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Past Lives of Knives: On Borges, Translation, and Sticking Old Texts
Histoires de couteaux: réflexion sur Borges, la traduction et l'« assassinat » de vieux textes

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

As a rule, translation "nurtures" a text, extends its genealogy across cultural and historical divides. The strange account of this article is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. We'll see a seventy-year old Jorge Luis Borges put heads together with a young Harvard man by the name of Norman Thomas di Giovanni and "re-write the slate clean," translate old texts for the purpose of "sticking it" to them, suppressing them, even consigning them to oblivion. The collaboration was a bit of inspired naughtiness that we'll call "translational infamy." It had enduring consequences, for the good and bad, on the characters populating Borges's writings and his private life. This equation of translation and oblivion, we'll see it play out in Borges's older fictions, specifically *Pierre Menard*; in the editorial logistics of his collaboration with Di Giovanni; in the creation—and simultaneous translation—of new fictions (*Brodie's Report*); and, perhaps most interestingly, in the details of his own biography.

Past Lives of Knives: On Borges, Translation, and Sticking Old Texts

Ryan Fraser

> *L'Herne: Humainement, à quoi ressemble cette Argentine que Borges a, dites-vous, enfantée ?*
> *Ibarra: Il l'imagine tendre et violente. Il l'imagine, il la veut heureuse.*
> *L'Herne: Le paradis à l'ombre des épées ?*
> *Ibarra: À l'ombre des couteaux.* (Ibarra, 1969, p. 36)

Borges was pushing seventy when he wrote "El encuentro". It's about a nine-year-old boy who slips away from a dull grownup party and goes exploring the darker corners of the host's house. What he finds is a case full of knives. Knives that had made themselves infamous in the arrabal. Knives that had made instruments of their owners and not the other way around. Knives with old scores to settle. And a quarrel between two of the party's guests is just the occasion. The case is opened. Minutes later a man lies dead.

Borges was pushing seventy when the first comprehensive translation of his works into English was undertaken.[1] By that time, most of his 'knives', his instruments of literary fame, were well over

[1] I'm drawing from two biographies. The first and best reputed is Emir Rodriguez Monegal's *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography.* Because second opinions are always important in such things, I also draw on James Woodall's *The Man Behind the Mirror: A Life of Jorge Luis Borges.* Both have their merits. Monegal is rich in psychological insights, while Woodall prefers a more streamlined, journalistic presentation of the facts.

thirty years old and had been displayed countless times in countless forms: Argentine literary magazines, collections, cross samplings of collections chosen for special editions and translations, collections continually re-edited. They were aging nicely in the machine.

So was their writer, by all appearances. In the mid-sixties, Borges's international profile was at an all time high. Never before was there so much fanatical re-arranging of his works. Never before so many prefaces and by-lines to write. But as far as new fictions went, his creative output was at an all time low. The literary magus seemed out of tricks, tired and after some well-deserved domestic comfort. He dug up a lukewarm affection by the name of Elsa Astete Millán, married her and settled into a life of hearty stews and long afternoons at the National Library. Little did he realize that those old knives "lo andaban buscando."

That they would show up at his door in the hands of an ambitious American translator by the name of Norman Thomas Di Giovanni. The two would give them some rough play. They would translate several volumes of poetry and short stories, the standouts being the fanciful bestiary *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1969) and *The Aleph and Other Stories* (1970). Other volumes would come out of their industry as well: *Selected Poems* (1972) and *A Universal History of Infamy* (1972). Together, they would simultaneously write and translate original works: a collection of poetry, *In Praise of Darkness* (1974), a collection of prose fiction, *Dr. Brodie's Report* (1971), and the "Autobiographical Essay".

At the time, Di Giovanni was just what Borges needed, an aggressive young sparring partner to force him out of the cocoon he had woven around himself: fame, blindness, marriage, the National Library, that sinecure/sepulcher where he could have just as easily let himself rot. Ideas for original prose fiction had accumulated since the mid-fifties, all emerging from the literary topoi of his youth: the violent corners and characters of the *arrabal*. Borges was long convinced he could no longer tell their stories. Pen-to-pen, he and Di Giovanni would flesh them out in the fictions that make up *El informe de Brodie* (1970), the visceral likes of which hadn't been seen since *La historia universal de la infamia* (1935), thirty-five years earlier.

This article is about infamy, "dark deeds" multiplying in the valence of a translation project. An irreverent translator from a

competitive American publisher put heads together with a world-famous, yet painfully reserved Argentine author with a lifelong reverence for English-speaking tigers. The chemistry was explosive. Again and again they reduced each other to frustration, even mad panic. Again and again they pulled each other through. To great mutual benefit, of course. But often, as well, to the dramatic misfortune of others, namely the characters populating their worlds, both fictional and real. There's no doubting it. Our picture of post 1965 Borges would be quite different without the translating tiger. Di Giovanni brought out the very best of Borges's worst.

Our esteemed reader has noticed by now that we've opted for a "tongue-in-cheek-sensationalistic" sort of rhetoric. The move is deliberate. We feel it befits the many ironic and counterintuitive attitude reversals we're about to explore. "Translational infamy" is our colorful way of connecting re-writing with certain suppressive impulses directed by a writer against his own work. In our opening quote, Ibarra suggests that Borges would have Argentina live in the shadow of knives. His nation, his culture, his blood bonds and interpersonal ties, all living blissfully under the threat of oblivion. As with his nation, so with his texts, we propose. Knives with past lives are translations conceived to over-shadow, over-write, even annihilate their previous incarnations, the literary genealogies from whence they sprang. By 1966, reports Monegal, "Borges was tired of labyrinths, tigers and mirrors … [he] had decided to stop making stories about them and was leaving to his followers: 'Now let them try it and get screwed!'" (Monegal, 1978, p. 462).

Translating and "screwing" old texts. Re-writing the slate clean. We'll see it happen at three levels. First, the philosophical level. Decades before Di Giovanni came on the scene, Borges was already using the concept of translation to undo literary history. We're referring, of course, to his postmodern manifesto: "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote". We'll take a close look at this fiction, specifically at Menard's palimpsest. Borges, it turns out, wasn't being as esoteric and metaphysical as all that. The notion of the palimpsest actually bore upon the project, influenced even their most mundane writing and editing decisions, this being the second or pragmatic level.

