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“Eorlas arhwate eard begeatan”

Revisiting *Brunanburh*'s (hi)story,
style and imagery in translation*

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1. Introduction

A few years ago the online edition of *The Times* presented its readers with a short article that offered, under the heading of “Is this the battle site that shaped England’s destiny?” (Hoyle 2004), the by then most recent information about the more or less exact spot in which the battle of Brunanburh took place. The journalist stated that:

The starting positions for the battle are unclear but the “English” forces probably lined up towards the back of the heath. The invaders almost certainly made their stand on a slight ridge just below the woods on Storeton Hill looking down over what is now Brackenwood golf course (. . .) The English broke through and began the pursuit, chasing their quarry up what is now the fairway of the par 4 11th hole.

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Brunanburh on the 11th hole, then. A very adequate metaphor if we take into account that it is on the sports field where many battles are fought nowadays. These sport battles usually carry a heavy load of patriotism, group identification and, in the case of English sports, a considerable amount of “Englishness”. By using modern metaphors than tend to relate sport and war — specially in contemporary journalistic discourse — this newspaper report, with a jocular tone perhaps more convenient for the sport section rather than for the cultural pages, just wanted to inform the readers of the work of Steve Harding (2004) who, together with other scholars, affirms that the battle took place near Bebington Heath, in the Wirral Peninsula, between the rivers Dee and Mersey, or, as the journalist said, “on Merseyside, a millennium before the Beatles and football put the area on the international tourist map”.

Perhaps the use of sport is meaningful in the article, as it described the pursuits, the chase, the attacks, the movement of troops, the courage of the fighters, with an style that, though similar to that of sport narrative, highlighted not the place of the battle but its contents, the events that took place there. Such poetic narrative of heroes and famous fights, though presented in a different way nowadays, is still on fashion. As far as the precise location of the battle itself is concerned, though all data seem to point towards the Wirral area, that still appears to be a matter of debate. Perhaps, we’ll probably never be sure of the very spot itself, not unless somebody finds physical evidence. Then, the important thing, from a literary point of view, is not the *history* but the *story* of what happened, or rather, the story of the historical event as it appears told in the poetic insert we like to call *The Battle of Brunanburh*.

If we admit the literary relevance of this text, if we also accept the fact that the Old English original can only be read by a reduced number of specialists, translations are the only way to transmit the content of the poem to the general reader. The aim of this article is to offer a brief revision of the poem and its topics and to see how its content has been presented in several important English (Treharne 2004, Hamer 1970, Rodrigues 1996, Garmonsway 1953, Swanton 2000) and Spanish (Lerate & Lerate 2000, Bravo 1998) translations and recreations (Borges’ 1964 & 1975 poems, Tennyson’s 1880 text). Exception made of my own recently published translation (Bueno 2007), these are the most frequently used *Brunanburh* texts in both languages. This corpus I have selected, though reduced, is useful enough to establish a translation taxonomy in which to fit in the future the rest of translated texts. Let’s start, then, from the beginning.

2. What the text says: 937 Her Æthelstan cyning. . .

The annal for the year 937 of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* narrates the events which took place with a poem. It constitutes one of the main pieces of Anglo-Saxon heroic epic poetry due not only to its poetic quality but also to its unusual disposition in a collection of prose historical annals. Perhaps such an arrangement is less unusual than it seems. As Donald Scragg (2001:279) very appropriately stated, the presence of verse segments within a prose *continuum* may not be so surprising in the Anglo-Saxon era as “the line between prose and verse in Old English is nowhere as clear as it is today”. Notwithstanding, the verses contained in 937 annal are important because those lines fall into the rhythmical units of verse and have diction and imagery associated with heroic poetry

The place of heroic poetry in the evolving society of Anglo-Saxon England during the tenth-century period of nation-building has been very recently assessed by John D. Niles (2007). In that historical moment the concept of “heroic geography” was undoubtedly an aspect of the mentality of that era. *Brunanburh* constitutes by no means one of the most interesting texts for the building of the aforementioned Old English heroic geography. Perhaps *Brunanburh* was a case of government poetic *agitprop*, a piece of propaganda designed to subdue any further serious anti-Saxon attacks by Æthelstan’s neighbours. It is, of course, a prime example of history being written by the victors, “a famous hymn of praise to the English royalty and nation”, as John D. Niles (2007: 164) stated, with a highly poetic sense inserted in it. As far as the historical reality that inspired the poem is concerned, perhaps we’ll never know of it. The sense of a united England, a nation growing in confidence, is clearly part of the myth *Brunanburh* helped to create. As in many other cases, real things, events, manners, rituals, from the Anglo-Saxon world, became literary topics. In *Brunanburh*, literary form is heavily indebted to heroic poetry. The poem, as Marsden states (2005: 86), “builds a sense of national destiny, using style, diction and imagery of heroic poetry”.

