

Anna's Extreme Makeover

Revisiting Tolstoy in
Karenina Express

DEBRA A. CASTILLO

When cultures confront one another in this contested space of media interpretation and recontextualization, new opportunities arise for . . . ‘reciprocal translation’” (18), says D. N. Rodowick hopefully, in an introduction to the topic “mobile citizens, media states” in the January 2002 issue of the *PMLA*. The objective of Rodowick’s comments in this context is to bridge to an analysis of Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s work from his discussion of Ian Chambers, whose enlarged concept of translation is decoupled from geographic considerations. Chambers works with translation in terms of the concepts of transit, transition, and the transitory, where language rather than geography defines a sense of home. For Rodowick, Gómez-Peña offers a superb exemplar of this concept in his performances and his theoretical commentaries, marked as they are by an always-estranged and defamiliarizing reading of identity against deterritorialization. Common to all these scholars—Rodowick, Chambers, and Gómez-Peña—is a speculation about a basic reorganization of critical axes from something like the cluster of meaning that adheres around the concept of space/identity/authenticity to one that emphasizes time/contingency/performance—perhaps even “larger-than-life” performance. Because Gómez-Peña’s performances also include an element of linguistic undecidability (he uses Spanish, English, Spanglish,

pseudo-Nahuatl and nonsense, among other registers), they insist on an unsettling deterritorialization of language as well.

Three queries immediately present themselves: (1) What would happen if we were to imaginarily decouple language from place? (2) What do we mean when we talk about the concept of identity in highly performative texts? (3) What are the precise mechanisms for this conceptual/geographic deterritorialization? The Mexican writer Margarita Mansilla, in her 1995 novel *Karenina Express*, reminds the reader of her work's nature as a critical practice or trope, always a (self-consciously, ironically) staged performance of a discursive fiction rather than the thing itself. Beginning with a riff on a highly familiar iconic figure/text, her work displaces itself from the presuppositions that give rise to it. In her novel, it is no longer the question of identity that is at stake in the narrative, but rather that of a postmodern agency unmoored from the grounding discourse of identity-speak, with all its concomitant associations to a national or geographic referent. Thus, for example, this Mexican novel with a Russian referent, English-sounding title (calling to mind, among other referents, the Orient Express) first introduces our character's point of view by shifting the ground immediately, in the very first sentence: "Amalia was not located in the French Riviera."¹ France is evoked and dismissed; a counterfactual gesture. Even further, Amalia, and her alter ego, Ana, soon realize that "what was this vision if not a predetermined set and character from her next reading adventure [*lectu-aventura*]?"² Instead of a grounding in historical or geographic circumstance, Mansilla's fictional agency is conceived as a metaliterary performance—something constructed and staged. This performance is of an enlarged, but also fragmented, self/image, one that harks back to a narrative structure rather than any imagined authentic national self.

Where is the city in this novel? Like the fragmented meta-self, it is everywhere, and everywhere dispersed. Mansilla pays homage to the urban consciousness of her nineteenth-century literary-historical models, whose understanding was shaped by the industrial revolution and the rise of the bourgeoisie, and whose works define those peculiar literary sites: Paris, London, Moscow, Vienna. Her own novel offers both an ironic reflection on these earlier metaphors for a modern urban existence defined in its European particularity and a more contemporary, cosmopolitan, and American redefinition of the city. Her urban space is the multilingual, multicultural megalopolis that her European forebears never dreamed of or imagined:

Mexico City, New York City. At the same time, she never loses sight of this exploration as primarily that of a *lectu-aventura*; the urban spaces exist only in the literary imagination and only coincidentally overlap with known geography.

As is suggested in the title of her novel, Mansilla explores contemporary mores through a reexamination of one of the classic texts of nineteenth-century narrative, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Mansilla's narrator advises: "we need to reeducate the audience to believe in fiction once again."³ Thus, following her own advice, her protagonist reimagines her own variations on the great nineteenth-century romance while bidding an ironic farewell to the pathetic texture of the earlier novel. Mansilla picks up on the powerful image of the train from Tolstoy's novel and plays with its metonymic condensation of the very idea of technology, modernity, and progress. In this sense, Mansilla is reinscribing a now-traditional paradox—that modernity (an imagined desirable state or even a kind of mathematical constant) itself is best defined in the onrush of continual movement, by velocity and blurred geographies: the shift of perception from the train itself to what a passenger might observe through the train's windows as it follows the rails from city to city. In this sense, *Karenina Express* can be imagined as a sort of tropic TGV in contrast with Tolstoy's steam locomotive; in each case, the train serves as a marker of modern high-speed movement for the masses. At the same time, the title suggests an understanding of "express" in its other sense, "un café express" or an expresso: a hypermodern caffeine rush. In contrast with Tolstoy's weighty (in both senses) tome, even before opening the book we already know that this is a lighter, faster, more streamlined *Karenina*, a *Karenina* for contemporary urban commuters who measure out time in nanoseconds.

