

Text metempsychosis and the racing tortoise: Borges and translation

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Borges insistently returns to the question of translation, which he considers of great importance on the level of experience. Direct writing does not enable us to perceive that mystery of the text which, on the contrary, is indistinctly revealed by translation.

Borges in 'Las versiones homéricas' (Borges 1932b), included in the collection entitled *Discusión*, recalls Bertrand Russell's definition of the 'external object' as the point of irradiation of possible impressions. The same thing can be said about the text, says Borges. And it is translation that permits familiarity with all the vicissitudes of the word of which the text is a continual manifestation more than a result. According to Borges in 'Paul Valéry: *El cementerio marino*', the text will only appear definitive when viewed in the light of some dogmatic conception or for reasons of fatigue (Borges 1932d). Only if the text is considered as invariable and definitive will translation seem an exercise of an inferior order lending itself to the Italian proverb 'traduttore traditore'. But that a text should be considered as definitive and unmodifiable is the consequence of prejudice or mental indolence, and not only this. Borges describes the process through which a text comes to be considered as such.

Just as repetition of a sequence leads one to believe, as observed by David Hume, that what comes first is the cause of what comes after and that the two terms are connected by a relation of necessity, familiarity with a text leads us to believe that its order is necessary and unchangeable. In this way any modification of the text ends up being considered a sacrilege. The text cannot be but *that* text, and its translation seems a fake.

This occurs for the reader accustomed to reading *Don Quijote* in Spanish, for example, or the *Divina Commedia* in Italian. For the latter, the *Inferno* can only begin with the line 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita', and any kind of variation, not only the transposition from one language to another, but even any form of paraphrase, is not tolerable.

Similarly, a reader exercised in Spanish, like Borges himself, will tolerate no other variant in *Don Quijote* beyond those — if these even — introduced by the publisher or typographer.

On the contrary, for anyone unfamiliar with ancient Greek the *Odyssey* may exist in numerous and diverse variants. However, though a question of translations none of them refer us to an original expected to act as the measure of the variant's fidelity. Nor does it make any difference whether these variants are in prose or in verse. The *Odyssey*, as Borges says speaking for himself, is a sort of international library of works in prose and verse.

In any case, as much as all translations of the *Odyssey* may seem at once sincere, genuine and divergent, Borges betrays his preference for versions and transpositions into the English language, which are the ones he cites. He in fact sympathizes with the association between the *Odyssey* and English literature, which has always had an intimate relation to this particular epic of the sea.

All the same, developing Borges's thoughts, we may conclude that relations no different from those between the original text and the translated text are created when a question of a text known only in translation, given that the original remains inaccessible through linguistic ignorance. For example, concerning the Homeric texts, Vincenzo Monti's translation of the *Iliad* has taken over the role of the original text in Italy, especially for those who encountered his text during early school years and have continued to read it, to the point that any other version taking its distances from Monti's will not be tolerated. And yet on Foscolo's account, Monti was not worth much as a scholar of Greek. Indeed, it would seem that his translation derives from other translations that he had at his disposal more than from the original. Foscolo apostrophizes Monti as the 'Traduttore dei traduttori d'Omero'.

In his reflections on the question of the translation of Homeric poems, Borges deals with the problem of distinguishing between that which belongs to the poet and that which belongs to linguistic usage and in the last analysis to language. Such Homeric epithets as 'swift-footed' Achilles, 'divine Patroclus', and so forth, are renowned. Some scholars believe they belong to the poet, others that they are idiomatic expressions. Alexander Pope thought they were liturgical in flavor. On the contrary, Remy de Gourmont believed they were worn out stylistic expedients that were slowly losing their original effectiveness. According to Borges, such epithets were not part of the Homeric style, but compulsory formulae imposed by usage that obliged one to say 'the divine Patroclus' just as in Italian one says 'andare a piedi' and not 'per piedi' or in English 'to go on foot', and not 'by foot'. It is a

question of such expressions as 'the whole blessed day', where there is nothing 'blessed' about the day, or 'good morning', when in fact there is nothing good about the morning.

