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## RANSLATION AS METAPHOR: THREE VERSIONS OF BORGES BY ALFRED J. MACADAM.

The three translations into English of Borges' "La muerte y la brújula" ("Death and the Compass") provide a unique opportunity to examine the morphology of translation. Of course, dealing with as protean a figure as Borges is a risky business since as artist, essayist, translator, and critic he combines roles he often depicts as antagonistic and contradictory. By dealing with three versions of one tale it is hoped the punishment will fit the crime, but in order to accomplish this it will be necessary to discover what lies at the root of translation itself and to examine how this peculiar art has flourished.

In the *De Ratione Dicendi*, or *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, once attributed to Cicero, metaphor is defined in this way:

Translatio est cum verbum in quandam re transferetur ex alia re, quod propter similitudinem recte videbitur transferri. Ea sumitur rei ante oculos ponendae causa . . . Translationem prudentem dicunt esse oportere, ut cum ratione in consimilem rem transeat, ne sine dilectu temere et cupide videatur in dissimilem transcurrisse.

Metaphor (*translatio*) occurs when a word applying to one thing is transferred to another, because the similarity seems to justify this transference. Metaphor is used for the sake of creating a vivid mental picture . . . They say that a metaphor ought to be restrained, so as to be a transition with good reason to a kindred thing, and not seem an indiscriminate, reckless, and precipitate leap to an unlike thing.'

Metaphor (*translatio*), according to the author of *Ad Herennium*, is a kind of transfer, and it is a happy coincidence that the word he uses for metaphor and the word translation should have the same root, the past participle of the verb *transfero*, *translatum* (to bear across,

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "La muerte y la brújula," *Sur*, No. 92 (May, 1942). Reprinted in *Ficciones* (1935-1944) (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1944), pp. 161-179. All Spanish quotations taken from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> *De Ratione Dicendi* (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*), ed. and tr. Harry Caplan, Loeb Classical Library (Great Britain: William Heinemann, 1968), pp. 342-344.

carry, bring over, transfer), because both metaphor and translation have their source in the same ideas, carrying over from one place, condition, or language to another, or transforming one thing into another.

The mystery shrouding both ideas arises from the absence of a middle term, the bridge that simultaneously conceals and reveals itself. The author of *Ad Herennium* can justify the creation of metaphors only with some uneasiness. He says that "a word applying to one thing is transferred to another, because the similarity seems to justify this transference" (p. 343). But this kind of argument is specious: he may postulate that the similarity between the objects facilitates the shift of terms, but he cannot use this to explain why such transfers are made. He seems to realize that metaphor making depends on the whim of the individual when, at the end of his statement on *translatio*, he mentions restraint: "a metaphor ought to be restrained, so as to be a transition with good reason to a kindred thing, and not seem an indiscriminate, reckless, and precipitate leap to an unlike thing."

Too subjective a connection between terms, too far-fetched a bridging would engender obscurity or hermeticism. Of course, this is precisely what the purpose of metaphor has been in Western culture, at least since the Baroque. The creation of a "vivid mental picture," in the words of the author of *Ad Herennium*, is an end in itself. Metaphors, as the author of a seventeenth-century treatise on metaphor notes, are "like the apples which grow by the Dead Sea; in appearance they are beautiful and bright, but if you bite them, they leave your mouth full of ashes and smoke."<sup>3</sup> In reality, all literature is metaphoric. First, it is a *translatio* (transfer, translation) between traditions, individuals, and languages, and second, it is always an utterance which is simultaneously a camouflage, a saying of something in terms of something else. Literature is metaphor set in a void, a one-sided bridge curling back into itself like a Möbius strip. The critic's task is to examine the properties of what he has and perhaps (but we know this to be an unattainable ideal) to recross the bridge of metaphor into the ground from which it springs.

Granted, the re-translation can only be another construction rather than a true work of analysis, and the result is a new structure composed of the text, the critic-reader, and the literary tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Emanuele Tesauro, *Il cannocchiale aristotelico* (Bologna: Gioseffo Longhi, 1675), p. 325.

Other critical bridges are possible, ones built on the life and personality of the author, but these too are subject to many pitfalls. In fact, there is no possibility of wholeness, totality, or perfection in any phase of the text's life: it is born as *atranslatio* (metaphor/translation) and it exists as just that. It exists when it is perceived; it is only and always the version created by the reader's act of translation.

We may wonder whether translation, taken simply as the putting into other languages of words that occur in a first language, is simply another step in this endless coupling of metaphor to metaphor. Borges would seem to think so, especially if we consider his 1932 essay, "Las versiones homericas" ("The Homeric Versions"). This essay deals with translations of Homer, primarily into English — and Borges preversely translates those translations into Spanish — and states:

Bertrand Russell defines an object in the world as a circular system shining forth myriad impressions; the same can be said of a text, given the incalculable repercussions of anything verbal.

