

BORGES ON POETRY AND TRANSLATION
IN THEORY AND PRACTICE



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Jorge Luis Borges's vision of the arts of poetry and translation displays similarities central for the understanding of both his own poetic *œuvre* and his work as a translator.¹ Taking a cue from Borges's theoretical interventions on poetry and translation, this paper aims at exploring the integrity between Borges the writer, critic and translator as reflected in his version of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and at delineating his self-portrait as a translator in "A Islandia" and "Al idioma alemán," two poems included in *El oro de los tigres*.² My reading of Borges's texts is informed by two complementary perspectives. Mikhail Bakhtin's ambivalent notion of poetry, and his concept of dialogue, will help me to consider Borges's approach to poetry and translation as emphatically singular

¹ I would like to thank Efraín Kristal and Suzanne Jill Levine for their insightful comments throughout the writing of this essay.

² In his illuminating article "Borges y la traducción," Sergio Pastomerlo notices that Borges translations influenced Borges's literary views: "[Borges] toma como punto de partida las traducciones para elaborar ciertas reflexiones sobre la literatura: la figura del autor, la lectura, las creencias y las valoraciones literarias." (1). It can be further suggested that Borges's vision of poetry and that of translation are mutually enriching.

forms of artistic expressions inspired by others' words. Willard van Orman Quine's ideas about indispensability and indeterminacy of translation will allow me to examine the *topos* of translation as an imaginary encounter in Borges's poetry. In light of Bakhtin's and Quine's perspectives, I will discuss affinities between the notions of poetry and translation developed by Borges the critic, his version of Whitman's text as a performative response by a mature writer to a maestro of his own life-time, and a concept of translation as mediation and communication in Borges's poems.³

In their theoretical discourses, Bakhtin and Borges coincide in their approaches to poetic expression as both reasserting and challenging its own singularity. In his paradigmatic essay, "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin characterizes poetic discourse as intrinsically monologicistic, in contrast to the essentially dialogical discourse of the novel. Though he asserts the word's essential dialogicity, a poetic work seemingly appears to be an exception, as he observes: "Poetic style is by convention suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse, any allusion to alien discourse" (285). His approach to the language of the poet as "his language [...] a pure and direct expression of his intentions" (285), a single intentional whole, points to the intrinsic ambivalence of this monologicity. As Michael Eskin suggests in his perceptive analysis of this ambivalence, if a poem structurally tends toward monologicity, it sets a task before a poet, namely "answerability" for every element of the act of poetic utterance (174). As an aesthetic category, "answerability" implies a relationship to earlier texts, and literary tradition(s), among which the language itself is a major one. Consequently, poetry raises dialogue

³ This essay has been inspired by Efraín Kristal's pioneering systematic study of Borges's vision and practice of translation *Invisible Work. Borges and Translation*, and specifically by this scholar's observation that translation has played "the central role" in every one of Borges's literary pursuits (145). In his book, Kristal perceptively observes that, for Borges, translation involves creation, an inclination "to interpolate his own inventions and excise passages that could have been rendered with ease" (8). He also convincingly illustrates translation as a leitmotif in Borges's stories. Furthering these ideas, I will unravel parallelisms in Borges's metapoetical ideas on poetry and translation, focusing on his translation of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and on his own later poetic works where translation is thematized.

to the principle of poetic construction. Indeed, as Bakhtin notices, poetry, as any other literary work, is like “the response in a dialogue,” “a link in the chain of speech communication” (280).

For Borges, as for Bakhtin poetry is ambivalent. It is a highly idiosyncratic expression and, inevitably a quotation, both a part of the natural order and an overt artifice. In his early essay, “La poesía gauchesca” (*Discusión*), the Argentine writer observes that “El arte siempre opta por lo individual, lo concreto; el arte no es platónico” (*OC* 1: 180); in “Palabrería para versos” he characterizes poetry as “invención de las palabras” (*Tamaño* 49) and suggests that “[t]oda literatura es autobiográfica finalmente” (146). At the same time, in accord with Bakhtin’s perspective, Borges acknowledges the essential dialogism of words observing that “[t]oda palabra [...] presupone una experiencia compartida” and that words are “symbols for shared memories” (*This Craft* 117).

