

Translating Virginia Woolf

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Oriana Palusci (ed.)

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PAOLA LAURA GORLA

Did Borges Translate *Orlando*?

The Spanish edition of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando – A Biography* was published in *Sur*, Buenos Aires (Argentina) in 1937, in a translation by Jorge Luis Borges. Before taking into consideration the analysis of the translation and interpretative insights emerging from the Spanish version of the text, it is necessary to define three coordinates from which this study will proceed.

Virginia Woolf wrote *Orlando – A Biography* in 1928. In that period, Woolf was a distinguished figure not only on the English literary scene, but also abroad. She had already published *The Voyage Out* (1913), *Night and Day* (1920), *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). By the time of the publication of the translation of *Orlando* in its Argentinian version, 1937, Jorge Luis Borges had already published three collections of poems, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), *Luna de enfrente* (1925), *Cuaderno de San Martín* (1929); a collection of short stories, *Historia Universal de la Infamia* (1935); and some of his essays, *Inquisiciones* (1925), *Evaristo Carriego* (1930), *Discusión* (1932), *Historia Universal de la Eternidad* (1936). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that in 1921 (on 24 January), Borges signed the first Ultraist Manifesto in Spain, the first issue of the Spanish avant-garde literary magazine *Ultra*, together with very important figures of the peninsular avant-garde panorama, such as Rafael Cansinos-Assens, Guillermo de Torre and Ramón Gómez de la Serna.

After translating *A Room of One's Own (Un cuarto propio)* in 1936, Borges was compelled by Victoria Ocampo, one of the most prominent South American women of her time, to translate *Orlando*. The Ocampos belonged to Argentina's upper class and their family history was strongly connected with the cultural and political history of the Republic. During the years of Victoria's education, her family

moved to Paris where she concluded her studies at the Sorbonne. Victoria's stay in Europe greatly influenced her literary tastes. Having gained a deep understanding of European literature of the time, her personal interest in the contemporary European scene would later be given expression in her Argentinian publishing work. As a matter of fact, back in Buenos Aires she took part actively in the city's cultural and artistic life together with her sister Silvina, a poet. In 1931, for instance, the first issue of *Sur*, a literary journal founded and edited by Victoria, came out; Jorge Luis Borges contributed to its first issue with an article. The journal was soon followed by a full-blown publishing house, which together with the journal jointly gave voice to the several writers from Argentina and from elsewhere, authors such as Adolfo Bioy Casares, Ernesto Sábato and Julio Cortázar, Federico García Lorca, Juan Carlos Onetti, Horacio Quiroga, Aldous Huxley, Carl Gustav Jung, Vladimir Nabokov, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jack Kerouac, Albert Camus and Virginia Woolf, of course.

Before embarking upon the analysis of the interpretative and translating choices of the text, another indispensable vector to draw takes us to the year 1974, when the journalist Orlando Barone organised a series of seven meetings between Jorge Luis Borges and Ernesto Sábato.¹ All the meetings were recorded and published in 1976 in a volume entitled *Jorge Luis Borges y Ernesto Sábato, Diálogos (Compaginados por Orlando Barone)*, printed by the Argentinean publisher Emecé. The first encounter took place at La Ciudad, a bookshop in Buenos Aires on 14 December 1974 and it was exactly during this first exchange of views that Sábato referred to the translation of *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf that Borges had signed in 1937:

1 The dialogues planned by Orlando Barone between Borges and Sábato took place on 7 consecutive Saturdays, so each dialogue took its name from the date it originated: "14 de diciembre de 1974", "21 de diciembre de 1974", "11 de enero de 1975", "15 de febrero de 1975", "1º de marzo de 1975", "8 de marzo de 1975" and "15 de marzo de 1975". They were held at the bookshop La Ciudad, in de Maipú y Córdoba bar and in the atelier of the painter René Noetinger, a mutual friend.

Ernesto Sábato: [...] Pero a propósito, Borges, recuerdo algo que me llamó la atención hace un tiempo en su traducción del *Orlando*, de Virginia Woolf...

