

Tradition and Treason, or the Tricks of Translation
in Borges's Prose

Marcy E. Schwartz
Rutgers University

Prepared for delivery at the 1998 meeting of the
Latin American Studies Association
The Palmer House Hilton Hotel, Chicago, Illinois
September 24-26, 1998

In the field of translation in Latin America, Jorge Luis Borges stands out as a practitioner and as a stimulating force behind comparative literature and translation projects in Argentina. The role of translation in his work stretches beyond his own translations from English to infiltrate his essays and fiction. Translation forms part of his narrative strategies that present the narrator as a recorder or commentator on other culture's writings. He teasingly obscures his role as author through the invention of scribes, translators, ethnographers, and scholars who work from the sidelines. He exposes translators' mastery in order to side-step the main textual event, often regarding the translation--artistically and culturally--more highly than the "original."

This peripheral, or displaced, perspective in his writing parallels the cultural politics of his self-declared marginality as an Argentine intellectual who confronts world literature as a critic, translator, poet and fiction writer. As Beatriz Sarlo states in her book, JLB: A Writer on the Edge,

To read all world literature in Buenos Aires, to rewrite some of its texts, is an experience which cannot be compared to that of the writer who works on the secure terrain of a homeland that offers him or her an untroubled cultural tradition. (36)

Borges's translation episodes explore the issues of sacred and secular, local and foreign, verbal and non-verbal communication, the literary canon and its periphery. The insistence on translation in his essays and fiction questions those very categories and reasserts the periphery over the center.

While many of Borges's stories hint at or toy with translation ("Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote," "El etnógrafo"), and still others pretend to be translations ("El jardín de

senderos que se bifurcan," "El inmortal," "Un problema," "El informe de Brodie," "La secta de los 30" and "Undr"), his story "El evangelio según Marcos" from the collection El informe de Brodie (1970) makes translation the center of its plot. The story borrows and transposes Bible stories, embedding them within dramatic reenactments, to reveal both the power and the peril of translating the sacred canon. In this short presentation, I'd like to discuss this story as emblematic in its use of intertextual narrative games for the purpose of Borges's complex positioning within world literature. Through an examination of the sacred and the profane, the oral and the written, and the original and the imitation, "El evangelio según Marcos" maps Borges's geocultural perspective by means of translation.

In "El evangelio según Marcos," Baltasar Espinoza, a medical student from Buenos Aires, goes to spend the summer on his cousin Daniel's ranch in the provinces. Daniel leaves within a few days for a business deal, leaving Baltasar at the ranch with the barely articulate foreman family, the Gutres. Heavy rains and flooding prolong Daniel's absence, and Baltasar emerges as the leader, teacher, interpreter, and new head of the household. In close quarters with the barely conversant Gutres as a result of the rain, he begins to read to them from a Bible he finds in English, spontaneously translating into Spanish. After numerous repetitions of Mark, the Gutres begin to attribute healing and mystical powers to their interim leader. Finally, when the rains cease, they lead Baltasar out to a patio where they have built a cross, destined for their transformed Christ-figure.

The protagonist of this story transmits the Gospel by retelling and reading aloud in translation for his listeners. The metanarrative incorporation of Biblical tales and their translation exploits Biblical oral tradition.¹ The text questions both oral and written sources, and hints at the notion of a unitary original, or universal textuality. The mastery of the translator together with the power of his sources and the circumstances of his delivery promise potent results before a suggestible audience, as the translated narration leads to crucifixion.

Baltasar confronts the challenges of communicating across a series of cultural and linguistic divides. The Biblical tales bridge the gaps in understanding beyond the translating character's linguistic prowess or uncertainty.² The translated Bible stories are spontaneous oral performances of human contact set against the characters' isolation. Baltasar resorts to

translating for moral and cultural survival. Borges's successful protagonist suffers quite an unexpected fate: the efficacy of his translation transposes his own epiphanic destruction.

The translation of Biblical tales in this story problematizes the resonances of historic, mythical and sacred texts that become incorporated into new settings. Displaced and linguistically transposed, these writings and readings are wrenched from their canonical contexts. The story manipulates Baltasar's tenuous relationship to the Bible and religion to heighten the irony of his destiny. The Biblical "original" persists as a force looming over the protagonist's translation.³ The responsibility inherent in trafficking with the sacred impinges on the translation scene. Conscious that some elements of the original's style and tone may come through, Baltasar adapts his own delivery. This is what compels him to stand at the table while reading, remembering his elocution lessons to tap into ancient oral culture and rhetoric (1070). His authoritative stance causes the Gutres to clear the table so as not to stain or mark the book.