Moreover, the very origin of poetry is ambiguous, it is a divine gift, a present of nature, and an artifact inspired by previously created works. Borges states that poems are “ejercicios mágicos,” “given” in a mystical-biblical sense as “a revelation.” (*Borges at Eighty* 6). They are also “gifts of nature,” he suggests, evoking John Keats’ approach to a creation of poetry as a natural phenomenon. According to Keats, Borges explains, “el poeta debe dar poesías naturalmente, como el árbol da hojas” (*OC* 2: 95).⁴ At the same time, poems are re-creations of existent fictional worlds. As Borges comments in his lecture “The Riddle of Poetry,” “I often find I am merely quoting something I read some time ago, and then that becomes a rediscovering. Perhaps it is better that a poet should be nameless” (*This Craft* 15-16). And he continues in a usual for him paradoxical fashion that “[v]erbal distinctions should be valued, since they stand for mental—intellectual—distinctions” (*This Craft* 43).

Evoking Bakhtin’s ideas on dialogism and answerability, and attacking “la inferioridad supersticiosa de la traducción” (*OC* 1: 239) in his paradigmatic essay on the subject, “Las versiones homéricas,”

⁴ This is an indirect quote from Keats’s a letter to his publisher John Taylor, Keats, where the English poet proposes the following “axiom”: “... if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (108).

Borges conceptualizes translation in dialogical terms: “La traducción [...] parece ser destinada a ilustrar la discusión estética.” (OC 1: 239). Translation for Borges turns out to be a polyphony *par excellence*; a structure, which according to Bakhtin, does not dialogically engage “two impersonal linguistic consciousness,” the mere “correlates of different languages,” but rather two or more “individualized linguistic” wills (“Discourse” 359).

In parallel with poetry, translation for Borges can be characterized in Bakhtin’s terms as a “rejoinder in dialogue [...] oriented toward a response of the other” (74). For Borges, as for Bakhtin, the order in which texts/voices enter the dialogue is not of importance. Borges suggests that the historical order in which the original and the translation(s) were created should not be taken into the account when these separate artistic works of art are judged. He goes further in suggesting that translations can even be superior to their originals. Evoking Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s comment in *Conversations with Eckermann* that he likes *Faust* in French more than in German, Borges consistently refers to translations of his own works made by other people as improvement of originals.⁵ In his essay “Problemas de traducción. El oficio de traductor,” published in *Sur*, he, for example, observes: “Qué me parecen mis textos traducidos a otros idiomas? [...] Con mis poemas [...] generalmente encuentro que los han mejorado muchísimo” (325). The circumstances of creation, Borges urges, should not be overburdening when one consider the beauty of a poetic work.

Borges’s view of poetry and translation as highly idiosyncratic responses to potentially limitless interpellations is also compatible with the one developed by Quine.⁶ His account of poetry is highly ambiguous. On the one hand, the American philosopher wants to eliminate the universe of dreams and the imagination, as in his essay “On what there is” where an object of his fury is a poet. On the

⁵ Praising Gérard de Nerval’s translation of *Faust* into French, the German writer, for instance, exclaims: “I do not like to [...] read my *Faust* any more in German; but in this French translation all seems again fresh, new, and spirited” (341).

⁶ Christopher Johnson suggests that Borges’s approach to literary translation is inspired by Sir Thomas Brown’s conception of the universal author.

other hand, in the closing sentence of his essay "Identity, Ostension and Hypostasis," for instance, he draws a parallel between philosophy and poetry: "Where elegance doesn't matter, we may and shall, as poets, pursue elegance for elegance's sake" (79). Whereas Borges would probably not join Quine in his rebellion against the "overpopulated universe" ("Identity" 4) generated by poetry for the sake of the 'desert oases' offered by philosophy, he explicitly viewed some of his own works as the enactment of a dialogue between philosophy and poetry. As he points out in a prologue to his book of poetry *El oro de los tigres*: "Mi lector notará en algunas páginas la preocupación filosófica. Fue mía desde niño." (OC 2: 458) In his lecture "A Poet's Creed," Borges draws a parallel between poetry and philosophy, emphasizing their equal importance for belief formation and their belonging to the same aesthetic/ontological order that human beings live by: "the idea is that one *believes* in philosophy or that one *believes* in poetry – that things beautiful once can go on being beautiful still" (*This Craft* 115).

