

Reading and translation in Borges's *Autobiographical Essay*

AUGUSTO PONZIO

Un lector

Que otros se jacten de las páginas que han escrito;
a mí me enorgullecen las que he leído.
No habré sido un filólogo,
no habré inquirido las declinaciones, los modos, la laboriosa
mutación de las letras,
la *de* que se endurece en *te*,
la equivalencia de la *ge* y de la *ka*,
pero a lo largo de mis años he profesado
la pasión del lenguaje.
Mis noches están llenas de Virgilio;
haber sabido y haber olvidado el latín
es una posesión, porque el olvido
es una de las formas de la memoria, su vago sótano,
la otra cara secreta de la moneda.
Cuando en mis ojos se borraron
las vanas apariencias queridas,
los rostros y la página,
me di al estudio del lenguaje de hierro
que usaron mis mayores para cantar
espadas y soledades,
y ahora, a través de siete siglos,
desde la Última Thule,
tu voz me llega, Snorri Sturluson.
El joven, ante el libro, se impone una disciplina precisa
y lo hace en pos de un conocimiento preciso;
a mis años, toda empresa es una aventura
que linda con la noche.
No acabaré de descifrar las antiguas lenguas del Norte,
no hundiré las manos ansiosas en el oro de Sigurd;
la tarea que emprendo es ilimitada
y ha de acompañarme hasta el fin,
no menos misteriosa que el universo
y que yo, el aprendiz.

— Jorge Luis Borges

In the Jorge Luis Borges household the languages commonly spoken were English and Spanish, a fact that was to play a significant role in his intellectual development. Subsequently, Borges was also to learn French, Latin and German. Another determining factor, the most important, was his father's library which contained several thousands of volumes.

Multiple languages and multiple writings: an advantage for the development of the mind. Even more so, however, if these languages and writings talk to each other, look at each other through the gaze of the other, enter into dialogue with each other. Translation is this dialogue. And Borges's development took place in the context of such a dialogue. Translation was an experience of central importance in his reading and writing.

The first books he read were in English, *Don Quixote* included. His first readings counted the writings of Poe, Dickens, Lewis Carroll, as well as Grimm's fairy tales and Burton's *The Arabian Nights*.

In his writings, including his *Autobiographical Essay* (Borges 1970) (the main source of information for our present reflections), Borges repeatedly returns to the question of the real *Don Quixote*: in relation to his experience as reader. Borges read *Don Quixote* for the first time in English, so that when he read it in the original the effect was like reading a bad translation. Consequently, what counts as the original ends up being the first in the order of a succession, where the fact that this succession may only concern one's personal experience is of no importance.

This means to privilege not only the language of the text in which it was first encountered (independently from whether it is the original or a translation), but also its typographical format. Reading *Don Quixote* in a different edition from the red volumes and gold letters of the Garnier edition in his father's library (which at a certain point was lost) gave Borges the impression that it wasn't the real *Don Quixote*. The 'real *Don Quixote*' was returned to him years later by a friend who found the Garnier edition with the same illustrations, notes, even the same misprints, all of which for Borges were part of the text.

He began writing at the age of six or seven. He compiled an English handbook in Greek mythology. He imitated Miguel de Cervantes. And in the same style he wrote his first novel, *La visera fatal*. At the age of nine he translated *The Happy Prince* by Oscar Wilde into Spanish. This was published in *El País*, a daily newspaper in Buenos Aires, and given that it was signed Jorge Borges, people thought that the translation was by his father.

Writing in the language of the other (but language is always the other's!) and in the style of another, playing on ambiguity, signing with

the name of another and being taken for another: all these expedients are used by Borges as he searches for his 'own' writing position which, in fact, is the position of the other. The writer as I cannot say anything.

Among these expedients, expedients of the *apprentice* (the writer is an apprentice through to the very end, forever), translation occupies a place of first importance. Writing is always rewriting, the reading-text become writing-text, in love with the text it rewrites like Menard, author of *Quixote*. Translation avoids such paradoxical and extreme cases of rewriting as is Menard's, simply because in the case of translating the text is certainly rewritten, but in another language.

However, one's very relation to the world passes through reading. For Borges who was a writer from the very beginning, his relation to the world ensued from an originary reading position. In this case too, the original is a text, more exactly a translation: the world said in the language of a text. I would take an interest in things, said Borges, after having found them in books, translated, transposed into signs, in verbal signs, but more precisely in written signs, and specifically the signs of literary writing.

