

Jorge Luis Borges and the Debate of Translation

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Most translations with which we are familiar have been performed within the Indo-European family of languages and the culture of this linguistic domain is homogeneous. Most linguists have arrived at the conclusion that translation from a language into another is possible at least in the field of universals.

As a matter of fact, many linguists for whom the translation of the whole message within the text is impossible distinguish a vast corpus of vocabulary in all European languages which expresses the identity of culture. The description of this identity of languages has been done by Whorf under the name of Standard Average European. It seems obvious that translation ought to be considered not as confrontation of linguistic systems but as a contact and mutual interpenetration, bilingualism being the best way for these contacts.

Jorge Luis Borges is perhaps the writer who represents the best of this model. As you know, he lived in Switzerland, Italy and in Spain. He used to feel at home in several languages but English and Spanish were simultaneously learnt, however he affirms that he IS condemned to write in Spanish. He penetrated different cultures. He delighted in spreading the sense of the foreign, of the mysteriously mixed. What is central in him is the idea of the writer as a guest, as a human being whose task is to be sensitive to many strange currents, as a person who has to keep the doors of his temporal rooms open, to let all the winds enter. Although he considers the Spanish language his fate, he used English words both in his writings and his talk. He used them for precision, when Spanish fails to fulfill his aspirations to exactness. He sometimes translated English words into Spanish literally.

For him, translation is not impossible. On the contrary, it seems to serve the purpose of illustrating discussion on aesthetics. For him, a work of art has as many possible translations as it has possible readings. Reading in itself is a translation within the same language. He does not consider literature as a fixed monument, but as a text. And a text is a circular system which irradiates possible impressions, given the unlimited repercussions of the oral. A text has many possible approaches, that is to say, many possible translations.

In an essay on the translations of *The Arabian Nights* he quotes an impressive list of examples which shows how one translator after the other pitilessly cut, added, deformed and falsified the original to make it conform to his own and his reader's artistic and moral norms. The list which in fact turns into a complete catalogue of men's sins, culminates in the incorruptible Enno Littmann, whose edition in 1923-28, is in Borges' words *scrupulously exact* and he qualifies it as *lucid, readable and...mean*. No need to say that Littmann's translation is considered as the best by the Encyclopedia Britannica, but Borges' opinion is that it is inferior to the others because it lacks the richness of literary association

which allows the other so-called "bad" translations to give the language, depth, suggestivity, ambiguity: that is to say, style.¹

The problem comes because the link between language and translation is more or less clear, but that existing between the history of literature and translation is far more subtle. I find it useful to say a word about the translation of *The Arabian Nights* into English, the ones that came after the important, incomplete and unfaithful 1704 translation by Galland, who claimed to have found a Persian MS, which nobody had seen. At first it was considered a literary device. He published his translation in Caen, Normandy, and presented it in Paris. The problem was that it was thought to be a work of fiction, the product of his imagination, and the Found MS a narrative formula. In fact, it was civilized, cut, and adapted to the 18th c. manners. Addison, the editor of *The Spectator* wrote about it in his newspaper in 1712. In 1713 there was an anonymous translation into English *Arabian Nights. Entertainments translated from the French* which was later adapted by Foster and Bussey.

It was only by the end of the 19th c. that there were new editions in Arabic in Beirut, Cairo, etc. In the European libraries there exist 13 Arab MSS differing among themselves. It was now what the British, the French and the Germans set themselves the task of fixing the canon of the text which as far as I know has proved to be a useless and impossible effort for *The Arabian Nights* are books so mysterious that authorship and origin are blurred. They seem to be composed by humankind. Their origin and creative process still remain unknown.

Previous to 1881 there were two other versions in English: Torrens published an Irish version called *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* in 1828; Lane, 1839 produced a new version, which passed unnoticed. In 1881 John Payne, published a fine translation based on the original texts, or on one of the original texts. It has four times more material than Galland's and three more times than any of the others. It was intended for private circulation, 500 copies were issued by the Villon Society. It was a product for an elite. By then Richard Burton, the explorer that preceded Livingstone to the springs of the Nile was working on his own translation. He praised Payne's and complained of Galland's as incomplete. The same as Payne he claimed to have translated the complete original. His is more important than the exclusive version of Payne, because it became popular. He added an enormous amount of erudite material in the form of notes. He traveled in Africa, the Middle East and had a profound knowledge of the Eastern Languages and literature. He was also familiar with their oral literature.

