

Graduate Program in Translation
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GALLINO
(a translation of Gallino
by Martín Kasañetz)

by
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Translator's Preface

Translating a story requires considerable effort and dedication. To work on something so challenging and time-consuming, you must be passionate about the task and material at hand. Translators are not always afforded the luxury of choosing what they will translate, and this thesis, one of the requirements to achieve the Master's Degree in Translation, may be one of the rare chances I will get as a professional to do so.

I chose *Gallino*, a novella by Martín Kasañetz, after having considered a few other options, all of which had one thing in common: animal cruelty as the main theme. I was raised in close proximity to animals and have formed deep emotional bonds with them since I was a small child. The cruelty shown by humans to animals, regardless of the cause, is one of the harshest realities I have had to face and come to terms with in my adult life. I have learned about the calamities animals are put through in the name of science, and the indignity with which they are treated in the food industry. But no acts of cruelty have offended me more than those committed for the sake of human entertainment. This is why I was reluctant at first to choose *Gallino*, given its storyline, which is deeply entwined with the tradition of cockfighting.

When I first obtained a copy of *Gallino*, it seemed like a simple short novel. Upon a more careful review of the novella, and after considering all the possible pitfalls in translation and the important themes woven between the lines, I was able to distinguish the true

nature of the story. *Gallino* is a coming-of-age story in which cockfighting exists primarily as a metaphor for the changes within its main character, a boy named Verón.

Gallino does not praise or glamorize cockfighting. Neither does it advocate against animal cruelty. There is no dogma in this text. *Gallino* allows readers to make up their own minds, and the way its events are narrated go beyond the mere physicality of the relationship between the gamecock and its master. There is a strong spiritual connection between animal and man, between the society portrayed and its "sport" of choice. Fortunately I had the chance to share these observations with Martín Kasañetz, and I was not disappointed with his take on the subject. His intention with *Gallino* was not to expose the world of cockfighting in a realistic way, but to present it from an outsider's point of view, allowing this world to be perceived in a more magical and idiosyncratic manner. This statement of purpose was key for me to allow myself a certain amount of liberties in the reinterpretation of the novel.

1. About the author

Martín Kasañetz is a young writer, born in Buenos Aires, Argentina on March 3, 1978. He has collaborated as a poet and storyteller in many literary and scholarly publications, such as the journal *Espiral* and other poetry publications for the National Autonomous University of Mexico. He has won many literary prizes, including the award by the Writers Society of Argentina Tres de Febrero for his poem "Pabellón Almirante Brown" in 2003. His first novel was *Gallino*, which was warmly received by literary critics. The novel was

published in the midst of a new boom in Latin American literature, and was considered to be part of a new strain of magical realism.

Gallino opened new doors for Kasañetz, and he now works as a regular collaborator for the "Radar Libros" literary review column in the Argentine newspaper *Página 12*. He wrote a subsequent novel, *Los Acostados*, which was a finalist for the Letra Sur Award. He is currently working on a collection of stories and a new novel.

Kasañetz's inspiration for *Gallino* was something that befits the novel itself: he dreamed of a gamecock. Given that cockfighting is very rare in Argentina (it was outlawed sometime during the nineteenth century), Kasañetz resorted to researching the topic online to begin writing his first novel. Shortly thereafter, he was sent on a work assignment to Puerto Rico, where he soon discovered the Club Gallístico, a cockfighting arena in Isla Verde, and was enthralled by the images and the atmosphere surrounding these fights. He finished writing *Gallino* during a year-long sojourn in Puerto Rico.

When asked about the reasons for choosing such a blood sport as the medium and background to his novel, he said: "My fascination with cockfights stems from the concept of human passion, the relationship between the gamecock breeder and his gamecock, [which is] a kind of love, but also [involves] the possibility of leading this love into death. All of this is related to the money and violence involved in certain aspects of the cockfights. There were a few times, in literary reviews, when comparisons were made between this ["sport"] and bullfighting, but I defended my stance. Bullfighters are not the ones who

breed the bulls, but in cockfights, the breeders themselves are the ones who put the gamecock in a fight. It is something completely different, and deeper on an emotional level."

