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Tradition and Treason: Sacred Translation in Two Stories by Borges and Chekhov

The translation of stories from one language to another is a story in itself. As a given text multiplies linguistically it also expands episodically in the translation procedure's struggles, resistance and challenges. As Ruth Finnegan explains in *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts*, translation is a social process that entails more than the linguistic competence of the translator: "translating is a social, not just technical, activity and ... the conventions and values surrounding the process of translation will affect not only the translator but also any assistants, in some cases the original performers too, and certainly eventual readers or hearers" (193). Translation is a cross-cultural endeavor with long-lasting products, and its implications test the boundaries of language, writing, authority and cultural identification. In this article I propose a comparative reading of two stories in translation whose plots problematize the very activity of translation.

Jorge Luis Borges and Anton Chekhov, in their stories "The Gospel According to Mark" and "The Student," rework New Testament tales to reveal both the power and the peril of translating the sacred canon. These stories borrow and transpose stories from the Bible, embedding them within new narrative episodes or dramatic reenactments. For these tales to carry out their contemporary mission, they must undergo translation. The tales' new "secular" settings contain echoes of their originally sacred context, inspiring their listeners to unpredictable interpretations according to their own personal or social needs. Borges and Chekhov's translation episodes explore the issues of sacred and secular, local and foreign, verbal and non-verbal communication that determine how the translated tales will be heard.

The protagonists of these stories transmit the Gospel by re-telling and reading aloud in translation for their listeners. By incorporating biblical tales and their translation, both stories exploit biblical oral tradition. Intertextually the stories encompass not only the New Testament, but also the Old Testament, written history, and the act of narration leading to meta-narrative. The texts question both oral and written sources, and hint at the notion of a unitary original, or universal textuality. The mastery of the translators together with the power of

their sources promises potent results before a suggestible audience. In one story the translated narration leads to homecoming and in the other it leads to crucifixion.

The protagonists of both stories confront the challenges of communicating across a series of cultural and linguistic divides. The biblical tales bridge the gaps in understanding beyond the translating characters' linguistic prowess or uncertainty. The translated stories are spontaneous oral performances of human contact set against the isolation of all of the characters' exile. They resort to translating for moral and cultural survival. Both protagonists are successful, although they suffer quite different fates. Chekhov's student moves his audience to tears before continuing on his journey, while Borges's protagonist transposes his own epiphanic destruction through the efficacy of his translation.

Translation and oral transmission work together in "The Gospel According to Mark." Baltasar Espinoza, a medical student from Buenos Aires, goes to spend the summer on his cousin Daniel's ranch in the provinces. Daniel leaves within a few days for a business deal, leaving Baltasar at the ranch with the "barely articulate" foreman family, the Gutres (Borges, *Brodie* 16). Heavy rains and flooding prolong Daniel's absence, and Baltasar emerges as the leader, teacher, interpreter, and new head of the household. He finds himself in close quarters with the Gutres as a result of the rain and leaking roofs. "Conversation turned out to be difficult" with this illiterate family (*Brodie* 17), so Baltasar decides to read to them. He finds a Bible in English, and begins to read to them from the Gospel according to Mark, spontaneously translating into Spanish. "[T]hey listened attentively, absorbed" (*Brodie* 19). After numerous repetitions of Mark, the Gutres begin to attribute healing and mystical powers to their interim leader. Finally, when the rains cease, they lead Baltasar out to a patio where they have built a cross, destined for their transformed Christ-figure.

Chekhov's "The Student" begins with an abrupt change in the mild spring weather, a sudden cold snap that "seemed to destroy the order and harmony of things," as the theology student Ivan Velikopolsky is returning home (Chekhov 105). Hungry and cold, Ivan pauses to warm himself by the mother and daughter widows' fire. It is Good Friday, and he recalls Peter warming himself by a fire the day of the crucifixion. Ivan recounts Peter's betrayal of Christ, as he denied three times being his disciple. Ivan tells of Peter sobbing; as they listen, the older widow begins to sob and the younger blushes with emotion. The student is moved by the widows' reactions, by the sign of the story's relevance to their lives. He realizes that it is not his telling, but rather the presence and closeness of Peter accessed via his telling, that connects them: "'The past,' thought he, 'is linked to the present by an unbroken chain of happenings, each flowing from the other'" (Chekhov 107). The student continues on his way with a joyous feeling of restored meaning.

