

# Autobiography/Translation: Memory's Losses or Narrative's Gains? Response to Bella Brodzki's Lecture

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“We translate to be translated”—translation transports the translator, but also the reader and the writer, in an act that transforms one text into another. Professor Brodzki uses this quote (which was a rejoinder in my book *The Subversive Scribe* (1991; 2009) to “thou art translated,” a line uttered by Quince to Bottom in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*), to move onto a broader stage. From the diverse scenarios of Russia and the Francophone Caribbean, from psychoanalysis to graphic memoir, Bella (I use her first name as we are old friends) analyzes parallels between the practice of autobiography and of translation, seeking to expand the definition of autobiography by means of the code of translation. Mediating these two practices she sets out to understand the screening process of memory, how or to what extent memory both distorts and creates the truths it seeks, and especially narratives that propose to reenact memory and to represent the truth.

In her lecture, Bella discusses how autobiography, like translation, is a rewriting, a re-presentation. At first glance we might find this argument farfetched. After all, unlike autobiography, a translation is normally a rewriting of a whole and visible text. It is not, at least on the surface, the reconstruction or restaging in coherent form of the fragments of memories of a life lived. If we look further, however, we can see that a translation performs a comparable artificial resuscitation. The original language has vanished in the text’s new version; the language that replaces it works to resurrect words and phrases, wordplays and metaphors, fragments of the translator’s language and mnemonic associations, that will bring to life the original, one hopes, as one expects the same from an autobiography.

Bella’s discussion departs precisely from the readerly expectation that the autobiographer’s pact with the reader—like the trans-

lator's "sacred duty"—is to be candidly true to an original. And yet, from an essentialist perspective, the end products of both practices can easily become Faustian Frankensteins. Under the aegis of Freud, who made the unconscious betrayals of the omniscient narrator visible to us, these betrayals are parallel to those of the translator, who can only give us approximations, never the thing itself. The first question that jumps out at me, then, is: Are we talking only about autobiography in relation to translation, or are we talking about all narrative in general? That is, is Bella's proposal in her paper suggesting a narrative theory that could be applied to any narrative form, beyond verbal language and written texts?

No two narratives are the same, as Borges's very first *fiction*, "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote," his famous parable about the "anachronistic" practice of reading, written in 1939, so spectacularly tells us. This devilish commentary on commentary (as George Steiner called it) is at the center of Bella's topic. Pierre Menard, avant-garde poet who, among his many daring experiments, attempts to rewrite a *Don Quixote* completely identical to the original, is Borges caricaturing himself as a young Ultraist. Borges's story—supposedly written in French by an admiring disciple of Menard—is a fiction that pretends to be a biography while it is (like all fiction, one could argue) autobiographical, and is not only about the absurd impossibility of the totally faithful translation but also implies and reveals that it is in itself a translation.

My question to Bella is, in this discursive context, is there a significant difference here between autobiography and biography vis-à-vis translation? I ask this coming, also, from my own work on a biography of Manuel Puig. The author of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, Puig's novels pay homage with their "dollar book" Freudianisms to Freud's invention of the modern novel, that is, the decidedly nonobjective narrator. As both translator and biographer I have dealt with the challenges of subjectivity, memory, and interpretation, haunted by the pact of fidelity that such nonfiction writing involves. Autobiography, biography, and creative memoir are evaluated, however, by the strength, intensity, and inventiveness of their narrative structure, of the story they construct, just as translation is evaluated by its fluency, its persuasive rhetorical effect. The writer of nonfiction is as dependent on literary conventions, plot, theme, character development, climax, and denouement as the fic-

tion writer. Truth is less of a consideration than the appropriateness of form and the success of style. Autobiography differs from biography because, as the subject and the writer/producer of the former is the same, we assume a much higher/deeper level of fidelity to the subject. However, considering that “the self is constituted by a discourse that it never completely masters”<sup>1</sup> how different, really, are these two genres? We might define the difference this way: the biographer is situated outside of the life he or she wishes to represent and wants to work his or her way into it, while self-writing, autobiography, presents its author with the problem of being too much of an insider, needing to distance her or himself, to get far enough away to see what’s happening and what it is one actually wants to represent.