Gallino is set in an undetermined location, described in the prologue as "a town, maybe a simultaneously new and historical *Macondo*." It is hard not to associate this place with Puerto Rico, specifically one of those inland municipalities where traditions have been fixed in a state of timelessness.

2. Synopsis

In this story, we come to meet Verón, a young boy who has been sent out into the world by his mother, as a way to push him into adulthood. He, in exchange, has promised to return with enough money to buy a horse. He appeals to Don Ramiro, a gamecock breeder of certain renown in the village, sure to get some work due to his previous experience helping his father breed gamecocks. Don Ramiro takes Verón under his wing as an assistant to help in breeding his gamecocks and prepare them for fights.

Verón immediately starts what seems to be an inner journey towards what will be his ultimate destiny. He starts dreaming of the *gallino*, a huge hen with the head of a rooster. He believes this to be one of God's gamecocks, and takes this experience to heart. He begins his training as a gamecock breeder, a process revealed to us through a collage of moments and memories, most of which are of Verón's long-departed father. Through

these memories, and the way Verón reflects upon them in his present speech and attitude, we can discern his steadfast commitment to becoming a grown man and a gamecock breeder, as his father was.

Don Ramiro sees the boy's inner struggles and decides it is time for him to experience his own rite of passage. He takes Verón to a brothel in the village and pays for his first prostitute, Angélica. The boy is immediately smitten by her, as we can perceive through the vivid description of Angélica, from Verón's point of view: to him, she is an angel, a *Donna Angelicata* of sorts. After this moment, the thought of her is all that occupies his mind.

Soon, Don Ramiro signs his star gamecock, El Rengo, for a big fight. Verón is tasked with preparing the bird, a process in which the animal is deprived of light and space so it can think only about the fight. Through this process, we get a better understanding of the spiritual bond that has formed between Verón and El Rengo, and how Verón deals with his own rite of passage through the gamecock's training.

Verón soon runs into Angélica again during a stroll in town, and an idea takes hold of him. All of a sudden, the horse he had promised his mother seems much less important, and he decides to spend his meager savings on a pair of shoes for his angel-prostitute instead. As soon as he makes this purchase, all seems to lead through a floral tunnel of ecstasy to the point of no return.

When Verón arrives at the brothel to give the shoes to his angel, he gets the news that she has left town with another man. On his way back home, he falls down a well. He then has a breakdown, in remarkably similar circumstances to those El Rengo is submitted to during the confinement training. Memories and broken visions flood his mind, all of them pinning him down at the bottom of the well, where he remains unable to see and unable to escape. He finally meets the *gallino* again, and in a fit of rebellion against the *gallino*, God and all things that would determine his fate, he recovers his strength and free will, and finally escapes the well.

The day of the fight comes upon Verón and Don Ramiro. The fight is described in great detail, in an apparent echo of the first scene—another cockfight—where Don Ramiro and Verón had initially met. El Rengo is fatally wounded, but he wins this last match. Don Ramiro is satisfied that El Rengo had a good final fight and can now die in peace. He instructs Verón to leave the gamecock in the basket by the doorway to his house so that people can visit him. He explains that when a gamecock is dying, it is a tradition for people to approach the bird and leave messages for their dearly departed, so that the gamecock will take these messages with him to heaven. Verón is the last to come to El Rengo that evening, and he leaves two messages: one for his dead brother, telling him that he has decided not to be a gamecock breeder anymore; the other, to his father, asking for his forgiveness for not following in his footsteps as a *gallero*.

The next day, Don Ramiro, now completely alone after Verón's departure, approaches the bird in its final moments. He leaves a message for his own mother saying that he has lived a full life in this village, and was unable to return home.

3. The Translation Process

3.1 Domesticating the Text

Given the strong Latin American themes and backdrops pervading the story and rooting it to a particular yet unspecified culture—in which cockfights are the most popular social events for adult males to interact—the most important question throughout the translation process was how much to domesticate the text.

We can bring the story closer to the reader's comfort zone through domestication of the text and thus, as stated by Lawrence Venuti, the "invisibilization" of the translator. Domestication would ensure that the reader's departure from familiar elements and forms of expression would be minimal, and it would allow for an easier enjoyment of the novel.