This title is also unanchored from any particular spatial referent—it suggests a hurtling through rather than an anchoring in any particular geography—and is even to some degree ambiguous about the language of the text to follow: "*Karenina*" has obvious Russian associations; "express" sounds like English, but has been adopted into many languages. Of course, the author is not a nineteenth-century Russian man but a twentieth-century Mexican woman. Here too we experience a displacement of sorts, from the great male-imagined female characters of the nineteenth century—Galdós's Fortunata, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, Flaubert's Madame Bovary—to a female author's take on her literary forefathers and fictional foremothers. We might argue that in this shift from male to female authorship,

movement (of an intellectual sort) is privileged in another manner in her enterprise, through her focus on the female writer's literary progress.

Literary women have historically been eccentric to the great tradition of Western letters; thus, they have traditionally remained outside the canon defined and circumscribed by nation-oriented narratives and by male-centered practices of reading. The great sentimental novels distinguished by women's names on their covers to mark the presence of female protagonists are complemented in these national narratives by the adventure stories associated with masculine derring-do. The idea of a journey of self-discovery, like quest narrative in general, is firmly tied to the idea of a male quest (often an adolescent male quest); the female *Künstlerroman* is still inherently transgressive. Anna's most famous relation to the train, for instance, is not to take off on an adventure, but to throw herself under its wheels. Men journey across great geographic expanses, cross literary and literal borders, define the immigrant or exile experience; in contrast, literary women remain, like Jane Austen, imaginarily tied to a set of astonishingly interchangeable enclosed domestic spaces. Mansilla asks us to shift these perceptions. When we erase or defamiliarize the traditional travel referents and focus on a vectored now, something happens to these hoary literary expectations as well, and a feminized epistemological structure of movement offers up doubly transgressive potential. Mansilla in some sense spills together two literary subgenres; her project is both a rewriting of the romance novel and a rethinking of the encounter with modernity.

Mansilla's novel is the story of a literary journey—that is, the process of writing a novel—and it also includes other metajourneys through international literary history and modern theory, as well as references to trips by plane, train, and ship to places like New York City. One of the epigraphs to the novel—from Louise Bogan's "autobiographical mosaic" *Journey around My Room*—asks: "the initial mystery that attends any journey is: how did the traveler reach his starting point in the first place?" Mansilla's response is a long tangent from one ostensible starting point to another, constructing a cartography of a diverse body of writings by and about women, a trip that metaphorically goes back to Columbus. The prologue, which is placed at the end of novel, tells us: "This is a book about origins, about letters and stars and ships that navigate under a paper sky. . . . I have permitted myself to mark the earthly plane of the mathematical axes in red and the ordered chronometry of the heavens in blue, and have used purple paper for the *terra incognita* where writing grows. The meeting point for

tracing the round trip is up to the reader, who can proceed in order or not, and interpret what is written in other languages."²⁴ (The cartographic projection is entirely imaginary; there is, unfortunately, no helpful color-coding in the black-on-white lettering of the actual novel.)

Here, at the very end of her text, the narrator duplicitously suggests that there are two stories in this novel, and provides a sketch of how to read them that cuts diachronically and synchronically, through the abscissa and the ordinate of the Cartesian plane. The first narrative, in Roman numerals, tells a love story; the second, in Arabic numerals, consists of the characters' appropriations of the story and their comments on and rewriting of it. Upon looking back to the text itself with this cartographic marking in mind, however, we will find that the divisions are not so clear-cut between stories, nor is the numbering itself consistent. The Arabic numbering begins the text and runs roughly in order from chapters 1 to 21, though there is a chapter 0 (a missing chapter or *capítulo faltante* [61]) inserted between 10 and 11, and two different chapter 13s (both literary biographies of different sorts) sequentially following each other. The Arabic-numbered chapters include the main line of the plot—the story of the writing of a novel—along with the narrator's comments on her ill-starred love life and her conversations with "AK." The chapters marked with Roman numerals are irregularly interspersed; the first (II) comes after chapter 4, followed by I after chapter 9, a different I after chapter 0, XIX between the second chapter 13 and chapter 14, a second II after chapter 14, followed by III, IV, V, and, after chapter 17, VI. There are no chapters corresponding to the Roman numerals between VII and XVIII. At the appropriately numbered chapter 0, the narrator notes that "the abscissas and the ordinates cross at this location. It is the axial point of the narration, and for that reason, characters, books, and the narrator have been excluded from this space."²⁵ Materials deployed in the Roman numeral sections, like the rest of the book, include household hints, recipes, and citations from the how-to books they also include diary entries, letters, the transcription of a tape made during a visit to New York, a poem in prose, and a meditation on the narrator's love of chocolate. The book ends with a set of unnumbered materials that mimic a scholarly apparatus: translations of some of the long passages from English into Spanish (citations from other languages are generally not translated), a highly entertaining glossary (examples: "baroque, few save themselves from," "Cannes, see N.Y." "desire, no comment," "Derrida, study him," "tears, no way around it," "New York, see vox

