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Stephanie Payette Piccioni
Western Washington University

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Recommended Citation

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https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors/90

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The Goal of the Translator:
Questioning the Impossibility of a Perfect Translation

Honors Capstone Project: Spring 2018

Stephanie Piccioni

“No problem is more essential to literature and its small mysteries than translation”

-Jorge Luis Borges¹

Throughout the course of history, an understandably massive canon of texts has been produced. Everything from grocery lists to epics have been written in a vast swath of languages. As a result of this proliferation, translation has always been a mainstay of study. *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Das Kapital*, the Bible, and countless other texts are almost never studied in their original language, but this aspect of their accessibility is often overlooked. In this essay, I will aim to explain the basic tenets of translation, the different methods that translators typically employ, and the pitfalls that the act itself creates. Applying this lens to Andrew Hurley and Anthony Bonner’s translations of “Pierre Menard, Author of *The Quixote*” will reveal issues in the translations, provide for comparison between the two, and grant the opportunity to compare them both to the original text. Throughout this piece, I will be using English translations of various philosophers. The irony is not lost on me, but since I am not versed in French and German, I will be going against my own arguments and accepting that their translators knew what they were doing.

When translation becomes necessary, establishing goals and expectations for such translations is also necessary. The 19th century German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher summarized these expectations nicely when he said, “the translator’s goal must be to provide his reader with the same image and the same pleasure as reading the work in the original language offers to the man educated [in that language]” (44). In order to accomplish this,

¹ This quote mistranslates the Spanish idiom equivalent to the English idiom “little mysteries” as “small mysteries.”

translators must not only have an understanding of both the text's original language and the one into which they are translating, they must also have an understanding of the tone and underlying intentions within the original piece. In every instance, translators must be cognizant of authorial intent, recognizing that though "meanings intended by an author cannot be absolute certainty," it is nonetheless their responsibility to locate and translate such moments (Hirsch 8).

Schleiermacher describes these careful interactions with original texts as providing opportunities to "see... the language through the special needs of the author's mind and his power of expression" (45). Directly engaging with authorial intent contributes directly to what

Schleiermacher calls the "impression" that translators receive as they begin their projects (45).

This term appears analogous, if not synonymous, to an interpretive lens. Schleiermacher considers such impressions absolutely crucial to the translation process and says that it is "a part of the task of translation to communicate this very impression to the readers; otherwise an extremely significant part of that which is intended for them often gets lost" (45). By this logic, any translation which fails to recapture the "impression" that the original author created with a combination of content, context, and simple syntax and word choice does not serve as an adequate translation. The efficacy of translations is therefore not determined solely by the "accuracy" with which words are translated, but equally by the impact that the translation can have as an aesthetically complete work.

Behind the concept of translation lurks that of synonymy, or "the expression of an absolutely identical meaning through different linguistic forms" (Hirsch 50). Integral to this concept is an assertion that, although different terms for the same concept may carry different connotations when viewed in a vacuum (a *verbum verbo* analysis, a dictionary entry, a carefully

worded survey), they can almost always be used interchangeably within a larger context. Hirsch expands on this concept with the concrete example of the paired terms “unmarried man” and “bachelor.” Although the terms carry different connotative, semantic meanings based on the contexts in which they are used, Hirsch asserts that they can be used interchangeably in the correct context. He presents a potential club charter as proof:

“This is a club for bachelors. Experience having shown that this town offers no convenient facility where unmarried men can eat, drink, and converse in peace with fellow bachelors, nor any place where they can resort free from the gaze of unmarried women, we, the undersigned do hereby charter and found the Bower Club where only unmarried men, that is, bachelors, may entire its precincts as members or as guests”

(Hirsch 61)

Clearly, it’s possible for two words to mean the same thing when given sufficient support by their context, but contextual synonymy is not enough to prove the concept. In fact, Hirsch never aimed to do so, hoping instead to present an instance of “occasional substitutability,” a form of synonymy based around and respectful of the necessity of context when translating or interpreting works (54).

