derives from the difference between the narrator’s problem—a seemingly immaterial, all-consuming mental state—and the concrete, unassuming things that unexpectedly bring about its resolution. Volume 6 develops an idiosyncratic philosophy of language on the basis of the semiotic theory of Louis Hjelmslev.

The theory that Hjelmslev proposed in his *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, published in 1943, “[rejects] the common definition of a sign as an expression that points to a content outside the sign itself” (Nöth 70). Rather, as Winfried Nöth explains, “he defined the sign as an entity generated by the indissoluble connection between an expression and a content” (70). The expression-form and content-form are called functives, and their connection is called a function. The relationship between expression and content is interdependent, a relationship that Hjelmslev classifies as one of solidarity.

Ortiz reformulates Hjelmslev’s idea of functives to mean not content and expression, but phenomena or things, and a function is a connection or dependency that exists between them. Words and things can serve as functives that enter into a dependency, or function, with each other, as can

words with other words, or also things and things. Ortiz follows the first abstract propositions of this volume with others that invoke poetic tropes and relate words to concrete things:

5. Existen las flores que abren sus pétalos a la noche. Están cerca del gallinero.
6. Las flores son cosas y son palabras.
7. Abren sus pétalos. Se pronuncian.
8. Están bajo las estrellas, que también son cosas y son palabras, y brillan y se pronuncian.
- .....
10. Las flores y las estrellas copulan en la misma oración. Luego del punto, se pueden cerrar los ojos y solo queda el aroma.

(*Cuadernos* [2013] 135–36)<sup>11</sup>

5. The flowers that open their petals to the night exist. They are near the henhouse.
6. Flowers are things and are words.
7. They open their petals. They pronounce themselves.
8. They are under the stars, which are also things and words, and they shine and pronounce themselves.
- .....
10. Flowers and stars join in the same sentence. After the period, they can close their eyes, and only the fragrance remains.

Flowers and stars, Ortiz explains, can serve as the terminals, or functives, of a function. As this volume of the *Notebooks* progresses, the narrator further explains the idea of the function, or dependency, through the connection between his gaze and the circuits of a broken radio that he looks at, or, more abstractly at one point, between “semillas y emociones” (“seeds and emotions”; 144). The narrator’s subjective or affective states share the same functive status as objects in this interdependent relationship.

All of these functions, according to Ortiz, are interconnected in “una malla tupida que, de hecho, abarca al conjunto del universo” (“a dense mesh that, in fact, spans the ensemble of universe”; 151). These lines, while they are “invisibles” (“invisible”), are not detached from the material: they can

be “temporales, espaciales, utilitarias, morales, políticas e imaginarias” (“temporal, spatial, utilitarian, moral, political, and imaginary”; 151). Words are things, but they also mark the path of these invisible lines: proposition 22 states, “Las palabras hacen visibles esas líneas vectoriales como el polvillo en suspensión que marca la trayectoria de un rayo solar al filtrarse por las rendijas de una persiana” (“Words mark these vectors like the dust suspended in the air that marks the path of a sunbeam filtering through the blinds”; 151). The poetic text that can result from this process is called a verbal-functional projection, or a PVF for its initials in Spanish (*proyección verbal-funcional*). These theoretical ideas, however, are proposed in the context of a literary or poetic work, so moving back to the poetic premise that there are “no ideas but in things”—understanding things specifically as physical objects—I turn now to how Ortiz develops these ideas through a study of material things, and more importantly things that no longer function as they should, in a way that leads back to the study of language through translation.

As mentioned earlier, Ortiz’s narrator encounters a number of broken vessels that work on him, or enter into a functional dependency with him, precisely through their broken state. Here, I am understanding the term *vessel* in a broad sense, as something that holds something else, not limited to what I imagine in Benjamin’s essay as a sort of broken vase or jar. The narrator’s field of study fuses the literal and metaphoric levels of the text in that it is an actual field, a plot of land his father-in-law owns in the countryside. More specifically, the narrator conducts his observations in this field at a junk pile near the chicken coop.