On the other hand, foreignizing the text, an approach supported by Friedrich Schleiermacher, among others, could be construed as a gesture of respect toward the culture from which the text originated. The reader would have to possess certain knowledge of the original culture, language and literary traditions to be able to grasp the target text and all its nuances, or at least the adequate enthusiasm to educate himself or

herself through research. However, foreignization would certainly keep the purity and true flavor of the novel intact.

I tend to view domestication with skepticism. The complete or near complete absorption of a text into another language and culture, and the consequent obliteration of its original nuances and motifs, while offering certain advantages to the average reader, seem to me like a transgression against the original culture, language, and story. I can nonetheless acknowledge that an absolute foreignization of this novel will only result in a very reduced readership, which is not the purpose of this translation either. I am a staunch believer that a story such as *Gallino* should be made approachable to all interested readers, independently of their previous knowledge of the original culture and language.

As part of my research to arrive at an appropriate resolution to this problem, I read *Boyhood*, by J.M. Coetzee. In his novel, Coetzee introduces phrases, even entire sentences, in Afrikaans. His approach towards clarifying meaning was exceptionally organic, only stopping to translate his Afrikaans phrases into English at the very beginning of the story, then progressively leaving the reader to infer meaning by context. I felt that this technique was respectful of the originating culture and language, while at the same time prompting the reader into an adequate understanding of the story without being condescending. I endeavored to adopt a similar approach in the translation of *Gallino*. The few terms that were deemed untranslatable due to their full semiotic significance, more than their semantics, have been rendered in their original form. Readers will then be able to extrapolate their meaning from the context.

3.2 Translating the Title

The first problem we confront when translating *Gallino* is the title itself. In the novel, Don Ramiro describes the *gallino* as "a gamecock with feathers just like a hen's." I was able to confirm a similar definition in the Spanish Royal Academy's online dictionary ("Rooster missing his tail feathers"). After some thorough research, I was able to ascertain that the correct translation for this term is the word "hennie."

What is the difference between *hennie* and *gallino*? Both terms signify the same concept—a cock born with the plumage of a hen—but the weight and connotations of these words differ greatly one from the other. This could be easily explained by the construction of each word. The root morpheme for *hennie* is the word *hen* itself ([hen|nie]), which tends to exclusively signify the female bird, and the termination */nie/*, which tends to be used as a diminutive form of the word's root. However, the construction of *gallino* is much richer: *|gall|* is the root morpheme, from which the terms *gallo* (cock or rooster, i.e. a decidedly male bird) and *gallina* (hen, the female bird) can be formed. In taking the turn */gallin/*, we are pretty much expecting the word to denote a female bird, but we get the termination *-o*, which usually signifies a male subject. Hence, the word *gallino* is something of a surprise to Spanish speakers. It can also be understood as a form of transsexualizing the bird—it is supposed to be a female, but alas, it is male in the end.

3.3 The Translation of Names

The names of some of the characters were also up for debate. El Rengo, the name of the gamecock that serves as a central figure in the lives of Don Ramiro and Verón, means lame or crippled. I did not deem it appropriate to translate his name to any of these words, so the name remains in Spanish in the translation, with adequate explanation as to what the word “rengo” means. However, the nickname of one of the prostitutes, “La Mamadora,” can be translated into “The Cocksucker,” which adds an element of harmony with the main theme of the novel.

3.4 Technical Terms

A comprehensive research of technical terms was also necessary to determine the best translation for many other words and phrases in the text. Terms such as “gallo peruano de navaja,” “desbarbar,” “reñidero de gallos,” and “colchonear” required a comprehensive examination of all options given in gamecock breeding texts written in English. Some of these terms have more than one translation, such as “reñidero,” which can be translated as “pit,” “ring,” or “cockpit.” The correct choice was determined by keeping in mind which term would be the most clear and concise in conveying the term correctly, as well as its contextual nuances. Other terms did not have an adequate translation to English, such as “colchonear.” In such cases, I resorted to paraphrasing within the text. For example, I solved the untranslatability of “colchonear”—“Verón tomaba al Rengo con las dos manos, empezando a colchonearlo”—in the following manner: “Verón held El Rengo aloft with both hands, then released him, catching him on his way down.”

