

ON EMERSON'S DREAM OF EATING THE WORLD

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Motto: “A god, I reflected, ought to utter only a single word and in that word absolute fullness. No word uttered by him can be inferior to the universe or less than the sum total of time. Shadows or simulacra of that single word equivalent to a language and to all a language can embrace are the poor and ambitious human words, *all, world, universe.*” (Jorge Luis Borges, “The God’s Script”)

Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson recorded in his journal a dream that he “floated at will in the great Ether,” and “saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple.” Urged by an angel who took it in his hand and brought it to him to eat, Emerson “ate the world.” More than a century and a half later, Edward Hirsch chose the metaphor of Emerson’s dream as a motto for his book *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*, in which poetry is seen as a life-changing and world-embracing experience. Starting from the metaphor in Emerson’s dream, I argue that literature not just embraces the world but also transcends, and ultimately transforms it. Taking my examples from writers of diverse languages and cultures whose works embrace the languages and cultures that shaped them, I contend that literature, which is a matter of language in its most essentialised form, is not merely a whim of the intellect but also a need to free ourselves from stifling contingency and find an escape and a solace in the alternative worlds we create.

Keywords: *books, the world, writing, reading, bibliocosmos, languages, cultures, literary migrants, translation*

INTRODUCTION

I have developed a lifelong interest in literature, which in the last thirty two years has been academically focused but by no means exclusively academic. In my view, literature is the deepest and most authentic form of communication.

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Any literary text is its author's idiosyncratic response to the world, which is communicated to a reader in the form of the words in their syntactic arrangement, structured in paragraphs or stanzas, bearing a title, and usually held between two covers. E-books replicate this form that the book takes in print.

However, the description of the text in its book form is far from exhausting its complexity. Arguing that the book is an object only until the moment when it is taken from the shelf and read by somebody who becomes its reader, the Romanian philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu contends that "every book carries within it the promise of the life of the spirit and does nothing more than aspire, out of the helplessness of initial inertia, to the chance of some future life" ("Cearta cu filozofia" 192, my translation). In this line of argument, the reader breathes life into the book and thus brings it to life in the most concrete way. Furthermore, what connects a reader to a book is life itself: the book has it in a latent form, and when that latency is activated, the act of reading is a form of living. When he wrote that his first readings became for him "something lived in and lived through, a way in which the soul finds itself in life" (qtd. in Manguel 11), the psychologist James Hillman meant that the reading of books grounds you in the experience of life in the most compelling way.

Spiritually, intellectually and emotionally, reading is perhaps the most intense way of living. Harold Bloom, an advocate of the intimacy between the book and its reader, which he calls "solitary praxis" (21), accounted for it in these terms:

Reading well is one of the great pleasures that solitude can afford you, because it is, at least in my experience, the most healing of pleasures. It returns you to otherness, whether in yourself or in friends, or in those who may become friends. Imaginative literature is otherness, and as such alleviates loneliness. We read not only because we cannot know enough people, but because friendship is so vulnerable, so likely to diminish or disappear, overcome by space, time, imperfect sympathies, and all the sorrows of familial and passional life. (19)

Both Harold Bloom and Alberto Manguel speak about reading as a "selfish" practice that is at the same time connection with the text's author. What makes it a strong desire that soon becomes a necessity is the fact that the book offers solace and refuge. Because the reader's relation with the book is so intimate and the experience of reading so intense, the book is ultimately perceived as "a world unto itself" (Manguel 11).

EMERSON'S DREAM, BORGES'S "CIRCULAR RUINS" AND "THE GOD'S SCRIPT"

In the autumn of 2014, I had my once in a lifetime chance of meeting the American poet Edward Hirsch, who was, together with his friend Norman Manea, one of the guests of the International Festival of Literature and Translations. Hirsch is the author of *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*, a bestseller originally published in 1999. Thrilled that Hirsch accepted the proposal that my colleague Radu Andriescu, also a poet, and I would translate the book into Romanian, I embarked on my journey through it, and I proceeded with the very first lines after the dedication. The lines are the motto of the book, and they are a record of Emerson's dream, which reads: "I dreamed that I floated at will in the great Ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand and brought it to me and said, 'This must thou eat.' And I ate the world" (qtd. in Hirsch v). The depth and richness of the dream's meaning stunned me because it revealed to me, in powerful words and in the symbolic imagery of dreams, what imaginative literature is for its author. It showed me that the book is "a world unto itself" through a metaphor of how it comes into being. What we call reality is messy and shapeless. The act of swallowing the world in Emerson's dream suggests a process of taking in and absorbing it, and then (re)-shaping it into a text.