Biblical borrowing in international contexts is only one element that these two stories hold in common. The mystery of transformation — the Gutres' conversion of Baltasar into their savior, the moving reactions of the two women (tears and sheepish embarrassment) to Ivan's story — is announced by the atmospheric changes of the flood in "Mark" and the sudden cold spell in "The Student." Both protagonists are students who are far from home close to Easter. This displacement unsettles their sense of linguistic and geographical community. Each protagonist seeks to restore or reassure his place in the group through translated storytelling. Both stories' outcomes rely on the translator/protagonists' narrative impact. The two translation episodes elicit profound reactions from their listeners, whether from Ivan's awkward sincerity or Baltasar's spiritually aloof yet skillful oratory.

THE METAFICTION OF ORAL TRADITION

According to Reynolds Price, the tale's truth, in the New Testament biblical sense, is its authenticity in providing an eye-witness report for readers or listeners who are not participants in the event itself (41). "Mark" and "The Student" offer written reenactments of oral transmission in their appropriation of biblical tales. These stories are Borges and Chekhov's (or their narrators') written versions of Baltasar and Ivan's new oral versions. The metafictional move in both cases reconstitutes the Bible tales in oral performances within written texts. The stories simultaneously employ a number of metafictional and intertextual transformations, using citation, paraphrase, linguistic translation, dramatic adaptation and *mise en abîme*. This comparative analysis that considers the stories in English adds yet another intertextual layer to the translation strategies of the protagonists within the stories.¹

In the incorporation of biblical tales in these stories, the protagonist/translator passes on the resonances of a historic, mythical and sacred text. The stories manipulate the protagonists' connections to their sources in the dramatic tension of the transmission scenes. The reader is made keenly aware of Baltasar's tenuous relationship to the Bible and religion, in contrast to Ivan's close link through his theological studies. In both cases the biblical "original" persists as a force looming over the protagonists' translations. Alvin C. Kibel mentions the necessity for translation in transmitting the canon: "the essential feature of the canonical text [is] namely, that it is established as such only in relation to a secondary kind of writing, which demands the continued presence of an original

1 Hendrik Van Gorp in "La traduction littéraire parmi les autres metatextes" discusses the inherent intertextuality and metatextuality in any translation. His parallel typologies for metatexts and translations account for degrees of distance or proximity ranging from plagiarism (exact copy or citation) to artistic or film adaptations.

in the course of transmitting its meaning" (243). The responsibility inherent in trafficking with the sacred impinges on the translation scene. Conscious that some elements of the original's style and tone may come through, Baltasar and Ivan each adapts his own delivery. This is what compels Baltasar to stand at the table while reading, "remembering his lessons in elocution," tapping into ancient oral culture and rhetoric (*Brodie* 19). His authoritative stance causes the Gutres to clear the table so as not to stain or mark the book.

Ivan likens himself to the Apostle Peter, twice mentioning to the widows the parallel function of the fire: "Peter stood with them near the fire — also warning himself, as I am now" (Chekhov 106). Borges considers Christ the greatest of all oral masters ("El culto de los libros," *Obras Completas* 714); both Baltasar and Ivan emulate their idea of the master, as well as the precedent and authority of the text. Both stories stress the significance of the relationship between the performers and their listeners in the staging of these dramatic scenes. These translation performances involve "more than just 'verbal' elements.... The art and meaning ... are realised not just in words but in the teller's delivery skills, the occasion, or the actions and reception of the audience" (Finnegan 19).

As Borges's and Chekhov's protagonists translate tales, their listeners react to them and follow them. The audiences in turn cast their translators as patriarchal prophet or martyr. Both protagonists are liberated by their translating, Baltasar ironically through crucifixion and Ivan through the widows' catharsis. Their emotional response to the story lets Ivan continue on his way. The widows experience Peter's presence not through contact with a physical text, but rather through Ivan who served as the tale's vessel of transmission through translation. Although the translators appear to enjoy very different fates, both stories exalt the text as master, and translation as a powerful immortalizing force.

