



**"Make me Macho. Make me Gaucho, Make me Skinny":  
Jorge Luis Borges' desire to lose himself in translation**

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Amongst many critics in the area of translation studies at the end of the 20th century there seems to be a general agreement that the desirable translation is that which respects the original, takes stylistic, syntactical, morphological and lexical elements of the original to the translation. It is a transparent translation; the original is clearly visible. This translation has an excellent pedigree: from Goethe and Schleiermacher and the whole of German pre-romanticism through Martin Buber and Walter Benjamin to H enri Meschonnic, Antoine Berman to contemporary commentators like Jean Laplanche, Haroldo de Campos and Lawrence Venuti. The range of critics is formidable, and their artillery is even more so as Derrida and Foucault are not infrequently brought in to strengthen their fire. It even seems that this translation, for so long impossible to think of in the commercial world is becoming commercially viable.

We must respect the foreigner and the foreign; we must make him appear to the reader of the translation; we must respect the "Other" ;we must not make a logocentric and ethnocentric reading of the text; we must respect the translator

him or herself. But isn't there here something a little smug in the almost wholesale rejection of facilitating and naturalising translations? The aculturising translation seems to be a thing of the past, to belong to Pope and the *belles infidèles*.

One dissenting voice is Jorge Luis Borges. His comments on translation show something rather different: rather than a desire to approximate the translation to the original, he wishes to distance the translation from it. The translation should be as different to the original as possible and can even improve on it. The misquotation which forms part of the title of this paper comes from Borges' interview with his translators into English, Ben Belitt and Norman di Giovanni. Borges insists that the translators do not use Latinate terms in English and instead use as much vocabulary with Anglo-Saxon roots as possible. Borges wishes to see the change in himself, he wants to be different. We see the attraction of the play, the fascination for the new clothes, which may or may not be a little loose

Ben Belitt describes his shock when translating Borges' poetry together with the author:

We all revised and re-revised, until there was a kind of despairing agreement or its English equivalent, on the text which was to stand next to the Spanish. The same was true of di Giovanni's later project on Borges, we slaved at a very special genre of translation

that Borges had in mind as par for the course. Of course, Borges knows better English than we do -- down to its Anglo-Saxon marrow, which he especially coveted in exchange for the Latinate marrow of his own language. In the case of Borges, there was a change in the matrices of the two languages, as though he were subjecting the weight and the temper of a Spanish which he regarded as jejune, to an Anglo-Saxon decantation. If Borges had had his own way - and he generally did - all polysyllables would have been replaced by monosyllables, especially in the 3rd and 4th revisions, to which he often pressed his absent collaborators. People concerned about the legitimacy of the literal might well be scandalized by his mania for dehispanization.

Question: He was using you as his hands?

Ben Belitt: Simplify me. Modify me. Make me stark. My language often embarrasses me. It's too youthful, too Latinate. I love Anglo-Saxon. I want the wiry, minimal sound. I want monosyllables. I want the power of Cynewulf, Beowulf, Bede. Make me macho, gaucho and skinny". (Belitt: 21)

The situation is quite comic: the elderly Argentine author who learnt English from childhood and who has had a lifelong love of Anglo-Saxon trying to coax the American translators not to show excessive respect to the original. The author wishes to lose himself and his original language while the translators want to maintain it. May we not have been worrying a little too much

about the respect and sacredness of the original and respect for the author when this was not what he or she wanted?

Borges' longest text on translation is "Los traductores de 1001 Noches", in which he examines French, English and German translations of the Arabic original. Galland's famous French version, which has been itself translated into many other languages (including Arabic), which emphasises the colour and the magic and omits all the lasciviousness of the original, and which has been responsible for many of the clichés about the Arab world we still have; Edward Lane's prudish censoring version; Sir Richard Burton's rhyming version, distributed privately, full of footnotes to display the translator's erudition, in which he even adds many details to the original; Dr. Mardrus' *fin de siècle* French version which exaggerates the local colour to brilliant technicolour; and finally the three German versions: Gustave Weil's enjoyable version, with interpolations, certain omissions and certain sections in rhyme; the insipid version of Max Henning, except in the sections where he translated sections from Burton; Félix Paul Greve's translation of Burton; and the best known German version, that of Enio Littmann, which is an accurate verse rendering of the original. No word is missed out; Allah is not changed to God; no attempt is made to exaggerate local colour; the original epithets are kept.

