

Borges' Writings on Joyce: From a Mythical Translation to a Polemical Defence of Censorship

ANDRÉS PÉREZ SIMÓN

Jorge Luis Borges was no doubt one of the most influential Latin American writers of the last century. Although his best-known collections of stories, such as *Fictions* and *The Aleph*, were originally published in the 1940s, Borges did not obtain widespread recognition until the 1960s. At that time, he had already developed a coherent project including not only fiction but also poetry and critical writings. A passionate lover of English literature since childhood, Borges wrote with pleasure essays on Stevenson, Whitman, Chesterton, and others. Significantly, his references to Joyce were less a personal homage than an acknowledgment of a presence he could never avoid.

The first part of the essay to follow analyses Borges' views on *Ulysses*, as they are expressed in a considerable number of essays, prologues and press articles. In the 1920s, Borges was deeply interested in the novel and in fact translated the final fragment of "Penelope". Nevertheless, he later rejected *Ulysses* after a change of heart, partially motivated by the influence of *Finnegans Wake*, which the Argentine writer considered a total disappointment. The study of articles on Joyce's last work will thus close this opening section. The second part of the essay deals with a polemical text on *Ulysses* and censorship published in 1960. Although many of Borges' writings on Joyce have previously been examined, I do not know of any study examining this particular article.

In 1925, shortly after his second stay in Europe, a 26-year-old Borges published an article on *Ulysses*, together with a translation presented under the title "The Last Page of *Ulysses*", in the literary review *Proa*.¹ Both texts constituted a crucial moment in the importation of European *avant-garde* literature into Argentina. Borges, a cosmopolitan reader who had spent most of the previous years in Spain and Switzerland, combined his literary heritage with a project of national regeneration. The cited translation is a mythical one, given its capacity to

stimulate commentary in subsequent decades. There is no doubt that this initial version constituted a historical event in the reception of *Ulysses* in literature in Spanish. Borges was perfectly conscious of his foundational act when he proudly declared in the accompanying article: “I am the first Hispanic adventurer to dock at Joyce’s book”.² Antonio Marichalar was in fact the first Hispanic critic to publish an article on *Ulysses*, the article including extracts of the novel translated into Spanish. In November of 1924 his “James Joyce in his Labyrinth” was published in *Revista de Occidente*, the most prestigious cultural review in Spain.³ In any case, the marine metaphor coined by Borges was powerful enough to attach his name permanently to the destiny of *Ulysses* in the Spanish language, to the point that the Argentine writer is still mentioned as the first translator of the novel.⁴

As the translation has received the attention of several critics in recent years,⁵ I will not proceed with a detailed textual analysis of it. I would like to emphasize briefly, however, the peculiar use of the pronoun “vos”, typical of the Spanish spoken in Buenos Aires, substituting the standard Spanish “tú”, as well as several colloquialisms. With his translation, Borges sought to achieve an Argentine version of *Ulysses*, in the context of the nationalistic mission mentioned above.

In his article on *Ulysses*, Borges did not feel ashamed to admit to not having read the whole novel, due to its vast length. In his extraordinary essay on Joyce and Borges, Thomas J. Rice recently expressed doubts about the possibility of a (fragmentary) translation of *Ulysses* without a complete reading of the novel,⁶ but I prefer to believe the Argentine author. In any case, Borges’ assertion relates to a key concept in his poetics: the necessity of brevity. In 1921, a young Borges had defined condensation as a main concept for Ultraism, the vanguardist movement he encountered in Spain and later imported to Argentina. All throughout his life, Borges developed this initial opinion to the point that Ronald Christ has defined his work as being “characterized by brevity and quintessence achieved through a denial of all that is either decorative or superficial”.⁷ In 1941, Borges expressed his idea of narration in the prologue to his first collection of short stories, *The Garden of Forking Paths*:

It is a laborious madness and an impoverishing one, the madness of composing vast books—setting out in five hundred pages an idea that can be perfectly related orally in five minutes. The better way to go about it is to pretend that those books already exist, and offer a summary, a commentary on them.⁸

The Garden of Forking Paths included seven short stories, but Borges did not include one of his best works ever, “Funes, His Memory”, eventually published in *La Razón* the following year. The tale was almost finished even before the publication of *Forking Paths*, as Borges announced in a press article in 1941. In this note, titled “A Fragment on Joyce”,⁹ Borges began by summarising his story about Ireneo Funes, a man incapable of forgetting anything. The Argentine writer described the sufferings of a person whose mind contained all kinds of irrelevant details—for example, the shapes of clouds at sunrise on April 30, 1882. Borges concluded that Funes was “a monster”, and added that “a consecutive straightforward reading of the four hundred thousand words of *Ulysses* would require similar monsters.”¹⁰ Since Borges refused to define himself as a creature of this sort, he had to admit that “I (like the rest of the universe) have not read *Ulysses*”.¹¹ Sixteen years after his pioneer article in 1925, Borges’ sceptical position remained unaltered.

