

## BORGES AND TEXTUAL QUALITY IN TRANSLATION

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THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE BORGES dealt with translation problems. In his childhood translation was a daily experience for him since he spoke both Spanish and English at home. Later on he learnt French and German in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he spent three years when he was a teenager. Most of his reading was done in foreign languages, especially in English but also in French, German, and to a lesser extent in Italian and Portuguese.

Borges translated little but regularly through his entire literary career, which was very long indeed. Among others, he translated into Spanish some pages of *Ulysses*, Faulkner's *Wild Palms*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, a selection of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Moreover, he translated a great number of quotations of writers and philosophers that he inserted copiously in his writings, including his fiction and poems.

Translation issues are discussed, glossed, and even fictionalised widely by Borges (for a full and perceptive account thereof see Barbosa 1991). His most systematic treatment of the subject happened, though, in an early phase of his work: "Las versiones homéricas" (1932), and "Los traductores de las 1001 noches" (1935). For many, his story "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" besides a theory of literature also contains a translation theory. Finally, in his last years, as he was helping his American translator Norman Thomas di Giovanni, he participated in a seminar on literary translation at Columbia University, from which a transcription has been published in the volume *Borges on writing* (see Di Giovanni 1974).

### Translation and text

For Borges translation reveals the inherent changeability of texts according to the reader and to the place and time of reading. The history of the translations of a text appears then as a partial history of its readings:

Un parcial y precioso documento de las vicisitudes que [el texto] sufre queda en sus traducciones. ¿Qué son las muchas de la *Iliada* de Chapman a Magnien sino diversas perspectivas de un hecho móvil, sino un largo sorteo experimental de omisiones y de énfasis? (Borges 1974: 239)

A logical consequence of the previous argument is that all texts are provisional or, in Borges's words, "drafts", not definitive texts

Presuponer que toda recombinación de elementos es obligatoriamente inferior a su original, es presuponer que el borrador 9 es obligatoriamente inferior al borrador H — ya que no puede haber sino borradores. El concepto de *texto definitivo* no corresponde sino a la religión o al cansancio. (Borges 1974: 239)

Translations would be as much drafts as the originals themselves and therefore, to consider in principle a draft superior to others would smack of prejudice due to sheer habit:

La superstición de la inferioridad de las traducciones — amonedada en el concebido adagio italiano — procede de una distraída experiencia. No hay un buen texto que no parezca invariable y definitivo si lo practicamos un número suficiente de veces. Hume identificó la idea habitual de causalidad con la sucesión. Así un buen film, visto una segunda vez, parece aún mejor; propendemos a tomar por necesidades las que no son más que repeticiones. (Borges 1974: 239)

Borges himself provides a good example of the above when he refers to his first experience of *Don Quixote*, which he first read in English translation:

When I later read *Don Quixote* in the original, it sounded like a bad translation to me. (Borges 1971: 135)

The same can be said about the Bible in many countries until recently — most people were not aware that what they read and praised was a translation. Recent revised translations of the Bible into English, correcting inaccuracies and adapting the text to a modern audience have encountered a bitter reaction in many quarters. Many people —among them, Borges — prefer King James' version, for them *the* Bible, irrespective of the fact of it being faithful or not to the originals or, for that matter, suitable for a modern audience. As Borges observes:

I have no Hebrew, but I always think of the King James version as a very fine translation of the Bible. Maybe it's better than a literal translation could be. (Di Giovanni 1974:115)

What is central in Borges's approach, and has not yet been fully integrated by translation theory, is the distinction between fidelity to the original and textual quality. It is hardly surprising that the first being far more easily accounted for than the latter, has concentrated most of the debate on translation. When the pendulum moved it did towards the target system norms (see Toury 1980), not towards textual quality. As a result Borges's stance seems as revolutionary and heterodox now as it was in 1932.

### **Literal translation & free translation**

While in his criticism he does use the expression "literal translation", Borges points out that true literal translation is as impossible as translating the authors' intentions, or "the spirit" of the text:

Traducir el espíritu es una intención tan enorme y tan fantasmal que bien puede quedar como inofensiva; traducir la letra, una precisión tan extravagante que no hay riesgo de que la ensayen. (Borges 1974:400)

Indeed a true literal translation would be almost unbearable for

target readers because it would produce a text lexically, grammatically and idiomatically inappropriate, which is certainly more than the average native reader can cope with. “Literal translation” for Borges stands, as for most people in practice, for semiliteral translation, that is lexico-grammatically well formed texts with partial deviances. Incidentally, it is in this sense that I use the expression here.

