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A. Garzatagli

Jorge Luis Borges and the Creation of a Literature

Between 1921 and 1928 Jorge Luis Borges wrote a series of articles [collected in Inquisiciones (1925), El tamaño de mi esperanza (1926), El idioma de los argentinos (1928)] in which he talks about a future literature. According to that first scrutiny, the letters of the past (Argentine literature was over a hundred years old) were plagued by voids and vices of one kind or another: they had been cloyingly Gallicised, they had succumbed in recent years to a sort of Hispanicism, they lacked a voice of their own, their phantoms and fantasies. His programme therefore posed two old questions once again: the language and cultural tradition of the Argentines; questions which the intellectuals of La Plata had asked as they gazed at the flat, deserted, ignorant Pampa they had acquired after independence (1810-1816).

No doubt those men, Romantics and readers of Herder, thought of a break with Spain that would be cultural as well as political. They were concerned about the language (should the now independent Argentines continue to speak Spanish?) and the association with a school of thought (that of the former metropolis) which they judged to be mean, vacuous and intolerant. And so Mariano Moreno, Juan María Gutiérrez, Esteban Echeverría, Juan Bautista Alberdi and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento were formed by reading (or speaking) French and English, travelling around Europe (excluding Spain) or the United States and translating, an activity that they promoted or practised themselves. Thus they founded a literary system, not devoid of certain felicities —such as gaucho literature—, but based primarily on political or autobiographical writings. A precarious situation which lacked essential elements for producing and reproducing a culture: professional writers (almost all of them were men of different trades: politicians, governors, diplomats); publishing houses with continuity; specialised newspapers and, most of all, readers of Argentine literature

(learned people read hardly anything in Spanish; the general public, an unfortunate legacy of colonial negligence, was practically illiterate).

Borges' literary activity coincided with the transformation of that situation. The Common Education Law (1884) guaranteed the literacy of the native population and the teaching of Spanish to the foreigners who were beginning to arrive in Argentina in their millions; young publishers (mostly first generation Jewish immigrants) gave their backing to what was written in the country; journals and the literary supplements of the newspapers proliferated; the official institutions finally created the academic settings for the dissemination of Argentine literature (a chair of Argentine literature at the University of Buenos Aires, 1913; the Argentine Literary Institute, 1922) or the promotion of its development (generously endowed literary prizes).

However, in spite of the vertiginous nature of those changes (the whole process took place in the first few years of the century), none of those measures and actions could guarantee the existence of a great literature. And that was the aspiration of the young Borges and the subject he debated with his contemporaries, writers who, like him, were interested in the avant-gardes and wanted to be part of the modern world. In his opinion, the quality and originality of a literature were achieved by meticulous work with the language and a light-hearted reading of the traditions.

The language of the Argentines, according to Borges, was Spanish. Contrary to the opinions of the critics who analyse his work, this bilingual writer (part of his family was English) did not use a kind of mixed language, but advocated a policy of "enriching" his own. To do that he proposed a combination of verbal procedures (some of which he always used) based on translating, not other languages, but the **felicities** and ways of representing reality of other languages. He also stressed the oral nature of language ("the conversational prose of adults"), far from the tones of **the farce¹ or the gutter**, but related to the art of spoken language and oral narration which is

so widely practised in the country. And together with all that he recalled (as we can appreciate in the texts devoted to the writers of the Spanish Golden Age) that "language of marble", ie, Latin, which Quevedo, Cervantes, Torres Villaroel or the anonymous author of Epístola moral a Fabio, could translate into the Spanish of their time.

Concerning the other problem (what should the tradition of Argentine writers be?) his answer was far broader. It was systematized in an article entitled "Los escritores argentinos y la tradición" (1953), but it spread all through his work including, naturally, the articles dealing exclusively with translation.

