

ILAN STAVANS

BEYOND TRANSLATION: BORGES AND FAULKNER

In early 1999 I published in the *Times Literary Supplement* a review of *Collected Fictions*, by Jorge Luis Borges, translated by Andrew Hurley. This volume was part of an orchestrated effort by the publisher, Viking Press, supported by Andrew Wylie Literary Agency, to repackage the oeuvre of the Argentine master in three easily manageable anthologies of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, respectively. The editorial effort was made to coincide with Borges's centennial: he was born in 1899 and died in 1986. Hurley's was the first of the three anthologies to appear. My essay praised the volume, although it also expressed sadness that Hurley's versions were destined to replace earlier English translations, in particular the admirable ones by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. My review included a statement that, to my surprise, proved to be controversial, to the effect that the best translations of Borges's oeuvre, not only into Shakespeare's tongue but also into the language of Flaubert and Valéry, might have superseded the original in quality. I also suggested that, given Borges's early British education in Buenos Aires, to read the Argentine in English is, in a way, "to bring him back home." I invoked the famous fact that he read *Don Quixote* in English first and, years later, coming across Cervantes's original, he felt it was a lousy translation.

My comment was greeted with an immediate and far-reaching clamor. An exchange in the *TLS* correspondence section lasted several weeks, about these and other aspects of the review and the editorial effort. It reverberated in other periodicals. Several of Borges's translators, editors, and biographers

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Translators

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entered the debate that was less about the value of Hurley's translations than about the status of the Argentine in twentieth-century literature. In the Spanish-speaking world, on the other hand, the controversy was about "losing" the author of *El Aleph* and *Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952* to an "abductor": the English language. It is this aspect of the polemic that interests me. In Argentina, in the pages of *La Nación*, a deliberation ensued on the value of reading Borges in a foreign language. Other reactions appeared in Spain and the Americas, in monthlies such as *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*. I apparently offended people for whom Borges is "a milestone of Hispanic culture." To say that he tastes equally or better in translation than in Spanish amounted to heresy, e.g., to deprive a civilization of a coveted treasure.

I'm not the first to endorse such an apostasy: Martin Amis, J. M. Coetzee, and Salman Rushdie, among others, expressed similar opinions once; but none of them is fully versed in Quevedo's tongue, so their views might be taken as fanciful. In contrast, I come from *lo español*, and translation, the art and act of it, are for me as essential, as constitutive, as breathing. I have reflected on this aspect of my life in *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language*. My education in Mexico was in three languages: Yiddish, Spanish, and Hebrew; and eventually I embraced a fourth one, English. It is almost impossible for me, at this stage, to establish which of them is closest to my heart. Translation, therefore, is a daily routine; it is everywhere I go and in everything I do. And so is literature, which, as far as I'm concerned, has no owner: once it is out and about, it is less the property of the author than of any and all readers. It is said in "Borges and I" (in Irby's translation): "what is good belongs to no one [. . .] but rather to the language and to tradition." Is this sentence better than its Spanish counterpart: "*lo bueno ya no es de nadie, ni siquiera del otro, sino del lenguaje o la tradición*"? Does it really matter which of these universes is better than another of equal caliber? To translate, in my view, is to make the particular universal, to enter a Leibnizian reality in which simultaneous universes coexist.

Borges's syntax is revolutionary, among other reasons, because it cleansed Spanish of excesses even the *Modernistas* (Rubén Darío, José Martí et al.) indulged in, let alone the

Symbolists and Parnassianists; he made the Spanish language more precise, succinct, almost mathematical—he made it sound like English. Or else, he made English more accessible, less remote to readers in Buenos Aires, and henceforth the rest of the Hispanic orbit. I want to address his obsession with translation, though; it will allow me to explore the tension between original and “replica” in a way that, I hope, is a response to my critics. This obsession dates back to his adolescence: at the age of seven Borges drafted in English a summary of Greek mythology and a couple of years later he rendered into Spanish “*El príncipe feliz*,” a story by Oscar Wilde, and with the help of a relative, Alvaro Melián Lafinur, published it; readers thought the translation wasn’t by him, *aka* Jorge Borges, but by his father, *Jorge Guillermo* Borges. This passion persisted throughout his life: translators are protagonists in a myriad of stories, from “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*” and “Averroes’s Search” to “The Secret Miracle”; and in essays such as “The Translator of the *1001 Nights*,” “The Homeric Versions,” and “The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald,” he ponders the role translators play in the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of a book or in the construction of a heritage.