Finally, we'll see infamy at the biographical level. Translators, Lefevere has suggested, manipulate literary fame.[2] They disseminate images of the author and his work. These images conflict with reality at times, resemble it at others. For us, biography is one possible "reality" against which to compare the hype. The dark mantle that Borges draped around himself, the shadow that he and Di Giovanni cast over their Spanish language sources, their "graphic" assassinations—of characters both fictional and editorial—how did these play out against Borges's own life story? Naturally, image and reality will conflict. But curiously, they'll also strike a harmony. To keep the old man happy, Di Giovanni turned his pen into a knife. He rewrote the story of Jorge Luis Borges for the purpose of "suppressing" one of its characters. The result, we'll see, was the best "bad" of them all:

> "No se publica un libro sin alguna divergencia entre cada uno de los ejemplares. Los escribas prestan juramento secreto de omitir, de interpolar, de variar..." (Borges, "La lotería en Babilonia", 1944, 1974, 1997)[3]

But let's not get too bad too quickly. Why not warm up with a peccadillo? We'd be remiss not to mention, at least in passing, the crime of infidelity. By the time Borges and Di Giovanni got together, the scribes of Babylon had already sworn upon the collection of mad beasts and mini-essays that make up *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (1969). Co-written with Margarita Guerrero, it had already seen two very different incarnations: the first in Mexico (1957), where it appeared as the *Manual de zoología fantástica.* The second, ten years later, when it was expanded into *El libro de los seres imaginarios*. As for the Borges-Di Giovanni translation, it was finished in 1969. The first book they completed together.

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[2] "In the past, as in the present, rewriters created images of a writer, a work, a period, a genre, sometimes even a whole literature. These images existed side by side with the realities they competed with, but the images always tended to reach more people than the corresponding realities did, and they most certainly do so now. Yet the creation of these images and the impact they made has not often been studied in the past, and is still not the object of detailed study. This is all the more strange since the power wielded by these images, and therefore by their makers, is enormous." (Lefevere, 1992, p. 5)

[3] "No book is published without some divergence in each and every copy. The scribes swear a secret oath to omit, interpolate, vary…" Borges, "The Lottery in Babylon," 1944, 1974, 1997… All translations of Spanish language quotes are mine.

Completed and appreciably altered. In disclosing the bestiary to their Anglophone readership, they "dis-closed" it, re-opened it, set forth its genesis. Four new chapters were added, including the very Victorian sounding: 'An Experimental Account of What Was Known, Seen, and Met by Mrs Jane Lead in London in 1964'. They peppered their new texts with the type of *clin d'œil* references and insider jokes that pervade Borges's work with his other more famous collaborator, Adolfo Bioy Casares. Some of these winks and nudges actually *wrote the translator into the text*. But we'd never know it if Di Giovanni himself didn't confess: "We concocted four [new entries], working into them all manner of silly things, like the long Dutch name of one of my friends, a family surname, and my Buenos Aires street and flat number. It was all in good fun and the kind of thing Borges took glee in" (Di Giovanni, *In Memory*, p. 24).

If the *juramento de interpolar y de variar* wasn't all that *secreto* for those able to compare the translation with the original, there remained nevertheless, within these interpolations and variations, a dimension of understanding reserved exclusively for our co-conspirators. Officially, they signed up for a re-writing project. On a whim, the re-writing project veered into a full-out writing project. If we believe Di Giovanni, nothing particularly free-handed or adaptative went down until the end, when Borges had an impulse: "Borges was so delighted with the result…He insisted that we celebrate the end of the job by writing some new pieces for the book directly into English" (p. 24). They swore a new pact: the translation would not only make the source explicit, but would also inscribe, creatively and covertly, its own cognitive context. The scribes of Babylon would continue pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Borges the Nihilist

But these covert maneuverings, these little affronts to fidelity, are really only petty mischief. They are symptomatic of something far more infamous: a nihilistic impulse endemic in Borges's outlook on himself, on his own writing, on texts in general: "I am hungering and thirsting after oblivion," he explained to Alexander Coleman, "I do not want to be remembered; and—this is most important—I am tired of being myself. In fact, I am tired of being an ego, an "I"; and I suppose that when I'm dust and ashes, then I'll be nothing. I'm looking forward to that prospect" (Burgin, *Conversations*, p. 125). To oblivion with his

own writing as well. From the same conversation: "I never think about my own work…And I'm a very poor hand when it comes to being asked questions about my own work since I do my best, my successful best, to forget it once it's written" (p. 122).

And from there a Pandora's box. For many, this kind of talk seemed bleak, a postmodern *lese humanitas* with a good dose of *lese patria* thrown in. His bad blind self, the one who wrote baffling texts hovering between essay and fiction, the one who obsessed over metaphysical questions: absolute knowledge ("El Aleph"), the absolute text ("La biblioteca de Babel", "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote"), the temporal absolute ("El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan") and absolute otherness ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"); the one who exorcised in elegant fictional homicides an obsession with absolute nothingness: this is the Borges he offered the world. The one he wanted us to see.[4]

Not the *other* Borges, the twenty-something year-old criollista who had gushed over the Argentine character in works like *El tamaño de mi esperanza* and *El idioma de los argentinos*. No, the young Borges, the one who might have beaten Alejo Carpentier to the head of a literary choir singing Latin America's praises: this was the Borges he systematically suppressed. He clawed back those earlier texts, wouldn't let them circulate. Why he did this remains a mystery: was he trying to be less Argentine? Ernesto Sábato thought so. He took some pot shots at Papa in his 1962 novel *On Heroes and Tombs*. When the book made it to Anglophone North America, the press played up the caricature: "The watery blue eyes, the limp handshake, the facial tics…Borges, according to Sábato, is too European, too precious, too aristocratic, too cosmopolitan—in short, insufficiently Argentine…" (*Globe and Mail,* 1981). Was Borges denying spiritual support to a nation in need? In *La metafísica del arrabal*, Víctor Farías exhumes *El tamaño de mi esperanza* and issues a harshly worded reprimand to its inhumed author:

[4] And if an obituary has the dubious task of summing up in few words a man's life and his impact on the world, then bad Borges made his mark: "Mr. Borges astonished readers with his humorously elegant way of saying horrible things. For example, he would describe a deadly knife fight as if it were a ballet, or turn a violent crime into an esthetically pleasing spectacle" (*Globe and Mail,* 1986).