His first axiom was that Argentines could pick their way through the cultures of East and West unburdened by superstitions. Located on the southernmost periphery, there was nothing to prevent them from reading the infinite library of the universe in a spirit of irreverence. And so Borges' gaze wandered over the delights of the world, exalting the creators and creations of genius: Virgil, The 1001 Nights, Dante, Shakespeare and Cervantes; but also—and this is the most remarkable thing—the works and authors who, like him, were outside the "official" encyclopedia of literature: the heresiarchs, Jewish mysticism, the Mediaeval Chinese storytellers, the Persian poets.

But, in the style of the first German Romantics, Borges' library also implies a bildung, that is, a culture and a method for constructing it. Hence the second of his axioms about tradition is linked to the reader. In "La supersticiosa ética del lector" (1928), in "Las versiones homéricas" (1932) or "Los traductores de las 1001 noches" (1935) Borges invented an individual capable of making infinite texts from one text. The hypothesis, converted into fiction in "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" (1939), annihilated the ancient tyranny of authorship (the author is an infinite succession of voices; the author is the Spirit) and replaced it with reading, a more civilised and deeply creative operation.

But if this proposal meant fixing the form that the modern reader would have to take (as shown in the reflections of Michel Foucault, Gerard Genette, Harold Bloom or Umberto Eco, who begin by quoting Borges) it is equally clear that these theories send out ripples on the pool of narcissism that the modern world created to gaze in ecstasy at its own face.

Until the concept of originality, a theoretical construct of the eighteenth century, was invented, to read and "translate" or imitate, to create from alien sources, to recreate one's predecessors was the manner in which the great literary traditions were made. Borges observed in "La flor de Coleridge" (1945), "La esfera de Pascual" (1951), "Formas de una leyenda" (1952), "Los ecos de un nombre" (1955) how certain images, metaphors or ideas were handed on from one author to another, from one language to another. He also revealed how a nineteenth century Irish writer could find his voice in a Persian poet ("Omar Jayam", 1925), "El enigma de Edward Fitzgerald", 1952), that an author creates his precursors ("Kafka y sus precursores", 1951) and that for any writer the words of the past are contemporary, because literature, that "willful dream", does not recognise differences of nationality or time.

Thus, if his essays recall that for centuries the boundaries of the words "translate", "interpret" or "romance" were imprecise, it is no less evident that his reflections, fictions or the meticulous footnotes reveal an obvious identification between translation and creation.

To understand translation as a mere technique or a way of decanting texts in their entirety is to forget its true function in the field of culture: to transmit verbal procedures, new poetic forms, ways of narrating, model stories and even criteria of truth and beauty. Thus in "Las versiones homéricas" Borges bases his reflections on an extraordinary paradox: he comments on various fragments translated from Greek to English while reproducing them in Spanish. We may conjecture that those versions were a facility for the Argentine reader (like all the author's texts, the article was published in a

Buenos Aires newspaper) or that those "copies" (the word used by Borges) give the lie to Walter Benjamin² and will serve as an example of the aporia of translation with which Jacques Derrida was concerned³. Nevertheless, the rarity of the procedure (which is repeated and multiplied in "Los traductores de las 1001 noches", where he comments on how Arabic texts were passed into French, English and German and which he also transcribes in his language) leads us to think that we are looking at a continuation of the idea which had been sketched out earlier. Far from conceiving languages as closed symbolic universes, Borges sees them as repertoires of poetic and narrative procedures which a writer from anywhere in the world may —symbolically— lay hold of.

Borges praised translation in a series of theoretical texts⁴ or in prologues to and essays about different books and authors; but for many years he also practised the activity. He did so in books which bear his signature: Wild Palms, Orlando, A Room of One's Own, Metamorphosis; but most of all in articles and anthologies.⁵ It is in these last where we can appreciate clearly that this Argentine writer aspires to produce not just a personal work, but a *canon* conceived in the classical manner. His books of essays from Inquisiciones to Otras Inquisiciones (1952) or the anthologies he compiled alone or with Adolfo Bioy Casares: Antología de la literatura fantástica (1940), Cuentos breves y extraordinarios (1955), Libro del cielo y del infierno (1960), Libros de los seres imaginarios (1967), Libro de sueños (1976) contain translated fragments or are almost entirely translations designed to serve as models for languages and poetic or narrative forms. Like Jakob Werner's book on the Latin proverbs and aphorisms of the Middle Ages or, long before in the reign of Tiberius, Valerius Maximus' collection of memorable events and sayings, such texts as those, heteroclitic and unclassifiable, which mixed fragments of English literature with Italian, German, Chinese, Latin or others, revealed —especially to young and old

writers— that literature is universal and eternal; they encouraged their readers' taste for the fantastic genre; they showed, in short, those stories that tell how to tell a story.

