REWRITING ANGLO-SAXON: NOTES ON THE PRESENCE OF OLD ENGLISH IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

> Hwilum he sette word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgite, swa swa he hit tha sweotolost ond andgitfullicast gereccan mihte for tham mistlicum ond manigfealdum weoruldbisgum the hine oft aegther ge on mode ge on lichoman bisgodan.
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> (King Alfred's Translation of Boethius, Proem)

> A return to origins invigorates because it is a return to nature and reason. The man who returns to origins does so because he wishes to behave in the eternally sensible manner. That is to say, naturally, reasonably, intuitively.
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> (Ezra Pound, "The Tradition")

Literary critics have described Literature as a process that involves a constant rewriting of what others have written before. There is no literary work -we cannot conceive of any possible literary work- without the presence, both in the mind of the author and the reader's, of other texts, of some words, concepts and ideas that shape a literary tradition. It is self-evident that when we, once again, write "the arrows of fortune" we are, on the one hand, merely repeating or rewriting what Shakespeare wrote four hundred years ago. But, on the other hand, it must also be apparent that our "arrows of fortune" are not the

same as Shakespeare's, since all that load that has been deposited upon the expression in these four centuries has contributed to give it another significance. And this simple example is naturally a mere illustration of a much more complex mechanism, one which has produced a well-known movement in contemporary literary theory and in literary creation associated with such fashionable terms as "poststructuralism" and "postmodernism." The "death of the author" and the power exerted by the text, by the languague and by intertextuality seem to dominate over our contemporary culture and literature. What we create and what we read seem to be simply a product of the constant "remaking" to which all commodities are subject.

One of the greatest contemporary writers in Spanish, generally considered as a pioneer of this postmodernist trend, is the Argentinian poet and short-story teller Jorge Luis Borges, who was perhaps one of the first men to be conscious and to make others conscious of this complex phenomenon of intertextuality. I am thinking particularly of his famous piece "Pierre Menard, author of *Don Quixote",*[1] but many other examples coud be quoted as well. The fictitious French writer of this story imposed upon himself the titanic task of rewriting Cervantes's work, with the astonishing result of producing an exact replica of the original 17th-century work. But the narrator of this Borgesian short story is well aware of the differences that separate one from the other. Although words and syntax are the same, the product -for Borges- is finally diverse. His comments on a few lines are revealing; words such as "truth," "mother," "history," "present," etc. cannot be the same when written by Cervantes or when "rewritten" by Menard. Borges wonders how we could ignore William James's philosophy, which is (must be) hidden under Menard's words, and

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[1].- Cf. Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote," *Ficciones,* Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1980, pp. 47-59.

simply read a sentence like "la verdad, cuya madre es la historia, émula del tiempo, depósito de las acciones…" etc. in the manner of the 17th century. The conclusion then is simple: literature is necessarily a process of rewriting, since we need the words that others have used before, but it is also a process of "rereading," because our role as readers of texts cannot remain unaltered by history and the evolution of genres.[1]

This contemporary condition, that makes us hesitate in the reading and interpretation of the texts of the past, cannot be ignored when we discuss Anglo-Saxon texts and their presence and relevance in literary tradition. It is well known that Old English verse *seemed* to disappear from the English literary tradition after the Norman Conquest, and that the majestic stature of Chaucer casts a long shadow on that earlier poetry, but that is simply a false impression. John Speirs noticed this in his well-known book *Medieval English Poetry. The Non-Chaucerian Tradition,*[2] where he emphasized something that others seemed to have forgotten, that is, that not only *Gawain, Pearl, Piers Plowman* and other minor poems preserved the Anglo-Saxon alliterative tradition in the 14th century, but that also great English poets of later periods such as Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Donne, even Dryden, Pope, Crabbe and Keats -not to mention Hopkins, or Yeats and Eliot- cultivated this vigorous tradition of alliterative poetry. And we could also add that alliteration is not the only feature of that old poetry which has been continuously present in the language and in English literature without interruption. Shakespeare and Milton, for

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1.- One of the most attractive and effective procedures to face this double process of rewriting and rereading is the one put forward by the French critic Gérard Genette in his book *Palimpsestes* (1982), where he describes literary works that are affected by "transtextuality," that is, five different kinds of textual activity: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality.

