Jorge Luis Borges and the Translators of the *Nights*

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Introduction

This reading of Borges's essay was initially inspired in the 1970s by the Uruguayan literary critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal (1921-85). Yet another game with shifting mirrors, "The Translators of *The 1001 Nights*" (1936) is a labyrinth whose hidden center is Sir Richard Burton. In Borges's private universe, Burton is ultimately a precursor of Jorge Borges, his Anglo-Argentine father who was also drawn to the "Orient." Borges ponders Burton's rivalry with other translators of this famous work, framing translation as a polemical tool as well as an act of creation. In the future I hope to explore further implications of Burton's impact on the European translations: for example, Borges questions the highly regarded German translation by Littman, but he apparently did not know that Littman was translating in order to correct the shortcomings of a previous German translation that had been based on Burton's.

I.

The subject of translation traverses much of Borges's oeuvre, as Efrain Kristal has lucidly discussed in his *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation* (2002). Homer's epic poems and the Arabian Nights, two classics of world literature to which Borges dedicated essays that explicitly examine the field of translation history, share in common their questionable authorship. Both apparently began as oral traditions and cannot be traced to a single author whose identity is indisputable. Moreover, the *Nights* were translated from different sources at different times and as they passed into various European languages, acquired additions which, ironically, became the tales for which they were most known, especially the framing story of Scheherezade. The survival and transformations of such literary monuments over centuries and languages

no doubt contributed to Borges's own very original and ironic "theory" of translation which he expounds in his essay on the Homeric Versions, namely that the only difference between an original and a translation is that a translation can be measured against a visible text, a *trouvaille* worthy of Pierre Menard.

As an amateur of the *Nights* (I read some abridged version as a child, more fascinated by the illustrations than the stories), my modest intention here is to revisit Borges's 1936 essay in order to see how his interpretation of this border-crossing chapter in literary history may help us understand how Borges uses the subject of translation to discuss his own intricate relationship with literature and its producers. Of particular interest are the curious mistranslations that seem unavoidable in cultural exchange, as well as the reception of this ubiquitous book in its various reincarnations in the Western canon. Aside from his childhood in his father's library, a key to Borges's fascination with the *Nights* was, as Dominique Jullien has observed, his innate cosmopolitanism. [1] Though not a popular attribute in nationalist intellectual circles during the 1930s and 1940s, such a spirit was central to characterizations of Argentine cultural identity. "Our patrimony is the universe," Borges pronounced in his famous lecture "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," alluding to T. S. Eliot's modernist manifesto "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (185).

For Borges, growing up in his father's English library, in the bosom of an Anglo-Argentine family steeped in European liberalism and Victorian morals, the *Nights* were his childhood entry into the forbidden world of sex. His father, a frustrated novelist who had played a key role in Borges's literary destiny, destroyed a book of Oriental stories he had written inspired in the Arabian Nights, an act which must have struck the young Borges as significant. Hence, it shouldn't surprise us that this book often appears in his stories (for example "The South") as an icon or displacement for erotic content, as well as a literary terrain to be explored by a son created to fulfill his father's desires. For the writer Borges, *The Thousand and One Nights* (that *one* extra *mise en abime* night in the title intrigued him the most) it offered, moreover, like *Don Quixote*, a template for an infinite textuality, an endless stream of stories which can be read and reread in order to be rewritten anew. And, finally, for Borges, the Argentine, that the book was a translation, arriving in a "form assumed by a classic Oriental text in a European language," made

it relevant to his region's marginality in the Western literary tradition. Like the Arab world, Latin America also was misread as exotic under the "civilized" gaze of Europe and Anglo-America.

It is interesting to note, therefore, how Borges embarks on the *Nights*, discussing the literary figure whose version he apparently preferred but who had also explored South America as he had Africa, intrigued Borges most among the European translators. This writer was Sir Richard Burton, British consul in Trieste (before the city became Joyce's home in exile), a linguist who knew some of the most obscure languages in the world, a scholar and adventurer who discovered the source of the Nile and who fought in wars in South America, a libertine who scandalized Victorian England with his exploits and with his pen: in brief, the kind of man Borges, a mere bookworm with unfulfilled yearnings for a more active and sexual life, could admire, envy, and also disdain for his "orientalizing" perspectives.

The Argentine immediately speculates about the "secret aims" of Burton's famous 1872 translation, namely, to annihilate his predecessor, the Orientalist Edward Lane—who in 1839, Borges continues, had in turn, translated against his predecessor, Galland, the French translator (73-74). Borges implies here that translation is a polemical tool, an act of literary criticism, a way for one reader to impose his interpretation over another's. His argument also suggests that through translation one writer outdoes another, that translation is a perfect weapon to kill a father figure, to assert one's own paternity. Borges may also be telling his reader that his own "secret aim" in writing this essay may be to damn with praise and to pay homage with ironic reservations: for while Burton's was the best version of the *Nights* in his view, Burton was also an ingenuous positivist who did not recognize that while he thought he succeeded where Lane failed, his appropriation of the cultural Other was problematic, and that even great translations, like originals at their best, are brilliant failures.

II.

While Borges starts his essay with a story that evidently fascinates him, the rivalry between Lane and Burton, he swiftly changes gear, as it were, and returns to his job as literary historian: "Let me begin with the founder," he says, meaning the French Galland, who in the

eighteenth century brought from Istanbul copy of the book along with a supplement "from someone said to be Hanna"—and Borges notes both the questionable origin of the supplementary stories plus the fact that these are among the stories which were to become most popular, such as Aladdin's Lamp, and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves (74). Always the ironist, Borges remarks that this translation filled with "jewels and magic spells" was both the "worst and the most read"—and praised—by writers who would have eminent repercussions on literary culture such as Coleridge, De Quincey, Stendhal and Poe (74).

