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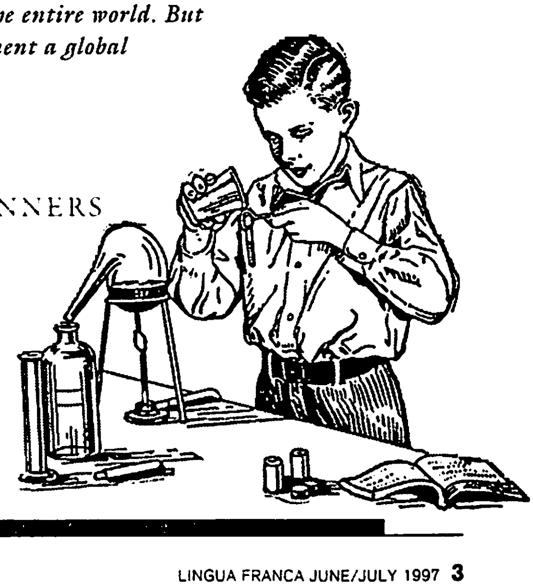
Lingua Franca: A mixed language or jargon used in the Levant, consisting largely of Italian words deprived of their inflexions. Also *transf.* Any mixed jargon formed as a medium of intercourse between people speaking different languages. *Fig.* 1870 LOWELL *Among my bks.* Ser. I. 170 What concern have we with the shades of dialect in Homer or Theocritus, provided they speak the spiritual *lingua franca* that abolishes all alienage of race.



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"There is no problem so consubstantial with literature

BY **MATTHEW HOWARD**

and its modest mystery as that proposed by translation."

Jorge Luis Borges

STRANGER THAN FICCIÓN

THE UNLIKELY CASE OF JORGE LUIS BORGES AND THE TRANSLATOR WHO HELPED BRING HIS WORK TO AMERICA.

"IN THE LONG RUN, PERHAPS," wrote Jorge Luis Borges in 1971, "I shall stand or fall by my poems." The intervening years have failed to vindicate that claim: The great Argentine writer's *ficciones* are required reading in short story courses, his essays and metaphysical games cited in countless monographs on every imaginable subject, his name—and its adjectival form, Borgesian—invoked by scores of journalists to explain bizarre phenomena, from the afterlife of Eva Perón to the vastness of the Internet. Borges's poetry, on the other hand, has long since been overshadowed in the English-speaking world by his persona and fame; the poems are largely remembered and read today because they were written by Borges, rather than, as he imagined, his being remembered for having written them.

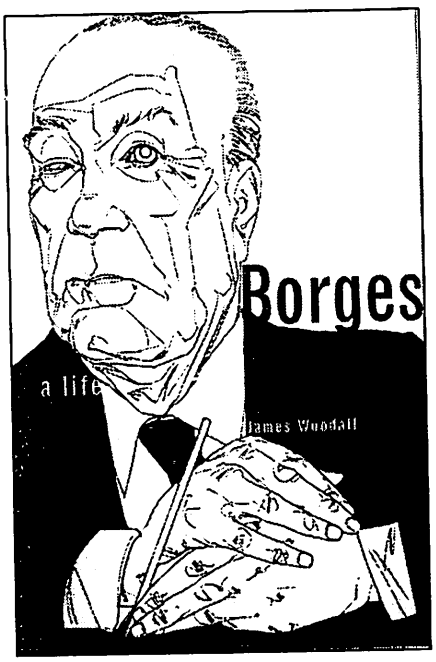
The occasion for Borges's ill-fated prediction was the publication in English of his *Selected Poems, 1923–1967*, a volume that had been compiled, edited, and partially translated by his collaborator at the time, a young American named Norman Thomas di Giovanni. Di Giovanni had first discovered Borges, appropriately enough, through his poetry. In the fall of 1967, di Giovanni, a graduate of Antioch College, was living an hour north of Boston and working as a translator; at

ARCHIVE PHOTOS

that time he had already published an anthology in English of the Spanish poet Jorge Guillén and was starting on another collection of Latin American poetry, but had only recently stumbled across Borges's work. After reading an intriguing *Paris Review* interview with Borges, di Giovanni went to Cambridge one day to search for an edition of his poetry in Spanish. He learned that the author was himself in residence at Harvard, where he had been invited to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton lectures. Di Giovanni took advantage of this chance proximity and wrote to Borges to propose doing a volume of his poetry in English.

Thus began an intimate collaboration between the brash, strong-willed Italian American (di Giovanni, a Boston native, had been named for Norman Thomas, the fiery leader of the Socialist Party) and the blind, soft-spoken, aristocratic Argentine—a collaboration that would span two languages and many continents over a period of four years. It was a critical time for Borges, during which his international fame and mystique steadily grew. Di Giovanni's role in this phenomenon was considerable: He became Borges's translator and his amanuensis, secured lucrative contracts for him with American magazines and publishers, and helped organize public appearances and trips abroad. As an Argentine newspaper noted at the time, di Giovanni "managed the great writer with the energy of a boxing promoter." Yet despite his enthusiasm and dedication, di Giovanni's efforts have left a troubling legacy for Borges's readers and critics. For di Giovanni put his access to Borges to questionable literary uses—in particular, a determined tidying up and simplification of Borges's highly allusive work. Most mysteriously, Borges eagerly colluded with di Giovanni in this enterprise; that is, until he abruptly broke off their working relationship in 1972.