PARADOX," "Utopia, see N.Y."),⁶ a section called "On the Museum's Ruins" in explicit homage to Douglas Crimp that consists of mock reviews of the novel, and, finally, on the last two pages of the novel, the prologue. Spanish is the dominant language of the text, followed by substantial portions in English, but the author plays constantly with languages in the body of her text, including at one point a translation of a German quote into French, but into neither English nor Spanish.

The novel opens in an unnamed Sanborns-type café/bookstore. Amalia has just lost her job and needs to come up with another, and, adding insult to injury, her most recent boyfriend (a married man) has just left her, taking the television with him. Her fellow classmates are entering professional life and the "publication frenzy," mostly for an infinitesimal and shrinking market of intellectual readers, and she's considering the "immediately finite horizon" of a potential career as a bi- or trilingual secretary. On her way out of the store after drinking her coffee, her eyes light on the how-to section, and she is immediately attracted to one of books in the display, *How to Write Romantic Novels*:

She realized the book was already beginning to have an effect. . . . period And comma finally comma open interrogation why not close interrogation She had a friend who had thrown herself into writing soap opera scripts comma tired of all her erudite baggage period?

Amalia takes the book home, but still wavers between the challenge of opting for a more intellectually acceptable academic project and the appeal of a descent into pop fiction. That unresolved wavering becomes the substance of the novel *Karenina Express*. In the pages of this text, she reads fragments of her how-to book while meditating alternately on the great male-authored romances of the last century, *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, which combined best-sellerdom with highly desirable canonical status, and (implicitly) the critically less well received contemporary woman-authored narratives such as Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*. In the latter's case, the popularly irresistible combination of romance and recipes made the Mexican novelist's book an international early-1990s best seller, which furthermore was parlayed into an equally phenomenally successful film, but unlike its nineteenth-century forefathers, which carry almost the aura of sacred texts, Esquivel's book was universally panned by the male-dominated literary establishment as "the lit." What happened in the interim between Tolstoy and Esquivel so that we now read romance

differently? And how can the author of a turn-of-the-twenty-first century romance rethink these changing mores, changing them again into an innovative form that nevertheless speaks to a contemporary audience?

The narrator of this novel asks: "How does the reader (Does the reader?) learn to enjoy a new narrative form?"⁸ One answer is, of course, familiarly: formal reiteration makes the merely strange into an aesthetic form the reader can appreciate. But is the reader enjoying the newness of the form itself? Or does it become enjoyable precisely at the point that it is no longer new? Is the reader's pleasure perhaps related to a reshuffling of the old narrative structures in unexpected ways? À la Esquivel, Mansilla's narrator begins to record household tips ranging from banal to obscure, an homage to the successful formula of the earlier novel, but always a bit skewed from Esquivel's sumptuous celebrations of culinary genius. Thus, for example, she reprises Esquivel's famous opening with a note on how to cut onions without crying (133), but hers is a throwaway one-liner, and she matches Esquivel's phenomenal and exotic rose-petal sauce with a footnote recipe for to how to make violet ice (59). Other household advice ranges from how to keep feet warm in winter by wrapping them in newspaper before putting on socks (18) to how to blend an exotic perfume called "hourri extract" (*extracto de hurtes*).

Like Esquivel, the narrator of this book wants to make a parallel between writing and other forms of creativity associated with the feminine; unlike her antecedent, however, she never, ever takes herself seriously. Perhaps her clearest parallel between cooking and writing comes in a footnote late in the text that, typically for Mansilla, uses the culinary metaphor to make a point related to high culture and to the theoretical continuity between work and life (the text is in English in the original, so the kinds of awkward pronominal references that vanish in Spanish are highlighted instead): "NOTE: it is a matter of culinary expertise that if a writer is left alone too much he/she will inevitably spoil not only his/her current work but all future work, that is, he/she will spoil all his/her unwritten life" (103).