To Emerson's we may add Borges's dream in "The Circular Ruins," where a magician's dream projects a son "limb by limb and feature by feature, in a thousand and one secret nights," (*Labyrinths* 50) which implies that the son is a figment of the magician's imagination, an "Adam of dreams fabricated by the magician's nights of effort" (*Labyrinths* 48), a "dream child" (*Labyrinths* 49). The magician's final revelation, which occurs in the very last line of the story, is that "he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another" (*Labyrinths* 50). Another Borges story "The God's Script" epitomizes our predicament of imprisonment in a space-time where dreams are circular in the sense that they enclose us in the confinement of a destiny where we fail to say the "formula" of "forty syllables, fourteen words" which are, probably, the "shadows or simulacra" of God's one word's "absolute fullness" (*Labyrinths* 171).

RUSHDIE'S DESIRE

A writer like Salman Rushdie, who feels he does not belong to any particular place or culture, whose work embraces several places, cultures and languages, and who calls himself a "literary migrant" who can choose his "parents," saying that his "include Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis, a

polyglot family tree" (21), develops a gargantuan appetite for a large world. Rushdie closes his essay "Imaginary Homelands" with the image of Dean Corde, the protagonist of Saul Bellow's novel *The Dean's December*, hearing a dog barking, and interpreting it as a protest against the limits of its experience. If eating the world is Emerson's metaphor, barking a protest against the limits of experience and a desire to open the universe is Rushdie's. One's "floating" suggests a detachment and distancing that points to the artist's demiurgic stance that is the typical nineteenth-century Romantic role of the artist as creator. Rushdie may have twisted this stance in a late twentieth-century postmodernist playful disposition, and his dog metaphor could be an ironic tongue-in-cheek anagram of the god-like stance of the artist. His world is not "the great Ether" but the small Earth, and his desire is for it to cease to be partitioned.

THE WORLD OF THE BOOK, ITS MAKER AND ITS READER

If Emerson's world is an apple, firm in its shape and ready to eat, Borges's universe is a library "composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries" (*Labyrinths* 51). Borges's dream is that this bibliocosmos, which is god's creation, is infinite. Borges's library is total, and its books, "no matter how diverse they might be, are made up of the same elements: the space, the period, the comma, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet" (*Labyrinths* 54). Therefore, the origin of the universe is linguistic, and the library shelves contain "all that is given to express, in all languages" (Borges, *Labyrinths* 54).

Emerson, Borges and Manguel are of the same mind when they argue that the universe is a Book. The argument itself is based on an essential idea and practice in the Judaeo-Christian tradition that is also a major theme in the literature of that tradition. Speaking about his own experience of the world as coming from books before it was a series of real-life events and circumstances, Manguel recounts a disappointing *déjà vu* in which the life described in books felt much more clearly shaped because it had already happened to him "in words," it "had already been named" (8). This mindset is rooted in the thought that God created the universe as a written Book made from ten numbers and twenty-two letters.¹ Manguel, who was brought up in that tradition, accounts for it always in relation to himself. In this pattern of thinking, the Book, which has a Maker, fares through ages and spaces, its ten numbers and twenty-two letters being reshaped and re-embodied in a variety of languages until it eventually chances in the hands of a reader, who has the task to decipher it. Manguel writes about himself as one of those readers who, through reading, breathes life into the

¹ Drawing on Gershom Scholem's *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1974), Manguel explains that this has its origins in *Sefer Yezirah*, which is the earliest extant Hebrew text of systematic, speculative thought, written in approximately the sixth century (8).

book. That book, like any book for that matter, is an instantiation of the primordial Book. Therefore, "the key to understanding the universe lies in our ability to read these properly and master their combination, and thereby learn to give life to some part of that colossal text, in imitation of our Maker" (Manguel 8).