These stories examine the potential of translated oral transmission as bonded ritual, repetition, and healing. Ivan's storytelling is much more freely oral than Baltasar's. The English translation quoted here scarcely captures the clumsiness, spontaneous intrusion of scholarly Old Church Slavonic into Ivan's conversational tone.² He recounts the story from memory rather than reading and translating directly from the text as Baltasar does. The result is less polished, presenting his translation as more authentically oral. Chekhov's narrator invites the reader to become another humble listener along with Vasilisa and Lukerya.

Borges's narrator, by contrast, presents the activity and circumstances of the repeated Gospel readings without ever quoting Baltasar's translations. Excluding the reader from the discourse of Baltasar's performance creates a textual level in which only the Gutres participate. At the end of "Mark," the various layers overlap, and the gospel tale takes over Borges's story. While Chekhov's narrator,

and his protagonist, links his text to the endless chain Ivan revels in discovering, Borges's text caves in on itself, creating an intertextual *mise en abîme*.

Baltasar's crucifixion, and its intertextual circumscription, leaves the translation's meaning unresolved. The listeners' interpretation is either ironic or historically fated. Ironically, Baltasar's end could be considered a misguided act based on misinterpreting a translated text. His immortality then becomes a joke, the Gutres' privately canonized mistake. However, perhaps Baltasar's reckless trafficking in the sacred is all too effective and ensnares him in his own success. The story's finale is reminiscent of the early Bible translator burned at the stake. Baltasar's subtly efficient performance incites the Gutres to reenact Christ's fate with their substitute (translated) master because they no longer distinguish between the original and his translation.

The metafictional episodes of oral transmission dramatize a crisis within the stories' fictional classification. Both stories exploit the uneasiness that arises when the roles of listener/spectator and teller/actor blur. Borges discusses this shift in his essay "Partial Magic in the *Quijote*": "Why does it worry us that Don Quijote be a reader of the *Quijote*, and Hamlet, a spectator of *Hamlet*? ... such inversions suggest that if the characters of a fiction can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious" (*Obras Completas* 669; my translation). "Mark" and "The Student" challenge fiction's ontological status by empowering storytelling to take over the story. The initial scenarios (Baltasar arriving at his cousin's ranch and Ivan approaching home) merely introduce the storytelling scenes that expand to occupy the narrations.

These are framed tales that are structured so as to implicate all levels of the story in competition for validity and verisimilitude. The activity of translation within the oral episodes contributes to this contest among the textual levels. Linguistic otherness allows the translator/protagonist more authorial leverage in his tale, marking his role as master of his version. In these stories, the Bible's familiarity contrasts with the translators' groping and awkward communication with their audiences. The translators are cast in a performance role that remains linked to a weighty but inaccessible source. The books from which they might have quoted are either unavailable (Ivan) or in the wrong language (Baltasar). The stories hint at citation but provide none, and thus preclude the reader from holding the protagonist accountable for his version. Borges and Chekhov yield their textual authority to young students in precarious and temporary roles whose speech comes to author(ize) their texts.

These texts further complicate the strategy of the story-within-the-story by their biblical borrowing and extensive intertextuality. A variety of allusions intermingles with the textual layers, as the narrators enumerate historical facts and literary artifacts. In "Mark," Baltasar finds that "in the whole house, there was apparently no other reading matter than a set of the *Farm Journal*, a handbook of veterinary medicine, a deluxe edition of the Uruguayan epic *Tabaré*,

2 I am grateful to Richard Macksey for our illuminating discussions of this story's original Russian.

a *History of Shorthorn Cattle in Argentina*, a number of erotic or detective stories, and a recent novel called *Don Segundo Sombra*" (18). This list of titles, representing a variety of genres, sets the stage for the textual games to come. *Don Segundo Sombra* appearing here as a literary novelty is more than an allusion. The romanticized *gaucho* novel by Ricardo Güiraldes was published in 1926, i.e., around the time the story takes place. Borges inserts it as a metafictional irony that frames Baltasar, since the *Don Segundo Sombra*'s protagonist is a cultural hybrid who awkwardly fuses the nomadic orality of the *gaucho* with the literate landowning culture of the elite. Borges's enumeration of genres reveals pieces of the literary canon isolated among the non-literary Gutres.