Borges was not an isolated case. There is no doubt that the writers of his generation: Adolfo Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo, Victoria Ocampo, José Bianco, Manuel Mugica Láinez, Julio Cortázar, all translators, made their contribution to that cosmopolitan canon that today gives shape to Argentine literature. However, Borges' gift was to have theorized, imagined and defended this form for a peripheral literature.

Relishing in the essays, poems and fictions the resonant names of the famous translators: St Jerome, Ulfilas, The Venerable Bede, Notker Labeo the German, **Conrad of Regensburg**, James Macpherson, Luther, Pope, Lane, Galland; mentioning the versions by Chaucer, Samuel Johnson, Thomas de Quincey, William Morris; to invent characters who translate: Pierre Menard, James Alexander Nolan, Marcelo Yarmolinsky, Jaromir Hladik, Emil Schering; making his characters read and compare translations; all that is more than just mere erudition or a web of extravagant quotations. It is to recall, in the twentieth century, the role that translation played in the dawn of western literatures and to assert that young countries have the right to that tradition and to translate it, enjoy it, parody it and forget it.

Undoubtedly the strength of this thought affected countries which had no reason to pose such concerns. But, as has occurred so often, the history of literature is magnified more by the peripheral, the marginal, the half-caste, the hybrid and, most of all, the generous, deforming and deformed translations.

Argentina is still vast and deserted. Nevertheless, the voice of its writers has managed to fill it with universal words.

1. As in the "sainetes", or farces: popular theatrical works which used an invented language called "cocliche", a mixture of Spanish and Italian dialects.

2. The author claims that it would be impossible or ironic to translate a translation. *The Task of the Translator*, Translated by Harry John (New York, 1968) - Harcourt Brace and World

3. "Ulisse gramophone: l'oui-dire de Joyce", in *L'écriture et la Différence*.

4. Apart from the ones already mentioned, we should cite: "El Ulises de Joyce" (1925); "Las dos maneras de traducir" (1926); "Lawrence y la Odisea" (1936); "Walt Whitman; Canto a mi mismo" (1942); "Cansinos-Asséns" and "Las 1001 noches" (1960); "Las 1001 noches", "El Traductor" (1985).

5. Borges translated works or fragments by the following authors: Ernest Stadler; Johannes R. Becher; Kurt Heynicke; Alfred Vagts; Wilhelm Klemm; August Stramm; Lothar Schreyer; H.V. Stummer; Werner Hahn; Herwarth Walden; James Joyce; Walt Whitman; Edgar Lee Masters; Langston Hughes; G.K. Chesterton; Virginia Woolf; André Gide; Carl Sandburg; Rabindranath Tagore; T.S. Eliot; Franz Kafka; William Faulkner; Henri Michaux; Sir Thomas Browne; John Pearle Bishop; e.e. cummings; Hart Crane; Wallace Stevens; Herman Melville; T.S. Lawrence; Edith Boissonas; Francis Ponge; Thomas Carlyle; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Snorri Sturluson; Robert Louis Stevenson; Max Beerbohm; Lord Dunsany; W.W. Jacobs; Rudyard Kipling; Villiers de L'Isle Adam; Eugene Gladstone O'Neill; Edgar Allan Poe; Saki (the pseudonym of H.H. Munro); May Sinclair. He also translated the following texts from Old English: Beowulf; The Battle of Finnsburg; Deor; The Seafarer; The Grave; **Ottar's Tale; An Anglosaxon Dialogue of the Eleventh Century**. In the anthologies referred to there are numerous authors in other languages translated into Spanish by other people.