Borges's narrator presents the activity and circumstances of the repeated Gospel readings without ever quoting Baltasar's translations. Excluding the reader from the discourse of Baltasar's performance reasserts the distance between textual versions. Borges creates a textual level in which only the Gutres participate, a structural segregation that underscores their marginality. At the end of "El evangelio según Marcos," the various layers overlap, and the gospel tale takes over Borges's story. Borges's text caves in on itself, creating an intertextual mise en abîme. Translation together with geographical isolation forms a vortex into which all versions fall.

Baltasar's crucifixion, and its intertextual circumscription, leaves the translation's meaning unresolved. The listeners' interpretation is either ironic or historically fated. Ironically, Baltasar's end could be considered a misguided act based on misinterpreting a translated text. His immortality then becomes a joke, the Gutres' privately canonized mistake. However, perhaps Baltasar's reckless trafficking in the sacred is all too effective and ensnares him in his own success. The story's finale is reminiscent of the early Bible translator burned at the stake. Baltasar's subtly efficient performance incites the Gutres to reenact Christ's fate with their substitute (translated) master because they no longer distinguish between

the original and his translation.

In "El evangelio según Marcos," the Bible's familiarity contrasts with the translator's groping and awkward communication with his audience. This framed tale is structured to implicate all levels of the story in competition for validity and verisimilitude.⁴ The activity of translation within the oral episodes contributes to this contest among the textual levels. Linguistic otherness allows the translator/protagonist more authorial leverage in his tale, marking his role as master of his version. The translator is cast in a performance role that remains linked to a weighty but inaccessible source. The book from which the story might have quoted is itself in the wrong language. The story hints at citation but provides none, and thus precludes the reader from holding the protagonist accountable for his version. Textual authority, in this story and for Borges in general, is generated from the margins. In "El evangelio según Marcos," a young student in a precarious and temporary role spontaneously author(ize)s his text through his translation performance.

Extensive intertextuality further complicates the authorial position. A variety of allusions intermingles with the textual layers, as the narrator enumerates literary artifacts that are part of the scene. Baltasar finds that

[e]n toda la casa no había otros libros que una serie de la revista La Chacra, un manual de veterinaria, un ejemplar de lujo del Tabaré, una Historia del Shorthorn en la Argentina, unos cuantos relatos eróticos o policiales y una novel reciente: Don Segundo Sombra (OC 1069).

This list of titles, representing a variety of genres, sets the stage for the textual games to come. Don Segundo Sombra appearing here as a literary novelty is more than an allusion. The romanticized gaucho novel was published around the time the story takes place. Borges inserts it as a metafictional irony that frames Baltasar, since the Don Segundo Sombra's protagonist is a cultural misfit who awkwardly tries to fuse the nomadic orality of the gaucho with the literate landowning culture of the elite. Borges's enumeration of genres reveals pieces of the literary canon isolated among the non-literary Gutres.

The boundaries between writing and speech blur in this story. Baltasar, who refuses his cousin's invitation and stays

behind to be with his "textbooks," neglects them for a translated Bible that he must again translate orally. The overlapping of writing and speech in this story refuses any hierarchy that would privilege either source. The narration undermines the expectations of an "original" in the diffusion of storytelling levels that converge in the plot.⁵ The translated performance generates catharsis and transformation due to a potent simultaneity of textual levels.

Borges's translation scenes reveal a search for tradition and local identity in his protagonists' estrangement. Translated intertexts attempt to recreate community, to resist distance and absence. The geography, the travel and isolation of the protagonist in "El evangelio según Marcos," contrasted with the ideas of community are reminiscent of Jewish (Old Testament) identity and names, attachment to land, the struggle against exile and dispersion, and the search for a homeland. Those spatial contests hint at Latin America's nation-building and cultural development, and the challenge of forging a new literature that will go beyond imitating European letters to find some recognition within world literature. In fact, the interaction and coexistence of languages so characterizes the emergence of literate culture in Latin America that a recent article points to translation, as the acknowledgment of this multiplicity of languages rather than as monolingualistic nationalism, as "the model for an Argentinian literature" (Rosman 23, my emphasis). When Baltasar is away from home and yearns for familiarity, he surrounds himself with a temporary but incomplete extended family and his storytelling attempts to fill the familial absence. His English to Spanish translation of Mark charismatically establishes linguistic boundaries. It reasserts the local and national, through language, as the home ground on which the Gutres (whose name, he finds out, is a translation of Guthries) must function.

