

VOICE DISTORTION: CHARACTER NARRATION  
IN BORGES'S TRANSLATION  
OF HERMAN MELVILLE'S *BARTLEBY*

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...los actos son nuestro símbolo.

Borges "Biografía de Tadeo Isodoro Cruz (1829-1874)"

As one of the twentieth century's major innovators of unreliable narration in fiction, and a champion for irreverent translation practices that privilege translators' own artistic sensibilities, the last translation strategy one would expect of Jorge Luis Borges is to make a narrator *more* reliable. Yet in his translation of Herman Melville's "Bartleby" (1853, translated 1943), he did precisely this. Melville's self-deluding, self-justifying lawyer becomes straightforward and sincere in Borges's translation, free from the ironic treatment he received in the English. Rather than confound or falsely lead the reader on, in Spanish, the lawyer is divested of tools of persuasion he would otherwise employ to sway the reader to his side and detract from the "truth" of narrated events. It would thus seem that Borges is not only moving the character narrator away from Melville's narrative style, but away from his own as well. Yet the motivation for Borges's innovative deployment of unreliable narrators and his editorial impulse to transform the lawyer into a narrator that readers may trust stem from the same aesthetic inclination marking all of Borges's fiction: an intense disliking of psychological narrative.

On the one hand, Borges's rejection of psychological fiction reveals itself in the flatness of his third-person characters. In his story "El muerto," the envious porteño-turned-gaicho, Benjamin Otálora, seeks to ruin and then replace his contrabandista boss, Azevedo Bandeira. He does not consciously covet his boss's power or the cult of personality that surrounds him, but focuses instead on the boss's woman, his saddle and his horse; they become "atributos o adjetivos de un hombre que [Otálora] aspira destruir" (OC 1: 659). Borges's use of objects, rather than personality traits, to describe his characters is typical of their lack of dimension; they are generally repositories of action rather than subjects with whom readers can identify. Indeed, as Sylvia Molloy notes, in Borges's fiction, "[c]haracters are rarely persons, they are narrative functions" (40). This distaste for psychological narration is long-standing and well documented—perhaps nowhere so strongly as in Borges's prologue to Adolfo Bioy Casares's *La invención de Morel* (1940):

La novela característica, "psicológica", propende a ser informe. Los rusos y los discípulos de los rusos han demostrado hasta el hastío que nadie es imposible: suicidas por felicidad, asesinos por benevolencia, personas que se adoran hasta el punto de separarse para siempre, delatores por fervor o por humildad... Esa libertad plena acaba por equivaler al pleno desorden. Por otra parte, la novela "psicológica" quiere ser también novela "realista": prefiere que olvidemos su carácter de artificio verbal y hace de toda vana precisión (o de toda lánguida vaguedad) un nuevo toque verosímil. (OC 4: 29)

While authors such as Tolstoy and Proust sought to mimic reality with their "vastos libros" by depicting the complexities of the human psyche, Borges desired no such mimetic representation of his characters ("Prólogo" OC 1: 511). Borges is sparing in his description of characters' feelings, often displacing their emotions onto the adjectives describing their environment—an economizing technique to keep focus on the action. As Jaime Alazraki notes, "el adjetivo no expresa cualidades que están contenidas en las cosas, sino airea, más bien, la reacción que esas cosas provocan en el personaje" (211).

On the other hand, Borges employs highly visible or intrusive character narrators for the same end of obliterating the psychological from his fiction. More than half of the stories from *Ficciones* and *El Aleph* contain narrators calling themselves, or narrating as abstractions, of Borges. The

unreliability of these Borges characters may be taken for granted, not simply because they make such obvious claims as: “recuerdo (creo)” (OC 1: 583); or “ignoro los detalles de su aventura; cuando me sean revelados, he de rectificar y ampliar estas páginas” (OC 1: 656). Borges’s character narrators also enhance the sensation of unreliability through techniques such as disguising themselves as third person narrators; pages into the story they burst into the discourse, making it clear to the reader that the apparently objective relation of events has been subjectively mediated for the duration of the story. Unreliability also results when the character narrator surreptitiously translates someone else’s discourse, as he does in “La forma de la espada” and “El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan.” Furthermore, in texts such as “Deutches Requiem” and “La casa de Asterión” the character narrator Borges insinuates his mediation in and commentary upon the story through editor’s footnotes.