2.- Cf. John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry. The Non-Chaucerian Tradition,* London, 1966.

instance, are notorious cases in the continuity of compounding, so fundamental and significant in the construction of that old poetry, as Hopkins remarked once when he tried to defend and justify his passion for Anglo-Saxon.[1]

But I am not going to trace an evolution of Old English verse devices through all these centuries of English literary tradition, a task that is obviously beyond my purpose in this essay. Let me simply tackle this issue of the rewriting of Anglo-Saxon from the perspective of our time, let me examine some contemporary instances of this process; because by doing so I think we can learn something of the power of a literature and a language which many people -among them some of our colleagues at the University, alas- deem dead and forgotten, those who insist in denying Old English literature a space in the curriculum.[2] My modest proposal here is then to show that this is not so, that Old English is -to a certain extent at least- still alive, and not only in the English literary tradition. Some of the greatest writers of the twentieth century offer excellent evidence of the opposite. On the other hand, contemporary literary theory, one which seems so inimical to (or at least, so far apart from) our Old English texts may help us in this task through the means of intertextuality (see note 2).

1.- In a letter to Robert Bridges on November 26, 1882 he wrote: "It makes one weep to think what English might have been; for in spite of all that Shakespear *[sic]* and Milton have done with the compound I cannot doubt that no beauty in a language can make up for want of purity. In fact I am learning Anglosaxon and it is a vastly superior thing to what we have now." Quoted by Denis Donoghue in "The Flight of Gerard Manley Hopkins," a review of Robert Bernard Martin's *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life* published in *The New York Review of Books,* vol. XXXVIII, no. 13 (July 18, 1991), pp. 14-18; for my quotation see p. 17].

2.- Cf. the polemics initiated by Valentine Cunningham in the *TLS* when he called "for an end to compulsory Anglo-Saxon study in the Oxford English course." *TLS,* no. 4613 (August 30, 1991), p. 11.

Ezra Pound is perhaps the most remarkable contemporary poet who must be quoted in this case. His conception of tradition, for instance, or his defence of old literatures, and particularly Anglo-Saxon, come immediately to our minds. Pound is certainly a man who cannot be ignored in a discussion of this kind, since his courage and determination in defying all those stereotyped notions about the primitive and simple values of Old English literature deserve at least some attention. That he approaches it with clarity and simplicity, with an attitude free from what sometimes constitutes the heavy burden of old philology, should not -in my opinion- be rejected with the usual scorn philologists address to *amateurs* and *dilettanti.* Pound was obviously no philologist, but he should not be seen as an intruder at all. Let us read what he said when he defended the seriousness and quality of early English texts. Although the quotation that follows is long, I think it is interesting to reproduce it, because the words Pound uses here are an effective evidence for the depth of his insight and the seriousness of his commitment to Anglo-Saxon, and not, as some scholars have said, a mere superficial bent, led perhaps by fashion and snobbery:

> Time and again the old lie.[…] we read again for the one-thousand-one-hundred-and-eleventh time that poetry is made to entertain. As follows: 'The beginnings of English poetry… made by a rude war-faring people for the entertainment of men-at-arms, or for men at monks' tables.'
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> Either such statements are made to curry favor with other people sitting at fat sterile tables, or they are made in an ignorance which is charlatanry when it goes out to vend itself as sacred and impeccable knowledge.
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> 'The beginnings -for entertainment' -has the writer of this sentence read *The Seafarer* in Anglo-Saxon? Will the author tell us for whose benefit these lines, which alone in the works of our fore-

> bears are fit to compare with Homer -for whose entertainment were they made? They were made for no man's entertainment, but because a man believing in silence found himself unable to withhold himself from speaking. […]
> Such poems are not made for after-dinner speakers, nor was the eleventh book of the Odyssey. Still it flatters the mob to tell them that their importance is so great that the solace of lonely men, and the lordliest of the arts, was created for their amusement.[1]