> Cuando hacia los años treinta, Jorge Luis Borges dejó de ver así las cosas, se quedó ciego mucho antes de que se le secaran los ojos de la cara. Lo que abandonó y perdió, después de haberlo visto, mucho antes y mejor que tantos entre sus colegas del continente, era nada menos que lo único que puede ayudar a la vida como lo que prolifera, lo que cuida, habla y escucha a los demás, lo que respeta los derechos personales para así poder respetar los derechos de las instituciones. (Farías, 1992, p. i)[5]

The later Borges, the one who wrote "bad" postmodern things, did something "extra bad" in murdering the "good" Borges and stowing the body where no one could find it. Sounds like an episode of the twilight zone, but it's precisely how Farías represents it:

> En la catacumba de Borges, padre también él de una postmodernidad nacida de la pura negación y la tristeza, se encuentra escondido el cadáver iluminado de una modernidad que espera, anuncia y exige su renovación. Borges creó y destruyó al anti-Borges que debe devolvernos al Borges que todos necesitamos y que nos hace progresar hasta el punto de partida... (p. 9)[6]

Borges: Self-suppression through Re-writing

Does this record of self-supression shed light on Borges the self-rewriter? Of course, re-writing is always a way of casting shade on previous texts, of dismissing them as "unfinished," "pending." And Borges was a manic self-rewriter. It was common for two or three versions of a piece to circulate in reviews before the chosen one found its way into a collection. And we've seen how he published varying editions of entire collections. But it doesn't end there. Most of his prose pieces actually masqueraded as some form of rewriting, referred back to some obscure or nonexistent source. Some claimed to be essays on

[5] When, towards the 30s, Jorge Luis Borges stopped seeing things as he once did, he went blind long before his eyes withered in his head. What he abandoned, what he lost, after having seen it long before and more clearly than many of his colleagues on the continent, was nothing less than that which nurtures life, helps things proliferate, urges their growth, speaks and listens to others, respects individual rights in order to respect those of the institution.

[6] In the catacombs of Borges, father of a post-modernity rooted in pure negation and sadness, the cadaver of another Borges can be found, a Borges lit by the flame of a modernity awaiting, announcing, demanding resurrection. Borges created and destroyed the Anti-Borges whom we all need, who'll allow us to move forward to the starting point.

literary texts ("Pierre Menard"), on biographies ("Bill Harrigan, el asesino desinteresado"), on encyclopedia entries ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"), on events circulating by word of mouth ("El encuentro"), on translations ("Pierre Menard"). Some claimed to be translations ("El informe de Brodie"). All of this a monumental tease, of course. All to suggest that there is nothing new under the sun. Every text glosses every other.

For Michel Lafon, this was quite enough to stamp every letter Borges wrote with contingency, with the inevitability of a future "réécriture qui embrasse le texte dans toutes ses dimensions, n'en néglige ni le détail ni la masse, considère qu'aucun signe en place ne va de soi, que chacun doit être revu, pesé, jugé, pour son profit ou pour sa perte…" (Lafon, 1990, p. 61). Borges didn't write the sort of fully integrated, autonomous text that the romantics call l'Œuvre with a capital "O." He wrote texts with "sprawl," texts meant to diffuse, reverberate and ultimately disintegrate within the inter-textual labyrinth. "Detonation," in its explosive and nihilistic sense, but also in the sense of "de-toning," "varying," "transforming:" this was a hallmark of Borges's literary creed.

How can we conclude this? For starters, he liked to see his texts monkeyed with, tweaked, even radically transformed by other writers. Second versions were always better than the first, and *somebody else's* second version, better still. In a conversation with Frank MacShane, head of Columbia University's creative writing department, he confessed: "I don't like what I write. In fact, I find myself personally expressed far better in the writings of other poets than in my own" (Di Giovanni, *Borges on Writing*, p. 74).

And he particularly enjoyed seeing his texts undercut by the sharpest, most trans-formative rewriting tool of them all: translation. He consistently set foreign language renderings above his originals. In *Sur*: "Qué me parecen mis textos traducidos a otros idiomas? Los han traducido muy bien...Con mis poemas...generalmente encuentro que los han mejorado muchísimo..." (Borges, *En Sur*, p. 338).[7] When it came to his work with Di Giovanni, it seems he would have happily tossed his Spanish source altogether. After finishing *The Book of Imaginary*

[7] "What do I think of my texts translated in different languages? They've been translated very well…As far as my poems are concerned…they've been greatly improved."

Beings, he insisted that all forthcoming translations be based on their English version alone (Di Giovanni, *In Memory*, p. 24).

"Pierre Menard": Nihilism and Palimpsests

A good "bang" for Borges. A source text detonated and buried, at once re-written and over-written. To better understand his unique view on translation, we'll take a quick look at the nihilist manifesto that began it all in 1939: "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote." Let's briefly re-cap the story. French symbolist poet and essayist Pierre Menard wants to translate the *Quijote.* However, he wants nothing of the typical tools and crutches. Nothing of the information historical inquiry provides. He cares a fig for the Spanish language, for Cervantes's biography, for the culture of seventeenth century Spain.

What Menard wants is to render the *Quijote*'s most basic implicature of all: *its creation from nothing*. He wants to translate its spontaneity, its "ex-nihilo," the very essence of its originality: "Yo he contraído el misterioso deber de reconstruir literalmente su obra espontánea" (Borges, "Menard", p. 50).[8] After much wringing of hands, Menard achieves the impossible. He spontaneously writes, while at the same time reconstructing letter-for-letter, an entire paragraph. The translation comes to light posthumously and all the critics praise Pierre Menard, "author" of *Don Quijote.* Would it occur to anyone to compare Menard's work with Cervantes'? Of course not. How could Menard's text, written spontaneously and within radically different historical and cultural circumstances, possibly derive from Cervantes'?