Borges examines various translations of the Homeric poems referring in particular, by way of exemplification, to the episode where Ulysses narrates the facts about the night when Troy was burnt to the ground to Achilles's spectre in the underworld. In this passage Ulysses informs Achilles about his son Neoptolemus. Borges evokes, among others, the 'literal' translations by Butcher and Lang, the spectacular translation by Pope, the lyrical translation by George Chapman, the purely descriptive and informative translation by Samuel Butler, and then asks which of these numerous translations is faithful? To which he responds, none or all. In a way this reply is similar to that given by Jacques Derrida when, in an essay entitled 'Qu'est-ce que c'est une traduction relevante?' (Derrida 2000), he claims at once the possibility and the impossibility of translation.

No translation can be faithful to Homer's imagination due to distances in epochs. But for what concerns the possibility of rendering sense, many translations are doubtlessly faithful, unless they are literal translations, says Borges, which lose in sense because they are too close to Homer's times and too distant from our own. And if we must say which translation is the most faithful, we cannot exclude the most descriptive and informative, such as that by Butler.

That the text first cited at the beginning of this paper, 'Las versiones homéricas' is followed by another two, both dedicated to the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, may or may not be incidental: their titles are 'La perpetua carrera de Aquiles y la tortuga' and 'Avatares de la tortuga' (cf. Borges 1932c and 1939a). The paradox plays a fundamental role in Borges's intellectual formation. In 'Autobiographical Essay' (1970), Borges narrates how it was his father who, using a chessboard, explained this particular paradox and others still, through which Zeno of Elea denied movement. The question we must ask ourselves is whether swift-footed Achilles, who pursues the slow but unreachable tortoise, is similar to a skillful and relevant translation, to the 'relevant' translation (Derrida). Similarly to the tortoise the original only has a small advantage, that of having taken off first, of having moved first and the translation attempts to reach it. But similarly to the tortoise the original, too, seems unreachable because of its advantage.

In any case, it must be remembered that the *logoi* or arguments developed by Zeno of Elea to the end of denying movement and becoming (such as the story about Achilles and the tortoise or the one about the arrow) were intended, in the last analysis, to support the

Parmenidian thesis concerning the unchanging *one* against the appearance of the *multiple* (On Zeno's paradoxes, see Colli 1998). This confutation of the existence of the many to the end of affirming the possibility of the one is also connected, in a way, to the issue of translation, of the relation between the *unique* original text and its *many* translations. And from this point of view, it is interesting that confutation of the multiplicity by Zeno of Elea, as reported by Plato in *Parmenides* (1998: 3) is based on the notion of *similarity*, which is the same notion generally invoked to explain the relation between the text and its translations.

A translation is obviously not identical to the original (not even Menard's *Quijote* with respect to Cervantes's *Quijote* as we shall soon see), even though the former is 'rewritten' in the same language (cf. Borges 1939b, 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote'). If a translation were completely similar to its original it would be identical to it, simply another copy of the same text. A translation must be at once similar and dissimilar. This is the paradox of translation, which is the same as that of the multiplicity.

To admit the possibility of translation is to admit, contradicting oneself, that something may be at once similar and dissimilar. We could use Zeno's argument against admitting the existence of the many, at once similar and dissimilar, reported in *Parmenides* (Plato 1998: 3.127d–128e), to demonstrate the absurdity of admitting that the text may exist at once as the original text and as the translated text: given that it is impossible for the nonsimilar to be similar and for the similar to be nonsimilar, it is also impossible for translations to exist, for they would have to submit to impossible conditions. Instead, expressed in terms of the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, the 'paradox of translation' may be identified by the fact that in order to reach the text to be translated the translation must catch up with the former, which is at an advantage simply because it started out first.

The argument maintained by Achilles and the tortoise, as reported in *Physica* (1983: 239b: 14–20) by Aristotle, is that the slowest will never be reached in the race by the fastest. In fact the pursuer should be the first to reach the point where the fugitive started, but the slowest will always be slightly ahead with respect to the fastest. This argument is identical to the paradox of the arrow: in fact the arrow will never reach its objective because it must move across a sequence of infinite halves in a route whose segments are divisible *ad infinitum*. But in Achilles's argument the distance that remains to be covered each time Achilles attempts to reach the tortoise is not progressively divided into half.