The conspicuousness of Borges’s unreliable first-person narrators underscores his third-person characters’ status as mere props, yet it masks those narrators’ own limited functions. There is little ethical deliberation or manipulation involved in the author’s very plain attempts to convince the reader that he is not to be trusted; it is not a technique for increasing the verisimilitude of his narrators. Rather, as we see in “Funes el memorioso,” in which the character narrator (a version of Borges were he born mid-nineteenth century) clearly states his inability to accurately report his conversation with Ireneo Funes, the point is aesthetic, rather than ethical: his merely human memory, and his ironic remorse for sacrificing the efficacy of his story by telling only the most important points and suggestive details, make the narrator the inversion of Funes, who has become incapacitated by his monstrous memory. Like “los rusos y los discípulos de los rusos,” who register every minor detail of a character’s interior workings and exterior environment in an effort to evoke the highest degree of mimesis, Funes is unable to discern what merits his attention and what does not. Consequently, as Sergio Waisman notes, “the sacrifice of efficacy to which the narrator admits is no sacrifice at all” (190). To the contrary, unlike Funes and the authors his character satirizes, the narrator, unable (and perhaps unwilling) to recreate his dialogue with Ireneo word for word, seeks to include only those details from which readers can create

“una realidad más compleja que la declarada... y referir sus derivaciones y efectos” (Borges, “La postulación de la realidad” OC 1: 256).

While it was nothing new in his day, Borges’s novel deployment of unreliable narration subverted the technique’s traditional form of subversion. As Seymour Chatman describes it,

in “unreliable narration” the narrator’s account is at odds with the implied reader’s surmises about the story’s real intentions. The story undermines the discourse. We conclude, by “reading out,” between the lines, that the events and existents could not have been “like that,” and so we hold the narrator suspect. (Chatman 233)

Unreliable narration often serves to increase the verisimilitude of a narrative, to emotionally implicate readers in narrator’s motivations for their unreliability and to enhance the “truth” from which the unreliable narrator appears to be departing. Yet the narrative communication between implied author and narrator in Borges rather reinforces that there are no “real intentions,” no definitive events or existents against which readers may gauge the accuracy of the narrator’s account. Instead, a multiplicity of possible versions unfold through the narration: in Borges’s fiction, it is the discourse that undermines the story. Effectively, most representations of Borges as the character narrator have the primary rhetorical function of highlighting the verbal artifice of fiction, of reminding the reader that the text is a creation, not a reality. Their unreliability is the textual strategy through which this metafiction is accomplished; it is not, as may be found in other fictional texts, a means for revealing their complex psychological motives.

By virtue of their dual points of enunciation, one in the narrative present and another in a past distant enough to merit narration, character narrators have the potential to complicate the discourse of a text in extraordinary ways. As characters, they are located within the story where they experience narrative events and communicate with other characters. Yet in the discourse, as narrators, the distance from those events allows them new perspectives, room to reframe their relationship to those events. The most consequential feature of this distinction—especially for the study of translation—is what James Phelan explores in his *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*: the multilayered and polyvalent communication that arises as voice and focalization shift between

the narrator as character, and the narrator in her or his role as reporter of narrative events. Phelan argues that at differing points in a fictional text, even within the same sentence, the discourse may contain the narrator's focalization and voice; the character's focalization and narrator's voice; the character's focalization and voice (as in stream of consciousness); blends of the character's focalization and voice with the narrator's focalization and voice (as in free-indirect discourse); or the narrator's focalization with the character's voice (117).

Intense ethical and psychological situations may thus arise, as a narrator's voice, enunciated at the time of narration, comments upon what is being seen through her or his eyes as a character at the time of narrative events. Unreliable narration occurs as narrators defend or misrepresent, condemn or remain oblivious to their ethical positioning as characters, as Phelan notes of famous character narrators such as *Lolita's* notorious Humbert Humbert. "Humbert, *through the very act of telling his story, the effort of perceiving and re-perceiving himself and Dolores, is changing his relation to the story as well as to himself, to Dolores, and to his audience*" (120, emphasis in the original). With few exceptions, Borges's character narrators rarely possess such complexity, much less such psychologically fraught motives for narrating; they are not transformed by the act of narration. Borges does not unreliably report to affect the narratee's/reader's view of his ethical standing, nor to try to convince himself of something he knows to be otherwise, as do many other character narrators. Rather just as his third person characters are narrative functions responsible for action, his character narrators are narrative functions that serve to foreground the text's fictionality. The mimetic function of misleading readers to persuade them of one's ethical position is precisely the realism Borges seeks to avoid. While he certainly does seek to mislead readers, it is not to play on their sense of ethics but on their skill in the game that is reading.

Through his inconsistency, sentimentality and cowardice, the narrator of "Bartleby" becomes more human, even as his (self-)deception is made ever clearer. Ethics, rather than artifice, are the motivating factor for the lawyer's unreliable discourse, riddling the English version with the psychological mimesis Borges so carefully sought to avoid. By making the character narrator more reliable—through the elimination of complex intersections of character/narrator focalization and voice; the minimiza-

tion of the narrator's disclosure functions<sup>1</sup> (that is, what he unintentionally reveals about himself); and the substitution of a more masculine discourse—Borges was able to rid the text of those details he found so cumbersome. What's more, by making the narrator more reliable, Bartleby becomes an even stranger figure, more out of place with his environment than ever.