Now it would be very fashionable in today's academic climate to side with these defenders of Menard's originality. Does Meschonnic not insist, after all, that texts and their translations are fundamentally "historical"? Isn't History—that constellation of temporal, geographic, cultural and subjective circumstance—the constraint shaping all aspects of the text's creation and interpretation? Why should it matter that those two texts are graphically identical? The same chain of words

[8] "I've assigned myself the mysterious task of re-constructing literally his spontaneous work."

couldn't possibly mean the same in 19th century France as they did in 17th century Spain.[9]

However, we can trust our bad Borges not to be a victim of fashionable thinking. He's not one to let History force an ethics of interpretation upon him. In fact, the real lesson of *Pierre Menard* is radically anti-historical: *no* author, *no* text can ever lay claim to originality. The very notion that texts are anomalous events dependent on time, place, circumstance, the ingenious subject, is a massive delusion. Texts, all texts, are nothing more than the exercise of a trans-historical, self-sustaining and self-repeating human intelligence:

> Pensar, analizar, inventar... no son actos anómalos, son la normal respiración de la inteligencia. Glorificar el ocasional cumplimiento de esa función, atesorar antiguos y ajenos pensamientos, recordar con incrédulo estupor que el *doctor universalis* pensó, es confesar nuestro languidez o nuestra barbarie. Todo hombre debe ser capaz de todas las ideas y entiendo que en el porvenir lo será. (Borges, "Menard", p. 55)[10]

Borges repeated the idea to Antonio Carrizo a few years before he died. Let no man live off the words of another: "que todo hombre es su propio Brahms; que todo hombre es su propio Shakespeare. Y luego, cuando muere, se destruye toda su obra, porque todo hombre es capaz de producirla" (Carrizo, 1982, pp. 125-126).[11]

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[9] The following bit of Meschonnic, written 'under the influence' of History, is a more erudite defence of Menard's originality: "Le moment de la traduction compte autant que la spécificité linguistique-culturelle du rapport en jeu. La traduction, étant installation d'un nouveau rapport, ne peut qu'être modernité, néologie…" (Meschonnic , 1973, p. 311).

[10] "Thinking, analyzing, inventing … these aren't anomalous acts, but rather the normal respiration of intelligence. To glorify the occasional fulfillment of this function, to hoard ancient and foreign thoughts, to recall with stupid incredulity that the *doctor universalis* had a thought, is to confess our laziness and barbarity. All men should be capable of all ideas and I believe that in the future, they will."

[11] "… that every man is his own Brahms, every man his own Shakespeare. And after, when he's dead, let his entire work be destroyed, because every man is capable of producing it."

Let every man be his own Cervantes. And what of the dichotomy that Berman, with a vengeance, brought to translation theory? What of "alterity," of "self vs. other?"[12] The accepted notion that one "identity"—subjective, collective, national, cultural or what have you—could exist in contradistinction with another; the idea of spending effort inhabiting the thinking of the "other:" this is precisely the intellectual torpor to which Borges refers. This is testimony to our barbarous, insular way of looking at things. The joke is on the slack-jawed admirers who ring their hands trying to "read" Menard and his circumstances through this text. The joke is on any fool who believes that this text varies one iota from the original, or that any text, in the big picture, *could vary one iota from any other.* [13]

The joke is on all the proponents of History. They would have us believe that re-writing spawns a genealogy, a diachrony of texts classifiable by date, nation, language, edition, etc. Classifiable in a hierarchy of secondary and primary sources, of target and source texts. All emerging from, and able to shed light upon, the unique circumstances that produced them. But bad Borges has other ideas. Again with Antonio Carrizo:

> Yo creo... yo espero llegar a una edad sin aniversarios, sin colecciones... Y no hay clásicos, y no hay memoria, y no hay bibliotecas, desde luego...Que no huberia nombres de países...que ningún individuo tuviera nombre. Que todo libro que se publicara fuera anónimo...

[12] Antoine Berman, *L'Épreuve de l'étranger,* Paris, Gallimard, 1984.

[13] Translation will come into its own only when we stop thinking historically, when we stop looking at "targets" and "sources" through the lens of circumstance. We were lucky enough to come across the audio-recordings of the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard. Here, Borges views translation through a trans-historical lens: "We are burdened, over-burdened, by historical sense. We cannot look into a nation's texts as the men of the Middle Ages, or the Renaissance, or even of the Eighteenth century did. No. We're worried by circumstances. We want to know exactly what Homer meant when he wrote about the 'wine dark sea'… I think that we may perhaps suppose that a time will come when men will no longer be as aware of History as we are. A time will come when men shall care very little about the axioms of circumstances of beauty. They shall care for beauty itself. Perhaps they shall not even care about the names of the biographies of the poets. That is all for the good…And then we will have translations not only as good, because maybe we have them already, but as famous as Urquart's Rabelais, as Pope's Odysee. And I think this is a consummation devoutly to be wished for" (minute 30:00 – 40:00).

> Recuerdo cuando los alemanes bombardearon la catedral de Reims. Todo el mundo protestó y Bernard Shaw dijo: "No, está muy bien que se destruya. Por qué vivir de la Edad Media?" (Sonríe). Y tenía razón... (Carrizo, 1982, pp. 125-126)[14]

Let the complicated architecture of History come crashing down. Let the inter-textual hierarchy resolve into anarchy, and then let all resolve into forgetfulness. Those thousand and one versions of *Don Quijote*, why do we translate them, comb through them, compare them, argue over the iota? Let forgetfulness integrate them all into a gross fiction illuminating nothing beyond itself. And then wipe the slate clean. If we must translate, then let translation be an instrument of this dissolution. Let it spawn no genealogy, but rather a *palimpsest*:

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[14] "I believe…I hope to see a day without anniversaries, without collections…without classics, memories, libraries, of course…when no country or individual would have a name. When every book published would be anonymous…I remember when the Germans bombed the cathedral in Reims. Everyone protested and Bernard Shaw said: 'No, good riddance. Why live in the Middle Ages?' (smiles). And he was right."