The interpretation of this translation on the part of the public was of interest to our purpose: some only saw the sensual side of it; many thought it was scandalous, most did not appreciate it at all. Madame Blavatsky, the *famous clairvoyante of The Waste Land*, believed it to be an esoteric book which is part of the great tradition of the immemorial Gnosis, whose secret is kept by the Buddhist Lama in the Tibet. As a rule, each version criticizes the previous ones, and in spite of believing, pretentiously, that they are definitive, they are only provisional, waiting for new discoveries.

It is now when we can understand Borges' reasons about these translations. He says that the previous and so-called bad translations of *The Arabian Nights* are only conceivable in the context of a literary tradition. And this is the case with Galland's. Whatever their merits or demerits, these characteristic works presuppose a rich previous process. He says *the almost inexhaustible English process is present in Richard Burton's translation: John Donne's hard obscenity, Shakespeare's huge vocabulary, the rich erudition of the 17th c. prose writers, the energy and ambiguity, love for storms and magic. In Littmann, he added, who is unable to tell a lie, only German honesty is present, and this is little, very little: the interaction of The Nights and Germany should have produced something else.*²

From the theoretical point of view this statement is important, for it implies the idea of the text as an interference of writings. So five or ten versions of the same text can clarify what the ideal text is, that is to say, Novalis's mythical text.

Borges was formulating these ideas about 1932. Roland Barthes's important and influential essays came some thirty years later, and these theories have been the core of the French magazine dedicated to translation, first issued in the sixties, whose name *Change* speaks well of its direction. It defines translation as a transformational activity, as an exploration of the writings of universal literature. Jean Rabel, one of the men of *Change* has written *transformational and translation tasks have the aim of squeezing the multiplicity of texts within the text, for every literary text contains an almost unlimited number of other texts.* This is almost the literal translation of what Borges had said forty years before the text as an interference of writings.

A partial and precious record of the changes it bears remains in its translation, many of these changes are nothing else but different perspectives of a movable tact. A long experimental play of attention *is not impossible within a literary tradition*: reader, actor, editor, are translators of language. The schematic model of translation is one in which the message from a source language passes into a receptor language via a transformational process.

We tend to imagine beforehand that any recombination of elements is always inferior to the original. In Borges' opinion this would be to suppose that draft A is inferior to draft B as only drafts can exist. *The conception of a definitive text is proper only to religion or to weariness.* Borges has had a special fondness for parallelisms and enumerations of endless lists of the various definitions of a subject through history. This fondness is the answer to a deeper theory whose consequences are most interesting: it is an attempt to develop the idea of all works being the work of a single author who is a temporal and anonymous (the central idea may be, as John Barth has suggested) how unnecessary it is to write an original work of art in literature. The idea is in any case not new, it has been proposed quite often before by Shelley, Emerson, Valery...; and it is because to Borges, as to Valery, the author of a work of art does not exercise any privilege over it. *The work of art belongs to the public domain, and only exists in terms of its innumerable reactions with other works in the open space of reading.* This idea is also present in Bergson's *L'Évolution Créatrice*;

Mallarmé said that the world exists in order to arrive at a book. T.S. Eliot, in a way or other popularized it through *Tradition and The Individual Talent* in 1917.

Borges' myth sums up the Modern *nothing has been written yet* and the classic "Everything has already been written". Babel library exists a "Ab aeterno", and it contains everything that could be expressed in all languages. Before being a reader, a librarian, a copyist-author, a man is a page of writing. At bottom literature is in fact that plastic space that bent space in which the most unexpected relations and the most paradoxical meetings are possible at every moment. This is one of the characteristics of Modernity: the timeless present. It implies that any literature of the past can always act on the literature of any present. There are endless numbers of inexhaustible relations. Borges starts one of his poems in English with the following lines:

*No man can write a book. Before
A book can truly be
It needs the rise and set of the sun,
Centuries, arms, and the binding and sundering sea.*

("Ariosto and the Arabs").