The project of rewriting "Bartleby" was so far-reaching, that the translator began with paratext surrounding the story. Though Gérard Genette has not commented on the functions of translators' notes, his claim regarding original prefaces describe Borges's prologue accurately: their "chief function [is] to *ensure that the text is read properly*" (197, emphasis in the original). With his prologue, Borges establishes the narrator as a strong-willed, upright gentleman, thus making his "nihilistic contamination" by Bartleby all the more surprising: "el cándido nihilismo de Bartleby contamina a sus compañeros y aun al estólido señor que refiere su historia y que le abona sus imaginarias tareas" (11, my emphasis). Before Spanish language readers begin "Bartleby," its narrator is described for them, reifying a series of traits that transpose themselves onto the translated text through the readers' newly created expectations. Borges is thereby ensuring that the story be read "properly" as a fantastic narrative, not a "moral allegory" as per the Dover edition's back cover.

The Wall Street lawyer who narrates "Bartleby" recounts his employment of the strange, pale scrivener who begins diligently working in his busy law office, but gradually begins to refuse to work until he does nothing but stare out the window all day. Bartleby's firm but passive demeanor renders the lawyer incapable of dismissing him, even after he discovers Bartleby has made the law office his place of residence. Whether asked to work, to leave, or to simply reveal anything about himself, Bartleby's usual reply is: "I would prefer not to." As the copyist will neither move out nor work, the lawyer, rather than call the police, moves his office to

1 Phelan provides an account of character narrators' functions which establishes two tracks of communication within the discourse. The first is between the narratee and the narrator, whose "narrator functions" consist of reporting, interpreting and evaluating the narrative for the narratee. The second track runs between the narrator and what Phelan calls the "authorial-audience" (implied reader), and consists of the "disclosure functions" the narrator performs by revealing information unwittingly, unaware such an audience exists (12).

another part of town. He even invites Bartleby to come live in his home, though only after being harassed by the police and the new tenants when the unemployed copyist still hangs about the building. Bartleby refuses this offer as well, and is taken to jail where he refuses to eat until finally starving to death.

Mellville's story originally appeared in two sequential issues of *Putnam's Monthly* magazine, its stated mission to consolidate an American literature and with it, an American culture. Notably, the tale bore the original subtitle, "A Story of Wall-Street." Critics have frequently read "Bartleby" as a capitalist critique, associating Bartleby with Marx's alienated worker. At the center of the story are assumed to lie ethical questions regarding the New York financial community's moral indifference to the alienation and poverty brought on by waves of immigration and mechanical industry (Barnett, Guillen, Kuebrich, Zeinich). Others have turned this Marxist reading toward a biographical connection they make between Melville and his character, equating Bartleby's refusal to write as a rejection of the commercial demands of popular fiction (Marx). Critics have also treated "Bartleby" as a depiction of mental illness, suggesting he suffers from schizophrenia (Beja), while still others have read the story as a parable of Christian values (Zlogar, Davis) or as philosophical response to Jonathan Edwards's *Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will* (Leyda, Arsic), Joseph Priestley's *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity* (Patrick), or Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* and *Heroes and Hero Worship* (D'Avanzo).

In each of these readings, ethics are central to the text. The lawyer tends to come under fire, for even when he does deign to charity, it is admittedly the cheap purchase of "a delicious self-approval" or "a sweet morsel for my conscience" (13). The lawyer's "profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best" (3) condemns him in any reading for his failure to act even in his own interest when it comes to dealing with conflict. In addition to framing the narrator through his prologue to the translation, Borges conclusively reestablishes the story's genre: "*Bartleby*, en un idioma tranquilo y hasta jocoso cuya deliberada aplicación a una materia atroz, parece prefigurar a Franz Kafka... yo observaría que la obra de Kafka proyecta sobre *Bartleby* una curiosa luz ulterior" (10). By making "Bartleby" another of Kafka's precursors, Borges moves the story from the realm of ethics to the realm of the bizarre, where the former are meaning-

less. As a fantastic narrative, what is at stake is not the rightness of the lawyer's actions, but the strangeness of *Bartleby's* actions and of a world in which rightness is impossible, for nothing "reasonable" will appease the scrivener. Borges indicates his awareness of the psychological motives inherent in the text: "*Bartleby* define ya un género que hacia 1919 reinventaría y profundizaría Franz Kafka: el de las fantasías de la conducta y del sentimiento o, como ahora malamente se dice, psicológicas," yet through his introduction, the translator is carefully manipulating the original into something more palatable (11). As we will see, to foment the environment of strangeness, Borges made the narrator more reliable to emphasize the lawyer's reasonability and thereby play down the psychological complexities while enhancing the fantastic. The narrator's ethics no longer the driving force of the narrative, he transforms the lawyer to create a more ethical character; for the less selfish, cowardly and delusional the lawyer appears, *Bartleby* is inversely stranger. The character narrator thereby comes closer to a masculine ideal, while at the same time the story loses the psychological aspect of ethical debate, as the lawyer's disclosure and narration functions come closer in line.