3.5 From Translation into Transcreation

One of the most gratifying challenges was the use of literary or colloquial language: "hizo de mí una casa e hijos," "cantar a otras mañanitas," "poniéndole grillos a todo," "el pueblo dormía su noche." These are just a few examples of the many expressions that required a more unconventional and creative approach to translation: "I met a woman that gave me children and a home," "cock-a-doodle-doo'ing on his merry way," "flooding the world with cricket chirps," and "The town slept through the night," respectively. In fact, the translation of *Gallino* in its entirety could be construed as a transcreation, a re-creation of the source text based not only on an intended readership but also on the possibilities inscribed in the source text.

I faced problems with some of the less graceful metaphors, such as "alargado como tubo," which translates as "elongated like a pipe." The best option in cases such as this was to lend some musicality to the language by departing from the source, like the case in point, which I chose to transcreate as "his body was a slender black sheath." This approach may not be completely faithful to the source text, but its core content deserves to have these problems solved in the most tasteful manner.

The prologue, written by Omar Amadeo Ramos, is likewise maladroit and adds nothing to the text itself, its conclusion being the utmost example of its inadequacy: "[...]un mundo propio lleno de percepciones, comprensión, misterio, iniciación y otros hallazgos que capturarán al lector". I considered leaving it out of the translation, but decided against this. Instead, I have attempted to rework it, such as the case mentioned above,

translated as: “[...]its own world, full of perceptions, insights, enigmas, rites of passage, and other revelations that will captivate the reader.” A simple rewording may prove to effectively render the brief analysis of the novel the prologue was meant to provide.

There was also an instance of the source text that required clarification: the passage in the first instance of Chapter XVI in which the death of Verón’s little brother is explained: “La quebrada había recibido agua durante la última tormenta. Nadie lo sabía. Se desmoronó en la tarde fría de invierno. El niño trabajaba los canastos sentado debajo”. All we can garner from this passage is that the creek broke its banks, but no further logical explanation is provided, and this was not made clear by the author either. I resorted to simplifying the situation by not giving too many details and leaving the details up to the reader’s imagination and comprehension: “Water had flooded the creek during the last storm. No one had noticed. The overpass crumbled down on that cold winter afternoon. The child had been weaving baskets underneath.”

The prose style, riddled with fragmented phrases and disjointed sentences, also proved difficult to render in English. The source text provides a stream-of-consciousness feel throughout the entire novel, bringing us closer to the characters, to the point of being able to see the world through their eyes, as if we were wearing them like a mask. For example, we can almost feel as if we were part of the crowd at the first cockfight in the following passage: “Minutos antes de la riña los galleros estaban pesando a sus gallos. Los galleros se cruzaron frente a la balanza. No se hablaron, los galleros. [...] Nadie miraba el canasto; era de mala suerte pasar por su lado. Nadie. Mal augurio”.

In English, this technique, when abused, can feel forced and graceless. Therefore, the original style was subdued in favor of a more natural approach to the narration: “Minutes before the fight, the breeders had met in front of the scales while they were weighing in their birds. They hadn’t said a word. [...]Nobody looked at the basket. It was bad luck to even go anywhere near it. Nobody. It was a bad omen.”

Another issue brought on by the differences between Spanish and English is the way in which Verón’s father addresses the boy. This can be seen in a few flashback episodes: Verón’s father addresses his son with the formal second-person singular in Spanish “usted.” This form of address is used in most Spanish-speaking countries as a way to denote respect for elders, people of authority, and strangers. In Puerto Rico, its use is not as commonplace among family members, except in rural regions. In *Gallino*, it serves as a way to portray the strict boundaries of authority between Verón and his father. The English language has no such distinction, so an alternative way of expressing the formality and distance of their relationship was devised. The characterization of Verón’s father takes shape in the target text through his sparse use of conjunctions and a slightly higher register in tone and lexical selection: “Of course, son. You will be a good *gallero*, like me. *Gallos* have the utmost respect for their *galleros*. We all have our own *gallero*, do not forget that.”

Likewise, the difference in register for the prostitutes—one of whom is characterized as an uneducated and graceless woman—had to be reconsidered as a portrayal from the

foundation up, instead of a direct translation of the existing dialogue. This entailed an exercise of envisioning the character as a whole, then conceiving her words based on the general idea of the original text.