At the same time as she sprinkles her text with these ironic Martha Stewartisms, the narrator takes, and reproduces in the text, erudite notes on her project, sprinkled with quotations from such thinkers as Henry James, Fredric Jameson, Marx, Lyotard, Duras, Proust, and Derrida. She records quotes from these authors on note cards along with her commentaries: for example, "it is perhaps not until modernism that the difference between LITERATURE and BEST SELLERS begins to be noted. That is, the

difference between Literature and literature"; or "fantasy: a book to teach desire. Warning. It is necessary to learn to read in another way to read it."⁹ Whereas the recipes and the household advice correspond to the type of how-to publications at the very top of every nonfiction best-seller list, the extracts from high-theory thinkers and writers propose a different point of entry into the writing process. In this latter respect, the narrator switches between questioning how to write and how to read, a concern that remains unresolved in the text, perhaps because she is unable to settle on whether her narrative is best captured by the metaphor of the abandoned stations where no train stops, or the entirely opposite idea of the landscape as perceived through the window of a moving train (179).

This too is a function of speed and the angle of perception. Unlike Tolstoy's nineteenth-century romance, in contemporary understandings, a romance novel has second-class status as a woman's text (both authors and readers): too obviously gendered, too quickly written, and too easily read. Like the abandoned station, it is eccentric to literature and excluded from the canon so paradoxically shaped by male romantic masterpieces such as *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*. At the same time, the author of this novel, like the passenger on the TGV, has an interrupted and blurred sense of a (literary) landscape passing by at high speed on her way to the city, the mecca of publishing, her sensibility capturing something akin to the "fractal history" described by Paul Virilio: "A landscape has no fixed meaning, no privileged vantage point. It is oriented only by the itiner-ary of the passerby. . . . Here, the landscape is a passage—the data transfer accident of the present to the most recent past" (xi). In this sense, the author-passenger is making a much more radical proposition about literary history, by which the seemingly solid academic discriminations of the previous scale of values are plunged into discontinuity.

When Mansilla's narrator asks herself the related question of for whom she is writing, her response is equally vexed. On the one hand, "we suppose that with modernism the reading public turned into a *publique introuvable* [unlocatable public],"¹⁰ and somewhat later in the text, her "almost-sister" and alter ego offers her own perspective: "reading, Ana used to say, is fickle, because it is harder to do on Tuesdays than Thursdays, and on Sundays no one can understand a thing."¹¹ The narrator also shapes her text in specific ways out of her supposed regard for her alternately frivolous and hyper-intellectual unlocatable reader, as, for example, expressed by this English-language footnote early in the novel: "*N. de narrador* Talking about the

19th century, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, Anna all met, but about them it was almost impossible for her to say anything, the three having the same kind of beard. As for her friend, these three chapters constituted such serious reading that her notes take up several chapters which have been left out in regard to the reader's patience" (57). In passages like this, Mansilla breaks down distinctions of fact and fiction, allowing historical and invented figures to speak together, memorializing the circulation of ideas, but privileging movement over content, and favoring above all the velleities of her inconstant and easily distractible public, who, like her, are jangling along an urban public transportation system, unsatisfied with their life, jittery with caffeine, pretending to read in order to avoid the eyes of the fellow passengers.

Says the narrator, condensing these urban desires: "she wanted to read a novel about ships and trains, and baskets of fruit and passionate women with long hair and dark eyes. Suddenly she wanted an espresso, three sips of aroma and foam of an exquisite vital bitterness."¹² Here Mansilla's textualized woman author overlaps two structures of desire—"wanting to read" and "wanting an espresso"—with very different temporalities. In the first case, her longing is associated with the dilated time of nineteenth-century narrative, an expanded dialogue with a text experienced through the long and leisurely engagement with triple-decker novels that feature sloe-eyed women whose sensual daring is expressed in letting down their abundant waist-length hair. This first-articulated desire, interestingly enough, prompts a second, not for leisure, but for temporal contraction, not for a social *café* with friends, but the three quick sips and instant jolt of an espresso. In her constant playing off of nineteenth-century European modernity and contemporary American cosmopolitanism, the narrator is, of course, marking intellectual as well as temporal distances. This expansion and condensation of temporality reminds me again of Virilio: "The beyond is no longer the beyond of a territory. . . ; it is the beyond of real time. . . from which we are progressively exiling ourselves" (91). Mansilla's narrative terrain, if we can still call it that, likewise moves beyond a spatial orientation; it is temporal and vectored, the moving target of a present that contemporary life attempts to exceed. Her dislocation of the charms of narrative through the desire for an espresso recalls her analogously jarring juxtapositions of academia and pulp fiction, canonical romance and sentimental shock. In some sense the novel defines the unresolved tension between these two longings: nostalgia for an idealized,

picturesque past, desire for the immediate gratifications of a postmodern urban present.