The poem, thus, uses history as a narrative device¹ to build the inner story of the text experimenting with the topics (style, diction, imagery) of heroic poetry. Alliterative style, formulaic vocabulary, the beasts-of-battle topos, phrases taken from the stock of the heroic corpus. . ., all these elements are combined then in a poem that, as Jayne Carroll (2007: 330) pointed out, “deliberately evokes the topos of the generous lord, surrounded by a loyal band of men, a *comitatus*, to summon up a vision of heroic leadership”. A vision of heroic leadership linked directly

1. The use of history as narrative device also takes place in other Anglo-Saxon poems. For an example of this use applied to the Old English elegies, i.e. the case of *Deor*; see Bueno (2003).

to a mythical past, to the *adventus Saxonum* that is contained in the poem’s final part. The poet alludes to written tradition, to the authority of books or chronicles, — “þæs þe us secgað bec” — to justify Æthelstan’s victory and to turn him into a literary hero. And the very use of *auctoritas* itself is a literary figure, “the trope of the wisdom of ancient books”, as Patrick Conner said (2001: 259). But the *Brunanburh* poet is himself a chronicle writer, so he is using *auctoritas* not only as a literary device, but also as a means to justify the goodness of his own chronicle.

The *Brunanburh* text has been labelled as political poem, heroic panegyric, praise poem, short epic, skaldic-influenced poem, and so long and so forth. What kind of text is it anyway? What is the condition of the source text we have to translate? If the critical community widely agrees that the poem is a crucial text in the building of the Old English heroic geography, if its emphasis is on “English nationalism” in an historical perspective rather than on individual heroics, as Marsden points out (2005: 86), it seems most evident that a careful consideration of these topics has to be made when translating the text into other languages. If we take into account how that careful consideration has been accomplished in the aforementioned English and Spanish translations and recreations, then we’ll have to examine three different groups of translations — and translators — that consider the poem (a) in isolation, (b) in the context of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, or (c) as an excuse for poetic inspiration, i.e. the most interesting cases of Tennyson and Borges. Since offering a full deep evaluation of the whole translated texts would exceed the average length available for articles like this, I am going to offer the meaning of the texts in a very general way, mentioning though two very specific parts of the poem: the beginning (1–10a) and the end (65b–73).²

3. What the translations say: Isolation, contextualization, poetic inspiration

If we leave Borges’ and Tennyson’s most interesting cases of poetic recreation/rendering aside, it seems that all translators have chosen either to consider the poem isolated from its narrative context or to include it in a complete edition of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as a whole. The final result has to be different in both cases. Does this fact modify the meaning of the text as it has been previously defined? Let’s revise the poems according to this taxonomy.

2. The Old English source text is provided in a short appendix at the end of this article.

3.1. Brunanburh in isolation: Heroic poetry

Due to its importance as a heroic epic poem the majority of translators choose to isolate the text. Hamer (1970) includes it in an anthology of Anglo-Saxon verse and declares that the poem is “though vivid, surprisingly conventional” (1970: 41), highlighting then some short passages as an example to support his opinion. Although his translation is very successful it is quite expansive and over-narrative sometimes (i.e. 5b–7, 65–72). Hamer uses a sort of blank verse and abandons any systematic attempt to reproduce the Anglo-Saxon rhythmical and alliterative verse structure. Sometimes, albeit written in verse, his text looks more like a prose narrative. Although he does not want to keep the OE poetic features, in some lines (7, 8, 71) alliteration is present, enhancing the rhythm and the poetic quality of the verse.

Rodrigues (1996), a prolific translator of OE poetry, offers a much more poetic rendering in an attempt to maintain the spirit of the structure of Anglo-Saxon verse. His text appears published with *Maldon* and *Finnsburh* in a volume titled *Three Battle Poems*. Although Rodrigues also states that the text is conventionally following the epic tradition, he points out that *Brunanburh* is the work of a brilliant “individual creator”, due to the presence of many *hapax legomena*, and possesses a “neat, clear, never superfluous, vigorous, perfect” poetic style that speeds the narration up. The final result thus is more poetic, perhaps due to his preconceived ideas on the text both in the initial description of the victorious lord and in the narration of the final glory, where the link with the mythical foundational past is stronger than in Hamer’s text. Besides, Rodrigues keeps, though not always, a form of alliteration and poetic diction that build a poem which is somewhat less neat and clear than the original, but full of poetry anyway.

