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## BORGES ON TRANSLATION

In prose, the colloquial meaning is the most valid, and finding its equivalent tends to be easy.<sup>1</sup>

Jorge Luis Borges

### Not an Impossible Task

Contrary to Walter Benjamin, Borges, as the epigraph above suggests, did not consider translation an “impossible task.” Translation is not only possible but also essential to the understanding of literature: “No problem is as consubstantial to literature and its modest mystery as the one posed by translation,” he wrote in “Las versiones homéricas” [“The Homeric Versions,” 1932].<sup>2</sup> Translation is not only intrinsic to the reading process, but, as he asserts in the same essay, it is “destined to illustrate aesthetic debate.” Written from a peripheral Argentina that looked toward Europe (with Paris as its capital) as the center of culture, Borges’ statement reverberates far and wide: not only is translation a literary practice motivated by aesthetic goals and choices, but is itself a facet of reading and writing, the link between and across languages and literatures.

Borges first made this statement, as well as the now famous dictum at the end of the first paragraph of his Homer essay-- to wit: that the concept of “definitive text” is relevant only to religious dogma or exhaustion—in his prologue to the Spanish translation of Paul Valéry’s *Le Cimetière marin* (Sea Cemetery) published a few months

before “Las versiones...”. Borges would often recycle his material —thereby showing in practical terms that no enunciation is definitive or exhaustible—expanding, evolving, supplementing ideas and citations. In “Las versiones homéricas” he repeated not only a phrase but the first two paragraphs of his discussion from the Valéry prologue where, in effect, he had redefined the categories of original and translation by placing both kinds of texts on an equal plane as “drafts.” In the same text, he praised the bilingual Nestor Ibarra (a close friend) as not only a great translator of Valéry into Spanish, but also the best translator of Borges into French. As Borges wrote later about Ibarra in the preface to the French edition of his poetry published in 1965: “Ibarra does not misinterpret the connotations of irony, tenderness and nostalgia that nuance each word in my poems...he understands the affinities and differences of the two poetic languages.”<sup>3</sup> This time speaking not of prose but of poetry, Borges affirms that the gifted ear, the translator who intimately knows the culture and language of the text’s origins as well as the language into which he is translating it, can produce a successful recreation.

Borges is also a pragmatist in that he does not trust general theories, but rather evaluates “particular” translations and originals alike, case by case: hence the work itself matters more than its author. He criticizes author-centric modern readers (the today he spoke of was the 20<sup>th</sup> century) who read the writer rather than the work. Art matters more than the individual artist, and translation dramatizes the error readers make upon thinking, for example, that they’re reading Borges or Valéry when, in fact, the aesthetic experience has been produced by Ibarra in conjunction with a Borges or Valéry—the collaborative or non-authorial spirit of Borges’ perspective here was at the very heart of his own many collaborations with his friends, most notably, with Bioy Casares.

These ideas illustrate how essential Borges' broad understanding of translation (both as a writerly activity and as a text) was to his poetics and practices as a writer. The implications, as we shall see, of translation as a paradigm for reading, writing and critical interpretation bear fruit not only in his numerous translations but also in almost every essay, poem, review, prologue and story he wrote from the 1920s through to the 1980s. To follow such a fertile path would require an entire book. Thus, while glancing over a range of texts, I will highlight those four essays whose principal theme is translation—"Las dos maneras de traducir" (1926) "Las versiones homéricas," (1932) "Los traductores de las 1001 noches," (1936) "El enigma de Edward Fitzgerald"(1951) --as well as his quintessential *fiction*, "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote" (1939).