Moreover, as Efraín Kristal notices, Borges' vision of translation also "intriguingly coincides" (17) with that offered by Quine. Indeed, both authors consider translation as indispensable and indeterminate, and suggest that the number of possible translations is infinite and contradictory translations can be equally valid. First in his essay "Meaning and Translation," and then in his book *Word and Object* Quine explains this by referring to the essential indeterminacy of meaning, for it is not "an objective matter" (*Word* 73) as to whether two linguistic expressions are synonymous. Therefore, he argues, there is not even a necessity to know the original language in order to translate a work.

Though Borges probably would be skeptical about Quine's term "radical translation" (*Word* 28), which refers to a translation from a completely unknown language, a translation which cannot assume any prior understanding, he admits the possibility of evaluating translations from languages he did not know in his seminal essays on the subject, "Las versiones homéricas" and "Los traductores de *Las 1001 Noches*." Further, he praises all translations of the *Odyssey* as "Esa riqueza heterogénea y hasta contradictoria" (OC 1: 240). A plurality of translations becomes possible, and each translation is an

invention, because for Borges as for Quine, the understanding of any text, in fact any object from the surrounding extratextual world is open to infinite possibilities. In both cases this idea has been inspired by Bertrand Russell, for whom an external object, as Borges explains, is “un sistema circular, irradiante, de impresiones posibles” (OC 1: 239).⁷ And he continues: “lo mismo puede aseverarse de un texto, dadas las repercusiones incalculables de lo verbal.” (OC 1: 239).

Moreover, for Quine and for Borges, translation is at the very beginning of existence and communication. Quine emphasizes that translation and interpretation, which he sees as parallel notions, are necessary conditions of linguistic understanding and being. Likewise, a lyric voice suggests in “Mateo, 25, 30” (*El otro, el mismo*) that translation, a mode of communication between the poet and the divine, is also a mode of creation itself: “Dijo estas cosas (*estas cosas no estas palabras*), /Que son una pobre traducción temporal de una sola palabra” (OC 2: 6-7; italics added). Translation is also a synonym of understanding and creation in Borges’s essay “Mutaciones” (*El hacedor*), where the narrator observes that “no hay en la tierra una sola cosa que el olvido no borre y que la memoria no altere y cuando nadie sabe en que imágenes lo *traducirá* el porvenir” (OC 2: 176).

In line with Borges’s, Quine’s and Bakhtin’s theoretical perspectives, *Hojas de hierba* can be viewed as Borges’s performative response to Whitman, where the ‘copyist’ Borges, as he likes to call himself, shows his ink. Motifs and poetic devices recurrent in Borges’s own narratives and poetry reappear in his version of Whitman’s text.⁸ The metafictional dimension, one of the constants in Borges’s artistic *œuvre*, is emphasized in his translation of Whitman’s “the talk of the beginning and the end” (3, 1-2) from “Song of Myself” as “*la fibula*/del principio y del fin” (3, 1-2) in “Canto de mí

⁷ Quine makes similar observation when he discusses Russell’s theory of description in his essay “On what there is,” where he emphasizes that for the English philosopher there is a “gulf” between the singularity of the name of the object and its potentially infinite meanings.

⁸ Borges’s version of Whitman’s *Leaves of the Grass* exemplifies Suzanne Jill Levine’s illuminating notion of translation as “a subversive scribe” (7), where an encounter with the foreign as an unconscious return to the familiar takes place.

mismo" (italics added). In the same text both authors connect creation and respiration, but whereas Whitman establishes a parallelism between these two acts, when he writes, "My respiration and inspiration," (2, 15) Borges avoids direct reference to a creative process and conceptualizes inspiration in respiratory (physiological) terms: "Mi aspiración y mi espiración, el latido de mi pecho" (2, 15). This translation is probably inspired by the description of the birth of poetry in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which Borges admired throughout his lifetime. In "Canto 1" of *Paraíso* the lyric voice uses breathing as a trope in his quest for inspiration which he needs for the creation of a song comparable to Apollo's (God's) one:

Enter my breast and breathe as thou didst
when thou drewest Marsyas
from the sheath of his body (19- 21)

