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Borges Reads Joyce
The Role of Translation in the Creation of Texts

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Introduction

There is perhaps no other writer for whom the act of reading is as intimately connected to that of writing as it is for Borges. His texts constantly blur and contaminate the distinctions between writer, reader, and text. By extension, whom Borges chooses to read and how is always relevant to what Borges writes. With this idea in mind, I analyze the role translation plays in the creation of new texts by looking at how Borges reads Joyce. What does Borges’ dialogue with Joyce tell us about the relationships between translation, influence, reading, and writing?

I begin with what I call the first point of contact between these two writers, a 1925 article by Borges about Ulysses which includes a translation of the last page of Joyce’s novel. Using Borges’ own theories as a frame, I analyze this translation to see how Borges puts his ideas into practice, and how translation can function as a metaphor for writing. In both theory and practice, Borges establishes that there is no reason to believe that a translation is inferior to the original, problematizes issues of “authority,” “originality,” and “fidelity,” and negates the concept of a “definitive text.” I also consider several other places where Borges dialogues with Joyce, especially an unexpected intersection between Funes and Joyce. I conclude with a discussion of how Borges utilizes Joyce (as a precursor, one might say), and of the possibilities and limits (if any) of translation.

1. First Contact

In the January, 1925 issue of Pros, calling himself the first “aventurero hispánico” to arrive to Joyce’s book Ulysses, Borges provides a brief
commentary on the book followed by a translation of its last page. In spite of its brevity (or perhaps: with characteristic brevity), the article manages to introduce Joyce to Argentine readers and to make a number of insightful comments about Ulysses—which also turn out to be telling about Borges himself—in the space of four quick pages before going on to the by-now celebrated translation of the last page of Ulysses. The translation becomes part of Borges' reading of Joyce, and the decisions that Borges makes in it are interesting in how they illustrate Borges' theories about translation. I will examine the translation below.

A few words first about the article, entitled “El Ulises de Joyce.” Borges starts out in a humble tone (which should raise the first warning sign for us, as Borges' “humility” can almost never be read literally, but should be seen rather as a rhetorical tool), stating that he will not attempt to describe the entirety of the text. He leaves such a description, instead, to Valéry Larbaud, who has already done so, as Borges informs us, in issue 18 of the Nouvelle Revue Française. Borges also makes another disclaimer of sorts about Ulysses, as he confesses not to have “desbrozado las setecientas páginas que lo integran.” However, he adds that he knows the text with an “…aventurera y legítima certidumbre que hay en nosotros, al afirmar nuestro conocimiento de la ciudad, sin adjudicarnos por ello la intimidad de cuantas calles incluye ni aun de todos sus barrios” (3). This latter comment claims an affinity regarding the importance of the role of the city in both writers; it presents the idea of the geography of a text, a concept both writers explored throughout their works. This is especially evident in Borges' poetry of the time, in Fervor de Buenos Aires, Luna de enfrente, and Cuaderno San Martín, which all contain the careful working of the text as a map of the city. As Jorge Schwartz says about Fervor and Joyce: “Tanto Dublin quanto Buenos Aires são ficcionalmente construídas como centros geopolíticos de arquitectura labiríntica” (“Borges e Joyce” 143). The affinity does not end with Borges' early poetry, however, but also extends to many of Borges' fictions, where the role of the labyrinthine city (either as a literal or a figurative one) is often crucial.

The other comment, about not having read all seven hundred pages of Ulysses, expresses a sentiment that Borges would repeat, in one form or another, either humorously, like here, or in more hostile terms, throughout his life. I will come back to what these kind of comments suggest about the relationship between Borges and Joyce in section 5 of this paper.

After this introduction, the essay reveals the extent to which Borges understood the depth and value of the most important facets of Ulysses. Borges discusses subjectivity and perspective in Ulysses, Joyce’s study of human consciousness with relation to concepts of time, and the conception of reality in the text (4-5). Borges also intersperses an ironic sense of humor throughout his analysis, which, as in the following example, serves to undermine the verisimilitude of Borges' “humble” stance at the beginning of the article:

Si Shakespear [sic]—según su propia metáfora—puso en la vuelta de un reloj de arena las proezas de los años, Joyce invierte el procedimiento y despliega la única jornada de su héroe sobre muchas jornadas de lector. (No he dicho muchas siestas.) (5)

The point of these asides is that even as he praises Joyce, Borges throws in underhanded barbs, demonstrating his own humor and wit, and very appropriately so in dealing with a writer like Joyce, for whom humor and wit were basic staples. By the time we get to Borges' final comments about the styles and languages in Ulysses, it gets more and more difficult to believe that we are dealing with someone who did not make it all the way through the seven hundred pages of the book, as Borges stated earlier.

