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Borges as Translator: A Preliminary Examination

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Jorge Luis Borges, primarily known for his original short fiction, also published many translations of other authors' works over the course of his life, as well as essays on translation theory. Borges proclaimed his own 'periphrastic' approach to translation, taking the opportunity to effect changes in his versions of other writers' works rather than simply attempting to render the source texts into Spanish. In order to examine the strategies employed by Borges in his translations of English-language prose fiction, this paper will consider three texts translated by Borges alongside the original versions: "The Red-Headed League" by Arthur Conan Doyle, and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" and "The Purloined Letter." Analysis of these texts will demonstrate the extent to which Borges is prepared to put into practice the theory of radical innovation that he outlines in his essays on literary and translation theory.

Although best known for his original fiction, Jorge Luis Borges was also a prolific translator, in particular of English-language prose. Borges was raised in an English-speaking environment and developed a great love of English culture and literature. His first published translation appeared in Buenos Aires newspaper *El País* when he was only ten years old. From then on, he continued to produce translations which were published in magazines, newspapers and the anthologies he edited alongside friends like Adolfo Bioy Casares, fellow Argentine writer and translator, with whom several of Borges' most important translations were co-written. Borges not only produced translations himself, but also wrote commentary on others' translations and papers on the principles and theories of translation as a discipline. This paper will explore how Borges puts into practice the principles that he espouses in his writings on translation theory.

In his essays, Borges makes a distinction between two types of translation: one that "practises literalness" ("practica la literalidad"¹) ("Las dos maneras de traducir," 257) and the other which practises "periphrasis" ("perífrasis") (257). According to Borges, "the first corresponds to Romantic mentalities; the second to Classical ones" ("La primera corresponde a las mentalidades románticas, la segunda a las clásicas") (257-258). While Borges considers Ro-

¹ All translations into English included in this paper are my own.

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mantic mentalities to be over invested in the individual artist, he applauds the Classical emphasis on the work of art independent of its creator. He applies this idea to translation: literalness in translation, he says, is born of “that reverence for the self” (“Esa reverencia del yo”) (258) that demands fidelity to the so-called ‘original’ author rather than allowing for the possibility of an evolving work of art. In “Versions of Homer” (“Las versiones homéricas”), Borges rejects the idea of ‘original’ and ‘derivative’ works altogether, referring to both translations and their source materials simply as “drafts”: “To presume that every recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original is to presume that Draft 9 is necessarily inferior to Draft H – since there can only be drafts” (“Presuponer que toda recombinación de elementos es obligatoriamente inferior a su original, es presuponer que el borrador 9 es obligatoriamente inferior al borrador H – ya que no puede haber sino borradores.”) (94). Thus, Borges rejects any concept of inherent superiority in ‘original’ texts, advocating for innovation as an acceptable and necessary part of the translation process.

Similar sentiments are echoed in the work of other translation theorists. In his introduction to *Rethinking Translation*, Lawrence Venuti comments on prevailing cultural narratives around the supposed superiority of original texts over translations, drawing the same connection with Romanticism (3). In line with Borges’ idea of multiple drafts, Venuti proposes that if translations are not original works, then neither are their source materials: the authors of these have in turn been influenced by the endless wealth of cultural production already in existence (7). The very idea of originality and the importance attached to it are dismantled. Venuti considers translation to be an “active reconstitution of the foreign text” (10). This “active reconstitution” resembles Borges’ idea of a “recombination of elements”; both Venuti and Borges conceptualise translation as a process of active reconstruction.

Philip Lewis states that translators must at times go beyond the content of the source material. He calls this phenomenon “abuse”, but recognises this abuse as a necessary component that contributes to the translated text (42). Once again, translators must build on an existing work in order to create a new one. This process is intimately connected with the translator’s role as insightful reader of the source text (59-60). The translator plays the double role of reader and author, first reading and interpreting the source text and then constructing a new one in what is crucially a creative act. In her commentary on Lewis, Rosemary Arrojo states that his decisions regarding what to preserve in his translations is inherently based on his own reading of the texts. Lewis’ translations, she argues, will ultimately be marked by the interference of