Given these tensions, it is no wonder that the novel we are offered is presented as a work-in-progress: "this tale, barely an outline, will remain forever inconclusive."¹³ At the same time, progress, in a novel of this sort, is to be preferred over closure, and furthermore progress suggests a movement toward some perhaps as yet undefined goal, if only, as Virilio has it, the goal imagined in the beyond of real time. Indeed, Mansilla's is a project that has a clear vector: "this tale, barely an outline, will remain forever inconclusive . . . but certainly, just like my letters, notes, and postcards, it carries a direction [play on the word for 'address,' *llevar una dirección*]."¹⁴ Here the Spanish word *dirección* hints at both a movement toward (direction) and a specific goal (address of arrival).

Anchoring this sense of direction/address in a more literal sense, the book includes reproductions of various letters and cards, both sent and received, as part of the body of the text. The postcard's text and its image irremediably blur, both projections of desire onto an imaginary and fervently desired space: "One day I gave him a postcard with the Umpire-stabilidin in New York, which was one of my magic words when I was a child."¹⁵ Here the word to conjure with, the magic word, is stripped of a concrete referent and becomes a mere collection of syllables—a kind of abracadabra—that vaguely presages wonders. When one character gives the postcard to another, it is not a trip to the United States, nor a visit to the Empire State Building in midtown Manhattan, New York City, that is represented in the transfer, but rather the symbolic access to the marvelous word of childhood magic uncoupled from any strict relation to geographic spaces.

Given the author's and the narrator's very wide range of high-culture references, it is not surprising to find in this self-consciousness about postcards and their direction an echo of Derrida's 1980 *The Post Card*, a reading of Freud that is similarly, if more densely than Mansilla's novel, organized around the concept of a love letter, still in transit, indecipherable and at the same time fully available on the reverse side of a postcard. Like Mansilla's text, in Derrida's project there is simultaneously an invitation to participate and a warning of a primary exclusion—the postcard epitomizes the letter that is not directed at us, but comes through our hands nevertheless, read or unread, on its way to another destination. At one point, more than halfway through his long book, Derrida announces: "once more

the possibility of progress is announced, and finally as a kind of promise. But this progress will not belong to the order of that which one might acquire" (338). Earlier, at the very beginning of the text, he writes: "you might read these *envois* as the preface to a book that I have not written. . . . You might consider them, if you wish to, as the remainders of a recently destroyed correspondence" (3). For Derrida, one sort of theoretical conundrum is posed in the relation between the unwritten and the already destroyed, the book and its fragmentary remainder. In thinking of the postcard that serves as his primary referent, however, the concept of traversal is key. The postcard is not for us, he emphasizes, but passes by us on its way to another destination, one that lies outside the purview of the text; not "here," but ambiguously in transit between one "there" and another "there." In passing, it interpellates the reader into its mysterious decorum. Furthermore, the postcard has two sides: image and text, and, says Derrida, if the text is legible but ultimately indecipherable, the image at some level deciphers us, putting us into its space, its path.

Mansilla's text has a very similar function to Derrida's. This love letter between Tolstoy and Mansilla, or AK and Amalia, or the textualized reader and the narrator, puts us into that multiply traversed path: a book in progress, not yet written but moving in time and space between two addresses. Sometimes she uses the epistolary style; in one of her letters, for instance, the narrator writes, referring to the love affair: "I wish I could traverse it, share it, and give away little pieces of I love you. Time does not contain it, my writing does not contain it, my body, poor thing, is in a serious quandary."¹⁶ More often, as can be expected, Mansilla's metaphor for this literary transmission is the train. Earlier in the text, the narrator has explained to her reader: "it is useful to make a stop and explain what is style. Style has its tracks and its stations. . . . In this tale, the reader should be ready for the inconveniences of frequent transfers without any guarantee of arrival."¹⁷ Again, as with the letters or postcards, it is the movement in the direction of an as-yet undefined "there" that marks the narrative rather than the content of the text: "you are reading a somewhat retro love letter," says Derrida in his cover copy to *The Post Card*, "but you have not yet received it."

From still another perspective, Mansilla's narrative also wants us to be attentive to the crossings of languages in an abstract plane of literary intersections. Tolstoy's text derives from a Russian "there" and in Mansilla's is headed toward a Spanish "there." At the same time, while these referents

are important as abstract sites marking an intellectual map of departure and not-yet arrival, the highly educated Mexican writer of this author's late-twentieth-century American continent is almost obligatorily cosmopolitan and polyglot. Thus, for example, the narrator directs one of her letters to her "very dear reader, who she presumes "knows all thirty-three natural languages that are indispensable to speak in order to survive this end of the millennium. . . . For this reason the translations that appear at the end of this little book are solely for you to verify the inconsistencies, the losses, the permutations, and form changes that literary works suffer when they are forced to pass through the funnels of translation."¹⁸ The reader is not only polyglot, then, but fussily academic, worrying over the transit between languages and focused precisely on the process of this permutation of text into another text.