All this is part of the Argentine’s easily available oeuvre; there is a less approachable aspect, too. Not long ago I acquired in Manhattan a copy of *Borges: Obras, reseñas y traducciones inéditas. Diario “Crítica”, 1933-34*, which contains many early efforts by Borges to translate international figures into Spanish: G. K. Chesterton, Lafcadio Hearn, Kipling, Dickens, Jack London, George Bernard Shaw, Swift, Wilde, Carl Sandburg, Eugene O’Neill, and T. E. Lawrence (as well as French and German figures like Marcel Schwob and Gustav Meyrink). Borges was in his mid-thirties at the time and the literary pages of *Crítica* were his to experiment with. That the results are decidedly mixed is less important than the fact that these experiments took place, for the Argentine was in search of a voice and a viewpoint, and through these translations he found, or at least solidified his literary manner. In due time, several non-fiction pieces from *Crítica*, especially from *Revista multicolor de los sábados*, made it into his collection *Universal History of Infamy*, and one or two of them into *Discusión* and *El hacedor* also. This practice, of course, doesn’t necessarily say anything significant about Borges’s

view of translation. Scores of litterateurs translate in their free time: for money, most often, but also for posterity.

So what *were* his views? He didn't prepare an *Ars Poetica* on translation; it would be preposterous to produce one that simplifies and perverts. I suggest instead four illustrative examples. My first example is about Pierre Menard, who is and isn't a translator of Cervantes. He is indeed described as the author of "a manuscript translation" of Quevedo's *Aguja de navegar cultos* into French under the title *La boussole des précieux*; as well as a translation, with a prologue and notes, of *Libro de la invención liberal y arte del juego del axedrez*. But his version of *Don Quixote* isn't a translation in the strict sense of the term; instead, it is "a rewriting." Is there an implication that, in Borges's view, a translation might also be another fresh original? My second example is a sentence in "On *Vathek*, by William Beckford," a favorite line of mine: "the original might be unfaithful to the translation." This, I think, is a forceful statement: Borges didn't see translation as a substitute, a replacement, a hand-me-down; instead, he perceived it—especially the translations of classics such as *The Iliad* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*—as equal to, if not more valuable than, the originals. This desire to experiment with language and to give birth to a text in a particular linguistic realm is evident in his two so-called "English poems," drafted in 1934 and dedicated to the improbable Beatriz Babiloni Webster de Bullrich. They are part of *El otro, el mismo*. I quote from the second:

I offer you my ancestors, my dead men, the ghosts that living men have honored in marble: my father's father killed on the frontier in Buenos Aires, two bullets through his lungs, bearded and dead, wrapped by his soldiers in the hide of a cow; my mother's grandfather—just twenty-four—heading a charge of three hundred men in Peru, now ghosts on vanished horses.

I offer you whatever insights my books may hold, whatever manliness or humour my life.

Echoes of Borges's Spanish poetry abound, but these two are poems *in English*: they were not translated, but delivered in Browning's tongue; and they still inhabit it. (The Argentine included them in his *Obras Completas*). Only *in English*, too,

is his "Autobiographical Essays," done in collaboration with Norman Thomas Di Giovanni for the *New Yorker*.

Another example of significance, the third in this sequence, is in "The Translator of *1001 Nights*," published in Spanish in 1935 and collected in *Historia de la eternidad*. In it the Argentine contrasts the four major translators of *Quitab alif laila ua laila*, as it is known in Arabic: Richard Francis Burton, Edward Lane, Antoine Galland, and J. C. Mardrus. He wonders by which process of misappropriation—e.g., mis-translation—the title *Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night* came to be. It is enlightening, in this context, to realize that not a single one of the three Spanish renditions of the book up until the 1930s is ever considered. This is symptomatic: how is it that an erudite, cosmopolitan Spanish-language critic in remote Buenos Aires compares a handful of English, German, and French versions, but never the ones emanating from his milieu? The answer is straightforward: at no time did Borges perceive himself as confined in the Spanish language; language, after all, isn't a prison but a springboard. As a perfect polyglot, he realized—and seized upon the fact—that his own territory, his milieu, was not Argentine letters alone, and Spanish culture in particular, but world literature in its entirety, and every language at his disposal in general.

This realization, truly, is his outstanding contribution to the topic of translation. Why be imprisoned in our own environment? In "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," in my eyes one of his most significant writings, he announced:

I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to that tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have. . . . I believe that we Argentines, we South Americans in general . . . , can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences. . . . Anything we Argentine writers can do successfully will become part of our Argentine tradition, in the same way that the treatment of Italian themes belongs to the tradition of England through the efforts of Chaucer and Shakespeare.