Borges created the short story “The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim”, first published in 1936 and later reprinted in *Fictions* (1944), under the appearance of a review of the novel with the same title. The protagonist of this narrative was a student from Bombay who decided to spend his whole life trying to find Al-Mu’tasim, a mystic supposed to be the origin of the brightness in the world—a light partially reflected in the rest of humanity. After travelling through the valley of Hindustan, the student eventually discovered a light behind a door and Al-Mu’tasim’s voice. In his review, Borges indicated that the novel ended when the student drew back the curtain to meet the man. The Argentine author proceeded to clarify the imaginary novel in the second part of his false review, indicating that the light desired by the student was, paradoxically, inside him. Borges added in a footnote that, according to a Persian bookseller, there could be other interpretations of the novel: one, that the seeker and Al-Mu’tasim were the same person; another, that at the time of the encounter the search had already influenced the young man.

Rice has recently pointed out that the short story can be connected with the ending of the poem “Invocation to Joyce”, included in the book *In Praise of Darkness* (1969).¹² Although this poem constituted an evident homage to Joyce, Borges conceived it not as the declaration of a mature writer but as a retrospective image of his youth. Since Borges tried to avoid any biographical connotations, the voice invoking Joyce was not an “I” but a “we”:

We were imagism, cubism

the conventicles and sects
respected now by credulous universities.
We invented the omission of punctuation
and capital letters
stanzas in the shape of a dove
from the librarians of Alexandria.

.....
You, all the while,
In cities of exile,
In that exile that was
Your detested and chosen instrument,
The weapon of your craft,
Erected your pathless labyrinths,
Infinitesimal and infinite,
Wondrously paltry,
More populous than history.

In the closing lines, the anonymous “we” turns into the personal “I”:

I am the others. I am all those
Who have been rescued by your pains and care.
I am those unknown to you and saved by you.¹³

By declaring that “I am those unknown to you and saved by you”, Borges echoed the doctrine of anonymous interrelation that sustained “The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim”. With this peculiar theory of literary influence, Borges explained Joyce’s influence on him and other writers in the 1920s: they sought to emulate enthusiastically his art and, by the simple fact of trying to, were already “saved” by the Irish writer.

In Praise of Darkness contained another poem devoted to the author of *Ulysses*. The sonnet “James Joyce” recreated the travels of Leopold Bloom through the streets of Dublin and shares evident similarities with Borges’ article “A Fragment on Joyce”. If the article concludes, “It can legitimately be inferred that for Joyce every day was in some secret way the irreparable Day of Judgment; every place, Hell or Purgatory”,¹⁴ the sonnet begins by declaring that “In a man’s single day are all the days / of time”, and in the first tercet Borges proclaims that “universal history” can be found “between the dawn and the night” of Bloomsday.¹⁵

Coming back to “The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim”, it must be indicated that there was another point of contact with Joyce. Since the imaginary novel was supposed to be based on an (also imaginary) epic

poem, it is not difficult to perceive an emulation of Joyce's method in *Ulysses*. According to Edwin Williamson:

The Indian novel, we are informed, was modelled—in a manner reminiscent of the way James Joyce patterned *Ulysses* on the *Odyssey*—on a narrative poem called *The Conference of the Birds* by the Persian mystic Farid ud-din Attar. This Sufi poem relates how the Simurgh, the king of all the birds, dropped one of his splendid feathers in China, whereupon the birds resolve to find it. They traverse seven valleys . . . until finally thirty birds arrive at a sacred mountain, only to discover that “they are the Simurgh and that the Simurgh is each one and all of them”.¹⁶

On the contrary, the following words by the narrator/literary critic at the end of “The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim” seem to deny any value to the “mythic method” underlying *Ulysses*: “The repeated but irrelevant points of congruence between Joyce's *Ulysses* and Homer's *Odyssey* continue to attract (though I shall never understand why) the dazzled admiration of critics”.¹⁷ Thus, Borges conceived an epic poem as a basis for the novel, but in the commentary of the narrative there is an explicit criticism of Joyce's method. Along with Rice I prefer to interpret the last assertion not as an attack on Joyce but rather on “the dazzled admiration of critics”.¹⁸ In this way, both positions would be compatible.