Even if he does not usually appreciate literal translation, Borges did not fail to observe that literal solutions can be sometimes as creative as non-literal options:

I think there are two legitimate ways of translating. One way is to attempt a literal translation, the other is to try a re-creation. The paradox is — and, of course *paradox* means something true that at first seems false — that if you are out for strangeness, if you want, let’s say, to astonish the reader, you can do that by being literal. I will take an obvious example. I know no Arabic whatever, but I know there’s a book known as *The Thousand and One Nights*. Now when Jean Antoine Galland did that into French, he translated it as *Les Mille et une Nuits*. But when Captain Burton attempted his famous translation, he translated the title literally. Following the original Arabic word order, he called his book *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*. Now there he created something not to be found in the original, since to anyone who knows Arabic the phrase isn’t at all strange; it’s the normal way of saying it. But in English it sounds very strange, and there is a certain beauty attained, in this case, through literal translation. Now let us take the opposite example — where something is not translated literally and where the translator has wanted to re-create the original. I suppose you all know the Latin sentence about science, *Ars longa, vita brevis*. When Chaucer chose to put that into English, he did not write, *Art long, life short*, which would have been rather cut and dried, but he translated it in this fashion: *The life so short, the craft so long to learn*, or *The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne*. By working in the words to *learn* he gave the line a kind of wistful music not to be found in the original. (Di Giovanni 1974:104-5)

For Borges *legitimate* seems to mean something like “aesthetically valid”, not equivalent. It is precisely his concern with textual quality

that makes his view flexible, since, as he shows, quality can be achieved by opposing methods depending on the string of text in cause. This stance changes the focus of debate, instead of equivalence it is the aesthetic quality which is paramount.

Borges takes a similar position in relation to the time-dependence aspect of texts. As a rule translation specialists spend much time discussing the “problems” of translating older texts. In fact, how do you find a present equivalent to a wording of the past? For Borges this not only does not constitute a problem, but may mean a sort of present, liberating the translator of the obligation of equivalence and giving him more freedom to look for quality. He tackles this issue indirectly when justifying his option while translating Whitman:

El idioma de Whitman es un idioma contemporáneo; centenares de años pasarán antes que sea una lengua muerta. Entonces podremos traducirlo y recrearlo con plena libertad, como Jáuregui hizo con la *Farsalia*, o Chapman, Pope y Lawrence con la *Odisea*. Mientras tanto, no entreveo otra posibilidad que la de una versión como la mía, que oscila entre la interpretación personal y el rigor resignado. (Borges 1969: 22)

The observation above shows that for Borges old texts are easier rather than more difficult to translate, which is coherent with his view of equivalence as important, but secondary, and textual quality as fundamental. In fact, he considers textual quality as the *raison d'être* for a text being translated at all. Thus, he laments the absence of creative German translations of *The Thousand and One Nights* or, *The Arabian Nights*, as it is commonly known in English:

Hay maravillas en las *Noches* que me gustaría ver repensadas en alemán. (Borges 1974: 412)

Linguistically it would mean perhaps that a German translator could use some of the specific tools available in the language like easily formed compounds and a large and sophisticated philosophical lexis, with thousands of meanings and shades of meanings perhaps not so well defined in other languages. An artful exploitation of these resources in the translation would certainly give a unique flavour to the

Arabic classic work in German.

For Borges then translation can enhance the latent possibilities of a text, as much as perceptive critical readings. A good text would be enriched when translated by competent textualisers, especially in languages with a rich textual tradition. This makes him wonder what a great writer could do in German with the original matrix of *The Arabian Nights*:

¿Qué no haría un hombre, un Kafka, que organizara y acentuara esos juegos [simetrías, contrastes, digresiones], que los rehiciera según la deformación alemana, según la *Unheimlichkeit* de Alemania? (Borges 1974: 413)

Here Borges seems to refer to global textual patterns that occur more frequently or exclusively in German. The average text organisation, and indeed paragraph organisation, in German seems to differ from other languages, even from close-related languages like Dutch. For Borges these German “deformations” could bring new elements to our perception of *The Arabian Nights*.

Thus, translation occupies for Borges a place of honour, a locus where experiments with writing can be made and new ways properly tested. It is a view that we seldom find, even in specialised literature. He has no recipe for good translation but as a man who used translation intensively he is busy criticising real translation instead of insisting on its abstract problems, or on its actual shortcomings.

