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[ABOUT](#)

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[ELENA FERRANTE'S "THE LYING LIFE OF ADULTS"](#)

[ESSAYS ON TRANSLATION](#)

[READING DOMENICO STARNONE](#)

[READING NATALIA GINZBURG](#)

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IT'S ALL RELATIVE: THE MULTIFOLD SELF IN SERGIO PITOL'S "THE LOVE PARADE," TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH BY G.B. HENSON

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By [Dorothy Potter Snyder](#)

*Eyes of Lisette, smile of Mignonette
The sweetness of Suzette
That's in you displayed
Grace of Delphine, charm of Josephine
The cuteness of Pauline
That's in you, arrayed...
Lips of Lucille, and beauty of Camille
You are my ideal, my love parade.*

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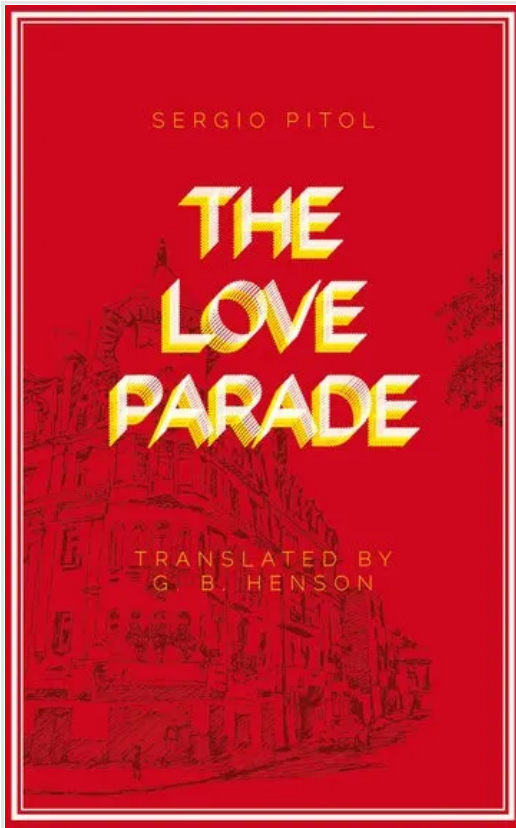
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Lyric by Clifford Gray, from the movie "The Love Parade"



Mexican essayist [Laura Baeza](#) writes, "If I went to books for answers when I was young, now I read trying to appreciate the questions they pose, their gritty spinal columns."^[1] *The Love Parade* by Sergio Pitol is dense with questions that refute the possibility of answers because everything, especially in memory, is relative. This is the first novel of Pitol's Carnival Trilogy published in the late 1980s and early 1990s; the second two (yet to be translated) are *Domar a la divina garza* and *La vida conyugal*. The unifying features of the trilogy are extreme intertextuality and the literary and linguistic theories of the Russian philosopher [Bakhtin](#),

specifically heteroglossia and the carnivalesque. *The Love Parade's* protagonist, the recent widower and historian Miguel del Solar, has returned to Mexico to write a "microhistory" about the year 1942 and we witness his efforts to impose order on a complex knot of chaotic subplots. As in [commedia dell'arte](#), the delightful lazzo is always at hand, and wicked caricatures, witticisms, and clever references are generously imparted. *The Love Parade* is a romp with so many characters that the publisher wisely chose to list (most) of them in the front matter.

As in Ernst Lubitsch's madcap movie from which the novel takes its name, the question arises: are we unknowable mishmashes, even to ourselves?

The Love Parade is like a Japanese fan that slowly opens, revealing a beautifully painted landscape while still concealing the face behind it. Much of what we learn about Miguel del Solar is divulged by the huge cast of characters he interviews for his book, each of whom embodies a fragment of his past. He is investigating a murder (or murders) that took place at the Minerva building where he lived as a child, a European-style mini-castle built in 1908 to house the representatives of foreign governments in Mexico City.

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(Pitol lived for a while in the real building upon which the Minerva is based, The Rio de Janeiro building in La Colonia Roma.) But by 1973, the structure has slipped into decadence like its former inhabitants. Del Solar quickly becomes lost in conflicting subplots and everyone he interviews inspires escalating anxiety: Was his uncle involved with the Nazis? Organized crime? Was his uncle's pal Martínez more than just a friend? Was young Erich María Pistauer killed by accident or on purpose? Answers to these and other questions prove elusive; rebuilding the crumbling edifice of memory is a Sisyphean task. Nevertheless, he forges on because "[i]n that tumbledown redbrick building lay the seed of a historical event...the only one in his life he'd had a brush with..." (68). Del Solar "feels an almost physical need to know the circumstances and details of the crime. He believes it touches him personally." (27) How does the grand sweep of history relate to the individual? How much of who we are is way beyond our control? Whom will we see when we look closely in the mirror and peel back the mask?



The Rio de Janeiro building in La Colonia Roma, Mexico City.

Photos: Dorothy Potter Snyder.

Despite del Solar's efforts to keep his interview subjects on point about the murder(s?), they always digress, telling Cervantine side stories that don't get us any closer to finding out who killed the German (Austrian?) Pistauer. The women are particularly memorable: the lecturer Ida Werfel whose daughter Emma has devoted her life to maintaining a temple to her famous mother's memory; gallery owner, Delfina Uribe, the product of Mexican historical

dialectic since the **Porfiriato**; and prickly Eduvigis de Díaz Zepeda, who proclaims the innocence of her corrupt politician son Antonio even as he evades criminal prosecution. The border between the human and animal blurs for del Solar, who compares people to insects, birds, tigers, and gophers. Gender fluidity is embodied in the side-story of the castrato, an indigenous soprano, a tragic figure who, it turns out, was actually a hermaphrodite. Layered references, winks, a bricolage of historical and literary references, and parallels between Pitól's and his protagonist's lives provide depth and fun. Nothing is as it seems, all attempts to impose definition are ill-fated. No single person reveals the truth del Solar seeks, and history is a kind of hologram projected by a variety of perspectives. Del Solar is driven, seemingly less by the book he wants to write than by the yearning to locate the missing pieces of himself.