Rice's interpretation of the short story “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*”, written in 1939 and also included in *Fictions* (1944), reinforces the image of Borges despising the mythic parallels in *Ulysses*.¹⁹ If Menard's project of rewriting *Don Quixote* turned into an extreme parody of *Ulysses*, the frequent mention of drafts, crossed notebooks and manuscripts also pointed to the methods of composition typical of Joyce. Nonetheless, I interpret the story as a partial parody, since Borges' main purpose was not to criticize Joyce but to denounce the loss of originality produced by the anxiety of emulating previous books. In the late thirties, Borges translated “Before the Law”, the parable in Kafka's *The Trial*, about a man incapable of crossing an open door. The influence of this negative vision of life, together with Borges' personal situation after the recent death of his father and a very serious illness, made the writer feel insecure about his writings. As a result, “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*” was more an image of the lack of artistic power than an explicit criticism of the use of literary archetypes in *Ulysses*. To confirm this assertion, I would emphasize the attraction Borges felt for the figures of Ulysses and the Errant Jew, as demonstrated in the opening short story of *The Aleph* (1949). In the “The Immortal”,

Borges conceived the effects that an infinite time would produce on humanity, and recreated it through a manuscript written by a Roman soldier who, paradoxically, pronounced Homer's words on different occasions. The character of Flaminius Rufus transformed into different men with the passing of time, but always conserving verses from the *Odyssey* and Homer's intellectual ambitions. As a Roman soldier, he referred to the river Egypt, following the terms used by Proteus and Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, instead of the more accepted Nile. Converted into an Arabic translator living in the thirteenth century, he prepared a version of *The Adventures of Sindbad*, defined as "another Ulysses".²⁰ And, under the mask of an antiquarian in 1714, he bought Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, and discussed the book with Giambattista Vico. In conclusion, "The Immortal" indicates that Borges was not alien to the symbolic possibilities inherent to the archetype of a wandering man, canonized by Homer and the *Book of Exodus* in the Bible.

In a return to the analysis of references in essays and press articles, Borges describes *Ulysses* in his *Course of English Literature* (1965) as a frustrated attempt to "replace its lack of unity for a system of laborious and useless symmetries".²¹ This severe condemnation of Joyce's verbal excess reappeared in an interview with Richard Burgin, published in *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (1969):

Well, by the time it's read through, you know thousands and thousands of circumstances about the characters, but you don't know them. . . . You know, for example . . . that they went twice to the men's room, you know all the books they read, you know their exact positions when they are sitting down or standing up, but you don't really know them. It's as if Joyce had gone over them with a microscope or a magnifying glass.²²

In light of these statements, the protagonist of "Funes, His Memory" would be the ideal reader of *Ulysses*. Nonetheless, these attacks on the novel were not invariably present in Borges' critical writings. His volume of essays *Discussion* (1932) includes two texts containing very positive allusions to Joyce. In "Narrative Art and Magic", Borges explains that his perfect model of narration should be "a rigorous scheme of attentions, echoes, and affinities".²³ Since this vision of the novel as a semiotic artifact prohibited any arbitrariness in its components, Borges defined the ideal construction as one full of *leitmotifs* and internal allusions, and in citing an example affirmed that "the most perfect illustration of an autonomous orb of omens, confirmations, and monuments is Joyce's preordained *Ulysses*."²⁴ Two decades later, in his

article “A defense of Bouvard et Pécuchet” (1954), devoted to the figure of Gustave Flaubert, Borges again acclaims *Ulysses*:

The man that forged the realist novel with *Madame Bovary* was also the first one to destroy it. . . . Flaubert’s instinct scented this death, which is happening right now—Is not *Ulysses*, with its planes and timetables and precisions, the splendid agony of a literary genre?²⁵

Although this last article was published in 1954, Borges’ admiration for *Ulysses* disappeared in the late 1930s, when he decided to create short stories dealing with metaphysical and theological themes, a model of narration opposed to that of *Ulysses*. But despite this difference of criteria, Borges continued being a fundamental interpreter of the novel. In the 1940s, Borges organized literary meetings in Buenos Aires, and it is not a secret that Joyce’s novel was one of the most fascinating books for his pupils, although there was not yet a complete Spanish version. According to the Argentine writer Juan José Saer, Borges even contemplated the possibility of preparing a translation together with his group of admirers.²⁶ Eventually, an insurance broker responding to the name of José Salas Subirat completed the Spanish version on his own.²⁷ Also from Buenos Aires, Salas Subirat was in frequent contact with Borges, but the role of the latter in the translation must be considered secondary. It would no doubt have been incredibly productive for the history of literature that Borges, the epitome of an artist in search of impersonality, had translated Joyce’s *Ulysses* under the mask of another person. The Spanish novelist Julián Ríos, for example, could not avoid the temptation of rewriting reality when he recently affirmed that “Salas Subirat’s *Ulysses* . . . was revised by Borges, before its publication in 1945.”²⁸