Borges's formulation of this argument is slightly different: Achilles is ten times faster than the tortoise. For this reason when he races against the tortoise he gives it a ten-meter advantage. But if, as we started by saying, Achilles runs ten times faster than the tortoise, it follows that while Achilles runs a meter, the tortoise runs a decimeter; while Achilles runs a decimeter, the tortoise runs a centimeter; while Achilles runs a centimeter, the tortoise runs a millimeter, and so forth ad infinitum. Therefore, swift-footed Achilles will never reach the slow tortoise.

Borges reports and examines various attempts at confuting Zeno of Elea's unquestionable paradox: the attempt made by Thomas Hobbes, Stuart Mill (*System of Logic*), Henri Bergson ('Essay upon the immediate data of consciousness'), William James, who maintained that Zeno's paradox is an attack not only on the reality of space, but also on the more invulnerable and subtle reality of time (*Some Problems of Philosophy*), and lastly by Bertrand Russell (*Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy: Our Knowledge of the External World*). The latter was the only one considered by Borges to be worthy of the "original" from the viewpoint of argumentative force. The 'original' is in double quotes because all successive confutations competing with Zeno's paradox and attempting to equal it in argumentative ability may be considered variants or *translations* of the primary text.

As Borges informs us in his equally paradoxical story in *Ficciones*, dedicated to Pierre Menard, author of *Quijote*, the latter also takes an interest in the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. The book in question, listed among works by Pierre Menard, is *Les problèmes d'un problème*, dated 1917 (Paris), where the author discusses the various solutions to the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise in chronological order and cites, in the second edition, the following advice from Leibniz: 'Ne craignez pas, monsieur, la tortue'.

Why should we fear the slow tortoise? Because of his advantage, because of the time-lapse separating it like an abyss, in space and time, from swift Achilles. To fear the tortoise is to fear the original in translation, with its advantage of being first. The text that translates it inevitably comes second. To fear and faithfully respect the original: to the point of deciding, as did Menard, not to compose another *Quijote*, but *the Quijote*, the unique, original *Quijote*. Of course, it is not a question of imitating or copying, for this would mean to repropose the advantage of the original, to transform *Quijote* composed by Menard into a second text.

Menard had a sacred fear of the original, but at the same time he did not fear the possibility of the ambition of producing pages that

coincided word by word with those of Miguel de Cervantes. Menard succeeded in composing chapters 9 and 38 from the first part of *Quijote*. What was the expedient he used? After having excluded the idea of competing with Cervantes (who was decidedly at an advantage simply because he was able to undertake the same artwork in a previous epoch) by identifying with his life, times, biographical context, and reaching *Quijote* having become in a manner Cervantes, it appeared to Menard that the greatest challenge was that of remaining Menard and of reaching *Quijote* through his own experience.

Menard's *Quijote* (a fragmentary work, to complete it one must be immortal) is only *verbally* identical to Cervantes's *Quijote*. To evidence the difference, Borges refers to a passage from *Quijote* by Cervantes (Part I, chapter 9) and to the corresponding passage from *Quijote* by Menard. Even though the two passages coincide by the letter, that by Menard, a contemporary of Williams James, sounds clearly pragmatic. And differently from Cervantes, Menard's historical truth, discussed in exactly the same terms in both passages, is not what happened but what we judge happened. Achilles can recover the tortoise's advantage and supersede it simply because it was Achilles who gave it the advantage, who allowed it to start first, to be first, so that in the last analysis it is the tortoise that depends on Achilles who, with the generosity of his gesture, precedes and surpasses the tortoise. Time plays its part as well. The style of Menard's *Quijote* inevitably tends to be archaic and affected, while Cervantes's *Quijote* is unconstrained and actual with respect to the Spanish of his times.

Another case in which the text that comes after claims its place before the original, indeed claims to be the very original, though in this case questioning it, asserting its difference with respect to the original, and disputing not only the prescribed text but also the language into which it is translated, overturning the logic and order of the discourse of representation, is that by Antonin Artaud (1989) translator of Lewis Carroll. In *L'arve et l'aume*, translation of the chapter on Humpty Dumpty in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Artaud's crossing through the text by Carroll (to read is 'to read *across*', 'to read *through*') becomes a cruel antigrammatical enterprise against Carroll himself and the French language. Similarly to the theater of cruelty, 'existence' and 'flesh', body and life are all at stake in this translation.