Jorge Luis Borges: (Melancólico) Bueno, la hizo mi madre... yo la ayudé.²

The third coordinate pertains to this last statement that Borges released in 1974, which alone seems sufficiently concise to put an end to any discussion around Borges as the real translator of Woolf. At the age of 75, Borges had been nominated several times for the Nobel Prize (which, reputedly only for political reasons, he never won). Having been blind for 20 years, and having been a world famous and highly respected writer for much longer than that, Borges did not have any desire to dwell on this supposed lack of recognition from the Nobel committee. It would not have taken away from or added to his life and fame as a writer. Neither would a badly made translation, nor the content of the statement itself, namely that the translation signed by him had actually been the work of his mother.³

Borges' statement seems a convincing one from different viewpoints: the family background in which the writer had been educated was famously bilingual. Since his childhood, he had been seriously visually impaired to the point of becoming blind. Thus, he had been educated at home by his parents and grandparents and by an English nanny. Besides, in 1937, although Borges had already published some of his works, he was still too young and not very famous to deny the passionate request by Victoria Ocampo to translate Woolf. Finally, Borges' writings and works cannot be pinpointed as particularly involved with the female world; on the contrary, he was an author who had been often pointed out as a misogynist. Since his statement seems

2 Orlando Barone ed., *Jorge Luis Borges y Ernesto Sábato-Diálogos*, Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1976, p. 15.

3 Borges had already made a similar statement when, interviewed by Norman Thomas di Giovanni, he admitted: "Yes, she did the translations, but I signed them!", in Richard Burgin ed., *Jorge Luis Borges - Conversations*, University Press of Mississippi, 1998, p. 131.

to be quite likely true, it is worth mentioning at this point the name of the writer's mother: Leonor Acevedo Suárez.⁴

Let us follow the 1974 dialogue between the writers:

Sábato: Pero está su nombre. Además, lo que quiero decirle es que encontré dos frases que me hicieron gracia porque eran borgeanas, o así me parecieron.

Borges: (Riéndose) Bueno, sí, caramba...

Sábato: No tiene nada de malo. Sólo muestra que casi es preferible que un autor sea traducido por un escritor medio borroso e impersonal ¿no?⁵

Ernesto Sábato's reaction to Borges' statement is interesting. First of all, although he seems to roughly accept the idea that Borges was not the translator, Sábato clarified that in his reading he had the impression of detecting some sentences sounding very Borgesean. We will go back to those sentences in our text analysis. Then Sábato began an interesting speculation on the role of a perfect translator underlining the importance of favouring an impersonal and sometimes "invisible" attitude in translation in order not to "cover" the will and tone of the source text with the translator's personal style.

Taking into consideration Sábato's observations about the 1937 Castellan translation signed by Borges, it is still possible to notice some interesting discontinuities in the linguistic construction of the text. If we hypothesise that the translation was mainly done by Leonor Acevedo Suárez, and that Borges intervened only on some specific passages of that translation with sentences marked by Sábato as 'frases que me hicieron gracia porque eran borgeanas', can we really distinguish between two distinct translators?

However, a more attentive reading of the target text will show the presence of three different translators: the first one is a disciplined translator who is appropriately subjugated to the text in the sense that he is 'subject to the text', and not the other way round just as we read

4 Borges had always had a close relationship with his mother. The writer lived with her until her death in 1975, and he had looked after her for years when she was in bed almost completely paralysed.

5 Orlando Barone ed., *Jorge Luis Borges*, p. 16.

in Sábato's words, 'el escritor impersonal y medio borroso'. Then, a "creative" translator, who, again paraphrasing Sábato, 'suenan tanto a Borges'. And finally, as we shall see, the third profile belongs to a translator who could be defined as a "censor", i.e. a translator who intervenes in the text so as to delete whole sentences and expressions written by Woolf.

The disciplined translator or *el escritor impersonal*

The Spanish version of *Orlando* hinges almost entirely on a unique translating style that is very respectful of the source text with its disciplined translation choices. This style echoes Sábato's *escritor impersonal*, in the sense of a translator who is capable of interpreting the original text and reproducing it in Spanish without distorting it but paying attention to the content value and stylistic choices of the author, namely Virginia Woolf.

Some examples taken from this type of translation can help understand the professional attitude of the translator and his/her technical choices:⁶

It came from a dark spot *down there*; a spot compact and mapped out; a maze; a town, yet girt about with walls; it came from the heart of *his own great house* in the valley, which, dark before, even as he looked and the single trumpet duplicated and reduplicated itself with other shriller sounds, lost its darkness and became pierced with lights (p. 15).