Significantly influenced by the modernists such as James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, as well as Ezra Pound "transcreations," Borges' views on translation have trickled down to literary thinkers such as George Steiner and Umberto Eco, and have been analyzed at length in numerous essays, dissertations and books (most recently Efrain Kristal's fascinating study, *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation* (Vanderbilt UP, 2002), and Sergio Waisman's postcolonial discussion in *Borges on Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery* (Bucknell UP, 2005). In *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975), George Steiner accurately called the famous Borgesian *boutade* "Pierre Menard, the Author of Don Quixote" the "summa of translation theory." Menard is an imaginary author who recreates word for word excerpts from *Don Quixote*, passages which though identical to the original, as shown by his equally imaginary reader, the author of the homage to Menard, signify something entirely different from anything Cervantes may have imagined. Translation, like reading, always follows an original,

whether or not its origins are known, and is by its very nature anachronistic. As I have discussed in my “Notes on Borges’ Notes on Joyce: Infinite Affinities” (1997) and especially in my 1991 book on the creative and critical act of translation, *The Subversive Scribe: Translating Latin American Fiction*, I believe Borges provides the most lucid perspectives for the understanding of literary translation.

## Invisible Work

Efrain Kristal’s *Invisible Work* (the title alludes to the way Borges’ narrator refers to Pierre Menard’s “fantastic” feat) summarizes the three aspects of Borges’ engagement with translation which informs the essays we will explore. Kristal observes that the obscure books (better known in the Edwardian era) which Borges perversely celebrates in his many essays and fictions became “secret masterpieces” thanks to the invisible workings of Borges himself. Creation in Borges emerged organically, systemically and simultaneously along with his elaborations as a translator, and the notion of what a writer is, indeed, emerged out of Borges’ version of what a translator is, or can do, especially when that translator is Borges. The first chapter, “Borges on Translation,” takes on the slippery challenge of Borges’ translation theory (theory in a uniquely Borgesian mode, that is) by leading us through numerous essays and stories to show how Borges subtracts from the history of translation and its theoretical positions those elements which most help him construct his ideas and especially his practices as a reader and writer. Kristal illustrates, for example, that translation mistakes are sometimes more valuable than so-

called accurate translations: texts are inevitably appropriated by readers, become for the creative mind pretexts for the act of writing and, ultimately, the resurrection of a kindred imagination.

Borges precisely avoids the pitfalls of theoretical positions such as the famous debate between humanist Matthew Arnold and linguistic scholar Newman. Borges rewrites the terms of that debate and exposes the insights and blindness of both gentlemen to show, ultimately, how both their positions are valid, depending on the function or effect of the version at hand. In Borges' portrayal, the feverish discussants are left speechless because either is right, depending on text, context, and reader, depending particularly on the emphases that matter in a given context. Their seemingly ironclad positions melt away but what remains is the continuing elaboration of the work of art despite the intentions of individuals. Borges sees the other side always, and tells us both sides simultaneously with his famous insight that "there is no such thing as a definitive work." And yet, who loves the great Classics we consider definitive more than the man who utters these seditious words?

In his chapter on Borges as translator, we get to study the specific transformations in Borges's translations of writers such as Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe and Franz Kafka, and how Borges, by improving upon and enriching the originals, was developing his own strategies as a writer. The book's final chapter "Translation in the Creative Process" reveals how translation scaffolds Borges' fictions in our now increased and detailed awareness of the presence of other writers' works in Borges' texts. Furthermore Kristal discusses at length the now visible presence throughout Borges' works of the trope, or metaphors of translation, the word whose etymological meaning is metaphor.

In the context of his early career as an avant-garde poet, Borges' first essay, written in 1926, came out in *Inquisiciones* and was called, no doubt with some irony, "Las dos maneras de traducir" ["The Two Ways to Translate"]. By the mid-1920s, young Borges (who by age nine had experienced and published his first translation, of Oscar Wilde's story "The Happy Prince") was well aware of translation (and particularly Anglophone) controversies centered on the ideological and linguistic complexities of the Bible, Dante and Homer, most notably the Arnold-Newman debate about Homer—more famous, as he chides in the "1001 Nights" essay, than its two interlocutors.

He had already concluded that a "literal" formula for fidelity to an original was by definition absurd, and would lay this idea to rest most effectively via the "invisible" work of the intrepid and phantasmal Pierre Menard. But beyond questioning accepted notions about originals and authors Borges, as the creative reader, was also arguing that, as there are endless interpretations by diverse readers of any given text, there is no ONE way to translate. To begin with, countless works throughout history have been translated, many of them repeatedly, hence Borges' close reading of generations of English poets who had translated Homer's epics, as a way into understanding Homer's contributions to Western culture.