Carroll's wordplay does not go beyond a caricature of the exchange between *signifié* and *signifiant*. He does not succeed in denouncing hypocrisies, removals, suppressions on which that exchange is based, nor does he alter social structures, the mechanisms of production, the ideological

assumptions to which exchange is functional. Carroll glimpses at the looking glass, but he knows how to keep away the double he indistinctly catches sight of — the shadow. An infinity of heartless, psychic trickeries. An affected language. The battle of the deep, its monsters, mix-up of bodies, turmoil, subversion of order, encounter between the bottom-most and the elevated, food and excrement, eating words, *Alice's Adventures Underground* (the original title of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*), all this is supplanted, as observed by Deleuze, by a play of surfaces: rather than collapse, lateral sliding movements (cf. Deleuze 1996: 37–38).

Therefore with respect to Artaud's antigrammatical enterprise, the text by Carroll is a bad imitation, a vulgar reproduction. The presumed original is no more than the expression of edulcorated plagiarism, devoid of the punch and vigor of a work written by Artaud first. And Artaud wants a postscriptum added to the publication of *L'arve et l'aume* notifying his sensation that the poem on fish, being, obedience, the 'principle' of the sea, and God, in his translation of Carroll, revelation of a blinding truth, had in fact been conceived and written by himself, Antonin Artaud, in other centuries, and then rediscovered in the hands of Carroll (cf. Ponzio 1997 and 1998; Petrilli 1999).

A case of metempsychosis, the original text is reincarnated in a bloodless and weak body and frees itself by returning, in Artaud's writing, to being what it was. It is not only a question of transmigration from one author to another, but also from one language to another. It is a question of freeing the text from the body of language, including the language into which it is translated. Is this an extreme case? Or is every translation — every translation of a literary text — the transmigration of a text that wants to get free of its own language, its own author, its own contemporaneity? But isn't every text a prisoner of its own times and the very fact of reading it, an attempt at freeing it? And once it has been read or translated doesn't it become prisoner yet again in the new text that interprets it? Every reading, every translation, is a transmigration. An infinite transmigration. The question itself of translation is a paradox. The text withdraws from both the reading-text and the translation-text because it is unreachable, but because of this it remains a prisoner in endless transmigrations.

Borges calls all the arguments and reasonings that reproduce Zeno's paradox 'avatares de la tortuga'. This paradox and all its metempsychoses deal with the concept that corrupts and drives others mad, the concept of the *infinite*. The idea of the infinite is present in the expression itself, 'la perpetua carrera de Aquiles y la tortuga', which, as we know, is the title of one of the two texts by Borges dedicated to the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise.

This is the infinite of 'nothing new under the sun' in *Ecclesiastes*, in *Qohélet*. 'Havèl havalim' 'Un infinito vuoto', as translated into Italian by Ceronetti (1970) and subsequently, in his continual revisitation of the same text, 'Fumo di fumi'. This is Saint Jerome's 'vanitas vanitatum', he too a translator who reflects upon the paradox of translation (*Liber de optimo interpretandi*). His motto was 'non verbum e verbo reddere, sed sensum exprimere de sensu', even though, as observed by Derrida (2000: 30), he had attempted to make an exception for the mysterious word order in the Bible (*verborum ordo mysterium*).

This is the infinite of Achilles's perpetual pursuit of the tortoise, of the translation's pursuit of the text.

Andare e girare il vento / Da Sud a Settentrione / Girare girare andare / Del vento nel suo girare / Tutti i fiumi senza riempirlo / Si gettano nel mare / Sempre alla stessa foce / Si vanno i fiumi a gettare / Si stanca qualsiasi parola / Di più non puoi farle dire. (*Qohélet*, It. trans. in Ceronetti 1970)

Andato a Sud gira a Nord / Il vento nel suo andare / Dopo giri su giri / Il vento ricomincia il suo girare / Si versano nel mare tutti i fiumi / Senza riempire il mare / E là dove si versano / Seguiranno ad andare / Stancabile è ogni parola / Oltre il dire non può. (*Qohélet*, in Ceronetti 1988)

Borges knows of the *infinite*, he knows of the tortoise's perpetual race and of the tortoise's metempsychoses, but not as a philosopher who wishes to solve paradoxes. He knows as a writer and translator, because of his experience of texts, of his practice in reading-rewriting. He knows of the *infinite*, like 'our' Leopardi, he too a translator-writer: 'lo chiamerei *Ecclesiastes noster*, se *noster* non ponesse limiti, a Leopardi e a Qohélet, come se fosse meno nostro il Vecchio di Gerusalemme perché nato e morto in Giudea, e meno nato in Giudea, e vivente dappertutto, un poeta di Recanati' (Ceronetti 1970: 94).