IN A NEW biography, *Borges: A Life* (Basic), James Woodall comments on the "extraordinary" friendship between the two men: "Di Giovanni, almost half Borges's age [he was thirty-four when they met], was pugnacious, wily, extroverted: in personality the polar opposite in every way to Borges." Despite the temperamental differences, the two got along, and Borges soon agreed to collaborate on several translations while he was in Cambridge. Di Giovanni quickly arranged for publication of those, and with a grant from a private foundation to cover expenses, cash advances from the publisher E.P.



Dutton, and a contract with *The New Yorker* for the translated poems and stories, he moved to Buenos Aires in 1968. While he had originally planned to stay only a short time, di Giovanni ended up living in Argentina for almost four years, working side by side with Borges nearly every day in his office in the National Library and handling all details of his work's publication in English. In the time they spent together, di Giovanni and Borges produced half a dozen volumes in English, including *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1969), *The Aleph and Other Stories* (1970), and *Doctor Brodie's Report* (1972).

The influence of these translations on Borges's international reputation, and the public exposure they gave his work in the United States, was enormous: Although Grove Press, New Directions, and the University of Texas Press had published collections of Borges's writing—including such masterpieces as "Funes, the Memorious," "The Garden of Forking Paths," and "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*"—for the first time a major press was committed to publishing almost all Borges's work, translated with the benefit of the author's own insight and involvement. As di Giovanni explained in 1971, "Through residence in Argentina, daily contact with Borges, and complete dedication to his work, I am able to bring to our translations a wealth of background knowledge and preparation otherwise not easy to come by.... I cannot stress this personal association enough, for no matter what we do together—whether we are walking, talking, traveling, dining with friends, or exchanging gossip and worries—all of it is valuable and puts me in touch with Borges's world, his thoughts, his voice." These advantages lent di Giovanni's translations a luster of authority that attracted libraries, scholars, and the burgeoning number of readers turned on to Borges through the publication of his work in American magazines.

For di Giovanni it was a windfall: the opportunity to work with a writer gaining recognition as one of the century's most important, to publish his own accounts of their work together in the prefaces to the volumes and in well-respected literary journals, and to accompany Borges to his numerous public appearances before adulatory audiences in the United States and elsewhere. Then there was the generous financial arrangement, which provided for a fifty-fifty split between di Giovanni and Borges of all royalties from the collaboration.

In many ways, like Umberto Eco and William Weaver today, Borges and di Giovanni appeared to represent an ideal literary partnership. And yet it was a partnership that took many strange turns, as the translator relentlessly pushed the author to accept his own stylistic precepts—and even to rewrite Borges's original Spanish prose to accord with di Giovanni's tastes.

DI GIOVANNI AND

Borges's method of translating followed a consistent pattern. First, working alone, di Giovanni would fashion a handwritten English draft of the piece to be translated. He would then bring this draft to Borges and read aloud from it, comparing each sentence to the Spanish original while the two of them revised. A third stage began with di Giovanni taking the revised draft home, typing it

out, and, as he describes it, "shaping and polishing the sentences and paragraphs by supplying exact words, referring to the Spanish text for checking rhythms and emphases only." The final stage consisted of di Giovanni reading the new draft to Borges without any reference to the original. At this point, di Giovanni says, Borges would occasionally suggest only "small adjustments."

A preserved recording at the University of Texas's Ransom Humanities Research Center suggests the sessions at the National Library weren't quite so placid. On tape, di Giovanni's voice is strident and insistent; Borges mumbles, stammers, equivocates. Time and time again, di Giovanni reads a phrase in Spanish, Borges proposes an English translation, and after a pause, di Giovanni suggests one or two other alternatives of his own. Borges inevitably ends up going along with di Giovanni's word or phrase. To take one instance, di Giovanni wishes to translate "*hombre vil*" as "scoundrel," Borges wants "vile man"; the published text uses the former.

Indeed, di Giovanni's translations tended to proceed from one underlying principle: to make Borges's writing clearer and less ambiguous for North American readers. He therefore saw one of his main tasks as explaining obscure regional references and providing historical details that Borges had omitted in writing for Argentine readers. This approach was not without its benefits: In translating Borges's "The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829–1874)," a story that recasts an episode from José Hernández's nineteenth-century Argentine epic poem *Martín Fierro* (a work all Argentine readers would have read in school), di Giovanni sensitively added passages to make clear to North American readers the military allegiances of the characters.

