

Translating Borges: What Lies Beyond the Text

By Antonius Rhys

In early 2023, I began reading the works of Jorge Luis Borges in Spanish. Almost immediately, Borges's 1970 story, "The Gospel According to Mark," raised my interest when I first heard the Spanish audiobook version. I previously listened to and read many of his short stories but only the English translations. Reading the story in Spanish evoked a deep enjoyment and satisfaction, akin to when an outstanding song touches you and summons a feeling that life is good. Later that evening, excited to share the experience, I read the story to my wife. She does not speak Spanish so naturally I read the English translation by Andrew Hurley. The story did not have the same gripping effect for her and I, alike. Puzzled by the variance of captivation in each language, my first instinct was to attribute the difference of experience to the English language itself. "It is not as poetic," I thought. Through examination, I found that the differences in the engaging power of the story had little to do with the poetic spirit I associated with the Spanish language. More impactful were the associations with each language and the history that is inherent in the culture where the language is spoken.

"The Gospel According to Mark" follows an intelligent and charismatic Baltasar Espinosa on a trip to the Los Alamos ranch. While there, he encounters storms, flooding, and meets the Gutres, an illiterate family of ranch-hands who listen to his reading of their bible and ultimately take him for a savior. To find the "missing feeling," I reread the story in both languages, side by side, line by line. To my surprise, the first half of the story had only one objectionable mistranslation and few less significant errors. In the second half of the story, Hurley made some needless changes. The issues with the translation were not liable for what was "missing" but in a few instances, there were some notable differences.

An example where Hurley fails to capture Borges's style is when he translates, "El frio era intenso"¹ into "It was very cold."² A better translation would be, "it was intensely cold." When Borges

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Cuentos Completos: Jorge Luis Borges* (Vintage Espanol, 2019): 414.

² Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Penguin, 1999): 400.

uses the word *intense*, it describes not only the *cold* but also sets a potent tone for the coming scene. Espinosa is about to be visited by the young woman of the Gutres family. Borges writes, “En la oscuridad no la vio, pero por los pasos notó que estaba descalza y después, en el lecho, que había venido desde el fondo, desnuda.”³ By describing the setting and details in such way, Borges waits until the last word of the sentence to reveal that the young Gutre daughter is naked. It has the effect of an exclamation point. Hurley, by contrast, translates this sentence as “In the darkness he couldn’t see her, but he could tell by her footsteps that she was barefoot, and afterward in bed, that she was naked – that in fact she had come from the back of the house that way.”⁴ Revealing the girl’s nakedness halfway through the sentence does not have the same dramatic effect. We may come closer to the original with the following translation, “He did not see her in the darkness, but by her footsteps noticed she was barefoot, and later in bed, that she had come all this way, naked.”

In the final paragraphs, Hurley indulges in creative freedom at the climax, describing Espinosa’s siesta as “a light sleep, interrupted by persistent hammering and vague premonitions” and that “Toward evening, he got up.”⁵ Borges does not mention the quality of sleep, the persistent hammering, the premonitions, nor the time of day. After Espinosa wakes up, Borges writes that our main character walked out to see the receding waters and says, “Ya falta poco” and Borges continues, “Ya falta poco – repitió Gutre, como un eco.”⁶ Gutre echoes Espinosa’s words, emitting a rather eerie intensity. The scene is reminiscent of a priest and his faithful congregation echoing his words. Hurley translates this exchange as: “It won’t be long now” and “‘Not long now,’ repeated Gutre like an echo.”⁷ Inexplicably, even when clearly described as an echo, they utter different words. This should simply read “It won’t be long now.” ~ “It won’t be long now”, repeated Gutre like an echo.” This is another alteration that strays from Borges and the power of the echo escapes. In the last lines, Hurley rewrites the story, adding that “Espinosa realized what awaited him on the other side of the door.”⁸ In the original, Espinosa and the reader do not know what awaits on the other side until the doors open and reveal the striking ending. The changes impact some of the flavor of the story and I was inclined to blame Hurley for the divergence of the stories in each language.

³ Borges, *Cuentos Completos: Jorge Luis Borges*, 414.

⁴ Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 400.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Borges, *Cuentos Completos: Jorge Luis Borges*, 415.

⁷ Borges, *Collected Fictions*. 401.

⁸ *Ibid.*

After noting the mistakes and creative liberties by Hurley's translation of "The Gospel According to Mark," it is evident that they account for little of what is different in the two languages. Text and stories may "feel" different in Spanish or English, even when translating with exactitude. This might be due to personal and cultural associations with each language. What grasped me in my first reading was more than just the words. Psycholinguists Viorica Marian and Ulric Neisser suggest that memories can be best recalled in the language they were first experienced and that different memories will present themselves based on the language being used.⁹ The mental pathways are surely at work in recalling memories and their associations, but there is a cultural context that has a greater influence. Borges wrote with an innate knowledge and understanding of the Latin American world and its folklore, customs, and world view. This is most likely what Hurley cannot translate.