Borges, in 'Ecclesiastés, 1-9', included in *La cifra* (Borges 1981), expresses the idea of the infinite in the qohéletic terms of a perpetual restarting, a perpetual tending towards, a perpetual running under the sun. With its slow indifferent restarting the sun advances beyond such movements making them appear static, as though they were blocked in their pose outstretched towards something, but destined to remain without satisfaction, without gratification, without conclusion.

No puedo ejecutar un acto nuevo, / tejo y torno a tejer la misma fábula, / repito un repetido endecasílabo, / digo lo que los otros me dijeron, / siento la mismas cosas en la misma / hora del día o de la abstracta noche. (Borges 1981, in Borges 1985: 1166)

Through his paradoxes Zeno posed the problem of the infinite, but not with the presumption of solving it, like other philosophers. Indeed, we could say that if philosophy consists in questioning the ethics of accumulation and productivity and in evidencing the nonfunctional character of what is properly human (cf. Ponzio 1997), the philosopher is he who, like Zeno of Elea, rediscovers the (qohéletic) truth of the paradox of swift-footed Achilles who was defeated by the slow tortoise, even when, as in the case of Alexander the Great, he was indoctrinated by one of the most important philosophers ever, Aristotle (cf. Ponzio 1990), and not by the centaur Cheiron.

Borges could have compiled a 'mobile story' of the idea of the infinite, which like 'numerous Idra' reappears always again in man's meditation: an 'illusory' biography of the infinite starting from Zeno's paradoxes: more exactly, registration of the metempsychoses of Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, the metempsychoses of the tortoise.

'Metempsychosis of the tortoise' is the 'argument of the third man' used by Aristotle against the Platonic doctrine of ideas. In simplified form, this argument may be expressed by saying that beyond the empirical man and the man of ideas, there exists the relation between these two terms and therefore there should also exist the idea of this relation, and accordingly the relation with this idea, and consequently the idea of this relation, and so forth ad infinitum. To demonstrate that the one is in reality many, Plato himself had already used an analogous argument in *Parmenides*, in a clearly Zenonian style, maintaining that if one exists, then being and one exist, and accordingly there exist two terms; if each of these two is one, it includes being and one, therefore the terms are four, and so forth, in geometrical progression. Another one of the tortoise's metempsychoses is the argument held by Sextus Empiricus concerning the vanity of definition, for all terms used in the definition should also be defined as well as the definition itself, in a process that is potentially infinite. Analogously, on dedicating his book *Don Juan* to Coleridge, Byron writes the following: 'I wish he would explain His Explanation'. Among the various cases of 'avatares de la tortuga', cited by Borges, he counts William James (*Some Problems of Philosophy*) who denies that ten minutes can pass, because first of all seven must pass, and before seven, three and-a-half, and before three and-a-half, a minute and three-quarters, and so forth, through the tenuous labyrinths of time (cf. Borges 1939a, 'Avatares de la tortuga', in Borges 1984: 398).

Among the tortoise's metempsychoses we believe that the metempsychosis of the text in its readings and in its translations should doubtlessly be counted. Not only is the existence of the translation-text

a paradox, but also that of the reading-text. The text is one and cannot be many, for the many would be contradictorily similar and dissimilar by comparison. At the same time, however, from one the text becomes two because of the very fact of existing, and from two it becomes three, and so forth ad infinitum. The text itself is an infinite metempsychosis. This is so because of its very nature as a sign.

As clearly demonstrated by Charles S. Peirce, meaning is not in the sign but in the relation among signs. Reference is not only to the signs of a defined and closed system, those forming a code, *langue*, but also to signs as they are encountered in the interpretive process that knows no boundaries or impediments in moving across different sign types and different sign systems. And such a process is so much more capable of rendering the meaning of a sign the more interpretation is not just mere repetition, literal translation, synonymic substitution, but reelaboration and explicative reformulation: interpretation that is risky in the sense that no guarantee is offered by the possibility of appeal to a unique and preestablished code that is exempt from the risks of interpretation.