I should add, moreover, that Pound's commitment is not theoretical, is not simply concerned with statements of this sort, but that he really studies those texts. His version of *The Seafarer* and his comments on it are revealing;[2] he was not involved in a mere translation into modern English, but in something more transcendent, that is, in adapting Old English words, phrases, alliterations, rhythm, even if that effort some times implied a certain treason of the dictionary "meaning" of the original. His version of *The Seafarer* is not an accurate translation in this respect, as some critics have pointed out, because *wrecan* does not mean *reckon* (l. 1), because *Lifge mid englum* is rendered as *remain 'mid the English* (l. 28), or because *byrig faeriath* is mistakenly given as *cometh beauty of berries* (l. 48), among other howlers. Nevertheless he was fully conscious of some of these slips

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1.- Ezra Pound, "The Constant Preaching to the Mob" [first published in *Poetry,* VIII, 3 (June, 1916)], in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound,* edited with an Introduction by T.S. Eliot, Faber & Faber, London, 1985, pp. 64-5. Cf. also these words about his classics: "I should want Dante of course, and the *Poema del Cid* and the *Sea-farer* and one passage out of *The Wanderer.* In fact, some knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon fragments -not particularly the Beowulf- would prevent a man's sinking into contentment with a lot of wish-wash that passes for classic or 'standard' poetry," in "The Renaissance," *Literary Essays…,* pp. 215-6 [originally published in *Poetry,* Chicago, 1914].

2.- Cf. *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound,* ed. by Michael John King, with and introduction by Louis L. Martz, New Directions Publishing Corporation, New York, 1976, pp. 188-190 for the text, and p. 311 for notes.

so that they cannot be simply due to "ignorance." His purpose was to repeat the experience of the original poem and to produce in his contemporary audience *similar effects* to those of the earlier period. Although Pound was certainly no Anglo-Saxon scholar, and he did not aspire to accuracy in his version, most contemporary literary critics (but not many philologists, alas) judge his task as meritorious;[1] it is perhaps Michael Alexander -who knows very well what he is talking about- the one who has defended Pound more warmly, referring to some of the attacks he has suffered as "archaelogical fallacy," that he defines as "the notion that the reading of a lexicographically accurate version in readable modern English prose, rather than Pound's phonetic simulacrum, would be nearer to the experience the original audience had of the original poem."[2] He also remarks that Pound's version "as a translation […] is brilliant, stimulating, inaccurate, misleadingly heathen and at times rather loud. As an interpretation it is radical and heterodox, though not indefensible. As a model to translators it needs to be handled with care, except by translators of

1.- Cf. Vilas Sarang, "Pound's *Seafarer," Concerning Poetry,* vol. 6, no. 2 (Fall 1973), pp. 5-11, and Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era,* University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1971, pp. 151-3, 349-354 and 484, *passim.* It is also interesting to quote Borges's opinion about this translation, that he compares with Gordon's version. Borges says: "La prosa de Gordon es más natural y fluida que la versión poética de aquél [Pound], pero es evidente que Pound, sin dejar de ser fiel, ha querido reproducir en inglés moderno la enérgica aspereza del texto antiguo y también los mismos sonidos. […] Los que, como nosotros, se han dedicado, con mayor o menor fortuna, al ejercicio de la poesía, sabemos que lo esencial del verso es su entonación y no su sentido abstracto. Los eruditos acusan a Pound de incurrir en crasos errores, demostrando su ignorancia del sajón, del latín o del provenzal; no quieren comprender que sus traducciones reflejan las formas inasibles y no el fondo" (Jorge Luis Borges, "Notas sobre Ezra Pound, traductor," *Syntaxis,* 8/9 (1985), pp. 41-2).

2.- Michael Alexander, *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound,* University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1979, p. 71.

comparable gifts. But as an adaptation and as a poetic performance it is a work of genius."[1]

It must be recognized that the voice of the solitary Seafarer comes back anew, in an English which is not exactly our contemporary English but that we can understand and feel. It is also true that Pound's version says other things, slightly different from what was said in the original poem, but at the same time we cannot ignore that it sounds almost like the anonymous Old English text, and this is much more than what others have achieved with more accurate prose versions:

> May I for my own self song's truth reckon,
> Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days
> Hardship endured oft.
> Bitter breast-cares have I abided,
> Known on my keel many a care's hold,
> ……