The variability of word meanings is the ultimate challenger of synonymy. Octavio Paz posits that “every word holds a certain number of implicit meanings; when a word is combined with others to make up a phrase, one of those meanings is activated and becomes predominant” (158). Paz reiterates the importance of context in determining a word’s intended meaning, while reminding readers that in prose, each word is given a predominant meaning. Rather than seeking multiplicity of meaning, readers expect each word to have a solid meaning, and won’t be looking

at alternate meanings in an attempt to find a fuller understanding of the purpose of each word selection. As Hirsch says, “we know that not every meaning potential is actualized in every use of a word,” and the majority of comprehension comes from incorporating past experiences with words into the context where they are found. When this concept is applied to translation, interpretation must acknowledge the differences between languages and cultures both before and while finding synonyms between the languages. Therefore, no translator can ever effectively transfer a work from one language into the other if their focus is on the denotative meanings of words. As Schleiermacher rightly warns, “there are only a few words in one language to which a word in another language corresponds completely, so that the word could be used in all instances in which the other is used and always produce in the same context the same effect; this is even more true for all concepts, and it is most true of the entire field of philosophy” (50). Pure synonymy assumes the interchangeability of words: an assumption that provides far less benefit than it does confusion to the field of translation. Good translations will not present the terms that most literally align with the original, and instead will aim to understand the original context for terminology before translating it into an analogous structure or term.

The ineffective nature of translation via synonymy appears in both translations of “Pierre Menard, Author of *The Quixote*.” Discussing the titular character’s disdain for trashy novels, the original text says that, “Menard abominaba de esos carnavales inútiles” (Borges, 111). “Carnaval” literally refers to the three-day festival preceding Lent; the South American Mardi Gras, if you will. Spanish allows for secondary definitions which denote rowdy behavior and large groups of people, but every definition is clinical and free of cultural connotations. In the context of the passage, none of these meanings make sense. When translated by Anthony

Bonner, the phrase becomes “Menard detested these useless carnivals,” which translates the word carnival directly from the English/Spanish dictionary, and makes the connotative issues in this line obvious (48). By referring to the books as “useless carnivals,” Bonner manages to sidestep the intended meaning of this line and confuse his readers (48). Quite aside from the difficulty of explaining what, precisely, a useless carnival would look like, this phrase makes very little sense to the English reader. Bonner may be attempting, as often recommended to translators, to bring the English wording closer to the Spanish as a way to force his readers to engage with the foreign-ness of the text. If this is the case, he has not succeeded. Rather than opening a new, perhaps uncomfortable, association for his readers to explore in their interpretations of the line, he makes it cryptic, basic, and boring. Unfortunately, Andrew Hurley’s attempt isn’t much better. His translation of this passage reads “Menard abominated those pointless travesties,” a phrase which manages to capture Menard’s disdain and show a minimal awareness of the intended use of the word carnival (111). The term travesty, unlikely to appear in a thesaurus alongside carnival, is nonetheless closer to the intended meaning of carnival than its direct translation. A travesty, defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “a false, absurd, or distorted representation of something,” approaches the connotations of carnival that Borges would have (word), but it still fails to understand the full implications. For Argentines, carnival is meant in the Rabelaisian sense, a time of “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth,” when the world was turned entirely upside down. This concept of carnival also encompasses a “peculiar logic of the “inside out”... of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations...”; ergo, a time of total upheaval. This term is charged, and in Borges’ usage is connected far more to

images of wanton revelry and rejection of the established state of affairs than any positive festival scene. Therefore, this term's connection to a class of book is not a throwaway comment about their content, but a complete rejection of these books' potential value to society. The decisions made by the translators do not reflect this reality, which is unfortunately common in both their work and translation in general.