Young Borges' attraction to philosophies of military aggression became tempered with age and wisdom. But his image was irretrievably blackened by it. His youthful fascination with Ernst Jünger's *Bajo la tormenta de acero* (1922) is grist for Farías: "Borges agregó: 'Esto fue para mi una erupción volcánica'... Por tratarse de una apología brutal y patológica de la guerra de agresión, alentada por el militarismo y el nacionalismo más extremos, esta obra, que situó a Jünger entre los precursores e inspiradores más importantes del nazi-fascismo ulterior, ... plantea relevantes problemas hermenéuticos acerca de los antecedentes de la evolución ideológica y literaria de Borges." ("Borges added: 'for me it was a volcanic eruption'… For being a pathological and brutal apology for aggression, spurred on by the most extreme militarism and nationalism, this work, which placed Jünger among the precursors and agitators of the nazi movement … raises some relevant questions regarding the interpretation of Borges's ideological antecedents.") (Farías, 1992, pp. 16-17).

Even Nestor Ibarra, long time translator and friend of Borges, is forced to concede to l'Herne: "Il y a une éthique nazie qui a vraisemblablement tenté Borges, c'est indéniable. Avez-vous lu *Deutsches Requiem?* (El Aleph) C'est un fort beau texte. Un criminel de guerre allemand, Otto Dietrich zur Linde, s'adresse à la postérité la veille de son exécution. L'Allemagne a été vaincue, mais cette défaite même est un avertissement, un symbole : l'Allemagne a appris au monde, et pour toujours, cette violence qui l'a vaincue. Elle n'a été vaincue que par l'Allemagne éternelle…" (Ibarra, 1969, p. 30)

> He reflexionado que es lícito ver en el Quijote "final" una especie de palimpsesto, en el que deben traslucirse los rastros—tenues pero no indescifrables—de la "previa" escritura de nuestro amigo. Desgraciadamente, sólo un segundo Pierre Menard, invirtiendo el trabajo del anterior, podría exhumar y resucitar esas Troyas... (Borges, "Menard", p. 55)[15]

Palimpsests: "the imprecise image of prior texts unwritten"

Here's the kicker. If you're thinking these metaphysical extravagances could never factor into a brass-tacks translation project, you'd best think again. Borges and Di Giovanni really did *mix it up.* Over and over, they treated the texts they were producing as one totalized, undifferentiated entity. A palimpsest. They were translating Spanish source texts into English target texts. At the same time, however, they were translating Spanish "target texts" into English "source texts." Yes, astonishingly enough, they routinely invoked those Spanish originals as *translations. Translations of prior English texts yet to be written*. To hear them tell it, you'd think they were performing the work of Pierre Menard's successor: "inverting the work of the first, exhuming, resurrecting" some English text buried deep in the palimpsest, an English text destined, in its turn, to bury the rest. Let's look at a few cases in point:

First Case: Translating back from English Target to Spanish Source

While Borges and Di Giovanni were writing and translating simultaneously, they often practiced "retro-active editing." Di Giovanni would alter something in the translation and show it to Borges, who would edit his original accordingly. Case in point, the poem "John 1:14." Di Giovanni explained to a group of creative writing students in a translation seminar at Columbia University:

> When this poem was taken by the *New Yorker,* Howard Moss made a valuable suggestion about one of the lines. The Spanish read, "*Por obra*

[15] "I've concluded that one might see the "final" Quijote as a sort of palimpsest, in which the traces — tenuous but still discernable — of the previous writing of our friend must show through. Unfortunately, only a second Pierre Menard, inverting the work of the one before, could exhume and resurrect these Troys…"

> *de una magia/ nací curiosamente de un vientre."* In English, I had written, "I was strangely born of a womb/ by an act of magic." Howard pointed out that "strangely" and "by an act of magic" was a redundancy, and so I gratefully cut the word. When Borges and I prepare a bilingual edition for Dutton, I'll take this up with him, and he may wish to drop the word from the original as well. This, incidentally, is an example of why I can't sign the poems as collaborations. I took that cut upon myself without consulting Borges…When that happens, I ask him to take a word or line of mine on faith. (Di Giovanni, *On Writing*, p. 145)

Let's get this straight. Di Giovanni and his publishing cohort had the option of nipping and tucking the translation as they saw fit. And Borges, of course, was allowed to change his Spanish text accordingly. But when it came to suggesting alterations for the translation, Di Giovanni would ask to be taken on faith. There are ethical implications here, and we'll address them shortly. For now, suffice it to picture a Borges translating backwards from Di Giovanni's source. And to wonder just how nebulous the boundary between source and target text actually became.

Second Case: Translating from English Source to Spanish Target

Pierre Menard is able to convince himself that his memory of the original *Quijote*, "simplificado por el olvido y la indiferencia, puede muy bien equivaler a la imprecisa imagen anterior de un libro no escrito" (Borges, "Pierre Menard", p. 50). Well, Borges himself had "memories of prior texts unwritten," of English source texts buried deep in the palimpsest, below the Spanish language surface. Texts he would finally unearth with Di Giovanni. Case in point, the "Conjectural Poem". From the same seminar:

> **Di Giovanni**: I'd like to close with an example of Borges's attitude toward his own text. One afternoon, when I was reading him a draft of the "Conjectural Poem," he stopped me to announce that the next phrase I was going to read—"*se ciernen sobre mí*"—he had imagined in English and translated into Spanish. He said his English line had been "loom over me." Undaunted, I read him my phrase, "tighten the ring around me." He didn't say, "Well, I'm sorry, it's 'loom over me'"; he told me to retain my words, which were more effective than his own.
>
> **Borges:** I thought "loom" a beautiful word—slow-sounding, slow-moving. Loom, loom, loom. But he was right. (p. 160)

"Borges' attitude toward his own text." But which text? Di Giovanni seemed to respond to the Spanish source. To those "tight" sounding sibilants and high front vowels in "*s*e *ci*ernen *s*obre m*í*." He doubtless felt a connection with similar Spanish words denoting "closing," "tightening," or "surrounding"—"tensar," "cercar," "cerrar." Borges, for his part, responded to some phantom English source preceding and informing his Spanish target text. Here, low, expansive vowels prevailed: "l*oo*m *o*ver me." The question was whether to unearth the palimpsest's "deep" English text or to translate its Spanish "surface text." Di Giovanni seemed to opt for the latter. Borges naturally conceded.

