blood will slide from his neck, and
for a minute he'll freeze, astonished

stare at the hangman, at his blouse, and not see
It's as if he owes them his life.

He needs another moment, another two, ten
remembers not why, knows not for what.

Translating Babel

Jonathan Basile

Can infidelity be a style? Some translators are known for it, and perhaps none made a virtue of it so much as Jorge Luis Borges. The majority of Borges' work that was translated into English during the writer's lifetime was the product of his partnership with Norman Thomas di Giovanni, who described their working method as follows, "We agree that the text should not be approached as a sacred object but as a tool, allowing us, whenever we feel the need, to add or subtract from it, to depart from it, or even, on rare occasions, to improve it" (Kristal 12). However, they were unable to secure translation rights (an English version had already appeared) to a story eminently suited to authorial infidelity, "La Biblioteca de Babel."

It is the story of the untranslatable. The narrative casts itself as a manuscript from a universe with only 25 typographical marks, redacted into grammatical Spanish by an unnamed editor. Thus every introduction of letters, majuscules, punctuation, or diacritics undertaken by the translators of this story (which now exists in countless

languages, in numerous scripts) violates the unknown original. And its subject matter is the myth of untranslatability itself, the story of Babel, where God introduced the multiplicity of languages, thus the necessity of translation, in order to make translation as mutual understanding impossible. On countless occasions the story cautions us that even within a no-longer-single language something like translation is necessary and impossible, that all languages contain infinite diversity and lack self-identity.

After Borges' death, di Giovanni completed translations of the remaining stories from *The Garden of Branching Paths*, alone. He granted himself the same license. Yet, perhaps inevitably, his game feels somewhat willful without Borges' cooperation, almost like a hand of solitaire. He seems to follow the method of his collaborative translations, often simplifying language in accordance with Borges' later style. The result is quite readable, though it loses the philosophical precision and hard-edged rigor of Borges original. The vocabulary of metaphysics is frequently excised: "*necesaria*" becomes "quintessential" in the phrase, "Idealists argue that hexagonal chambers are the quintessential form of absolute space..." (74/465),[1] the philosophical intent of which is self-evident. In the Pascalian description of the library as an infinite sphere whose circumference is "*inaccesible*," the descriptor becomes "beyond reach," reducing the necessary transcendence to a circumstantial one (74/466). "*Axiomas*" become "salient facts" (74/466), "*ab aeterno*" becomes "always" (75/466), the concept of "*análisis combinatorio*," essential to the story, becomes "synthetic analysis" (77/467).

Borges is careful, when he examines the potential for the same written mark to house infinite interpretations, not to use a turn of phrase that would imply any relationship to meaning, let alone referent:

> *Un numero de lenguajes posibles usa el mismo vocabulario: en algunos, el símbolo biblioteca admite la correcta definición ubicuo y perdurable sistema de galerías hexagonales, pero biblioteca es pan o pirámide o cualquier otra cosa, y las siete palabras que la definen tienen otro valor.* (470)

Di Giovanni renders this passage:

> A number of possible languages use the same vocabulary; in some, the symbol for 'library' correctly denotes 'a ubiquitous, ever-lasting system of hexagonal galleries', but in others 'library' is 'bread' or 'pyramid' or anything else, and the seven words that define it have another meaning. (81)

Irby uses the phrase "allows the correct definition" for "*admite la correcta definición*" (58/470), obeying the logic of the sentence. Di Giovanni's translation mars the linguistic and philosophical insight; the phrase that follows should have been rendered as Kerrigan does: "*library* admits of the correct definition...but *library* is *bread* or *pyramid* or anything else..." Di Giovanni alters the first phrase so it refers to languages where *library* does indeed "denote" what we think it does, then uses "but in others," that is, other languages, to create an opposition that is not at all equivalent to the original. There is no implication in di Giovanni's version that the "seven words" used to define *library* in these languages are written the same way, so the sense of the passage is lost. Perhaps di Giovanni's desire for simplicity again led him astray.