Nabokov, writing in 1964, complained that "one of the main troubles of would-be translators is their ignorance" (137). He expands on this thought, saying that "anyone who wishes to attempt a translation... should acquire exact information in regard to a number of relevant subjects" (Nabokov 137). When translators fail to research contemporary cultural and linguistic norms for the original text, they create translations that fail to recreate the connotations, and therefore the impact, that the original word choice presented. Nabokov comments that one of the translations he is criticising "would have been a really good translation had Viardot realized how much Pushkin relied on the Russian equivalent of the stock epithets of French poetry, and had he acted accordingly" (136). Had the translator researched the literary context of the text he intended to translate, he could have produced a translation that, if not more enjoyable to read, would have been much closer to the experience that a native speaker shared. Nabokov also mentions a translation that, "while crawling with errors of a textual nature, is more idiomatic" (136). This is not to say that focusing on corresponding or synonymous idioms is a more important aspect of texts than their content or syntax. Instead, idioms are an aspect of texts that require background research; just as a translator would ideally conduct research into the political climates that a text may address, so too should they ensure that their understanding of idiomatic language is not flawed. When this research is not conducted, the result is a translation

that only coincidentally conveys the same meaning with idioms as the original text did, and may in fact obscure meanings that were clear in the original text.

These issues with idiomatic comprehension, rampant in translations in general, most assuredly appear in both Hurley and Bonner's renditions of "Pierre Menard, Author of *El Quixote*". Describing a "filántropo internacional" (international philanthropist), Borges says that he is "tan calumniado ¡ay! por las víctimas de sus desinteresadas maniobras," a sentence that certainly presents challenges for a translator (108). Alas, neither of our translators quite faced these challenges. The terms "¡ay!", and "desinteresadas maniobras" are the sources of confusion for these connotation-blind translators (108). ¡Ay! serves as an interjection in Spanish, intended entirely to draw attention to the superlative nature of an utterance or, literally and denotatively, as the word "alas." It is worth noting that Bonner sidestepped this issue by using the word "alas," and this decision does not cause issues for reader comprehension of the term or the sentence. Therefore, Hurley's decision to translate the term as "it grieves me to say" accomplishes little more than complicating the sentence with extra English verbiage (88). Hurley's tendency towards verbiage is paramount throughout this entire passage, with "calumniado" translated as "vilified and slandered" (88). While an interesting expansion on the literal translation of "calumniado," which is "slandered," he hasn't added anything other than unnecessary words to the meaning that he's supposed to be transmitting to English readers. Hurley's self-assured creativity continues in his translation of "desinteresados maniobras" as "disinterested operations", which Bonner rendered as "disinterested handiwork" (88,45). Their shared decision to translate "desinteresada" as "disinterested" reflects a charmingly archaic English usage, and their shared experience of falling straight into the false-cognate trap promised by entry-level

Spanish teachers. They might have understood the irony in Borges' original line, but they certainly didn't transfer it into their translations. The term *disinterested* is defined in English as "not influenced by considerations of personal advantage," with a secondary meaning reflecting lack of emotional interest (Merriam-Webster). Although the Spanish term can technically be read with this second definition, the word choice is still bizarre. Had the two men translated "maniobras" more correctly, then the combination of terms could appear as ironic and suggestive as it does in the original, but since they did not, it stands out as strange and nothing more.

Bonner's mistake is almost understandable: "maniobras," which certainly looks like it should translate as "handiwork" since it can be pulled apart into "mani-" (*mano*: hand) and "obra" (*obra*: work, as of art or literature), is not as friendly as it appears. The term, archaic for Borges and more so for modern readers, is charged with its usage in political and military realms, and even more by its connotations of sneakiness. If the fruit of one's labors is a "maniobra," they're more likely to be undermining democracies and using philanthropy as a cover for wage-slavery than building wells and providing healthcare and education. Hurley's decision to translate "maniobras" as "operations" could perhaps recognize English usage of "operations," as in the phrase "military operations," but the connotations are not equivalent, and his readers are far less likely to make the connection. Does the word-to-word translation make sense? Yes. Is the translation an effective transfer of meaning as it relates to the original text's intention in terms of word choice? Absolutely not. Compare the difference between the phrase "altruistic tactics" and "disinterested operations". In English, using the word "tactics" tips readers off to the strangeness of this image—modern usage is generally associated with subterfuge, the military, and deception, i.e. the images that the Spanish word "maniobra" would evoke in native speakers.

