

# *More Borgesian than Borges?: Joyce, Borges, and Translation*

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**Abstract:** *This essay focuses on the ambivalent relationship between Jorge Luis Borges and James Joyce from the perspective of literary translation as well as of the Argentinian writer's fluctuating attitude towards his Irish counterpart. Both writers are polylingual artists and life-long translators. Borges was fond of making provocative statements about translation, though his own translations are rarely as radical as his theories about the craft. He could not enjoy the comparatively unfettered freedom of a self-translator like Joyce, whose Italianizing rendering of an excerpt from Finnegans Wake is more Borgesian than Borges.*

**Keywords:** *Translation Theory; Self-translation; De-localizing; Italianizing*

The relationship between Jorge Luis Borges and James Joyce begins on an ambivalent note. In a review of *Ulysses* in 1925, only three years after the first appearance of Joyce's great novel in Paris, Borges claims with uncharacteristic immodesty to be the first Hispanic "traveler" —literally adventurer —to have reached the shore of Joyce's novel (Non-Fictions 12). His praise of the artistic audacity and stylistic prowess of Joyce— "a millionaire of words and styles" (27) — is, however, strewn with barbed comments, especially about the inordinate demands that Joyce makes on his readers. While Borges's claim to have merely browsed in *Ulysses* may seem questionable there are in this instance grounds for taking this often-canny Argentine writer at his word. By the mid-twenties Borges had grown disenchanted with much of his previous writing. Is it any wonder then that he should have focused on those portions of *Ulysses* to which he was spontaneously drawn or that his most striking early homage to Joyce should come in the form of a translation of the "last page" of a book that he had never read to the end?

At the age of nine, Borges began his lifelong side-career as a literary translator with a translation of Oscar Wilde's *The Fairy Prince*. Although not so precocious or prolific a translator as Borges, Joyce learned Norwegian and German to translate plays by Henrik Ibsen and Gerhart Hauptmann; among his achievements as a translator is a polyglot rendering of a poem by James Stephens (1880-1950), the Irish novelist and poet best known for his witty novel, *The Crock of Gold* (1912). In a bravura feat in May, 1932, Joyce translated Stephens's short poem, "Stephens Green," into French, German, Latin, Norwegian, and Italian<sup>1</sup>. Then there is *Finnegans Wake*, which Joyce famously contemplated having Stephens finish should he himself find himself unable to do so. Joyce played the leading role in a collaborative Italian translation of a portion of the eight "Anna Livia Plurabelle" chapter in *Finnegans Wake*. Borges's rendering of the climax of Molly Bloom's sensuous — and famously unpunctuated — monologue in the final "Penelope" chapter of *Ulysses* invites comparison with Joyce's own "Anna Livia" translation. Such a comparison might admittedly seem perverse. After all, Borges had persistent misgivings about Joyce, whom he ridiculed in 1939 in the influential Buenos Aires journal *Sur* (1931-70). In a piece entitled "Joyce and neologisms" he not only describes Joyce's language

games as inferior to those of Lewis Carroll, but also indicts him for the “monstrosities” (*Borges: A Reader* 347) —i.e. punning neologisms—with which Joyce lards *Finnegans Wake*. However, the verbal obsession for which Borges criticizes Joyce, especially in *Finnegans Wake*, is one that, as he concedes towards the end of his life, he himself shares.

Borges’s impish upsetting of received opinion about translation is of course legendary. In his view, translations are not necessarily inferior to so-called originals. He suggests in “The Homeric Versions” that all writers can do is create drafts since there is no such thing as a definitive text, a concept which corresponds “only to exhaustion or religion.” (Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 69) In an essay, “On William Beckford’s *Vathek*” he famously claims—not entirely tongue-in-cheek—that “the original is unfaithful to the translation.” (239)<sup>2</sup>. However, the most daring enactment of Borges’s provocative ideas about translation can be found not in his own wide-ranging translations but in Joyce’s radical Italian rendering of a portion of *Finnegans Wake*.