"The Student"'s introductory enumeration, however, sets a more historical, geographical stage:

Cringing in the cold, he reflected that just such a wind had blown in the days of Ryrrik, Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great. Their times had known just such ferocious poverty and hunger. There had been the same thatched roofs with the holes in them, the same ignorance and misery, the same desolation on all sides, the same gloom and sense of oppression. (105)

Ivan's brooding historic-geographical consciousness of regional, national, architectural motifs will lighten as he transmits the Gospel's universal message. The series of epic and historical heroes provides the framework in which Ivan evokes the biblical Peter in his spontaneous tale. The story's beginning outlines the patriarchal structure of Ivan's translated storytelling.

TRANSMISSION AND TRANSCRIPTION

Borges's and Chekhov's texts depend on transcription, one variety of translation, as they are produced and reproduced, published, printed, edited, and, in our case, translated into English. However, in their stories the boundaries between writing and speech blur. Ivan's written sources are only oral memory in this context; and Baltasar, who refuses Daniel's invitation and stays behind to be with his "textbooks," neglects them for a translated Bible that he must again translate orally.

These stories, then, examine the production of literature as well as the perpetuation of literature. While the medieval bard relies on memory and oral transmission, both the protagonists of "Mark" and "The Student" are literate interpreters, well versed in oral exposition and the procedures of textual interpretation. They transmit orally what they have read and studied, what they have learned and are trained to interpret.

The overlapping of writing and speech in these stories contributes to their intertextuality. They simultaneously rely on the oral and the written without

hierarchically privileging either source. The narrations undermine the expectations of an "original" in the diffusion of storytelling levels that converge in their plots. This textual relativity is coherent with the Derridean concept of writing that recognizes and incorporates the content underlying writing. Derrida's Writing invites the dynamic presence of a written message's essential roots and substance beyond its material inscription.³ In these fictions, the translated performance generates catharsis and transformation due to a potent simultaneity of textual levels.

The vascillation between the oral and the written rather than accounting for the overlapping levels of sources in these texts confuses them even further. The New Testament collects tales held to be original transmissions or versions of unique events. However, presuming the tales' "originality" fails to explain the echoes and resonances in those very tales of the Old Testament. In *A Palpable God*, for example, Price retells his chosen biblical tales in *pairs*, drawing on the resemblances and intertextuality already available in its two parts. Borges resurrects Old Testament names and events, as already noted, in his retelling of the gospel story. More allusions include Baltasar's surname Espinosa, evoking the Dutch Sephardic Jewish philosopher Spinoza, and the storm of course resembles the flood. Baltasar learned to recognize bird calls, and a bird sings at the end of the story as he is being led to the cross, simultaneously evoking the Old Testament end of the flood along with the New Testament end of the Messiah. The geography, the travel and isolation of the two protagonists, contrasted with the ideas of community are reminiscent of Jewish (Old Testament) identity and names, attachment to land, the struggle against exile and dispersion, and the search for a homeland.

The stories voyage between languages, between versions, like floating textual islands in search of very slippery shores: "Dès l'origine de l'original à traduire il y a chute et exil" (Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel" in Graham 232). The stories resemble the Bible's own internal translation of stories and quotations, between the Old and New Testaments. Daniel Sibony, in *La Juive. Une transmission d'inconscient*, describes the New Testament as "un régime d'écritures entièrement organisé autour de la citation" (269). In retelling the apostles' tales, Ivan and Baltasar unknowingly call upon the Old Testament as well, incorporating yet another intertextual layer of oral/written authority.

3 Derrida defines Writing as "not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself. And thus we say 'writing' for all that gives rise to an inscription in general ... not only the system of notation secondarily connected with these activities but the essence and the content of these activities themselves" (*Of Grammatology* 9).