Venía de un lugar oscuro *allá abajo*; un lugar compacto y dibujado; un laberinto; un pueblo, pero ceñido de muros; venía del corazón de *su propia casa grande* en el valle, que, antes oscura, perdía su tiniebla y se acribillaba de luces, en el

6 All the English quotations are taken from Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, edited by Brenda Lyons, London, Penguin Books, 1993, while the Spanish ones from Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, translated by J. L. Borges, Barcelona, Edhasa, 2003. At the end of each quotation the reference page will be in brackets. The stylistic and translation expressions investigated are in italics.

mismo momento que él miraba y que la trompeta se duplicaba y reduplicaba con otros sonos estridentes (p. 17).

These examples, frequent in all the text – as we noticed before – show the attention and rigour of the translator, who not only never digresses from the English text, but tries also to respect the number of words stylistically used by Woolf. In the above passage, equivalence at word level is straightforward: *down/abajo* and *there/allá*; then, the use of the Spanish adjective *propia* as the emphatic form of the possessive *su*, is remarkable since its use in Spanish is rarer and more specific than the English expression *his own*. Moreover, the translator had to solve a problem of linguistic acceptability in Spanish with the odd sequence of a possessive adjective (*his/su*) followed by an intensifier (*own/propia*) and by an adjective (*great/grande*), all three referring to *house/casa*. As a result, he necessarily moved the adjective *grande* after the noun *casa*, producing a sequence that in the Spanish language is certainly correct but a bit too formal. Punctuation also strictly follows the source text: ‘He dashed downhill (p. 15)’; ‘Se precipitó cuesta abajo (p. 18)’. The English solid compound *downhill* is given by means of a word-for-word translation, with the Spanish translation of the two English words *down* and *hill* by keeping both meanings: *cuesta abajo*. *Abajo* indicates a descending movement, and it is strengthened by the noun *cuesta* which evokes the presence of a hill:

He reached his room. He tossed his stockings to one side of the room, his jerkin to the other. He dipped his head. He scoured his hands. He pared his finger nails. With no more than *six inches of looking-glass* and a pair of old candles to help him, he had thrust on crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them as big as double dahlias in less than ten minutes by the stable clock (pp. 15-16).

Llegó a su cuarto. Tiró las medias por un lado, el justillo por otro. Se empañó la cabeza. Se lavó las manos. Pulió sus uñas. Sin más ayudas que *seis pulgadas de espejo* y un par de viejas brujías, se metió en bombachas coloradas, cuello de encaje, chaleco de Pekín y zapatos con escrapelas tan grandes como dalias dobles, en menos de diez minutos por el reloj del establo (p. 18).

The phrases in italics in the above quotations also highlight the source-oriented translation of measurements: in the Spanish transla-

tion, the English measurement in inches is kept unvaried, although the metric-decimal system is generally used in Argentina.

To sum up, most of the text translated in the Spanish language pays great attention to Woolf's original text, as we have seen, and a careful discipline on behalf of the translator who tries to follow the source text with an invisible touch.

The creative translator: examples of *lo que suena tanto a Borges* or *gracias borgeanas*

In order to delineate the profile of a second translator in the Spanish version of *Orlando*, the so-called creative translator, whose incidence we are hypothesising here, we shall start from the following words by Sábato:

[...] encontré dos frases que me hicieron gracia porque eran borgeanas [...]. Una cuando dice, más o menos, que el padre de Orlando había cercenado la cabeza de los hombros de “un vasto infiel”. Y la otra, cuando aquel escritor que volvió hacia Orlando y “le infirió un borrador”. Me sonaba tanto a Borges que busqué el original y vi que decía, si no recuerdo mal, algo así como presented her a rough draft.⁷

Starting from the second reference:

He turned to Orlando and presented her instantly with the rough draught of a certain famous line in the ‘Characters of Women’ (p. 149).

I cannot personally grasp the loose connection between the verb *inferir* in Spanish and the English *presented*:

Se volvió a Orlando y acto continuo le presentó el borrador de cierto memorable verso de los “Retratos de Mujeres” (p. 187).

7 Orlando Barone ed., *Jorge Luis Borges*, p. 16.

I could not get hold of the 1937 translation of *Orlando* signed by Borges, but in the so many – non-amended and unmodified (as the copyright page reports) – later editions, I have never found the expression suggested by Sábato in the dialogue. It might be the result of a false memory, also because in the very same sentence Sábato uses expressions such as ‘si no recuerdo mal’ and ‘decía ... algo así como’, which tend to hedge on the correctness of the memory.