To arrive at this conclusion our starting point is that language considered as an instrument of knowledge is not a translation, it is only a paraphrase: from the reflection of a reality an independent reality results: meaning and signifier leave the parallel formation to open in an angle without a possible point of intersection. So formulated the possibility of man in his relation to the world, Borges' skepticism far from being empty or exoteric is defined as most reasonable. Borges wrote, *A philosophical doctrine is at the beginning an acceptable description of the Universe, but as time passes it becomes a mere chapter in the history of philosophy.*³

We accept that knowledge means neither to see nor to demonstrate but to interpret. To know only consists in referring language to language. Mario Wandruzka has used translation to demonstrate the limits of the strictly structuralist methodology (*Sprachen-Vergleichbar und Unvergleich*). His works and conclusions are well known, but let us revisit some of the ideas that are relevant to our paper. He applies the principle of comparison of several translations to discover the different ways of syntax and vocabulary in six Germanic and Latin languages. Through the comparison of the versions of more than fifty literary translations he arrives at this conclusion: each language has a number of special registers to express the reality of the world. He repeats that this variety of registers, in spite of all he insists that it does not imply a difference in the vision of the world as Humboldt thought, but a difference in the instrumental character of each language. So what is the basic difficulty which prevents translation from a language into another? Wandruzka says that human languages are singular and unique, all at the same time. So translation is possible but not the translation of the whole message in the text. His school has offered a complete list of relations and connections between the languages.

The truth is that translation has been a normal activity throughout man's history. There have been two main currents in translation: literal and free translation. Borges' position about them is as follows: *To translate the spirit is so enormous an intention that it could remain innocuous, translating literally so extravagant a precision that it will be risky to practice*⁴ but it is difficult to renounce one of them. Besides it does clear Borges' ideas but it does not help very much. Obviously, translators need a guide. A quick review of the different positions on translation through history will illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of these two main currents

At the beginning translation was an act of violence, a rape. But out of this rape European civilization was born. From the translation of the Bible to the transmission in popular languages during the Middle Ages of the literature of Arthur, born in Brittany and widely known in all countries. The more popular languages grew in Europe, the more translation was the vehicle of modern European cultures. The unity of European cultures presupposes the existence of a traffic of ideas and concepts. In the end all the big stylistic movements are essentially exercises in translation.

Till the 19th c. there was a model of translation which has been called "The unfaithful beauty", then came the fashion of the "supertranslation". The famous Arnold-Newman controversy (1862-64) which as a matter of course Borges considers more important than the protagonists themselves, serves to illustrate these two basic ways of translating a text. Newman defended literality; Arnold the severe elimination of details which distract from, or interrupt the essentials of the text.

Walter Benjamin said that translatability is essential to the work of art itself. His theory is most interesting for our purpose: he says that translators need to amplify and deepen into their own language by means of other language. The translator's creative task is to break the narrow limits of his own language assimilating the foreign one. It is in this way that medieval and Renaissance translation have enlarged the limits of German or English embodying some qualities from Greek, French, Italian or Spanish. This is why translation cannot be limited to working out the meaning of the original, and the best way, in Benjamin's opinion is doubtless to stay as close as possible to the original: that is to say, the most literal.

Ortega y Gasset, in *Esplendor y miseria de la traducción* (1940) arrived at the conclusion that the best way of translating a text is literality. Nabokov stands for literality and plenty of notes at the bottom of the page explaining the terms. These should be as many and long as necessary. His annotated translation of Pushkin's works is an example. Benjamin, as Goethe, before, Ortega and Nabokov later are defending the theory of translation of German idealism which is the starting point.