Di Giovanni's solicitude for the reader did not stop, however, at merely filling in such details. It was equally important to him to find and correct "errors" in Borges's texts. "In the Spanish language editions of Borges's work nothing can be taken for granted," he said during a seminar he and Borges held at Columbia University in 1971. The transcript of that seminar, later published in the book *Borges on Writing* (Dutton, 1973), vividly demonstrates di Giovanni's obsessive desire to "get things right." In the following passage, he is playing a tape of himself and Borges at work on "Tadeo Isidoro Cruz":

> DI GIOVANNI *(on tape)*: I checked the epigraph from Yeats: "I'm looking for the face I had/Before the world was made." You cite the whole book, *The Winding Stair*, and I'd rather cite the single poem to make it easier for anyone who wants to look it up. Actually, it's a poem in many parts, called "A Woman Young and Old."
>
> BORGES: But I think that those two lines should be left—because they don't give the story away.
>
> DI GIOVANNI: No, I'm going to use them. The only thing I want to...
>
> BORGES: And besides, as the verses are fine—you know, the Platonic idea and so on.
>
> DI GIOVANNI: The only thing I want to do is, instead of giving the title of the book it comes from, I want to give the title of the actual poem.
>
> BORGES: Maybe I gave the title of the book because it was a fine title.
>
> DI GIOVANNI: Well, "A Woman Young and Old" isn't bad, either.
>
> BORGES: Besides, as it made me think of the library, with the winding staircases at hand...
>
> DI GIOVANNI (to students): This is a lapse on Borges's part. The story was written eleven years before he came to the National Library.

In this exchange, Borges appears to know he is fighting a losing battle; he fears that di Giovanni will cut the epigraph entirely. As for di Giovanni, he clearly misunderstands the purpose of quotation in Borges's work. He wants to change the epigraph to "make it easier for anyone who wants to look it up." But as Borges's comments indicate, the epigraph functions not to refer the reader to a poem by Yeats but as a philo-

AN ARGENTINE NEWSPAPER SAID DI GIOVANNI "MANAGED THE GREAT WRITER WITH THE ENERGY OF A BOXING PROMOTER."

Saturday, June 17, 1972

SATURDAY SIDELIGHT

Borges's manager sets sail

Jorge Luis Borges's "Boswell," a young American with the noble socialist name of Norman Thomas di Giovanni, sailed (with wife Heather and Argentine-born son Thomas Alastair) for Britain earlier this week.

The departure, which leaves Argentine literary circles wondering at the strange and sudden silence, is merely a hiatus in a unique relationship. Di Giovanni met Borges in the Autumn of 1967 at Harvard when the author, in Boswell-di Giovanni's words, "was suffering from an unhappy private life and from the peculiar isolation it had forced him into."

The relationship flowered into a close collaboration which has produced five books so far. Di Giovanni has been more than a translator of Borges's work. He has managed the great writer with the energy of a boxing promoter.

Before di Giovanni, Borges was a distinguished writer but an unprofitable enterprise. Di Giovanni changed all that.

Di Giovanni is going to spend the next year working on a novel that he had to put aside when he joined Borges (he settled in Buenos Aires in November 1968).

Another book is due to be published in the U.S. later this year and di Giovanni will also be working on the English edition of the poetry book. Another two new books are planned and Borges and di Giovanni should be together again in November next year.

Di Giovanni will be missed in Buenos Aires. Some of the literati objected to his drive – thought he was making Borges work too hard. But he will be most missed by about a million friends, many of whom allowed themselves to be managed by him. He found houses for his friends, solved their problems, and looked after their money. So it's not just a question of what Borges will do now that his Boswell has gone. What will Norman's friends do now that they have no one to manage their lives for them? (RJC)

• Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Borges' "Boswell" and super-manager returns to his unfinished novel. Pictured with wife Heather and son Thomas Alistair (named after Neruda's translator, poet Alastair Reid.)

B for mutton in Chubut

by Nora Mackinnon

A for 'orses; B for mutton; C'forth Highlanders, I had this cockney alphabet by heart long before I understood it. In the case of the letter B [illegible] often not even wether but old ewe; the sort of strong tasting meat that [illegible]

sophical allusion, a suggestion of other themes—"the Platonic idea," "the winding staircases." Further, the exchange reveals just how ignorant di Giovanni was of much of Borges's early prose even after translating with him for three years. Even a cursory investigation would have revealed to him an obvious source and justification for citing "The Winding Stair": Borges begins his famous story "The Library of Babel" with a description of "the universe (which others call the Library)," one of whose central features is a "spiral stairway, which sinks abysmally and soars upwards to remote distances." Despite these reasons for retaining the original citation, in the "collaborative" translation the epigraph reads "A Woman Young and Old."

Di Giovanni thought they could "improve" Borges's work not only by correcting such "errors," but because, he said, "the nature of English is such that we can often be more physical or concrete or specific in the translation." Translation was also able to eliminate what di Giovanni saw as difficulties in Borges's *Spanish*. One problem, he told an interviewer in 1972, was "the abruptness—so characteristic of Borgesian style—of the transitions between clauses or sentences or paragraphs. This abruptness is too sharp...and to soften it, I often find myself trying to intercalate 'buts' and 'therefores' and 'howevers.'" Di Giovanni concludes: "In English they're so common that, even though they're not in the Spanish original, I try to put them in just to satisfy my own concepts about style."