The narrator has a wry sense of humor that is often overlooked; while Melville frequently presents the lawyer in ironic terms, the narrator is not without an ironic tone of his own. Describing his office, and in doing so, the sordidness of New York City itself, he writes: "my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade, which wall required no spyglass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all nearsighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my windowpanes" (4). The city's stark contrast between rich and poor, between optimism and despair plays out in the lawyer's withering description. The Big City's limitless possibilities, represented by windows with "unobstructed views" are undercut by that view being of not the city skyline but a of brick wall; "lurking beauties," as the bright side of having it block one's view, are cheerfully revealed to all by the fact that this black wall is but ten feet away from the lawyer's window.

Yet to show that the lawyer need not always be taken at face value, despite his critical insights, Melville makes a number of disclosures at the narrator's expense. *Bartleby* was taken on once the lawyer received the position of Master in Chancery, a court of equity where natural rights were

protected from overly literal application of the written law, where and negotiations involving alternatives to fines or compensation to both parties were administered. The lawyer's position, like much of New York's legal system in the nineteenth century, required quick (and potentially dirty) legal decisions, and held significant potential for abuse (Guillen 35). All of the new cases he now saw required an additional scrivener in his office, while the extra cash made "the easiest way" even easier. The entire Chancery court system was abolished in 1846 with New York State's new constitution, the only situation in the entire story for which the lawyer admits to letting anger get the best of him:

I seldom lose my temper, much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages, but I must be permitted to be rash here and declare that I consider the sudden and violent abrogation of the office of Mastery in Chancery, by the new Constitution, as a — premature act, inasmuch as I had counted upon a life lease of the profits. (4)

The lawyer's outrage has expressly to do with the profits he will no longer see as Master in Chancery—which were in addition to the income he already received with his law practice—not with concern that the Chancery might serve justice better than the new Supreme Court and Court of Appeals. More damaging to his credibility is his admitted reluctance to indulgence in "dangerous indignation" at true injustices, situations in which wrongs are being committed against others, and not just deflating his pocketbook. In the epilogue, when it is rumored that Bartleby formerly worked in the Dead Letter Office, the lawyer's emotion is roused solely by the thought of working amongst dead letters, as if these missives were corpses, not by the fact that Bartleby had been unduly fired during a change in the administration.

Melville makes the lawyer more compelling by bringing him close to realizations of the world outside himself, of moving past mere self-interest to genuine concern for the poor among the streets, factories and offices of New York. After discovering that Bartleby had been residing in the law office the lawyer is startled to discover:

For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not unpleasing sadness. The bond of common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam... (17)

The lawyer, as character, is at the point of recognizing the other as himself; the sight of Bartleby so forlornly without a home initiates a change in his ethical orientation, a recognition of “wrongs and outrages” that do indeed merit a “dangerous indignation”—dangerous, for he risks questioning the naturalness of his privilege and his “easiest way of life” (3-4). Yet at the time of narration, these realizations have clearly failed to take hold. The narrator interjects in the character’s melancholy meditation: “These sad fancyings—chimeras, doubtless, of a sick and silly brain—led on to other and more special thoughts concerning the eccentricities of Bartleby” (17). The lawyer’s stark realizations have been reduced to fancy, produced by a brain whose concern for others and question of privilege could be nothing more than infirm and inane.<sup>2</sup> Thus while he has the ability to be dynamic, the lawyer chooses to remain static; such discrepancies between the lawyer’s narrator functions and disclosure functions occur throughout Melville’s story, making him ever less respectable in the eyes of the reader. To the degree possible, however, Borges brings these two functions closer in line; the narrator in both his actions and their telling is either less contradictory, or as narrator he is more scornful of his weak or selfish behavior as a character, as opposed to defending such behavior as the lawyer often does in the English.

The predominant location in which the lawyer’s disclosure contradicts his narration is his law office, where the descriptions of his behavior at work are naively hypocritical. Recounting the moment Bartleby “appeared to him,” the lawyer describes how busy he had become after being appointed Master of Chancery: “There was now great work for scriveners.

2 As will be argued later in this article, the lawyer’s retrospective “sickness” may have been his sexual desire for Bartleby. The “fraternal melancholy” the lawyer and scrivener shared as “sons of Adam,” expelled from Eden for their sinful nature, may be the mutual recognition of the impossibility of their desire. By ultimately disavowing himself of the scrivener, and the scrivener subsequently dying, the lawyer can finally be free of the “chimera” of a world in which he may love Bartleby.

It may be noteworthy that Melville later employs a second reference to Adam: “When this old Adam of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled him and threw him” (25). The term “old Adam” has long been a euphemism for homosexuality, dating as far back as Shakespeare (Rubinstein 89). The statement is followed by the lawyer’s (temporary) surrender to the fact that Bartleby will remain in his care, and his admission that “I never felt so private as when I know you are here. At last I see it, I feel it: I penetrate to the predestined purpose of my life. I am content” (26). Yet public pressure eventually makes this private union untenable.