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his interpretation (26). While intended as a criticism of Lewis, this argument can be reinterpreted as a crucial point in the consideration of translation: this inscription of the translator's interference need not necessarily be viewed as a negative. In fact, it is the natural consequence of the fact that translation is the combination of the acts of interpretation and creation. As Arrojo notes, Lewis' aggressive translator can be faithful only to her own subjective interpretation of the text (26). Again, while her statements are couched in somewhat denigrating language, Arrojo actually expresses an idea that is key to translation as a whole: any translation is inherently based upon the translator's interpretation of the source text. Applying this to Borges, the ways in which he chooses to recombine elements must, therefore, be based on his interpretation as reader of the source texts, determining what to respect and emphasise in his creation of the new text. As is the case with any translation, Borges' are faithful to his own interpretation of the source texts. Bearing in mind Borges' arguments regarding the de-emphasis of the reverence for the self and promoting the existence of multiple valid drafts of a work of art, this fact loses the negative connotations that Arrojo seems to attribute it. The subjective interpretation and creative reconstitution of existing works becomes, instead, exactly the basis upon which Borges practises and views translation.

I will now examine examples of short stories originally written in English alongside Borges' Spanish versions: "The Purloined Letter" / "La carta robada" and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" / "La verdad sobre el caso de M. Valdemar" by Edgar Allan Poe, and "The Red-Headed League" / "La Liga de los Cabezas Rojas" by Arthur Conan Doyle. "La carta robada" and "La Liga de los Cabezas Rojas" were translated by Borges and Bioy Casares and published in the second volume of their anthology *Los mejores cuentos policiales*. "La verdad sobre el caso de M. Valdemar" appeared in *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, edited by Borges, Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo. In keeping with Borges' own use of the term "versions" ("versiones") to refer to others' translations in the title of his essay "Las versiones homéricas", Borges' Spanish texts will henceforth be referred to as "versions" rather than "translations."

The extent of Borges' changes to these short stories is immediately evident from their physical presence on the page alone. Borges' versions are in all cases shorter than their source materials: Borges writes two words for every three in Poe's and Conan Doyle's texts. These drastic shortenings can be attributed in part to what Emron Esplin calls "Borges's tendency to streamline" (81); this is true particularly in the case of Poe, whose style Borges found exces-

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sively verbose. According to Efraín Kristal, “Borges venerated Poe’s imagination but disparaged his writing skills. He often said that Poe is a writer that one enjoys when remembering his tales, not while reading them in English.” (61) This is certainly reflected in his versions of “Valdemar” and “The Purloined Letter”: where Poe is wont to stylistic flourishes, Borges cuts right through these, eliminating what might be perceived as extraneous detail, tautology or unnecessary wordiness. Thus, Poe’s style is edited out by Borges: superfluous phrases like “that is to say” or “nothing so much as” (“Valdemar” 837 & 839²) are removed entirely; redundancies like “partially, if not thoroughly,” “silently – without the utterance of a word” and “positively, or thoroughly” (835, 840 & 834) become respectively “partly” (“en parte”), “silently” (“en silencio”), and “thoroughly” (“plenamente”) (373, 377 & 372); slightly archaic or literary structures like “spareness of his person”, “wore a leaden hue” and “He spoke with distinctness” (834, 835 & 835) become the more concise “extreme thinness” (“extremada flacura”), “seemed leaden” (“parecía de plomo”) and “He spoke clearly” (“Hablabla claramente”) (371, 372 & 373). In this way, Borges essentially leaves Poe’s style out of his own version of the story entirely; rather than presenting a Spanish version of Poe’s verbose prose, Borges retells the story in his own voice. This is most apparent in his versions of Poe due to the glaring absence of Poe’s particularly idiosyncratic style from Borges’ versions; however, Borges applies the same processes of reduction to Conan Doyle’s writing. Nevertheless, mere changes in style do not account for the loss of a third of the source text. Borges’ decisions as a translator also often have consequences for the characterisation and plots of the stories.

Arthur Conan-Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes story “The Red-Headed League” is narrated in the first person by one of the characters: Holmes’ sidekick Dr Watson. Borges’ version of this story, “The League of the Red Heads” (“La Liga de los Cabezas Rojas”), features reductions in the role of this narrator as both narrative voice and character. In his version of “The Red-Headed League,” Borges modifies or cuts out several passages in which the narrator records his internal thoughts and feelings. This may be observed in the scene in which the main characters wait in a cellar to spring upon the criminals they have been working to apprehend. In the narration, Conan Doyle’s Watson gives a detailed account of his personal experience:

² All English quotations in this paragraph are taken from “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar.”