### **Language and culture-specific features**

Cultural differences may be great and may hinder the translation process, as has been recognised by almost everyone who has studied translation. Inverting the normal procedure, that of lamenting lost features, Borges often highlights what remains aesthetically powerful in translation:

I ought to have studied the Oriental languages: I have only glanced at them through translations. But I have felt the punch, the impact of their beauty. For example, that line by the Persian poet Hafiz: I fly, my dust will be what I am. I will be reborn again and again, in another country, I will be Hafiz, the poet.

All of this is given in a few words which I have read in English, but which cannot be very different in Persian. It is too simple to have been altered greatly. (in Di Giovanni 1974: 86)

The resilience of some literary texts occurs, according to Borges, even in bad translations:

Recuerdo haber asistido hace muchos años a una representación de Macbeth; la traducción era no menos deleznable que los actores y que el pintarrajeado escenario, pero salí a la calle deshecho de pasión trágica. Shakespeare se había abierto camino (Borges 1969: 22)

### Translation as source text

Borges's contribution to reading does not appear to be less important than his contribution to writing. He adopted a very personal style of reading, considering texts from everywhere and from every time synchronically, as it were. The same all-embracing criterion he employed when dealing with translations, he considered as autonomous texts, with their own strengths and weaknesses. His wide knowledge of foreign languages allowed him to take a direct look into major texts in their original but he did not limit himself to that, using a large number of different translations of a book from the languages he did not master. The originality of his stance is that he managed to turn this insufficiency into an advantage:

F.S.: Haven't you ever felt a kind of remorse when reading the Greek classics in translation?

J.L.B: No. I used to think about this the same way I thought about Arabic. Not knowing Greek and Arabic allowed me to read, so to speak, the *Odyssey* and *The Thousand and One Nights* in many versions, so that this poverty also brought me a kind of richness. (in Sorrentino 1982: 87-88)

This novel approach led him to exercise criticism of literary translation from languages he *did not* know: Greek, Persian, Arabic. As Barbosa points out:

By reading many different translations of the *Arabian Nights* and of the *Odyssey*, Borges was able to arrive at a “chimerical” *tertium comparationis*, as a Borgesian Borges well would. (Barbosa 1991:14)

This apparently strange method allowed him, in fact, to concentrate in stylistic questions, not being hindered by considerations of equivalence. In doing so Borges arrives at many insights that are hardly found in criticism where equivalence is the major criterion. Through the use of several translations, but no original, he arrives at a sort of central textual patterns, which precisely seem to make those texts highly valued. The mere language-specific features are thus abandoned in benefit of text-specific features. The fact that he has achieved this intuitively does not make it less important.

At the same time he also used to read many different translations of a given book, say *The World as Will and Representation* by Schopenhauer, from a language which he *did* master. So for Borges, translations not only provide access to unknown originals but can also help to understand and enjoy them better.

A last, but no less important, point about Borges and translations is that he has consistently considered old translations like Fitzgerald’s *Rubaiyat* and Pope’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* on a par with other original books. What he did for aesthetic reasons and linguistic intuition is not unlike that which the generations of English speakers and writers have done with the *Bible*, as Sinclair (1991: 18) attests:

A written work may take some time to establish itself, and may remain influential for some time. The phraseology of Shakespeare and the *King James Bible* still exert an influence on present-day English usage.

### **Borges as translator**

Borges’s work is unthinkable without translation, an all-pervasive presence in his writing. However, although he highly valued translations as independent texts his own translations are as yet not considered as part of his so-called *Obras completas*.

In order to better understand Borges’s ideas it seemed useful to



me to briefly describe and analyse the strategy and some procedures he uses in his own translations. I found two main reasons for that: 1) Borges is widely seen as a very able textualiser, and 2) Borges has a personal theory of translation. It is highly probable that most translators are less able as textualisers and as a rule do not have an articulated theory guiding their practice. Do these differences matter at all to the texts so produced?

I have chosen three short texts, belonging to three different genres: fiction, essay and poetry. Sadly only in the case of Whitman's poem, it is possible to give the full text. Unlike Borges, the writers he translated did not produce condensed prose texts.

### **“To the garden the world” by Whitman**

This poem belongs to the section “Children of Adam” of *Leaves of Grass*. Before engaging in the analysis, and since the text is quite short, I reproduce the original, Borges's translation and Asselineau's translation into French.