Not only must I push the clerks already with me, but I must have additional help” (8). The lawyer is recalling this event from the narrative present, yet viewing it as a character, unable to see the inconsistency of his remark. The verb “must” suggests that the imperative to push his clerks is beyond his control; the sympathy he expects from the narratee is for how busy he is, not the clerks who are being pushed. To make congruent the lawyer’s rhetoric and ethics, Borges eliminates the sense of obligation from the text, “Ahora había mucho trabajo, para el que no bastaban mis escribientes: requerí un nuevo empleado” (26). The lawyer’s perception and recounting of the events is located in the narrative present, aided by the preterit form of “requerir,” which gives an immediacy to the need for a scrivener, but leaves it squarely in the past. The contradiction is thereby eliminated on two fronts: extracting the hypocritical concept of obligation to shove additional work on his employees, and removing the possibility for the lawyer’s functions as narrator and as character to conflict with one another.

Through his unreliable narration, the lawyer’s expectations of “immediate compliance” by his employees are to be overshadowed by his largesse in tolerating the quirks of his scribes: the one, Turkey, an alcoholic who is drunk every day after lunch; the other, Nippers, dyspeptic every morning and mixed up in questionable business dealings on the side. The lawyer seeks to evoke a sense of his generosity when he states, “now and then, in the haste of business, it had been my habit to assist in comparing some brief document myself” (9). The haste of business being the motivating factor for this generosity discloses once more the lawyer’s convenience-based ethics. Again seeking to improve the narrator’s image, and to foreground the strangeness of Bartleby’s refusal to work, Borges omits a few words from the text, putting the lawyer in the habit of helping his copyists whenever the task was fairly small: “Yo ayudaba en persona a confrontar algún documento breve” (35).

The change in the narrator’s discourse corresponds to a transformation of his attitude. In the Spanish he is less put out by inconveniences, and has a more optimistic outlook in general. Bartleby’s industriousness immediately after his hire is overshadowed for the lawyer by the scrivener’s lack of cheer. Unable to content himself with the scrivener’s good work, the lawyer, again thinking of his own comfort (or perhaps his own desire for requited attentions), writes: “I should have been quite delighted

with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically” (9). In Spanish, the lawyer appears less egocentric as he is already delighted with the copyist’s work, and would have only been more so, were Bartleby a cheerful worker: “Yo, encantado con su aplicación, me hubiera encantado aún más si él hubiera sido un trabajador alegre. Pero escribía silenciosa, pálida, mecánicamente” (27). This attitude of self-importance is attenuated again when the lawyer asks the scrivener to take some letters to the post office, hoping Bartleby may have changed his mind about consistently preferring not to run a single errand. Met with the usual reply, the lawyer huffs, “so, much to my inconvenience, I went by myself” (21). While the lawyer is eliciting a sympathetic response, the importance he places on his own convenience has the opposite effect. In Spanish he says more straightforwardly: “aunque me resultaba molesto, tuve que llevarlas yo mismo” (53). While the task was bothersome, it lacks the melodrama attached to the English; the “tuve que” places the emphasis on the lawyer taking care of his own responsibility—which indeed it was, for as copyist, Bartleby is paid per word, not per errand run as a favor to his employer.

As Bartleby begins “preferring” not to work, the lawyer, whose benevolence is moved primarily by convenience or cowardice, continually puts off firing the scrivener, hoping that he will return to the industrious copying with which he began his employment. Disclosing his own tendency toward self-deception, upon yet another of Bartleby’s refusals to proof his work, the lawyer recalls: “Instantly it occurred to me that his unexampled diligence in copying by this dull window for the first few weeks of his stay with me might have *temporarily* impaired his vision” (21, my emphasis). First, the poor quality of Bartleby’s working conditions is revealed, yet they remain apart from the lawyer’s consciousness, as if it were Bartleby’s choice to have only the dull window for light. Secondly, if the scrivener were to have suffered vision impairment, the likelihood of its being “temporary” seems considerably small. Rather, it appears to be a case of magical thinking on the lawyer’s part, his interest being better served by Bartleby improving his work ethic than by firing him. Consistent in his efforts to remove the lawyer from ethical inconsistencies, Borges removes the term “temporary” from the sentence, making the lawyer sound at least partially interested in Bartleby’s well-being: “Enseguida se me ocurrió que

su ejemplar diligencia junto a esa pálida ventana, durante las primeras semanas, había dañado su vista” (53). The indifference to the working conditions remains, but the elimination of the lawyer’s self-deception with his contrived medical diagnosis keeps his character more in line with the honest man Borges would have him be. The lawyer’s added humanity thereby contrasts even more with Bartleby’s “cadaverously gentlemanly nonchalance” (16).

After finally mustering the courage to tell Bartleby to leave, the lawyer prides himself on the commanding way he dealt with the situation. He *assumes* that when he returns to the office the following day, the scrivener will be gone; though doubt begins to creep in, when he realizes his assumptions do not have the power to transform reality. After all, Bartleby “was more a man of preferences than assumptions” (23). The lawyer’s vision and voice come from his place as character, these tentative suggestions still debating with his hopeful assumptions. Yet with just a few minor changes, the focalization and voice move over to the lawyer as narrator, his tone now firm with a certain disdain for the himself as character and his naive assumptions: “era un hombre de preferencias, no de presunciones” (57). By eliminating the lawyer’s diffidence, the Spanish narrator is effectively scolding himself as character for such naive wishful thinking.