It is possible, however, to verify that Borges showed an interest in this pioneer translation just a few months after the printing of Subirat’s version. In January of 1946, the literary review *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* included his “Note on *Ulysses* in Spanish”.²⁹ Borges praised the complex task of the translator but regretted that the Spanish language could not be an adequate vehicle for Joycean innovations. The following are two significant passages:

Ulysses, perhaps, includes the most chaotic and tedious pages registered in history, but also includes the most perfect ones . . . whose perfection is verbal. English (like German) is an almost monosyllabic language, apt for the formation of compound words.

Joyce was notoriously happy in this field. Spanish (like French, like Italian) is composed of unmanageable polysyllables, very difficult to combine.

The aim of this note is not to accuse Mr. Salas Subirat of incapacity . . . but to denounce the incapacity, for certain ends, of all Neo-Latin languages, and especially, of Spanish. Joyce expands and reforms the English language; his translator has the duty of taking similar licences.³⁰

In Borges' opinion, Subirat committed the error of paying attention only to semantic aspects of the English words. Thus, Borges criticised the paraphrases chosen by Subirat in response to Joycean neologisms, such as the cases of "muskperformed"—translated "perfumados de azmicle"—and "myriadminded man"—"hombre de inteligencia multiple". Borges likewise praised Subirat when the Spanish text was "not less neologic than the original one".³¹

But neither this translation, nor the one to follow by the Spanish professor and poet Jose Maria Valverde (1976),³² could substitute the foundational page by Borges decades before. In 1981, the first (and last) number of the journal *Referente* included two texts by Borges and his fragmentary translation from 1925. The journal also published an interview with the title "Borges and Joyce, 50 years later",³³ in which the Argentine author was asked this question: "Did you translate *Ulysses*?"³⁴ In this interview, five years before his death, Borges provided erroneous information when he declared that his first contact with the novel took place "in 1927 or 1928".³⁵ Whether this chronological alteration was voluntary or not, it would not be the first attempt by Borges to manipulate dates during an interview.³⁶ Borges recognised having translated the last page of *Ulysses* "very badly",³⁷ and added that after 80 years of life it was not possible to say whether anyone had proposed that he prepare a complete Spanish translation.

In 1982, Ramon Alcalde and Enrique Pizzoni retranslated the passage of "Penelope" chosen by Borges 56 years before,³⁸ a fragment that Patricia Wilson recently defined as "a new unit that will circulate and will be retranslated independently of the rest of the novel and even of the chapter".³⁹ And Beatriz Sarlo, a prestigious Borges scholar, wrote in 1993 that "Borges' translation of the last pages of Molly Bloom's monologue is, without doubt, the best translation of Joyce ever achieved in Spanish".⁴⁰ In 1999, Francisco Garcia Tortosa and Maria Luisa Venegas published the third Spanish translation of *Ulysses*,⁴¹ but Sarlo's opinion will likely not have changed. What Borges once defined as a "very faulty

translation”⁴² was not considered a failure by his multiple admirers, who might have declared that a man of genius makes no mistakes, because his errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery.

If translation brought Borges into contact with Joyce, an extravagant book separated them definitively. This work was *Finnegans Wake*, and the earliest data of the separation appears in 1937. In a biographic profile, Borges applauded the “delicate music” of *Ulysses*, but at the same time described *Work in Progress* as “a weave made of languid puns in an English combined with German, Italian and Latin”.⁴³ This negative impression turned into a severe attack in 1939, when Borges confessed his frustration in the review “Joyce’s Latest Novel”:

I have examined it with some bewilderment, have unenthusiastically deciphered nine or ten calembours. . . . *Finnegans Wake* is a concatenation of puns committed in a dreamlike English that is difficult not to categorize as frustrated and incompetent.⁴⁴

In this article, Borges portrays Joyce as the finest writer of his epoch, at least “verbally”, and declares that there were lines in *Ulysses* not inferior to the best by Shakespeare or by Sir Thomas Browne. Although recognising it was possible to find “some memorable phrases” in *Finnegans Wake*, Borges concluded that in this book “efficacy is an exception.”⁴⁵ Curiously, this review was published on June 16. At the end of 1939, Borges published another article on *Finnegans Wake*, “Joyce and neologisms”,⁴⁶ an article focusing again on the creation of compound words.

