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Alberto Manguel

Translation: A Miracle

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Jorge Luis Borges once said that translators shouldn't be literal. "The error," Borges explained, "consists in failing to take into account that each language is a singular way of feeling or perceiving the universe."¹

"Translation" is the name we use to describe the most intimate act of reading. Every reading is a translation, the passage of a formal vision of the universe into a particular form of sensation or perception, the transference of one representation of a world text (in written letters) into another (in letters seen and heard). Recent studies have shown the area of our brain that processes our perception of a text is the same as that which allows us to discern shapes and distances; that is to say, reading, from a physiological perspective, translates the physical forms of the universe into both imaginary and spatial representations. To read is to translate physically the reality of the world into our own felt reality.

To name something is to translate it. To say "Hispanic America," for example, is to reduce a complex geography with its long indigenous histories, its colonization, its independence, its new independence, its cities, its rivers, its literary works, its factories, its roads, the individual lives of its inhabitants—all this and much more—into two words that produce a forced verbal association with an Italian explorer and a culture indebted to Rome. Every translation is a conquest.

One of the many moments when the American continent tried to figure out its unique plural identity happened right after the Spanish arrived. Between the native languages of the continent and the language of the newcomers occurred encounters, clashes, dialogue, attempted extermination, study, and, to a certain extent, acceptance. In the Babel of the Americas, translation in many forms attempted to recognize the other and its language in order to understand it, or talk with it, or eliminate it.

Legend has it that the first translator in Hispanic America was a woman, Doña Marina, or “La Malinche,” an Indian interpreter for Hernán Cortés and Moctezuma. As an emblem of a new problem, Malinche is a perfect figure. José Cadalso, in the ninth of his *Moroccan Letters*, completed in 1774, says that she is “a remarkable example of how useful the fair sex can be, always able to direct her natural subtlety to great laudable goals.” From this patriarchal Spanish perspective, the first attempt to understand the other’s language in the colonized land is through a new instrument, “weaker” than manly weapons, less prestigious than the classical masculine model of translation, a Saint Jerome or an Alfonso the Wise.

There’s something magical about the transformation of the Indians’ “babel” into the Christian language through this “translator-traitor” (as Nora Catelli calls her), the beautiful Malinche. It fits within the parameters of the entire condescending European aesthetic the explorers use to judge the continent and their role in it. “I assure you,” the chronicler Caldosó writes in his fifth letter, “everything seems to have been carried out by magic: so many are the marvels of discovery, conquest, possession, and domination.” With apparent impartiality, he adds that in order to “establish the most sound opinion,” one should also consult writings by foreigners since he has only read about the conquest in works by Spaniards. And then he explains, “The reading of this particular history is a necessary supplement to the general history of Spain.”

This is an essential point: we read the other to understand ourselves, to know our own identity from what we can salvage from the opposite culture in passing from an unknown language to the one we speak at home. Cadalso understands translation in America, in its broadest sense, as the process of returning the act of exploration to its starting point, no longer the mapping of a foreign land but of our homeland. And he wisely associates translation with reading.

As the independence of the Spanish colonies in America progressed, so, too, did the desire to fix the world in a different voice. Vernacular Spanish began to distinguish itself from that of Spain, either stopping in the moment and refusing to shed archaisms

or by appropriating indigenous words or by inventing new vocabularies. The Spanish creole was born as a sort of self-parody, voluntarily disguised as something neither Indian nor Spanish, something whose characteristics were exactly those of an intermediary, a mestizo, a bridge. It has been suggested that the first important translations in Mexico, Peru, and Argentina, around 1800, were the result of the censorship that Spain imposed with the Indian laws prohibiting (without great success) the importation of works of fiction. Pedro Henríquez Ureña adds that this is also the time that translation in Spain “stops being an individual achievement by a creator of a still perfectible language—Boscán, Fray Luis de León, Quevedo—and becomes part of an editorial process.” In Hispanic America “appears the reading public whose appetites begin to regulate the production of literature.”² Translation then begins not as a single act of reading according to the whim of a literate reader but as a pluralistic activity for an entire linguistic community.

As heirs to the Counter Reformation, for whom Greek was synonymous with heresy, Hispanic Americans in the beginning chose to translate almost entirely from Latin but soon turned to modern languages : French, Italian, and to a lesser extent, English. Father Anastasio de Ochoa turned to Boileau, Racine, Petrarch, and Beaumarchais; Sánchez de Tagle to Rousseau and Voltaire; Fray Servando Teresa de Mier to Chateaubriand; Castillo y Lanzas to Byron; Juan Antonio Miralles to Ugo Físcolo and Thomas Gray; Bartolomé Mitre to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; José Martí to Victor Hugo and Thomas Moore. Unfortunately, many of these works have been lost.

In this charged atmosphere of vernacular readings, the Venezuelan Andrés Bello prepared a grammar for Hispanic Americans and said clearly in his preface: “I have no intention of writing for Spaniards. My lessons are addressed to my brethren, the inhabitants of Hispanic America. I consider it important to preserve the language of our fathers as purely as possible, as a providential means of communication and a fraternal bond among the various nations of Spanish origin spread across the two continents. But it’s not a superstitious purity I venture to recommend. . . . The greatest of all evils, if not checked, depriving us of the inestimable advantages of a common language, is the flow of constructed neologisms that floods and muddies much of what is written in America.”³ Borges takes up the argument: “For us, translation in Argentina has the advantage of being done in a Spanish that is ours and not the Spanish of Spain. But I believe it’s an error to insist only on the vernacular. I myself have committed this error. I think a language that extends over such a vast area as Spanish is an advantage, and it’s

necessary to insist on the universal rather than the local.”⁴ And Bello concludes with this definition: “A language is like a living body: its vitality isn’t in the stable identity of its parts but in the uniformity of their functions, which precede the form and character of the whole.”