The irony of Borges' original image is most obvious in his use of the word "víctimas" (victims), which both translators managed to transfer correctly. Distressingly, its presence did not indicate to either of them that the passage might contain other words that reinforce that tone, and therefore the humor and cynicism of the original image cannot transfer fully or effectively.

The transmission of misunderstood meanings can change the image conveyed, and can also directly impact reader comprehension of the intended statement. As Schleiermacher says, translators must always be aiming to provide the "*same image and same pleasure*" for their new readers that original readers found in the original text (44). In the line "paso ahora a la otra: la subterránea, la interminablemente heroica, la impar," Borges uses a familiar, basic sentence structure and common, albeit polysyllabic adjectives to keep the line accessible for his readers (Borges 111). The verb portion of this line, "paso ahora," can be translated several ways, but is essentially a less colloquial version of "now I'm going to talk about..." (Borges 111). It is therefore little surprise that this verb introduces a series of adjectives that appear complicated but are in fact accessible. Although accessible in Spanish, this line certainly presents syntactic difficulties for translators trying to transition it into English. The original line does not require a referent because "la otra" signals that the referent appeared in the previous line. Incidentally, the referent is "obra," which translates to "work" specifically in literary and creative fields. In Spanish, therefore, the referent has been established, and can be followed by three separate adjectives ("subterránea," "interminablemente heroica," "impar") without being restated (Borges 111). This construction doesn't work as well in English, where the referent either needs to resurface throughout the course of the sentence, or the structure itself needs to be altered to allow for the descriptors. Bonner tries to translate the "otra" construction directly as "the other part,"

and continues with “which is,” an English convention which allows him to introduce a list of descriptors (48). This decision allows the translation to adhere closely to the syntax and intentions of the original line. Hurley, on the other hand, moves the referent to the end of the string of descriptors and translates the entire passage as “the other, the subterranean, the interminably heroic production” (90). This rendition is certainly grammatically correct and intelligible in English, but something fundamental has been lost in the translation: the basic accessibility of the sentence.

As mentioned earlier, the descriptors used to describe this obra/part/production might appear complex, but don't create issues for understanding. For example, the term “la impar” (lit. the unequalled) is common both colloquially and in literature (111). Because of this, Hurley's decisions in his translation are fascinating. He infuses the line with French, translating “la impar” (the unequalled) as “the *oeuvre nonpereil*,” which may elevate the term for him, but doesn't enhance or aid understanding for his readers (90). For Hurley's English-speaking readers, understanding this phrase requires either an understanding of French or access to a dictionary; either case alters their experience of the line dramatically from that of the original readers. Rather than encountering a common idiom, readers either acknowledge or deconstruct a foreign one, and regardless of the level of difficulty they encounter in doing so, the idiom remains foreign to them. Therefore, this phrase signals a boundary between English readers and the text, rather than providing entry points into the image; Spanish readers, instead, were welcomed by a familiar phrase within a familiarly constructed statement. A sensation of familiarity is context-driven, as are most aspects of comprehension. An understanding of context is absolutely

crucial if translators are to translate terminology and constructions in ways that recognize their purpose.