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Holmes shot the slide across the front of his lantern, and left us in pitch darkness – such an absolute darkness as I have never before experienced. The smell of hot metal remained to assure us that the light was still there, ready to flash out at a moment's notice. To me, with my nerves worked up to a pitch of expectancy, there was something depressing and subduing in the sudden gloom, and in the cold, dank air of the vault. [...] What a time it seemed! From comparing notes afterwards it was but an hour and a quarter, yet it appeared to me that the night must have almost gone, and the dawn be breaking upon us (68).

Borges' version of this passage reads: "Holmes kept us in darkness, but with the lantern ready to light up at the necessary moment. [...] The minutes felt like centuries to me." ("Holmes nos mantuvo en la oscuridad, pero con la linterna preparada para alumbrar en el instante necesario. [...] Los minutos se me hacían siglos") (62). Over and above the obvious drastic reduction of the physical space occupied by Watson's narration, it is noteworthy that Watson's subjectivity (with regards to his emotions and senses) makes up most of what has been removed. Borges removes the comment relating to Watson's personal life experience; the reference to smell; the feeling of assurance from the light, which is replaced with a mere observation that it is still present; the description "depressing and subduing," relating to Watson's emotional response to the situation; finally, the reference to the character comparing notes afterwards is also removed. The only expression of Watson's subjectivity that Borges includes is a comment on how long the period of time felt. The contrast between how long it felt to Watson in the moment and how long Watson as narrator decides that it must have been is left out. Borges seems uninterested in the subjective first-person narrator-character presented by the original text. Shortly after the quoted passage, Conan-Doyle's sentence "Suddenly my eyes caught the glint of a light" (69) is rendered by Borges "Suddenly a beam of light appeared on the floor" ("De pronto apareció un rayo de luz en el suelo") (62); the reference to the narrator's eyes is totally omitted, and the appearance of the light stated in a way that draws less attention to Watson's physical presence in the scene.

The following internal monologue is particularly significant in the narration of the story by Conan Doyle's Watson:

I trust that I am not more dense than my neighbours, but I was always oppressed with a sense of my own stupidity in my dealings with Sherlock Holmes. Here I had heard what he had heard, I had seen what he had seen, and yet from his words it was evident that he

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saw clearly not only what had happened, but what was about to happen, while to me the whole business was still confused and grotesque. As I drove home to my house in Kensington I thought over it all, from the extraordinary story of the red-headed copier of the ‘Encyclopædia’ down to the visit to Saxe-Coburg Square, and the ominous words with which he had parted from me. What was this nocturnal expedition, and why should I go armed? Where were we going, and what were we to do? I had the hint from Holmes that this smooth-faced pawnbroker’s assistant was a formidable man – a man who might play a deep game. I tried to puzzle it out, but gave up in despair, and set the matter aside until night should bring an explanation (63).

This entire passage is missing from Borges’ version of the story. Borges’ Watson does not worry about what is to come; does not turn over the events in his mind; does not compare his own intelligence to Holmes’, and certainly does not *question* Holmes. Here the effect of Borges’ modifications to Watson’s narration begins to become apparent: with Watson downplayed throughout, Holmes becomes emphasised. Early in the story, a disagreement between the two is brought to light: Holmes claims that “for strange effects and extraordinary combinations we must go to life itself, which is always far more daring than any effort of the imagination” (42). Watson voices his doubt of this assertion in both versions, but in Conan Doyle’s his disagreement is taken far more seriously by Holmes, who promises to persuade him: “You did [doubt this], Doctor, but none the less you must come round to my view, for otherwise I shall keep piling fact upon fact on you, until your reason breaks down under them and acknowledges me to be right” (42). Borges’ Holmes is far more dismissive of Watson’s opinion, replying only that “You will not take long to accept it” (“No tardarás en aceptarla”) (48). Conan Doyle’s Holmes has enough respect for Watson’s intelligence to attempt to persuade him of his own opinion; Borges’ merely predicts that Watson will fall in line. Borges’ Watson probably *will*: he is more passive and blindly accepting of Holmes’ superior intellect and understanding of the case, not questioning these as does Conan Doyle’s narrator. While Conan Doyle’s Watson is surely less adept at reasoning than Holmes, he remains an intelligent man with his own mind; the Watson of “La Liga de los Cabezas Rojas” is severely reduced to simple follower and chronicler of Holmes’ adventures. On occasion Borges even collapses Watson and Holmes’ experiences into one. When Conan Doyle’s Holmes remarks that the case presented “promises to be one of the most singular which I have listened to for some time,” following this up by saying to Watson that “You have heard me remark that the strangest and most unique things are very often connected not with the larger but with the smaller crimes” (42), Borges changes