Pitol's emphasis on extreme heteroglossia engages a grotesque, scatological, sophisticated, and arcane vocabulary that demands every ounce of a translator's insight and creativity. Happily, Henson's previous translations of Pitól's Trilogy of Memory, particularly *The Art of Flight*, provided him with some guidance for translating the present volume, which brought the writer overdue recognition in the Spanish press, his first major critical attention in his native Mexico, and was the tipping point that won him the **Cervantes Prize**. Pitól writes:

“As the official language I heard and spoke every day became increasingly more rarefied, to compensate, that of my novel became more animated, sarcastic, and waggish. Every scene was a caricature of real life, that is to say, a caricature of a caricature... Everything that aspired to solemnity, canonization, and self-satisfaction careened suddenly into mockery, vulgarity, and derision. A world of masks and disguises prevailed. Every situation, together as well as separate, exemplifies the three fundamental stages that Bakhtin finds in the carnivalesque farce: crowning, uncrowning, and the final scourging. [2]

Depending on the reader's knowledge of world history and Pitól's oeuvre, the references and jokes in *The Love Parade* will either land — or fly over one's head with a rush of wings. Warning: you may feel compelled to embark on research tangents to disentangle fact from fiction! This is as it should be. Pitól

is an intellectual writer whose devotion to the word is exemplified not only by his huge body of writing and more than forty translations of important books into Spanish but also by the unconventionality of his language.

The choices I admire in Henson's translation are legion. Elotes, quesadillas, la nota roja (crime tabloids), and other Mexican words and expressions appear without italics, explanation, or fanfare; "Jardineras" are rendered the francophone "jardinières" (10), which at once evokes the international quality of the residents of the Minerva (and Pitol himself) while also avoiding the inelegant-sounding "planters" or "window boxes"; and the Minerva's "insólitos torreones" become not "unusual" but rather "unwonted" turrets (9). Henson always chooses the writerly word that evokes Pitol's beloved Dickens, one of the authors the anglophile Mexican credited for saving his life during his many long, lonely childhood illnesses in his grandmother's home in Córdoba, Veracruz. He also succeeds by adhering to the humorous effects Pitol offers: "verborrea", which could have been rendered "verbosity" or "loquaciousness", instead retains its music and fun as the less common "logorrhea" (16), thus evoking the classical while also providing a stab of irony for those who know that in the last years of his life Pitol suffered from the inverse infirmity, aphasia. Ultimately, if readers fail to appreciate the intentions or depths embedded in such choices, it is unimportant. This masterful translation, clearly rendered with joy and gusto, is the product of a translator's translator rendering the work of a writer who drew from the ample linguistic palette he developed as a translator. Henson's renderings of three essay memoirs, one collection, and one novel by Pitol, all published by Deep Vellum during the past six years confirm his position as one of the most important translators of Mexican literature today.

The Love Parade does not offer "what's expected, the facile, the saleable", in the words of Pitol's contemporary, Mexican writer **Angelina Muñiz-Huberman**, but rather "the individual, the unique, the shockingly rare."^[3] Some will find the novel hard-going for its sheer complexity. For Bolaño fans, however, it will be a playground, a literary game of hide-and-seek that they will recognize and relish. The fact that this remarkable writer's first work in English (*The Art of Flight*, trans. Henson) was only published in 2015, while a credit to the vision of publisher Deep Vellum, is also a ringing indictment of the ongoing dysfunctionality and failure of imagination of mainstream publishing, which insists upon reserving "greatness" and translation budgets for a few canonical authors, most of them white, male and heterosexual. The absence of Pitol from the anglophone literary consciousness for the past half-century is a grave lacuna, akin to having lived ignorant of Borges. And for that,

we should be truly sorry.

Pitol, Sergio. *The Love Parade*. Translated by George Henson. Deep Vellum, 2022.

Dorothy Potter Snyder writes short fiction, essays, and translates literature from Spanish, including works by Mónica Lavín (Mexico), Almudena Sánchez (Spain), and Juan Carlos Garvayo (Spain). She is a passionate promoter of contemporary Hispanic women's texts and her translations have appeared in *The Sewanee Review*, *Surreal Poetics*, *Two Lines Press*, *Review: Literature and Art of the Americas*, and *The Short Story Project*. Dorothy lives in *America's Little Literary Town*, Hillsborough, North Carolina, with her husband, Randall.

[1] Baeza, Laura, *Niebla ardiente*, Revista de la Universidad de México, No. 879-880, Nueva época, 140. (Trans. D.P. Snyder)

[2] Pitól, Sergio, *A History of Some Prizes*, trans. G.B. Henson, Latin American Literature Today, Vol. 1 No. 5, February 2018.

[3] Angelina Muñiz-Huberman, "Las Entrañas y La Piel," in *Arritmias* (México, D.F.: Bonilla Artigas Editores, 2015), 84. (Trans. D.P. Snyder).

Tags: *Deep Vellum*, *Dorothy Potter Snyder*, *Sergio Pitól*, *The Love Parade*

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