Third Case: Translating to and from the Spanish "middle text"

At other times, the idea of the palimpsest led Borges, reflexively and without warning, into the most paradoxical statements. The following exchange with Alexander Coleman is as flummoxing as it is intriguing. As in the case we just examined, Borges refers to his Spanish text as the translation of a phantom English source. In the same breath however, he refers to it as the flawed rough draft—in other words the source—of an inevitable, and far superior English language version:

> **Coleman:** Ronald Christ has written about the remarkable translation you gave "*unánime noche*," which has puzzled many a commentator, and now in English —
> **Borges:** Well, to tell you the truth, it has puzzled *me*! I wrote it down because I thought it had a fine sound, hadn't been used before. But I wonder what it really means, if it means anything.
> **Coleman:** — in English it comes out "encompassing night"—
> **Borges:** That's far better.
> **Coleman: —** which is lovely
> **Borges:** Of course. I'm very sorry I wrote "*unánime.*" But there is no word for "encompassing" in Spanish.
> **Di Giovanni:** A mere rough draft.
> **Borges:** A mere rough draft, yes. I was doing my best in a Romance language, say. (Burgin, *Conversations,* p. 123)

The reversions are subtle. First, praise on how "unánime" came out in English. For Coleman, the Spanish word is the source. But then comes Borges's apology, along with a sly reversal: if Spanish only had a word for "encompassing", he would never have used "unánime." In other words, for Borges the Spanish word is the *target*. Not only a target, Di Giovanni kicks in, but a *mere draft*, one layer in the palimpsest. One

stage in a textual genesis meant to culminate in a splendid English edition. In other words, springing from an English deep text and evolving toward an English surface text, is an "insignificant" Spanish *middle* text.

Fourth Case: Translating Borges Home

I'm not exaggerating when I say "culminate in a splendid English edition." There's ample evidence to suggest that Di Giovanni, aided and abetted by Borges, entertained notions of linguistic and cultural appropriation through translation. Borges was an Anglophone "manqué," forced by the accident of his birth to grow up in a culture alien to him. Now, with the translator's help, the writer finally comes into his own. By excavating the palimpsest, Di Giovanni revives the "true text," brings Borges home:

> **Question:** There are no stories you consider untranslatable because they reflect a peculiarly Spanish way of looking at the world?
> **Borges:** No, I don't think so. I don't think I have a Spanish way of looking at the world. I've done most of my reading in English.
> **Di Giovanni:** Borges's Spanish is already much more specific than anyone else's … I listen to a sentence of his and I hear an English sentence beneath it. As I've said, many times his syntax isn't really Spanish … He has revitalized the language.
> **Borges:** Thank you.
> **Di Giovanni:** No, don't thank me. García Marquez is thanking you; Carlos Fuentes is thanking you. People ask me how I reflect in English what Borges has done to Spanish…In a way, since English made Borges and since he is giving Spanish an English cast, he fulfills himself in English, his work becomes more itself in English. (Di Giovanni, *Borges on Writing*, p. 137)

The "boom" writers have English to thank for reviving their language, and they have an Ivy League upstart in his early thirties to thank for making Borges's work "more itself." In his mind, Di Giovanni really did perform the work of a second Pierre Menard: not only a translation, but a full-out restoration. And when we consider that those deep English texts are little more than ghosts of conceits, can we presume that Di Giovanni is taking credit for realizing those texts, actually writing them? If not, then where exactly did he draw the line between representation and creation?

Biographical Infamy

We promised earlier to get more "concrete." So we'll leave opinions and concerns related to writing and move into the biographical realm of deeds and events. Because let's face it. Their ballsy intentions would never prevail against History. Recalling Lefevere, here's where the image conflicts with the reality. Borges could be as masochistic as he pleased, Di Giovanni as aggressive and self-glorifying. Those fictions would always be an Argentine institution. The best way to read them would always be in Spanish. The prosaic "encompassing night" would never supplant the poetic "unánime noche." The translators couldn't really do much damage. Carlos Frías at Emecé could afford to sit tight and let them play cowboys and Indians.

Luckily for us, Di Giovanni wasn't all talk. A series of brazen acts would not only guarantee the young translator a prominent place in Borges's biography, but would open a new chapter in his writing career. Di Giovanni possessed the type of courage that Borges had always envied and admired in those Argentinian hoodlums. Nestor Ibarra put it best: "Il lui faut un courage plus éclatant, plus heureux, plus gratuit. Il lui faut la fête et l'innocence du courage" (Ibarra, 1969, p. 44). The type of courage born of naivety; the type that enables youth to execute infamous deeds joyfully, without the burden of self-doubt. A look at Di Giovanni's track record does much to confirm such a portrait.

"A trabajar hermano. Después nos ayudarán los caranchos..." Borges, "La intrusa"[16]

The scene had changed from the time Roger Caillois and long time friend Nestor Ibarra started raising Borges's international profile in post-war France, since American admirers such as Donald Yates, Alaistair Reid and John Updike began translating him in the fifties. Borges was now world famous and much fought over. There were spoils to be had, and several American publishers were circling overhead.