A partial and precious document of a text's vicissitudes may be seen in its translations. What are the many translations of the Iliad, from Chapman to Magnien but different perspectives on an object in motion, a long, experimental game of omissions and emphases? (There is not even any need to compare French and English translations; the same contradictions appear within the same language.) To presuppose that any recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original is to presuppose that rough draft 9 is necessarily inferior to rough draft H. Of course there can be nothing but rough drafts. The concept of the "definitive text" belongs only to religion or fatigue.<sup>4</sup>

This passage, not rendered less paradoxical by translation, may tell more than we care to know about such matters as originality, the artist as unique personality, and Borges himself. Borges ridicules the idea of originality: what makes a translation seem less original than what it stands for (or than other works of art) is the palpable presence of that model. The model however is itself a copy, since it inevitably existed in stages, the "rough drafts." Where the first draft came from is indeed mysterious, although Borges, in the sentences preceding the quotation above, suggests that the act of composition

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Las versiones homericas," *Discusión* (Buenos Aires: Emece, 1966).

is another act of translation or metaphor-making, that is, an assembling of a different whole out of extant pieces. When Levi-Strauss describes the myth maker as a *bricoleur*,<sup>5</sup> he might be describing Borges' writer, who composes his texts out of the body of literature itself. The Renaissance shared Borges' opinion, which would seem to be a source of esthetic horror for the Romantics, if we take Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a depiction of the Romantic artist.

The artist, then, despite his personal hopes, is in the last analysis striving toward anonymity. All he can ever achieve is a recombination of materials which takes on a life of its own, one which, as Borges says in "Borges y yo" ("Borges and I"),<sup>6</sup> becomes a part of language itself. The artist is mortal; the text cannot die. It sprang from the corpus of literature and to it it returns, eternally divorced from its creator, labeled or not with his name. There is a despair here which appears in most of Borges' texts, the despair of the artist who creates knowing his work will be turned against him, interpreted in ways he cannot imagine. What he has done in creating will be done by readers. A careful examination of much of Borges' early poetry reveals a curious deformation of the elegiac tradition, one in which the poet sings of his own death, immortalizing himself at the same time. The work of art is a self-portrait, deformed like Parmigianino's "Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror," recognizable, if only to the artist himself.

Inferiority, superiority, originality, copying, the "definitive text": these are all concepts invented by readers or critics, but they have little to do either with the creation or the interpretation of a text. Borges pulls the rug out from under any esthetic evaluation which does not deal with the text itself. The word evaluation itself he devalues. This is perhaps why he seems at his most bizarre when he talks about his favorite authors—Kipling, Stevenson, Chesterton, de Quincey—he is showing us that our notions of hierarchies in literature are social and not literary, questions of taste imposed on literature, a field, it would seem, unrelated to the idea of taste.

To exemplify the infinite possibilities of any text, it seems appropriate to compare the results of three contemporary versions of "La muerte y la brujula," the translations by Donald Yates, Anthony

<sup>5</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Borges y yo," *El hacedor* (Buenos Aires: Emece, 1960), pp. 50-51.

Kerrigan, and the combined efforts of Norman Thomas di Giovanni and Borges himself.<sup>7</sup> Of the many problems which plague Borges' translators (criticism and reading being understood to be acts of translation), none is as perplexing as the first sentence of "Death and the Compass." It combines parody and clue-dropping (in many senses), a style that seeks to exhaust its own possibilities,<sup>8</sup> and hints about the significance of the tale:

De los muchos problemas que ejercitaron la temeraria perspicacia de Lonrot, ninguno tan extrabo — tan rigurosamente extrabo, diremos — como la periodica serie de hechos de sangre que culminaron en la quinta de Triste-le-Roy, entre el interminable olor de los eucaliptos.

(p. 161)

How are we to understand the grandiloquence and banality of such a sentence? It seems to be a parody of every opening sentence from every detective story, although it smacks heavily of Edgar Allan Poe's Auguste Dupin stories. Borges' narrator adopts the pose of the familiar story teller: he assumes we know who Lonrot is, either because we have already heard of him or because his "temeraria perspicacia" constitutes an epithet which marks him as the detective in this tale. Of course, there is nothing in the title that would denote its being a detective story; the title is in fact meaningless until the story is read.

All of the translators agree that "Death and the Compass" accurately renders "La muerte y la brujula." And on one level of meaning they are certainly right: how else could one translate the Spanish words? But there may be more to the title than meets the eye. A reading of the story demonstrates the importance of the relationship between the numbers three and four: three points on a map which form an equilateral triangle, which becomes a rhombus or equilat-

<sup>7</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, edited by Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1962).

*Labyrinths*, edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York, New Directions: 1962).

*The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969*, edited by Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York, E. P. Dutton: 1970).

<sup>8</sup>See "Prólogo a la edición de 1954," *Historia universal de la infancia* (Buenos Aires, Emecé: 1967), p. 7. "Yo diría que barroco es aquel estilo que deliberadamente agota (o quiere agotar) sus posibilidades y que linda con su propia caricatura. "I would call baroque that style which deliberately exhausts (or seeks to exhaust) its possibilities and that borders on its own caricature." (my translation)

eral parallelogram by the simple addition of a fourth point. Is this suggested in the title by the trisyllabic "la muerte" juxtaposed with the quadrisyllabic "la brujula," both connected by an inert conjunction "y"? It may well be, but the combination of three and four could only have been retained in English by abandoning the translation of the meaning of the Spanish words. None of the translators bothered with this matter, and we may all agree that it is insignificant, but a possibility is present in the original which is absent in the translations.