Borges' insights into Ulysses come at a very early date. His article is early not just for Argentina and Latin America, but for the world in general. It shows Borges at the "avant-garde" of Joycean reception, four years before the publication of the French translation of Ulysses. And a remark he makes about the need for having to wait for commentaries and guides in order to be able to enjoy it also anticipates Gilbert's 1931 study, James Joyce's Ulysses, A Study. Thus, well ahead of his time in Argentina, and, arguably, internationally, Borges realizes not only the importance of Joyce's work, but also provides an insightful reading of Joyce's project based on what is perhaps just a partial read of Ulysses.
2. Borges on Translation

What really makes Borges’ first article about Joyce extraordinary is that it is followed by his brilliant translation of the last page of *Ulysses*. As I look at some of the solutions Borges finds for this translation, and analyze a few of the decisions he makes, I want to keep in mind Borges’ own ideas about translation, as presented in his two most important essays on the topic, “Las versiones homéricas” (Discusión, 1952) and “Los traductores de las 1001 Noches” (Historia de la eternidad, 1936), as well as Borges’ critique of Salas Subirat’s 1945 translation of *Ulysses* (Los Anales de Buenos Aires, January, 1946).  

Borges examines a number of translations of Homer (in “Las versiones homéricas”) and the *Arabian Nights* (in “Los traductores de las 1001 Noches”) as he argues that there is no reason to believe that a translation need be inferior to the original. The memorable passage that sums up this idea, found in the first of these essays, is:

Presuponer que toda recombinación de elementos es obligatoriamente inferior a su original, es presuponer que el borrador 9 es obligatoriamente inferior al borrador H — y que no puede haber sino borradores. El concepto de texto definitivo no corresponde sino a la religión o al cansancio. (OC 1: 239; italics in the original.)

In Borges’ 1946 critique of Salas Subirat’s translation of *Ulysses*, he repeats this statement almost word for word, and, applying it to the text he is reviewing, adds the following: “Joyce dilata y reforma el idioma inglés; su traductor tiene el deber de ensayar libertades congénères” (“Nota sobre...” 49). As Jorge Schwartz has said, these ideas imply that, “La posibilidad que una traducción tiene de superar al original, coloca al traductor en posición de verdadero recreador.” Borges establishes the concept of a “traductor-recreador”; he sees the text as “un objeto provisorio, posible de una continua re-escritura.” From these statements, I agree with Schwartz in concluding that, for Borges, “el texto definitivo constituye una falacia” (“Borges y la primera...” 722).  

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3 Borges has two other essays related to translation, which I will not be utilizing here, both from *Otras Inquisiciones*: “Sobre el Valhak de William Beckford” and “El enigma de Edward Fitzgerald.”

4 Fritz Senn studies this topic in *Joyce’s Dislocations: Essays on Reading as Translation.*
of providing “agrados,” but also states that a literal translation can never be faithful to the original, as it claims to be. At end of “Las versiones homéricas,” Borges concludes that Butler’s version, which is the least literal of them all, might just be the most loyal (OC 1: 243).

Does this suggest that Borges prefers Arnold’s stance? Perhaps. But the issue is further complicated by the fact that the very concept of fidelity is problematized in these essays. For what does fidelity mean when we realize that there is no “definitive text,” and that every translation, every text, is a re-writing of — a dialoging with — a previous version?

In “Los traductores de las 1001 Noches,” Borges adds:

Ambas [conductas, la de Newman y la de Arnold] son menos importantes que el traductor y que sus hábitos literarios. Traducir el espíritu es una intención tan enorme y tan fantasmal que bien puede quedarse como inofensiva; traducir la letra, una precisión tan extravagante que no hay riesgo de que la ensayen. Más grave que esos infinitos propósito es la conservación o supresión de ciertos pormenores; más grave que esas preferencias y olvidos, es el movimiento sintáctico.

(OC 1: 400)

Borges appears to be saying that neither approach, exclusively, is feasible; that both are impossible if taken to their extremes. Instead, the emphasis is on the literary habits of the translator, on the way he/she is able to manipulate the language, the “movimiento sintáctico.” In this same essay, Borges valorizes a series of preferences, omissions, alterations, and additions — of creative infidelities — in Burton’s and Mardrus’ versions of the Nights. Speaking of Mardrus, he says: “Su infidelidad, su infidelidad creadora y feliz, es lo que nos debe importar” (OC 1: 410; my italics.).