Borges the writer knew that not only his relation to the world originated from the discourse of others but also his very vocation as a writer. That he was to become a writer was 'established tacitly' from very childhood, that is from the moment his father became blind.

'Established tacitly': at the beginning of writing there can only be that which is writing, that is, taciturnity. The writer, says Bakhtin, is he who clothes himself in silence, he who uses language while standing outside it, he who has the gift of indirect speaking.

To speak of one's vocation as a writer, like speaking of one's birth, is to pass from one's own discourse to the discourse of others, to reported discourse. But in the case of one's birth as a writer, reported discourse is not in the direct form because it is not direct, explicit, but expressed tacitly. The destiny of the writer is established tacitly by others.

Nor does one necessarily become a writer; the destiny of writer is not said: it is established tacitly and by others. One would have expected me to become a writer, says Borges. And similarly to the silence of literary writing, this tacit expectation is far more capable of inciting, provoking, defying than any other linguistic act whatsoever: you are a writer but this is not said. Similar unsaid things, says Borges, are far more important than those which are only spoken about.

Even the way Borges, as writer, felt the language on which and with which he worked depended on his relation to the language of others, to a language that was foreign. The writer is he who uses language while standing outside it, in a relation of extralocality with language.

This is foreseen even by a single language, by its internal plurilinguism, by virtue of which an internal language can be considered from the viewpoint of another internal language; all the same the relation of extralocality is chiefly achieved through knowledge of a foreign language.

As an Argentinian writer Borges necessarily used Spanish and therefore he perceived its defects — for example, Spanish words he said were long and cumbersome. Similarly, Goethe complained about German as the worst language in the world, while on the contrary, Borges considered it an extremely beautiful language. I imagine, observed Borges, that most writers think the same of the language they must *struggle* with. But the same thing is true for translators. Experience as translator, as in the case of Borges, sharpens the sense of extraneousness towards one's own language, the sense of its resistance, of its hostility.

On criticizing the Saussurean concept of language as a system that imposes itself on the speaker, Bakhtin observes that when the relation between the language and speaker is conceived in terms of imposition and passive acceptance, the model referred to is the foreign language and even more so dead languages. The study of foreign languages and especially dead languages, philologism, subtends Saussurean linguistics. It is not exact to say that the speaker suffers or passively accepts his own language. We do not have the speaking subject, the individual, on one side, and language on the other, which as a social fact is not considered as a function of the speaking subject, but as a product that the individual registers passively. We do not 'accept' our own mother tongue, observes Bakhtin; it is inside one's own language that we reach consciousness for the first time. Language does not impose itself on the person who speaks it: it is the place where consciousness is awakened for the first time.

Only in the foreign language is a relation of opposition established between speech and language that imposes itself as a system of norms and must be accepted. But it is precisely this relation with the foreign language that permits distancing, extralocality with respect to one's own language, the mother tongue, the language where consciousness is originally formed. The condition for becoming a writer is his participation in such an extralocalized relation to language.

To perceive the extraneousness of one's own language as though it were a foreign language, or better to *recognize* it as belonging to others, as other, is to realize that we are not the owners of our own language and places the writer in the same position as translator. Borges's *Autobiographical Essay* testifies to this intimate relation between writer and translator, more precisely between reading, translating, and rewriting: Borges reader-translator-writer.

What the translator and writer have in common is the fact that neither of them use language directly, neither speak in their own name.

Whoever presents himself with his own, direct word is a journalist, literary critic, expert in a given discipline, or whatever, but not a *writer*. A writer cannot say anything in his own name.

The *other* is the starting point of literary writing. The artwork characterizes itself as *other* with respect to its author. Its otherness, its irreducibility to the subject that produced it, its disengagement in relation to a project that responds to the economy of the subject, with respect to which, as Bakhtin says, it appears *transcendent* or *transgredient*, confers literary validity upon the artwork.

As author-man, the writer says nothing. In the literary work, the author-writer speaks through the various forms of silence including parody, irony, allegory, etc. Silence eludes the *order of discourse* (Foucault 1996). It is endowed with the characteristics that Blanchot attributes to the *other night*, that which *does not serve the productivity of the day*.

Similarly to the translator, the writer, finds himself in the position of having to 'struggle', says Borges, with his own language, feeling all its materiality, objectivity, extraneousness. For the writer-translator the verbal presents itself in the terms described by Roland Barthes in *Lezione* (1981), language is a legislation and *langue* its code.

