

Borges y yo

por Jorge Luis Borges

Al otro, a Borges, es a quien le ocurren las cosas. Yo camino por Buenos Aires y me demoro, acaso ya mecánicamente, para mirar el arco de un zaguán y la puerta cancel; de Borges tengo noticias por el correo y veo su nombre en una terna de profesores o en un diccionario biográfico. Me gustan los relojes de arena, los mapas, la tipografía del siglo XVII, las etimologías, el sabor del café y la prosa de Stevenson; el otro comparte esas preferencias, pero de un modo vanidoso que las convierte en atributos de un actor. Sería exagerado afirmar que nuestra relación es hostil; yo vivo, yo me dejo vivir para que Borges pueda tramar su literatura y esa literatura me justifica. Nada me cuesta confesar que ha logrado ciertas páginas válidas, pero esas páginas no me pueden salvar, quizá porque lo bueno ya no es de nadie, ni siquiera del otro, sino del lenguaje o la tradición. Por lo demás, yo estoy destinado a perderme, definitivamente, y sólo algún instante de mí podrá sobrevivir en el otro. Poco a poco voy cediéndole todo, aunque me consta su perversa costumbre de falsear y magnificar. Spinoza entendió que todas las cosas quieren perseverar en su ser; la piedra eternamente quiere ser piedra y el tigre un tigre. Yo he de quedar en Borges, no en mí (si es que alguien soy), pero me reconozco menos en sus libros que en muchos otros o que en el laborioso rasgueo de una guitarra. Hace años yo traté de librarme de él y pasé de las mitologías del arrabal a los juegos con el tiempo y con lo infinito, pero esos juegos son de Borges ahora y tendré que idear otras cosas. Así mi vida es una fuga y todo lo pierdo y todo es del olvido, o del otro.

No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página.

Borges and I

by Jorge Luis Borges

Translated by Brian Quale

The other Borges is the one who has things happen to him. I, on the other hand, walk through the city of Buenos Aires and lose track of time, somewhat mechanically, to look at the arch of an entryway and a screened door; I get mail for Borges and I see his name on the distinguished list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like time measured in sand, maps, typography from the eighteenth century, etymologies, the taste of coffee and Stevenson's prose, the other guy shares these likes, but in a more conceited manner whereby he converts these into the tools of an actor. Perhaps it would be an exaggeration to describe our relationship as hostile; I live, and I keep living if it allows Borges to keep spinning his tales, and this literature is my justification. It doesn't bother me at all to confess that he has created some true pages, but these pages are not able to offer me salvation, perhaps because the good ones are not penned specifically by one or the other, but instead by language or tradition. Apart from this, I am destined to lose myself, definitively, and only in some instances will I be able to survive in the other. Little by little I am going to hand over everything to him, although I am quite aware of his perverse tendencies of falsifying and exaggerating. The philosopher Spinoza understood that everything wants to persevere as it is; the rock eternally wants to be a rock, and the tiger, a tiger. I have remained in Borges, and not in myself (if I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many other ones, or in the laborious strum of a guitar. It has been years since I have attempted to free myself from him and pass through the mythological city slums to his games with time and with the infinite, but these games belong to Borges now and I will need to think of other things. So now my life is a fugue and I have lost everything, and everything now belongs to the forgotten, or to the other.

I am not sure which of us is writing this page.

A Note on the Translation

I suppose the act of translating (by an amateur translator) a riddle-filled and abstract fragment such as "Borges y yo" is also an act of stepping willingly into a Borgesian Labyrinth. Whereas the fragment "Borges and I" already deals with the complexities of two Borges (one who exists as an alter-ego in his stories, and one who seems to wander around Buenos Aires, jealous, resentful and ironically lost without the other), my attempt at translation simply adds another layer to the onion, or perhaps strips away one, without getting any closer to the center.