Galland's version was much criticized, Borges notes. One reason was because it suffers—perhaps inevitably—from anachronisms: Weil, a German scholar whose translation Borges would peg as the most pleasant of the four uninspiring German translations, points, for example, out a "valise" should be a "saddlebag" (74). More serious was Galland's so-called decorum, suppressing, as the Victorian Lane will later do, scenes, descriptions and stories (such as kings who had many wives) that a Western reader of that era might consider obscene. Borges remarks mischievously, defending Galland against the criticisms of Andre Gide who favored Mardrus's colorful version, that the censorship of these elements makes the book all the more obscene, since more is left to the reader's imagination.

Moving onto the scholarly Lane, Borges delights in the paradox that while his translation was "an encyclopedia of evasion" (75), Lane was admirably faithful, resorting, unlike Galland who simply practiced the art of omission, to explanatory and scholarly footnotes. Lane, unlike his successor Burton, had no polemical or ulterior motive other than that of bringing the wonders of the Orient to Western readers, but Borges is quick to point out—without using jargon—that ideology is never absent despite an author's visible intentions. Lane becomes for Borges exemplary of the notion of censorship not only as a predictable aspect of translation between cultures whose moral codes were so different, but as a form of creation. Comparing this "creativity" humorously with certain procedures of Hollywood where husbands and wives slept only in twin beds until the Hayes code was defrocked by the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Borges is suggesting that such indirect creative processes are not alien to him. Censorship is seen in an affirmative light through the Borgesian looking glass, or rather it is considered, at the very least, unavoidable in the act of interpretation.

While Galland and Lane "disinfected" the *Nights*, however, Borges points out that they also invented the concept of the "marvelous"—an adjective missing from the original book which, as Borges comments, was in its own culture, only an "adaptation of old stories of plebian taste, coarse, from Cairo's middle classes" (77). Citing Enno Littman, the highly regarded German translator whom Borges would criticize for being the most faithful and least inspired, Borges stresses that the book which Galland introduced to the Western reader was, on the contrary, a "collection of marvels," projecting a "magical atmosphere" (77). This defining factor made it a more popular and much greater commercial success than it had been for its original readers who, after all, already knew the original characters and customs which those stories portray.

At this juncture of the essay Borges returns to Burton who claimed to have a command of thirty-five languages and wrote seventy-two volumes, and who apparently experienced every kind of sexuality and cuisine not to mention, in his African wanderings, cannibalism. Borges sums all this up—as if following Lane's prudish example—with his superlatively British librarian tone: "the attractions of the forbidden are his" (79). Certainly by alluding to Burton's friendship with the poet Algernon Swinburne, well known for his homosexuality, Borges means to leave tantalizing trails for his reader's imagination—once again affirming the vicarious joys of censorship.

III.

What exactly did Borges like about Burton's version? He criticizes Burton for a lack of "ear" (79) in his verses, and for an inconsistency in the language ranging from the literal to the colloquial. It would appear that he praised most of all the erotic erudition, the copious copulating footnotes as it were—more the pleasure of the sex than of the text, as it were—and the fact that this translation vacillated between a recreation and an act of literary criticism. To wit, Burton had created a heterogeneous genre—one might say like Borges's *Ficciones*—somewhere between narrative, essay and poetry. The one other element in both Burton and Mardrus which was decisive in Borges's mind was the title which added, following Galland, that "One Night," that gateway to the infinite *mise en abime* of story telling represented by the framing tale of Scheherazade, reaching from the picturesque past into the unfathomable future.

From his discussion of the enterprising Burton, whose motives were to glorify his reputation as an Arabist and to gain readers, Borges traveled chronologically and back across the Channel to the French version of "Dr. Mardrus." Here he slapped Gide on the hand not for preferring Mardrus but rather for using the wrong reasons to play Mardrus against Galland, claiming the latter to be more unfaithful than the former. *Au contraire*, this 1899 French version was the most readable after Burton's but also because, once again, it was not faithful. Borges tells us why: Mardrus was an illustrator, providing the reader with "art-nouveau" flourishes, "visual Orientalism" (84); rather than literal translator, Mardrus was an inter-semiotic translator; hence Borges compares Mardrus's "interpolations"—not without his usual tongue-in-cheek tone—to the biblical extravaganzas of the Hollywood classic filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille (83).

While with his discussion of Dr. Mardrus he reaches the climax of the essay, a celebration of "creative infidelity" (84), perhaps the most important point is made in his critique of the German versions, which he saved for last. This point could be summed up thus: each literature, each culture, each era appropriated the *Nights* according to its own deforming mirror; the better translations were better because they, in turn, in Poundian spirit, brought something new into the target literature and language. In the case of Germany, a country which had generated such a prolific body of fantastic literature in the 19th century, Borges was disappointed by the relatively "tranquil" results. He concluded that "the exchange between the *Nights* and Germany should have produced something more" (86). Finally, alluding to Germany's *Unheimlichkeit* (Freud lurking notwithstanding Borges's resistance to the father of psychoanalysis), the Argentine ended his discussion suggesting that Kafka would have been the translator the *Nights* needed to fulfill its destiny in the German language.

Notes

See Dominique Jullien's "In Praise of Mistranslation: The Melancholy Cosmopolitanism of Jorge Luis Borges" in "Borges in the 21st Century" (Special Double Issue edited by Suzanne Jill Levine) *Romanic Review* 98.2-3 (2007): 205-224.

Works Cited

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