An aggressive translator was needed, a wily and resourceful one capable of secretarial expeditiousness. One with a mind for the business

[16] "Let's get to work, Brother. The vultures will finish the job…" Borges, "The Intruder", 1970, p. 18.

of letters. Di Giovanni had met Borges at Harvard in 1967 and was already busy in Boston translating a collection of poetry, from which he would float the occasional sample to *The New Yorker*. It didn't take him long to team up with E. P. Dutton in New York, plant himself in Buenos Aires and corral English rights to all of Emecé's nine available volumes. He signed Borges on as co-translator and split the publishing proceeds with him fifty-fifty. The project was nothing less than a complete English Borges under his editorship.

In other words, young Di Giovanni did a cannonball into waters where other translators had spent decades humbling themselves. By the time Nestor Ibarra sat down with the editors of *l'Herne* in 1969 to discuss his own translations for Gallimard, he had been getting to know the writer and his work for forty years. And the only thing he knew for sure was his limitations. There were works he wouldn't even attempt. *Seis problemas para Don Isidro Parodi* being only one example:

> *L'herne*—Est-ce que des ouvrages de ce genre passent ou passeraient bien en français ?
> *Ibarra*—Non. Ce sont des textes essentiellement intraduisibles. Il y faudrait un bon connaisseur de trois ou quatre milieux argentins, un hispanisant sûr, un spécialiste de Borges…et, côté français, un Raymond Queneau au meilleur de sa forme, de son exigence… (Ibarra, 1969, p. 44)

Ibarra's opinion was shared by most who possessed anything beyond the most superficial understanding of those fictions. Borges had a gift for packing tomes of philosophy into five pages of surgical prose.

You'd think this would be intimidating for any translator. But Di Giovanni was able to take it in stride. He spurned the prattling of the erudite, pretty much stuck to the denotations and trusted his intuition: "I'm lucky because I'd never read Borges before I started translating him. And I don't read any studies of his work. If you once read what the professors say about his work, you won't translate another line. They make such a fuss over hidden meanings" (Di Giovanni, *On Writing*, p. 131). The best way to become stymied was to let yourself be pulled into undertows of poetic or philosophical speculation. Di Giovanni preferred to slip effortlessly over the conventional surface of things.

He enjoyed Borges as a naïve reader. More importantly, he went at Borges as a naïve writer. It wouldn't be enough to translate old texts.

A new readership meant new texts. And unlike Borges's legion admirers, Di Giovanni never took it for granted that the new texts coming down the pipe were masterpieces. He spared neither the old man's blindness nor his memory. When he had translated one too many sonnets, he told Borges to stop being lazy and write some free verse. The old man was miffed, but started dictating free verse. Then, Di Giovanni announced they had enough poetry to publish a brand new collection. The old man flew into a rage: "I haven't published a book in eight years and I won't be known for this stuff!" (Di Giovanni, *In Memory*, p. 22). But it wasn't long before he announced that a new collection of poetry was in the shop.

On one of their many walk-abouts, Borges took Di Giovanni to Palermo, the low rent neighborhood where he grew up. While they sat in an *almacén* drinking rum, watching greasy types playing *truco*, and conversing about the smooth criminals Borges knew as a child, Di Giovanni saw new fictions on the horizon. It was simply a matter of convincing Borges to do what he longed to but thought he couldn't: dictate prose. The campaign of needling began. Questions regarding possible characters and plots were answered with other questions in an effort to keep the old man talking. Claims of fatigue were met with goading and playful mockery. Borges began dictating a new fiction, but refused to breathe a word of it, kept it secreted away even after he had finished it. One Friday, Di Giovanni was able to coax it from him, on the condition that he wait until Monday to read it: "maybe he thought he'd have better luck and Monday would never happen" (Di Giovanni, *In memory*, p. 27). The fiction was "El encuentro".

What followed in a torrent were the fictions that made up *El informe de Brodie.* Most all a cinematic, violent homage to the hoodlum and the knife. The titular story, an allegory inspired by *Gulliver's Travels*, tells of the Yahoos, a tribe of blood drinking savages whose kings undergo ritual geldings and amputations. The rest are more straightforward. Apart from knives with past lives ("El encuentro"), we have hoodlum crucifixions ("El Evangelio según Marcos"), hoodlums who run foot races with their throats gushing blood ("El fin del duelo"), hoodlum brothers who knife the girl they love instead of fighting each other for her affections ("La intrusa"), and let's not forget the hoodlums of Borges's youth ("Juan Muraña", "Historia de Rosendo Juarez").

These bloody numbers, eleven in total, were written and translated almost simultaneously. It's impossible to know the extent to which Di Giovanni helped write them, but it's hard to believe that his creative input went unheeded. We do know, however, that without some aggressive maneuvering, *Brodie* would have been much shorter. Borges grew tired. He told Di Giovanni to back off and went to Emecé with the order to publish what they had. But by the time he arrived, Di Giovanni had already phoned and instructed Frías to tell Borges no deal unless he wrote at least three more stories: "They're there in his head but he's just being lazy". Di Giovanni never informed Borges of his intervention, and praised his stiff upper lip: "Frías saw that I was right. Borges came back and told me that Emecé wanted another three stories. To his credit, he didn't sulk over the news even for a second" (Di Giovanni, *In Memory*, p. 29).

So far it's kudos to the translator. Sure, he took as much credit for realizing Borges's texts as for representing them. Sure he treated Borges like a doddering old Granddad, told him what was best for him, dealt behind his back. And yes, he was more than a little hypocritical. We've seen how he over-wrote Borges's editorial decisions, why he couldn't sign his translations as collaborations. And yet this never stopped him from using his relationship with the writer as a billboard when it came to promoting his translations, or as a free pass when it came to poaching texts. Take *El Aleph* (1949), for example. This book, long secured by another American publisher, was one of the few works that eluded Di Giovanni. He translated and published it anyway, with the justification that Borges had every "right to determine the form and fate of his own work" (p. 31).

Despite all this, kudos to the translator. So far, his aggressions have been for the good. He achieved what a more reverent and accommodating soul couldn't. He warded off the stupor accompanying fame, comfort and old age. He kept Borges's imagination whetted. And as long as the only victims were fictional hoodlums, then no real harm could come of it. But here's the rub. Di Giovanni's efforts to keep the old writer interested had consequences reaching far beyond poetic and fictional anthologies. He ended up crossing a much more sensitive line, raising an important ethical question: to what extent can the translator exercise his right to represent a writer, to advocate in his interest?