ABSENCE, AND TRANSLATION'S SUBSTITUTE GENEALOGY

Translated intertexts attempt to recreate community, to resist distance and absence. Both protagonists are away from home and yearn for familiarity. They surround themselves with a sort of temporary extended family, for Ivan the company of the widows, and for Baltasar initially his cousin and then the Gutres. Yet in both situations, the substitute families Ivan and Baltasar construct are missing members. The protagonists' storytelling attempts to fill the familial absence. Baltasar's English to Spanish translation of Mark charismatically establishes linguistic boundaries. It reasserts the local and national, through language, as the home ground on which the Gutres (despite their exile-like isolation) must function. "The Student" also relies on linguistic framing to set up the dramatized translation. Ivan tells his intercalated Gospel story in an awkward Russian laced with Old Church Slavonic. The written, sacred syntax seeps into the vernacular at the moment of Ivan's translation. Both Borges's and Chekhov's translation scenes reveal a search for tradition and local identity in their protagonists' estrangement.

In "Mark," the initial distances are Baltasar's departure from Buenos Aires, and then Daniel's absence from the ranch. The kinship between the two names is closer than cousins; in the Old Testament book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar invites Daniel to be included in his court, and bestows the name "Belteshazzar" upon him, a Babylonian name meaning "spirit of the holy God" (Daniel 1:7 and 4:8-9). The biblical Daniel's gift for interpreting, or translating, dreams brings him a new identity. Thus Daniel's absence in "Mark" removes part of the Old Testament figure's identity; and, since Daniel is the owner of the ranch and the head of the household, his absence shifts the power structure of tribal leadership. Later in the story, Baltasar, Daniel's "replacement," emerges as the Gutres' leader. The new leader also shares his name with one of the three biblical wise men. Straddling both the Old and New Testaments, his emerging power evokes Christ's birth and prefigures Baltasar's death.

The Gutres used to be the Guthries, Baltasar discovers in the genealogy scribbled at the back of the English Bible. "After a few generations, they had forgotten English; their Spanish, at the time Espinosa knew them, gave them trouble" (Brodie 19). Thus Baltasar must provide *all* language in the household, must furnish all communication. Baltasar's translation from the English Bible into Spanish results in a masterful performance that bridges the Gutres' cultural and linguistic genealogy. Daniel/Baltasar offers textual, genealogical memory to the Gutres forgotten past.

In "The Student," Ivan looks back in his own family scene as he approaches home: "The student remembered that, when he had left the house, his mother had been sitting barefoot on the lobby floor cleaning the samovar, while his father lay coughing on the stove" (105). The widows are marked by their losses: they each lack husbands, Vasilisa is "a plump old woman in a man's fur jacket," and

Lukerya, "whose husband had beaten her, only screwed up her eyes at the student, saying nothing and wearing an odd look as if she was deaf and dumb" (105-06). Translation is Ivan and Baltasar's way of filling these gaps, the "dette insolvable à l'intérieur d'une scène généalogique" (Derrida, qtd. in Graham 220). These two scenes present loss, lack, missing pieces and people, illiteracy, and language incompetence. Translation of biblical tales attempts to provide the canonical authority and paternity of narrative through these translators. Their listeners, though illiterate, are easily moved, readily brought into the cathartic transformation. Both texts revolve around the relationships between master and disciple, teacher and student, patriarchal leaders and their followers/subjects.

THE ARENA OF TREACHEROUS TAMPERING

There is in every act of translation — and especially where it succeeds — a touch of treason. Hoarded dreams, patents of life are being taken across the frontier. (Steiner 233)

Translation is simultaneously Babel's blessing and blasphemy. "Mark" and "The Student" are part of a chain of reconstructions, of new renderings within a flexible cycle of past inscription and recurrent translation. Each of these texts reunites with sacred stories and promises an enduring if dangerously acquired message. The translated performance transports Ivan on his continuing journey while it demands Baltasar's sacrifice.

Ivan's translation overrides the gloomy historical landscape of the beginning of the story, restoring a sense of continuity and meaning to his journey home, and to the widows. After telling his tale, Ivan joyously notes the connection of all events, the "unbroken chain of happenings," and "he felt as if he had just seen both ends of that chain. When he touched one end the other vibrated" (107). The vibration that he mentions depends upon oral transmission and translation, and provides a metaphor for the word's living, pulsating meaning. Out of the cold, dreary evening blossoms Ivan's hope for happiness, thanks to translation's miracle.