Something similar was done by another contemporary poet, although not perhaps with the high level of consciousness that Pound exhibited. I mean W.H. Auden, whose poem *The Wanderer* is also characteristically an adaptation, a recreation (a re-writing), but not a translation, of the original Anglo-Saxon. In Genette's terms (see note 2), we could say that while Pound deals mainly with hypertextual, paratextual and intertextual relations, Auden prefers those wider references of architextuality, although paratextuality is also present. Auden seems to have found inspiration in the theme and the atmosphere of the old text, seems to have imbued himself with the sounds, the rhetoric and other peculiarities of the poetic language of the period,

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[1].- Michael Alexander, *The Poetic Achievement*... pp. 78-9.

and then tried to compose (to re-write) something equivalent. And certainly the reading of Auden's lines conveys parallel emotions to those we experience with Old English verse, although this is not a version of any Anglo-Saxon text. Notice how his efforts at alliteration, his deviant syntax, the occasional compounding, the absence of articles, and word order contribute decisively to create this impression:

> Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle.
> Upon what man it fall
> In spring, day-wishing flowers appearing,
> Avalanche sliding, white snow from rock-face,
> That he should leave his house,
> No cloud-soft hand can hold him, restraint by women;
> But ever that man goes
> Through place-keepers, through forest trees,
> A stranger to strangers over undried sea,
> Houses for fishes, suffocating water,
> Or lonely on fell as chat,
> By pot-holed becks
> A bird stone-haunting, an unquiet bird.
>
> There head falls forward, fatigued at evening,
> And dreams of home,
> Waving from window, spread of welcome,
> Kissing of wife under single sheet;
> ……[1]

These texts I have quoted, together with others by Hopkins I have not cited here, are some of the most relevant examples of the preser-

[1].- W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems,* ed. by Edward Mendelson, Faber & Faber, London, 1976, p. 62.

vation, of the rewriting, of Anglo-Saxon in contemporary English literature. There are also some critical studies on them, perhaps mainly because these authors -Hopkins, Pound and Auden- occupy such an important position in the English literary tradition. But it would be wrong to assume that this sort of rewriting is present only in English and exclusively in the authors and texts I have mentioned. How can we forget Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns,* for instance? Many suggestions, echoes and images from the past, from the old literature of this distant past, are relatively abundant in our contemporary cultural scene. But there are other literatures, which had originally no connection with the Anglo-Saxon world, particularly French and Spanish (as far as I know), where similar examples could be (and perhaps should be) quoted because they are usually ignored by Old English scholars and medievalists in general; and because their lack of contacts (linguistic, historical, cultural, etc.) with the Anglo-Saxons is an adequate proof that the presence of these echoes in them are not merely a reflection of other external factors. We are really in front of a genuine process of rewriting for its own sake.

Two interesting cases of this presence of Old English literature in French and Spanish are the French writer Marguerite Yourcenar and the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges, both essential writers in their respective literary traditions.[1] Yourcenar voices, or rather lends her voice to King Alfred and -through him- to Bede, when in her essay "Sur quelques lignes de Bède le Vénérable" she evokes some beautiful words uttered by a thane of Northumberland in a "stormy dawn" of the 7th century, on the occasion of the christianization of this heathen people.

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[1].- An interesting discussion of the meeting of both writers in Geneva in 1986 is offered by Juan Luis Panero in "Encuentro en Ginebra," *El País,* 31 March 1991, "Libros," p. 8.

The French writer glosses the historical and social circumstances and explains the linguistic transmission of that message. References are made to the version written in Latin by Bede of the words pronounced in Old Saxon one century before he wrote; also to the new rendering by King Alfred who, using the Latin text, put those words back into English in his translation of the *Historia ecclesiastica;* and finally Yourcenar's contemporary rewriting is presented to the reader. She explains in French those words of the thane, but gives them also in Latin and in Old English because -as she also says- the human word comes down to us full of corruptions and misunderstandings caused by the passage of time and the omissions and additions of many generations. There is no other way than to rewrite Bede's and Alfred's words once more and, following the classical medieval procedure, to gloss them. She quotes the Latin words: "Adveniensque unus passarum domum citissime pervolavit, qui cum per unum ostium ingrediens, mox per aliud exierit," remarking that Bede's prose is still excessively classic for such a primitive thought, and that Alfred's language is much more effective and powerful in its simplicity: "Cume an spearwa and braedlice thaet hus thurhfleo, cume thurh othre duru in, thurn othre ut gewite."[1]

