

Ilse Logie

Review

Efraín Kristal. *Invisible work: Borges and translation*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002. xxiv + 213 p.

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The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (Buenos Aires, 1899–Geneva, 1986) is universally acknowledged as a central figure in twentieth-century literature, but his work as a translator is only just beginning to receive the attention it deserves. With his study *Invisible work: Borges and translation*, Efraín Kristal (professor of Spanish and comparative literature at UCLA) highlights what is still considered a minor aspect of Borges’s oeuvre. The title, *Invisible work*, refers to Borges’s famous tale “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”, and reveals Kristal’s main purpose: he wants to ‘make visible’, to offer an account of the role translation plays in Borges’s writings. Not only was Borges himself a translator (he introduced fantastic and detective fiction into the Spanish-American canon), also some of his most important characters are translators, many of his fictional works are actual or imagined translations and finally, translation is a recurrent motif in his stories.

However, Kristal does not stop there. He underscores the pivotal role translations play in the gestation of Borges’s creative world per se. Indeed, there appears to be a correlation between Borges’s methods as a translator and the conception and execution of his fictions. For Borges was convinced that, for those who have come so late to literature, the themes and stories that are at hand have already been exhausted. There is a sense, therefore, in which translation is an element of any literary work of the recent past. On the other hand, all

writing is a form of rewriting and writers are essentially recreators, but Kristal demonstrates that, as far as Borges is concerned, translation is much more than a loose metaphor for influence and intertextuality: the idea of translation as “a process whereby a writer remodels one sequence of words into another” is, on the contrary, “central to Borges’s reflections on writing and to his contributing to literature” (p. xiii).

Kristal’s book consists of three parts. Chapter one offers an account of Borges’s ideas about translation. In chapter two, Kristal analyses a number of Borges’s translations and his methods as a translator. In the third chapter, he explores the role of translation in some of Borges’s most important works of narrative fiction.

In the first chapter, Kristal argues that Borges developed an engaging view about translation, although he never, not even in his most famous texts (“Los traductores de las mil y una noches”, “Las versiones homéricas”...), wrote a fully elaborated treatise on the subject. He was rather inclined toward the scrutiny of particular cases, all of which were approached with skepticism and irony. Borges’s views on translation had taken shape by the 1930s, once he had abandoned the romantic, strictly autobiographical ideas of his youth, and remained fairly constant in the subsequent decades. He attached an increasing importance to the collective factors of the literary experience, to the work as an interpersonal enterprise (rather than the expression of a genius).

It is also in this context that Borges developed a way of writing fiction informed by his own approach to translation: a way of writing that wilfully adopts, transforms and adapts the work of others. This also explains his protest against the assumption that a translator is a traitor to an original and against views that proclaim the superiority of that original. He maintains that an original and its translations are just variations on a theme. Borges argued that with the passage of time, the meanings of words survive while it becomes increasingly difficult to determine the connotations and associations of written languages. He defines translation as “a long experimental game of chance played with omissions and emphasis” (p. 18). This constantly shifting context also justifies repeated translations of the same work, translations that can be equally valid. If Borges believes some works are more translatable than others, he also claims no work of literature is untranslatable, because a translator can always take the necessary liberties to achieve a convincing transformation. Borges even holds that a translation can improve an original, and that an original can be unfaithful to its translation when it fails to fulfil its own potentialities. That is why he sometimes rewrote his own translation of the same work,

just as he recreated his own work when he collaborated with his translator into English, di Giovanni.

Kristal demonstrates that some prevailing opinions on Borges need correction, and that his essays on translation offer, first and foremost, a very personal synthesis of his own views, rather than an accurate reproduction of the views of the other authors he claims to present.

In the second chapter of his detailed study, Kristal describes Borges's strategies as a (very productive) translator. This analysis shows that Borges's main goal as a translator was to create a convincing work of literature, and that he judged the dichotomy 'faithfulness/unfaithfulness' of secondary importance. This also explains his tendency to compress, to cut sectors and omit details he considered superfluous. Borges's method also involved moving elements to the background so that other elements, more compatible with his insights into literature, become the focus of the story. In nearly all his translations, he therefore left his distinctive mark adding nuances and transfiguring the writer he translated (Poe, for instance). In fact, Borges exploited possibilities that the original writer did not or, perhaps, could not have envisaged, but he also inserted fragments of literal translations into his own works and assembled new works of fiction based on his translations. This explains why Borges's translation process "has been seminal in his work as creative writer" (p. 87).

The bulk of Kristal's third chapter ("Translation in the creative process") treats some of Borges's best-known tales in order to exemplify the different ways in which he integrated translation. Kristal's scrupulous reading of these stories makes clear that many of them include at least one character who translates, that the stories are often presented as implied translations and that many translated fragments are inserted into them. Kristal also likes to think of Borges the creative writer as translator at work with respect to works he did not translate. By doing so, he expands the fields of translation studies and comparative literature and draws some interesting conclusions about the centrality of translation in Borges's poetics. It goes without saying that Borges's approach to translation is the product of a powerful literary mind able to "rewrite the works of other writers in the process of fashioning a personal literary world" (p. 136).

After reading *Invisible work*, we realize to what extent translation informed Borges's general approach to literature and art. Kristal's conclusions are followed by an afterword intended to demonstrate that Borges's philosophical concerns are a function of his literary ones. The book also contains a substantial bibliography and a useful index.