

JORGE LUIS BORGES AND TRANSLATION

Translation is the corner stone of Borges' works. It is not only an art that he practiced most of his life, but it is also one of his favorite themes or topics of reflection. Translation is also an essential structural element in many narratives. The present study of Jorge Luis Borges' relationship with translation and its importance in his creation is divided into four stages. The initial stage is the compilation of all the translations done by Borges into Spanish, from the most well-known to the most unnoticed. It also presents the circumstances in which they were done and their motivations. The second stage states Borges' views on translation and translating as they may be deduced from various essays or interviews. The third stage demonstrates that translation acts as a structural element in Borges' writings. The text appears as being either a translation, the translation of a translation, or inspired by a translation. In any situation, what Borges writes is the double of some obscure original text usually left unfound or whose author is unknown. The fourth and last stage concentrates on Borges' self-translation in collaboration with translator Norman Thomas di Giovanni, chronologically his last translation task. The work is well-documented, and extensively described if not so much by Borges himself, by di Giovanni. The experience of Borges translating his own texts is a very particular one that must be looked at as intimately linked to his concept of literary creation.

Borges' background is multi-linguistic and multi-cultural. From an English grandmother and from his father, he acquired English simultaneously with the Spanish language of Buenos Aires which he got from his mother. Later on when the Borges stayed in Europe, he acquired French, German, Latin, and Italian. His ability to speak and read in several languages and his predilection for English constitute a great part of his fame.

Borges did his first translation at a very young age. It was a version in Spanish of "The Happy Prince" by Oscar Wilde that was published in *El País*, and according to *Borges' Autobiographical Essay*, was mistaken for being his father's work. Much later, because of his well-known facility with languages, it was common for him to be asked to do translations of literary works when he was writing for literary revues such as *Sur or Proa*.

The source texts of Borges' translations belong to three literary domains: the French,

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the British, and the North-American. From the French domain, Borges translated André Gide's *Perséphone*, Henri Michaux's *Une Barbare en Asie* and various isolated poems. All of these versions from French were commissioned to Borges by Sur Publishers. Gide's translation was done in 1936 when the play was being shown in Buenos Aires. The translation of *Un Barbare en Asie* in 1941, while Michaux was staying in Argentina during World War II. The poems by Supervielle, Francis Ponge, and Edith Boissonnas were published in several issues of the revue *Sur* between 1940 and 1947. From the British domain Borges translated two integral works by Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*. *A Room of One's Own* was published in several consecutive issues of *Sur* in 1935 and 1936 and later on together in one book titled *Un cuarto propio*. *Orlando* was translated and published by Sur Publishers in 1937. In addition, Borges translated the last two pages of James Joyce's *Ulysses* which were published in 1925 in the Revue *Proa* in Buenos Aires. The North-American domain is the most represented probably because the translations were done at a time when Argentina was developing interest in American authors. Those translations of both prose and poetry were done between 1931 and 1969. William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* was translated in 1940, and published as *Las Palmeras Salvajes* by Sudamericana. Herman Melville's tale "Bartleby the scrivener" from *The Piazza Tales* in 1943 as "Bartleby" and published by Emecé. In 1949, Jackson Editions in Buenos Aires published Emerson and Carlyle's Essays under the title *Hombres representativos*. As for the poetry, several isolated texts by various authors, among others, Langston Hughes, E.L. Masters, Carl Sandburg, and Delmore Schwartz appeared in *Sur* between 1931 and 1944. Also, the version of selected poems by Whitman was done in 1969 and titled *Hojas de Hierba*. It was almost one of Borges' life long dreams because he had already contemplated the project at young age, but only brought it to realization in 1969 while he was in the United States. This work is very likely to be the only translation he was not commissioned to do and which he undertook of his own.

The three domains of the source texts having been specified, it is important to reflect upon Borges' theoretical views of translation and translating. In essays such as "Las versiones homéricas", "Los traductores de las 1001 noches", and several other articles and

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interviews, from the early texts to the dialogues with di Giovanni in the 1970s, Borges expresses clearly that translation's fate is not to be inferior to original creation, nor does it traditionally seem bound to betray the original text, as expressed by the famous Italian proverb. To him the ultimate goal should not be for translation to vainly imitate or fake literary creation, but rather to create a text of its own, thus being synonymous with literary creation. As perfect imitation, perfect reduplication are not a part of this world, an omnipresent concept in Borges' works, why should we look for it in vain in literary creation? Translators and authors should share one and only goal in literary creation. The translator should not limit himself to literality. The original should be set aside, as Borges himself urged di Giovanni to do when they translated his own works. To Borges, a text is only original in that it is only one possible draft, only one stage of literary creation set in time and conventionally accepted as definitive, rather than by a set of ideas or feelings which constitute inspiration. An original text is a pre-text, as a text before a text, and it allows that creation be perpetuated and inspiration concretized again into a new text written with a different linguistic tool.

Borges distinguishes translation of poetry from translation of prose. The method of translating must correspond to the genre of the original text. Although literal translation must be avoided in all cases, it may sometimes work in prose translation but would probably fail when translating poetry. Because of the very nature of poetic language, the amount of freedom and creativity which a translator must allow himself to take when translating poetry must be broader than when translating prose. A limited number of prose or poetry texts may represent a particular challenge for a translator because of the uniqueness of the language in which they were written and not because of linguistic differences between the source and target codes. Such texts contain characteristics which unavoidably get lost in the translation process, because the language of the original is a genuine language in itself Borges defends this idea with the example of Joyce's *Ulysses*. He only translated the last two to three pages of the book because according to him, *Ulysses* could not be entirely translated. When comparing Borges' translation to Salas Subirat's, who translated the entire book into Spanish, one can see what Borges meant by failure of literal translation. Many passages of Salas

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Subirat's work are uncomprehensible, although they literally correspond to Joyce's text, literalness being the rule. Borges' version managed to reflect the creativity and uniqueness of the original because he made Spanish do what Joyce did in English. Borges also stated that a translation may occasionally surpass its source and appear as a better version of the original. The translator would succeed in recapturing original inspiration and in expressing it in a superior fashion. It might also be that the target linguistic code lends itself to greater creativity than the source one. To Borges, the translation of the *Quijote* in English is superior to Cervantes's Spanish original, and he discovered and first loved Whitman's poems in a German version.