The image of this bird entering the house and going out again is extremely suggestive for Yourcenar, who meditates on its significance and compares it with man's development upon the earth:

> Pour ce barbare, au contraire, l'oiseau sort de l'ouragan et rentre dans la tempête; ces rafales de pluie et de neige chassées par le vent dans la nuit druidique font penser au tourbillonnement des atomes, aux cyclones de formes des sutras hindoues. Entre ces deux orages monstrueux, le thane interprète le passage de l'oiseau

[1].- Marguerite Yourcenar, "Sur quelques lignes de Bède le Vénérable," *La Nouvelle Revue Française,* 280 (April 1976), pp. 1-7.

> dans la salle comme un moment de répit *[spatio serenitatis]*. Il nous surprend beaucoup. Le thane d'Edwin savait pourtant qu'un oiseau entré dans une maison des hommes tournoie éperdu, risque de se briser contre ces murs incompréhensibles, de se brûler à la flamme, ou d'être happé par les dogues allongés au bord du foyer. La vie, telle que nous la vivons, n'est pas un moment de répit.[1]

The French writer is then rewriting and recreating on the basis of direct allusions and quotations from other texts (or a double text: an elaborated Latin-Old English text) -and that is genuine intertextuality for Genette- as well as with commentaries (metatextuality) on them. Yourcenar adapts these old words to our present perspective: the image of that bird which passes so quickly through the house, coming from a place no one knows and going elsewhere, is like the ephemeral course of human life ("this laene lif"). It becomes for her even a symbol of greater power, a symbol of anxiety: "that of the mind, an illumined room, a central fire, momentarily placed for each of us in the middle of all the things and without which, neither the bird nor the storm would have been imagined or perceived."[2]

I have also mentioned Jorge Luis Borges, who is -it is probably unnecessary to say it again- the best "English poet in Spanish," and also the Spanish-speaking author who has done most to spread the knowledge of Germanic medieval literatures in Spanish. His book *Literaturas germánicas medievales,* written first with Delia Ingenieros in 1951 (under the title *Antiguas literaturas germánicas),* and revised later in 1966 with María Esther Vázquez, is his best known

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1.- Marguerite Yourcenar, "Sur quelques lignes…," pp. 6-7.

2.- Marguerite Yourcenar, "Sur quelques lignes…," p. 7. The French text says: "Celui du cerveau, chambre éclairée, feu central, temporairemente placé chacun de nous au milieu des choses, et sans quoi l'oiseau ni la tempête ne seraient ni imaginés ni perçus."

work about this period,[1] but not his only contribution to this field; he also wrote essays on medieval Germanic verse, such as "Las kenningar" (in *Historia de la eternidad)* and compiled a short Anglo-Saxon anthology, in collaboration with María Kodama, where he translated a fragment from *Beowulf,* "The Fight at Finnsburg," "Deor," "The Seafarer," and some other pieces.[2]

What is perhaps less known is his contribution to this process of rewriting Anglo-Saxon literature, a task to which he devoted special attention from 1960 onwards, as can be appreciated in his books *El hacedor* (1960), *El otro, el mismo* (1964), *Elogio de la sombra* (1969), *El oro de los tigres* (1972), *La rosa profunda* (1975) and *La memoria de hierro* (1976). There are about thirty poems connected with the Germanic world, many of them particularly with Anglo-Saxon civilization, although some others are more closely related to Old Nordic literatures, especially Icelandic. Apart from his translations and his essays, in these poems Borges is really *rewriting* Old English literature -taking inspiration from particular Anglo-Saxon texts, but not translating them-, using poetic words, phrases, metaphors that evoke memories of the past. As if he were following his Pierre Menard, Borges employs those classical Old English words (in their Spanish forms), importing into his Spanish verse audacious metaphors that sound like the old kennings, trying to keep some of the rhythm and alliterations of Old English through anaphoras and diverse rhetorical figures. This old language is for Borges a vehicle that helps him

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1.- Recent editions of this work are: Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1980, and also as a part of *Obras completas en colaboración,* Alianza Tres & Emecé, vol. 2, Madrid, 1983, pp. 387-512.