3.6 Narrative Elements

The use of flashbacks within the narrative, which occur with both Don Ramiro and Verón, serves to pinpoint parallel elements between their stories and rites of passage. This obviously creates an unspoken emotional bond between both characters, as well as between them and El Rengo. These passages are undifferentiated in the text, and only after a few lines does the reader understand that these in fact deviate from the novel's present temporality. In the target text, flashbacks remain undifferentiated as well. This poses a slight risk of confusion among future readers; however, employing other approaches, such as changing the text font to differentiate these passages, could be seen as a crass gesture of condescension, something I have endeavored to steer clear of in the final translation.

The underlying elements and themes in the story were another determinant in choosing transcreation over translation. The relationship between cockfighting and religion, as well as various instances of "Surrealism," suffuse the novel in such a way that the categorization of this text as magical realism seems to be justified. This is the main element that separates the novel from a more secular reality. Other elements support this differentiation, such as the portrayal of Verón's first prostitute as a *Donna Angelicata*, his journey through a path of flower petals as a portrayal of his sexual maturity, or his

various encounters with the *gallino*. All of these instances required a careful use of transcreation, more than straightforward translation, to faithfully render the awe and veneration these images inspire in Verón and the reader. One such passage that proved to be particularly difficult was the description of the brothel lounge from Verón's particularly naive point of view: "Se movían de un lugar a otro manchando una acuarela sin forma que mezclaba las tonalidades de su ropa". Kasañetz turns the brothel into a lively watercolor, and rendering it thus in English as well—"They whirled across the room, their vibrant dresses streaking and blurring like watercolors"—certainly poses a challenge.

3.7 Drawing the Reader Closer to Puerto Rican Culture Through the English Language

There are some quirks to the language used in the novel that, at first glance, represent no more of a problem than any of the more routine tasks in the translation. But upon closer analysis, the reader will observe that many of these linguistic expressions and elements are not native to Puerto Rican Spanish and culture. Words such as *transpirar* (to sweat), *porotos* (beans) or *aljibe* (well) are much less commonplace than their synonym terms (*sudar, habichuelas, pozo*). There are even entire phrases and expressions that ring alien to Puerto Rican Spanish. And most importantly, some elements, such as the tradition of drinking gin instead of the customary rum—very minute, almost hidden in plain sight—also prove a chance to change things around. It could certainly be argued that the target text could be brought closer to Puerto Rican culture by translating it into English.

But do I really want to subvert Martín Kasañetz's metabolized view of Puerto Rican culture? Changing *ginebra* (gin) into *rum* may bring the text closer to Puerto Rican culture, but it suppresses the foreignness of the author himself, looking from the outside into our culture, trying to assimilate his vision of Puerto Rico through his Argentine words and worldview. I have had two choices in this matter: I can be faithful to the source text, try to somehow render Kasañetz's process of our culture as a rarity in Argentine and Latin American literature. Or I can undermine the author's original purpose and turn this novel not only into a translation, but into a plausible symbolization of how intricate Puerto Rican culture is, that rendering a text such as *Gallino* into English will actually bring it closer to the reality of our society.

If I were to render the original text in such a way, I would indeed be appropriating Kasañetz's work for my own purposes, but isn't that the ultimate aim that translation has historically served? Witting or unwittingly, a translator cannot refrain from filtering a source text through his or her own worldview before rendering it in another language. He or she can try to commit to the author's purpose, but this is a lost cause right away. The author's true and unaltered intent will immediately be subject to manipulation as soon as the first word of his text is translated. We could even go as far as to say the author's intention is lost and ceases to matter as soon as his audience reads the first line.

A text—any text, be it a novel, a story, an essay—belongs to the author inasmuch as he or she is still in the process of creating it. But as soon as that text is set free into the

world, the author can do very little to influence the way his audience will receive the text.

I deem then that my chosen course of action, a subversion of his intent, is no more than the actions of any conscious reader. Proving how a text in Spanish can be drawn closer to Puerto Rican culture through a translation into English is far more relevant and provocative than the source text could have suggested. It hints at the intricacies of the political relationship between Puerto Rico, the United States, and the rest of Latin America, and it could be regarded as a symbol of the divergence between Puerto Rican and Latin American cultures.

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