That is not to say, however, that di Giovanni's translations should have been allowed to go out of print. Borges' widow, María Kodama, arranged for their ouster when she inherited her husband's literary estate. Borges granted a generous fifty-fifty profit sharing arrangement to his friend di Giovanni, and María Kodama, along with Penguin-Viking, saw the opportunity to profit by breaking their contract with di Giovanni and commissioning translations from Andrew Hurley.[2] Hurley's work exhibits a different sort of infidelity, and is widely execrated by fans and scholars. He drifts even further from Borges' original in his rendering of the passage we were just reading: "the *symbol* 'library' possesses the correct definition 'everlasting ubiquitous system of hexagonal galleries,' while a library—the thing—is a loaf of bread or a pyramid or something else..." (118/470). Deviations multiply. "Pos-

sesses the correct definition" may be the poorest translation for "*admite la correcta definición*" (given that "denotes" wasn't a translation of this phrase at all). More than "admits" or "accepts," it suggests the definition is correct not only in form but also in signification. "Library—the thing" is worse than any abuse of Borges' text we encountered from di Giovanni, mixing philosophical strata and producing needless incoherence. It reads as though the referent of the word *library*, the library itself, were a loaf of bread or pyramid. Borges' narrator is a rigorous metaphysician, whose aporia have nothing in common with this mere confusion. He referred only to words, never delving into the uncertain realm of reference: "biblioteca *es* pan *o* píramide." These three nominatives are italicized, indicating that we here refer to the words.

Did Hurley think these italics were for emphasis, and displace them onto "*symbol*" to underscore his perverse word/referent misreading? Many of Hurley's infidelities have this air of haste and needlessness, for example, when he places the titles of the library's books on their "front cover" rather than their "*dorso*"—their spine (113/466). He often manages to mar the tone and theme of Borges' narration without altering a single word, merely by the introduction of punctuation, parentheticals, or paragraph breaks not present in the original. In the first paragraph, the appearance of the mirror, infinitely important in Borges' fiction, is mangled when a parenthetical "(*si lo fuera realmente ¿a qué esa duplicación ilusoria?*)" is separated instead by an em-dash: "Men often infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite—if it were, what need would there be for that illusory replication?" (112/465). As a result, the opposition view that is subordinated in the original is emphasized by Hurley.

Only Irby's translation captures the voice of Borges' narrator (I wouldn't dare say of Borges). The placid, scriptural exposition, which draws its strength from parataxis, presenting philosophical dicta, facts and figures (the forty lines, the eighty characters...), and historical tragedies (sectarian strife, the burning of books) in the same unceasing tone, is best preserved in Irby's work: "Light is provided by some

spherical fruit which bear the name of lamps. There are two, transversally placed, in each hexagon. The light they emit is insufficient, incessant" (51/465). The force of Borges' surreal juxtapositions, his plaster cramp and combed thunderclap, depend on a willingness not to fill the gaps of his narration. Irby reaffirms this in his translator's introduction to *Labyrinths*:

> Certainly, since Borges's language does not read "smoothly" in Spanish, there is no reason it should in English... Elevated terms are played off against more humble and direct ones; the image joining unlike terms is frequent; heterogeneous contacts are also created by Borges's use of colons and semicolons in place of causal connectives to give static, elliptical, overlapping effects. (xix-xx)

Yet, Irby has a strange tendency to distort quantities. He places "thirty-five" books on each shelf of the library, instead of "*treinta y dos*" (52/466). He offers the best rendering of the apparently difficult passage on the definition of library, but makes a simple error of arithmetic, "*a ubiquitous and lasting system of hexagonal galleries*... these seven words..." (58/470). While "seven" may be a good translation, it is bad math; Irby has added an eighth word to his definition, the initial article. And he offers an unhelpful measuring stick for the height of each bookcase, saying it "scarcely exceeds that of a normal bookcase" (51/465). The others translate *bibliotecario* as "librarian." Perhaps we can say that Irby's translation attests to the principle that such errors can exist without vitiating a translation, whose power must lie elsewhere than in its accuracy.

Irby's *Labyrinths* was published in 1962, the same year as Kerrigan's *Ficciones*. Together, they introduced Borges to English audiences, though in significantly different styles. Kerrigan's seems to be the most rigorous translation, the most likely to satisfy a philologist. There are several phrases that all the other translators void or avoid, which Kerrigan preserves. For example, Borges' architectural description contains

an ambiguity that each translator effaces in his own way. The Spanish phrase, "*galerías hexagonales, con vastos pozos de ventilación en el medio*" can mean, as Irby says, "hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between" (51/465), though di Giovanni and Hurley see it differently. The latter writes, "In the center of each gallery is a ventilation shaft" (112). He has left Borges' syntax and punctuation behind completely, but has rendered a meaning that is nonetheless contained in Borges' phrase. Only Kerrigan acknowledges the ambiguity in Borges' blueprint, which places the abyss undecidably at the center of each gallery, or in the middle of a cluster of galleries. He translates literally, "an indefinite, perhaps an infinite, number of hexagonal galleries, with enormous ventilation shafts in the middle" (79). The other translators show a similar anxiety in the face of a strange phrase from the end of the first footnote, the only one identified as an editor's note.