In Borges’s hands, the filter through which the narrator sees his former self as character is frequently critical in those places where incongruence or unbecoming traits cannot be eliminated. Upon returning to work the next day, and seeing that Bartleby indeed has not left as instructed, the lawyer points to the money he had left the scrivener: either to bribe him to leave, or at least settle his conscience for demanding Bartleby do so. Seeing it untouched, he recalls: “‘Why,’ I added, *unaffectedly starting*, ‘you have not even touched that money yet’” (24, my emphasis). The lawyer’s unfeigned surprise that Bartleby has not touched the money does not quite sound like a condemnation of his character, but rather an astonishment at Bartleby’s. In the Spanish, however, the lawyer takes on a more critical tone in reference to himself: “¡Cómo! –agregué, *naturalmente asombrado*–. ¿ni siquiera ha tocado ese dinero? –Estaba en el preciso lugar donde yo lo había dejado la víspera” (60, my emphasis). That he be “naturally shocked” that Bartleby did not touch the money is a harsh statement of the lawyer’s

connatural avarice; he cannot conceive of doing the same in the scrivener's place.

While being stern with the lawyer as character, when it comes to recalling unflattering behavior or attitudes in the past, Borges also continues to look for ways to improve his person. When first met with Bartleby's refusal to check his copy, the lawyer explains how he turns to Turkey and Nippers to ask what they think of this unheard of behavior, "for some reinforcement for his own faltering mind" (11). The term "faltering mind," whether coming from his view as character or as narrator suggests an unwillingness to take responsibility for one's reaction, a hope that one is insane rather than that reality be what it is, giving the lawyer an appearance of weakness in his dealings with the world. In rectification, Borges translates, "si hay testigos imparciales, se vuelve a ellos para que de algún modo lo refuercen" (33). Here it is not his faltering mind that needs backing up, but his position, which is the demand that Bartleby check his work, even though he is not paid to do so. Borges often seeks to toughen the sentimental lawyer up—especially because his melodramatic sentiments frequently fall as censure to his character for their inextricable tie to his own self-interest. Considering pity, the lawyer suggests that it is not selfish to refuse to entertain thoughts of unpleasant circumstances which invoke sympathy, but that, "to a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it" (18). When one realizes that the situations for which such painful sympathy is felt cannot be resolved, it is to eliminate the pain than one abandons their cause. Whether Borges took issue with the lawyer as a "sensitive being," or that he feel pity and be caused pain by it, the line was unsuitable enough to be completely omitted. Thus, in the Spanish, it is not because pity causes the lawyer pain that he must be rid of the feeling, but because in a practical manner pitying Bartleby cannot help the situation.

Borges's impulse to deemphasize the lawyer's sentimentality is symptomatic of a greater concern, which the translator must have sensed as early as 1943, though critics have only recently begun exploring it: homosexual desire within the text. A number of studies have treated homosexual and homosocial desire in other of Melville's writings, such as Eve Kofosky Sedwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990/2008), which devotes an entire

chapter to *Billy Budd*, Robert K. Martin's *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (1986) and James Creech's book, *Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville's Pierre* (1993). With his article, "Dead Letters!... Dead Men?": The Rhetoric of the Office in Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener'" (2000),<sup>3</sup> Graham Thompson is the first to address similar issues in "Bartleby." Thompson suggests that the story's entire plot is a "tense, desire-ridden tale," constructed around the developing emotional attachment between Bartleby and the lawyer (397). Analyzing the office as a discursive space where, during the nineteenth century, male identity was coming into definition through homosexual and heterosexual distinction, Thompson argues that the narrator's surveillance of Bartleby—they share an office, separated by a screen—and his continual need to restructure and rename the space of their relationship, ultimately guides the lawyer to the recognition of both his sexual desire and its impossibility, leading to his final rejection of Bartleby and the scrivener's subsequent demise.<sup>4</sup> *Hombria*, and homosexual desire, are tropes never lacking in Borges's writing—"Hombre de la esquina rosada," "El muerto," "El Sur" and "La intrusa" are just a few of his stories whose plots are driven by shows of masculine dominance or the lack thereof. These concerns appear to have been as influential in Borges's translation style as his distaste for psychological narrative, as Borges carefully edited the text to make the lawyer not only more reliable, but more masculine.