Borges' original line incorporates the exclamation “¡ay de las posibilidades del hombre!” rather ambiguously: previously established connotations for the word “¡ay!” do not suffice, and its placement in the middle of a fairly standard sentence reinforces the unexpected nature of its appearance (111). In this context, ¡ay! appears as part of a different construction than the one initially discussed, “¡ay de...!”, which translates directly to “woe to..!”, and appears in condemnations, whereas other renditions of ¡ay! present lamentations. In the Reina-Valera version of the Bible, Isaiah 10 opens with “ay de los que dictan leyes injustas”, which appears in the English New International Version as “woe to those who make unjust laws” (*Reina-Valera*, Is. 10:1, *NIV*, Is. 10:1). This is a surprisingly strong tone for this passage to take, particularly if it's intended as a parenthetical thought— what is damned? This damnation doesn't appear in either translation, with Hurley converting the entire opening into “for such are...”, while Bonner uses the interjection translation of ¡ay! and simply says, “oh...!” (Hurley 90, Kerrigan 42). The latter part of the line, “las posibilidades del hombre,” would appear to present fewer moments of ambiguity, since “posibilidades” translates easily into “possibilities,” but the “del hombre” undermines any sense of simplicity (111). This passage talks about Pierre Menard specifically, so this could indicate a possessive and be translated as “the man's possibilities” or something analogous, but such a reading is not universal for translators. Bonner's translation of this portion of the line is “the possibilities inherent in the man,” which uses the obvious counterpart to the word “posibilidades,” but fails to recognize that there might be other meanings at play (Kerrigan 42). This is in part because the word “hombre” can refer to a specific man, i.e. “el hombre por

alli” (the man over there), or a collective, i.e. “el hombre moderno” (modern man) (“hombre”). In its role as a collective noun, “hombre” can be used to refer to humanity as a whole. Therefore, Hurley’s decision to translate this portion as “our human limitations” is not the result of ignoring the source text in favor of pretty words (90). That being said, the image in his translation is undoubtedly different from the image that other translations, such as Bonner’s, convey. “The possibilities inherent in the man” does not appear synonymous to Hurley’s rendition, and in fact seems to align with an understanding of “del hombre” as a singular man’s possession (48). The impact of these different translation decisions manifests as a clear difference in the meaning gleaned from the line; “for such are our human limitations!” does not express the same sentiment as “oh, the possibilities of the man!” (Hurley 90, Bonner 48). Neither of these lines convey the underlying anger that the original Spanish does. With this in mind, the question of whether these translations are successful arises; after all, if Schleiermacher is to be believed, and the intent of translation is to foster “an enjoyment of foreign works [that is] as unadulterated as possible” then these translations may have failed (Schleiermacher 52). The images that translators convey do not *appear* to reiterate the images in the original line, but Borges’ intentions cannot be known for certain, since translators and readers do not possess a direct line into his writing process. Borges himself cited the “impossibility of knowing what belonged to the poet and what belonged to the language” as the reason that different translations of the same text can vary and even contradict (1136). This line certainly presents opportunities for closer reading by picking apart the words and constructions that spark such divergences.

The fundamental impossibility of understanding authorial intent does not absolve translators of their responsibility to carry as true and complete an image from the original text

into their own. As Nabokov reminds, “anyone who wishes to attempt a translation... should acquire exact information in regard to a number of relevant subjects,” and perhaps the most relevant subject of all is an understanding of the colloquial usage of language (137). This is continually reinforced throughout “Pierre Menard, Author of *The Quixote*,” and particularly appears when Borges describes the titular character, saying that he “dedicó sus escrúpulos y vigiliás” to his project (Borges 116). When translated by Bonner, this passage becomes “he dedicated his conscience and nightly studies,” which makes both semantic sense and acknowledges the continuous nature of the project, but introduces comprehension questions that readers can’t easily answer (Kerrigan 54). The English term “conscience” is generally analogous to “moral compass,” and certainly doesn’t habitually appear as a descriptor for an academic or intellectual endeavor. Its presence here introduces morality into the conversation, but not in any way that readers can actually track. Hurley’s decision to translate this same word as “scruples” is equally bewildering, but somehow less descriptive (95). The Spanish connotations for this term are not present, and it’s time to talk about what those are to begin with. The term “escrúpulo” can be translated as “hesitation,” but it can also be translated as “squeamishness.” Its actual usage aligns more with the second definition, particularly when used in connection with a person. Someone “escrupuloso” is someone who is tidy and dutiful in their affairs to the point of neurosis, not simply someone who is effective. With this in mind, why would Borges use a word with negative connotations instead of a word like “esfuerzos,” which would also create the image of someone devoting their life to something without any of the negative associations. Hurley’s attempt to translate “escrúpulos” as “scruples” not only misses these connotations entirely, it also introduces unnecessary ambiguity into the image because it simply doesn’t look like an English