Identity of the sign calls for its continuous displacement, so that each time the sign is interpreted it becomes other, it is in fact another sign that acts as an interpretant. The sign's identity is achieved in its metempsychoses, in its transmigrations from one sign to another. Identification of the sign is not possible if not by exhibiting another sign. The sign can only be captured as the reflection in the mirror of another sign, and is made of all the deformations involved in such a play of mirrors (cf. Ponzio, Calefato, and Petrilli 1999; Petrilli 1998). The text itself is a paradox; one of the 'tortoise's metempsychoses'.

It is clear that the paradox of translation is the paradox itself of the text and of the sign.

On the other hand, if the question of similarity is central to translation, it is not less important for the text, itself an interpretant before becoming an interpreted sign of other interpretants in the processes of reading and translating.

Even the relation between the text and what it deals with appears in terms of similarity. And that which characterizes the literary text, and the artistic text generally, as Bakhtin in particular has contributed in demonstrating (Ponzio 1999), is that similarity presents itself in terms of 'rendering', and not as the copy, as imitation, representation, nor in terms of identification, unification.

To say it with Paul Klee, the text — literary, pictorial, artistic in general — does not render the visible — as does the theater text in the world of representation — but renders visible. *Per invisibilia visibilia*, according to an ancient formula of the Fathers of the Church and the

II Nicene Council. Therefore, the literary and in general artistic text may be characterized in terms of the *icon* and not of the *idol* (Ponzio 1998–99).

The literary text too, is originally an interpretant. It renders itself before being rendered in turn, made visible, in another language, through translation. Similarly, the literary text in translation is turned to *rendering visible*; it too relates to the other and not to the identical. The artistic work as such, as shown by Lévinas in 'La réalité et son ombre' (Lévinas 1994: 123–148), renders the alterity that any identity carries like its own shadow and does not succeed in cancelling. First of all the identity of self.

At a certain point in the text by Lévinas the name of Zeno of Elea appears, and reference is made to his first paradox, that of the arrow: 'Zénon, cruel Zénon ... Cette flèche ...' (Lévinas 1994: 142). Lévinas does not tell us, but this is a citation from *Le cimetière marin* by Valéry, where reference is also made to Zeno's second paradox concerning the tortoise, and where Achilles who does not succeed in catching up with the slow tortoise is the identity of self which does not succeed in standing up to its own alterity, in leaving its own shadow. To say it with Peirce, the self, the subject, is also a sign and therefore it is continuously displaced, rendered other, in a process of deferrals from one interpretant to another, without ever being able to coincide with itself.

Before reference to Zeno (strophe 21), in *Le cimetière marin* (strophe 13), the only change with respect to the sun hanging motionless in the sky at midday is represented by the self ('Midi là-haut, Midi sans mouvement / ... Je suis en toi le secret changement'). In strophe 21, the situation is overturned: despite the self's struggles, nothing new under the sun, shadow of the tortoise for the self, which, by comparison, like Achilles, though running fast seems motionless.

Zénon! Cruel Zénon! Zénon d'Élée! / M'as-tu percé de cette flèche ailée / Qui vibre, vole, et qui ne vole pas! / Le son m'enfante et la flèche me tue! / Ah! Le soleil ... Quelle ombre de tortue / Pour l'âme, Achille immobile à grands pas! (Valéry 1995)

Zenon! Crudele! Zenone eleata / M'hai tu trafitto con la freccia alata, / Che vibra, vola, eppure in vol non è! / Mi dà il suon vita che la freccia fuga, / Ah! Questo sole ... Ombra di tartaruga / Per l'io, l'immoto Achille lesto piè! (Valéry 1999–2000: 245)

Let us now return to the paradox of the text and its translation. Insofar as it is identical and other, similar and dissimilar, not only is the artwork

a living image of the tortoise's metempsychosis, but it also renders visible, qohéletically, how any identity is a living image of the tortoise's metempsychosis, how reality itself is such. As says Lévinas, in the case of the artwork similarity appears 'non pas comme le résultat d'une comparaison entre l'image et l'original, mais comme le mouvement même qui engendre l'image. La réalité ne serait pas seulement ce qu'elle est, ce qu'elle se dévoile dans la vérité, mais aussi son double, son ombre, son image' (Lévinas 1994: 133; cf. also Ponzio 1996: 127-142).

