

Chapter 4: Reconstructing suspense: Borges translates Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*

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Abstract

With *The Wild Palms* (1939), William Faulkner critiques commercial literature through the treatment of pulp-fiction themes with high modernist literary style. Through experimental prose, metafictional uses of pulp literature, and complex, non-traditional representations of gender, Faulkner complicates the experience of suspense traditionally associated with the sex, crime and violence featured in the novel. On the part of Faulkner's various publishers and his translator, famous writer and critic Jorge Luis Borges, there has been a concerted effort to reformulate and repackage *The Wild Palms* as a thriller. *Las palmeras salvajes* (1940) diverges from the English in manners suggesting a conscious attempt to reconstruct suspense in both the prose and the storyline –most strikingly through the exchange of fictional dialogue between the novel's female and male protagonists.

Keywords: Jorge Luis Borges, William Faulkner, *The Wild Palms*, pulp-fiction, hard-boiled

1. *The Wild Palms*: Pulp-fiction or high art?

The Wild Palms (1939) is generally considered one of William Faulkner's minor works. Overshadowed by his modernist masterpieces such as *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and *Absolom, Absolom!* (1936), the novel is also excluded from bibliographies citing Faulkner's crime fiction, with works such as *Sanctuary* (1931), *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) or *Knight's Gambit* (1949) (Hubin 1979: 142; Reilly 1985: 305-307). Notably, this exclusion from Faulkner's crime fiction canon occurs despite *The Wild Palms'* action centering around a prison break, the performance of illegal abortions by an unlicensed doctor and a murder trial. The problem, it seems, is not that the novel cannot be considered high art or commercial fiction, but rather that it is the synthesis of both. Unlike *Sanctuary*, which –out of financial necessity– Faulkner modeled on the pulp novels that were bringing his contemporaries financial success, *The Wild Palms* rather constitutes a deconstruction of pulp fiction.¹

Toward the end of the 1930s, Faulkner was anxious to distance himself from mass culture after “whoring [himself] with short stories”, an economically motivated stint in Hollywood, and in the wake of the notoriety he garnered with *Sanctuary* (Faulkner 1978: 59). *The Wild Palms* instead became the site for a critical modernist engagement with the commercial literature on which Faulkner

had reluctantly been earning a living (King 1998; Earle 2009: 204-206).² *The Wild Palms* deploys complex prose and formal experimentation in the exposition of pulp themes –crime, sex, violence– in such a way that he dismantles the experience of suspense traditionally achieved through the consumption of pulp fiction.³ Rhetorically, the narrative devices through which Faulkner complicated suspense in *The Wild Palms* had the effect of both exposing and undermining the values underlying commercial fiction –particularly hard-boiled crime narrative– namely, the commodification of art and the mystification of gender. Despite the novel’s lofty intentions, its failure to conform to either genre appears to have made a negative impression from the start. From the time of its initial release, there was a concerted effort on the part of publishers, through editing, censorship and marketing, to repackage *The Wild Palms* as precisely the kind of suspenseful thriller Faulkner attempted to critique.

The novel’s Spanish translator, Jorge Luis Borges, whose *Las palmeras salvajes* was published by Sudamericana in 1940, can be counted among those who sought to recast *The Wild Palms* as a thriller. Despite, or possibly because of the kinds of transformations Borges effectuated in the translation (among them the mere inclusion of his name on the book cover!) in the Spanish speaking world, *Las palmeras salvajes* has come to be considered one of Faulkner’s most important and influential works. In stark contrast to *The Wild Palms*’ scant recognition among English language readers, *Las palmeras salvajes* has been personally mentioned as a significant influence by such celebrated writers as Mario Vargas Llosa, José María Arguedas, Juan Carlos Onetti, Ricardo Piglia, Manuel Puig and Guillermo Cabrera Infante (Leone 2011). It is impossible to definitely establish whether it is Borges’s name, his translation style, or merely the condition of the Latin American polysystem that motivates *Las palmeras salvajes*’ initial and ongoing success in the Hispanophone world. Regardless, study of the translation and its legacy is well worth undertaking –be it a polysystems approach as suggested by Even-Zohar (1978), a descriptive study as originally proposed by Toury (1995), considerations of literary manipulation as discussed by Hermans (1985) and Lefevere (1992), or a gendered approach as taken by Simon (1996) and von Flotow (1997). From any angle one approaches *Las palmeras salvajes*, one may discover the surprising expense at which creating the desired effect of suspense may come. In what follows we will examine the literary techniques by which Faulkner destabilized suspense in *The Wild Palms*, historical evidence of publishers’ attempts to recast the novel into the very style it satirized, and then employ comparative analysis to reveal the ways in which Borges turned Faulkner’s most subversive tactics on their heads.