My possible response to the question above can perhaps be aided by my own experience. I have written an authorized biography and am attempting to write a translator’s autobiography. While the research for the biography was different from the current research for my own history, I also had to realize that my subjectivity influenced the biography as if it were in some way an autobiography; or, whether narrating an autobiography or a biography, I was and am never totally subjective or objective. Hence, can we agree on the translational nature of autobiography and also of other forms of narrative, fictional or nonfictional, and are we perhaps speaking of a translational paradigm for narrative in general?

In “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” Georges Gusdorf<sup>2</sup> examines Paul Valéry’s radical proposal that biography in order to be true must go beyond its traditional limits.<sup>3</sup> I cite these thoughts on this topic here because, among other things, they also relate to Bella’s provocative discussion of autobiography and translation. They also reveal an important source of Borges’s fictions and essays that highlight narrative theory and feature his antirealist theories of narrative art as well as his poetics of writing as translation. According to the theory of biography proposed by Valéry—whose *Monsieur Teste* was a direct Borgesian model, fondly parodied by

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Spinker, “Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography,” in James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Practical* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980) 342.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” in James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980) 41.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Valéry, “La Vie est un conte,” *Tel Quel II* (1943): 348-349. The entire issue is available online at <https://archive.org/stream/telquelv02valuoft#page/n7/mode/2up>.

Borges's famous Pierre Menard as a kind of absurdly avant-garde intellectual artist—a biographer, moving between the actual life and his life-writing, would have to see through the eyes of the subject. The biographer would have to attempt to know as little of the following moment as the subject himself would know about the corresponding instant of his career. This would be to restore chance in each instant, rather than putting together a series that admits of a neat summary and a causality that can be described in a formula. Causality was, as we know, one of the core issues of Borges's "Narrative Art and Magic."<sup>4</sup> Valéry's point, as Borges sees it, is that the so-called real truth is nothing, unformed, blurred, and that therefore the original sin of biography—which we could compare with the original sign of autobiography—is to presume the virtues of logical coherence and rationalization.

That is, we can extend Valéry's discussion of the prerogative of biography to that of autobiography in that the task at hand is not to show us the objective stages of a career, but to reveal the efforts of historian/biographer/autobiographer to discover or reveal the effort of a creator to give the meaning of her (or his) own mythical tale. This latter statement basically describes Freud's attempt at autobiography in his "study." On the surface he "objectively" appears to summarize his career—giving us much valuable information—but in reality he is creating his own self-myth as intuitive scientist, a myth in which, it so happens, his early work as a translator plays a major role.

Bella reminds us that for Freud "la psychanalyse c'est moi." Through her discussion we read his "autobiographical study" which reveals his influences, Goethe on Nature, and notably the Bible, which impacted him precisely because he belonged to an oppositional minority as a Jew. What he read or experienced or what influenced him is more about his real feelings or interests; what he actually says about himself, is all about his ego and need for cultural power. For Freud translation was a power play, or as Bella writes, "Though he had a position as a Lecturer in Pathology in Vienna, it was his work as a translator that gained him entry into

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<sup>4</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Narrative Art and Magic," in *Selected Non-Fictions*, edited by Eliot Weinberger, translated by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999) 75–82.

Charcot's circle of personal acquaintances and full participation in the activities at Salpêtière Clinic" (AS, Freud R, 6). (infra, 21)

Ironically this personal essay says less about the man beneath the persona than his essay on screen memories or any of his fundamental books such as *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud's "Autobiographical Study" is a prime example of an omniscient narrator blind to his own subjectivity. What I personally found fascinating is that Freud, as Jewish outsider, gained entrance to the circles of cultural power as a translator. Curiously, I could see a similar trajectory in my own life, as a woman gaining entrance to the Latin American Boom literary circles, a world of cultural significance in my time and context, in which I took on an identity as translator and even muse, more glamorous than my own modest "outsider" Washington Heights Jewish origins.

As Manuel Puig (the author whose literary texts I translated and whose life I ultimately translated into a biography) aptly put it, Freud invented the modern novel: that is, he exposed the unavoidable limitations of the omniscient narrator, hence his importance not only to autobiography but to all writing. In Bella's discussion, Autobiography and Translation come together logically and intuitively in Freud whose early work as a translator helped create his career as a scientist. By extension, his role as translator helped create the persona whose theoretical work was practically based on autobiographical as well as clinical reflection.

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