This archetype is the key to our understanding of a whole range of texts written by their makers, faring to us in the shape of books, and choosing us as their readers. Of course, it is the same archetype that is the key to our understanding of what our task is as readers. Tackling his favourite topic of "the cult of books," (*On the Cult of Books*) Borges traces this essential thought in the writings of Sir Thomas Browne and Thomas Carlyle. The idea travelled and took a variety of guises in a variety of genres. We find it, for instance, in the series of questions that structures William Blake's "The Tyger," with its very clear suggestions that the Tyger's perfect design was conceived and actually crafted by a Maker, possibly the same who made the Lamb, a perfection captured in the lines of the poem. Later, in the early twentieth century, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats reshaped it in his poem "Sailing to Byzantium" that projects Byzantium as a perfectly crafted city of unperishable artefacts enduring the ravages of time in the immortal lines of Yeats's poem. Across the ocean, the American poet Wallace Stevens imagines the whole universe as a song whose spirit lies in the words sung by a "maker," also called "artificer," in "The Idea of Order at Key West" that echoes the stance of the artist as an artificer in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that in its turn is a translation of the Greek myth of Daedalus, the classical epitome of the skillful craftsman and artist. By preceding the text of his novel with a quote from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, VIII, 188, "*Et ignotas animus dimittit in artes*," (2) translated as "And he applied his mind to obscure arts," Joyce draws the lines of the portrait of the artist across centuries, languages and cultures. The "he" in Ovid's text is Daedalus, whose name in Greek means "cunning artificer," i.e. a skillful maker of things, a craftsman who, in Ovid's text, "*naturamque nouat*," (Ovid 71) translated in English as "and [he] alters nature." Giving his novel a circular pattern, Joyce closes it with Stephen's prayer to the same "artificer," Daedalus, the prototype of the classical artist, to help him "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (276). The diction used by Joyce, in which "forge" is a key word, reinforces the materiality of the text as a skillfully crafted thing. The same archetype dwells in Leonard Cohen's poem "The Book of Longing," but Cohen gives it a twist when he laments the fate of a craftsman who fails to accomplish his design. However, in all its accomplishments and despite failures, the archetype survives and takes new shapes in time and across cultures.

Manguel recounts the days of his childhood and early youth when the reading of books made him project his own existence in the colours of sorcery,

myth, fantastic encounters and adventures. His recollections are redolent of Plato's allegory of the cave and the theory of forms: "Like Plato, I passed from knowledge to its subject. I found more reality in the idea than in the thing because it was given to me first and because it was given as a thing. It was in books that I encountered the universe: digested, classified, labelled, meditated, still formidable" (10).

Gabriel Liiceanu sees reading as a "long-distance seduction," an "eroticism of distances," and for him the whole culture of humanity "is essentially an erotic epidemic whose virus is the book" ("Declarație de iubire" / "Declaration of Love" 172, my translation).

FROM MYTH TO LITERATURE

Before written literature, there was the myth, i.e. that narrative which accounts for the origin of the world and our relation to it. The Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade argues that, with the advent of writing, the visible universe of myth disappeared but it continued to survive in writing (141). As Eliade accounts for it, "literature, be it oral or written, is the daughter of mythology" (141) and its major function, like that of myth, is to tell the story of something significant that happened in the world. No matter how apparently trivial a story may be, Eliade contends, it is related to a primordial narrative.

Maybe the ur-myth or the myth of all myths is that of the heroic quest or journey. Indeed, if we think of the key-texts which shaped what T. S. Eliot called "the mind of Europe"² ("Tradition") the quest is emblematic for our human condition. Since primordial times, humanity has always been on a quest for something considered to be essential: one's self, one's lover, one's home, happiness, luck, immortality, the Golden Fleece, the Holy Graal, meaning, etc. Likewise, the act of reading is a quest or a journey, thus reiterating that archetypal quest.

WRITERS AND LANGUAGES

Literature, the universe in the shape of a Book, travels to a reader until it finds one who embarks on the quest that is the reading of the book, and is language in its most quintessential expression. "In imitation of our Maker," writers use a combination of (some of) the twenty-two letters and the ten numbers to encode a meaning for the reader to decode.

²T. S. Eliot speaks about "the mind of Europe" in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). He argues that any new poet should learn that this line of tradition, the canon of European literature is more important than his own mind.

When it comes to their relation to language, Simon Leys distinguishes four categories of writers. There are writers, like Roland Barthes and Philip Larkin, who are so rooted in their own language that they are indifferent if not hostile to what is not written in it. The second category is that of writers who are attracted to and fascinated by linguistic diversity, and who get involved in literary translations (from Baudelaire to Pasternak, there are many examples) or who try to write in a language which is not their own (like T. S. Eliot or Rilke writing in French or Fernando Pessoa writing in and translating from English and French). There are also bilingual writers, like Beckett, Julien Green or Raymond Federman, who feel that they are claimed by two languages. Last but not least, there are writers who adopt a new language or who shift languages, which is the case of Conrad, Nabokov, and Cioran (Leys 245-46). Whatever the case, what defines the writer's condition of being a writer is a sense of dwelling in language, either being rooted in it or feeling translated by the languages in which one writes or writing across languages.

“TRANSLATED” WRITERS AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Languages define identity, and when he speaks about himself “having been born across the world” and thus being a “translated” man, Rushdie celebrates this condition, arguing that, despite the hazards it entails, it also provides the writer with “new angles at which to enter reality” (15).