2. Strangeness and suspense in *The Wild Palms*

2.1. Two novels in one

Reading Borges's rather scathing review of *The Wild Palms*, published in *El Hogar* in 1939, one is almost surprised he accepted the commission to translate the novel. Annoyed –as many U.S. critics were– with Faulkner's formal experimentation in the novel, he wrote:

En las obras capitales de Faulkner –en *Luz de agosto*, en *El sonido y la furia*, en *Santuario*– las novedades técnicas parecen necesarias, inevitables. En *The Wild Palms* son menos atractivas que incómodas, menos justificables que exasperantes. (Borges 2007: 527)

Chief among critics' complaints about *The Wild Palms* was its consisting of two alternating short novels.⁴ In “The Wild Palms”, considered the primary story, Charlotte Rittenmeyer abandons her husband and two daughters to run away with her lover, a medical student named Harry Wilbourne; after Charlotte becomes pregnant, and at her insistence, Harry performs but botches an illegal abortion, killing Charlotte and landing himself a life-sentence in prison. “Old Man” relates a convict's unintentional flight from and desperate attempts to return to prison during a Mississippi flood, during which he saves a pregnant woman who gives birth in the midst of the storm. As Borges states in his review, “[e]sta segunda historia, admirable a veces, corta y vuelve a cortar el penoso curso de la primera, en largas interpolaciones” (2007: 527).

While somewhat missing the thematic confluence of the two stories, in a 1939 review of *The Wild Palms*, critic Paula Snelling certainly noted the effect of their intermittent juxtaposition:

[Faulkner] tells two unrelated stories which have been placed in the same volume for little other discernible purpose than to afford him the pleasure, after engrossing you in one story to the point where you have forgotten what occurred in the other and have lost all interest in its characters, of transporting you to the other, there to remain until the same disinterest has arisen concerning the first set; then back again. (Cited in Inge 1995: 202)

In other words, a primary strategy by which Faulkner interrogated commercial genres was splicing the two pulp-inspired stories precisely at moments of high drama. While in a typical thriller, there may be cuts to other scenes as a way to provide background information, or provide alternative sources of details perhaps unknown to protagonists; these devices generally serve to enhance the primary narrative. In *The Wild Palms*, these cuts rather detract from each story, going on long enough after interrupting the experience of suspense as to obliterate the previous story from the reader's mind.

2.2. Prose as an obstacle to suspense

Faulkner's technical experimentation also extended to his prose, which was at times so wrought, dense, and often ungrammatical, it was simply described as "impudence... a cynical disregard of ordinary politeness" by one reviewer (Robinson [1939] cited in Inge 1995: 191). Suspense in the novel was often curtailed by intrusions into the narration of dramatic exposition through character interruptions into extended dialogue, a third-person narrator's interjection of details, a first-person narrative, and the mid-sentence placement of descriptive parentheses consisting of several paragraphs. Fast-moving scenes are often cut up and spliced with characters' reflections on the events, and even more intrusively, the narrator's supplementation of character motives, events from their past that are directly impacting current events, hints at what a character *would* think, were her or his intellectual or spiritual faculties better developed, and personal guesses about what a given character *might* be thinking, as if the narrator, at some points, is barred from omniscience. Indeed, rather than occlude details from readers in order to keep them engaged and guessing about what will come next, Faulkner saturates them, slowing them down, as another reviewer noted, "as if one were inside a miasma" (March [1939] cited in Inge 1995: 197).

2.3. Metafictional uses of pulp-fiction

The novel's interrogation of commercial literature can also readily be seen in the disastrous consequences that result from reading it as a truthful representation of reality. In "Old Man", the convict blames his imprisonment on "the writers, [...] the paper novels", who put the idea in his head that he could successfully rob a train, just like the fictional characters in his dime-store paperbacks (1939: 19).⁵ In "The Wild Palms", Charlotte has so internalized romance novels that she abandons her husband and children, demands an abortion of her unwilling lover, and then later refuses to seek medical attention for the toxemia it produces because she learned in books, "that love and suffering are the same thing and that the value of love is the sum of what you have to pay for it" (1939: 43). Harry, for his part, is not unduly influenced by pulp-fiction (except as the victim of Charlotte's credulous reading), but rather must bear the weight of Faulkner's irony, as he –like the author at varying points in his career– must write pulp-fiction to make a living.