For Borges, translation inevitably means dispersion but also deliverance and liberation in the links it not only makes with future readers/listeners but also in its revelation of previously hidden intertexts. As Sarlo concludes about this story,

[t]his sinister parable of the power of reading demonstrates that, for Borges, cross-cultural blending is one of the imaginative strategies needed to liberate literary invention from the claims of realism and the repetitive routine of everyday experience (29-30).

The Borges story considered here maps out several trajectories of translation: the problematics of "continuity" and fidelity, the cross-cultural role of translation, the potential treason of misinterpretation, and the entanglement of stories within stories. Baltasar engages in Biblical transmission in an effort to reassimilate culturally, and inadvertently becomes a virtual master of the word. As Walter Costa states in a forthcoming article on Borges and translation, "[e]sse gesto de exploração da cultura dos países dominantes, que poderia ser apenas um gesto de subordinação, se transforma, ao contrário em um gesto de afirmação de autonomia."

It is clear from essays such as "Los traductores de las 1001 Noches" that "originals" for Borges become simply a first version in a textualization process.⁶ He is interested in the drama of translation, the circumstances and personalities, their phobias and fascinations. If he prefers Mardrus and Burton over Littman and Galland, it is not because their translations are superior, but rather because their versions encompass a whole literature, "presuponen un rico proceso anterior" (OC 412). Similarly, in his essay "Kafka y sus precursores," Borges expresses his keen awareness of, perhaps even obsession with, the textual networks that produce what one reads, particularly if one is, as he declares with ironic humility, "un mero literato--y ése, de la República meramente Argentina" (412). Borges's translations--his actual literary translations, his commentaries on examining others' translations, and in particular his invented translational episodes--form the foundations of a literary and cultural position that considers relativity, multiplicity and distance inescapable characteristics of Latin America's developing literary tradition.

Notes

1. "El evangelio según Marcos" offers a written reenactment of oral transmission in a metafictional move that reconstitutes the Bible tales in oral performances within written texts. The story simultaneously employ a number of metafictional and intertextual transformations, using citation, paraphrase, linguistic translation, dramatic adaptation and mise en abîme.

2. These translation performances involve "more than just 'verbal' elements. . . . The art and meaning. . . are realised

not just in words but in the teller's delivery skills, the occasion, or the actions and reception of the audience" (Finnegan 19).

3. Alvin C. Kibel mentions the necessity for translation in transmitting the canon:

. . . the essential feature of the canonical text [is,] namely, that it is established as such only in relation to a secondary kind of writing, which demands the continued presence of an original in the course of transmitting its meaning (243).

4. The metafictional episodes of oral transmission dramatize a crisis within the stories' fictional classification. The story exploits the uneasiness that arises when the roles of listener/spectator and teller/actor blur. Borges discusses this shift in his essay "Partial Magic in the Quijote":

Why does it worry us that Don Quijote be a reader of the Quijote, and Hamlet, a spectator of Hamlet? . . . such inversions suggest that if the characters of a fiction can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious (OC 669, my translation).

"El evangelio según Marcos" challenges fiction's ontological status by empowering storytelling to take over the story.

5. This textual relativity is coherent with the Derridean concept of Writing that recognizes and incorporates the content underlying writing. Derrida's Writing invites the dynamic presence of a written message's essential roots and substance beyond its material inscription. Derrida defines Writing as "not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself. And thus we say 'writing' for all that gives rise to an inscription in general . . . not only the system of notation secondarily connected with these activities but the essence and the content of these activities themselves" (Of Grammatology 9).

6. "Através da leitura incessante de múltiplas traduções é criada uma instância transcendente, da qual o original passa a ser apenas uma versão, embora a primeira do processo" (Costa).

Works Cited

- Borges, Jorge Luis. Obras completas. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974.
- Costa, Walter. "Borges, o original da tradução." In Voice-Overs: Translation and Latin American Literature. Eds. Daniel Balderston and Marcy Schwartz. Forthcoming.
- Derrida, Jacques. Of Grammatology. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.
- Finnegan, Ruth. Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Kibel, Alvin C. "The Canonical Text." Daedalus (1983): 239-254.
- Rosman, Silvia N. "Of Travelers, Foreigners and Nomads: The Nation in Translation." Latin American Literary Review 26.51 (1998): 17-29.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge. London: Verso, 1993.
- Van Gorp, H. "La traduction littéraire parmi les autres metatextes." In Literature and Translation. Eds. James S. Holmes, José Lambert and Raymond Van den Broeck. Leuven, Belgium: Acco, 1978, 101-116.