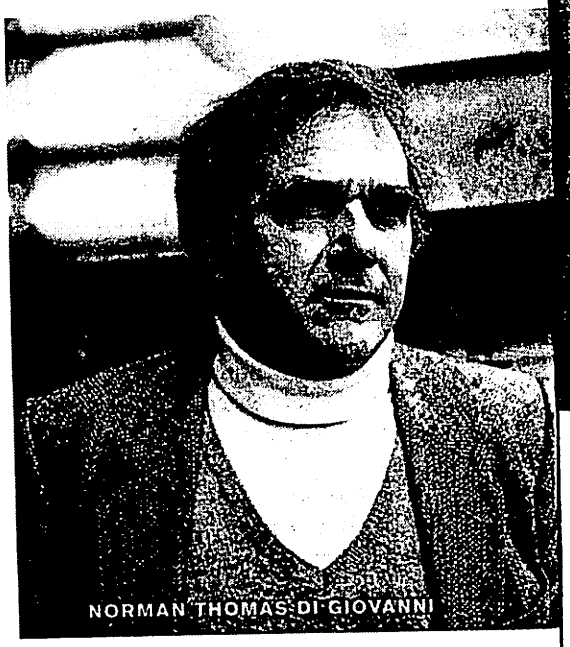
Here di Giovanni's sentiments interestingly echo one of Borges's favorite literary figures, Edward FitzGerald, the Victorian translator of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. "It is an amusement to me," FitzGerald wrote in 1851, "to take what liberties I like with these Persians, who, (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really do want a little Art to shape them."

IN AN INFLUENTIAL 1964 essay in the *New York Review of Books*, Paul de Man suggested that the central "aesthetic, formal principle" in Borges's work is "infamy": the constant "ordering presence" of a "villain." As an example of this principle in practice, de Man singled out Borges's essay "The Translators of the *1001 Nights*," in which Borges examines how, according to de Man, "translator after translator mercilessly cut, expanded, distorted, and falsified the original in order to make it conform to his own and his audience's artistic and moral standards." Borges condemns one translator's "lucid, readable, mediocre" version of the tales (while praising other less "faithful" ones), de Man argued, because "it lacks the wealth of literary associations that allows the other, villainous translators to give their language depth, suggestiveness, ambiguity—in a word, style. The artist has to wear the mask of the villain in order to create a style."

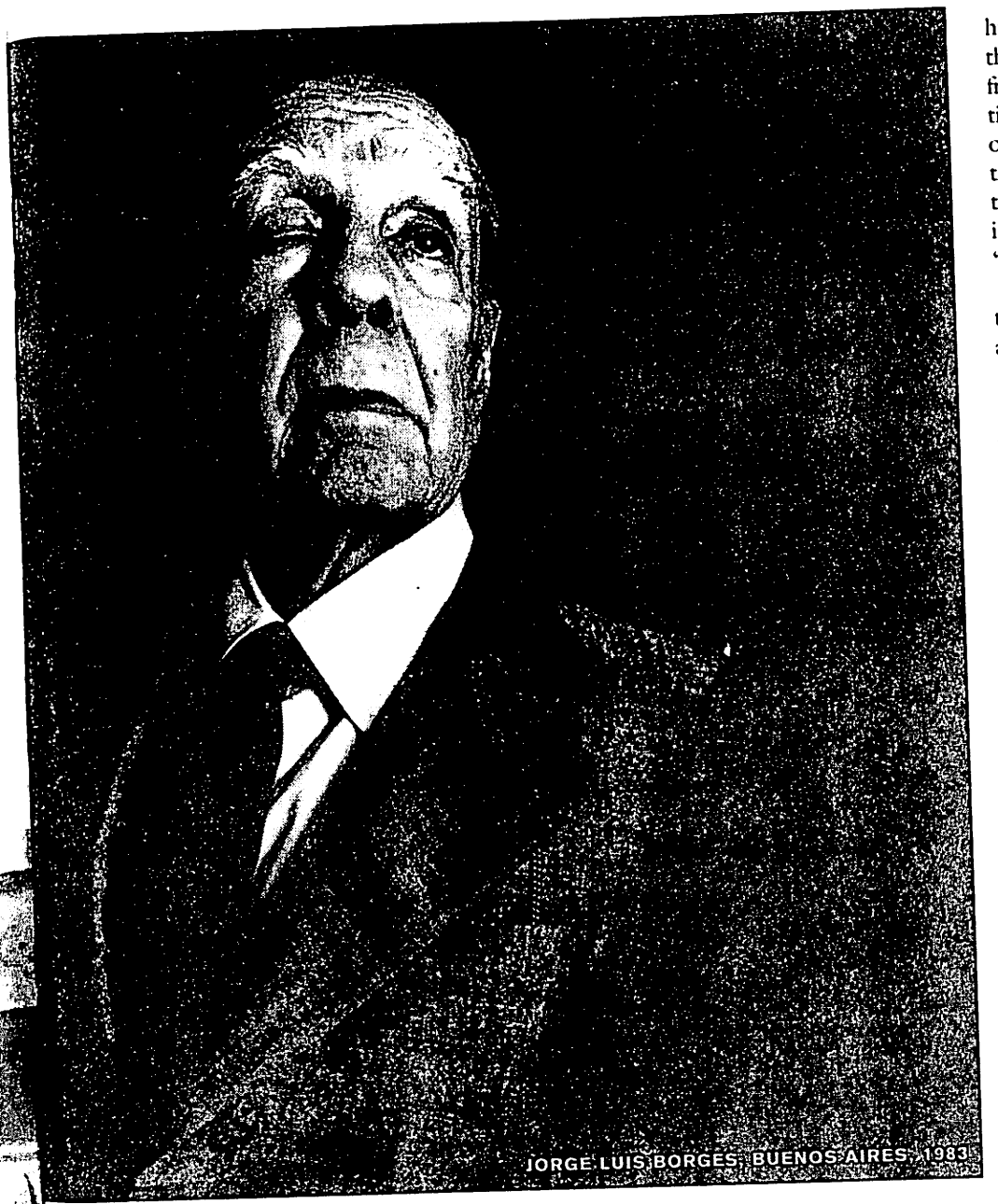
In de Man's terms, di Giovanni's translations would qualify him as a "villain," the equal of any of those Borges describes in "The Translators of the *1001 Nights*." Yet ironically, di Giovanni's transformations of Borges's texts were intended to erase precisely those same qualities—"depth, suggestiveness, ambiguity"—that graced the villainous efforts of the others; di Giovanni's versions were intended to smooth away all these complications, this "style," substituting in their place a kind of transparent, idiomatic expression that he thought would be more accessible to North American readers.