Borges' theoretical views on translation are also indirectly expressed in his narratives where translation is often one of the main structural elements. In a great number of his works, translation, translating, or translators play essential roles which may be categorized as follows. In the first category, the narrator is presented as a translator acting as the medium between the reader and an original text, usually lost or unknown, between two literatures and two worlds. What Borges offers to his reader is therefore the translation of another text. The nature of that original varies from one narrative to another. In "El informe de Brodie", and in "Undr", Borges' text is the translation of an original text. In "La secta de los treinta", Borges' text is presented as the translation of another translation. In the second category, the main character of the narration is a translator by choice or by profession, of which "El enigma de Fitzgerald", is a perfect illustration. In the third category translation acts like a triggering factor of literary creation, as it is a source of Borges' narrative. Several of Borges' texts quote or summarize another translated text, as in "La busca de Averroes." It might also have been inspired by it like in "Las magias parciales del Quijote". In all three categories, translation as a structural element contributes to the omnipresent duality and ambiguity omnipresent in Borges. Whether the text written by Borges is a translation, or has been inspired by one, the original text is always mysterious. Although it is given as an original, the text has been copied and recopied several times and the beginning or the end are missing. The protagonist or the narrator found the original text by pure chance. If there is an original, it is anonymous. If it is signed, there is no information on its author. All situations have in

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common the fact that there is a great physical distance between the original text and its translation, which emphasizes and validates the importance of the target text over the source text. The translation is more real, more concrete than its original. To Borges, every creation is a recreation, every text an original. Literature is born from literature. There is not only one author, but a multitude of authors, not only one translator, but a multitude of translators.

The last stage of this research reflects upon the last translations done by Borges, the versions in English of his own works in collaboration with translator di Giovanni. By choice or by necessity being blind most of his life, a great deal of Borges's works were written in collaboration. The self-translation in collaboration is a domain of the greatest interest. Firstly because an author rarely translates his/her own works and even more rarely in collaboration with a translator. Secondly, because if Borges only seldomly commented on the work, di Giovanni described the translation process in several essays and interviews, and is able to document his statements. The collaboration was initiated by di Giovanni when he first met Borges in 1969 during the authors' visit in the United States. They agreed to continue working in Buenos Aires upon Borges' return to his country. The self-translation in collaboration consists of two domains. The project originated after di Giovanni translated Jorge Guillen for an American publication. He discovered Borges and came up with the idea to do a version in English of a selection of poems. Borges was not directly and actively involved in this project. A team of American poets, who either had or did not have knowledge of Spanish worked under di Giovanni's direction. Di Giovanni would come up with a rough English version of the poems and would check it with Borges, requesting specific clarification from him on the meaning of the original. Di Giovanni would then send the draft to his team of poets. The poets wrote the final English versions in light of Borges' explanations provided by di Giovanni. Although he did not participate directly in the writing of the English texts, Borges approved of the method and even more so encouraged it and praised the results which he sometimes declared to be better than his own original creations.

For the translation of the prose, Borges' involvement was much greater, and he intervened at several stages in the process. At first, there was a dialogue between the author and the translator. From there came explanation of the message of the source text and either

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a rough translation or a final version. Borges also contributed to the writing – the dictating rather – of the definitive version, giving either last recommendations for changes or his complete approval. By its very nature, its unique technique, and the quality of the target texts produced in English, this work constitutes an ideal representation of Borges's relation with translation. It is most revealing of Borges as translator, not because of the role he played, which of course was less active than when he translated alone, but for what it expresses of Borges' concept of translating so intimately linked to the one of writing. Borges was incredibly enthusiastic and his creative energy, the stubbornness with which he insisted that di Giovanni and he set themselves free from the original is more significant than any of his theoretical declarations on translation. In this situation, Borges was the author of the source text as well as of the target one. According to di Giovanni, Borges welcomed and encouraged changes, and even insisted to all together eliminate one particular passage, which to him had no reason to be in a version in English. Likewise, he agreed to add elements that were not in the original. Borges and di Giovanni state in the forewords to the book that they aimed to write a translation that read as an original and flowed naturally. Borges showed extreme satisfaction and emotion when the final stage of the translation was read to him. The translating of Borges by Borges is an ultimate form of re-creation and re-writing. One would expect an author to jealously protect his original creations. For Borges, translating his own works was the opportunity to create again and to take the inspiration further from the limit of the original Spanish text. The English language, the superior linguistic code according to Borges, being a different tool allowing a different expression, it should not be forced to imitate the Spanish language of the original. Most of Borges' texts repeat themselves in their themes or structure, and as duality and recreation characterizes his entire work, translation appears as one other Borgean creative mask. The originals are unfinished and may lend themselves to endless rewriting. The translation of Borges by Borges, at the end of his life is probably his ultimate trick: the blind author reading himself, hearing himself read, re-writing through another's hand in the very language in which he had always dreamt to write. This is Borges' magic of literature.

Translation is at the base of Borges' works and of his unique concept of literary

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creation. The following quote contains in a few concise words what could be developed in more than a thousand pages:

"La superstición de la inferioridad de las traducciones - amonedada en el consabido 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."

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