sentence (95). These connotative oddities continue with the word “vigilias,” which is actually devoid of specific connotations in Spanish (Borges 116). The word serves as an umbrella term for anything that keeps people awake at night and can refer to anything from insomnia to serving as the night guard. The general applicability of this term means that it corresponds to a wide variety of English terms, but any translation will indicate the translator’s interpretation of the word more than its original sense. Bonner translates the term as “nightly studies,” which successfully transfers the continuous nature of the work, but doesn’t quite grasp the obsessive, overnight nature that the term “vigilias” conveyed (Kerrigan 54). Hurley comes closer to the connotations of “vigilias,” but in the process he sacrifices the integrity of the line by inserting his interpretation and making the entire thing wordier. His translation, “nights “lit by midnight oil,”” manages to convey the duration of these nightly events, but his decision to insert a portion of an English idiom into the line obfuscates the original simplicity of the line and undermines the connotations that original readers would have found themselves (95). As a result, neither of these translations quite manages to replicate the original image; in fact, they convey images that are different from each other as well as the source material.

This line continues by identifying the purpose of Menard’s obsessive studies: reproducing *El Quixote*. The original line introduces this goal with “repetir,” which is the infinitive form of the verb meaning “to repeat,” and is the standard Spanish construction for such situations (Borges 116). Neither Hurley nor Bonner translates this directly, but this is not a bad thing. Hurley transitions from the infinitive verb to the gerund, saying that Menard is dedicated to “repeating” this book (95). Simply by rereading the previous sentence, it becomes clear that this construction makes more sense for English syntax than an infinitive would have. Bonner

also shifted the part of speech for this term, saying that Menard focuses on “the repetition” of the text concerned (Kerrigan 54). These shifts might appear to interfere with the goal of recreating the text’s original image, but in fact do the opposite. Both renditions shift the syntax into their home language, and these decisions help their readers to experience the line naturally. As Walter Benjamin, another translation theorist, says, “a literal rendering of the syntax completely demolishes the theory of reproduction of meaning and is a direct threat to comprehensibility” (79). In this instance, along with many others, this is consistently clear. Confusion surrounding the translation of syntax continues as the line continues, since the original Spanish refers to “un libro preexistente” (Borges 116). In the Spanish, this is a simple adjective phrase, but translating it the way that Bonner did, as “a pre-existing book,” simply repeats the Spanish phrase with English words (Kerrigan 54). This is not a phrase that an English speaker or writer would use, and it stands out. When Hurley translates this phrase, he moves the adjective to the end of the phrase, and it becomes “a book that already existed” (95). This rendition makes perfect sense for English readers, since it presents a construction that they recognize and utilize, and also reiterates the image conveyed in the original Spanish. By recognizing the purpose of the original syntactic decisions, translators can transfer that intent into their own language, and use the syntax of the target language to strengthen their translation. In Schleiermacher’s words, Hurley “provide[s] his reader with the same image and the same pleasure as reading the work in the original language,” while Bonner falls into Benjamin’s incomprehensible trap (Schleiermacher 44).