The *topos* of eternity, familiar to readers of "Doctrina de los ciclos" and "La muralla y los libros," is reinforced in Borges's translation of "Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am" (4: 15) as "Lejos de la contienda y de sus clamores, *perdura* lo que soy" (4: 17 italics added). Borges repetitively uses his favorite words for the expression of infinity, such as *innumerable* and *incesante*, where Whitman's vocabulary varies. Whitman's "limitless are leaves stiff" (5: 22) becomes in Borges' version "son *innumerables* las hojas rígidas." (5: 24). Whereas in Whitman's "Children of Adam" the motif of a parallelism between body, nature (water), and the poem itself is emphasized through the references to roundness and circularity (shape); Borges' text underlines the temporal dimension, eternity and infinity. "The circling rivers the breath;" (9: 52) becomes "Los ríos *incesantes* de aliento" (9: 59); "Out of the rolling ocean" (1) in a poem with the same title, Borges translates as "Del *incesante* océano" (1). Borges's implicit reference to the Kabbalistic idea of divine writing as incorporating the mystery of existence, with which he had been fascinated throughout his life, and a *topos* of revelation (mystical experience), both reappear in his translation of Whitman's "Writing and talk do not prove me" (25: 28) as "La escritura y la charla no *me revelan*." (25: 33).

The motif of "el destino" vividly present in Borges's poetry and prose such as "Las ruinas circulares," "Poema conjetural," and "Po-

ema de los dones" appears in his recreation of Whitman's "Canto de mí mismo," when he translates Whitman's self-confident and active "I know I have the best of time and space" (46: 1) as the almost fatalistic "Me ha tocado en suerte, lo sé, lo mejor del tiempo y del/ espacio" (46: 1-2). In "Spontaneous me," "The souse upon me of my lover the sea, as I lie *willing* and naked" (63) becomes "La espuma que me arroja mi amante, el mar, mientras/ yazgo *sumiso* y desnudo" (71-72). A related leitmotif such as "azar" familiar to the readers of Borges's "La lotería de Babilonia," "El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan" reappears in Borges's translation of Whitman's "the fitful events" (4: 12) from "Canto de mí mismo" as "Las batallas, el horror de la guerra fratricida, la fiebre/de noticias inciertas, *los acontecimientos azarosos*" (4: 14; italics added) which emphasizes his vision of a power of chance as a guiding force in history. The *topos* of solitude present in Whitman's text is even more prominent in Borges's translation, where it is reinforced by alliteration and also by apparently deliberate changes of vocabulary: Whitman's "Alone far in the wilds and mountains I hunt" ("Song of Myself" 10: 1) is transformed into "Solo, salgo a cazar por montañas y soledades." (10: 1) His translation of the verb "To translate" as "to confess" can be seen as a metapoetical comment which reflects his interpretation of translation as an intimate act. Whitman's assertion "And I swear I will never translate myself at all" ("Song of Myself" 47: 27) becomes "Juro que no me confesaré" (47: 33-34) in Borges's version. Whitman's and Borges's texts also differ in their use of poetic tropes. Expressing his preference for metaphor, which he considers a major poetic trope, Borges explicitly identifies himself with language: "Yo soy la lengua que está atada en tu boca," (47: 29-30). By contrast, Whitman uses a comparison: "I act as a tongue of you/ Tied in your mouth." (47: 22). Syntactic peculiarities of translation also manifest a unity between Borges-poet and Borges-translator. As has been mentioned by Kristal, the voice of Borges "poeta-circular" (*Fundadores* 119) as defined by Saul Yurkievich, reappears in his translation of Whitman's text.⁹ Indeed, Borges translates Whitman by using parallel constructions, whereas the syntax of Whitman's poem varies:

⁹ For an insightful discussion of syntactic peculiarities of Borges's translation of

Not a mutineer walks handcuff'd to jail but I am handcuff'
 to him and walk by his side,
 (I am less the jolly one there, and more the silent one with
 sweat on my twitching lips.) (37: 9-12)

No hay un rebelde que vaya esposado a la cárcel y a
 quien yo no acompañe; estoy esposado también y
 camino a su lado,
 (No soy el que está alegre, soy el que avanza silencioso
 con temblorosos labios húmedos.) (37: 10-14)

In this way, Borges' *Hojas de hierba* displays a consistent dialogization, and hence poetic displacement, of Whitman's text, for translation, as George Steiner observes, "invades, extracts and brings home" (298).

A suggested interpretation of Borges's translation of Whitman's work as a return to himself through the asymmetrical dialogue with the other is in accord with Borges's own self-portrait as a translator offered in "A Islandia" and "Al idioma alemán." Both poems can be read as metapoetical comments on translation as an intimate act of reading, which, as Harold Bloom perceptively observes, strengthens the individual. Significantly, they are recollected in *El oro de los tigres*, a book inspired by the author's blindness. This biographical fact, a deterioration which left only the color yellow to the author, may explain Borges's return to translation as a theme in his poems, synonymous to mediation and communication, a creative alternative to isolation.