I come to my fourth and last example, about which I have a bit more to say. Beyond the almost two dozen uneven exercises in *Crítica*, Borges's sustained efforts at translation include a cluster of full-fledged books and numerous stories, essays, and aphorisms, commissioned for publications by publishers as self-sufficient volumes or as integral parts of anthologies the Argentine edited alone and in collaboration with Adolfo Bioy Casares and others. A decade or so ago, in a bookstore in Madrid, I came across his rendition of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, as well as his version of her influential essay *A Room of One's Own*, both released in Spanish by Ediciones Sur in 1937, and assigned to Borges by his friend and editor-in-chief of the monthly *Sur*, Victoria Ocampo; I've also held in my hands his translation from the French of André Gide's *Persephone* and Henri Michaux's *A Barbarian in Asia*; and I have in my library his translation of *The Wild Palms*, William Faulkner's novel of 1939.

I have a handful of impressions to offer on the latter. The edition I have of it—*Las palmeras salvajes*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 1970, with a prologue by Juan Benet—has a copyright dated 1962, twenty-three years after Faulkner published its original in English. But the Uruguayan critic and Yale professor Emir Rodríguez Monegal, in his 1978 biography of the Argentine and in an anthology called *Borges: A Reader*, dates the translation to 1940, a period of intense creativity: many of the stories in *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*, as well as the essays collected in *Other Inquisitions*, date from that time. Monegal argues that as a result of this translation, Faulkner's fiction, "intense and baroque," became "naturalized" in Spanish, thus easing "its assimilation and adaptation in the pens of young narrators such as Juan Carlos Onetti (*Para esta noche*, 1943), Juan Rulfo (*Pedro Páramo*, 1955), and Gabriel García Márquez (*La mala hora* [Evil Hour], 1963)." Thus, the implication is made that *The Wild Palms*, in Borges's rendition, opened the door to Faulkner's mammoth influence over south-of-the-border literature at mid-century. This claim is true but not fully: the version by the Argentine did have a considerable impact, but by 1940 Faulkner was already a well-known figure in the Spanish-speaking world; among others, Lino Novás Calvo, the Cuban poet, had translated him into English (Calvo rendered *Sanctuary* in 1934).

But this translation was barely passable, like several other in the 1930s; Borges on the other hand, mimicked the American's style elegantly, making it fluid, electrifying, breath-taking in Spanish. Monegal argued: "[His] translation was not only faithful to the original but created in Spanish a writing style that was the equivalent of the original's English. For many young Latin American novelists who did not know enough English to read the dense original, Borges's tight version meant the discovery of a new kind of narrative writing. They had [in it] the best possible guide to Faulkner's dark and intense world." A set of questions arises: why did Borges, at the time a tetragenarian of national prominence—not until 1961 was he awarded, along with Samuel Beckett, the International Publisher's Prize—, decide to translate the author of *As I Lay Dying*? And why embark on *The Wild Palms* specifically, a fairly mediocre title in Faulkner's corpus (the original title, changed by the American publisher, was *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* [Psalms 137:5])?

James Woodall, another of Borges's biographers, claims that, aside from the novel, the Argentine translated for Emecé Editores one or a handful of stories by Faulkner, although I've not seen them. What I have not only seen but scrutinized in detail are the Argentine's opinions on Faulkner. For the most part, he delivered them in the second half of the 1930s, in three reviews he wrote for the Argentine magazine *El Hogar*: in order of appearance, on *The Unvanquished* (January 22, 1937); on *Absalom, Absalom!* (January 21, 1938); and on *The Wild Palms* (May 5, 1939). In these commentaries he expressed his wholehearted admiration for the American: he describes Faulkner as an author that doesn't attempt to explain his characters; instead, he shows us what they feel, how they act. I quote (in Spanish): "*El mundo que imagina es tan real, que también abarca lo inverosímil.*" Of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Argentine announces that it possesses "an almost intolerable intensity" and equates it, in quality, to *The Sound and the Fury*: "I don't know if there's a higher praise," he concludes. In contrast, *The Wild Palms* strikes him as a lesser work, its technical novelties less attractive than discomfiting, less justifiable than exasperating. He concludes (again, in Spanish): "*Es verosímil la afirmación de que William Faulkner es el primer novelista de nuestro tiempo. Para trabar*

conocimiento de él, la menos apta de sus obras me parece The Wild Palms, pero incluye (como todos los libros de Faulkner) páginas de una intensidad que notoriamente excede las posibilidades de cualquier otro autor."