Sábato’s first reference is instead more precise, maybe because it is a more specific one, and it refers to the choice of translating *vast Pagan* with *vasto infiel*. Apart from the *gracia* of the phrase *vasto infiel* in Spanish, in the same sentence, however, it is possible to notice another translation choice that is particularly interesting:

Orlando’s father, or perhaps his grandfather, had *struck it* from the shoulders of a *vast Pagan* who had started up under the moon in the barbarian fields of Africa... (p. 11)

El padre de Orlando, o quizá su abuelo la había *cercenado* de los hombros de un *vasto infiel* que de golpe surgió bajo la luna en los campos bárbaros de África...(p. 11)

It is the choice of translating the verb *struck (to strike)* with the Spanish *cercenar*, derived from Latin *circus, circi*, which connotes precision and industry in the act of cutting. *Cercenar* is an aesthetic act, it is a faithful, precise cut, therefore it is slow and accurate. Yet, there are several verbs in Spanish to equate the English verb *to strike*: *la había cortado de los hombros, la había quitado de los hombros, la había arrancado...* Therefore, why *cercenar*? A disciplined translator would have never interfered with the source text in such an authorial way. However, at a deeper level the choice of the Spanish verb *cercenar* adds something interesting to the sentence: the chopped head of the vast Pagan becomes an aesthetic object, it is emptied and kept as a relic or a war trophy. Somehow, the verb *cercenar* in Spanish, referring more to its aesthetic value rather than to the authentic act of cutting, seems to anticipate the idea that the cut separates from the body an object which then becomes an aesthetic object:

...know without a word to guide them *precisely what he thought* — and it is for readers such as these that we write — it is plain then to *such a reader* that Orlando was... (p. 52)

...de intuir sin una palabra que los ayude, *un pensamiento exacto* — y no escribamos sino para lectores así —, *esos lectores ejemplares*, decimos, saben muy bien que Orlando estaba... (p. 64)

This passage highlights two other intrusions on behalf of the translator; I would argue two interventions fully aligned with Borges' taste, interests and themes: first, the choice of the beautiful expression *pensamiento exacto* instead of *precisamente lo que pensó/precisely what he thought*; as a result, we assist at another completely distancing choice from the source text. Although this choice may be unacceptable for any translator, it still sounds very Borgesian: instead of the phrase *such a reader*, the concept of *lector ejemplar* is introduced.

Another conceptual passage in Woolf is strongly modified and personalised in the Spanish translation:

The *mind of man*, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the *human spirit*, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; [...] on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the *mind* by one second. This extraordinary *discrepancy* between time on the clock and time in the *mind* is less known [...] but directly he was alone on the mound under the oak tree, the seconds began to round and fill until it seemed as if they would never fall. They filled themselves, moreover, with *the strangest variety of objects* (p. 68).

La *mente humana*, por su parte, opera con igual irregularidad sobre la sustancia del tiempo. Una hora, una vez instalada en la *mente humana*, puede abarcar cincuenta o cien veces su tempo cronométrico; [...] inversamente, una hora puede corresponder a un segundo en el tiempo *mental*. Ese maravilloso *desacuerdo* del tiempo del reloj con el tiempo del *alma* no se conoce lo bastante [...] pero en cuanto estaba solo bajo la encina, los segundos se inflaban y se inflaban como si nunca fueran a caer. Iban llenándose además de *objetos incoherentes* (p. 86).

We can first notice the free interpretation of English words such as *mind* and *spirit* which are arbitrarily and mutually translated with *mente*, and *mind* with *alma*. It is also noteworthy to underline how the concept of *discrepancy*, a denotative term to describe the non-

coincidence between chronological and psychological time, is translated with *desacuerdo*. Moreover, we can also note the choice of metaphorically translating the concept of *strangest variety of the objects*, with the *objetos incoherentes*. It is quite manifest here that the passages analysed doubtlessly demonstrate that another hand was involved in the translation of the text; in particular, the interventions are more visible when a higher concentration of Woolf's theoretical conceptualization on human condition occurs.