Academics generally consider this to be by far the best translation of the *Arabian Nights*. But Borges disagrees. The versions of Burton and Mardrus, and even that of Galland are linked to the traditions of their own literatures and are a result of that literature. John Donne's obscenity, the enormous vocabulary of Shakespeare and Cyril Tourneur, the excessive erudition of 16th century essayists and Swinburne's enthusiasm for the archaic can all be seen in Burton. *Salammbô*, Lafontaine, the *Manequí de Mimbres* and the Russian ballet can all be seen in Mardrus. But noting other than the "probity" of Germany can be found in Littmann. The translator seems to have ignored his own culture, which he could have used to a much greater extent. Borges suggests he should have taken advantage of the fantastic side of German literature and wonders what a Kafka would have made of the games, the digressions, the symmetries of the *Arabian Nights*.

Borges also wonders if the simplifying and prudish versions of Galland and Lane are not nearer the original innocent tales which were adapted and more strongly seasoned for the tastes of the Cairo middle classes.

So Borges favours the version which modifies the original, acculturises it, adapts it to its own literary traditions and disfavours that which shows respect for the original.

But isn't this preference for a certain kind of translation to a great extent connected with the background of the critic. The German Romantics were writing against French military domination. A. W. von Schlegel gave his series of lectures in Vienna in 1808 as Napoleon was conquering Europe. Benjamin, Buber, Meschonnic and Derrida are all influenced by the sacredness of the Word in Jewish culture. Berman and Laplanche react against their own ethnocentric French culture.

Borges is Argentine. His early poetry followed national gaucho themes. He then moved away from all kinds of nationalism and developed a lifelong hatred of the Peronist nationalism. Indeed, at one point the Peronists replied to Borges' taunts by naming him inspector of pig farms. In his essay "El escritor argentino y la tradición" he examines the possibilities open for the Argentine writer. It is impossible for even nationalistic Argentine writers to escape European influence; many of the metaphors of *Don Segundo Sombra* come from Paris, and its narrative is derived from Kipling and Mark Twain. Borges rejects following a Hispanic model: Argentina has always tried to distance itself from Spain, and Spanish literature is a special acquired taste amongst Argentines. Another possibility is that of isolationism, which Borges finds absurd: this says that the

Argentines are totally disconnected from the past and from Europe, as in the first days of creation.

Borges feels that Argentina is very much linked to Europe, and European events have all had strong repercussions in Argentina. He accepts that the Western culture is the Argentine culture, but then adds that their distance from European culture gives them a certain ability to use and handle European themes "without superstitions, with an irreverence which may have, and already does have, fortunate consequences". Borges makes parallels with Jews in Western culture as a whole and Irishmen in English letters: not tied by any fetters and devotion to a certain history or tradition, it has been much easier for them to innovate.

Borges does not confine this freedom to use European material to Argentine writers; it is a South American characteristic. We can link his comments to those of Brazilian critics and writers who have been faced with similar problems. The solution is crystallized in the anthropomorphic metaphor of Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade: European culture will be swallowed to be regurgitated in a rather different form.

Machado de Assis' translation of Poe's "The Raven" is often considered to be vastly inferior to that of Fernando Pessoa. In "'The Raven' by Machado de Assis" Sérgio Bellei looks at this

translation from a different angle: rather than attempting a mimetic translation, Machado is appropriating Poe for Brazilian culture. The writer in the colony should not attempt to ape the metropolis, but use what the colonizer has brought, what he cannot escape, to make fresh beginnings.

And here we come back to Borges' desire to be "macho. gaucho and skinny", to be completely different in translation. Translation for the South American aware of the colonial domination should not be too respectful of the original; this smacks too much of colonialism.



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