If Rushdie feels claimed by several cultures, he also feels he writes in a language that translates, i.e. literally “bears across” all those cultures’ languages (17). Acknowledging that condition, naming it and embracing it, Rushdie tags himself as an “international writer” who has the freedom “to choose his parents” (21). The Indian-born British writer pleads for “the right of any member of this post-diaspora community to draw on its roots for its art, just as all the world’s community of displaced writers has always done” (Rushdie 15).

Rushdie thinks that for him and his fellow Indo-British writers the English language is of utmost importance. In many instances, including their attitude to the language in which they chose to write, that is English, the modernist Joyce and the post-colonial Rushdie, both international writers, belong in that community of displaced writers who, although they left their countries of origin, translated the cultures and the languages of those cultures into English. Stephen Dedalus has a memorable discussion with the English dean of studies, a linguistic argument around the English words “tundish” and “funnel” noted in Stephen’s diary that closes the novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Through it Joyce means to convey that an artist like Stephen ultimately conquers the most important weapon of British rule, the English

language itself. In the scene of the argument, Stephen broods in a tone coloured by utter frustration:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted his words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (Joyce 205)

Sixty-nine pages later, in his diary, Stephen writes disdainfully and triumphantly: “That tundish has been on my mind for a long time. I looked it up and findit English and good old blunt English too. Damn the dean of studies and his funnel! What did he come here for to teach us his own language or to learn it from us? Damn him one way or the other!” (Joyce 274)

Stephen’s triumph is linguistic. What he realizes in the last pages of the novel that describe the laststage of his formation as a young artist, is that he has conquered the English language. Thus, language becomes one of the three “arms” he has explained to Cranly earlier in the novel that he will allow himself to use, and that is “cunning” (268-69). It is through the English language that, like the old artificer Daedalus whose namesake he is, Stephen will eventually “fly by” the “nets” of his Irish “nationality, language, religion” (220). When we read Joyce’s books written in the wake of *A Portrait*, we realize that the English language is “forged” by Joyce in the “smithy” of his Irish soul to express “the uncreated conscience of” his Irish “race” (276). Starting with *A Portrait*, Joyce’s English is a medium that accommodates a number of other languages, some of them languages of ancient European cultures like classical Greek and Latin, and also modern languages like Italian, French and German. In the “Sirens” episode of *Ulysses*, embedded in these languages, Joyce experimented with the polyglossia of his text, taking it beyond language into musical notation, and he wrote symphonically, tracking individual sounds and depicting them as a graphic score. In all these novels, he bent and forged English to such an extent that it eventually became a new Joyce-made language to describe Joyce’s world. In *Finnegans Wake*, the language is so peculiar to his writing that it needs a mind trained in this linguistic forgery to make sense of it.

Rushdie has frequently invoked Joyce as an epitome of the displaced writer who forged the English language to suit his purposes. With this model in mind, he tackles the changes the Indo-British fiction is likely to produce in the larger landscape of British fiction, and he accounts for the use of English as a major one:

Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the view that we can’t simply use

the language in the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free. (Rushdie 17)

A FEW NOTES ON TRANSLATION, INTERTEXTUALITY AND QUOTING AS CREATIVE (RE)-WRITING

There would be no culture and no “mind of Europe” without translation. Of course there are first-class authors who can bevesteemed translators at the same time. Generally writers like Charles Baudelaire, Ezra Pound, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Seamus Heany, etc., who also undertook translation, did not do it by the book, and their approaches to translation were very different from each other’s. While Nabokov believed that literal translation is faithful and accurate, Beckett was very loose in translating French poetry. Simon Leys, who is a writer, literary critic and translator, contends that “It is appropriate to include, for example, in an edition of the complete works of Baudelaire, of Proust, of Larbaud, or of Lu Xun, the translations they did,” and he endorses this with the idea of the modern Chinese writer Zhou Zuoren, who believed that “a writer can translate various texts in order to give form to things he had within himself but which he could not find other means of expressing” (251). Sometimes writers choose only certain passages to translate and they take notes on reading.³ To Leys’s mind, this “ensemble” where there may be no single line written by the writer, “may turn out to be the most accurate portrait of your mind and your heart. Such mosaics of quotations resemble pictorial ‘collages:’ all the elements are borrowed, but together they form original pictures” (251-52).

Borges, for whom writing itself is translation, believed that literal translation awakens in its readers a sense of revelation for the beauty and expressiveness of alien words, phrases and images. He argued that “Now everybody is fond of literal translations because a literal translation also gives us those small jolts of surprise that we expect” (*This Craft* 73). Borges was a cosmopolitan and erudite spirit, whose texts frequently reference other texts. He used parody in a textual Baroque style meant to exhaust its own possibilities.