3. The Translation

Keeping all this in mind, I turn now to Borges’ translation of the last page of Ulysses, to see if Borges leans toward either the Newman or the Arnold solution, and what his “hábitos literarios” may be. Jorge Schwartz has made a couple of important studies of this translation, in which he compares it with Salas Subirat’s version of the 1945 Spanish translation, as well as with two Portuguese translations, by António Houaiss and Haroldo de Campos. As Schwartz argues, Borges’ translation is much less literal than Salas Subirat’s, especially in situations where a literal translation would miss the idiomatic meaning of the original. Through an analysis of the translations, Schwartz shows how

Borges, in comparison with Salas Subirat, “aprieta y torna el lenguaje más coloquial — siendo este último un rasgo esencial para el tipo de discurso en cuestión: el monólogo interiorizado de Molly Bloom (corriente de la conciencia)” (“Borges y la primera...” 723); how he manages to avoid literal translation for poetic language and for local idiomatic expressions; and how he avoids artificial solutions that fall outside the style of the original language (such as using literary written expressions to translate dialogued language).

Thus, Borges finds ways to translate the orality of Molly’s monologue, as well as the many colloquial and idiomatic expressions she utilizes. He has a wonderful knack for translating literally when it helps to capture Molly’s personal idiosyncratic modalities, and to translate freely the expressions that are already built into the language, and that Molly herself incorporates into her monologue unconsciously. An example of the former is, “pinky sugar,” which Borges translates as “azúcar rosa”; or “my mountain flower,” which Borges translates as “mi flor serrana.” The latter situation, however, is much more difficult, and arises time and again, even in this small fragment. Here are some example of idiomatic expressions that Borges translates into a very colloquial and appropriate Spanish that fits into the flow of the monologue:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Joyce</th>
<th>Borges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| I love flowers I love flowers Id love to have the whole place swimming in roses
| that would do your heart good to see rivers and lakes and flowers all sorts of shapes and smells and colors
| wouldn’t give a snap of my two fingers
| and why why
| so there you are
|                    | me importa un pito
|                    | una vez santos
|                    | están embromados

Then an example of where Borges actually manages to translate an idiomatic expression in English into a poetic one in Spanish that does not feel forced, as in the first part of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Joyce</th>
<th>Borges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| they might as well try to stop the sun from rising tomorrow
|                    | eso es como atajarlo al sol de salir

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In this last case, Borges also displaces the alliteration in s ("sol de salir") which in the English version comes in conjunction with the next phrase, "the sun shines for you he said."

Borges is also not reluctant to make variations or omissions, as he finds necessary. For example, as Schwartz points out, he omits all proper names and references to previous characters in Ulysses that someone reading just this fragment would not understand. These kinds of omissions represent a recontextualizing that makes the fragment function better as an autonomous piece, allowing it to exist on its own, as a (co-)creation of the translator's. Some of the slight alterations are also wonderful in how they fit in with the overall tone and register of the internal monologue. In the following example, I believe Borges' version is shorter but perhaps more elegant than Joyce's:

Joyce

and all the fine cattle going about

Borges

y el ganado pastando

And here are some other choices made by Borges where his translation is not quite literal:

Joyce

atheist

Borges

libre pensadores

he understood or felt

él comprendía

I could always get around him

lograría engatusarlo siempre

Another interesting moment is when Borges translates, "the watchman going about serene with his lamp," as "el sereno pasando quietamente con su farol." By choosing "sereno" instead of, say, "vigilante," Borges manages to transpose the Latinate root, but displaces it unto a different word.

There is also an important set of decisions that Borges takes toward the end of the fragment. It begins with the phrase "the sea the sea," which comes near the very end of Molly's monologue. In English, it reads: "and O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea Crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets....." The language here is becoming more and more sexually charged, the phrases swaying with building desire, as they build towards the climactic last "yes I will Yes." Borges' version does not lose any of the passion or rhythm of the original: "y Oh ese torrente atroz y de golpe Oh y el mar carmesí a ve-

ces como fuego y los ocasos brillantes...." In fact, although he does not repeat "el mar" (it would not have the same romantic effect in Spanish as it does in English), and says "ese torrente atroz y de golpe Oh" (instead of "that awful deepdown torrent"), the "y de golpe" can actually refer to the "torrente" or to the exclamation "Oh" that comes right afterwards, giving the exclamation "Oh" an extra erotic emphasis. Also, as Schwartz points out in what he calls a paronomastic equivalence in which an original effect is removed and dissolved to another place where it is not in the original but can be re-created in the translation ("Borges y la primera..." 723-4), Borges displaces the repetition to another place earlier in the monologue: "y las castañuelas y aquella noche en Algeciras cuando perdímos el vapor las castañuelas ...", whereas the "castanets" only appear once in the English version.