#### TO THE GARDEN THE WORLD

To the garden the world anew ascending,  
 Potent mates, daughters, sons, prelude,  
 The love, the life of their bodies, meaning and being,  
 Curious here behold my resurrection after slumber,  
 The revolving cycles in their wide sweep having brought me again  
 Amorous, mature, all beautiful to me, all wondrous,  
 My limbs and the quivering fire that ever plays through  
 them, for reasons, most wondrous,  
 Existing I peer and penetrate still,  
 Content with the present, content with the past,  
 But my side or back of me Eve following,  
 Or in front, and I following her just the same.

(Whitman 1986:125)

Borges's translation:

## AL JARDÍN, AL MUNDO

Al jardín, al mundo, ascendiendo de nuevo,  
 Anunciando potentes compañeras, hijas, hijos,  
 Significando y siendo el amor, la vida de sus cuerpos,  
 Contemplo con curiosidad mi resurrección después del largo sueño,  
 Los ciclos que giran en vastas órbitas me han traído de nuevo  
 Amorosos, maduros, todos hermosos para mí, todos maravillosos,  
 Mis miembros y el vibrante fuego que siempre los anima, asombrosos,  
 Existiendo, penetro y sigo penetrando en todas las cosas,  
 Satisfecho con el presente, satisfecho con el pasado,  
 A mi lado o detrás Eva me sigue,  
 O me precede y yo la sigo.

(Whitman 1969:109)

Asselinau's translation:

## VERS LE PARADIS TERRESTRE, LE MONDE...

Vers le paradis terrestre, le monde de nouveau progresse,  
 De puissants conjoints, des filles, des fils préludent à ce retour.  
 L'amour, la vie de leur corps le signifient et le sont,  
 Chose curieuse, voyez-moi donc ici qui ressuscite après un long sommeil,  
 Les cycles en tournant, après avoir décrit une vaste courbe, m'ont ramené,  
 Aimant les femmes, mûri, tout est beau à mes yeux, tout est merveilleux  
 Mes membres et la flamme frémissante qui sans cesse pour une raison ou  
 pour une autre les parcourt, sont la chose la plus merveilleuse de toutes,  
 J'existe, je jette un coup d'oeil et pénètre comme autrefois,  
 Satisfait du présent, satisfait du passé,  
 Eve à mon côté ou suivant derrière moi,  
 Ou marchant devant et moi la suivant, exactement de la même façon.

(Whitman 1972:181)

**Choosing words**

It is often stated that in poetry words matter more than in prose, since they follow certain patterns more clearly than prose. Whitman's poetry manifestly does not follow many of these patterns like fixed metre or

rhyme, and that to an extent for many his is not poetry at all or, at best, prosaic poetry.

	TOTAL WORDS	DIFFERENT WORDS	REPETITION RATE
WHITMAN	101	70	1.44
BORGES	100	74	1.35
ASSELINÉAU	139	95	1.46

Even allowing for systemic differences among English, French and Spanish, the numbers above seem to indicate different stylistic options. The famous Borgesian conciseness does translate itself in numbers, even when he is translating. Borges appears to follow quite strictly the old rule that the shorter the better, and that is not advisable to repeat items save to form textual patterns.

It is worth noting that Borges achieves conciseness without sacrificing clarity, cutting words wherever possible (for instance *yo la sigo* for *following her just the same*) but not hesitating to use more words than the original when this seems to be the best or sole solution (like *largo sueño* for *slumber*: a literary tinted collocation compensating for the inexistence in Spanish of a literary word for *sleep*). Obviously cutting the anodyne *just the same* has consequences: a mark of colloquialism is removed and the last line loses four syllables, producing an overall metric balance quite distinct from the original.

Whitman's uncommon collocations are reproduced in Spanish: *potent mates*=*potentes compañeras*, *quivering fire*=*vibrante fuego*.

The famous imbalance of register of Whitman's writing (that is his constant mixture of high and low registers) disappears in Borges's text. The *rather literary* (according to the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary*) words *anew* and *wondrous* are translated by the rather neutral *de nuevo* and *asombroso*. The somewhat wordy string *for reasons, most wondrous* is surgically reduced to one single word, *asombrosos*, and the colloquial multiword-unit *just the same* is simply deleted.