The translations into Spanish have two radically different and opposed designs. The text by Lerate & Lerate (2000) is also published in an anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry with a brief introduction to every single text included in it. The translation follows a very peculiar style that, with the passing of time, has turned the text into a classic for the Spanish academia. It tries to transfer into Spanish a kind of half-line rhythm similar to that of Old English, abandoning alliteration as a distinctive feature. Although it is a very interesting experiment, very nicely obtained in most of the lines, it presents the reader with a very unnatural reading, which excessively restricts the narrative progress. The rhythmic effect is interesting and praiseworthy but it heavily hinders the appreciation of the content of the poem. Spanish syntax is extremely twisted in some lines and forced to offer a somewhat distorted sentence order. Just an example will suffice:

Sin cesar los de Wessex
 todo aquel día en patrullas fueron
 detrás de enemigos, por la espalda feroces
 matando con armas –las bien afiladas–
 gente que huía.

(20b–24a)

*Sin cesar los de Wessex fueron todo aquel día
 en patrullas detrás de enemigos, matando
 (¿feroces?) por la espalda con armas (las) bien
 afiladas a gente que huía.*

The excessive use of these kind of structures — forced by the rhythm pattern adopted by the translators — turns the poem into an exotic piece of poetry, which is perhaps not adequate enough to transfer the contents of the *Brunanburh* text into Spanish. Bravo (1998), on the other hand, brings about just the opposite by offering a totally explanatory text, almost in prose. In fact, if we rearrange the final lines without its apparent verse structure, the resulting text has the appearance of mere prose:

Jamás hubo
 en esta isla, antes de estos hechos,
 una masacre más grande de un ejército
 derrotado por el filo de la espada según
 nos cuentan los libros, el decir de los viejos
 sabios, cuando del este llegaron hasta aquí
 los anglos y los sajones y arrojaron a los
 britones al ancho mar;

(65b–71)

*Jamás hubo en esta isla, antes de estos hechos,
 una masacre más grande de un ejército
 derrotado por el filo de la espada según nos
 cuentan los libros, el decir de los viejos sabios,
 cuando del este llegaron hasta aquí los anglos y
 los sajones y arrojaron a los britones al ancho
 mar;*

If we leave some confusion aside — like the one found in line 71b where the “Brytene sohtan” that all translators render into something along the lines of “seeking Britain”, “sought the land of Britain”, “buscando Britania” and so long, is translated as “arrojaron a los britones” — Bravo’s text just wants to offer the content of the original poem as an appendix to the analysis of heroic lays and short epic poems in Old English, being this real aim of the volume in which the translation is published. He succeeds at this aim, but does not quite adapt rhythm, poetry and heroic diction.

Perhaps, the clearest style marker of the text — and link between the prose and poetry discourses of the chronicle — could be the adverb “Her” (“In this year/ Here”), together with the inclusion or exclusion of the annal year. These four translators offer different ways of dealing with this particular issue. Bravo does not include the year but renders “her” — “este año” —, which causes the very noun phrase a meaning loss as the referent vanishes: “This year”, yes, but which one? There is no reference unless you have previously read the analysis included in the volume. Lerate & Lerate add a latin Anno DCCCXXXVII and keep the literal meaning of “Her” — “Aquí” —, which in this case is coherent as the reader is provided with a referent. Hamer gets rid of both, so the reference is completely lost unless you have read the short introductory text. Rodrigues adopts a sort of a compromise solution by eliminating the year reference but keeping the literal “her” as “Here”.

I do believe that both the year reference and the “Her” are important style markers. They offer a link between poetic language and prose narration that at the same time causes the poem to be part of the historical narrative and highlights its poetic form. To keep it in a translated text is something necessary, although difficult if you present the poem in isolation as these four translators have done. However, there is a second group of translators that has chosen to contextualize it. Let’s revise their work.