## Two Ways to Translate

“The Two Ways to Translate” highlights the dialectic shape of translation arguments of which the abovementioned Arnold-Newman debate is typical, opposing “spirit” to “letter” or “literary” to “literal.” By setting forth to define two ways, with the usual ironic sleight of hand, he not only summarizes the historical dueling duets over translation, but opens the floodgates beyond dialectics into the ineffable world of chance and imagination. There is always more than one, and by inference multiple ways of translating any one text, just as there are many different interpretative approaches to any literary work. While appearing to summarize what’s been said, Borges steps out of his own frame to reflect implicitly on his inevitable limitation as yet another reader. His genial discussion, apparently objective and supposedly didactic, soon reveals, as with all intelligent critics, his own interests, aesthetic preferences, ethical stances. The underlying thrust of “The Two Ways to Translate” brings to the foreground a paradox: while preferring a classical Aristotelian approach to writing and translating, Borges has a problem with the sacred concept of “classic” for the very reason that any work, classic or eccentric, is the product of contingencies and of a progression of readings. Here he takes issue, from the cultural context of an urban Argentine writer in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the canonization of Argentina’s national poem *Martin Fierro*, which has its virtues but also its defects.

In this article whose ideas would be further refined in the “Homeric Versions” and “The Translators of the 1001 Nights,” he defines the “two ways” in terms of aesthetic positions, that is, the art-centered Classical approach and the artist-centered Romantic approach, revisiting, as mentioned, the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century debate of the Classicist man of letters Matthew Arnold who favored a “plain” and “noble” Homer in his attack upon

polyglot linguist Newman who favored a literal rendering which would make transparent all the linguistic quirks of the poetry. While “classical” and “romantic” pertain to precise historical periods of Western art, Borges uses them generically as the aesthetic tendencies they have come to signify. However, as with all categories Borges places in question, he reveals how their definitions, beyond the strictly historical contexts, are ultimately in flux—thus of course showing us by example how important it is to deal with the particular as opposed to attempting general principles. For example, in a mischievous 1930s essay “Postulation of Reality” he makes us realize that while Gibbon’s history of the Roman Empire proposes to be classical, the results are romantic--one of numerous instances where these terms cross each other’s boundaries as if they were Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum.

Nonetheless the two categories serve as a convenient departure in this first stab at a discussion of translation. Again, by the time the young poet Borges was in his 20s, his poetic tastes and strategies were already formed, and whether the object of discussion was originals or translations, in a subversive modernist way, his “classical” focus places the work in the spotlight by placing the master in the shadows—in line with T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” (1920)

Borges writes about two ways of translating, in 1926 [my translation]:

Universally, I suppose there are two kinds of translations, the literal and paraphrase. The former corresponds to the Romantic mentality, the second to the Classical. I’d like to explain this statement in order to diminish its aura of paradox. The classical way of thinking is interested only in the work of art, never the artist. The classics believe in absolute perfection and seek it out. They despise localisms, oddities, contingencies. Poetry must be a beauty similar to the moon, eternal, dispassionate,

impartial. The metaphor, for example, is not considered by classicism as either emphasis or personal vision, but as the attainment of poetic truth which, once engineered, can be (and should be) seized by all. Each literature possesses a repertory of these truths, and the translator knows how to take advantage of it and to pour the original not only into the words but into the syntax and usual metaphors of his language. This procedure seems sacrilegious to us, and sometimes it is. Our condemnation, nevertheless, suffers from optimism, since most metaphors are no longer representations, but merely mechanical. Nobody, upon hearing the adverb “spiritually” thinks of breath of air, or of the spirit; nobody sees any difference (not even of stress) between the phrases “dreadfully poor” and “poor as a church mouse.”

Inversely, Romantics never seek the work of art, but rather the man himself. Man (we already know) is neither timeless nor an archetype, he’s Jack So and So, not John Doe; he possesses a way of being, a body, an origin; he does something, or nothing, has a present, past, future and even his death is his. Beware of twisting one word of those he wrote!