2.- Cf. J. L. Borges, "Las kenningar," in *Historia de la eternidad,* Alianza Editorial & Emecé Editores, Madrid & Buenos Aires, 1971, pp. 45-70; and "Breve antología anglosajona" (in collaboration with María Kodama) in *Obras completas en colaboración,* Alianza Tres & Emecé, vol. 2, Madrid, 1983, pp. 307-321.

recover his own poetical persona; we hear the poet's voice expressing his gratitude:

> Por los ríos secretos e inmemoriales
> Que convergen en mí,
> Por el idioma que, hace siglos, hablé en Nortumbria,
> Por la espada y el arpa de los sajones,
> Por el mar, que es un desierto resplandeciente
> Y una cifra de cosas que no sabemos,
> Por la música verbal de Inglaterra,
> Por la música verbal de Alemania,
> Por el oro, que relumbra en los versos,
> Por el épico invierno,
> ……[1]

In these lines Borges, our contemporary, feels one with the poets who spoke and wrote in the old Northumbrian dialect, one with the warriors who handled swords, the *scop* who played the harp in the feasts celebrated after battle. For him language is then the instrument that takes him back to the primitive poetry and the primitive civilization where he finds himself; this is the way to enter the mystery of runes ("cifra de cosas"), and the music of the old words, and the gold present in this verse (which -we understand- is the blood that speaks of death and war), and even the cold winter of the Dark Age. Through this process (mostly intertextual and architextual in the lines quoted above) Borges is implicitly preaching here again his sermon that "literature is inexhaustible for the simple reason that one single book is inexhaustible;" that each text contains all texts and that all authors are finally reduced to one.

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[1].- J. L. Borges, "Otro poema de los dones," in *Obra poética, 1923-1976,* Alianza Editorial & Emecé Editores, Madrid & Buenos Aires, 1979, pp. 267-269.

On other occasions Borges is simply evoking an epic past that comes to his mind when he contemplates an old sword; in the following "Fragmento" he is chanting and exalting the old sword that he imagines in Beowulf's hand. But his evocation is no mere reflection on the past; his expression is phrased in strong Anglo-Saxon images, that bear no resemblance to the Spanish literary tradition:

> Una espada para la mano
> Que regirá la hermosa batalla, el tejido de hombres,
> Una espada para la mano
> Que enrojecerá los dientes del lobo
> Y el despiadado pico del cuervo,
> Una espada para la mano
> Que prodigará el oro rojo,
> Una espada para la mano
> Que dará muerte a la serpiente en su lecho de oro,
> Una espada para la mano
> Que ganará un reino y perderá un reino,
> Una espada para la mano
> Que derribará la selva de lanzas.
> Una espada para la mano de Beowulf.[1]

The references to "dientes del lobo" and "pico del cuervo" must remind us of the kennings for 'dead' and 'warrior' respectively that Borges himself collects in the list of kennings included in his essay on Scandinavian literature: the dead is "trigo de los lobos" as well as "árbol de los cuervos" and "avena del águila;" and the warrior is,

[1].- J. L. Borges, "Fragmento," in *Obra poética…,* pp. 228-9. A detailed discussion of this poem from the Anglo-Saxon perspective is found in my essay "Jorge Luis Borges, poeta anglosajón (Sobre un aspecto de las convenciones literarias)," *Revista de Filología de la Universidad de La Laguna,* 1 (1982), pp. 139-149.

among many other images, "enrojecedor del pico del cuervo."[1] Another expression, such as "la serpiente en su lecho de oro" is an obvious allusion, in this context, to the treasure guarding dragon, as the direct mention later to Beowulf proves. And "selva de lanzas" is a beautiful image probably coined on the Anglo-Saxon pattern of "gargewinn," "sperenid," "garmitting" or "garnid." What Borges has done here then is similar to Pound's effort to give shape to the old language, not merely to repeat it, but to integrate it as something transcendental, eternal, always present when rewritten by others. Furthermore, we must notice that Borges has to fight against a potent enemy which Pound did not have: the Spanish language is certainly very distant from the Germanic source that he wants to imitate. But readers familiarized with Anglo-Saxon poetry cannot help identifying that "selva de lanzas" quoted above, or his allusion to "una espada para la mano," which is reminiscent of "sweord-freca," a usual term for "warrior."