3.2. *Brunanburh* as entry 937: Contextualized heroism

In the four texts that belong to this category, there are two translations that are openly different. Garmonsway (1953) and Swanton (2000) present a magnificent critical translation of the whole *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Even so, both authors try to offer a completely different style when it comes to translate the *Brunanburh* text, a style that (a) contrasts with the prose annals, (b) highlights the relevance of the poem in its historical context and (c) makes the reader perceive how the chronicle writers used either prose or poetry to aim at very different things. Although neither of them refer to the style they adopt in their translations, it is quite clear that their texts reflect, as Swanton (2000: xvii) stated, that “in a handful of instances the annals take the form of genuine, probable ready-made, poems”. The function of these translations are by no means to reflect that “genuine poetry” in the chronicle’s overall style, with the obvious inclusion of the two aforementioned style markers, i.e. “her” and annal year. Both Garmonsway and Swanton succeed in offering beautiful poems. Perhaps Swanton does so with more poetic skills; his two final lines conclude the poem with a stronger link to that previously mentioned mythical past, but both reflect the *Brunanburh*’s style, diction and imagery quite well. Reading both endings is the best test to appreciate the quality of the text as a whole:

Never before in this island, as the books
Of ancient historians tell us, was an army
Put to greater slaughter by the sword
Since the time when Angles and Saxons
landed,
Invading Britain across the wide seas
From the east, when warriors eager for
fame,
Proud forgers of war, the Welsh overcame,
And won for themselves a kingdom.
(Garmonsway 1953: 109, 110)

Never yet in this island
was there a greater slaughter
of people felled by the sword’s edges,
before this, as book tells us,
old authorities, since Angles and Saxons
came here from the east,
sought Britain over the broad ocean,
warriors eager for fame, proud war-smiths,
overcame the Welsh, seized the country.
(Swanton 2000: 109, 110)

The text included by Treharne (2004), in her monumental anthology of texts from the Old and Middle English periods, forms part of a section devoted to

- The Reign of Ædelstan and *The Battle of Brunanburh*
- 924 In this year King Edward died, and Æpelstan his son succeeded to the kingdom. And Saint Dunstan was born, and Wulfelm succeeded to the archbishopric of Canterbury.
- 931 In this year Byrnstan was consecrated bishop of Winchester on 29 May, and he held that see for two and a half years.
- 5 932 In this year Bishop Fryðestan died.
- 933 In this year King Æpelstan went into Scotland with both an army and a fleet, and ravaged much of it. And Bishop Byrnstan died in Winchester on All Saints' Day.
- 934 In this year Bishop Ælfheah succeeded to the see [of Winchester].
- 10 937 In this year King Æpelstan, lord of warriors,
ring-giver of men, and also his brother,
acheling Edmund, obtained eternal glory
by fighting in battle with the edges of swords
around Brunanburh. They split the shield-wall,
cut down the lime-shields with the remnants of hammers,⁸
15 Edward's offspring, as was natural for them
because of their ancestors, that they should often defend
- ⁸ i.e. swords.

Figure 1. Treharne's prose and poetry text (2004: 29)

offering excerpts from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. I think Treharne is most correct when presenting the *Brunanburh* text in the context of the *ASC*. Her translation is very skilfull and, although she does not pay attention to the formal aspects of poetry, she manages to translate the poem's imagery and content in such a way that establishes an immediate stylistic contrast between her poetic text and the prose excerpts she also renders (Figure 1). This array is fundamental because when you offer *The Battle of Brunanburh* in its 937 annal with the other prose annals surrounding it, the functions of both styles are more clearly perceived. I agree with Treharne (2004: 28) completely when she states that:

the author of the prose *Chronicle* account that surrounds the poem is noticeably controlled in his praise of the king, preferring to create a sense of objectivity and historical restraint; the poem is the more effective precisely because of its context.

The effectiveness of the poetic text in its context and the ability of poetry to achieve an effect different from that of prose are key features to understand *Brunanburh*. That is why I think it should always be translated together with the prose annals that surround it. In my own version of the poem — included in a volume on history and texts from the rise of Mercia to the decline of the Anglo-Saxon monarchy (Bueno 2007) — I follow these assumptions. As far as I know it

constitutes the first Spanish translation that incorporates both discourses. I have also tried to keep alliteration as a distinctive element in OE poetry in a Spanish poetic text that contains the three elements discussed from the beginning: (hi)story, imagery and style. I offered a Spanish poetic line that (a) presents some degree of structural flexibility, (b) holds a certain pattern from the original rhythmical structure, (c) possesses a poetical language that avoids prosaic explanations and (d) tries to translate poetry into poetry. This philosophy is present in all my translations, as I have previously stated (Bueno 2005) when describing my forthcoming translation of *Beowulf* into Galician. My principle, thus, for representing the metrical form of the poem is to produce a line with two to three alliterative positions, adopting various procedures in order to transfer the force of this feature both to the style of Spanish and to modern Spanish readers. A representative excerpt taken from the beginning is enough to perceive the adopted procedure (Figure 2).