The censor

The translation analysis of Borges' version of *Orlando* is carried on here by focusing on a distinctive and meaningful trait of extreme markedness given by an extensive employment of the technique of deletion on whole parts of the source text. As a matter of fact, in the Spanish translation several parts have been deleted: single words, short phrases and sentences. The analysis of the deleted parts, which can be identified as a form of censorship, is informed by the excellent study by Leah Leone⁸ who detected all the parts in which Woolf holds her writing on an unstable gender balance, stylistically shifting between male and female in order to represent the sexual changes of her main character. These are the selected passages:

(It must be remembered that she was like a child entering into possession of a pleasurance or toy cupboard; her arguments would not commend themselves to mature women, who have had the run of it all their lives) (p. 109).

(Debemos recordar que era como un niño, que toma posesión de un jardín o de un armario de juguetes: sus razonamientos no podían ser los de una mujer ya madura que ha disfrutado de esas cosas toda su vida) (p. 137).

8 Leah Leone, "La novela cautiva: Borges y la traducción de Orlando", *Variaciones Borges*, 25 (2008). The examples which show the influence of a censor-translator, as defined here, are all taken from Leone's exhaustive and precise study. These examples are reported here to give a roundedness to our analysis.

Lord Chesterfield whispered it to his son with strict injunctions to secrecy, “Women are but children of a larger growth... A man of sense only trifles with them, plays with them, humours and flatters them”, which, since children always hear what they are not meant to, and sometimes, even, grow up, may have somehow leaked out... (p. 148).

Lord Chesterfield se lo confió a su hijo bajo el más estricto secreto: «Las mujeres no son más que niños grandes... “El hombre inteligente sólo se distrae con ellas, juega con ellas, procura no contradecirlas y las adula”. Como los niños invariablemente oyen lo que no deben y a veces llegan a ser grandes, el secreto se ha divulgado (p. 186).

Since Orlando had won the praise of Queen Elizabeth for the way she handed a bowl of rose water as a boy, it must be supposed that she was sufficiently expert to pass muster (p. 136).

Desde que Orlando había conseguido el elogio de la Reina Isabel por su manera de entregarle un bol de agua de rosas, cuando era niño, podemos suponer que era todavía lo bastante hábil para ser aprobada (p. 170).

we have no choice left but confess — he was a woman (p. 97).

Debemos confesarlo: era una mujer (p. 120).

Woolf’s sense of hesitation mixed with modesty and suspense is lost in Spanish from the very beginning of the novel. Indeed, there are Spanish expressions perfectly equivalent to the English ones, such as *No nos queda sino confesar... que él era una mujer*, or: *No podemos dejar de confesar...*

Finally, still from Leah Leone’s analysis:

His memory — but in future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his,’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’— her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle (p. 98).

Su memoria podía remontar sin obstáculos el curso de su vida pasada (p. 121).

This last example is an extreme case where the clause is completely deleted although it is indeed possible to render it in Spanish: *Su memoria – aunque para el futuro habrá que decir, por motivos de*

convención, 'su de ella' por 'su de él', y 'ella' por 'él', así que la memoria de ella...

It should now be quite clear that there are three main different translator profiles, as hypothesised at the beginning of this paper. The first profile, active in almost 90% of the whole text, belongs to a *disciplined translator*, very attentive to contents, sound and any form of equivalence of each word and expression used within the source text. This profile is incompatible with the second profile assumed here, i.e. the *creative translator*. The creative translator, namely the one who intervenes in Woolf's most theoretical-conceptual moments by modifying her expressions and of course her thoughts, not surprisingly shows his intrusion and his presence with authorship and authority any time Woolf engages with themes close to Borges' tastes and interests such as time, mind, spirit, reader/writer's relationship...

Finally, there is the *editor*. Leone's examples reported here emphasise the total indifference Borges had towards gender as a theme, and yet gender is the core of Woolf's novel. Therefore, this disinterest might support our initial thesis assuming Borges' mother as the real translator of the novel. Borges accepted to translate and sign the translation under his name just because Ocampo had personally asked him to. And of course, it would not be convenient for a young Borges to choose and antagonize such a well-known personality on the Argentinean cultural and publishing scene.

To conclude, we can imagine that Borges interfered only with some parts of the text, in particular with those passages that might have created problems to a "disciplined translator" such as his mother, or with those expressions he was most passionate with. Finally, it is feasible to hypothesise that all the repetitions and stylistic oddities connected to the word-play with male and female pronouns have been simply and graciously cut out by Jorge Luis Borges.