The choice of one language over another, or the inclusion of a translation in the text for sections written in languages other than Spanish, is never innocent. For instance, when one of the early sections of the novel includes a love letter written in English, the reader is quite rightly taken aback, for this long text violates our expectations about a novel published in Mexico, by a Mexican author, and up to this point written in Spanish, albeit with some French chapter titles. And yet, in addition to the suggestion of an international element to this epistolary play, at least one structural reason immediately suggests itself. Unlike Spanish, in English the writer's gender is completely unclear, because this language does not have grammatical gender that would mark the adjectives associated with the writer in the Romance languages (23–25). Helpfully, playfully, the unsigned letter ends with a parenthetical note—"(*see p. 157*)"—that refers the reader to the Spanish translation. The second version of the letter makes it obvious that a woman is the letter writer (e.g., in phrases such as "I am very fortunate"/"soy muy afortunada" [24, 158]), and thus main text and supplementary text offer their own instantiation of transfer and traversal.

In the main text, the English-language letter is followed with a comment on it by "Ana," this narrative's transposed voice of Tolstoy's tragic character: "there is no doubt that what hurts can be better swallowed in another tongue, which is the only good reason to learn languages."¹⁹ In this manner, an ambiguously "Russian" character called Ana speaks in Spanish about a letter in English, which reflects, perhaps, a Mexican version of Anna Karenina's sentiments on being abandoned by Vronsky. She does so, moreover, in terms that clearly foreground the body—the hurt that rolls

over the tongue and is consumed. Here, finally, is the clue to what I have called, in the title of this essay, "Anna's extreme makeover." Like the hapless or eager participants in a television reality show, Mansilla's characters radically reshape their bodies, remake their identities, passing through languages, cultural structures, academic presuppositions. Like a TV makeover, this is a public and performative event. In the novel's version, it articulates a shifting transformation that proposes at the same time to uncover a preexisting narrative shape and to give it a new, better—if invariably provisional, transitory, and permutable—form.

At one point in the novel, the character Ana comments, reflecting back on her namesake's famous suicide: "in my day, passion was carried to the wheels of a train."²⁰ For the Tolstoyan heroine, thus, closure is definitive and the symbol of modernity becomes the instrument of her death. Even more—the train represents the death of passion, that is, the romantic novel. In Mansilla's work, the question is how to innovate style and subject matter at the turn of the twenty-first century, rethinking at once death, romance, and the train. Here too the train, as a symbol of modernity and progress, is a constant presence, but rather than a mere prop in the background, it moves to the foreground of the narrative and takes on a certain autonomous quality as a plot device: "Ana said something, but the noise of the train as it invaded the farm/living room [*estancia*] did not allow her to be heard."²¹ In this later novel, the train defines conditions of transmission, what is heard and by whom, and even where, for the noun *estancia* can be used both for the presumably male domain of the Russian farm and the domestic space of a living room.

Even the title of the novel refers to a specific train, one that appears in the novel with Mansilla's rewriting of Tolstoy's tragic ending:

But this time Ana Karenina did not push her head forward in the direction of her lucid discourse in order to be carried off by the train's dark stain; this time she hurried her step in a flurry of silk skirts and hooped cotton petticoats with strips of lace that made the heads of various gentlemen turn, and she headed toward the platform where the K. Express awaited her.²²

Here the fatal train of Tolstoy's novel becomes transformed into a metropolitan subway line (the "K" line, to be exact), a quotidian commuter ride that is also an homage to the twentieth-century fabulist of urban angst Franz Kafka. Likewise, Anna Karenina skips her tragic suicide scene, and instead Mansilla's Ana flirtatiously turns her back on that so-called lucid

discourse, heading toward the subway platform, where she (improbably) sings something like a Russian version of a traditional Spanish *copla*, and then fades into the air. The narrator sits back, satisfied for the moment. Then she asks herself if Ana's happy determination will last, if she will find another Mr. Wrong (one more "count Wrong-sky") and another train platform: "but perhaps that would be the motivation, tomorrow, for another espresso."²² The narrative goal, nevertheless, is less important than the direction of travel; the fact of being in transit is more intriguing than the ending of the story, the performance of Ana's makeover more interesting than either the before or the after.