In Benjamin’s words, “sense... is not limited to meaning, but derives from the connotations conveyed by the word chosen to express it” (79). Remembering that translators are responsible for both conveying imagery as well as “impression” in their new works, the

decisions made in deconstructing and transcribing passages in “Pierre Menard, Author of *The Quixote*” create different tones for their readers. In a certain passage from the short story, Menard claims that his distant memory of *El Quixote*, which he read as a child, “puede muy bien equivaler a la imprecisa imagen anterior de un libro no escrito” (Borges 113). This claim can be translated into English in several ways, and generally expresses Menard’s belief that his memory of the book could be (or is) the same as an author’s understanding of their own work before they have written it. The ambiguity in this statement is evident from the beginning of the line, “puede muy bien” (113). This construction has different definitions and uses and can convey either certainty, as in “can perfectly/can very well,” or uncertainty, as in “might well be (i.e. it is possible that)”. Hurley translates this with uncertainty, rendering “puede muy bien” as “might well be,” and Bonner takes the opposite tack, translating it as “is much” (Hurley 92, Bonner 51). By translating different connotations of the construction, the two translations take the image of the line in different directions, but both are technically accurate. Before getting too invested in this moment of accuracy, it is important to realize that this construction is only the first in the line to introduce confusion.

The syntax of the original line is extremely convoluted, which mirrors and reinforces the convolution of the image it presents. The line literally describes an image (“imagen”) and will hereafter be referred to as “the image.” Close analysis of the establishment and description of this image only reveals further ambiguity. The image is preceded by the word “imprecisa,” which establishes its vagueness, and is followed by the word “anterior.” Anterior denotes that something has come before something else, either geographically or historically, and its placement after the noun is almost funny. It isn’t contradictory but it is certainly intentional. The

line continues, as does the convolution. This imprecise anterior image is attributed to “un libro,” but not just any book (Borges 113). This book is “no escrito,” a statement that translates literally to “unwritten” but cannot present its literal meaning because of the convolution of the line (113). The sentence itself is as vague as the image that it presents, so the syntax enacts the image of the line as well as naming it. Hurley translates this image as “the vague foreshadowing of a yet unwritten book,” which successfully recreates the wordiness of the original line as well as the overarching vagueness that permeates it (Hurley 92). Hurley’s translation is clearly an interpretive one, but this decision makes it possible to create the experience that Spanish readers received for English readers, and therefore translates the line successfully. English doesn’t allow for the same stacking and reordering of adjectives that Spanish does, so Hurley’s careful word choice serves as a translation of this structure. This decision allows for a better translation than a more direct one, which becomes clear upon analyzing Bonner’s rendition of the line. “The imprecise, anterior image of a book not yet written” is certainly an imprecise image, but not in a way that intentionally reinforces ambiguity for readers (Kerrigan 51). Bonner’s decision to replicate the Spanish syntax with English words leads to a line that is ineffective as a translation and difficult to understand as a sentence. The overblown adjectives and structure of the original line are intentional decisions that reinforce the line’s image and ambiguity, but Bonner’s rendition simply copies the words without fulfilling or even recognizing their purpose. As Benjamin says, “it is self-evident how greatly fidelity in reproducing the form impedes the rendering of the sense” (79). The syntax of this statement is also convoluted, but, much like the syntax that Borges utilizes, it reinforces the argument Failure to understand the original purpose served by words and constructions is a common issue in translation because it’s a simple mistake