The most obvious problem in the translation or interpretation of the story's first sentence is its modifiers: "temeraria perspicacia," "rigurosamente extrario," "periodica serie," and "interminable olor." Kerrigan renders the first "daring perspicacity," Donald Yates has it as "reckless discernment," and Borges-di Giovanni read it as "rash mind." No one used the cognate "temerarious," perhaps because it is a clumsy word, although the expression "temeraria perspicacia" is not any less tongue twisting than "temerarious perspicacity." While all the translations are equally accurate, each in its way raises some questions: "daring" seems too weak for temerity; "discernment" may be as good as "perspicacity," but the latter seems better; and "rash mind" makes Lonnot sound more like an impulsive adolescent than a man guilty of pride. None, again, is incorrect, and the examples simply point out the utter hopelessness of the situation.

This fear is confirmed by the translations of the other modifiers. "Rigurosamente extraño" becomes in Yates "rigorously strange," in Kerrigan "harshly strange," and in "Borges-di Giovanni, "methodically strange." The adjective is impossible to render in one word, but the modified adjective is even more difficult. All of the translators use the word "strange," but "extraño" may mean other things, such as "foreign," or "alien," or "bizarre." The combination of rigor and bizarreness yields an oxymoron which is rather pleasing, but this is simply another translation, and it says nothing about those already extant.

"Periodica serie" presents even greater problems. It was rendered variously as "periodic series," "staggered series," and "intermittent series." Something important may be at stake here if we read the sentence in the context of the entire tale. The specific incident of Lonnot *versus* Scharlack dissolves at the end of the story as both men acquire great archetypal significance. They become incarnations, metaphors indeed, of the hunter and the hunted, two sides of the

same coin, identities which are interchangeable. Does "periodica serie" refer to the recurrent cycle of hunts which occurs throughout time as well as the particular case recounted in the story? "Periodic" and "intermittent" certainly do carry the connotation of recurrence, but "staggered" does not sound right.

An interpolation might be made here about what follows "periodica serie." It is a "periodica serie de hechos de sangre que culminaron en la quinta de Trise-le-Roy." It is not the "periodica serie" that reaches its culmination but the "hechos de sangre" which reach their culmination. In English it is all too easy to create a sentence in which it is not clear whether the series or the events culminate, and this is what all of the translators have done: "the periodic series of bloody events which culminated," "the staggered series of bloody acts which culminated," "the intermittent series of murders which came to a culmination." The only way out of this ambiguity is the use of possessives, but this requires some syntactical alterations. It is curious that "hechos de sangre" should be rendered as "bloody events" or "bloody acts" instead of "murders" as it is in the third case. The literal versions make the sentence sound archaic, almost Elizabethan, although, again, no version is absolutely incorrect.

The final combination of adjective and noun in the first sentence, "interminable olor," is the most perplexing. The three translations are these: "ceaseless aroma," "boundless odor," and "incessant odor." The problem of meaning here is acute. Emphasis is placed on the adjective "interminable": it might suggest (doubtful) tedium, but it would seem to be expressing the unending or timeless quality of the smell. It is an aroma which abides in the eucalyptus grove, an aroma which exists without the presence of the perceiver, something which escapes the existence-through-perception reality of the text itself. It is another hint about the archetypes which existed before the tale was written and will continue to live after it: the perceiver may perish, this perception will never die. This clue about the metaphoric significance of the entire story is brought to fulfillment toward the end of the narrative, when Lonnot is described advancing "among the eucalyptus trees, treading on confused generations of broken, rigid leaves" (pp. 172-173, my translation) as he comes to his doom.

These examples demonstrate both the impossibility and the inevitability of translation. In the same way that any work of art exists as a

metaphor, the hint of something absent, the translation stands as a reflection of a very dim shadow. How else can we explain why there suddenly appear in the translations bizarre twists having nothing to do with whatever it was the original seemed to be saying: how can the Spanish word "cosmorama" be a "peepshow," a "wax museum," and something called a "cosmorama" in English? How can the "Yidische Zaitung" in Borges' text be the "Jiidische Zaitung" in the Borges-di Giovanni text? How can the absurd "Congreso Eremitico" ("Congress of Hermits") of the original be the esoteric "Hermetical Congress" of one translation? Why should the "vendedores de biblias" in the Spanish text undergo a sexual transformation in another translation to become the "women selling Bibles"?

Everything in literature is transformation, and no sea-change is impossible, even when the man who brought the so-called original into the world assists at the rebirth of his text in a different language. We do not read the same text twice: why should we be allowed to create it twice? Translation, *translatio*, metaphor, transformation, all words used as images of the act of reading, which is itself an image of the act of writing, which is itself an image of the act of translating.

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