That reverence for the I, for the irreplaceable human difference which is any I, justifies literal translations. Besides, the faraway, the foreign is always beautiful. Novalis clearly articulated this romantic sentiment: distant philosophies resound like poetry. Everything becomes poetic in the distance: faraway hills, faraway men, faraway events and so on. From such derives the poetic essence of human nature. Poems of the night and of the penumbra (*Werke*, III, 213). Delight in the faraway, homey voyage through time and space, vestuary of foreign destinies, promised to us by the literary translations of ancient works, a promise that generally remains in the prologue. The announced purpose of truth makes the translator a charlatan since to maintain the strangeness of what he’s translating he finds himself obliged to thicken the local color, to roughen the rough edges, to sweeten the sweetness and to emphasize everything including the lie. [257-258]

Where this discussion begun in “Two Ways” might take us, beyond Borges’ move away from author-centered values, is the creative reader—which is maybe why he

ceased, in his later essays, to speak of such categories as classical and romantic, irrelevant if what matters is the reception of texts, that is, the reader. Regarding this creature, Borges was not so much defending or attacking approaches to translation as he was proposing to de-classify a classic, that is, his fellow Argentine's almost fetishistic idolatry for their epic gaucho poem of the romantic 19<sup>th</sup> Century, *Martin Fierro*.

### Anonymous Classics: Homer and “The Arabian Nights”

Homer's epic poems and the Arabian Nights, the two classics of world literature to which Borges dedicated essays that explicitly examine the field of translation history, share in common the fact their popularity with readers through the ages, and their questionable authorship. Both apparently began as oral traditions and cannot be traced to a single author whose identity is indisputable. Moreover, the Nights were translated from different sources at different times and as they passed into various European languages, acquired additions which, ironically, became the tales for which they were most known, especially the framing story of Scheherezade. The survival and transformations of such literary monuments over centuries and languages no doubt contributed to Borges' own very original and ironic ‘theory’ of translation which he expounds in his essay on the Homeric Versions, namely that the only difference between an original and a translation

is that a translation can be measured against a visible text—a *trouvaille* both obvious and previously unnoticed like the purloined letter, and worthy of that joker, Pierre Menard.

Rather than taking the pessimistic view that we will never know intimately the original language, never know whether Homer's images like the "wine dark sea" and epithets like the "wily" Odysseus were his inventions or the everyday speech of ancient Greece, Borges takes his "ignorance" as an opportunity to discover the poetry of the English language. Translation is not what you lose but what you gain. In the same light, Borges spoke of the contribution of the Celtic monk Bede the Venerable, who wrote in Latin and who translated the Bible. Borges mused: "It is beautiful to think that he died translating—that is, achieving the least vain and most self-effacing of literary tasks—and translating from Greek or Latin into Anglo-Saxon which, in time, would become the vast English language." <sup>4</sup>

Homer becomes a rich library of marvelous books, all those versions by one seafaring culture which felt affinities with that other ancient one. Ezra Pound preferred the lyrical emotion of Chapman's version, but for Borges, epic exaltation was essential. His own aesthetic preference is Pope's "speeches and spectacles" in part because Pope's Homer is reminiscent of the Spanish Golden Age hyperboles of Luis de Gongora, one Golden Age reincarnating what the Renaissance regarded as a glorious past Classical era. Any reading is contextual, Borges again reminds us.

As in *ficciones* such as "Pierre Menard", "The Garden of Forking Paths," and his later meditation "The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald," "The Translators of the 1001 Nights" explores, among other things, Borges' fascination not only with books but with men who are fascinated and submerge themselves in other cultures, times, and languages.

His “Arabian Nights” essay reveals, in particular, how his interpretation of this labyrinthine chapter (a Casbah worthy of “Pépé Le Moko”) in literary history uses the subject of translation to discuss his own intricate relationship with literature and its producers. Of particular interest (as Kristal pointed out in Borges’s own translations) are the curious mistranslations which seem unavoidable in cultural exchange, as well as the reception of this ubiquitous book in its various reincarnations in the Western canon. Aside from his childhood in his Anglo-Argentine father’s library, a key to Borges’s fascination with the ‘Nights’ was his innate cosmopolitanism.<sup>5</sup> Though not a popular attribute in certain intellectual circles during the 1930s and 1940s, such a spirit was central to characterizations of Argentine cultural identity. “Our patrimony is the universe,” Borges pronounced in his famous lecture “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” a title which pays homage to T. S. Eliot’s modernist manifesto “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