In 1964, Borges chose to criticise Joyce in the prologue of his volume of poems *The Other, the Same*. At this time, his theory regarding the impersonality of the artist was perfectly defined. It is thus not surprising to read his views on the prevalence of a literary tradition over a particular writer. According to Borges,

Human languages are traditions that imply some grade of fatalism. Individual experiments are, in fact, minimum, except when the innovator resigns himself to creating a specimen for museums, a game conceived for the discussion of historians or a simple scandal, as in the cases of *Finnegans Wake* or [Góngora’s] *Soledades*.⁴⁷

Joyce was thereby equated with Luis de Góngora, author of the *Soledades*, considered the least accessible volume of poems in Spanish literature, due to the hyperbolic use of mythological references as well as to neologisms from Latin and Italian.

In his articles on *Finnegans Wake*, Borges does not comment on the concept of cyclical periods that Joyce borrowed from Vico, while paradoxically at least two contemporary essays, “The Doctrine of Cycles” (1936) and “Circular Time” (1941),⁴⁸ were reflections on the Nietzschean concept of Eternal Return and its predecessors. In a second parallel, the short story “The Garden of Forking Paths”, included in the volume of the same title, portrays a man trying to conceive an infinite book, and one of the options he considers is to write “a cyclical, or circular, volume, a volume whose last page would be identical to the first, so that one might go on indefinitely.”⁴⁹ Given that this first collection of fiction was published in 1941, the influence of *Finnegans Wake* seems evident. But why did Borges not mention the structural pattern of Viconian cycles in Joyce’s last book? Although I cannot defend it adequately, my hypothesis is that Borges wanted to hide any influence from a writer whose work approximated the same circularity he was looking for. If, as Borges wrote in the cited story, “to always omit one word . . . is perhaps the most emphatic way of calling attention to that word”,⁵⁰ the omission of Vico’s theories is very significant. Curiously, a few pages after the attack on *Finnegans Wake* in the prologue to *The Other, the Same*, one finds the poem “The Cyclical Night”, which ends with a quotation of the initial verse and, in consequence, produces an infinite return. As mentioned above, the volume of poetry was published in 1964, but the fact confirming the (silenced) influence of Joyce in “The Cyclical Night” is its date of composition, 1940.

In short, after the publication of *Finnegans Wake*, Borges’ views on *Ulysses* became ever more distant, shifting from a critique on the impossibility of a full translation to bitter attacks on the novel he once translated. With this progression in mind, I will devote the second part of this essay to the analysis a polemical article Borges wrote on *Ulysses* and censorship. I know of no critical study that has previously addressed it. The article, under the title “Pornography and Censorship”, was published in the newspaper *La Razón* in 1960, and was recently included in an anthology of Borges’ texts. I quote from the article at length below:

I know that everyone opposes the idea of censorship of literary works; in my case, I believe that censorship can be justified, when executed with probity and not used to conceal persecutions of

personal, racial or political nature. . . . A skillful writer is able to say all that he wants to say without infringing good manners and conventions of his time. . . . It will be said that one thing is Joaquín Belda's pornography (which I do not remember having read) and another, James Joyce's occasional scatology, whose historic and aesthetic values nobody can deny. But the dangers of literature are in direct proportion with the talent of its authors. To affirm that no one has the right to modify Joyce's work, and that every modification or suppression is a sacrilegious mutilation, is a mere argument of authority. . . . As for me, I suspect that all work is a draft and that modifications, even made by a magistrate, may be beneficial.⁵¹

A literal reading of this fragment would doubtless produce the following interpretation: Borges defended cuts in *Ulysses* because of its obscene passages. His position would thus be similar to the one previously supported by English authors such as Virginia Woolf or Ezra Pound. Nonetheless, I prefer to read Borges' words more carefully, and to reconstruct the context surrounding the article. The information provided by the editors of the mentioned anthology is obviously mistaken: "Borges' opinions about the verdict of judge John M. Woolsey, magistrate of the district of New York, who authorised the diffusion of Joyce's *Ulysses*, without modifications or cuts."⁵² Since Woolsey's decision occurred 30 years before the article, this footnote must be considered erroneous. Borges was actually writing on a legal process begun in 1959, when the local authorities ("Municipalidad de Buenos Aires") removed several books considered obscene, such as Rochefort's *Warrior's Rest* and Nabokov's *Lolita*. *Ulysses*, circulating in Salas Subirat's version from 1945, did not suffer any prosecution. When the ban was produced, the magazine *Sur* asked several Argentine intellectuals to give their opinion on Nabokov's novel, and Borges was one of the writers asked to collaborate. In his article "The *Lolita* Case",⁵³ Borges began by acknowledging not having read the book, this time not due to its length—as he had written on *Ulysses* decades before—but to his own growing blindness. The thesis of his article was that local authorities should not have the right to "usurp a function pertaining to the judicial power"⁵⁴ and, in consequence, he opposed the censorship because of the arbitrariness of the government's decisions. His short essay then shifts from the particular case of *Lolita* to a general reflection on the immorality of literature:

If I do not deceive myself, there is a psychological factor that explains why the less dangerous of good or bad literatures is the pornographic one. . . . [O]ur memory . . . is only able to recreate auditory and visual perceptions, but neither the pleasure nor the pain. . . . This is the reason for the inefficacy of literary hells . . . and also of erotic writings. Its best instrument is suggestion. . . .⁵⁵

Borges opposed the political intervention but, as quoted above, he did not deny the role of judicial power in hypothetical cases of immorality. He also argued for the “inefficacy” of explicitness in books considered scandalous. It seems evident that this article, published in 1959, is very similar to the text on Joyce, “Pornography and Censorship”, published one year later. Given this similarity, the question becomes whether Borges defended the censorship of *Ulysses*.

The eminent scholar Emir Rodríguez Monegal published the article “In Praise of Censorship”⁵⁶ a few months after the appearance of “Pornography and Censorship”. According to Monegal, there was no defence of cuts because Borges simply wanted to develop, in an ironic tone, his classicist concept of literature—a constant rewriting of an eternal draft. Therefore, any original work, even *Ulysses*, could be modified. In 1932, three decades before the polemical article on Joyce, Borges had condensed his theory on originality and translation in his essay “The Homeric Versions”:

To assume that every recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original form is to assume that draft nine is necessarily inferior to draft H—for there can only be drafts. The concept of the “definitive text” corresponds only to religion or exhaustion.⁵⁷

Conceiving translation as a positive rewriting, Borges declared himself opposed to the notion of “definitive text”. In fact, his mention of religion was not a mere *boutade*, as literal translations flourished in an ideological context where the word was supposed to contain God’s message.⁵⁸ Therefore, taking into account Borges’ definition of the literary text as a draft to be improved, his words on *Ulysses* and censorship can be described as consistent with his aesthetics.

Nonetheless, even while agreeing with Monegal’s interpretation, I cannot overlook the fact that, by 1960, Joyce’s novel was not precisely one of Borges’ favourites. In this sense, I doubt Borges would have accepted the suppression of a passage from one of the works he most admired. Precisely in the same essay in which he defended the non-

prevalence of the original text, he also referred to the opening of Cervantes' *Quixote* in these terms:

I only know that any modification would be sacrilegious and that I cannot conceive of any other beginning for the *Quixote*. . . . The *Quixote*, due to my congenital practice of Spanish, is a uniform monument, with no other variations except those provided by the publisher, the bookbinder, and the typesetter.⁵⁹

It is curious that, in 1932, Borges used the term "sacrilegious" to refer to "every modification" and, when applying to *Ulysses* in 1960, maintained: "To affirm that no one has the right to modify Joyce's work, and that every modification or suppression is a sacrilegious mutilation, is a mere argument of authority". An apparent contradiction, I prefer to decode these assertions as two poles inherent to a writer who wanted to develop a classicist notion of authorship, despite his inevitable imprisonment in the modern paradigm, based on the Romantic concept of originality. What is evident, at any rate, is that for Borges it was easier to speak of non-definitive texts when the object of discussion was not one of his loved books.

In 1983, Borges delivered a second and more subtle opinion on *Ulysses*. The title of the article in question, "Censorship", recalls the previous "Pornography and Censorship". Although there is no direct reference to Joyce, it is easy to discern an evident allusion to his novel: "The direct style is the weakest. Censorship may stimulate insinuation or irony, which are more efficient."⁶⁰ Molly Bloom's interior monologue, with its abundance of coarse words, disgusted the old Borges. In 1985, a few months before his death, Borges deplored Joyce's verbal experiments one last time, and closing a cyclical relation, he condemned the chapter translated sixty years ago. In the prologue to his book of poems, *The Conspirators*, Joyce and Góngora formed a pair for the last time:

Theories can be admirable encouragements (we only have to remember Whitman) but at the same time can engender monsters or museum pieces. We just have to remember James Joyce's interior monologue or the extremely uncomfortable [Góngora's] Polifemo.⁶¹

As in the 1941 piece "A Fragment on Joyce" and elsewhere, one finds words such as "monster" and "museum piece". As is usual in Borges, his texts contain some set of internal allusions that point to previous and subsequent articles on Joyce.