This "editor" writes that an unspecified set of twenty-two lowercase letters, space, comma, and period, are "*los veinticinco símbolos suficientes que enumera el desconocido*" (466). The oddly placed adjective suficientes is what seems to give the other translators pause. Irby attributes the judgment to the narrator (imagined as the author of the unedited manuscript of the story, but not of this note)—"the twenty-five symbols considered sufficient by this unknown author" (53). Di Giovanni does the same, and though Hurley is less direct, writing "the twenty-five sufficient symbols that our unknown author is referring to" (113), the final clause seems to shift the claim of sufficiency toward the narrator as well. Again, only Kerrigan is bold or timid enough for a literal translation, "the twenty-five sufficient symbols enumerated by the unknown author" (81). Does it matter? There is an irony in the story surrounding the claim that these 25 symbols are "sufficient" enough to express all the possibilities of language.[3] The presence of other marks suggests an author separate from his narrator, aware of this irony and gently mocking or pitying his befuddled creation. By attributing the adjective "sufficient" to the narrator, Irby, di Giovanni, and perhaps Hurley all practice a sort of consciousness-raising on behalf of

the editor, liberating him from the implicit delusion, thus shifting him a little closer to Borges and to our world. Like the gnostic Basilides, who imagined 365 subordinate heavens between our realm and the true God, Borges prefers to multiply strata and delusions.

Kerrigan's translation may well be the most accurate, and I find it to be the worst. It is not without discrepancies, though there is no pattern in them. Where the other translators seemed to exhibit fundamental proclivities or hindrances in their deviations, Kerrigan's seem inessential, accidental, easily correctable. An unnecessary line break after each ellipsis. A phrase that should diminish humanity, cast us as the universe's expendable eccentricity, "*la especie humana —la única—*," becomes a celebration of humanism, "the human species—the unique human species—." Perhaps he intended to preserve an ambiguity, but in this case his rendering feels the most one-sided. There is no single quotation I could put forward to justify my impression that the *vis*, the force of Borges that I feel most in Irby's rendering is most absent from Kerrigan's. The latter's errors could easily be repaired in a second draft; his style could not.

The translators of "The Library of Babel" obey the mysterious logic or illogic of their inheritance from Borges. Those who remain most faithful to him violate him most certainly. Kerrigan, who tries to be true to the original, and di Giovanni who attempts to capture the style he honed in collaboration with his aging friend, produce texts that contain the least of Borges' power. Perhaps the original is, in some sense, to blame for this self-subversion. Like its namesake, it is multiple, containing a diversity of languages and styles in its no-longer-unified interior. As we saw in the case of Kerrigan, it is not as simple as saying that Irby's translation is most successful because it respects the heterogeneous and jarring surface of Borges' text, never effacing one of its styles for another. I will hazard a less verifiable, less philological or scientific thesis, one that tries to remain true to him by obeying his desire always to be unfaithful to himself. Perhaps it is only when surrounded by these four translations, in their interplay, their agreement and

disagreement, their blindness and insight, that what is most authentic or appropriate to Borges emerges. Enclosed by these four stories, as though by four walls of bookshelves, or between two mirrors, promising infinity…

Notes

1 Page numbers refer to English translations and are followed by the corresponding page numbers in the original. When it is unclear, I include the translator's name in place of the author's in the citation.

2 Di Giovanni has also been legally barred from publishing his translation of *The Garden of Branching Paths*, completed since Borges' death. It can be accessed at: http://libraryofbabel.info/Borges/thegardenofbranchingpaths.pdf.

3 For a more thorough thematic interpretation of the complicated weave of irony and ambiguity in the story, see *Tar for Mortar: "The Library of Babel," libraryofbabel.info, and the Dream of Totality*, forthcoming from Punctum Books.

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Colophon

INVENTORY NO. 7 WINTER 2017

Inventory is made possible by the generosity of the Department of Comparative Literature, the Lewis center for the Arts, the Program in Translation and Intercultural Communication and the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in the Humanities. Special thanks go to all our contributors. We are deeply indebted to our Advisory Board and particularly to Professors Sandra L. Bermann, Eileen Reeves, David Bellos, and Brooke Holmes for their sustained enthusiasm and support. *Inventory* would like to thank the Faculty and Staff of the Department of Comparative Literature for all their efforts and contributions.

Design Philip Tidwell

Typography Avenir and Bembo Type Families

Printing Printed in Estonia by Printon Printing House
www.printon.ee

Contact: *Inventory*
133 East Pyne Building
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08544
U.S.A.

invent@princeton.edu

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ISSN 2474-9303