And so, in the opening line of Borges's 1940 story "The Circular Ruins," the phrase "*noche unánime*" becomes in di Giovanni's English not "unanimous night," but "encompassing night," a translation that gains its logic and intuitive force from the loss of precisely the kind of poetic, purposely estranging quality that was surely the original's intention. Or take another example, from the vertiginous parable "Borges and I," in which the author examines his relationship to "the other one, the one called Borges," who shares his preferences for "hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson" but "in a vain way that converts them into the attributes of an actor." In di Giovanni's version, the Latin in these words ("*de un modo vanidoso que las convierte en atributos de un actor*") has disappeared, and we get instead "in a showy way that turns them into stagy mannerisms." Or yet again from "Borges and I": "*Spinoza entendió que todas las cosas quieren perseverar en su ser.*" In James Irby's translation, "Spinoza knew that all things long to persist in their being"; in di Giovanni's they "try to keep on being themselves."

In modernizing and Americanizing Borges's prose, di Giovanni imagined himself translating for a reader who had at least one central, unmistakable characteristic: He was not a professor. While many of Borges's early readers and translators were academics, di Giovanni was not, and he considered his ignorance of academic literary criticism a distinct advantage. "I'm lucky," he told the Columbia translation seminar, "because I'd never read Borges before I started translating him. And I don't read any studies of his work. If you once read what the professors say about his work, you won't translate another line. They make such a fuss about hidden meanings." In di Giovanni's view, academic translators—trained to celebrate complexity for its own sake—were wont to obscure, not illuminate, Borges's writing. "I think too much gibberish is praised as 'imaginative' and 'poetic,'" he said. "Perhaps this is the fault of the professors and pseudoscholars who look at writing through microscopes, placing too much emphasis on single words and abstractions and refusing to believe that writers write specifically about specific things."


NORMAN THOMAS DI GIOVANNI

CONSTABLE PUBLISHERS



JORGE LUIS BORGES, BUENOS AIRES, 1983

DI GIOVANNI RELENTLESSLY PUSHED BORGES TO ACCEPT DI GIOVANNI'S OWN STYLISTIC PRECEPTS.

Di Giovanni's obsession with the concrete worked itself out in strange ways in the translation of Borges's poetry. Commenting on the two previous English translations of Borges's "Conjectural Poem," di Giovanni expressed dismay: "Each of these earlier translations had somehow dropped the same line, and one contained a disastrous error of meaning. But still worse was their diction: both gave 'The lateral night' for the beginning of Borges's line '*La noche lateral de los pantanos.*'" He then asked, "What in the world is a 'lateral night'?"

Di Giovanni goes on to say that, when he put this last question to Borges, "he astonished me. He said he no longer knew exactly what he meant. No pompous explanation, no defense, just that plain admission." Here we have the quintessential di Giovanni: In his view, to use a word in any but the most straightforward way requires from the poet a defense; any explanation of an unorthodox usage—even one as characteristic of Borges's style as this (the use of such unexpected adjectives remains one of Borges's most imitated devices)—would have been "pompous."

In the end, di Giovanni translated the phrase as "The night and to my right and left the marshes."

NOT SURPRISINGLY, American professors hardly shared di Giovanni's views about Borges's diction. During a panel discussion on translation held in 1976, at a conference devoted to Borges's work at the University of Maine, Orono, Clark University's William Ferguson commented on the same word, *laterales*, in a different piece by Borges. "The word had a kind of etymological depth which we could easily feel," Ferguson said. "*Casas laterales* must be rows of houses which stretch off to both sides, or perhaps houses which are in themselves long and low. The question was whether a translator should attempt to resolve the difficulty of sense; my position was that he should not, since *casas laterales* is no less Latinizing and mysterious in Spanish than 'lateral houses' is in English. The problem with a translation such as 'houses that stretch off on both sides' is that it sidesteps the purposeful difficulty that existed in the original."