LA ÉPICA DE LA INGLATERRA ANGLOSAJONA

933 En este año el rey Æthelstan invadió Escocia tanto por tierra como por mar, y asedió buena parte del país. El obispo Beornstan falleció en Winchester el día de Todos los Santos.

934 En este año el obispo Ælfheah accedió a dicha sede arzobispal.

937 En este año

el rey Æthelstan, el que reparte anillos,
 el señor de los hombres, y su hermano,
 el noble Edmund, eterna gloria y nombre
 alcanzaron, luchando con largos filos de espada
 5 en la batalla de Brunanburh. El bravo
 muro defensivo destrozaron, y deshicieron
 con los tajos que se templan en la forja
 las vetas del tilo vuelto escudo.
 Eran de la estirpe de Edward,

Figure 2. Prose and poetry text in Spanish (Bueno 2007: 132)

Essentially these are the two main groups in which to classify the different translations of *The Battle of Brunanburh*, those I have discussed and probably the rest of them. However, there is a further sort that, although very different from those discussed so far, it is worth revising here: *Brunanburh* as an excuse for poetic inspiration.

3.3. Brunanburh as an excuse: Modern poets vs. OE scop

To point out that Anglo-Saxon literature has been a frequent source of inspiration for many talented poets is anything but new or innovative. There are quite well known and abundant cases. Just as a mere example of this, you could have a quick look at what Helen Damico (2007) states in the pdf brochure of her OE poetry course to be taught this very Fall semester that has just started in the University of New Mexico:

It’s difficult to know exactly how many modern poets have been influenced or inspired by Old English Poetry; Borges certainly, as he himself testifies. But there are others. Milton is said to have known the OE Genesis, for there are more than general similarities between his Satan and the anti-hero of the OE Genesis B; W. H. Auden was inspired by and adapted the OE Advent Lyrics; Ezra Pound did a pretty good job with the OE Seafarer. The Battle of Maldon found its way into the trench poetry of World War I, as well as into the culture of the Ante-Bellum south; and Beowulf, made into a movie, and ran a season Off-Broadway as a rock-opera. Traces, and sometimes more than traces in Tennyson (Battle of Brunanburh, for one), Coleridge (Wanderer), and Hopkins (in his possible imitation of OE versification patterns).

From all these well-known cases Damico mentions — and as far as *Brunanburh* is concerned — there are two poets, Jorge Luis Borges and Alfred Tennyson, who confronted their poetic skills against those of the Old English *scop*. Although they are divided by time, by literary tradition and by language, they are connected by *Brunanburh*, both from a critical and from a creative point of view.

In his lectures on English literature delivered at the University of Buenos Aires, Borges always devoted a unit to what he called “Ode of Brunanburh”. He mentioned and commented Tennyson’s text, which was one of his favourite translations. As Arias and Hadis (2002:78) point out on their critical edition of the lectures on English literature Borges delivered in 1966, he said — specifically on the in-class session that took place on Friday, 21st October — the following about *Brunanburh*:

Hay varias versiones de ella, y aquellos de ustedes que sepan inglés pueden ver una traducción realmente espléndida que figura en las obras de Tennyson. O sea, es muy fácilmente accesible. Tennyson no conocía el anglosajón, pero un hijo suyo había estudiado esa forma primitiva del inglés y publicó en una revista especializada una traducción en prosa de la obra. Esa traducción interesó a su padre, a quién le explicaría sin duda las reglas de la métrica anglosajona. Le dijo que estaba basada en la aliteración y no en la rima, que el número de sílabas de cada verso era irregular, y entonces Tennyson, un poeta muy adicto a Virgilio, intentó por una sola vez en su vida, y con un éxito indudable, ese experimento no ensayado hasta entonces en idioma alguno, que fue el hecho de escribir en inglés moderno un poema que correspondiera a una traducción casi literal de un poema anglosajón, y escrito en la métrica anglosajona. Es verdad que Tennyson exagera un poco las leyes de esa métrica (. . .) pero la versión merece, desde luego, ser leída.