In conclusion, Borges' attention to *Ulysses* shifted from an early admiration to a publicly declared state of scepticism about Joyce's achievements. Although the translation studied in the first part of this essay was a turning point in the reception of Joyce in Latin America, Borges himself was interested in deleting his initial contact with Molly Bloom's interior monologue. In the late 1930s, Borges devoted several articles to Joyce, always reducing him to a simple writer with a talent for games with words. To explain this repudiation, I have emphasised the negative impression that *Finnegans Wake* caused on Borges. At the same time, I interpret Borges' silence on the presence of cyclical time in Joyce's last work as an attempt to undervalue the book, and to deny the influence of the Irish writer. In the latter part of the essay, I have provided a coherent frame of analysis for the polemical article on Joyce and censorship. Since Borges defended a classicist idea of artistic creation, opposed to the Romantic notion of originality, he conceived literary paternity as a matter of legal fiction.

Notes

¹ *Proa*, January 6, 1925. The texts were "El *Ulises* de Joyce", pages 3-6, and "La última hoja de *Ulises*", pages 8-9. The first text was later published in the volume *Inquisiciones* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1994).

² My translation from Jorge Luis Borges, "El *Ulises* de Joyce", as published in *Inquisiciones* 23.

³ Antonio Marichalar, "James Joyce en su laberinto", *Revista de Occidente*, November 17, 1924, 177-202. The essay is also published in *Joyce en España (II)*, eds. Francisco García Tortosa and Antonio Raúl de Toro Santos (La Coruña: Universidad de La Coruña, 1997) 13-26. For more information about the figure of Marichalar, see Domingo Ródenas de Moya, "Antonio Marichalar: dos modernos en sus laberintos", *Joyce y España*, ed. Carlos García Santa Cecilia (Madrid: Círculo de Bellas Artes, 2004) 91-105.

⁴ In a recent example, Borges' last biographer defines the version as "the first ever translation of James Joyce into Spanish". See Edwin Williamson, *Borges, A Life* (New York: Viking, 2004) 128.

⁵ See Patricia Wilson, "La fundación vanguardista de la traducción", *Borges Studies Online*, J. L. Borges Center for Studies & Documentation, <<http://www.hum.au.dk/romansk/borges/bsol/pw.htm>>. See also Jorge Schwartz, "Borges y la Primera Hoja del *Ulysses*", *Revista Iberoamericana* 100-101, July-December 1977, 721-726. Other comparative studies include Antonio Ballesteros, "Joyce en Borges", *James Joyce: Límites de lo diáfano*, eds. Carmelo Medina Casado et. al. (Jaén: Universidad de Jaén, 1998) 61-71 and

Suzanne Jill Levine, "Note to Borges's Notes on Joyce: Infinite Affinities", *Comparative Literature* 4 (1997), 344-359.

⁶ See Thomas J. Rice, "Subtle Reflections of/upon Joyce in/by Borges", *Journal of Modern Literature* 24-1 (2000) 53.

⁷ Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion* (New York: Lumen Books, 1995) 19.

⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, foreword, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1999) 67. All subsequent quotations of short stories are taken from this volume.

⁹ The article was originally published in *Sur* 77, February 1941, 60-62. There is an English translation of the article in Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 2000) 220-221. To make them available for non-Spanish readers, I will quote Borges' essays from this edition. When there is no English translation available, I will provide my own version of the original text.

¹⁰ Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 220.

¹¹ Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 221.

¹² See Rice 52.

¹³ Qtd. in Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Daniel Halpern and Frank MacShane, eds., *Borges on Writing* (New York: Ecco, 1994) 141-143. For an English version of the volume of poems, see Jorge Luis Borges, *In Praise of Darkness*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (Dutton: New York, 1974).

¹⁴ Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 221.

¹⁵ My translation from Borges, *Obra poética* 326.

¹⁶ Williamson 179.

¹⁷ Borges, *Collected Fictions* 86.

¹⁸ See Rice 50.

¹⁹ See Rice 56-59.

²⁰ Borges, *Collected Fictions* 194.

²¹ My translation from Jorge Luis Borges and María Esther Vázquez, *Introducción a la literatura inglesa*, in *Obras completas en colaboración* (Barcelona: Emecé, 1997) 853.

²² Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) 56.

²³ Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 81.

²⁴ Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 81.

²⁵ Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 386-389.

²⁶ Saer recently recalled: "Una tarde de 1967, el autor de este artículo asistió a la escena siguiente: Borges, que había viajado a Santa Fe a hablar sobre Joyce, estaba charlando animadamente en un café antes de la conferencia con un grupito de jóvenes escritores que habían venido a hacerle un reportaje, cuando de pronto se acordó de que en los años cuarenta lo habían invitado a integrar una comisión que se proponía traducir colectivamente *Ulises*. Borges dijo que la comisión se reunía una vez por semana para discutir los preliminares de la

gigantesca tarea que los mejores anglicistas de Buenos Aires se habían propuesto realizar, pero que un día, cuando ya había pasado casi un año de discusiones semanales, uno de los miembros de la comisión llegó blandiendo un enorme libro y gritando: ‘¡Acaba de aparecer una traducción de Ulises!’”. See Juan José Saer, “El destino en español del *Ulises*”, *Babelia*, June 6, 2004, 12.