Taken together, the academics' comments at the 1976 Orono conference (preserved in a transcript) give the distinct impression of a professorial backlash. Ferguson wickedly recalled the following exchange:

> [Di Giovanni] showed up one night in 1968, very upset, and demanded to know what iambic pentameter was; I explained that it was supposed to have five beats; he demurred; so we talked about it at length and when he left he was more or less satisfied. Two or three nights later he was back, more upset than before: "Bill, when I translate Borges' lines they don't come out to five beats. What shall I do?" We discussed it all again; and at length he decided, all on his own, that the way to make the verses come out right in English was to convince the author to rewrite them slightly in Spanish.

Nearly all of the panelists had come into contact with di Giovanni as editor—many were assigned poems to translate for the *Selected Poems*—and nearly all of them mention the experience. With a sarcasm that comes through even in the transcript, Ferguson says that working on the *Selected Poems* was "a remarkable experience.... Di Giovanni had the engaging idea that a poem could be summed up in a prose paragraph. With di Giovanni it was a question of bargaining; he'd give you one participle if you took out one noun, that kind of thing. (Everyone knows the best poems are written by committees.) This procedure also occasioned a purification of the Spanish texts—'purification' was di Giovanni's word, and we were never entirely sure what it meant." Robert Lima of Penn State asserts that di Giovanni's practice of providing translators with prose versions was an "obnoxious process" that led to a "blatant savaging of Borges's originals."

Speaking in 1972, di Giovanni had no such reservations about his method. To di Giovanni it seemed that "even the poets who know Spanish are sometimes grateful for these transliterations. With them, they don't have to waste time interpreting the poem. The plain meaning is given them, and they can sail right into the poetry."

While many of the translators and scholars who came into contact with di Giovanni deplored his editing methods and displayed obvious discomfort with his self-assigned role as stubborn impediment, as barrier between them and Borges's text, their responses generally registered a larger sense of ambivalence about him. In the Orono transcript, Indiana University's Willis Barnstone said that "whatever one's notions of translation, the relentless kind of bullying intensity of di Giovanni in trying to seek the best possible translation is extraordinary, new, and admirable." Even James Irby—whose early translations of Borges, in their reproduction of the originals' abrupt semantic shifts and sudden logical leaps, were clearly a model against which di Giovanni conceived his own versions—commented in the Orono transcript that he would "moderate that aspect of them" were he to do it again. "But perhaps," he added, "not as much as I think Borges would like."

Irby's comment gets at perhaps the most interesting aspect of Borges's work with di Giovanni, and the central mystery: Why did he let him do it? Was di Giovanni the only "villain" in this story, solely responsible for the traducement of a great writer? And if not, what did Borges stand to gain from such recasting of his work?

BO ES (LEFT) AND DI GIOVANNI (FAR RIGHT)

SOME OF THOSE who knew Borges well suggest that his willingness to collaborate with di Giovanni had more to do with the author's personal life than with questions of literature. When di Giovanni arrived in Buenos Aires, Borges's recent marriage to Elsa Astete de Millán was already in shambles. As di Giovanni himself once put it, Borges "was suffering from an unhappy private life and from the peculiar isolation it had forced him into." Borges felt trapped by his domestic life—so much so that, according to Alastair Reid, the *New Yorker* staff writer and translator of Borges, "Borges took up with di Giovanni primarily to escape Elsa. He needed a reason to leave the house every day."

But Borges's reliance on di Giovanni may have also stemmed from Borges's long-standing, devoted, but characteristically timid, relationship with the English language. Though born in Buenos Aires to Argentine parents, Borges learned to read English before Spanish; his paternal grandmother was English, and his childhood tutor was an English governess. The books in his father's library, which Borges often called the "chief event in my life," were also mainly in English. One of the earliest books Borges read, not surprisingly, was Richard Burton's translation of *A Thousand Nights and a Night*. (Borges claimed that he read it hiding up on the roof, because his parents considered the book obscene and forbade it.) Another book Borges read early on was *Don Quixote*, probably the first book he ever read by an author writing in Spanish. Borges read the *Quixote*, however, not in Spanish but in an English translation.

In the "Autobiographical Essay"—a work that, despite its title, was actually written with di Giovanni in English—he discusses the importance of this fact: "When later I read *Don Quixote* in the original, it sounded like a bad translation to me. I still remember those red volumes with the gold lettering of the Garnier edition. At some point, my father's library was broken up, and when I read the *Quixote* in another edition I had the feeling that it wasn't the real *Quixote*. Later, I had a friend get me the Garnier, with the same steel engravings, the same footnotes, and also the same errata. All those things form part of the book for me; this I consider the real *Quixote*."

As a result of this bilingual education, Borges from an early age saw English as the language of culture; Spanish, the language in which he was to make his name as a writer, was for him a much less exalted form of expression. And yet Borges, by his own admission, could not write well in English. This tension, this "linguistic crisis," as one of his biographers puts it, can be felt throughout his work, which manifests a reverence not only for English literature and its great figures but for the grammar, syntax, and even the *sound* of the language itself. In the

AT ONE BORGES CONFERENCE, THE LITERARY CRITIC WILLIAM FERGUSON RECALLED THAT DI GIOVANNI ONCE "DEMANDED TO KNOW WHAT IAMBIC PENTAMETER WAS."