Borges describes quite correctly the virtues of Tennyson's text. More than a translation I would say, it is a rendering with a good amount of poetic recreation. Tennyson approached the text as a *makar*, a poet creating his very own poem. Tennyson's command of Old English was not good enough, so he was forced to use — as he himself said —³ his own son's prose translation as the basis for his own text. Given such a distance between himself and the OE original, it is most logical that he assumed a more creative perspective when translating the text. Tennyson's poem, published in 1880, keeps the essential ideas from the imagery of the original text. Tennyson's style and diction are somewhat different as they constitute not a reflection of OE poetry but an example of his own way of writing poetry. The poem appears divided into 15 numbered stanzas, which vary in length and array. The use of alliteration is, as Borges pointed out, somewhat exaggerated. But if you read the initial and final sections I have discussed when revising the other translations, you cannot deny the fact that we are facing a beautifully written piece of poetry, which establishes a free approach to the Anglo-Saxon text. Regarding its bizarre structure, it is curious to point out that, with a slight change on the array of the lines, we would have a line structure that would be closer to Anglo-Saxon stylistic patterns. Perhaps this peculiarity was not important in the 19th century:

1

Athelstan King,
 Lord among Earls,
 Bracelet-bestower and
 Baron of Barons,
 He with his brother,
 Edmund Atheling,
 Gaining a lifelong
 Glory in battle,
 Slew with the sword-edge
 There by Brunanburh,
 Brake the shield-wall,
 Hew'd the linden-wood,
 Hack'd the battle-shield,
 Sons of Edward with hammer'd brands

(Tennyson, through Hill 1971:441)

*Athelstan King, Lord among Earls,
 Bracelet-bestower and Baron of Barons,
 He with his brother, Edmund Atheling,
 Gaining a lifelong glory in battle,
 Slew with the sword-edge
 There by Brunanburh, brake the shield-wall,
 Hew'd the linden-wood, hack'd the battle-shield,
 Sons of Edward with hammer'd brands*

The case of Borges is radically different. His poetic work is well packed with poems heavily influenced by the topics, the style and the content of Anglo-Saxon Literature. As Helen Damico (2007) stated, Borges always publicly assumed such an influence. Moreover, he even did so with a certain, almost *beot*-like, pride in his

3. "I have more or less availed myself of my son's prose translation of this poem in the 'Contemporary Review' (November, 1876)." Tennyson's own quotation included in the text as edited by Hill (1971:441)

words. Although Borges translated some Old English poetry into Spanish, he never rendered *Brunanburh*. As it is seen in the written texts of his lectures, *Brunanburh* was undoubtedly a poem he was very much fond of. In his co-written handbook on medieval Germanic literature (Borges & Vázquez 1999) he discussed the poem in a very interesting section, but he never translated it. However, he did use it as an excuse for poetic inspiration in two very well known poems: “Brunanburh, 937 A.D.,” included in *La rosa profunda* (1975) and “A un poeta sajón,” published in *El otro, el mismo* (1964). The former clearly refers both to the historical event and to the topics of the text:

BRUNANBURH, 937 A.D.

Nadie a tu lado.
 Anoche maté a un hombre en la batalla.
 Era animoso y alto, de la clara estirpe de Anlaf.
 La espada entró en el pecho, un poco a la izquierda.
 Rodó por tierra y fue una cosa,
 una cosa del cuervo.
 En vano lo esperarás, mujer que no he visto.
 No lo traerán las naves que huyeron
 sobre el agua amarilla.
 En la hora del alba,
 tu mano desde el sueño lo buscará.
 Tu lecho está frío.
 Anoche maté a un hombre en Brunanburh.

(Borges 1989b: 101)

In this poem Borges gives the poetic voice to a Saxon warrior who fought at Brunanburh, as he himself pointed out in the explanatory notes he included in *La rosa profunda*.⁴ The tone of the text is more elegiac than epic. However, within such an elegiac text, you can perceive undertones from the last part of *Brunanburh*, where the beasts-of-battle topos begins. The poetic persona of the Borgian text, as Gabriel Linares (2007) has stated, treats the dead man as an object, turning him in into “a thing for the crow” [“una cosa del cuervo”] to bring him back to life later on in his wife’s memories. She uselessly waits for him in her dreams in a scene

4. The explanatory note (Borges 1989b: 117) reads as follows: “BRUNANBURH. Son las palabras de un sajón que se ha batido en la victoria que los reyes de Wessex alcanzaron sobre una coalición de escoceses, daneses y britanos, comandados por Anlaf (Olaf) de Irlanda. En el poema hay ecos de la oda contemporánea que Tennyson tan admirablemente tradujo”. This note is quite similar to the prefatory commentary Tennyson himself included in the translation Borges much praised (Hill 1971: 441: “Constantinus, king of the Scots, after having sworn allegiance to Athelstan, allied himself with the Danes of Ireland under Aulaf, and invading England, was defeated by Athelstan and his brother Edmund with great slaughter at Brunanburh in the year 937.”

in which the female character's behaviour could be connected with other Anglo-Saxon poetic female voices, i.e. the female voice of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, wishing for her lover's scarce visits, or the lamenting wife from *The Wife's Lament* who longed and waited for the loved one.