Contrary to his image as a desiccated and cerebral writer, Borges chooses to translate a passage in the most sensual chapter of *Ulysses*, and his rendering of Molly Bloom’s monologue is characteristically irreverent. In recasting Joyce’s prose, he de-localizes its setting, thereby shifting Molly from the banks of the Liffey to those of La Plata. His most notable excision of a place name is that of Howth Head, the promontory which forms the northern end of Dublin Bay. Molly remembers lying with Leopold (“Poldy”) Bloom “among the rhododendrons on Howth head,”<sup>3</sup> a phrase which Borges de-Irishizes, as it were, by recasting it simply as “tirados en el pasto”<sup>4</sup> (stretched on the grass). On that day in Howth, Leopold, or Poldy as she calls him, expresses his delight in her radiance: “the sun shines for you.” Borges adds an audibly Argentinian note by rendering the phrase as “para vos brilla el sol,” (my italics) using the second person informal commonly used in Buenos Aires, the *voseo*, rather than the standard *tú* of international Spanish. Nor does Borges have any compunction about condensing Molly’s breathless flow. Seemingly redundant or vague phrases are simply eliminated, thereby favoring Borges’s penchant for brevity and compression over Joyce’s preference for elaboration and expansion.

Even while abbreviating Molly’s prattle Borges manages to add new qualities to Joyce’s prose. Her phrase “and all the fine cattle going about,” for instance, becomes simply “y el ganado pastando” (and the cattle grazing), thereby shaving off two words while introducing an assonantal play with “a’s” and “o’s.” Moreover, thanks to Borges’s dexterous translatorly handicraft, Molly’s reminiscence of “those handsome Moors all in white” becomes “esos moros buen moscos todo de blanco,” which, with its pleasing plethora of “o’s,” represents a further gain in translation.

Let us now compare Borges’s translation of the final “Penelope” chapter in *Ulysses* with Joyce’s rendering of the Anna Livia Plurabelle chapter in *Finnegans Wake*. There can be little doubt about Joyce’s primary role in creating the 1937 Italian translation from *Finnegans Wake*. On several occasions, he claims that the translation is his work<sup>5</sup>. His collaborator in Paris, Nino Frank, a Swiss-Italian Jew who had fled from Italy to the French capital after falling afoul of the Italian Fascist regime, confirms Joyce’s assertion: Frank insists “without any false modesty” that, whereas his own role was merely that of “guinea pig and fellow worker,” Joyce “is responsible for at least three-quarters of the Italian text.” (Potts 96) A third, though minor, contributor to the collaborative endeavor was Ettore Settanni, an Italian writer and critic whose slight revisions displeased both Frank and Joyce. In March, 1940, Joyce, who was anxious about the possible effect of the recently declared world war on the reception of *Finnegans Wake* wrote

to Settanni, expressing delight in the appearance of his Italianized “Anna Livia Plurabelle” — whose middle name alludes of course to the river Liffey: “I have had much pleasure in learning that my little lady from Dublin has completed her pilgrimage and has so tactfully made her modest curtsy before her august uncle Tiber. Did it amuse that very reverend greybeard at least a little to hear her unaccustomed silly and extravagant chatter?” (Joyce, *Letters III* 473-74) According to Jacqueline Risset, a French poet and Dante translator, Joyce’s translation is “an exploration of the furthest reaches of the limits of the Italian language conducted by a great writer; a writer who was not Italian, but, according to his collaborators, ‘italianista unico.’” (3) Although there seems to be no evidence that Joyce knew of Borges, the Irish writer more than rises to the challenge to Joyce translators laid out by Borges in a review of the first Spanish-language translation of *Ulysses*:<sup>6</sup> “Joyce expands and reforms the English language; his translator is obligated to take similar license.” (Borges, “Nota sobre el *Ulises* en español” 49) And all the more so, one might add, when writer and translator are one and the same person.