The first object he studies is an enameled coffee-pot hanging on a chain-link fence. It has a small hole in the bottom, which causes the narrator to speculate on its material history. He imagines someone dropped the coffeepot while washing it. The enamel chipped, and rust ate away at the metal underneath, and now, in its brokenness, it acquires a new function. The narrator lifts it overhead, looks through, and sees “una estrella incandescente” (“an incandescent star”) on “el fondo oscuro de la cafetera”

("the coffeepot's dark bottom"): a bit of sun (139). The injury gives it a different function, understood as use: it becomes a "cafetera solar" ("solar coffeepot"; 141). It also reveals a function, in the pseudo-Hjelmslevian sense, as summarized in proposition 16: "Una función se descubre mirando con insistencia un objeto hasta que el ojo segregue un líquido caliente y aromático" ("A function is discovered by looking insistently at an object until one's eye secretes a hot and aromatic liquid"; 140). The gaze and the sun are two functives; the function, the sunbeam that passes through the coffeepot, produces not only the text, the proposition whose words reveal its path, but also a physiological and possibly affective response.

Another kind of vessel the narrator encounters in the junk pile relates to language, not just by producing a "function" but by the fact that these vessels are printed with words: namely, an old coffee can. The narrator is unable to read the entire label on the coffee can, because it has rusted out. The label is banal and recounts the material history, not of the metallic vessel per se, but of what it once contained: the brand (Café Tres Ríos), ground with ten percent sugar, grown in Brazil, the weight (which the narrator gives as "¿1?" kilogram, as the number is illegible), the date it was packaged, the address of the former coffee company, its inspection number from the Ministry of Health. The narrator is able to fill in the words (although not the variable date and inspection number) made illegible by rust when he finds an intact example of the same coffee can in the kitchen cupboard of his father-in-law's house. Turning to the paradigm of translation, these coffee cans represent two versions of the same text, although neither is original with relation to the other: both are copies, presumably, of a factory prototype, although a true original might not even exist, given the planned space for variability in the production date and inspection number. (That the can is hardly a unique object also points to trouble with the term *original*. Even its first iteration would be "shaped by generic conventions and a nearly infinite list of ghostly 'sources,'" as Emmerich observes about written texts [13].) The coffee can found in the junk pile,

divested of its function of holding coffee, fails also in its function of revealing a legible text because, deemed useless, it has been abandoned to decay, and rust has eaten some of the words away. Transformed by its new environment, the coffee can is now "relatively autonomous" from its prior use (Venuti 69).

The coffee cans' text, while created to have the same form, differs in terms of its state of preservation and in terms of planned variations in production date and inspection number. The text on the two cans differs, however, in one other important way. Each was designed to be repurposed to hold other pantry items when the coffee ran out. The narrator turns the can in the junk pile to the back side and sees the manufacturer had printed there, "ARROZ" ("RICE"; Ortiz, *Cuadernos* [2013] 145) The coffee can in the cupboard, meanwhile, was labeled "HARINA" ("FLOUR"; 146) This marketing device, which encouraged consumers to buy more coffee until they had collected a complete set, refunctionalized the vessel once it exhausted its original purpose of transmitting, as it were, the coffee it once contained. It is in this, the intersection of need and usability, or replication and redundancy, that the texts' temporal order gains importance: once consumers have accumulated one of each of these labeled cans, they can throw the rest away. The narrator observes, "No necesariamente sobreviven los más fuertes, sino las primeras" ("It is not necessarily the fittest that survive, but the first"; 147). The first become the fittest and serve, in a kind of reverse translation, as a code to decipher later versions of the text.

The vessel of the intact coffee can, however, exists in a larger context that is, if not a vessel, then at least a holding place—the kitchen cupboard—and it is here that another of its functions reveals itself: not as a vessel holding another thing, but as a thing held by a greater vessel. I am using *function* here in two senses: in terms of an object's instrumental purpose or use, and in terms of the idea of dependency or connection. The encounter with the coffee can in the father-in-law's cupboard reminds the narrator of an identical can in his childhood home—identical except for the fact that this