The Russian formalists considered that translation ought to capture the work to translate its historical relations. And other schools emphasized the multiplicity of possible translations. The text admits, even demands several translations. Translation is a means to actualize a text. So translation is not a mere linguistic tact. The cooperation of linguists and critics

seems to have found a good path in the recognition of the following: an ideal and abstract concept of translation cannot be possible.

Now what happens to the social context to which the translation is directed, that is to say, the reader, or the audience of the text. It is a well known fact that publishers demand a certain length suitable to their commercial purposes. There is the point of view of certain critics who stand on communication first. In fact a literal translation cannot approach the text; the translation is full of connotations which do not belong to the original. Even the most faithful translation would be addressed to a completely different audience from that of the original and would delight the readers for very different reasons. The setting of some of Borges' tales turns into a fantastic tale for the let us say, the German or Scandinavian reader. This is not talking about impossible things. Borges, Vargas Llosa, García Márquez, Onnetti, all have been translated. So we must accept that *author, translator, publisher, reader, original, plus translation always go together*. This is valid for fiction and prose in general.

Borges' theory as it is conveyed in his essays can be summed up as follows:

- A.- Translating is not passing the content of a language into another language, from one code into the other, it is the restructuring of a text through its principles of writing. That is to say the reconstruction of its richness of relation and connection.
- B.- The rewritten text should have the same creative values, it should have the same violence which the new exercises against the *cid* and false formulae that do not correspond to our actual experience.

This is what in fact Barthes and the structuralists had promoted. And it has these consequences, with which we are familiar:

- 1.- To know a text it is necessary to read its translations. A text is plural and it admits many readings. It can be offered in this formula:

Original text + its translations = literary space

- 2.- The deviation in translation always depends on the aesthetics of the period. It follows that translations are necessary to actualize texts that translations have never a finite number, each period has its own version and vision of a work of art, so translation is a historical phenomenon. It is also a limit to fidelity.
- 3.- The idea of the universality of a work of art has mean immobility. It should mean the different uses without losing its particular character.

What has happened to Borges' work translated? A few examples will do to see the changes through the translator and the publishers' work. He has been translated into German by the exiled writer Werner Block, but it has been Karl August Horst, a Curtius'

disciple who introduced him to the German reader. But I am afraid that the data they gave were not very exact. They considered him a disciple of Gongora and Gracian. The truth is that Borges despised them both as pretentious and unnecessarily baroque. On translating his work the titles have been consciously changed, *Historia Universal de la infamia* has been presented under the title of *Der Schwartze Spiegel (The Black Mirror)*. His poems and *El Hacedor* have been presented under the title of *Borges und Ich*, which is the final story in the book.

In The United States, *El hacedor* is known as *Dreamtigers*⁵ which is the second story in the book. It has also been divided into two parts, the first translated by Mildred Boyer and the second by Harold Morland in one of the editions. This second part consists of his early and late poems. Morland's translation generally adopts the tour stressed rhythm and rhymed lines. Stanzas, when they occur are very close to the original. If we come to details we find that the meaning has unconsciously changed: the adjectives which in Borges mean an enormous and inhuman conception of the world has been lost. The Anglo-Americans have translated the expression of irreality in his work. The book presented under the title *Labyrinths* is a methodic organization of Borges' categories.⁶

Translating is in any case a need and a fact and a terribly difficult task. St. Jerome was continuously anguished while translating God's word, probably it helped him in his way towards sanctity. Cansinos Assens, whose version of *The Arabian Nights*, was admired by Borges says, *la quimera de las traducciones fieles, literales a integrales, y que resulta tan vana y engañosa como la búsqueda del oro filosofal*.⁷

Notas:

1 "Los Traductores de las Mil y una Noches", *Obras Completas*, Buenos Aires: Ultramar, 1974; p. 397. My translation.

2 Borges, 1974, p. 398. My translation.

3 *Historia de la eternidad*, Borges, 1974, p. 384.

4 Borges, 1974, p. 398.

5 University of Texas Press, U.S.A., 1964.

6 *Labyrinths*, New Directions, 1962.

7 Preface to *El libro de las Mil y una Noches*, Madrid: Aguilar, 1969.

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