This is what Peirce in his typology of signs describes as the 'icon', which is characterized by similarity, alongside the 'symbol' characterized by conventionality, and the 'index' characterized by contingency and causality. An icon, says Peirce, is the sign that possesses the character that renders it significant independently from what it relates to through similarity, it is the sign that signifies even when that to which it refers does not belong to the world of visible, empirical objects, as occurs in the case of a streak of chalk considered as the icon of a geometrical line. 'An *icon* is a sign that would possess the character that renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line' (CP 2.304).

The literary text itself, and not only its translation, possesses the character of 'icon', that is, it is in a relation of similarity with the invisible, with the other of the identical, with the shadow of reality, which it renders visible in its very invisibility, in its irreducible alterity through the movement itself of its making as a sign through similarity. This is the sense in which we may say that the 'original text' has the character of 'icon' and not of 'idol'. The text becomes an idol when it expects to be exhausted in its identity and its alterity is denied.

Image-icon versus image-idol. In *Le Cimetière marin* by Valéry, we find the word 'idol' in the line 'De mille et mille idoles du soleil'. In the Spanish translation by Néstor Ibarra, published in 1932, with a preface by Borges (1932d), 'idoles' is incorrectly translated with 'images', even though *images* is, as maintained by Borges, 'the etymological equivalent of *idoles*'. In spite of the etymology, historically, beginning from the defense of the cult of icons (eighth century), the image is not only an idol, but it is also an icon.

However, precisely because the original text, in this case *Le Cimetière marin*, is also an icon just as its translation is an icon, the translation, as in the case of the translation by Néstor Ibarra, may in fact surpass the original in iconicity. Borges registers this appropriately with a line by

Ibarra: 'La pérdida del rumor de la ribera', with respect to which the line by Valéry: 'Le changement des rives en rumeur', seems an imitation given that by comparison with the former, says Borges, it does not succeed in integrally restoring the whole Latin 'savor'. To blindly maintain the opposite only because the line by Valéry is the original, means to privilege Valéry, the author-man who only comes first on a temporal level, with respect to Valéry, the author-creator who instead, for that which concerns this line, would seem to come second on the level of iconic rendering, on the level of picturing or portrayal, given that the line by Valéry would seem to be the bad copy of the Castilian text. Artaud maintains exactly the same thing with respect to Carroll, when he claims that his translation is the original text. This is possible because between two texts both icons, that by the author and that by the translator, that by the translator may well surpass the first in iconicity, rendering far better that which it intends to render.

To be the first among texts does not stop the second from surpassing the first, for not only is the second an interpretant sign and an icon, but first as well; indeed, there is no first text but only a succession of interpretants, and each overtaking is succeeded by a new overtaking: the text is another of the tortoise's metempsychoses; the text flourishes in its transmigrations from one text to another. This does not only happen among texts written in different languages, in translation, but also in the same language and in the same body of literature. To assume that a new combination of elements (says Borges in the first page of his text on *Le Cimetière marine* by Valéry, which is almost the same as the first page of his text on the 'las versiones homéricas') is necessarily inferior to the original text means to assume that a subsequent draft is necessarily inferior to the antecedent, given that there exist nothing else but drafts. In other words, we could state that there exists nothing else but a succession of interpretant texts, all icons. To believe that the 'original text' and the 'definitive text' are excluded from this succession of icons is idolatry.

The relation of iconic similarity distinguishes translation from dubbing. Dubbing produces 'phonetic-visual anomalies', says Borges, the arbitrary grafting onto a person's body, onto his or her features, gestures and movements, of another voice, in another language. A kind of praise of translation runs through the whole corpus of Borges's writings, but Borges takes a stand against dubbing (cf. Borges 1945, 'Sobre el doblaje', It. trans. in Borges 1984: 434-455). Dubbing is a substitution. Translation would also seem to be a substitution, but only as the result of idolatry of the 'original'.

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Special Issue

Jorge Luis Borges: The praise of signs

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LISA BLOCK DE BEHAR

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