Raised during the 1990s in the state of Puebla, I grew up in a very small town known to tourists as the site of the largest sculpture of the virgin Mary in the Americas and of natural volcanic baths. My hometown is Chignahuapan, meaning "over the nine waters" in the Nahuatl language, a place "where water is abundant" on account of nine freshwater springs in the area. Some of the best memories of my youth are visiting the natural volcanic baths, which were said to possess healing powers. This could possibly add to my affinity to the story since water is integral in "The Gospel According to Mark," as storms shower down the flood which forces the events between Espinosa and the Gutres. Water heals, destroys, and cleanses, on one hand a symbolism in baptismal sacrament, on the other, diluvian catastrophe. I grew up in a world where the supernatural was natural. Mexico, like all the Spanish speaking Latin countries was conquered by Catholicism. There was a naturally deep-mixture of Catholic mythology embodied by scriptures of saints, divine magical apparitions, as well as superstitious stories of witches, ghosts, and fantastical creatures. "The Gospel According to Mark" immediately calls to mind views of my Catholic upbringing and that magical world. Here lies one of the key differences in how the story develops for me in English versus Spanish. Reading in Spanish, I was subconsciously drawing from memories of my childhood in Mexico. Reading in English, those memories and emotions were washing away.

La Inmaculada Concepción, the Catholic church in Chignahuapan, was filled with religious art: paintings, sculptures, colorful depictions of pain, sacrifice, and a call to sainthood. Borges

⁹ Viorica Marian and Ulric Neisser, "Language-Dependent Recall of Autobiographical Memories.," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 129, no. 3 (January 1, 2000): 361-68, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.129.3.361>.

skillfully places Espinosa in the heart of all this, on an unbeknownst path to sanctity and ultimate sacrifice. The churches I went to in Mexico were impressive large buildings, castle-like. Entering such a place elicited a feeling of awe and reverence. The mass was celebrated in Spanish with ritualistic intonations by the priest and congregation, that resembled recitations of incantations. This and other elements, such as sprinkling of holy water and the swinging incense, contribute to the shamanistic qualities of the mass. The statue of the virgin standing almost forty feet tall, displays a ten-foot devil reaching up at Mary and Jesus. Strong imagery of that kind is normal through Latin America and would have been part of Borges's upbringing as well.

One of the most famous accounts of magical apparitions in Latin America is that of the virgin Mary as the Virgen de Guadalupe in 1531. The virgin appears at the site of a previous Aztec temple of the mother goddess, Tonantzin, and speaks to an indigenous man in his Nahuatl language. She miraculously imprints an image on his clothing which is still on display at the Basilica in Mexico City.¹⁰ Clearly, the roots of this amalgamation of physical relics, myth, magic, and devotion, had been laid five hundred years ago. Undoubtedly, that way of life informs the lens through which a Spanish speaker interprets the world and a story.

I moved to the United States in 1997 where, in contrast, Saint Rose of Lima in California was a very modern plain building, more casual, and without the traditional voice inflections. The music was contemporary which was well received by the congregation but lacked the transcendence of the traditional hymns. While the main elements and sequence of the mass remain the same around the world, the Mexican version seemed more closely related to the original European, whereas the modern American version seemed like a far-removed knockoff, missing the essence. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard encapsulated this notion: "America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding truth. Having no primitive accumulation of time, it lives in a perpetual present."¹¹

When reading "The Gospel according to Mark", the Spanish version instinctively and automatically touched on those deeper, more transcendent, ritualistic experiences. Deeper not necessarily by their virtue, but perhaps the Euro-American version was watered down. As such, the

¹⁰ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Basilica of Guadalupe | Virgin Mary, Pilgrimage, Miracle," Encyclopaedia Britannica, May 27, 1999, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Basilica-of-Guadalupe>.

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Geoff Dyer (National Geographic Books, 2010): 82.

unconscious associations while reading the story in English may have been watered down, as well. I describe it as the original European in reference to the Roman Catholic Church, but of course, the oldest copies of biblical text are in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and prior to the 1960's, masses were performed in Latin. A multitude of languages and translations across centuries of a collection of texts supposed to be the "word of God." It is not just a matter of the differences in the church, the entire context is linked with the language. An English translation cannot convey the essence of a world where one might be more naturally inclined to believe Borges's fiction as reality; a world in which fantasy and reality seem to effortlessly intertwine, as his writing does.

Only after scrutinizing Hurley's translation, did I notice the obvious coincidence that as Espinosa was reading to the Gutres, he was translating the gospel from an English bible into Spanish. A translation in the translation. This inclusion is purposeful. Borges was deeply aware of the complexities of translations. At the young age of ten, he translated Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* into Spanish and many more classics throughout his lifetime.¹² In his essay "Las Versiones Homéricas," Borges explores the intrinsic challenges of so-called accuracy in translation by analyzing and translating into Spanish, many English translations of *The Odyssey* through the ages. In his opinion, all versions were "sinceras, genuinas, y divergentes"¹³—"sincere, genuine, and divergent." One could not be labeled more correct than the other, but because Spanish is his native language, when addressing the opening line of *Quixote*, Borges could not accept any divergence from the original. Initially, I found myself with a similar attitude when reading Borges in English, but as already acknowledged, the differences in how I experienced each version were linked to the language itself, to no fault of Hurley. No matter the language, Borges's genius shines through.

Borges points to the power of language and story. In the case of "The Gospel According to Mark," that power exalted Espinosa as a man above men. The Gutres were captivated by the gospel and similarly, Borges captivates us. But evidently, there is a difference in how English and Spanish mediate this story that is not part of the text. This difference that ties Spanish to the cultural setting and the influences of where it is spoken, reveals why the original was more expressive than the translation.

¹² Jorge Luis Borges, "Jorge Luis Borges's Autobiographical Notes," *The New Yorker*, September 12, 1970, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1970/09/19/jorge-luis-borges-profile-autobiographical-notes>.

¹³ Jorge Luis Borges, Discusión: "Las Versiones Homéricas," 1976.