for translators to make. In a line of “Pierre Menard, Author of El Quixote,” the parenthetical “extranjero al fin” appears (Borges 116). “Extranjero” translates easily and directly to “foreigner,” but the prepositional phrase “al fin” presents issues for translators in terms of connotative interpretation and recognition (116). The phrase can be translated as “finally,” but it can also be translated as “in the end,” in its definition that is synonymous to “after all.” This usage appears when speakers are talking about someone or something which has shown its true colors— a half-feral dog that attacks its owner, a shotgun marriage that ends in tragedy, or perhaps a foreigner who overestimates his mastery of a second language. Neither of the translations convey this image. Hurley’s is almost clinical, translating the line as “who is, in addition, not a native speaker of the language in which he writes” (94). This rendition replaces a sense of disdain with one of boredom by expanding a three-word aside into a fifteen-word parenthetical. It may provide more information about Menard than the original statement, but it’s extraneous information that does nothing to convey the original image. Bonner’s translation builds from a different understanding of “al fin,” translating the line as “in the last analysis, a foreigner” (Kerrigan 53). The actual meaning conveyed by this translation is less ambiguous than it is confusing. The phrase “in the last analysis” is not common in English, and because of this it stands out as confusing instead of engaging readers with an idiom (53). Neither translation aligns with the tone of the original line, and it’s entirely because of the translators’ different understandings of “al fin.” Similar divergences in meaning appear in the translations of the word “alguna.” This term can translate as “any” or “some,” and can also serve as a referent for humans under the correct circumstances. In this particular line, alguna appears as part of a description of Menard’s use of Spanish, saying that it “adolece de alguna afectación” (Borges 116). Bonner

follows the syntax of the original line in his translation and says that Menard's Spanish "suffers from a certain affectation" (Kerrigan 53). Translating "alguna" as "certain" changes the word from a vague qualifier to a specific adjective, and the affectation that Bonner mentions is concrete. His decision to follow the Spanish syntax means that the term affectation appears in an English sentence. Although the word literally denotes a performance of feigned intelligence or indifference, it's not commonly used in English, and the unfamiliar nature of the word chosen impedes comprehension instead of enforcing the image. Hurley discards the governing laws of Spanish syntax in favor of English syntax and says that Menard's use of Spanish "is somewhat affected" (94). By shifting "afectación" from a noun to a passive verb, the syntax of the sentence shifts to allow for a construction which makes more sense in English. However, Hurley's translation of "alguna" as "somewhat" is still a shift in meaning (94). Borges' word choice allows readers to decide whether the inclusion of "alguna" is an indicator that the authorial voice is being diplomatic about Menard's pretension, or a description of the affectation itself. Neither translation, however, permits English readers to make their own interpretive decision.

Translation is a thankless task. Regardless of reader response upon publication, every translator faces the possibility that their work will be despised or dismissed within generations. Like Menard himself, translators aim to perfectly recreate a work of literature. Unlike Menard, they aim to fulfill this goal while transferring the work from one language to another and maintain the aesthetic whole of the original text. Essentially, they must completely rewrite a story without making it seem as though it has been rewritten. They have done their job best when there is no sign that they have done it to begin with, and this makes it all-too-easy to disregard the role that translators play in creating and shaping images and experiences for their readers.

Because of the multitudes of minds that have populated this earth, scores of texts have survived by means of translation, and because of those same minds, perfect translations will always be sought but will probably never be found. Borges himself said that “the notion of a ‘definitive text’ belongs to religion, or perhaps merely to exhaustion” (Borges 1136). With that in mind, it makes more sense to regard the analysis and lines of inquiry in this essay as an investigation into the differences that can arise between translations of the same source material, rather than a condemnation of the decisions made by individual translators. In a world where translation is absolutely crucial in day-to-day life, its absence from popular discourse, and even popular consciousness, is astounding. Without translators, the majority of the modern world would never have read literary works which change readers’ lives. Without translators, cultures that don’t share languages would be completely unable to share ideas. Their work may be undervalued and under-discussed, but it is absolutely crucial to the success of humankind. Since this is the case, and since the goal of the translator must always be to allow new readers access to extant concepts and images, translators must always research the original text to the utmost of their ability. They are the ones who allow ideas to spread far beyond the reach permitted by their original language, so they must understand exactly what it is that they are spreading. Basically, they need to always try harder. They may not write the ‘definitive text,’ but they may well create something that impacts new readers the way that the original text did with its first ones.

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