For Borges, growing up in his father’s English library, in the bosom of an Anglo-Argentine family steeped in European liberalism and Victorian morals, the Nights were his childhood entry into the forbidden world of sex. His father, a frustrated novelist, significantly destroyed a book of Oriental stories he had written inspired in the Arabian Nights. Hence, it shouldn’t surprise us that this book often appears in his stories (for example “The South”) as an icon or displacement for erotic content, as well as a literary terrain to be explored by a son created to fulfill his father’s desires. For the writer Borges, *The Thousand and One Nights* (that One extra night and *mise en abîme* in the title intrigued him the most) offered, moreover, like Part II of *Don Quixote*, a template for an infinite textuality, an endless stream of stories which can be read and reread in order to be

rewritten anew. Furthermore, for the Argentine Borges, that the book was a translation, arriving in a form assumed by a classic 'Oriental' text in a European language, made it germane to his region's marginality in the Western literary tradition. In its misinterpreted though familiar exoticism, the Arab world could be and was often associated with Latin America under the colonial gaze of Europe and Anglo-America. Sir Richard Burton's "adventures" in both Africa and Latin America exemplify such a positioning.

Regarding this realization, it is interesting to note how Borges embarks on the *Nights*, discussing the literary figure whose version he apparently preferred but also who, among all the European translators, most intrigued him as a flesh and blood individual. This writer was Sir Richard Burton, British consul in Trieste (before the city became Joyce's home in exile), a linguist who knew some of the most obscure languages in the world, a scholar and adventurer who discovered the source of the Nile and who fought in wars in South America, a libertine who scandalized Victorian England with his exploits and with his pen: in brief, the kind of man Borges, a bookworm with unfulfilled yearnings for a more active and sexual life, could certainly admire and even perhaps envy.

The Argentine immediately speculates about a "secret aim" of Burton's famous 1872 translation, namely, to annihilate his predecessor, the Orientalist Edward Lane—who in 1839, Borges continues, had in turn, translated against his predecessor, Galland, the French translator.<sup>6</sup> Borges implies here that translation is a polemical tool, an act of literary criticism in which one informed reader imposes his interpretation upon another's. His argument also suggests that through translation one writer duels against another, that

translation is a perfect weapon to kill a father figure, to assert one's own paternity. Borges may also be telling his reader that his own “secret aim” may be to damn with praise and to pay homage with ironic reservations: for while Burton's was the best version of the *Nights* in his view, Burton’s version was often awkward and inconsistent, and the man himself was an ingenuous positivist who did not recognize that while he thought he succeeded where Lane failed, his appropriation of the cultural Other was problematic: Burton was too naïve to realize that even great translations, like many originals, are brilliant failures.

Rather than beating a dead camel, i.e. the Lane-Burton debate, at this point in Borges’ essay he covers his tracks, as it were, and goes back to his job as literary historian: “Let me begin with the founder,” he says, meaning the French Galland. (74) In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Galland brought from Istanbul copy of the book along with a supplement from someone “said to be Hanna”—and Borges notes both the questionable origin of the supplementary stories plus the fact that these are among the stories which were to become most popular, such as Aladdin's Lamp, and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. Always the ironist, Borges remarks that this translation filled with “jewels and magic spells” was both the “worst and the most read”—and praised—by writers who would have significant impact on literary culture such as Coleridge, De Quincey, Stendhal and Poe. (74) These writers, particularly Coleridge, De Quincey, and especially Poe, would in turn be significant precursors of Borges, of course.

Galland's version was much criticized, Borges notes. One reason was because it suffers—perhaps inevitably—from anachronisms: Weil, a German scholar whose

translation Borges would peg as the most pleasant of the four uninspiring German translations, points out, for example, that a “valise” should be a “saddlebag.” (74) More serious was Galland's so-called decorum, suppressing, as the Victorian Lane will later do, scenes, descriptions and stories (such as kings who had many wives) that a Western reader of that era might consider obscene. Borges remarks mischievously, defending Galland against the criticisms of Andre Gide who favored Mardrus's colorful version, that the repression of these elements makes the book actually more obscene, since more is left to the reader's imagination.