A problem the translator faced was that in his conflicts with Bartleby, the lawyer always capitulates, requiring some serious changes to the story to make this be otherwise. In compensation, Borges alters the discourse in such a way as to make his concessions at least dignified. Upon surprising Bartleby, asleep in the law office on a Sunday morning—and according to Thompson, thereby feminizing the space by eliminating the work/home, public/private distinction—the lawyer, locked out of his own premises, is

3 Later published in *Male Sexuality Under Surveillance: The Office in American Literature* (2003).

4 Thompson convincingly cites Robert K. Martin, who claims that Melville was unable "to imagine what it might have been like for two men to love each other and survive" (411).

told to go away and come back later (406). He reports: “incontinently I slunk away from my own door and did as desired” (16). The disparaging terms with which the lawyer narrates his reaction suggest the focalization is angled from his position of narrator, harshly judging his actions as a character, “incontinently” and “slunk” being particularly withering descriptions. In the translation, however, this critique is eliminated, as the lawyer recalls simply, “de inmediato me retiré de mi puerta y cumplí con sus deseos” (42), his dignity still somewhat intact.

Continuing his reflection on this exchange between himself and Bartleby, the lawyer occasionally seeks to exonerate himself amid the protracted condemnation he gives his actions at the time of narrative events: “Indeed, it was his wonderful mildness, chiefly, which not only disarmed me but unmanned me, as it were. For I consider that one, *for the time*, is sort of unmanned when he tranquilly permits his hired clerk to dictate to him and order him away from his own premises” (16, my emphasis). The emphatic “indeed” conveys the lawyer’s surprise at Bartleby’s mildness having been the force that moved him to obey the scrivener’s wishes, making a clear distinction between his subjectivity at the time and his position now at the telling. His statement “for I consider” also positions the lawyer as someone other than the man who let his clerk order him away. The lawyer lets his former self off the hook somewhat, however, by adding that one was unmanned “for the time,” making clear that this emasculation was temporary.<sup>5</sup> Fortunately for Borges, there is no good translation of “unmanned” in Spanish that is fit for print; the term becomes “made a coward of.” “Su maravillosa mansedumbre no sólo me desarmaba, me acobardaba. Porque considero que es una especie de cobarde el que tranquilamente permite a su dependiente asalariado que le dé órdenes y lo expulse de sus dominios” (42). While the lawyer as character could not be tough, in Spanish, the verdict from his point of view as narrator can be. His callous stance makes no exceptions: one is not a coward for the time, but simply a coward.

5 This temporary state of being unmanned may be seen as corollary to the “sick and silly brain,” whose fancies were captive of that “wondrous ascendancy which the inscrutable scrivener had over me, and from which ascendancy, for all my chafing, I could not completely escape” (24).

Having avoided the potential ramifications of the lawyer being unmanned, Borges must also edge out the desire that saturates the dealings between the lawyer and Bartleby, such as when as the narrator pleads that the scrivener either return to work or leave the office:

“Will you, or will you not, quit me?” I now demanded in a sudden passion, advancing close to him.

“I would prefer *not* to quit you,” he replied gently emphasizing the *not*.  
(24)

The lawyer’s passion, and his moving toward Bartleby, lends a sexually suggestive tone to a conversation that could otherwise be interpreted as aggressive. The lawyer does not want Bartleby to leave, but the scrivener’s inscrutability frustrates his efforts to keep him in his company. The copyist similarly desires to be close to the lawyer, but refusing to be “read,” revealing neither why he chooses to stay nor why he refuses to work, the nature of this desire cannot be classified. The lawyer cannot tolerate this ambiguity for, as Thompson writes, “his identity as a man in the masculine and public world of work and patriarchy cannot permit the desire he has for Bartleby or other men to be vectored through sex” (401). While to himself he admits “I never feel so private as when I know you are here,” in the eyes of the lawyer’s fellows it is unacceptable to have a man share the intimacy of his office without a public purpose. The Spanish forecloses these questions of desire by making the issue of leaving or staying not between Bartleby and the lawyer, but between the scrivener and the entire law office staff:

–¿Quiere usted dejarnos, sí o no? –pregunté en un arranque, avanzando hasta acercarme a él.

–Preferiría *no* dejarlos –replicó suavemente acentuando el *no*. (60)

“Quiere usted dejarme” must have had an uncomfortably suggestive tone. By pluralizing the first person singular, Borges inserts space between the lawyer and Bartleby; the former’s desire inherent in not wanting to quit the lawyer is washed out as he now prefers not to leave all his colleagues including his employer.

As rumors begin to spread, the lawyer, who had acquiesced in the previous confrontation, and admittedly taken comfort in the scrivener’s presence on the other side of the screen, tries once more to rid himself of

his “millstone” (21). The combination of cowardice and reluctance make the aging lawyer stammer as he confronts Bartleby:

“If you do not go away from these premises before night, I shall feel bound—indeed, I *am* bound—to—to—to quit the premises myself!” I rather absurdly concluded, knowing not with what possible threat to try to frighten his immobility into compliance. (30)

In Spanish, the threat is issued unwaveringly:

¡Si usted no se va de aquí antes del anochecer, me verá obligado—en verdad, estoy obligado—a irme yo mismo!— dije, un poco absurdamente, sin saber con qué amenaza atemorizarlo para trocar en obediencia su inmovilidad. (72)

There are no italics emphasizing the lawyer’s forced-sounding assertion; he does not stumble in his indication that he will leave if Bartleby will not.