one held sugar—and that he still expects to find every time he visits his father, stored in its proper place. The important thing about this vessel is not that it serves the function of holding sugar—if it runs out, it can always be refilled. Rather, this thing, this piece or fragment, as it were, in the assemblage of items stored in the cupboard facilitates an affective and material practice: “El acto casi reflejo de manotear el recipiente cuando la azucarera se vacía devendrá rito sin sentido, además que no encuentra objeto” (“The almost reflexive act of reaching for the container when the sugar dish runs low would become a senseless ritual, a gesture that wouldn’t find an object”; 147–48). The arrangement of these fragments, and the breaking of the order, affects how one goes about one’s daily domestic tasks. The proper assemblage of these objects, these fragments, may not aspire toward a telos on the order of Benjamin’s “pure language”; to quote Ortiz, “no afecta al desenvolvimiento del universo” (“it doesn’t affect the development of the universe”; 147). However, this order, this form, affects those who organize their daily practices around it, “with all the . . . exercise and ongoingness that the word [practice] implies” (Briggs 71). Ortiz writes, “Los ritos aprisionan la mente, pero al mismo tiempo la liberan del *terror vacui*, de los abismos de lo aleatorio y el azar” (“Rituals imprison the mind, but at the same time they liberate it from the *horror vacui*, of the abysses of randomness and chance”; *Cuadernos* [2013] 148). These fragments, in short, fill the vessel of one’s life.

In the universal web, the tangled mesh of functions, things do not stand alone: they exist only in states of dependence, which makes it logical that two of the vessels Ortiz encounters are built into larger objects, into machines, in such a way that their functionality—their ability to work—depends on them. These vessels are parts of a greater whole, even if the function of that whole is the same as the function of a vessel, whose purpose is to hold something else. One of the machines in the junk pile is an antique radio, which contains the label pictured in figure 8. This label provides clues that can help one trace the radio’s material history: the brand, the model and series number, the

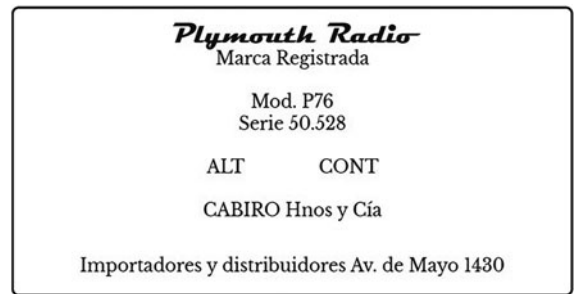


FIG. 8. Plymouth radio label, from vol. 6 of *Language and Literature Notebooks* (*Cuadernos* [2022] 474).

name and location of the importers. The narrator does not read the text for this information, however. He first reads this text as a whole, and then he materially fragments it: he holds the “solar coffeepot” above the label and reads it through the little hole, one letter at a time.<sup>12</sup> Then he describes what remains of the radio itself. In one sense, it is a fragment without a vessel—the cabinet is lost, and only the chassis remains. Yet this chassis contains another vessel, a vacuum tube, the part of the machine that functions as a signal amplifier: that is, it amplifies the electrical signal so that it is strong enough to be played over a speaker, to be converted into words and other sound.

The other machine the narrator finds near the chicken coop is an engine from an agricultural machine—what kind, Ortiz does not specify, though he imagines it was used in the production of wheat. As with the radio, the only image Ortiz provides is a visually approximate reproduction of its label (fig. 9). This image reproduces the words of the original, but visually—in its mediatic, material translation—it does not match: it seems to have been made with one of the fonts preinstalled in *Microsoft Word*, which does not quite line up with his description of the original letters’ “líneas art-nouveau” (“art-nouveau lines”; 153). The narrator reads this label as he read the label on the radio, letter by letter, fragmented, through two devices that are “conjugados” (“conjugated”; 152)—the lens of his glasses and the solar coffeepot. He considers the letters as objects: the “cuatro extremidades” (“four extremities”) of the *H*, the “orificio”





FIG. 9. Antique engine label, from vol. 6 of *Language and Literature Notebooks* (*Cuadernos* [2022] 487).

("orifice") of the *R*, the "fusión de cuerpos en un solo cuerpo verbal" ("fusion of bodies in a single verbal body"; 153). The fact that the engine was, as the label indicates, "fabricado en Inglaterra" ("made in England"; 152) might locate it in frameworks associated with a problematic translation—as a kind of transnational exchange in which the colonial economic power dominates. The narrator recognizes this context: he observes, "Leo sobre la superficie de estas cosas la sintaxis de un discurso mil veces repetido y denunciado" ("I read on the surface of these things the syntax of a discourse repeated and denounced a thousand times"; 153).<sup>13</sup> Like the other objects in the junk pile, this engine does not work. Although the narrator says the cylinders (themselves vessels) might retain compression, the moving parts have rusted together, and the gas tank (another vessel) now collects rain. The narrator tries to turn the gears by hand, but they will not budge. So he goes to the toolbox, pulls out a wrench, and tries to remove the motor head—which is covered with the text pictured here—to see what of the original substances that filled the engine, like oil, might remain inside. Again, he has no luck.