The second text recreates, between lines 10 and 21, the figure of the Brunanburh's scop:

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 viniste 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.

Borges 1989a:284 (my italics)

In this case the connections are clearer. Although the aim of the poem as whole is to celebrate the figure of an anonymous Old English *scop*, who composed the poems Borges esteemed so much, it is very clear that in some lines that anonym-

ous voice belongs to the *Brunanburh* poet. In the above lines in italics Borges offers, both as a reader and as a poetry composer, his own poetic explanation of the main events of the poem: the victory, the sword, the historical event and its historical meaning, the beasts-of-battle topos, etc.

Both texts constitute a sort of poetic exegesis, by means of a metapoem, of what Borges considered important and relevant in *The Battle of Brunanburh*. His version offers a contrast to the prose words about the poem he delivered in his university lectures and wrote in his critical works. As it happened to the Anglo-Saxon chronicler who composed the prose and poetry annals of the ASC, Borges offered a poetic version of *Brunanburh* to express something different than what he expressed in prose.

4. Final remarks: “My voice that brings your iron words back to life”

In this article I have just wanted to present a brief taxonomic revision of the treatment *The Battle of Brunanburh* has received in different past and present translations, renderings and recreations. Every issue I have dealt with in this article present different aspects for further research. My analysis, then, has not been exhaustively conducted to cover every question in depth. Rather, I have just pointed out how these three text types have been aimed at different intentions by their authors, showing then several final results that either bring the reader closer to what the text says or moves him further away from the experience contained in the Old English poem. I think it is important to keep the context in which the poem was produced to achieve the effect it creates, maintaining thus the poetic text together with the prose annals. Hence, the reader could perceive how poetry was considered in a different way than prose as far as the expressed content was concerned. Both discourses should, then, be maintained in translation.

One last point to conclude. In another of his OE based poems — composición escrita en un ejemplar de la gesta de Beowulf”, *El otro, el mismo* (1964) — Borges wondered “qué razones/me mueven a estudiar sin esperanza/de precisión, mientras mi noche avanza/la lengua de los ásperos sajones”. He answered himself at the very end of “A un poeta sajón”, of whom he said: “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.” This line holds an important topic. Poets and professors, germanists and anglosaxonists, medievalists and *makars*, we have all played — and will keep on playing, hopefully — a very important role in maintaining the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition. And sometimes, all these roles are mixed up.

Not so long ago we have seen how the work of a contemporary poet, Seamus Heaney, has revitalized the interest on Anglo-Saxon topics by attracting new read-

ers to the Old English world with his *Beowulf* translation. At the same time, this very translation itself has generated new academic reflections and reappraisals on topics such as the poem itself, the translated text, OE in translation, etc. etc. This translation has encouraged other authors to tread on Heaney's very same path and to turn him into a literary device. Such has been case of Kit Fryatt (2007) and his recent poetic rendering of *Deor*.

The well-known first lines of the heroic-elegiac poem — *Welund him be wurman wræces cunnade* — are translated as “Weland studied sorrow amongst whom/ we don't know rightly. Women, snakes, Swedes”. He incorporates, in one single line, the different meanings of this expression — *be wurman* — traditionally adopted by the majority of translators up till now. The previous tradition, academic, interpretative, translatorial, is then crammed in one line. Fryatt (2007: 19) justifies his selection stating that “where scholars differ over the meaning of the Old English, as in the mysterious *be wurman* in the first line of ‘Deor’, I have tried to incorporate a sense of that uncertainty”. At the end of *Deor*, where the poetic persona explains how he was a great poet until a better, more skilful one occupied his own place, Fryatt offers these verses: “I held my station and his steadfast favour,/until Heorrenda now, that famous seamus,/took my acres, that beforetimes/my beloved protector gave to me”. Thus, the “*leoðcræftig monn*” is seen as the Seamus Heaney of the Anglo-Saxon era. The metatext is thus manifold. The poet turns the concerns of *Deor*'s poetic voice into his own concerns as a 21st century contemporary poet who dares to compose a modern version of an OE poem and feels upon his poetic shoulders the heavy burden of the recent poetic tradition embodied by Heaney's text. This is a spectacular looping the loop, poetically speaking.