These quotes signal the degree to which Borges was not only familiar with English but had internalized it through and through. The style is English, and so is the *manner*. Notice I wrote *manner*, not *mannerism*: the former denotes measure; the latter implies excess. Expressions like "*Para trabar conocimiento . . .*" and "*Es verosímil la afirmación . . .*" are direct imports from locutions in Walt Whitman's tongue. Translation: "To get acquainted with . . ." and "It is feasible to affirm. . . ." But they are something else too: appropriations, reinventions. And so is the overall style of the sentences. *Verosímil* in particular, a Borgesian adjective, is infrequent in Spanish: its cognates might approach "accurate," "feasible," "realistic," and, at the suggestion of the *Oxford Spanish Dictionary*: "plausible."

Monegal is right: from Rulfo onward to Mario Vargas Llosa (and even to this day, to figures such as Ricardo Piglia), Faulkner remains an enormous literary influence in Latin America. But what inspired the majority of authors—the suffering, devastation, and defeat in the Deep South—did not attract Borges. What he saw in the author of *The Hamlet* is altogether different: a mastery of artifice, i.e., a novelist devoted to recreating the inner life of his characters and to experimenting with the elasticity of the novel as a literary genre. It wasn't pain that the Argentine empathized with, but the *capability of turning it into the core of a self-contained parallel universe*. For him History, with a capital H, was less significant than the effects of literary style and structure on the reader. In his eyes, Faulkner was first and foremost a technician; that Yoknapatawpha is to be found in Mississippi is a sheer accident.

I imagine Borges in the late 1930s, in need of money, sharing with Victoria Ocampo his willingness to translate from the English. She probably asked him who his choices were; he named Wilde, H. G. Wells, Stevenson, Melville, Kipling, Faulkner. . . . The list prompted a series of business contacts on her part, and gradually the list was reduced to a couple of concrete possibilities. In other words, I think it is less plausi-

ble that the Argentine selected *The Wild Palms* than the other way around. Upon its publication in the United States, Faulkner's novel was welcomed with scant enthusiasm. In *The New Masses* (February 7, 1939), Edwin Berry Burgum wrote: "In his distinguished career, Mr. Faulkner has not written a more thoroughly satisfying novel than [this one]." But in the *Listener* (March 30, 1939), Edwin Muir dissented: "Mr. Faulkner's world of imagination is really a prolonged dream or rather a nightmare, into which civil functionaries from another dream intrude now and then; but the tortured inner eye cannot account for these people, for to it the ordinary is the sharpest surprise of all. Mr. Faulkner has flashes of genius . . . ; but his novel accounts for nothing."

The time has come to compare the originals by Faulkner in English and Borges in Spanish. I've opened at random *Novels 1936-1940*, edited by Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk (The Library of America, 1990). My eyes fall on pages 516 and 517:

He had been in the hospital almost two years now. He lived in the intern's quarters with the others who, like him, had no private means; he smoked once a week now: a package of cigarettes over the week-end and he was paying the note which he had executed to his half sister, the one- and two-dollar money orders in reverse now, returning to source, the one bag would still hold all he owned, including his hospital whites—the twenty-six years, the two thousand dollars, the railroad tickets to New Orleans, the one dollar and thirty-six cents, the one bag in a corner of a barracks-like room furnished with steel army cots; on the morning of his twenty-seventh birthday he walked and looked down his body toward his foreshortened feet and it seemed to him that he saw the twenty-seven irrevocable years diminished and foreshortened beyond them in turn, as if his life were to lie passively on his back as though he floated effortless and without volition upon an unreturning stream. He seemed to see them: the empty years in which his youth had vanished—the years for wild oats and for daring, for the passionate tragic ephemeral loves of adolescence, the girl- and boy-white, the wild importunate fumbling flesh, which had not been for him; lying so he thought, not exactly with pride and certainly not with the resignation which he believed, but rather with that peace with which a middle-aged eu-

nuch might look back upon the dead time before his alteration, at the fading and (at last) edgeless shapes which now inhabited only the memory and not the flesh: *I have repudiated money and hence love. Not abjured it, repudiated. I do not need it; by next year or two years or five years I will know to be true what I now believe to be true: I will not even need to want it.*

Pages 37 and 38 of *Las palmeras salvajes*:

