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Negotiating the Labyrinth of Spanish (with instructions in English)

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Carlos Gamerro

Negotiating the Labyrinth of Spanish (with instructions in English).

Jorge Luis Borges, the greatest and most representative Argentine writer, first read *Don Quixote*, the greatest and most representative Spanish novel, in English translation. This fact has become endowed with a legendary status, a myth of origins for an author who always hovered between the two languages and the two literatures. It is clear that Borges' particular brand of written Spanish is not conceivable without the model of the English language and its literature, and that English helped him steer away from what he himself called "the vain symmetries of the Spanish (i.e. Iberian) style." This influence of English is manifest in his work despite the fact that he never wrote in English, perhaps precisely *because* he never wrote in English – in him, this powerful pressure of the English language had no other outlet than through, and in, his Spanish. Borges' English grandmother Fanny Haslam, his father's library stacked with English books, are the private buttresses of this myth.

But the fact is that this quality, far from making Borges different or unique, makes him a quintessentially Argentine writer. Argentine culture defined itself, from the early days of independence on, as a gradual and willful drawing apart from that of Spain (although France, rather than England, was the model in those days), and Argentine Spanish differs from the Castilian norm perhaps more than any other, mainly because of the massive surge of European immigration in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. Spoken language was affected mainly by Italian, the written norm by the prestigious forms of French, in the 19th century, and English, in the 20th. In the areas which set the norm for education and cultural production, more than half the population was during those days European born and is today of European stock.

This has also made Argentina, for a long time, a country of translators – peopled by men and women who had learned at least one of most of the major European languages as mother tongues, a potential perhaps unequalled in its time except by the U.S. Perhaps the most famous result of this situation was the 1945 translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the first one into the Spanish language. Because of all of this, Borges' reading of *Don Quixote*, in English is quite emblematic of Argentine literary culture as a whole.

When I was twelve years old, not knowing that I was reading to repeat a story, I recreated the myth by first reading Borges in English – Norman di Giovanni's translation of *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. I had been given the choice – and quite unconsciously chose the English version. Having merited, or suffered, a mother who spoke to me in English as well as in Spanish as far back as my early memories stretched, having been educated in a bilingual school, it seemed the natural

thing to do. In my case, this Spanish-English oscillation was present in my roots as well; the British side of my family having come from Gibraltar – a grandfather of Spanish blood who overacted the British subject by dressing in tweeds and posing for pictures with a pipe, breeches, and a bulldog probably not his own.

The influence, or pull, of English on Argentine language and culture has – and in this we differ from the more northern Latin American countries – always been definitively British rather than North American. Also, the word ‘Imperialism’ has, in the Argentine political imagination, always carried a definitively British, rather than American, ring, as was evident in the nationalist rhetoric of the first government of Perón (1945-1955). The fact that twice – in 1806 and again in 1807 – Buenos Aires was under British occupation has also become part of our cultural imaginary – the notion that we ‘might have been English’ and in what ways this would have made us a different country – better or worse. Because of all of this, the 1982 war between Argentina and Britain carried greater implications than the merely military or narrowly political ones. So once again, it seemed only natural, when it came to writing my first novel, eventually published as *Las Islas* (1998), that this war should be my theme.

Particularly important in the conception of the novel was my reading of Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle*, the archetypal narrative of the colonial voyage, in which the British naturalist, when dealing with the life of the natives of Tierra del Fuego, came to the conclusion that they were some sort of missing link, and that their language, adapted to the primitive conditions of their world and consciousness, would number some hundred words at the most (Lucas Bridges’ dictionary would later take the count up to 30,000 words).

The deeper I wrote myself into the novel, the more I felt that the ruling Argentine fantasy about the war was that we were colonizing the colonizers, that is, inverting the traditional cultural, economic, political and military power relationships between Britain and Argentina. It was tempting, if not inevitable, to take the conflict to the linguistic arena. Thus, in the chapter titled “The Diary of Mayor X” a rather insane Argentine officer playing at being an amateur anthropologist takes to the study of the British islanders as a primitive community and English as a ‘savage’ language. He notices, for example, the very rudimentary verbal system, the abundance of onomatopoeia, and the dearth of abstract vocabulary; the number of different words for rain, mud, swamps and all kinds of foul weather generally, indicative of a culture tied to its natural surroundings and a very primitive way of life.

Translating across both languages is, of course, also part of this complex, but in no way extraordinary, picture. Perhaps the single experience that marked me the most was my translation of Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*. At the end of this transforming experience I found, to my amazement,

that when writing in Spanish prose, my ear had become acutely sensitive to the rhythmical patterns of the language, that it was automatically measuring lines, paying attention to weak and strong endings, to alliteration and internal rhyme, in a way it had never done before. All my novels written after my translating of Shakespeare were affected in this way.

Identity is a complex amalgam of sameness and difference. This tension between language and cultures, far from being a conflict I must resolve in the one or the other direction, is the stuff my dreams are made of.