The writer-translator is he who directly experiences the power of language, he who clearly perceives that the characteristic of language is not so much that it enables us to say, but that it obliges us to say. Servility and power indissolubly merge in language. It is not possible to get free of language. However, it is possible to get free of one's own language, for it can be used while standing outside it, it can be 'cheated', as Barthes says, by exerting a 'displacement' action on it (1981); literary writing is this 'healthy fraud', this defiance of language, this possibility for he who uses it from the outside of withdrawing from servility and power. But it is the foreign language that creates a solid external position in the light of which the writer (who because of this is always to an extent a writer-translator) can gain consciousness of the predetermination inherent in the use of language, and therefore exert a displacement action on it — this being the task of the writer. To use language standing outside it, this *antigrammatical enterprise* (Artaud 1989) towards language and its ontology, confers a subversive character upon literary writing: *non suspect subversion* (Jabès 1984).

Literary writing dupes verbal language, it cheats the discourse of identity, difference, roles. To make fun of language, to play with signs, cheating them, is irony achieved by literary writing. Bakhtin describes this mechanism in terms of reduced laughter, a way of defending oneself,

by keeping silent, from the deafening noise of ordinary communication that covers the multiplicity of voices and channels them into monological discourse, uniting them into a single individual and collective identity, forcing them into a single sense, a single story. Literary writing puts into crisis the right to ownership over the word as well as the category itself of subject. It appears as a sort of disarranging, breakdown of the self, especially in certain genres and certain works, as a form of self-distancing, disengagement with respect to the authoritative, unilaterally ideological word. And even when literature attempts to forget its character of nonfunctionality by engaging in political and social action, such engagement takes the form of disengagement and action becomes literary if, as Blanchot observes, the character of artwork is to endure.

Of some interest are considerations made by Kierkegaard (1989, 1995), theoretician of the indirect word — *doctor in irony*, as he said of himself ironically, having written a thesis on irony in Socrates. The direct, objective word, he says, is not concerned with otherness, with otherness from self and of self, if not to overcome it, englobe it, assimilate it. The direct word is uniquely attentive to itself, therefore it does not constitute communication proper but contributes solely to maintaining the noise of communication. The silence, the *taciturnity* of literary writing is subversive as regards the order of dominant communication. Indirect discourse is hospitality towards otherness, listening, so that what the self communicates is communicated not as master but as attentive disciple, not with the authority of the author-writer but with the disposability of the reader-writer, translator-writer. As writer Borges boasts especially about his qualification as 'reader', for this is what connotes him best in his practice as 'apprentice': 'Que otros se jacten de las páginas que han escrito; / a mí me enorgullecen las que he leído'.

Literary language places the subject in relation to that which is other with respect to his identity, his objective word, the horizon of Being, the horizon of the possibility of the Same and of the Totality, as Lévinas would say: an otherness beyond ontology, knowledge, truth, utility, the economy of equal exchange, of the power of speaking. As says Blanchot evoking Mallarmé, the artwork is achieved as from the disappearance of the author, as from the absence of the writer-man, as from the omission of self, a sort of death created by writing as regards the subject who speaks in order to have and to can, to know and to possess, to judge and to teach.

Not only does the writer, similarly to the translator, not answer for contents or ideas that belong to different subjects, points of view, to the character, the narrator, the self of the lyrical composition; but even more

than this the style of writing is not his own. The writer speaks in different styles according to literary genre, personages, how he imagines the narrator would speak, etc. The writer does not have a style of his own. He stages styles and discourses, he renders them without identifying with any of them. The subjects who speak thanks to the writer have their own style and their own situation, they are situated; on the contrary, the writer is without a style or situation.

For Blanchot as well, the only possible perspective for the writer is the 'outside'. Writing, understood as the practice of the writer, 'intransitive' writing as described by Barthes (1981), requires a break in the relation to the world of normal life. This separation, this being on the outside is what characterizes the writer's point of view as he places his personages in the indefinite time of dying. All this is connected with the theme of the disappearance of the author in the artwork, of the writer as the place of absence, which Blanchot takes up from Mallarmé.

The relation between writing and death saves us from death that is nothing else but death, the consequence of a vision of life which when lived and exploited productivistically tends to be nothing else but life. Such an attitude, which forgets nonfunctionality inscribed in the 'incurable deviance' (Baudrillard 1976) that is death, nonfunctionality that makes of every human being an end in itself, a value in itself, ends up transforming life into something that is not life. Such a vision of life silences (and this is the silence which literature vindicates and redeems) the carnival-like view of the 'grotesque body' (described by Bakhtin in his study on Rabelais) in which death and life are indissolubly connected.