If one thinks of this engine as a collection of vessels, it is broken in a way that is the opposite of fragmentation: it is useless because it cannot come apart. The fragmentability of its individual components is what allows it to function, to move. So the narrator

watches an ant crawl over the letters of the label for a while, and then he decides to leave. The image of the engine remains with him, however, and years later he recalls how he placed his hand on the crank and traces in the air the gesture of trying to turn it. This movement—this practice—calls to mind the movement of writing; the engine generates in the writer the form of text (161).<sup>14</sup> The engine—the broken, though unfragmented, vessel—is refunctionalized through a function that depends on the narrator's hand, and it becomes "una máquina de escribir"—the term used in Spanish for a typewriter, which translates literally to "a writing machine" (161).

In the context of these notebooks, *una máquina de escribir* might seem untranslatable into English (understanding the term *untranslatable* naively)—and my solution, "writing machine," fails on several accounts. "Writing machine" is not an everyday term, like "typewriter," and it fails to capture the implication of typescript that is central to Ortiz's study of the materiality of language. The term might sound futuristic in a sort of antiquated way, but a "writing machine" does not belong to any particular technological generation in the way that a typewriter, an antique engine, and a radio that functions through vacuum tubes do. Even as my translation retains the semantic form of the original, it breaks it in such a way that it loses its functionality.

The Spanish verb *funcionar*, which is used throughout volume 6 of *Language and Literature Notebooks*, also breaks when one asks it to function in English. It breaks just as the solar coffeepot does, in the form of a tiny hole by which, asked to work in English as it does in Spanish, slight differences in use and relationship would make the original meaning seep out. *Funcionar* puns with the linguistic term (and noun) *función* ("function"). However, in Spanish, *funcionar* is also an ordinary verb that, in the case of a machine or device, and depending on the context, I would normally translate as "works." This is a "rather routine" translation choice (Venuti 54). Still, it entails loss, a term I am intellectually and affectively uninclined to repress, even knowing that the Spanish never actually goes away. If violence is a, if not the only, signature of translation—the sudden violence of rupture, a slow

weakening caused by rust—translation seems an occasion to stay with its attendant pain. However, returning to the idea of the task as *Auflösung*, the word “function” also works like the resolution of the chord. The note I hit in English is not the same as the note in Spanish, but it complements other notes on a different scale.

When translators write about the practice of translation, they often speak about the affective dimension of the work, about the way the text works on them as they work on it. Gayatri Spivak, for example, speaks of the translator’s relationship to the text—a relationship that bears ethical and political responsibility—as one of love. She explains from first-person experience: “Translation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate” (370). Language here serves as “a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries,” and as this loss happens, “we feel the selvages of the language-textile give way, fray into *frayages* or facilitations” (370). Whatever translation facilitates, the translator’s closeness with another’s language does not repair the deterioration of its fabric. Rather, Spivak writes, “[t]he task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying” (370). Perhaps this same love permits the rust that creates the solar coffeepot, which in turn brings the one who holds it to tears.

Ortiz, for his part, describes his—and his readers’—engagement with objects and texts affectively, not as love but as a way to confront a kind of existential dread. In the chapter titled “Balance provisorio” (“Provisional Balance”), which closes volume 6 of *Language and Literature Notebooks*, he asks what the purpose is of carrying out various tasks with the words and things he encounters around him. He concludes it is to address “la dificultad del vacío” (“the difficulty of the void”; *Cuadernos* [2013] 187), including the emptiness of grief:

[A]quellos que afirman sentirse vacíos en su interior, deberían tomar una lata vieja, elevarla hasta la altura de sus ojos y dedicarle toda la atención de que sean capaces. Piensen lo que ocurrió en estas páginas: objetos en desuso, condenados a la lenta destrucción en la intemperie, han encontrado una posibilidad imaginaria de sobrevida.

Imaginaria porque es real: está aquí, en el texto, ante tus ojos. (188)

Those who say they feel empty inside should pick up an old can, raise it to eye level and devote all the attention they are able to it. Think about what happened in these pages: objects fallen into disuse, condemned to slow destruction by the elements, have found an imaginary possibility of afterlife.