Finally, in addition to translating the colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions, to making choices that correspond to the poetic and emotional mood of the text, to capturing the rhythm and the phrasing of Molly's sensual stream of consciousness, Borges also captures the extreme eroticism and sexual desire that builds toward the end. It is interesting, in fact, that Borges would choose this particular moment of Ulysses to translate at all; one might think that Stephen's stream of consciousness in the first part of the novel, or some of the moments of "Ithaca," might have suited him better. For "Penelope," and this last moment in particular, deals with sexual desire much more explicitly than any of Borges' own work ever does. In any case, I agree with Schwartz with an instance—a very erotic one—in which Borges' solution might be an improvement on the original version. Joyce's says, "and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me"; Borges writes, "y primero lo abracé sí y encima mío lo agaché." I would add that the conclusion, "yes I will Yes" sounds even more sexually explicit in Borges' Spanish: "si quiero Sl."

But I did not set out to determine if this is an instance where a translation surpasses an original. What I have wanted to show is that well before elucidating his thoughts about translation in "Las versiones homéricas" and "Los traductores de las 1001 Noches," Borges was already practicing the kind of translation for which he was later to advocate. The examples I have outlined above reveal that, especially in the area of syntactic decisions, Borges never feels that he has to be literal. He is willing to take risks, to omit and change and exercise his preferences as needed. By executing these creative infidelities, he is able to be both literal and free, as he reads and captures the spirit of the text and
5. Ulisses, the Wake and Translatability

c (a) the Located mysho in wihle o fighetion (6-6)

do’s la der hae o the shugpse to sicer to ilussture the ilustrapce of the iu.

This is a complex passage that discusses the theme of translation and its implications on the meaning of texts. The author mentions the work of Joyce and how the persistence of certain themes in his work, such as the dream and the waking, have influenced the translation of his works. The passage also touches on the idea of the wake as a reflection of the unconscious mind, a concept that is central to Joyce's work. The author suggests that the process of translation is a double-edged sword, as it can preserve the essence of the original text while also transforming it in the process. The passage ends by expressing the idea that translation is a form of dialogue between different cultures and languages.
In the 1941 *Sur* article “Fragmento sobre Joyce” discussed above, Borges says: “Nadie ignora que para los lectores desprevenidos, la vasta novela de Joyce es indescribablemente caótica” (61). Then, in his 1946 review “Nota sobre el Ulises en español,” also discussed above, he states: “A priori, una versión cabal del Ulises me parece imposible” (49). But it is not surprising that Borges would believe so emphatically that a complete and exact version of *Ulysses* in Spanish is not possible. We know from “Las versiones homéricas” and “Los traductores de las 1001 Noches” that he does not believe that a “cabal” version of any text is possible — although it may claim accurateness, Borges establishes that a literal translation is never faithful; and the translations Borges most values are those that contain creative infidelities. Furthermore, Borges himself had already produced not a “cabal,” but a reduced, one-page fragment of the novel some twenty years before this statement. As we have seen, it had the kinds of creative decisions that lead not to a “cabal” translation, but to a new version with the translator as a (co-)creator.

Although this may explain these particular comments, Borges’ stance only becomes more rigid with time. In the 1965 “Introducción a la literatura inglesa,” referring to *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, he states: “Los libros que hemos enumerado son intraducibles” (OCC: 854). And in the conference “La ceguera,” published in *Siete noches* in 1980, he says: “Tenemos esas dos vastas y por qué no decirlo ilegibles novelas que son *Ulises* y *Finnegans Wake*” (OC 3: 284). In part, these comments are related to how Borges uses Joyce. I will come back to what end Borges might be using Joyce shortly. But the issue that keeps coming back in Borges’ comments, regardless of their degree of hostility (in these later years) or of humor and wit (as in the earlier ironic comments), is on the possibility or impossibility of reproducing Joyce’s linguistic experiments in Spanish. In other words, on its translatability.

Thus, we arrive at another possible site of convergence (or divergence?) between Joyce and Borges. What is at stake here is the question of the limits — if any — of translation. In 1924, Joyce stated that he thought *Ulysses* was untranslatable (Ellmann 561). As we just saw, Borges eventually says the same thing, and repeated on several occasions. Both writers, however, believe their statements. As Ellmann details, encouraged by the first French translations organized by Valéry Larbaud, Joyce decides that *Ulysses* should be translated into French, and then participates actively in this production (Ellmann 521-524 and 600-602). Joyce would eventually come full circle, stating in 1930 that, “There is noth-

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4 This change can be read as coming from Joyce at a point in which, fully immersed in the creation of *Finnegans Wake*, he believed that language — any language, in fact — was fully capable of being manipulated and wrought into any shape, and hence translated.
Reading and translation in Bogos' work is equivalent to the materialization of language and translation. Together they become one and the same. Translation is not a mere craft but a process that goes beyond the confines of the written word. In this sense, the notion of 'Borges' Joyce' becomes even more pertinent, as it reflects the interplay between different forms of expression and their meanings. The screen between writer and reader is disrupted, leading to a transformation of language and thought in the same way...