De-localizing “Anna Livia Plurabelle” more radically than Borges does with “Penelope”, Joyce replaces Irish place-names with Italian references, thereby introducing different allusions and new puns. Take, for instance, Howth head, which features even more prominently in *Finnegans Wake* than in *Ulysses* since it represents the head of the main character H.C.E., whose acronym stands variously for Howth Castle and Environs, Here Comes Everybody, and so on. One of the washerwomen chattering across the banks of the Liffey says of H.C.E. that “he used to hold his head as high as a howeth.” (Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* 197) The simile alludes both to Howth and to the expression “as high as a house,” thereby suggesting H.C.E.’s giant proportions—Howth rises to a height of 561 feet. Joyce makes H.C.E. even taller in Italian when he rewrites the aforementioned phrase as: “capeggiando da gradasso di gransasso.” (Risset 18). This could signify that H.C.E. is the leader of Gran Sasso, which sounds like some ostentatious Grand Duchy; “gransasso,” boaster or braggart, is also the name of the highest peak in the Apennines (9,500ft.).

As with Howth, so too with Joyce’s greatest subject, Dublin. Joyce Italianizes the alliterative tag, “Dear, dirty Dublin,” supposedly coined by the nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish novelist, Lady Morgan, which links H.C.E. to the city from which he, like Leopold Bloom, is estranged. The initials DDD occur often in *Finnegans Wake* as, for example, in “Dear Dirty Dumpling,” a play on Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, another of H.C.E.’s numerous aliases, and on Humpty Dumpty. Moreover, the initial letters of the original four-word phrase “Sugna Purca Qua Ramengo” corresponding to “Dear Dirty Dumpling” have nothing to do with Dublin; together they spell SPQR, an acronym for *Senatus Populusque romanus* (the Senate and People of Rome).

Joyce’s aim, however, is not to eliminate Dublin entirely but rather to create a confluence of Irish and Italian lore, fluvial and otherwise. For instance, in rendering a caustic description of H.C.E.’s way of speaking, he weaves in the names of four cities, standing for the four provinces of Ireland: “And his *derry’s* own drawl and his *cork’s* own blather and his *doubling* stutter and *gullway* swank.” In the Joyce/Frank version: “Un ghigno *derriso* del *corcontento*, ma chiazze *galve* dal cervel *debolino*.”<sup>7</sup> (O’Neill 100) Even without the italics which I have inserted for clarity’s sake, the names of those Irish cities are perceptible both in Joyce’s “English” and in Joyce/Frank’s Italian. Similarly, Joyce replaces many mentions of Irish history and mythology (not always easily separable) with references to Italian cultural figures such as Figaro in Rossini’s opera, *The Barber of Seville*, and Machiavelli<sup>8</sup>.

Unlike most of us translators who render the work of others, Joyce is a self-translator who can do whatever he likes with his own text. He can, for instance, insert a topical allusion to

Italian politics in place of a generalizing reference to the publicity accorded a never precisely specified foul deed of H.C.E.'s in the Phoenix Park: "It was put in the newses what he did." In Italian the "newses" are named: "Il Marco Oraglio l'ha ben strombazzato." (The Marcus Aurelius has greatly trumpeted it"). This transmogrified title of an actual publication refers to *Il Marco Aurelio*, one of the few satirical journals left by the late 1930's in Mussolini's Italy. *Oraglio* contains the word *raglio* (braying like a donkey), thereby transforming the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius into an ass. But, as Patrick O'Neill points out in an entertainingly erudite study, the real target here is not the stoic emperor but the tempestuous Mussolini/Il *Duce*, who saw himself as a latter-day Caesar. (*Trilingual Joyce*, 85-6) By way of conclusion, I'd like to raise a counterfactual question. Borges evidently did not know about Joyce's Italian version of "Anna Livia Plurabelle". But if he had, what would he have made of it? The answer would depend on when he came across it. In the latter two decades of his life, Borges's attitude to Joyce became generally less defensive and at times openly appreciative. For instance, in a 1982 interview in Dublin with Irish scholar Richard Kearney and with poet Seamus Heaney, he acknowledges his own Joyce-like obsession with words, etymologies, and, one might add, with the diversity of human tongues: "I must admit that I have always shared Joyce's fascination with words, and have always worked at my language within an essentially poetic framework, savouring the multiple meanings of words, their etymological echoes and endless resonances." (Kearney 49) Moreover, in spite of Borges's forceful reservations about *Finnegans Wake*, he confesses to finding certain phrases in the book intensely memorable. In his Norton Lectures at Harvard he praises Joyce's unforgettable phrasing as the Liffey flows into Dublin bay: "the rivering waters of, hitherandthithering waters of. Night!" (*Finnegans Wake* 216) In Italianizing his own work Joyce is more radical than Borges, whose translations for all their undoubted merit are rarely as radical as his theories about the craft. Of course, unlike Joyce, Borges lacked the comparatively unfettered freedom of the self-translator.