The following day, upon finding the scrivener still residing in his office, the lawyer keeps his word and moves. Yet he misses Bartleby and must fight the impulse to return and visit him in his former offices. He resists, “though I often felt a charitable prompting to call at the place and see poor Bartleby, yet a certain squeamishness, or I know not what, withheld me” (28). The lawyer cannot name the feeling that prevents him from visiting the scrivener; it appears to be a visceral reaction to the ramifications of such an indulgence, for no professional purpose could be assigned to this visit. The lawyer is physically repulsed—or perhaps dangerously excited—by the thought of giving in to his desire. In Spanish, by contrast, it is not repulsion, but decency that keep the lawyer from calling upon Bartleby: “aunque a menudo sentía un caritativo impulso de visitar el lugar y ver al pobre Bartleby, un cierto escrúpulo, de no sé qué, me detenía” (69). The lawyer is unable to define the exact ethical scruple that impedes him, he cannot say precisely why it is wrong to visit, but he knows such an act is inappropriate. It would be more like giving in to a spoiled child, the risk of not keeping his word. Even as all of Melville’s allegories of love between men end in death and disaster, Borges precluded any need for such cautionary warning. Bartleby’s death came not at the expense of the lawyer’s love for him, but was the product of the scrivener’s unwavering negation of life.

Translation theorist Anthony Pym has noted that translation paratext do not intend an exchangeable value between the original and the translation, but function as “instruction[s] for use” (53). Yet Borges’s prologue to “Bartleby,” in casting the story as a fantastic narrative, and the narrator as reliable, crosses over that “border region between the material and the semiotic” to become “ideally equivalent,” that is, a signifying aspect of the translation itself (54). In the prologue, Borges suggests that it is Bartleby who contaminates the office with his nihilism, that he brings strangeness upon a group of men who heretofore were well balanced and hardworking. The English makes plain, however, that each man was subject to uncommon behavior prior to Bartleby’s appearance, whether it is Turkey’s being drunk every afternoon and daily refusing to change his clothes, Nipper’s morning orneriness and shady dealings, or the lawyer’s own “easy” business practices. While Borges employs the preface to frame the narrator as an “estólido señor,” in English, he proves to be nothing of the sort. In transforming the narrator into a man who is neither soft nor selfish, Borges tries to uphold the picture he paints in the prologue. In the preface he adds, “es como si Melville hubiera escrito: ‘Basta que sea irracional un solo hombre para que otros lo sean y para que lo sea el universo.’ La historia universal abunda en confirmaciones de ese tenor” (“Prólogo” 11). Borges’s own stories abound in such confirmations. As *El Inglés* states in “La forma de la espada”: “lo que hace un hombre es como si lo hicieran todos los hombres” (OC 1: 594). If this is indeed true, then what one man must not do is desire another.

In “Los traductores de las 1001 noches,” (1936) Borges precedes an example of the florid, French fin-de-siècle tone with which Scheherazade narrates her stories in J.C. Madrus’s translation of *The Arabian Nights*, with the wry: “refiere Shahrazad-Madrus...” (OC 1: 486). By attaching the translator’s name to that of the narrator, Borges presciently suggests that their roles somehow merge or overlap—a point that would be argued sixty years later by translation theorists Theo Hermans and Giuliana Schiavi in a groundbreaking edition of *Target*. Borges’s translation of “Bartleby” is a keen example of how a translator may be “constantly co-producing the discourse, shadowing, mimicking and, as it were, counterfeiting the [n]arrator’s words” (Hermans 43). While the recognition of translation as an activity that transforms an original text has become widely accepted, the

degree to which Borges alters the story and discourse of Melville's story indicates that much more is at stake than isolated phrases or specific formal features.<sup>6</sup> By usurping the voice of the lawyer, and moving him toward the image of his own character narrators, who rarely possess such psychological and sentimental depth, Borges consequently alters the narrator's relationship every other participant in the narrative communication situation (as Chatman calls it). The implied author treats him with less irony; the dynamics between the narrator and his person as character are either eliminated or made to emphasize the lawyer's masculinity and rationality; the narratee who reads the lawyer's "history" has increased reason to take his narrative at face value; while the implied reader is privy to significantly less disclosure on the part of the narrator and consequently is less inclined to judge his contradictory ethics as so many critics of the English original have. While lacking an unreliable narrator, the translation's new narrative communication situation, free from the sentimental excesses of psychological narration, make the Spanish version of "Bartleby" much more a Borges story than anyone may heretofore have imagined.

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6 Patricia Willson is among the very few who look at the narratological aspects of Borges's translation. In her book, *La constelación del sur. Traductores y traducciones en la literatura argentina del siglo XX*, she notes that in his translation of *Orlando*, in order to resolve his distaste for psychological narration, Borges moved the biographer/narrator from intra- to extradiegetic by making clear distinctions between the narrator's personal interjections and the narrated action.

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