This fragment I have quoted is only a sample of Borges's ability in intertextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality, of his capacity to make poetry with the old rhetorical devices that Anglo-Saxons and other Germanic cultures had at their disposal. A comparison with his translation (not recreation this time) of Egil Skalagrimsson's *Saga* will help us see that Borges was, in "Fragmento," really "rewriting" and not simply translating, as here:

> Los teñidores de los dientes del lobo
> Prodigaron la sangre del cisne rojo.
> El halcón del rocío de la espada
> Se alimentó con héroes en la llanura.
> Serpientes de la luna de los piratas

[1].- J. L. Borges, *Obras completas en colaboración…,* vol. 2, pp. 476-480.

Cumplieron la voluntad de los Hierros.
……
El aniquilador de la estirpe de los gigantes
Quebró al fuerte bisonte de la pradera de la gaviota.
Así los dioses, mientras el guardián de la campana se lamentaba,
Destrozaron el halcón de la ribera.
De poco le valió el rey de los griegos
Al caballo que corre por arrecifes.[1]

This is obviously formulaic language taken to extremes, and Borges knows very well that this is to be avoided, as he does when he is not translating, but composing his own poetry.

Probably some of the most outstanding examples of the control Borges has of this old technique are the sonnets he writes, combining the requisites of this type of stanza (rhyme, stresses, lines of counted syllables) with the images and vocabulary of Old English. The sonnet entitled "El instante," dealing with the *ubi sunt?* theme, is a clear proof of this, where we find a reference to the Rood (and possibly to *The Dream of the Rood):*

¿Dónde estarán los siglos, dónde el sueño
De espadas que los tártaros soñaron,
Dónde los fuertes muros que allanaron,
Dónde el Arbol de Adán y el otro Leño?[2]

In another sonnet, called "Lo perdido," Borges does not merely combine two different rhetorical traditions, but also introduces his own personal voice, his own particular and peculiar obsessions and images

1.- J. L. Borges, *Obras completas en colaboración…,* vol. 2, p. 475.
2.- J. L. Borges, "El instante," in *Obra poética…,* p. 243.

(night, blindness, death …), thus demonstrating the capacity of old texts to be fresh again, full of new life. The reader will probably read through the following lines the text (or texts) that is (are) under Borges's words without any help:

> ¿Dónde estará mi vida, la que pudo
> Haber sido y no fue, la venturosa
> O la de triste horror, esa otra cosa
> Que pudo ser la espada o el escudo
> Y que no fue? ¿Dónde estará el perdido
> Antepasado persa o el noruego,
> Dónde el azar de no quedarme ciego,
> Dónde el ancla y el mar, dónde el olvido
> De ser quien soy? ¿Dónde estará la pura
> Noche que al rudo labrador confía
> El iletrado y laborioso día,
> Según lo quiere la literatura?
> Pienso también en esa compañera
> Que me esperaba, y que tal vez me espera.[1]

Some times Borges presents his readers with suggestive pictures of the old world, as in "Hengist quiere hombres (449 A.D.)," that tells of the plans for the Germanic invasion of Britain in the fifth century. But in doing so he uses language to evoke the future that awaits England, and to make a reflection on his role as creator in this process of rewriting history. Some excerpts will suffice:

> Hengist el mercenario quiere hombres.
> Los quiere para debelar una isla que todavía no

[1].- J. L. Borges, "Lo perdido," in *Obra poética…,* p. 379.

se llama Inglaterra.
Lo seguirán sumisos y crueles.
Saben que siempre fue el primero en la batalla de
hombres.
Saben que una vez olvidó su deber de venganza
y que le dieron una espada desnuda y que la
la espada hizo su obra.
Atravesarán a remo los mares, sin brújula y sin
mástil.
……
Hengist los quiere (pero no lo sabe) para la fundación
del mayor imperio, para que canten Shakespeare
y Whitman, para que dominen el mar las naves
de Nelson, para que Adán y Eva se alejen, tomados
de la mano y silenciosos, del Paraíso que han perdido.
Hengist los quiere (pero no lo sabrá) para que yo
trace estas letras.[1]