Although it's tempting to imagine this latter-day Borges, free from the anxiety of influence concerning Joyce, exulting in his kindred spirit's irreverent rendering of "Anna Livia Plurabelle", the Argentine writer's ambivalence towards his Irish counterpart never disappears completely; a piece, written in January 1985 only a year and a half before his death, as a preface to his final poetry collection, "The Conspirator," reiterates one of his old complaints about Joyce: "Theories can be admirable motivators [...] but at the same time they can generate monsters or mere museum pieces. We need only remember James Joyce's interior monologue." (Borges, *Poesía Completa* 583). In criticizing Joyce's alleged propensity to over-theorize, Borges is also retrospectively criticizing his young self. At the age of twenty-two, after moving back to Argentina from Spain in 1921, he had introduced a movement known as *ultraísmo* to Buenos Aires. The *ultraístas*, who rejected the stiff language, ornamental heaviness, and traditional meters of the prevailing Spanish American *modernismo*, advocated an emphasis on metaphor and rhythm. Among the self-consciously modern movements from which the *ultraístas*, and Borges in particular, drew inspiration was Expressionism. While living in Mallorca (1919-1921) Borges had immersed himself so deeply in the German Expressionists that he could jokingly refer to himself as "Georg-Ludwig."<sup>9</sup>

Borges recalls that youthful advocacy of the avant-garde in a lyrical tribute "Invocation to Joyce" in which he weighs his own early, fleeting attempts to forge a new art—which now only impresses "credulous universities"—against Joyce's enduring innovations:

what does my lost generation matter,  
 that vague mirror,  
 if your books justify it?  
 I am the others. I am all those  
 whom your obstinate rigor has redeemed.  
 I am those you do not know and those you continue to save.  
 (Borges, *Selected Poems* 289)

## Notes

- 1 Richard Ellmann (655-656), reprints Joyce's translations of the Stephens poem into five languages.
- 2 For insightful discussions of Borges's theory and practice of translation, see Kristal, Efraín. *Invisible Work: Borges and Translation*. Vanderbilt University Press, 2002, and Waisman, Sergio. *Borges and Translation: The Irrelevance of the Periphery*. Bucknell University Press, 2005.
- 3 Since many of us readers are particularly drawn to literary depictions of familiar places, I should perhaps mention that I grew up on windswept Howth Head.
- 4 For this, and subsequent quotations from Borges's translation, see "La última hoja de Ulises" (Borges *Textos recobrados*).
- 5 For instance, in a letter to Mary Colum Joyce refers to "the Italian translation I made of *Finnegans Wake*" (Joyce, *Letters* I 412).
- 6 For an intriguing account of the life and work of the first Spanish-language translator of *Ulysses*, see Petersen, Lucas. *El traductor del Ulises: Salas Subirat. La desconocida historia del argentino que tradujo la obra maestra de Joyce*. Sudamericana, 2016.
- 7 Nino Frank recalls one of Settanni's unfortunate interventions: "by means of puns, Joyce inserted the names of four counties of Ireland: Derry, Cork, Dublin, and Galway; the newcomer (i.e. Settanni-mh) had changed the words and spoiled the puns." See Frank, Nino. "The Shadow that had lost its Man". Potts, Willard, editor. *Portraits of the Artist in Exile: Recollections of James Joyce by Europeans*. University of Washington Press, 1979.
- 8 Cf. O'Neill (70-72).
- 9 Edwin Williamson cites Borges's Germanic nickname, drawing on an unpublished letter from Borges to his friend Guillermo de Torre, a Spanish essayist, poet, and critic (See Williamson, Edwin. *Borges: A Life*. Viking, 2004, p. 82.

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