### Patterns lost and gained

The overall grammatical structure of Whitman's text is preserved by Borges with minor corrections due to systemic differences between English and Spanish. However, in lines 2 and 3, the final position of the gerund is not preserved, although perfectly possible in Spanish and indeed very common in traditional poetry. Borges prefers the normal or prosaic order V+C instead of Whitman's C+V. Similarly, in line 4 the inversion *Curious here behold my resurrection* is brought to the normal order in Borges's text *Contemplo con curiosidad mi resurrección*.

A simultaneous sound and grammatical pattern, the *-ing* form has a heavy presence in Whitman's poem, not so in Borges's translation. In part that is due to systemic differences between English and Spanish: in English the *-ing* form can function as adjective, what its equivalent in Spanish *-ndo*, cannot. So we have:

	WHITMAN	BORGES
line 1	ascending	ascendiendo
line 2	preluding	anunciando
line 3	meaning/being	significando/siendo
line 5	revolving	*que giran
line 7	quivering	*vibrante
line 8	existing	existiendo
line 11	following	*sigo

So from 8 *-ing* forms of ST we have only 5 *-ndo* forms in TT, with the added difference that in Spanish, according to the conjugation pattern of the verb, we obtain slightly different endings *-ando* for the first, and more productive conjugation and *-iendo* for the second and third conjugations. In other words, even when the *-ing* form is preserved through its Spanish equivalent rhyme does not always happen as in English. Most of Borges's choices are due to systemic constraints which are confirmed by Asselineau's choices, since French has in this case the same limits as Spanish. However, Borges's choice of last line seems different. It seems at the same time linguistically motivated, the simple present in Spanish being the normal equivalent

of the continuous form in English, and semantically and stylistically motivated, since the simple present stresses the permanence of things, a feature to be found in most of Borges's own writing.

Borges eliminates some patterns like the one formed by *all wondrous* in line 6 and *most wondrous* in line 7, and reduces the one formed in lines 10 and 11 by *my sidelbacklin front*. On the other hand, he creates new patterns like in lines 8, 9 and 10 with the repetition of forms of the verb *seguir*: *sigo penetrando, me sigue* and *la sigo*. The same occurs, by the way, at the phonological level, the sound patterns of lines 7 and 8 being lost but compensated by new sound patterns in line 6.

Finally it should be stressed that Borges, like Asselineau, as well as the ideational content of Whitman's poem keeps the structure of the lines, including the breaks of the longest lines, the lines 5 and 7. He demonstrates also a sensitivity for the graphological differences between English and Spanish through the addition of commas, for example in the title and in line 8, to signal intonation changes.

It is perhaps surprising that Borges translated mainly writers who wrote quite differently from himself, at least in his maturity. So Faulkner's "baroque" prose, although not unlike some of the early Borgesian writings, differs sharply from Borges's style as it appears in his most famous stories.

The following extract I shall briefly analyse seems to represent in a clearer way Borges's strategy of translating fiction, after all the area where his ability is most unanimously recognised. In a way, though, it is a bit particular: the drastic cut in Faulkner's text does not happen throughout his translation.

### **Faulkner's text:**

Yes!' he cried, running, plunging. 'here I am! Here! Here!' running on, into the first scattered volley, stopping among the bullets, waving his arms, shrieking, 'I want to surrender! I want to surrender!' watching not in terror but in amazed and absolutely unbearable outrage as a squatting clump of the khaki figures parted and he saw the machine gun, the blunt thick muzzle slant and drop and probe towards him and he still screaming in his hoarse crow's voice, 'I want to surrender!

Can't you hear me?' continuing to scream as he whirled and plunged, splashing, ducking, went completely under and heard the bullets going thuck-thuck on the water above him and he scrabbling still on the bottom, still trying to scream even before regained his feet and still all submerged save his plunging unmistakable buttocks, the outraged screaming bubbling from his mouth and about his face since he merely wanted to surrender. Then he was comparatively screened, out of range, though not for long. That is (he didn't tell how nor where) there was a moment in which he paused, breathed for a second before running again, the course back to the skiff open for the time being though he could still hear the shouts behind him and now and then a shot, and he panting, sobbing, a long savage tear in the flesh of one hand, got when and how he did not know, and he wasting precious breath, speaking to no one any more than the scream of the dying rabbit is addressed to any mortal ear but rather an indictment of all breath and it, folly and suffering, its infinite capacity for folly and pains which seems to be its only immortality: 'All in the world I want is just to surrender.'