Translation is an enactment of a dialogue, an imaginary anthropological encounter and a confession in "A Islandia." This poem literalizes Borges's observation, made in the prologue to *El oro de los tigres*, that a language is "un modo de sentir la realidad." (OC 2: 457). Indeed, Islandia is a heterogeneous addressee, a land, a creator (a composer), a woman, and a dream whose tongue Borges strives to decipher. It is both familiar, as the lyric voice refers to it as 'tú', and distant (enigmatic) "eres la más remota y la más íntima." (3). It is the author's dream he has been cherishing for many years, and a producer of the texts he has been attempting to translate.

"Song of Myself," see Fernando Alegria's "Borges's 'Song of Myself.'"

Islandia, te he soñado largamente
 desde aquella mañana en que mi padre
 le dio al niño que he sido y que no ha muerto
 una versión de la *Völsunga Saga*
 que ahora está descifrando mi penumbra
 con la ayuda del lento diccionario. (16-21)

The translation-reading of *Völsunga Saga* makes possible an imaginary encounter with Islandia, an “inscrutable” referent, a mysterious land, a picture puzzle, that this text synecdochically represents. The process of deciphering Islandia as an act of understanding, of translating its language, Old Norse, “latín del Norte,” Borges asserts in line with Quine is infinite: “Sé que no la sabré , pero me esperan /los eventuales dones de la busca, /no el fruto sabiamente inalcanzable.” (30-32) This “empresa infinita” (25) keeps the mind active and appears to make it easier for Borges to deal with his own declining health and old age:

Cuando el cuerpo se cansa de su hombre,
 cuando el fuego declina y ya es ceniza
 bien está el resignado aprendizaje. (22-24)

The translation that the lyric voice is engaged with is not, however, a pragmatic choice; it is rather a passion, an intimate act of recuperation and rejuvenation: “el amor, el ignorante amor, Islandia.” (35).

The poem “Al idioma alemán” is addressed to another life-long companion of the author: the German language, which is personified in the text. German breaks the lyric voice’s solitude, “dulce lengua de Alemania/te he elegido y buscado, solitario” (8-9), and the great writers in this language form Borges’s invisible company:

Mis noches están llenas de Virgilio,
 dije una vez; también pude haber dicho
 de Hölderlin y de Angelus Silesius.
 Heine me dio sus altos ruisenores;
 Goethe, la suerte de un amor tardío (14-18)

As if recalling a jungle, a place of meeting with an isolated and completely alien tribe (a setting for translation suggested by Quine), the lyric voice refers to translation from this language as a journey to a remote, exotic locale. Evoking Quine’s observation that there are

mutually incompatible translation manuals, “all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions” (“Translation and Meaning” 27) the lyric voice asserts that in this voyage, a dictionary increases doubts rather than resolves them:

pero a ti, dulce lengua de Alemania,
te he elegido y buscado, solitario.
A través de vigiliyas y gramáticas,
de la jungla de las declinaciones,
del diccionario, que no acierta nunca
con el matiz preciso, fui acercándome. (8-13)

As for Quine, for the lyric voice the jungle trip has a transcendental significance.¹⁰ Indeed, in addition to being a puzzling linguistic entity, the German language is also an emotion, a synecdoche for its speakers, readers, writers, and translators, whose voices form a polyphony and part of the natural order:

Tú, lengua de Alemania, eres tu obra
capital: el amor entrelazado
de las voces compuestas, las vocales
abiertas, los sonidos que permite
el estudioso hexámetro del griego
y tu rumor de selvas y de noches. (23-28)

To conclude, Borges’s metapoetical ideas have reflections in practice, where a poem as a translation is both an encounter and a highly idiosyncratic experience. Exemplifying an integrity of thought often paradoxical, and always passionate, Borges’ works as poet, critic and translator, one and multiple, continue to inspire and challenge contemporary readers.

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¹⁰ Quine develops his theory of translation in his discussion of the ‘jungle’ experiences in his “Translation and Meaning.” He uses anthropological encounters in the jungle as heuristic device which allows him to show translation/interpretation to be at the core of linguistic understanding.

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