Moving onto the scholarly Lane, Borges delights in the paradox that while his translation was “an encyclopedia of evasion,” Lane was admirably faithful, resorting, unlike Galland who simply practiced the art of omission, to explanatory and scholarly footnotes. (76) Lane, unlike his successor Burton, had no polemical or ulterior motive other than that of bringing the wonders of the Orient to Western readers, but Borges is quick to point out—without using jargon—that ideology is never absent despite an author's visible intentions. Lane becomes for Borges exemplary of the notion of censorship not only as a predictable aspect of translation between cultures whose moral codes were so different, but as a form of creation. Comparing this “creativity” sarcastically with certain procedures of Hollywood where husbands and wives slept only in twin beds until the Hayes code was defrocked by the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Borges is suggesting that such creative processes are not alien to him. Censorship is seen in an affirmative light through the Borgesian looking glass, or rather it is considered, at the very least, unavoidable in the act of interpretation.

While Galland and Lane “disinfected” the Nights, however, Borges points out that they also invented the concept of the “marvelous”—an adjective missing from the original book which, as Borges comments, was in its own culture, only an “adaptation” of smutty jokes and stories well-known to “Cairo's middle classes.” (77) Citing Enno Littman, the German translator whom Borges would criticize for being the most faithful and least inspired, Borges stresses that the book which Galland introduced to the Western reader was, on the contrary, a “collection of marvels,” projecting a “magical atmosphere.” This defining factor made it a more popular and much greater commercial success than it had been for its original readers who, after all, already knew the original characters and customs which those stories portray.

At this juncture of the essay Borges returns to Burton who claimed to have a command of thirty-five languages and wrote seventy-two volumes, and who apparently experienced every kind of sexuality and cuisine not to mention, in his African wanderings, cannibalism. Borges sums all this up—as if following Lane's prudish example—with his best stuffy British librarian tone: “the attractions of the forbidden are his.” (79) Certainly by alluding to Burton's friendship with the poet Algernon Swinburne, well known for his homosexuality, Borges means to leave tantalizing trails for his reader's imagination—once again proving the vicarious joys of censorship.

What exactly did Borges like about Burton's version? He criticizes Burton for a “lack of ear” in his verses, and for an inconsistency in the language ranging from the literal to the colloquial. It would appear that he praised most of all the erotic erudition, the copious copulating footnotes as it were—hence not so much the pleasure of the text

as of the sex—and the fact that this translation was somewhere between a recreation and an act of literary criticism. To wit, Burton had created a heterogeneous genre—one might say like Borges' *Ficciones*—somewhere between narrative, essay and poetry. The one other element in both Burton and Mardrus which was decisive in Borges' mind was the title which added, following Galland, that “One Night,” that gateway to the infinite *mise en abime* of story telling represented by the framing tale of Scheherazade, reaching from the picturesque past into the unfathomable future.

From his discussion of the enterprising Burton, whose motives were to glorify his reputation as an Arabist and to gain readers, Borges traveled chronologically and back across the Channel to the French version of “doctor Mardrus.” Here he slapped Gide on the hand not for preferring Mardrus but rather for using the wrong reasons to play Mardrus against Galland, claiming the latter to be more unfaithful than the former. *Au contraire*, this 1899 French version was the most readable after Burton's but also because, once again, it was not faithful. Borges tells us why: Mardrus was an illustrator, providing the reader with “art-nouveau” flourishes, “visual Orientalism”; rather than literal translator, Mardrus was an inter-semiotic translator; hence Borges compares Mardrus' “interpolations”—not without his usual tongue-in-cheek tone—to the biblical extravaganzas of the Hollywood classic filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille.