Imaginary because it is real: it is here, in the text, before your eyes.

Here Ortiz connects Hjelmslev’s idea of linguistic function as dependency to “el significado convencional del *uso*, es decir, *para qué sirven* nuestras emisiones lingüísticas en las diversas situaciones comunicativas, con qué finalidad nos expresamos” (“its conventional meaning of *use*, that is, *what* do our utterances *serve* in different communicative situations, to what end do we express ourselves”; 186). More specifically, he does so in the context of Roman Jakobson’s functions of language: in particular, the poetic, which prioritizes “the message for its own sake” (Jakobson 356), and the phatic, or “messages serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works” (355). The last lines in volume 6 of *Language and Literature Notebooks* consist of a quotation Ortiz finds in Jakobson’s “Linguistics and Poetics,” which Ortiz interprets as an example of the phatic function. They consist of a North Russian incantation: “Water, queen river, daybreak! Send grief beyond the blue sea, to the sea bottom, like a gray stone never to rise from the sea bottom, may grief never come to burden the light heart of God’s servant, may grief be removed and sink away” (Jakobson 355). However, Ortiz’s reading is an accidental misreading (Ortiz, E-mail); Jakobson gives this as an example of the conative function, or the one that directly engages the addressee.<sup>15</sup>

But what would it mean to read this incantation as an example of the phatic function, a message that seeks to establish a connection—a translation—between two disparate parties? To conclude, I return to the postdictatorial context lying largely unspoken beneath this work. I bring this up because

translation is not only a creation, a functional work-around addressing incommensurability, even failure, but a response, perhaps on a different order than the original, to a loss that might be irreparable. The final image of this volume of the *Language and Literature Notebooks*, that of a stone being thrown into the sea, recalls a moment in the middle of the text, when the narrator remembers a family friend who was an announcer on a radio station shut down by orders of the dictatorship in the 1970s. The navy confiscated the radio equipment and threw it into the sea. A recording of the last broadcast remains, in which the announcer states that the station was shut down by executive orders. He thanks his listeners for accompanying him, and the background music fades into silence.

This recollection drives the narrator momentarily mad with grief: he picks up a stone he has kept on his desk, a stone that he found as a child in the neighborhood where the announcer lived, and gets up. Then the narrator mixes what could be fact with what must be imagination. He throws the rock up toward the sky, and he imagines himself standing on the surface of a lake, like a mosquito, he says, suspended on the surface, that with any movement would break the surface tension and sink. He then recalls the disappeared through one of the most emblematic and also most horrific methods used to disappear people under the dictatorship, in which they were drugged and dropped into the sea from airplanes. The narrator protests: "Y no, el fondo del mar no es tu lugar natural, te repito, como no lo es el de las radios, no lo es el de los hombres que también yacen deseminados, no por el movimiento natural, sino violento, el más violento de todos los imaginables, llevados por el aire más allá del aire al que pertenecían" ("And no, the bottom of the sea is not your natural place, I'm telling you, it's not your place, just as it's not a place for radios, it's not a place for the men who also lie there, scattered all about, not as the result of a natural movement, but rather the result of a violent movement, the most violent of all imaginable movements, carried in the air beyond the air where they belonged"; *Cuadernos* [2013] 165).

A radio's vacuum tube would not sink unless it was broken. This signal amplifier, this instrument of one-way communication, could join the dead only if it were fractured or punctured. Otherwise, it would either wash to shore and join the sand, the material that its glass came from, or, like an unmanned vessel of another kind, float away.

## NOTES

Many thanks to Mario Ortiz for his generosity in conversation and Nurit Kasztelan for introducing me to his work. My research in Bahía Blanca, Argentina, was made possible with support from the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies at Cornell University. Thanks also to the many readers of various versions of this essay—especially Debra Castillo, Pedro Erber, Keiji Kunigami, Bret Leraul, Tom McEnaney, and Edmundo Paz Soldán—who provided feedback and support in the writing process.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this essay are mine.