"Autobiographical Essay" Borges wrote: "I have been lucky to have my own translator at my side, and together we are bringing out some ten or twelve volumes of my work in English, a language I am unworthy to handle, a language I often wish had been my birthright."

PERHAPS THIS linguistic diffidence, when combined with di Giovanni's aggressive personality, helps explain the extent to which Borges sanctioned di Giovanni's cleanup project. But did Borges actually welcome di Giovanni's reshaping of his work? It's certainly possible. At the very least, Borges's distaste for much of his writing is well known. He had for a long time been trying to forget about, to erase, his early work. Before leaving Spain in 1921 to return to Buenos Aires, he destroyed two books of poems strongly influenced by *ultraísmo* (a poetic movement whose manifesto, authored by Borges, stressed metaphor and imagery over lyricism and meter); in the Sixties, he bought up copies of his work written before 1930 with the intention of burning them.

Clearly, the translator came along at a time when Borges's embarrassment about the ornate diction, elaborate symbolism, and local references so characteristic of his early writing was particularly acute. Di Giovanni's opinion, as a native English speaker with definite ideas about good prose style, obviously meant a great deal to Borges; and his views neatly coincided with Borges's own renouncement of baroque experimentation and his adoption of the more stripped-down narrative style characteristic of later volumes like *Doctor Brodie's Report*. In this light, the translations Borges made in collaboration with di Giovanni might be regarded as a calculated act of self-censorship—or of self-creation, the creation of a mirror, rival "Borges," Borges as an English writer.

Borges knew how he wanted to be remembered and read in the English-speaking world and knew that the volumes he and di Giovanni were producing would define him for generations of readers, just as surely as the Garnier editions of *Don Quixote* in his father's library had defined Cervantes, Samuel Butler's *Iliad* had defined Homer, and Edward FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat* had defined Omar Khayyam. Literary history abounds with such doubles, as it does with examples of writers who destroyed, or attempted to

AN EMBITTERED BORGES LATER SAID OF DI GIOVANNI: "HE TOOK CHARGE LIKE A GENERAL AND GAVE ME ORDERS."

destroy, their work (think of Franz Kafka's final, fortunately unheeded instructions to Max Brod to burn his manuscripts) and of those who tidied up the untoward excesses of their youth (think of W.H. Auden's late emendations of the political commitment in his early verse). But the idea of revising one's literary legacy through translation may have been Borges's own palimpsestic innovation. What Borges did to his own writing, or what he allowed di Giovanni to do to his writing under the rubric of "collaboration," is deplorable, banal; the *idea* of it is astonishing, profound, literary.

BORGES and di Giovanni parted ways in 1972 and, except for a few brief encounters some years later, would never work closely together again. In his memoir *With Borges on an Ordinary Evening in Buenos Aires* (Illinois, 1993), the poet and translator Willis Barnstone recalls the story of how the collaboration came to an end. As Borges told it to him: "Di Giovanni called me one afternoon to let me know that he had used some of my funds to make a deposit on an apartment in which we could all live together. That evening—it was a Sunday—at [Adolfo] Bioy Casares's house, I said to myself enough is enough. We were eating dinner and between the soup and the main course I got up, went to the phone and called him. I said only three words to him. 'Norman, we're through.' Then I hung up. I did not see him again. It took only the time between the soup and the main course. Then I went back to the table and told Adolfo that I had broken with di Giovanni."

There is surely an element of retrospective bravado in this—the blind, shy, insecure Borges proudly recalling an instance of his overcoming his own vulnerability—as there is in the stories others tell of how Borges cruelly denigrated di Giovanni after severing their relationship. "Ah, yes, Don Giovanni, *el mafioso,*" a later collaborator of Borges's told me he would say when di Giovanni's name came up. Barnstone writes that Borges called di Giovanni "Nap," for Napoleon; as Borges told it, "He was short, and he took charge like a general and gave me orders, which I sometimes listened to. It was his manner and his method."

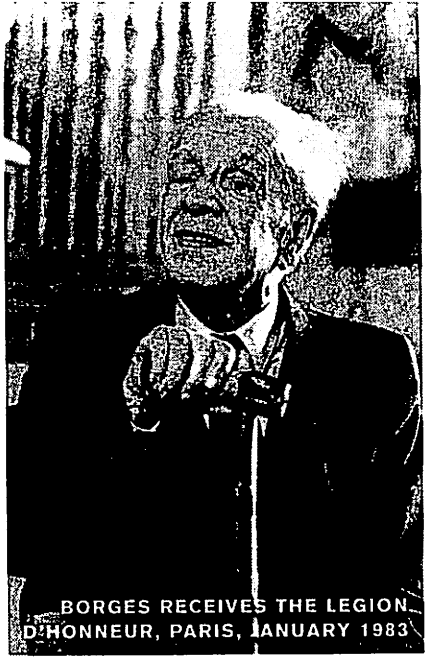
To Barnstone, Borges's break with di Giovanni represents just one instance in a larger pattern "repeated, with variations, with other devotees. There were always specific pretexts, but the rupture was due to Borges's need to free himself from so much service, dependence, management." It is true that Borges had a long string of such associations with

translators and assistants; it is equally true that in more than one instance these collaborators abused his trust, traveling a sordid path from initial admiration and devotion to eventual exploitation of a somewhat lonely, solipsistic man whose life was books.