"The story ends here," says the narrator in one of the first paragraphs of the next chapter.²⁴ Yet here, near the end of the novel proper, we find the narrator planning a new trip and packing up her trunks for an unknown destination. Letters, those "little paper ships for watercolors," "paper trains of dove gray," continue to sail back and forth between the lovers, but "Today is April on *Karennina Express* and in all its A-B-Cissas it is always the first season of the year."²⁵ Each narrative setting forth offers a new direction, new loves and new adventures, new discursive and artistic possibilities: "In her story love had been turned to paper, and not the other way around, thereby losing one time and gaining another. If once both of these times coincide, you will cry tears in the form of letters and will see once again the color of my eyes" (144; English in the original). Each new iteration of the story offers a reshuffling of the elements: how to write romance and how to read it; how to perform it so that it is always the same and always

are less jail-like, less restrictive, more age. Mansilla's mode is that of ironic metaromance of the present moment, c knew that he would spend his life seek in another country, in another language. And console yourself, because there is ing?"²⁷ Luckily, the makeover is always

NOTES

1. "Amalia no se encontraba en la Riviera."
2. "¿qué era esta visión sino escenaric lectu-aventurará?" (13).
3. "hubo que reeducar al público para (85).
4. "Éste es un libro sobre los orígenes navegan bajo un cielo de papel... Me he prestre de las abscisas y con azul la cronon violeta la *terra incognita* donde crece la e trazara la figura de un recorrido es cosa del interpretar lo que se ha escrito en otras len
5. "en este punto cruzan las abscisas y narración, por lo tanto, personajes, libros espacio" (61).
6. "barroquismo, pocos se salvarán," "Ca "Derrida, estudiárla," "Karinnae ni verra

discourse, heading toward the subway platform, where she (improbably) sings something like a Russian version of a traditional Spanish *copla*, and then fades into the air. The narrator sits back, satisfied for the moment. Then she asks herself if Ana's happy determination will last, if she will find another Mr. Wrong (one more "count Wrong-sky") and another train platform: "But perhaps that would be the motivation, tomorrow, for another espresso."²³ The narrative goal, nevertheless, is less important than the direction of travel; the fact of being in transit is more intriguing than the ending of the story; the performance of Ana's makeover more interesting than either the before or the after.

"The story ends here," says the narrator in one of the first paragraphs of the next chapter.²⁴ Yet here, near the end of the novel proper, we find the narrator planning a new trip and packing up her trunks for an unknown destination. Letters, those "little paper ships for watercolors," "paper trains of dove gray" continue to sail back and forth between the lovers, but "Today is April on *Karemina Express* and in all its A-B-Cissas it is always the first season of the year."²⁵ Each narrative setting forth offers a new direction, new loves and new adventures, new discursive and artistic possibilities: "In her story love had been turned to paper, and not the other way around, thereby losing one time and gaining another. If once both of these times coincide, you will cry tears in the form of letters and will see once again the color of my eyes" (144; English in the original). Each new iteration of the story offers a reshuffling of the elements: how to write romance and how to read it, how to perform it so that it is always the same and always new, how to transfer agency to the female protagonist, making her the actor rather than acted upon, how to avoid the traps of nineteenth-century realist aesthetics and twentieth-century postmodern academic jargon.

At one point near the end of the novel, Mansilla's narrator follows a quote from her how-to-write a romance book with several stanzas of a famous Oscar Wilde poem. In her citation of Wilde's text, Mansilla's English has a punning error—she titles the poem "Ballad of Reading Goal"²⁶—which entirely changes the context of the poem and leads the narrator into the meditation on her own setting of goals for conducting her reading/life. Wilde's poem, written from jail, includes a variation of the tag line "each man kills the thing he loves / Yet each man does not die." Mansilla implicitly rejects the nineteenth-century options of love or death, love and death, in favor of the freedom to remake the story at each subway stop or train station or cappuccino bar in the city, to reshape the reading goals so they

are less jail-like, less restrictive, more vectored to the needs of a modern age. Mansilla's mode is that of ironic nostalgia, ambiguous fascination, a metaromance of the present moment continuously displaced: "she also now knew that he would spend his life seeking a direction [direction, address], in another country, in another language, in the skin of other women. . . . And console yourself, because there is nothing worse than a happy ending."²⁷ Luckily, the makeover is always to do again.