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the “I” of these statements to “we,” having his Holmes say instead: “a story that promises to be one of the strangest we have heard. We have said once that the most extraordinary circumstances usually present themselves in those cases in which the crime is small, or does not exist” (“un relato que promete ser de los más extraños que hemos oído. Hemos dicho alguna vez que las circunstancias más extraordinarias suelen presentarse en aquellos casos en que el crimen es pequeño, o no existe”) (48). It is notable that Borges should make such a change from singular to plural and include Watson in this opinion; it is already a given for Borges’ Holmes that Watson shares his view. Although Borges’ distinctions between the two present Holmes as being exponentially more intelligent than Watson, at times he creates concurrence between them, eliminating Watson’s independent thought. For Borges, Watson as a character seems unimportant almost to the point of irrelevance; the stage is ceded entirely to Holmes, the great mind.

Holmes himself does not escape Borges’ reconstitution of Conan Doyle’s text. While Conan Doyle’s Holmes is already a figure of enigmatic intelligence, Borges emphasises these characteristics, partially through the discussed changes to Watson’s character and narration and resultant contrast between the two figures, and partially through adaptations made to the character of Holmes himself. Particularly notable are the reductions made by Borges in the revealing of Holmes’ method and insights. Holmes himself is more guarded with his explanations in Borges’ version of the tale than in Conan Doyle’s: during his conversation with Watson after the main events of the story, several passages in which Holmes details his process of solving the case are omitted. The key omission, however, comes earlier. In Conan Doyle’s text, when Holmes and Watson go to inspect the square in which their client, Wilson, keeps his shop, Holmes makes detailed observations about the street that backs onto the premises:

‘Let me see,’ said Holmes, standing at the corner, and glancing along the line, ‘I should like just to remember the order of the houses here. It is a hobby of mine to have an exact knowledge of London. There is Mortimer’s, the tobacconist, the little newspaper shop, the Coburg branch of the City and Suburban Bank, the Vegetarian Restaurant, and McFarlane’s carriage-building *depôt*.’ (61)

Borges writes simply: “‘Let’s see, Watson,’ said Holmes, taking in all the small shops that as a good Londoner he knew well” (“– Veamos, Watson – dijo Holmes abarcando con su mirada todos los pequeños comercios que como buen londinense conocía bien”) (59). The decreased

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awareness of Borges' Watson is once again apparent in this passage. In Conan Doyle, the comment about knowing London is made as a kind of excuse by Holmes that Watson does not swallow, as seen in the later passage in which he asks himself what Holmes saw that he missed, while in Borges' version it is Watson himself who puts Holmes' observation of these buildings down as simply that of an average Londoner which he does not see fit to question. Borges' Watson, unlike Conan Doyle's, is not savvy enough even to notice that his companion is in the process of gathering clues.

Furthermore, while Conan Doyle's Holmes *states* his observations, and the reader is therefore privy to the information that he uses to solve the case (the presence of the City and Suburban Bank behind the pawnbroker's shop), Borges' reader is not provided with this information and Holmes' observations remain entirely unknown. This omission is all-important given that Conan Doyle effectively gives his reader all or almost all of the raw information needed to come to the conclusions Holmes eventually draws; although the average reader cannot be expected to possess Holmes' powers of reasoning, and will not therefore solve the case, the information is *present* and the solution theoretically within the reader's grasp. Borges' reader, on the other hand, is not even aware of the presence of a bank until the characters enter its cellar at the climax of the story. It is therefore impossible that even the most intelligent of readers would be able to predict the resolution of the mystery. Sherlock Holmes himself could not have solved the case, had he been denied this crucial information. Conan Doyle's reader, like his Watson, is able to pit her own intelligence against that of the detective; more often than not, the former will be found wanting, thus emphasising Holmes' superior powers of deduction. Borges' Holmes holds his information and his methods close to the chest, keeping the character mysterious but making impossible his comparison to the everyman. Conan Doyle's story encourages active participation on the part of the reader, who attempts to compete against Holmes yet invariably loses; meanwhile, Borges' reader is not even adequately equipped to take part in the race. The reader's active part in the narrative is removed, and emphasis in the story comes to rest entirely on Holmes' individual intellect.