These excerpts, so full of allusions to the past, are again a confirmation of this extraordinary fusion of voices and texts. Borges tells us that what Hengist is doing when calling his men to invade England is of transcendental importance, although this barbarous warrior cannot know, of course, the consequences. Without Hengist -the Argentinian poet says-, Shakespeare, Milton and Whitman would not have existed; without Hengist and his men, even Borges himself would never have written this poem. Hengist is then not merely an excuse for rewriting history, the history of the invasion of England, but much more: he represents the foundation of the language, of the great literature Borges loves so deeply. Hengist and his men, nevertheless, come to

[1].- J. L. Borges, "Hengist quiere hombres (449 A.D.)," in *Obra poética…,* pp. 407-408.

life through Borges's writing, through the words that Borges takes from the tradition to create them ("Hengist los quiere (pero no lo sabrá) para que yo trace estas letras"). But we also understand that Borges -as I have just said- could not have written this without Hengist, because our contemporary poet is completely indebted to that language of iron, to those metaphors coined by a people of warriors.

Paratextuality and metatextuality are dominant in this poem, but most of Borges's works dealing with old Germanic literatures are also full of the other types of transtextuality. It seems unnecessary to give more details. Cases of intertextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality have been mentioned before. Let us now conclude this brief vision of Borges's rewriting of Old English with a poem in which he pays an emotive homage to an anonymous Saxon poet. This is a summary of the culture and literature of that old England, including both the heathen world and the Christian faith, the epic tone and the elegiac note, the language of war and battles and the language of poetry. Borges again, as in the first quotation given above (note 18), is one with the old Saxon poet:

A un poeta sajón

Tú cuya carne, hoy dispersión y polvo,
Pesó como la nuestra sobre la tierra,
Tú cuyos ojos vieron el sol, esa famosa estrella,
Tú que viviste no en el rígido ayer
Sino en el incesante presente,
En el último punto y ápice vertiginoso del tiempo,
Tú que en tu monasterio fuiste llamado
Por la antigua voz de la épica,
Tú que tejiste las palabras,
Tú que cantaste la victoria de Brunanburh

Y no la atribuiste al Señor
Sino a la espada de tu rey,
Tú que con júbilo feroz cantaste,
La humillación del viking,
El festín del cuervo y del águila,
Tú que en la oda militar congregaste
Las rituales metáforas de la estirpe,
Tú que en un tiempo sin historia
Viste en el ahora el ayer
Y en el sudor y sangre de Brunanburh
Un cristal de antiguas auroras,
Tú que tanto querías a tu Inglaterra
Y no la nombraste,
Hoy no eres otra cosa que unas palabras
Que los germanistas anotan.
Hoy no eres otra cosa que mi voz
Cuando revive tus palabras de hierro.

Pido a mis dioses o a la suma del tiempo
Que mis días merezcan el olvido,
Que mi nombre sea Nadie como el de Ulises,
Pero que algún verso perdure
En la noche propicia a la memoria
O en las mañanas de los hombres.[1]

This fusion of voices and metaphors, this intermingling of cultures and literary traditions is -in my opinion- a remarkable confirmation of the vitality of Old English literature. Borges has demonstrated that Brunanburh and the poet who chanted it are not so far away, that they

[1].- J. L. Borges, "A un poeta sajón," in *Obra poética…,* pp. 231-232.

are not forgotten; that they can be joined in our memories and in our activities with Ulysses, and be present there, playing a relevant role in the creation of poetry. This eloquent defence of poetry is an important evidence of the values of returning to tradition, which -Pound said in the epigraph that opens this paper- "invigorates because it is a return to nature and reason." Pound, Auden, Yourcenar and Borges have shown us how this can be achieved through the rewriting of Old English, a rewriting that opposes mere philological archaeology, and uses the old language and literature of the Anglo-Saxons to express feelings and emotions that are alive, that speak to people today as they did to others many centuries ago.

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