Di Giovanni needed a hook to make his poached version of *The Aleph* more competitive. His friendship with Borges provided an

obvious solution: an autobiography, an essay revealing something of Borges's life and work. Like everything else, they'd write it together. Di Giovanni would have his usual hand in determining how the whole thing took shape. He floated the idea by Borges in Oklahoma during a lecture series, and suggested that he make a dry run of it by talking about himself in the last lecture. Borges panicked and resisted: "He had never before spoken about his own work publicly—it would never have occurred to him to indulge in such a pointless, immodest activity…I saw I had a full-scale panic on my hands" (p. 31). And just how did Di Giovanni calm his boss down? By telling him exactly how to begin:

> 'Just remember your Dickens,' I told him. Twice.
> '*David Copperfield*,' I told him, 'I was born on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night.' And three times…
> Every once in a while, Borges's lips began to move. 'I was born in Buenos Aires, in 1899,' he mumbled. (p. 31)

An absurd image, this dummy talking through his ventriloquist. This translator talking through his writer. Who was representing whom? Was the world in for an autobiography, a writer representing himself? An autobiography with a ghost writer? Or was it a biography, the translator representing the writer? Maybe it was all and none of the above, as the *David Copperfield* model seems to suggest. Maybe what Di Giovanni was after was simply a riveting melodrama. It matters little, really. Far more important was the irreversible step Di Giovanni made in drawing Borges's life into the sphere of things he could represent. In so doing, he helped Borges the man live up to Borges the infamous public character. For a moment, reality and image coincided, and truth was as bad as fiction.

Here's the sordid story. While dictating the "Autobiographical Essay", Borges began complaining about marriage with Elsa. It seems that Di Giovanni just kept writing, because he quotes verbatim: "I've committed what seems to me now an unaccountable mistake, a huge mistake. A quite unexplainable and mysterious mistake" (1970, p. 33). Borges wanted out and his translator took him by the hand. They visited lawyers, drew up a plan for a legal separation. In the following six weeks, the translator had two major documents on the go: the "Autobiographical Essay" and a list of Borges's beefs with Elsa: "As far as I could, I carried on with the autobiography by myself…One Saturday we actually managed to revise half the first chapter. But the next was devoted to drawing up a list of Borges's marital grievances for the Córdoba lawyer" (p. 34).

Two documents: an autobiography recording Borges's history in five neat chapters. And a legal text forging out of this history an instrument for eliminating a character from Borges's future. Di Giovanni had barely begun his "Autobiographical Essay" before it too began living in the shadow of destructive re-writings. Ironically, he modeled his outline on genealogies. Borges's history would be explained through generational ties and interpersonal bonds: "I made us outline the material beforehand, breaking his life down into manageable chunks. I made him stick to that outline. 'No, no, don't jump ahead to your mother; let's get it all down about your father and his family first and then we'll tackle her.' It went like that" (p. 33). The "Autobiographical Essay" would elaborate the branches of a family tree. The legal document would start breaking them down.

And the break was violent and pitiless. Confrontations, tears and gentlemanly apologies were not bad Borges's bag. He simply woke up one morning, let Elsa dress him and feed him breakfast, informed her he wanted his usual "puchero" for lunch, and went off to the National Library. When he arrived, Di Giovanni leapt into the cab and they sped off to the airport: "Like good conspirators, we allowed no one knowledge of the whole plan…That way, no lies need be told, nor could anything be given away" (p. 35). In short, they made off like a couple of bandits. They'd finish up the "Autobiographical Essay" in exile. As for Elsa, she was ready with the "puchero" at one o'clock that afternoon. But instead of her husband, she had to serve it to the suits who came to collect his belongings. She never heard from hubby again. Not a word. Nada.

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ABSTRACT: Past Lives of Knives: On Borges, Translation and Sticking Old Texts — As a rule, translation "nurtures" a text, extends its genealogy across cultural and historical divides. The strange account of this article is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. We'll see a seventy-year old Jorge Luis Borges put heads together with a young Harvard man by the name of Norman Thomas di Giovanni and "re-write the slate clean," translate old texts for the purpose of "sticking it" to them, suppressing them, even consigning them to oblivion. The collaboration was a bit of inspired naughtiness that we'll call "translational infamy." It had enduring consequences, for the good and bad, on the characters populating Borges's writings and his private life. This equation of translation and oblivion, we'll see it play out in Borges's older fictions, specifically *Pierre Menard*; in the editorial logistics of his collaboration with Di Giovanni; in the creation—and simultaneous translation—of new fictions (*Brodie's Report*); and, perhaps most interestingly, in the details of his own biography.

RÉSUMÉ: Histoires de couteaux: réflexion sur Borges, la traduction et l'« assassinat » de vieux textes — En principe, la traduction ménage son objet, cherchant à lui faire franchir intact les frontières culturelles et historiques du pays de destination. Les curieux faits relatés dans cet article sont sans doute l'exception qui confirme la règle. À soixante-dix ans, Jorge Luis Borges s'associe à un jeune homme de Harvard, Norman Thomas di Giovanni, pour effacer l'ardoise de ses premiers écrits, pour les traduire à seule fin de les malmener, de les supprimer, voire même de les vouer à l'oubli. Leur collaboration espiègle, que nous qualifions d'« infamie traductionnelle », ne va pas sans conséquences ─ heureuses et

malheureuses ─ tant sur les personnages de Borges que sur sa vie privée. Nous verrons que l'équation traduction / disparition opère dans les premières œuvres de l'écrivain, surtout dans *Pierre Menard*, mais aussi dans les pratiques éditoriales adoptées avec Di Giovanni ; dans la création – et la traduction en parallèle – de nouvelles œuvres (B*rodie's Report*) ; enfin, plus intéressant encore, jusque dans les détails de sa biographie.

Keywords: translation, re-writing, infamy, nihilism, history.

Mots-clés : traduction, réécriture, infamie, nihilisme, histoire.

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