2. The most recent volume, subtitled *Tratado de iconogénesis* (*Treatise on Iconogenesis*) and numbered 11, was published in 2021. However, a middle volume, subtitled *La canción del poeta atrasado* (*The Song of the Belated Poet*) and numbered 3½, brings the total count in this series to twelve volumes. Perhaps fittingly, given its title, this volume, though written in 2004, was not published until 2015, after volumes 4–9 came out. Ortiz explains in a preliminary note that in early 2015, "la editorial *miembro fantasma* me preguntó si acaso no tenía algún librito sin publicar, algún miembro fantasma que haya quedado en los archivos físicos o digitales" ("the publisher *phantom limb* asked me if I happened to have any unpublished little book, some phantom limb left behind in the physical or digital archives"), which reminded him that he had this unpublished text (even if parts of it had found their way into other books). He states, in a passage that encapsulates the provisional quality of his *Notebooks*:

Si el sujeto del poema es un poeta atrasado, es absolutamente justo que la publicación se haya atrasado al menos once años. . . . Me llega como un eco de lo que una vez pronuncié. Sin embargo, la reconozco. Es mi propia voz. Y diré más: me llega en un momento muy oportuno para seguir pensando en la propia escritura.

Y sigo llegando tarde a todo.

Pero ya no importa: seguiremos fracasando con todo éxito.

If the subject of the poem is a belated poet, it is only right that the publication has been delayed at least eleven years. . . . It reaches me like an echo of what I once pronounced. However, I recognize it. It is my own voice. And I'll say

more: it reaches me at a very opportune moment to keep thinking about writing itself.

And I keep arriving late to everything.

But it no longer matters: we will keep failing with total success.

The 2022 Liliputienses edition that collects all twelve volumes of *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura* reprints volume 3½ in numerical order—that is, between volumes 3 and 4.

3. The text in the first photo in the page reads “APPLE,” “CAN,” and “BOOK.” The text on the page continues:

In the mind of the speaker, the fruit lost itself in word and returns to fruit over and over, indefinitely, until it comes to naturalize a one-to-one equivalence between word and object/image that allows it to go to the greengrocer’s and have full faith that it will arrive at a commercial understanding.

Now, it is perfectly possible that, in its return to concretion, the word dissolves its habitual ties with the referent to contract other hitherto unknown ties such that

CAN = [the photograph of the apple]

whereby it is possible to redistribute the small universe gathered on the patio table.

4. Antena Aire “was a language justice and language experimentation collaborative, focusing on writing, art- and book-making, translating, interpreting, and language justice” that existed from 2010 to 2020, as explained on the collaborative’s website ([antenaantena.org/](http://antenaantena.org/)). Antena Aire’s attention to stitching and snags resonates with Spivak’s metaphor of language as a textile that frays, which I discuss toward the conclusion of this essay.

5. Moure also connects her English “intranslation” to the Brazilian Portuguese term *intradução*. She writes, “When something is ‘untranslatable’ as an adjective, there is a negative judgement. But ‘the intranslatable’ as noun serves a different purpose. Here we hear the echo of the prefix ‘intra.’ There is a vibration at work” (18–19).

6. The notion of “equivalence” takes on a similarly mathematical valence in an essay by Lydia Davis on translation and *Madame Bovary*. Davis explains, “The translated text should roughly *add up* to the original; it does not need to attempt equivalency at each point. The translation is like a problem in math—using different numbers, the answer must be the same, different numbers must add up to the same answer” (507). For example, a pun or lyric passage difficult to reproduce might be compensated for elsewhere in the text.

7. Briggs also likens translators to students, insofar as they learn and, consequently, transform through repeated practice. Briggs’s “account of translating” embraces

the *chance* of learning. The chance it offers of becoming-expert, becoming-linguistically and culturally competent, becoming-critical, becoming-intimate, becoming a better—or, if not a better (because are we really getting any better at reading and writing? Is it useful to think of these activities in terms of progress?)—then certainly a *different* reader and writer. (207)

8. Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Pignatari borrowed the “enigmatic” term *noigandres* (which “had baffled romance philologists”) from *The Cantos* by Pound, who in turn took the term from a song by the Provençal troubadour Arnaut Daniel (Perrone 28). The Concretes drew from Pound’s poetic methods and theories to foreground the material qualities of language and also imbue their poetry with a high communicative density. As Perrone explains, “Of greatest influence in Pound were his musical interests and his relational ideogrammic method of composition” (29), as well as “his characterization of great literature as ‘language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree’” (28). *Noigandres*, in addition to being the self-selected name for this poetic group, also was the title of a journal the Brazilian Concretes published between 1952 and 1962 (Perrone 28).