NOTES

1. "Amalia no se encontraba en la Riviera francesa" (11).
2. "¿qué era esta visión sino escenario y personaje predicho en su próxima lectura-aventura?" (13).
3. "hubo que reducir al público para que creyera nuevamente en la ficción" (85).
4. "Físte es un libro sobre los orígenes, sobre cartas y estrellas y barcos que navegan bajo un cielo de papel... Me he permitido marcar con rojo el plano terrestre de las abscisas y con azul la cronometría ordenada de lo celestes; con hojas violeta la *terra incognita* donde crece la escritura. La unión de los puntos para trazar la figura de un recorrido es cosa del lector, quien podrá ir o no en orden, e interpretar lo que se ha escrito en otras lenguas" (178-79).
5. "en este punto cruzan las abscisas y las ordenadas. Es el lugar del eje de la narración, por lo tanto, personajes, libros y narrador quedan excluidos de este espacio" (61).
6. "Barroquismo, pocos se salvan," "Cannes, ver N.Y.," "deseo, no comments," "Derrida, estudiarlo," "lágrimas, ni remedio," Nueva York, ver vox PARADOX," "Utopía, ver N.Y.!"
7. "Se dio cuenta que el libro ya empezaba a hacerle efecto... punto Y coma finalmente coma se abre interrogación por qué no se cierra interrogación Tenía una amiga que se habla lanzado a escribir guiones de telenovelas coma cansada de todo su bagaje de erudición punto" (12-13).
8. "¿cómo aprende (aprende?) el lector a gozar de una nueva forma narrativa?" (57).
9. "no es tal vez hasta el modernismo cuando se da la diferencia entre 'LITERATURA' y 'BEST-SELLERS' O sea, Literatura y literatura" (53); "la fantasía: libro para enseñar a desear. Advertencia. Necesario aprender a leerdeotramanera para leerlo" (55).
10. "se supone que con el modernismo el público lector se convirtió en un *publique introuvable*" (53).
11. "la lectura, sola decir Ana, es veleidosa, pues se deja hacer peor los martes que los jueves y los domingos no hay quien entienda nada" (130).

12. "Tenía ganas de leer una novela que tuviera que ver con barcos y trenes, y macedonias de fruta, y mujeres apasionadas de cabellos largos y oscuras pupilas. Por lo pronto deseaba un express, tres sorbos de aroma y espuma de exquisita amargura vital" (154).
13. "este relato, apenas un bosquejo, quedará para siempre inconcluso" (117).
14. "...pero segura que al igual que mis cartas, notas y postales lleva una dirección" (117).
15. "Un día le di un postal con el Empayerreitbilding de Nueva York que de niña era una de mis palabras mágicas" (113).
16. "quisiera trasvasarlo, compartirlo y regalar trocitos de te quiero. El tiempo no lo contiene, mi escritura no lo contiene, mi cuerpo, el pobre, se ve en aprietos serios" (106).
17. "es conveniente hacer un alto y explicar qué es el estilo. El estilo tiene sus estaciones y sus vías... En este relato, el lector debe estar dispuesto a los inconvenientes de frecuentes trasbordos sin garantía de arribo" (36).
18. "[conoce] las treinta y tres lenguas naturales que es imprescindible manejar para sobrevivir este fin de milenio... De manera que las traducciones que aparecen al final de esta obrita son únicamente para que verifiques las inconsistencias, pèrdidas, permutas y cambios de forma que sufren las letras cuando se las fuerza a pasar por los embudos de la traducción" (29).
19. "no cabe duda que lo que duele se puede mascar mejor en otra lengua, que es la única buena razón para aprender idiomas" (25).
20. "en mis tiempos la pasión se llevaba hasta las ruedas del tren" (17).
21. "Ana dijo algo, pero el ruido del tren que invadió la estancia no dejó que la escuchará" (80).
22. "Pero esta vez Ana Karenina no empujó la cabeza hacia adelante en dirección de su lícido discurso para ser arrebatada por la mancha negra del tren; esta vez apuró el paso en un revuelo de faldas de seda y polleras de algodón con vueltas de encaje que hizo voltear la cabeza a varios caballeros y se dirigió al andén donde esperaba el *K. Express*" (139-40).
23. "pero eso sería tal vez motivo, mañana, de otro expresso" (140).
24. "El cuento termina aquí" (141).
25. "barquitos de papel para acuarela," "trenes de papel couché paloma" (143); "Hoy es abril en *Karenina Express* y en todas sus a-b-scias siempre es la primera estación del año" (ibid.).
26. Although the pun *goal for goal* seems particularly asinine and fitting, I cannot be certain that this is not simply a serendipitous error in the text. Despite the narrator's warning about the slipperiness of her translations, in the Spanish version of this poem she cites the original title—"Balada de la cárcel de Reading"—giving some plausibility to the theory that it might be a simple metastasis of the two vowels (161). It is necessary to admit, though, that this is, of course, exactly

the kind of pedantic aside that Mansilla spoofs in so much of her text. The referentiality is, finally, inescapable.

27. "ella también sabía ahora que él se pasaría la vida buscando una dirección, en otro país, en otra lengua, en la piel de otras mujeres... Y consuélate, porque no hay cosa peor que un final feliz" (132-33).

WORKS CITED

- Bogan, Louise. *Journey around My Room*. New York: Viking Press, 1980.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Mansilla, Margarita. *Karenina Express*. Mexico City: UNAM, 1995.
- Rodowick, D. N. "Introduction: Mobile Citizens, Media States." *PMIA* 117.1 (January 2002): 13-23.
- Virilio, Paul. *A Landscape of Events*. Trans. Julie Rose. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.