Yet the relationship between di Giovanni and Borges, like the work they produced, defies any such easy explanation. Undoubtedly, di Giovanni benefited handsomely from their association, and clearly he bullied Borges to some degree, whether by design or by temperament—James Woodall compares their relationship to that of a "crafty gym master getting a slothful pupil to perform somersaults the pupil thought he had forgotten." But their close association also helped Borges through difficult times: In the summer of 1970, di Giovanni made the arrangements necessary to enable Borges to extricate himself from his marriage with Elsa and planned what must have been an immensely rewarding trip to Iceland for Borges, whose passion toward the end of his life was the study of Old Norse.

More Borgesian, perhaps, is the story of how the author himself was once responsible for inventing di Giovanni's death. One day in 1977, a friend of Barnstone's took him aside and let him know that di Giovanni had been killed in a tragic accident. When pressed for more information, the friend told him that he had the news on good authority: from Borges himself. Eventually it was learned that the rumor had started with an offhand remark Borges had made in conversation: "Borges had said flippantly that he hadn't heard a word from di Giovanni in years; for all he knew, he might have been killed in an automobile accident in Scotland."

He hadn't been. Though Borges died in 1986 (in Geneva, the city in which he had been educated as a youth), di Giovanni is alive and well, in England, where he moved shortly after leaving Buenos Aires in 1972. He has continued to build on the collaboration, publishing a new translation of Borges's *Evaristo Carriego* in 1984 (the book's epigraph from Thomas De Quincey, misquoted by Borges in the original, has been corrected), a volume titled *In Memory of Borges* in 1988, and, just two years ago, a collection of essays titled *The Borges Tradition*. In the early Eighties, he was even made a Commander of the Order of May, a rare appointment by which the Argentine government honors cultural distinction, for his work with Borges.



BORGES RECEIVES THE LEGION D'HONNEUR, PARIS, JANUARY 1983

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WHEN I reached him by telephone this past April, di Giovanni was gruffly accommodating, even gracious, his replies perfectly in keeping with the themes that so dominate his published material from twenty-five years before. "Are you an academic?" he asked me at the outset. I replied that I was not. "Better," he said. When I questioned him about his relation to Borges's scholarly critics, he told me frankly, "I have a lot of trouble with academics. I have no patience with them whatsoever." When I mentioned that a number of other translators had objected to his editing of the *Selected Poems*, di Giovanni grew irritated: "Who the hell thinks they're so great that they don't need another pair of eyes over their shoulder?"

Asked why he thought the collaboration ended so abruptly, di Giovanni put it down simply to Borges's lack of interest in translating his early work: "He just sort of ran out of patience with it." Speaking of his own translations, he said, just as he had years before, that they gave the work "a far greater clarity and simplicity.... I liken it to cleaning a painting: you could see the bright colors and the sharp outlines underneath where you couldn't before."

Finally, I asked him about a specific phrase in the famous short essay "Borges and I." While other translators had rendered the passage "*el laborioso rasgueo de una guitarra*" as "the laborious strumming of a guitar," di Giovanni had intriguingly rendered the phrase "laborious tuning of a guitar." In explanation, he gave me this response, which to my mind captures many of the complex dynamics of his collaboration with Borges:

> There's nothing less laborious than strumming a guitar, right? So I said to [Borges], "What the hell does this mean?" and he said, "What does strumming mean?" And I showed him, physically, you know, running your finger over the string. And he said to me, "That's not what I mean at all," and then he explained to me: "What I mean is, you know, you go to a party and you think, oh, boy, there's going to be music here, and then the guy's there and he's plucking one string and he's turning the key, you know, and *bink bink bink* and he turns the key and *bink bink bink*, and then he starts on the next one, and that's laborious, right?" And I said, "But, Borges, that's not strumming, that's tuning." He says, "That's right, that's what I meant, tuning." So the point was—why the hell did he use the wrong word? There is a word for tuning in Spanish. But he said, "Ah, but the word tuning in Spanish is so *ugly*, I couldn't use it." Well, this is strange stuff, isn't it?

STRANGE STUFF indeed. What is a translator to do when the author uses the "wrong" word—a word whose meaning refuses to be made plain or ordinary, one that insists on defining itself? Should such a word be fixed? What's one to do with an author whose poetic imagination is governed not only by literal meaning but by the aesthetics of ambiguity? Such problems are, of course, not endemic to Borges; they are the challenges of literary translation—a nearly inexhaustible process that, as Borges recognized, assures the continual transformation and survival of literature itself. As he put it in his 1932 essay, "The Versions of Homer": "To presuppose that every combination of elements is inferior to their original is to presuppose that draft 9 is obligatorily inferior to draft number H—since there can never be anything but drafts. The concept of the *definitive* text complies only with religion or weariness."

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