Full disclosure: I am uncertain whether I read this nonfiction fragment in Spanish or English the first time I experienced it. I romantically think it was Spanish, although I have used English translations of this piece once or twice in my English classes in past years when studying Borges. In some respects, this admission feels like a reviewer of movies confessing to reading his peer's reviews before fashioning his own critical response; one cannot help but feel influenced by others' ideas. So maybe the only pure translation is coming to a work fresh without any preconceived notions, except perhaps with the knowledge of the author's proclivities, style and particular voice. Moreover, Borges' use of Spanish vocabulary is vast and intimidating, so as usual when reading or attempting to translate Borges, I had to look up several words, but I was comfortable with most of the more colloquial, idiomatic expressions.

When Borges begins with "al otro" there is an implication of a masculine man, which I decided to define in English, where we do not have masculine or feminine nouns, and therefore need to be more deliberate with our descriptors and who they are describing. I found one of the hardest challenges with translating this piece in particular was the tendency to want to clarify parts, in a way to offer my interpretation of what Borges is trying to do in his piece. I tried to resist this by keeping the vague parts vague, even if some come across as awkward and cumbersome in English, whereas in Spanish they are more fluid and mysterious. The hardest lines to translate were the vague ones, such as "todas las cosas quieren perseverar en su ser," which literally translates as "all of the things they want to persevere in his to be." I translated this, perhaps unsuccessfully, as "everything wants to persevere as it is."

I preserved most of the original punctuation. Borges like his semi-colons and long sentences, and changing them would be a matter of my stylistic choice, which would be improper to revise based solely on my tastes. I also found myself preserving some cognates, even if the English translation is somewhat awkward or dated. As a result, "laborioso" became "laborious," which has different connotations in English, but I did not feel comfortable converting this to "strenuous" or "tedious" or any other synonym. On the other hand, for certain words such as "preferencias" I used "like" instead of "preferences" (which sounds wordy to me in English) and I also added words like "guy" that don't exist in the original, in order to differentiate between the two aspects of his personality that he is playing with. Again, this decision has mainly to do with the problematic lack of masculine endings in English.

At certain points I attempted to preserve some of the beauty of the phrases such as "relojes de arena," which I translated as "time measured in sand" instead of "hourglasses," and I am proud of this. I also found myself adding a few helpful phrases, like "philosopher" in front of Spinoza, in order to help readers understand who this is, instead of worrying whether readers would wonder if it is someone who is lost in translation or in the culture of Argentina.

Even though Borges mastered several languages in addition to his native Spanish, --including English--and although he was a "translator of some note" according to Andrew Hurley (a translator himself), Borges seldom translated his own stories into these additional languages. He wrote in other languages, and read in other languages, but never felt comfortable converting his own poetry and prose between them. Perhaps I can rest

assured that Borges is well aware of the problems and pitfalls with translation. In his essay titled "The Homeric Versions," where he investigates and compares several translated versions of Homer's *The Odyssey*, Borges debunks the myth of the definitive text: "The concept of the 'definitive text' corresponds only to religion or exhaustion."

Translation Assignment

As we embark upon a semester studying works in translation from other language other than English, you will translate a piece of literature (poetry or prose) from one language other than English (preferably one you are comfortable with) into English. Once you complete this, using a dictionary if necessary, but without relying on other translated versions for guidance, you will also write a "Note on the Translation," like I did above, where you point out the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of the translation, citing specific examples. Your note will also want to address the problematic aspects of translation, and how you attempted to overcome these. You might also want to include another translation of the extract by another translator, like I have also done below, but this is not required.