The deception of language (in the dual sense that it deceives itself and deceives us) consists in the illusion, says Blanchot, of enclosing absence in a presence firmly and definitively. Sense is obtained at the price of a void in existence and presence. On giving us the idea of a thing, the sense of a word denies its being as a thing. The use of things involves their negation, their death which makes them present to us; the illusory presence of an absence that tells of their otherness, their materiality. The being of things is only apparently negated in their tacit and faithful compliance towards us; they last and survive, indifferent to their 'owners'. This is claimed in a poem by Borges:

Las cosas

El bastón, las monedas, el llavero,
La dócil cerradura, las tardías
Notas que no leerán los pocos días

Que me quedan, los naipes y el tablero,
 Un libro y en sus páginas la ajada
 Violeta, monumento de una tarde
 Sin duda inolvidable y ya olvidada,
 El rojo espejo occidental en que arde
 Una ilusoria aurora. ¡Cuántas cosas,
 Limas, umbrales, atlas, copas, clavos,
 Nos sirven como tácitos esclavos,
 Ciegas y extrañamente sigilosas!
 Durarán más allá de nuestro olvido;
 No sabrán nunca que nos hemos ido.

(Borges 1989/96: 2.370)

However, language is also plurivocality, misunderstanding, contradiction. Beyond the word that tends towards stability and unequivocity, to the fullness of sense (and in which misunderstanding, emptiness, and absence are badly hidden) we have a word whose sense is imprecise, ambiguous, deferred, made of references to other words, in a never-ending play of *renvois*. A diseased word, as Blanchot would say, sick with a disease that is the word's health: a word that is fundamentally a lack, a request, a question, and which consequently expresses negation, emptiness, absence in which language is grounded.

Writing knows of the death that language confers upon things when it says them. The language of writing becomes ambiguous and says the absence of things, their interdicted presence. Literary language defies the kind of language that, on the contrary, intends to reveal things and determine them, it says their nothingness with respect to what direct language makes them by denying them.

Praise of plurivocality, of ambiguity, of the indirect word, of a word without power, outside the dialectics of the relation between master and slave, is praise of literary writing. It is also 'praise of the shadow', as understood by Borges in his collection of poems, *Elogio de la sombra*, and as understood also by Lévinas in his essay 'Reality and It's Shadow' (Lévinas 1976), dedicated to literary writing.

To gaze on things from the outside, from an extralocalized position, by no means implies an indifferent and objective gaze. As an effect of distancing, the extralocality of literary writing reinforces proximity, nonindifference: not only does the writer participate in life but he also loves it from the outside, with a love that we all recognize as true love for it is turned to life in its nonfunctionality. As a writer Borges was well aware of all this, just as he knew why his native city inspired his first published book of poems, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. In fact, he perceived

Buenos Aires with an interest and a thrill he had never felt before, thanks to a relation of extralocalization and a distance achieved with respect to that city after having spent a long period of time abroad.

Writing and translation share a love for what is distant.

Literary writing and translation also resemble each other because they both involve oblivion of self, they both request a great sense of hospitality from language, one's own or the other's, not for self but for others — the *other-author* in the case of the translator, the *other-hero* in the case of the writer.

This disposability for hospitality and reception is also the basis of literary writing, according to Borges, when created in collaboration. Borges wrote thrillers with Adolfo Bioy Casares, and when asked how they collaborated in writing, Borges replied that the first requisite was the capacity to abandon one's ego, one's vanity combined with a good dose of common courtesy.

Translation carries out a role of no small importance for literary writing, that of rendering the writer visible, the writer who as writer chooses to make himself invisible through silence; and, paradoxically, translation does this through another who has also chosen invisibility given that he does not speak in his own name, the translator.

Similarly, to sacred images the iconic character of literary translation renders the invisible visible, in fact we have seen that the author of a literary text (differently to the author of a text in literary criticism) puts himself aside. And this iconic character of literary translation is an aspect which must not be ignored for a full understanding of the all but simple relation between translation icon and original archetype.

The 'mundane' or 'prosaic' side of the relation between translation and writing in the case we are discussing consists in the fact that, until he was published in French, the writer Jorge Luis Borges (and from this point of view he is neither unique nor rare) was, as he declared himself with the subtle irony of the writer, practically 'invisible' — not only abroad but also at home, in Buenos Aires.

Translated by Susan Petrilli

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Special Issue

Jorge Luis Borges: The praise of signs

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