³Leys points out that the English sometimes call it a “commonplace book.” Examples of writers whose logs of this kind have been published as part of their work are E. M. Forster or Montesquieu’s *Spicilège* (251). An epitome of this kind of mosaicked writing is Walter Benjamin’s bulky collection of notes accumulated over a period of thirteen years, from 1927 to 1940, and published under the title *Passagenwerk* (*Arcades Project*).

There is self-parody also in “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” “The Zahir,” “The Sect of the Phoenix,” in which he ironically translated himself. The Judaeo-Christian tradition to which Borges certainly belonged gave him a sense that after all there was no originality in literature; in his view, all writers are translators or annotators of archetypal patterns. According to Borges, the skills a writer is supposed to develop are those of a reader in the first place, and for him the writer is (or may become) the perfect reader. Like the displaced writers invoked by Rushdie, Borges did not feel he belonged to a particular culture or language. His rich imagination and polymorphic cultural and linguistic background made him create labyrinthine worlds outside time and space, where cultures and languages intersect, and the reality of the text and factual reality mirror each other.

Sometimes, writers may claim that their texts are translations, and thus reinforce the connection between their own text and the alleged source. The Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning claimed, though not in any serious way, that her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* were merely translations, with no basis in the Brownings’ lives. The very title suggests that the sonnets are translations, and that suggestion may also be a metaphor of a larger and indefinite space of translation, which is neither the original nor the translated text. At the same time, the space of translation may be a metaphor of the textual nature of Barrett’s sonnets, which ensures the immortality of the feelings they express.

There is no better and deeper reader than the translator, and reading is a skill that accomplished writers need to develop. Can translation be a substitute for creation? That is a possibility suggested by Leys, who quotes the self-mocking confession of Maurice-Edgar Coindreau, who introduced American literature to France, and who said that “The translator is the novelist’s ape. He must make the same grimaces, whether these please him or not” (qtd. in Leys 249). For the Romanian translator Antoaneta Ralian, translation is “like a triangle of love. I, alter ego and altera pars, but without altering the text’s essence” (152, my translation), an echo of Coindreau’s other statement that “Translating is a loving act of collaboration” (qtd. in Leys 250).

Leys argues that “Translation is the severest test to which a book can be submitted” (257). If poems or anything that approaches the poetic mode is virtually untranslatable, anything in discursive prose can be translated, meaning that any prose that presenting problems to translation is meaningless.

The last note here, recommending literary translation as a fabulous form of re-writing, may be at the same time the last stroke one could add to complete the picture. Translations may sound better than their originals. The most famous case is Baudelaire translating Poe. When he spoke of a line of poetry having its roots in Poe and continuing with Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry, T. S. Eliot

accounted for the influence of Poe upon the three French poets, whose knowledge of English was relative, by arguing that:

It is certainly possible, in reading something in a language imperfectly understood, for the reader to find what is not there; and when the reader is himself a man of genius, the foreign poem read may, by a happy accident, elicit something important from the depths of his own mind, which he attributes to what he reads. And it is true that when translating Poe's prose into French, Baudelaire effected a striking improvement: he transformed what is often a slipshod and a shoddy English prose into admirable French. ("From Poe" 336)

CONCLUSION

Literature is the most effective way of embracing the world, including its cultural and linguistic diversity. By embracing it, literature also transcends and transforms it. In Emerson's dream, the world acquires the round perfection of an apple, that the creator then eats. When absorbed, the world and its creator become one. The act of eating the world also implies its transformation.

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the world is a Book, containing ten numbers and twenty-two letters. In imitation of its Maker and his archetypal creation, the writers of the world read the code first and then they create combinations of these numbers and letters, giving them the shape of a well-wrought text. Each book thus created is a code, and it takes a reader to undertake the work of decoding it.

In today's era of globalization, writers dwell in a space of translation rather than rooted in one language and culture. Their dream is a world of sweeping vistas, and so they write across languages and cultures. Those who choose to write in English do so by conquering and then transforming the language to suit their purposes. Indeed, for those writers who use English dyeing it in the colours of their languages, those who are bilingual, or those who adopt it, English parades in new robes.

Writing may be seen as a translation process: writers translate the Maker's Book. In Borges's view, they create their precursors, they continue a line of tradition, they re-shape pre-existing archetypes, and sometimes they may read what is not there in the original, filling in what they imagine they have read with something that lies there in the depths of their minds.

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