Hacía casi dos años que estaba en el hospital. Vivía en los pabellones de internos con otros que como él carecían de recursos particulares; fumaba una vez por semana, un atado de cigarrillos para el fin de semana, y estaba pagando la deuda que había reconocido a su media hermana: los giros de uno o dos pesos que volvían ahora a su fuente de origen; la única valija contenía aún todo lo que poseía, incluyendo sus uniformes blancos de hospital—sus 26 años, los 2.000 dólares, el billete de tren a Nueva Orleans, el dólar 36 centavos en esa única valija, en el rincón de un cuarto como un cuartel con camas militares de hierro en la mañana de su vigésimoséptimo cumpleaños. Se despertó y miró su cuerpo tendido hacia el escorzo de los pies y le pareció ver los veintisiete irrevocables años como disminuídos y escorzados detrás, como si su vida flotara sin esfuerzo y sin voluntad por un río que no vuelve. Le parecía verlos: los años vacíos en que había desaparecido su juventud—los años para la osadía y las aventuras, para los apasionados, trágicos, suaves, efímeros amores de la adolescencia, para la blancura de la muchacha y del muchacho, para la torpe, fogosa, importuna carne, que no había sido para él; acostado, pensaba, no exactamente con orgullo y no con la resignación que suponía, sino más bien con una paz de eunuco ya entrado en años que considerara el tiempo muerto que precedió a su alteración, que considerara las formas borrosas y (al fin) desdibujadas que sólo habitan en la memoria y no ya en la carne: He repudiado el dinero y por consiguiente el amor. No abjurado, repudiado. No lo necesito; el año que viene o de aquí a dos años o cinco sabré que es cierto lo que ahora creo que es cierto: ni siquiera querré desearlo.

The resemblance—in syntax, in spirit—is startling: Borges builds his text almost word by word; he compresses Faulkner subtly, but does so by reproducing the cadence of the English

version. His translation (in "Los traductores de las 1001 Noches," perhaps symptomatically, he uses the Spanish term *traslación* for translation) takes few *tangible* liberties; the riskiest *intangible* liberty it takes is to emulate Faulkner in Spanish by "readapting" Cervantes's language to fit the needs of a convoluted syntax. Indeed, he might have initiated, in Monegal's phrase, "the discovery of a new type of narrative." One might argue that the Argentine failed to give his translation any autonomy. But the autonomy is in it: silent, unobtrusive, unsettling the target tongue.

There are many approaches to translation. They might be resolved to two: *The Flaubertian Way*, in which the translator disappears without trace; and *The Nabokovian Way*, in which the translator endlessly stresses the artificiality of his endeavor. In *The Wild Palms* Borges endorses the first approach: he is *behind* Faulkner, not in front or at his side. His use of italics, a prominent fixture in Faulkner (also, by the way, in the Argentine's own oeuvre), is exactly like the one in the English original; and the translator's footnotes he inserts are minimal: on page 27, for instance, he digresses: "*Old Man*: El Viejo: nombre familiar del río Misisipí"; another footnote explains the name *Jesse James*: "Léase los *Juan Moreira*, los *Hormiga Negra*, etc." And on page 96, to the line "Drink up, ye armourous sons in a sea of hemingwaves," Borges states that the sentence is an example of "Retruécanos más bien intraducibles a la manera de James Joyce. *Armourous* = *armour* + *amorous*; *hemingwaves* = *waves* + *Hemingway*." And yet. . . . For most people, the act of reading a work in a language other than the original is a way *into* another culture. But when the reader is acquainted with the original tongue, the act acquires an altogether different meaning: it becomes an exercise of concordance. In spite of its resourcefulness, however, the Spanish version by Borges in my view is not superior to its English counterpart. For a reader unfamiliar with Faulkner, *Las palmeras salvajes* is lucid, startling even; but the fact that the Argentine venerated the author of *The Wild Palms* and not the book itself is on display.

This brings me back to my original queries. Why is it so distressing to suggest that Borges in English feels "at home"? And why does it infuriate that a translation might supersede its source? Because our approach to literature is filtered

through the lens of malleable nationalist feelings. We enjoy claiming that an author, any author, is the sole property of an individual culture; that he could only have sprung from that culture and that his oeuvre holds the keys to understanding it. This view promotes the idea of human imagination as a series of loosely interrelated ghettos, each controlled by its own self-righteous inhabitants. But translation as an endeavor presupposes that no man is an island. It also proclaims that the only truly confined artist is the one convinced that he is an island.

It matters little if the Argentine, who is nobody's property, is read in French, Portuguese, English . . . as long as the translations are nourished by the same *Zeitgeist* as his own Spanish versions.