9. For a reading of this visual poem in relation to Pound’s centrality for *bahiense* writers and the small press VOX, see Moscardi 216–22.

10. For all of their concern with the word as thing, only two volumes of Ortiz’s *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura* call attention to the material quality of the book. One is the first volume, published in 2000 by VOX. The engraving printed on cardstock on the front cover lends this small volume the appearance of a hand-made artist’s book, one that asks to be considered as a unique, plastic object and that, through its unusual size and notable texture, reminds readers that they must manipulate material in order to access the text. The other is volume 3½ (*The Song of the Belated Poet*, discussed in note 2), which takes the physical form of a notebook and was published in a limited edition of fifty. The pages are long and narrow, and the binding is hand-stitched at the top edge, giving this volume the appearance of a spiral-bound steno pad or an artisanal blank book that one might purchase to keep a diary. Subsequent volumes, published by VOX and other independent publishers (such as Gog y Magog and Eterna Cadencia), take the form of standard paperbacks in terms of size and the texture of their covers and paper.

11. Proposition 9 consists of an extended discussion of Hjelmlev’s theory.

12. Ortiz’s aesthetic experiences with plainly communicative, even instructive text call to mind the Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer’s readings of the Venezuelan educator Simón Rodríguez’s pedagogic writing as a kind of protoconcrete poetics or conceptualist art. Rodríguez, born in 1769, best known as a childhood tutor to Simón Bolívar, wrote his educational philosophy using an idiosyncratic page design that foreshadowed twentieth-century poetic experiments. Camnitzer explains:

Most of his texts are written in a broken form of layout. Sentences rarely flow linearly as in ordinary texts, but are



subdivided by means of big brackets that accommodate options of ideas or subcategories. The typeface changes frequently for emphasis, sometimes even within the same line, and the text may follow geometrical shapes or be organized by a central axis. The result creates pages akin to calligrams. . . . But whereas calligrams are a formalist game, Rodríguez’s only concern when he used his form of layout was clarifying ideas. . . . They are visual as well as textual aphorisms, with beauty an unintended byproduct. (39)

Like Camnitzer, Ortiz finds aesthetic noise in the informational texts he encounters. However, Ortiz—who, like Rodríguez, is also an educator, and one who writes through a didactic conceit—furthermore examines throughout his *Notebooks* how the visual form of words influences readers’ reception of language, from children playing with letter-shaped toys to highly literate adults. Like Camnitzer, Ortiz does not separate the aesthetic and practical functions of the written word. Camnitzer argues that in the context of Latin American conceptualist work, “[a]rt, politics, pedagogy, and poetry overlap, integrate, and cross-pollinate into a whole” (21). Ortiz exemplifies that cross-pollination through his concern with history and his gently pedagogical addresses to the reader.

13. Seen from another perspective, the narrator here might exemplify Spivak’s postcolonial “reader-as-translator” (Spivak 384), insofar as he chooses “to use what is useful” (384) from the engine label to the point that he “feels that [he] has been written into the text” (385).

14. This gesture also recalls Briggs’s understanding of translation as a form of manual labor, given that translators write “the other’s work out with [their] own hands” (119).

15. As a critical reader—a category that includes my role as “reader-as-translator,” citing Spivak (384)—I “welcome errors and fissures” in the text, returning to Antena Aire’s manifesto (Antena 2). Here, as happens elsewhere in Ortiz’s *Notebooks*, meaning emerges as a prior form breaks apart.

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**Abstract:** This essay examines connections between the materiality of language and the impulse to translate through the hybrid series *Cuadernos de lengua y literatura* (2000– ; *Language and Literature Notebooks*) by the Argentine writer Mario Ortiz. These books confront historical trauma through a study of materials and processes that generate language in their author’s domestic environment. I read Ortiz to argue that a task of translation consists of tracing how words function through ways in which their original meaning breaks down. Their function is revealed through the tasks the translator carries out to create the new linguistic object of the translated text. This essay revisits a key image from Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator,” the broken vessel, through broken vessels in Ortiz’s work, as well as recent materially focused translation scholarship. I conclude that the material specificity of language intervenes in the lives of readers, writers, and translators to respond to grief.