Reworking biblical tales into secular literature is a way of both assuring and questioning the former's continuity, of insisting that its message be transmitted while transforming its mode of transmission. Telling stories is thus a spiritual ministry: "Cette perpétuelle réviviscence, cette régénérescence constante par la traduction, c'est moins une révélation, la révélation elle-même, qu'une annonciation, une alliance et une promesse" (Derrida, qtd. in Graham 246). Translation promises the continuity of truth and beauty, which according to Ivan "had guided human life there in the garden and the high priest's palace ... had continued without a break till the present day, always as the most important

element in man's life and in earthly life in general" (108). The characters' change of heart rests on translation delivering its promise.

In "Mark," Baltasar's fate casts him as an innocent victim or a scholarly saint of translation's powers. The act of translating both punishes and saves him, releasing him from the ranch and the Gutres' hold and immortalizing his stories for his audience. The two texts, Borges's and the biblical, grow closer and closer, in spite of the characters' uncertain faith and Baltasar's unsure responses to the Gutres' literal biblical inquiries, until the textual overlapping traps Baltasar in its folds. Baltasar uses translation "to bridge the inevitable after-dinner gap," and the Gutres use his translation to build him a cross (*Brodie* 18). In this way, the translator contributes to his own crucifixion that ends the story but may perpetuate his version. While Ivan's story links texts and meaning, Baltasar's turns on him with its intertextual refractions.

Borges and Chekhov, with these two stories, demonstrate a concentration of biblical intertexts in modern fiction. Examining the two stories in translation underscores the thematic problems the stories themselves treat, such as the challenge of communication in isolation and the validity of contemporary versions of canonical texts. Two simultaneous movements are clear: an accumulation of meaning toward a center, and a splintering of meaning away from the center. These centripetal and centrifugal forces are inherent in intertextual and metatextual struggles. "[L]a traduction littéraire n'existe précisément que grâce à ce double mouvement qui est création et réduction de l'écart" (Van Gorp 114-15). These texts demonstrate that translation demands movement both toward and away from a center. The arbitrariness of considering both stories in English translation joins them in a comparative analysis; however the fact of their translation attests to their distance from a linguistic, artistic and cultural "original."

Even in the most effective translation, echoes of the gap in communication still remain. These stories build bridges — across the Gutre's dinner table or the widows' fire — but leave their translators to suffer the consequences of their translations alone. The connections are powerful but subjective and fanatical. Ivan continues on his way, heartened but still isolated; Baltasar is either betrayed or immortalized.

For Borges, translation always means loss and dispersion; and yet in "Mark" that loss is also a liberation. As Beatriz Sarlo concludes about this story, "this sinister parable of the power of reading demonstrates that, for Borges, cross-cultural blending is one of the imaginative strategies needed to liberate literary invention from the claims of realism and the repetitive routine of everyday experience" (29-30). Both Baltasar and Ivan use translation as a bridge between the literate and illiterate, the verbal and the non-verbal, the word and silence. Where Ivan translates in order to bring about a cathartic transformation in his listeners, and project toward a future happier because of its link with the past,

Baltasar is caught in the entangling web of Old and New Testament legacy. Rural handbooks, textbooks, a novel and an epic are neglected in favor of a Bible belonging to a family who cannot read it, and who is excluded from its genealogy. Sacred discourse incites the Gutres' "problematic regression," and Baltasar's victimization ironically celebrates his translation's efficacy.

The Borges and Chekhov texts considered here map out several trajectories of translation: the continuity of tradition, the potential treason of misinterpretation, and the entanglement of stories within stories. Baltasar and Ivan engage in biblical transmission in an effort to reassimilate culturally, and inadvertently they become transformed into virtual masters of the word. Their listeners attach themselves as disciples to a series of interpretations, and react to the multiple layers of the stories they hear. Their responses come in cathartic and apocalyptic forms, for the translators as well as their listeners. Translations convey their own interpretations, even in these episodes of unrehearsed performances. These stories warn orators that they cannot control their listeners' interpretations. The translations examined here, of the Borges and Chekhov stories and of their protagonists' tellings, attest to language's potential both to perpetuate and contradict the message of the "source."⁴

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