Borges and I

It's Borges, the other one, that things happen to. I walk through Buenos Aires and I pause—mechanically now, perhaps—to gaze at the arch of an entryway and its inner door; news of Borges reaches me by mail, or I see his name on a list of academics or in some biographical dictionary. My taste runs to hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typefaces, etymologies, the taste of coffee, and the prose of Robert Louis Stevenson; Borges shares those preferences, but in a vain sort of way that turns them into the accoutrements of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that our relationship is hostile—I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges can spin out his literature, and that literature is my justification. I willingly admit that he has written a number of sound pages, but those pages will not save *me*, perhaps because the good in them no longer belongs to any individual, not even to that other man, but rather to language itself, or to tradition. Beyond that, I am doomed—utterly and inevitably—to oblivion, and fleeting moments will be all of me that survives in that other man. Little by little, I have been turning everything over to him, though I know the perverse way he has of distorting and magnifying everything. Spinoza believed that all things wish to go on being what they are—stone wishes eternally to be stone, and tiger, to be tiger. I shall endure in Borges, not in myself (if, indeed, I am anybody at all), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others', or in the tedious strumming of a guitar. Years ago I tried to free myself from him, and I moved on from the mythologies of the slums and outskirts of the city to games with time and infinity, but those games belong to Borges now, and I shall have to think up other things. So my life is a point-counterpoint, a kind of fugue, and a falling away—and everything winds up being lost to me, and everything falls into oblivion, or into the hands of the other man.

I am not sure which of us it is that's writing this page.

Translated by
Andrew Naylor

Quietness, subtlety, a laconic terseness—these are the marks of Borges' style. It is a style that has often been called intellectual, and indeed it is dense with allusion—to literature, to philosophy, to religion or theology, to myth, to the culture and history of Buenos Aires and Argentina and the Southern Cone of South America, to the other contexts in which his words may have appeared. But it is also a simple style: Borges' sentences are almost invariably classical in their symmetry, in their balance. Borges likes parallelism, chiasmus, subtle repetitions-with-variations; his only indulgence in "shocking" the reader (an effect he repudiated) may be the "Miltonian displacement of adjectives" to which he alludes in his foreword to *The Maker*.

Another clear mark of Borges' prose is its employment of certain words with, or for, their etymological value. Again, this is an adjectival device, and it is perhaps the technique that is most unsettling to the reader. One of the most famous opening lines in Spanish literature is this: *Nadie lo vio desembarcar en la unánime noche*: "No one saw him slip from the boat in the unanimous night." What an odd adjective, "unanimous." It is so odd, in fact, that other translations have not allowed it. But it is just as odd in Spanish, and it clearly responds to Borges' intention, explicitly expressed in such fictions as "The Immortal," to let the Latin root govern the Spanish (and, by extension, English) usage.

[. . .]

Borges himself was a translator of some note, and in addition to the translations per se that he left to Spanish culture—a number of German lyrics, Faulkner, Woolf, Whitman, Melville, Carlyle, Swedenborg, and others—he left at least three essays on the act of translation itself. Two of these, I have found, are extraordinarily liberating to the translator. In "Versions of Homer" ("Las versiones homéricas," 1932), Borges makes it unmistakably clear that every translation is a "version"—not *the* translation of Homer (or any other author) but *a* translation, one in a never-ending series, at least an infinite *possible* series. The very idea of *the* (definitive) translation is misguided, Borges tells us; there are only drafts, approximations—*versions*, as he insists on calling them. He chides us: "The concept of 'definitive text' is appealed to only by religion, or by weariness." Borges makes the point even more emphatically in his later essay "The Translators of the 1001 Nights" ("Los traductores de las 1001 Noches," 1935).

If my count is correct, at least seventeen translators have preceded me in translating one or more of the fictions of Jorge Luis Borges. In most translator's notes, the translator would feel obliged to justify his or her new translation of a classic, to tell the potential reader of this new *version* that the shortcomings and errors of those seventeen or so prior translations have been met and conquered, as though they were enemies. Borges has tried in his essays to teach us, however, that we should not translate "against" our predecessors; a new translation is always justified by the new voice given the old work, by the new life in a new land that the translation confers on it, by the "shock of the new" that both old and new readers will experience from this inevitably new (or renewed) work. What Borges teaches is that we should simply commend the translation to the reader, with the hope that the reader will find in it a literary experience that is rich and moving. I have listened to Borges' advice as I have listened to Borges' fictions, and I—like the translators who have preceded me—have rendered Borges in the style that I hear when I listen to him. I think that the reader of my version will hear something of the genius of his storytelling and his style.

Andrew Hurley's translation
notes for Collected Fictions
of Jorge Luis Borges (1998).