While with his discussion of Dr. Mardrus he reaches the climax of the essay, a celebration of felicitous “creative infidelity,” perhaps he saves for last his most important critique of the German versions. The summary of this critique could be: each literature, each culture, each era appropriated the “1001 Nights” according to its own deforming

mirror; the better translations were better because they, in turn, in Poundian spirit, brought something new into the target literature and language. In the case of Germany, a country which had generated such a prolific body of fantastic literature in the 19th century, Borges was disappointed by the relatively “tranquil” results. He concluded that “the exchange between the Nights and Germany should have produced something more.” (86) Finally, referring to Germany's *Unheimlichkeit* (Freud lurks in this remark, as well as Germany's vast library of fairy tales, notwithstanding Borges' occasional squashing of the father of psychoanalysis), Borges ended his essay with a tantalizing question that was also an answer: the creative translator to transport the “Nights” into German would have to be Kafka himself.

## Translation and Reincarnation

“The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald” pays homage to the curious fate of this minor Victorian poet whose fame was his translation of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*, quintessential love poem from old Persia. For Borges, FitzGerald was a kindred spirit but even more, a precursor of his English father Jorge Borges, that anarchist lawyer and frustrated novelist who also translated (into Spanish) the *Rubaiyat*, and whose son would fulfill his dreams of literary glory. Like Pierre Menard, FitzGerald was an avid reader of *Don Quixote*; the Englishman was separated by seven centuries from the Persian poet and was “less intellectual than Omar, but perhaps more sensitive and sadder,” Borges writes. And yet, a kind of miracle occurred in the textual encounter between these two dissimilar beings:

From the fortuitous conjunction of a Persian astronomer who condescended to write poetry and an eccentric Englishman who peruses Oriental and Hispanic books, perhaps without understanding them completely, emerges an extraordinary poet who resembles neither of them. [NF, 368]

The transmigration of Khayyam's obscure quatrains into FitzGerald's great "English poem with Persian allusions" becomes, in Borges' recounting, almost identical to the odyssey of the "Nights"—an obscure book from the East turns into a canonical work in the West. Borges' obsession, whether admiration or rivalry, vis à vis Burton seems displaced, however, by a sympathetic sense of communion in this tale of FitzGerald and Khayyam, a nostalgic communion with phantoms sought throughout his life as reader, writer and translator, seeking the spirit through the letter. His communion with writers included not only those he read and re-wrote but, again, those friends he collaborated with, such as Bioy Casares with whom he created a third writer, Bustos Domecq (and other pseudonyms). This third writer did not resemble either of them and was nicknamed "Biorges" by Emir Rodríguez Monegal; in Borges' world, collaboration and translation were, in a way, two sides of the same coin, as he concludes in his meditation on FitzGerald:

All collaboration is mysterious. That of the Englishman and the Persian was even more so, for the two were quite different, and perhaps in life might not have been friends; death and vicissitudes and time led one to know the other and make them into a single poet. [NF, 368].

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<sup>1</sup> “Las dos maneras de traducir,” *Textos recobrados 1919-1929* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1997), 256. [my translation]

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, edited by Eliot Weinberger (NY: Viking Penguin, 1999), 69.

<sup>3</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Preface a l’Edition Française,” *Oeuvre poétique (1925-1965)*, tr. Nestor Ibarra (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 8 [my translation]

<sup>4</sup> “Jorge Luis Borges, “Beda el Venerable,” *Literaturas germanicas medievales* (1966), edited with Maria Luisa Vazquez, from Obras completas en colaboracion (Emece, 1995), pp. 882-4. [my translation]

<sup>5</sup> Dominique Jullien. “In Praise of Mistranslation: The Melancholy Cosmopolitanism of Jorge Luis Borges” Special Issue: Jorge Luis Borges (edited with intro. By S.J. Levine) *Romanic Review*, Vol. 98, Numbers 2-3 (Columbia University, 2007), 205-224

<sup>6</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “The Translators of the 1001 Nights,” in *Borges: A Reader*, Emir Rodríguez Monegal & Alastair Reid (eds.) (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981) 73. My discussion of Borges’s essays and ideas on translation began in the 1970s with Rodríguez Monegal, hence I would like to use this edition to cite the “Nights.” Sections of the original essay, E. Weinberger explains (see Note 2), were first published in 1934, but the essay first appeared in its entirety in *Historia de la eternidad* in 1936.