(Faulkner 1961:124)

### Borges's translation

!Quiero rendirme, quiero rendirme!

Contemplando no con terror sino con asombro y absolutamente insoportable indignación cómo un pelotón agazapado de figuras caqui se separaba y vió la ametralladora, la boca gruesa y roma inclinarse y caer y buscar hacia él mientras él seguía gritando con su alarido enronquecido.

— ¡Me rindo, me rindo! ¿No me oyen?

Continuando sus gritos aunque se arremolinaba y hundía, chapoteando, zambulléndose, yéndose al fondo y oyendo las balas, *tuck-tuck-tuck* en el agua sobre él y él todavía arañando el fondo, tratando de gritar aun antes de hacer pie y aun sumergido todo salvo las inconfundibles nalgas hundidas, el grito airado, burbujeando de su boca y de su cara ya que sólo quería entregarse. Entonces estaba al abrigo, fuera de alcance, aunque no por mucho tiempo. Es decir (no decía por qué ni dónde), hubo un momento en que se detuvo, respiró un momento antes de seguir corriendo, remontando la corriente hacia el esquife

por el momento aunque aún podía oír los gritos a su espalda y un tiro de vez en cuando, y él anhelante, sollozando, con un tremendo rasguñón sobre una mano, hecho no sabía dónde ni cuándo, y desperdiciando su precioso aliento, ya sin hablar a nadie como el grito del conejo moribundo no se dirige a oídos humanos sino más bien es una acusación de todo lo que alienta, de su tontería y su padecer, de esa infinita capacidad para las tonterías y los dolores que parece su única inmortalidad.

— Todo lo que quiero en el mundo es entregarme.

(Faulkner 1981:166)

To 296 words in Faulkner's text correspond 256 in Borges's translation. The big difference is due not only to differences between Spanish and English and to Borges's economical option, but also to the omission of the first three lines of the paragraph.

Another surprising feature of the translation is that Borges completely rearranges Faulkner's paragraph, putting as it were order into it. Instead of one paragraph in English we have not less than 5 paragraphs in Spanish. That is curious if we remember that Borges himself writes more often than not very long paragraphs — and that some English translators split them, just in the same way he does with Faulkner! The result is that the narrator's voice becomes much more self-controlled in Borges's text.

Borges textual options, far ahead from mere equivalence, appear also clearly in the following clause, appended in a parenthesis:

(he didn't tell *how* nor where)

(no decía *por qué* ni dónde)

where *how* (normally translated by "como") is translated by *por qué* ("because"), which certainly gives more clarity to the passage. A similar option is taken in the translation of the following descriptive string:

a long savage tear in the flesh of one hand

con un tremendo rasguñón sobre una mano  
[“with a tremendous tear on one hand”]

where Faulkner's idiosyncratic *a long savage tear* becomes Borges's idiosyncratic *tremendo rasguñón*, *tremendo* carrying the sense of "savage" and the suffix *-ón* carrying the sense of "long", since the normal equivalent for *tear* is "rasguño".

Graphology is also used by Borges to de-dramatize Faulkner's text and make it able to depict a more Borgesian self-restrained narrator, as in the end of the extract:

its infinite capacity for folly and pains which seems to be its only immortality: 'All in the world I want is just to surrender.'

esa infinita capacidad para las tonterías y los dolores que parece su única inmortalidad.

— Todo lo que quiero en el mundo es entregarme.

The : in Faulkner's text makes the relation between the two sentences explicit. Borges, as in his own writings, prefers to lessen the link using a mere colon.

### Virginia Woolf's text:

I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a sister; but do not look for her in Sir Sydney Lee's life of the poet. She died young — alas, she never wrote a word. She lies buried where the omnibuses now stop, opposite the Elephant and Castle. Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here to-night, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within our power to give her. For my belief is that if we live another century or so — I am talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals — and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in



relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves; if we look past Milton's bogey, for no human being should shut out the view; if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her fore-runners, as her brother did before her, she will be born. As for her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. But I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while.