Conan Doyle's Holmes repeatedly expresses the idea that the solution to the case "was perfectly obvious from the first" (71). In his version, Borges has his Holmes say to Watson: "You will by now have realised" ("Ya te habrás dado cuenta") (64). Holmes no longer points out an inherent obviousness in the case, but rather signals that since he has resolved the case, Watson will now be able to understand. This shift in emphasis is strikingly similar to that made

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by Borges in his version of Poe's "The Purloined Letter," "La carta robada." This story famously features an object hidden in plain sight; as Dupin explains to the narrator, it is "the hyperobstrusive situation of this document, full in the view of every visiter [sic]" (696) that makes the case so difficult for the Prefect of Police, G, to solve. Several references to this oversimplicity made by Dupin in Poe's original text are omitted by Borges, for instance the passage in which Dupin makes an analogy with over-large shop signs which he claims are less obvious than their more subtle counterparts. As Efraín Kristal notes in his analysis of "La carta robada":

Borges downplays the sections in which Poe's Dupin, the prototype of Sherlock Holmes and other literary detectives, indicates that he solves the crime by not overlooking the obvious and emphasises the significance of understanding the mind of an opponent to solve a mystery. To this end Borges eliminates three long passages of the original, in which Dupin insists that the solution to the mystery unfolds on 'account of its being so *very self-evident*' (66).

The same process can be found in "La Liga de los Cabezas Rojas": in both stories, Borges makes the case itself seem less obvious, with the result that the intelligence of the detectives Dupin and Holmes receive even greater emphasis than in the source texts. Borges' choices may be reflective of what he considers to be important in the texts, exemplifying how his translation is based upon an inherently personal interpretation of the source materials.

In another move reflecting Borges' interpretation of the characters, in both stories Borges reduces or removes the detectives' interest in financial compensation. In Poe's text, Dupin tells the Prefect a story about a rich miser named Abernethy who refused to pay for advice, an obvious analogy to the present situation which forces the Prefect once again to promise to pay Dupin. While Borges' Dupin still accepts payment by the Prefect, the story about Abernethy is entirely removed. As Esplin notes, Borges' deletion of this section "cuts out Dupin's apparent need for reassurance that the prefect will actually pay him" (94). In the case of Holmes, Borges makes an even more drastic change, entirely removing the suggestion of financial compensation. In Conan Doyle's text, upon being asked how he can be repaid Holmes replies: "I have had one or two little scores of my own to settle with Mr. John Clay," said Holmes. "I have been at some small expense over this matter, which I shall expect the bank to refund, but beyond that I am amply repaid by having had an experience which is in many ways unique" (71). Borges' Holmes says instead: "The satisfaction of having carried out this unique investigation

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and having resolved a couple of pending matters with John Clay compensate me for everything” (“La satisfacción de haber llevado a cabo esta pesquisa única y de haber arreglado un par de cuentas pendientes con John Clay, me compensan de todo”) (64). Even though Holmes’ request to be refunded his expenses for the case is by no means excessively avaricious, Borges omits it, preferring his detective to be entirely compensated by having had the opportunity to outwit his rival. According to Esplin, this is the same reason for the deemphasis of Dupin’s other motivations for solving the case in “La carta robada”: “[Borges] attempts to shift the emphasis of this story away from the idea of a mystery having a self-evident solution toward the competition between two intellectual rivals” (98). Borges edits the presentation of both detectives, forming them into a common mould: the genius detective uninterested in money and who does not stoop to petty competitions with lesser minds, but only concerns himself with truly worthy rivals, which both stories have provided in the form of the intelligent criminals they feature. As such, the versions Borges presents of Poe and Conan Doyle’s texts are in many ways more similar to each other than to their respective sources.

In his translations, Borges puts into practice the principles of periphrasis that he sets out in his theoretical essays, demonstrating his lack of interest in literalness and in dogmatic reverence for the individual author of the source materials. His versions of Poe and Conan Doyle’s texts demonstrate differences from their sources not only in terms of style, but also significant aspects of characterisation. Borges’ essays on translation theory serve to illuminate this approach: when translation is viewed as creating a new version of a text that is equally as valid as, rather than inferior to, its source material, innovation on the part of the translator is not only acceptable but expected. Borges never shies away from the fact that translation inherently implies reconstitution and rewriting; rather, he takes the exercise as an opportunity to reinterpret the source texts in the fundamentally creative act of rewriting that is translation. Borges’ versions of Conan Doyle and Poe’s texts practise an originality that serves to disrupt narratives that cast translated texts as being inherently derivative of and inferior to their source materials. Like any work of art, the texts are simultaneously derivative and original in their own right: to quote Venuti, “there are no originals, only translations” (83).

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