²⁷ James Joyce, *Ulises*, trans. José Salas Subirat (Buenos Aires: Santiago Rueda, 1945).

²⁸ My translation from Julián Ríos, “Joyce, por ejemplo”, *Joyce y España*, ed. Carlos García Santa Cecilia (Madrid: Círculo de Bellas Artes, 2004) 37.

²⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, “Nota sobre el *Ulises* en español”, *Los Anales de Buenos Aires* 1, 1946. My translation from the collection *Textos recobrados: 1931-1955* (Barcelona: Emecé, 2002) 233-234.

³⁰ Borges, *Textos recobrados: 1931-1955* 234.

³¹ Borges, *Textos recobrados: 1931-1955* 234.

³² James Joyce, *Ulises*, trans. José María Valverde (Barcelona: Lumen, 1976).

³³ *Referente* 1, Winter 1981. The interview “Borges y Joyce, 50 años después” was later included in Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos recobrados: 1956-1986* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2003) 363-367.

³⁴ My translation from Borges, *Textos recobrados: 1956-1986* 366.

³⁵ My translation from Borges, *Textos recobrados: 1956-1986* 363.

³⁶ In this regard, see the very interesting the analysis of Burgin’s *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges* by Emir Rodríguez Monegal, “Borges en U.S.A.”, *Revista Iberoamericana* 36, January-March 1970, 65-76. An online version is at : <http://mll.cas.buffalo.edu/rodriguez-monegal/bibliografia/prensa/artpren/iberoamer/latino_70.htm>.

³⁷ My translation from Borges, *Textos recobrados: 1956-1986* 364.

³⁸ See “Joyceana”, *Sitio* 2 (1982) 27-53.

³⁹ See Wilson as documented in note 6 above.

⁴⁰ Beatriz Sarlo, *Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (London: Verso, 1993) 51. An online version of this study can be found at the J. L. Borges Center for Studies & Documentation, <<http://www.hum.au.dk/romansk/borges/bsol/bsi4.htm>>.

⁴¹ James Joyce, *Ulises*, trans. Francisco García Tortosa and María Luisa Venegas (Madrid: Cátedra, 1999).

⁴² Qtd. in Christ 270.

⁴³ My translation from Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos Cautivos. Ensayos y reseñas en "El Hogar"*, ed. Enrique Sacerio-Garí y Emir Rodríguez Monegal (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1986) 84.

⁴⁴ Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 195.

⁴⁵ Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 195.

⁴⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, “Joyce y los neologismos”, *Sur* 62 (November 1939) 59-61. The article is included in Jorge Luis Borges, *Jorge Luis Borges en Sur (1931-1980)* (Barcelona: Emecé, 1999) 164-166.

-
- ⁴⁷ My translation from the prologue of Borges, *Obra poética* 174.
- ⁴⁸ Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 115-122, 225-228.
- ⁴⁹ Borges, *Collected Fictions* 125.
- ⁵⁰ Borges, *Collected Fictions* 126.
- ⁵¹ My translation of a fragment of “Pornografía y censura”, in Borges, *Textos recobrados: 1956-1986* 253-254.
- ⁵² My translation from Borges, *Textos recobrados: 1956-1986* 253.
- ⁵³ See “El caso Lolita”, in Borges, *Jorge Luis Borges en Sur (1931-1980)* 308-309.
- ⁵⁴ My translation from Borges, *Jorge Luis Borges en Sur (1931-1980)* 309.
- ⁵⁵ My translation from Borges, *Jorge Luis Borges en Sur (1931-1980)* 309.
- ⁵⁶ Emir Rodríguez Monegal, “Elogio de la censura”, *El País*, 12/19/1960, 17. An online version is available at <http://mll.cas.buffalo.edu/rodriguez_monegal//bibliografía/prensa/artpren/pais/pais191260.htm>.
- ⁵⁷ Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 69. Fourteen years later, Borges’ analysis of the Spanish translation of *Ulysses* began with these exact words, with the only change of “superstition” in place of “religion”.
- ⁵⁸ See George Steiner, *After Babel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 251.
- ⁵⁹ Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 70.
- ⁶⁰ My translation from Borges, *Textos recobrados: 1956-1986* 305.
- ⁶¹ My translation from Borges, *Obra poética* 643.