Function precedes form: this formula, so like Lewis Carroll (“*take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves*”⁵), applies in great measure to translation in Spanish America. “For whom do I translate?” seems the motto for translators on the continent, from La Malinche onward.

Following the advice Borges would give a century later, the best Hispanic American translators now carry the idea of non-literal translations to surprising extremes. It’s no longer a case of changing the words of one language onto another, flipping the weave, as Cervantes proposed—to quote Luis Zapata quoting Horace—“as one views the back of Flemish tapestries.” The task is more ambitious, more complex, more ingenious: it’s to reconstruct the original in another geography, to colonize the landscape with a foreign text, to plant in a different country a tree from another climate.

How far can you go to appropriate the alien, to make your own what isn’t yours originally, to transform what’s foreign into what’s native?

To conclude, I propose an example.

In 1974, in *Dreamtigers*, Borges published a brief text called “The Plot.” I want to quote it in full:

To complete his perfect horror, Caesar, crushed against the foot of a statue by his friends’ impatient daggers, recognizes among their visages and steel blades the face of Marcus Junius Brutus, his protege, perhaps his son, and no longer defending himself cries out, “You, too, my son!” Shakespeare and Quevado recover this pathetic cry.

Fate enjoys repetitions, variations, symmetries. Nineteen centuries later, in the south province of Buenos Aires, a gaucho is attacked by other gauchos. As he falls, he recognizes his godson and says to him with gentle reproach and slow surprise (these words have to be heard, not read): “Pero, che!” They kill him, but he doesn’t know he’s dying in order to repeat a scene.

Hear it! Don’t read it! Now, how do you translate it?

Years ago, when I was attempting to share Borges’s text with some Canadian friends, I tried to translate it into English but encountered insurmountable difficulties. First, the title, “The Plot,” in Spanish can also mean “net” and “argument”; in English, it has to be one or the other. The parenthetical injunction (“hear it, don’t read it”) refers to

the phrase “Pero, che!” but no English expression we found demanded the same auditory urgency.

And finally, if there’s any untranslatable locution, it’s “Pero, che!” incontrovertibly rooted in the Argentine land and impossible to plant in any other linguistic soil. “Pero, che!” seems born from Argentine identity itself, a laconic complaint that can’t be expressed any other place on earth. “Pero, che!” can’t be spoken in England or the United States, but neither can it be said in Spain or Mexico or Cuba. “Pero, che!” is almost the definition of Creole speech.

Fortunately, the history of translation is the story of tiny miracles. Virtue, intelligence, skill, experience, research, chance: all these factors play into the success of a translation, but the only essential ingredient is the miraculous. In this field of literary creation, there is no victory without a miracle.

I’d resigned myself to leaving my translation unfinished or to end the short text with some weak synonym for the elusive expression. To distract myself, I was reading Chesterton’s *Short History of England*, a work well known to Borges, when suddenly I came across this sentence:

“The British state which was found by Caesar was long believed to have been founded by Brutus. The contrast between the one very dry discovery and the other very fantastic foundation has something decidedly comic about it; as if Caesar’s ‘Et tu Brute’ might be translated ‘What, you here?’ ”⁶

Chesterton’s “What, you here?” is the perfect translation of Borges’s “Pero, che!” Or better yet, the “Pero, che!” of Borges is the perfect translation of “What, you here?” by Chesterton. Translation as reading travels in two directions: from the source to the original text and from the original text to the source, journeys that confuse and redefine the source and the original. Who’s the author and who’s the translator of the expression? Borges or Chesterton? It’s impossible to say. Chronology and anachronism aren’t useful concepts to judge a translation and its sources.

The infinite task of a reader searching through the universal library for the definitive text becomes multiplied (if the infinite can be multiplied) when the reader accepts the qualities of the translator. Then every text rescued from the page becomes a multitude of others, transformed into the vocabularies of the reader, redefined in other contexts, other experiences, other memories, rearranged on other shelves. In place of the fixed text, the reader-translator proposes a nomadic one that’s never anchored. That’s the moving paradox of the art of translation, that through those constant

migrations and incessant explorations, one literary work can become less tentative, less haphazard than is the nature of an artistic work, and it can miraculously acquire a sort of immanent immortality.

Translated by Frank Bergon and Holly St. John Bergon

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "El Oficio de traducir," in *La Opinión Cultural*, Buenos Aires, September 21, 1975, collected in *Jorge Luis Borges en Sur, 1931-1980* (Barcelona: Emecé Editores, 1999).

² Pedro Henríquez Ureña, *Las corrientes literarias en la América Hispánica* (Mexico, 1978) in Nora Catelli and Marietta Gargatagli, *El tabaco que fumaba Plinio: Escenas de la traducción en España y América: relatos, leyes y reflexiones sobre los otros* (Barcelona: Ediciones del Serba, 1998).

³ Andrés Bello, *Gramática de la lengua castellana dedicada al uso de los americanos* (1847), in *Obra literaria*, selected and introduced by Pedro Graces (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1985).

⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, "El Oficio de traducir."

⁵ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, chapter 9, in *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass*, with an introduction and notes by Martin Gardner (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1960).

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1917).