(Woolf 1988: 107-8)

#### Borges's translation:

Les he dicho en el curso de esta conferencia que Shakespeare tenía una hermana; pero no la busquen en la auténtica biografía de Sir Sidney Lee. Murió joven — ay, nunca escribió una línea. Está sepultada donde ahora se paran los ómnibus, frente al Elefante y la Torre. Mi credo es que ese poeta jamás escribió una línea y que yace en la encrucijada, vive todavía. Vive en ustedes y en mí y en muchas otras mujeres que no nos acompañan esta noche porque están lavando los platos y acostando a los chicos. Pero vive, porque los grandes poetas no mueren; son presencias continuas; sólo precisan una oportunidad para andar entre nosotros de carne y hueso. Pienso que en breve, ustedes le podrán ofrecer esa oportunidad. Porque mi credo es que si perduramos un siglo o dos — hablo de la vida común que es la verdadera y no de las pequeñas vidas aisladas que vivimos como individuos — y tenemos quinientas libras al año y un cuarto propio; si nos adiestramos en la libertad y en coraje de escribir exactamente lo que pensamos; si nos escapamos un poco de la común y vemos a los seres humanos no ya en su relación recíproca, sino en su relación a la realidad; si miramos los árboles y el cielo tales como son; si miramos más allá del cuco de Milton, porque no hay ser humano que

deba taparnos la vista; si encaramos el hecho (porque es un hecho) de que no hay brazo en que apoyarnos y de que andamos solas y de que estamos en el mundo de la realidad y no sólo en el mundo de los hombres y las mujeres, entonces la oportunidad surgirá y el poeta muerto que fue la hermana de Shakespeare se pondrá el cuerpo que tantas veces ha depuesto. Derivando su vida de las vidas desconocidas que la precedieron, como su hermano lo hizo antes que ella, habrá de nacer. Esperar que venga sin esa preparación, sin ese esfuerzo nuestro, sin esa resolución de que cuando renazca le será posible vivir y escribir su poesía, es del todo imposible. Pero sostengo que vendrá si trabajamos por ella y que vale la pena trabajar hasta en la oscuridad y en la pobreza.

(Woolf 1980: 110 )

Judging by a detailed analysis of some samples, like the above, this translation presents a curious blend of typical Borgesian textual solutions with others typical of the average translator, eager to be idiomatic and make his or her text sound “natural”. Unlike other translations by Borges, it scrupulously follows the original text, save the latest sentence which is split in two. The overall strategy is very similar to that of the average translator: adaptation to TL’s phraseology and common patterns, linguistic as well as cultural — something that we could hardly expect from the cosmopolite and innovationist Borges. So in the first line of the passage, Woolf, perhaps in a typical English unassuming way calls her text *paper*:

I told you in the course of this *paper* that Shakespeare had a sister

Les he dicho en el curso de esta *conferencia* que Shakespeare tenía una hermana

The translation reads *conferencia* (*lecture*), which is certainly more formal and more according to the prevailing rhetorical habits of most Spanish-speaking countries.

Unlike the typical Borgesian writing in this translation idiomatic expressions appear throughout the passage, as the following examples show:

she never wrote *a word*  
jamás escribió *una línea* (*a line*)

to walk among us *in the flesh*  
andar entre nosotros *en carne y hueso* (*in flesh and bone*)

if we live *another century or so*  
si perduramos *un siglo o dos* (*one century or two*)

At the same time idiosyncratic lexical choices do appear, which are also of a higher register than their ST's counterparts and represent a shift in meaning, like in the following cases:

if we *live* another century or two  
si *perduramos* ["remain"] un siglo o dos

*drawing* her life from the lives  
*derivando* ["deriving"] su vida de las vidas

if we *have the habit* of freedom  
si *nos adiestramos* ["train ourselves"] en la libertad

The above strategy also reveals itself in some textual options at the interpersonal level. So a mark of oral discourse and of intimacy between the author and the reader is removed:

*Now* my belief is that this poet  
Mi credo es que ese poeta

In the same spirit Borges removes the pronoun *our*, which include author and audience, in the following sentence:

This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within *our* power to give her.

Pienso que en breve, *ustedes* le podrán ofrecer esa oportunidad.  
("I think that soon you will be able to offer her this opportunity")

Revealing also is the change in the theme, with *opportunity* being thematic in ST and *oportunidad* being new in TT. The use of *ustedes* (“you”) instead signal that the author is not involved in the process — precisely the contrary that is clearly stated in ST.

### Final remarks

In this brief theoretical analysis accompanied by some translated texts by Borges I hope to have shown that his contribution to the theory and practice of translation lies mainly in his preoccupation with *quality* in text, the translated texts being one stance where this quality can be concretely perceived. A proper reflection on his theoretical writings on the subject, combined with a close examination of his choices in actual practice, can shed a helpful light on translation process and product.



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