If we manage to bring the voices of past human beings back to life through our works, lectures, translations or poems, if new readers read them or compose poems inspired by them, if the new generations understand that a great deal of what we are is closely related to what we have been in past times, perhaps we will keep on providing good reasons to the old Borgian desire of studying Anglo-Saxon literature just for the survival of a given poetry line “en la noche propicia a la memoria/O en las mañanas de los hombres”.

Appendix. The Battle of Brunanburh Old English source text (1–10a, 65b–73), as edited by Treharne (2004: 30, 32)

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Her Æþelstan cyning, eorla dryhten,
 beorna beahgifa, and his broþor eac,
 Eadmund æþeling, ealdorlangne tir
 geslogon æt sæcce sweorda ecgum
 ymbe Brunanburh. Bordweal clufan,
 heowan heapolinde hamora lafan,
 aþaran Eadweardes, swa him geæþele wæs
 from cneomægum, þæt hi æt campe oft
 wiþ laþra gehwæne land ealgodon,
 hord and hamas.

(1–10)

Ne wearð wæl mare
 on þis eiglande æfre gieta
 folces gefylled beforan þissum
 sweordes ecgum, þæs þe us secgað bec,
 ealde uðwitan, siþþan eastan hider
 Engle and Seaxe up becoman,
 ofer brad brimu Brytene sohtan,
 wlanca wigsmiþas, Wealas ofercoman,
 eorlas arhwate eard begeatan.

(65a–73)

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Abstract

The poetic insert known as *The Battle of Brunanburh* (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 937) constitutes by no means one of the most interesting texts for the building of the Old English heroic geography. Its author, as Marsden states (2005: 86), "builds a sense of national destiny, using style, diction and imagery of heroic poetry". There are many interesting issues to deal with when you want to revise how the elements Marsden quotes are used in the construction of a poem that uses history as a narrative device to build the inner story of the poem experimenting with the topics (style, diction, imagery) of heroic poetry. If the poem constitutes such a crucial text, if its emphasis is on "English nationalism" in an historical perspective rather than on individual heroics, as Marsden points out (2005: 86), it seems most evident that a careful consideration of these topics has to be made when translating the text into other languages.

The aim of this article is to revisit the poem and its topics and to see how that careful consideration has been accomplished in several important English (Treharne 2004, Hamer 1970, Rodrigues 1996, Garmonsway 1953, Swanton 2000) and Spanish (Lerate & Lerate 2000, Bravo 1998, Bueno 2007) translations that consider the poem in isolation, in the context of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* or as an excuse for poetic inspiration, i.e. the case of Borges' 1964 and 1975 poems and Tennyson's 1880 text.

Résumé

L'insertion poétique dans l'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 937, connue sous le titre *The Battle of Brunanburgh*, constitue sans doute l'un des textes les plus intéressants pour la construction de la géographie héroïque de l'anglais ancien. Son auteur, comme le précise Marsden (2005: 86), «construit un sens du destin national en se servant du style, de la diction et de l'imagerie de la poésie héroïque». De nombreux points intéressants peuvent être abordés lorsque l'on veut revoir de quelle manière les éléments cités par Marsden sont utilisés dans la construction d'un poème en expérimentant les thèmes (style, diction, imagerie) de la poésie héroïque. Si le poème constitue un texte aussi crucial, s'il met l'accent sur le 'nationalisme anglais' dans une perspective historique plutôt que sur l'héroïsme individuel, comme le souligne Marsden (2005: 86), il semble évident qu'il faut tenir compte attentivement de ces thèmes en traduisant le texte dans d'autres langues.

L'objectif de cet article est de réviser le poème et ses thèmes et de voir avec quel soin on en a tenu compte dans plusieurs traductions importantes en anglais (Treharne 2004, Hamer 1970, Rodrigues 1996, Garmonsway 1953, Swanton 2000) et en espagnol (Lerate and Lerate 1970, Bravo 1998, Bueno 2007). Ces traductions considèrent le poème isolément, dans le contexte de la chronique anglo-saxonne, ou comme prétexte à une inspiration poétique, comme dans le cas des poèmes de Borges de 1964 et 1975 et du texte de Tennyson de 1880.

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