2.4. Subverting heteronormative gender representations

2.4.1. Critical reception of Harry and Charlotte

In addition to the metafictional uses of pulp-fiction in the novel, it is in Faulkner's treatment of gender that the subversion of popular literature, particularly hard-boiled crime fiction, truly reveals itself. More troubling to critics than the experimental format of the novel were the protagonists of "The Wild Palms", Harry and Charlotte, whose characterization made them virtually unrecognizable as possible people with whom readers could identify.⁶ Reviewer William McFee claimed that Faulkner "outrages the intelligence of his readers and admirers with such preposterously distorted characters" ([1939] cited in Inge 1995: 193), while Mary-Carter Roberts argued, "[t]he poignancy of the adventure itself naturally suffers from the unnatural quality of the adventurers. The hero is pallid and the heroine is chromo" ([1939] cited in Inge 1995: 191). She went on to add:

[T]he heroine is one of those awful monsters which male novelists from time to time create when they decide to forgo nature as a source of material and rummage about instead in the old grab-bag of desire, bringing up a half dozen or so isolated traits and arbitrarily shoving them together, making such a creature as has haunted a good many dreams since the world began but which nobody has ever yet met in the flesh —or could endure. ([1939] cited in Inge 1995: 191)

In effect, the terms "unnatural" and "distorted" refer euphemistically to the feminization of Harry and masculinization of Charlotte. These traits are particularly jarring, as they occur within the framework of a hard-boiled plot, which traditionally hinges upon male dominance over the female.

2.4.2. Moving beyond mere gender role inversion

Deborah Clarke has asserted that "Faulkner consistently questions cultural definitions of gender, and in ... (*The Wild Palms*), in particular, reveals their tenuous nature" (1995: 112). Nevertheless, as a genre, hard-boiled fiction has also consistently questioned cultural definitions of gender —but as an anxious response to social and economic changes occurring over the first half of the 20th century, which include the permanent entrance of women into the workforce, immigration, corporate capitalism and the new market system's rendering impossible the fulfilment of an individualistic masculine ideal. Yet rather than offer an alternative to the debilitating gender expectations whose impossibility fuelled the darkness and tragedy that often characterizes the noir genre, hard-boiled fiction presented a reactionary version of masculinity: brute strength, violence and either the absence of, or opposition to, women. As Christopher Breu defines it,

[T]he hard-boiled male was characterized by a tough, shell-like exterior, a prophylactic toughness that was organized around the rigorous suppression of affect and was mirrored by his detached laconic utterances and his instrumentalized, seemingly amoral actions. (2005: 1)

“The Wild Palms”, however, rather than reify, often undermines hard-boiled representations of masculinity as it is the “awful monster”, Charlotte who performs them: she is aggressive, violent, sexually dominant and the independent breadwinner in her extra-marital relationship. Harry, despite his role as the male protagonist, cooks, cleans, writes confessional erotica from a female point of view, and openly admits that Charlotte is a “better man” and a “better gentleman” than he (Chatto and Windus 1939: 123, 129). Character discourse in “The Wild Palms” is especially suggestive of the text’s complex relationship with both pulp-fiction and the hard-boiled style of masculinity it projects; for as Faulkner breaks down normative representations of gender he also complicates the associations that produce reader anticipation, and hence, suspense. Language is a defining aspect of hard-boiled masculinity, which can be located in cool detachment, threats, cursing, slang, orthographic markers of pronunciation. The power and control present in hard-boiled language traditionally contribute to a sympathetic identification with the male protagonist, whom readers desire to see rise victorious from verbal conflict (Nyman 1997: 142). Again, when such language is deployed in “The Wild Palms”, it is almost exclusively uttered by Charlotte: she is dry and ironic, curses, gives Harry orders, berates and belittles him.

The preservation of male power through its exertion over the feminine, a core value of hard-boiled fiction, is thus unravelled in the novel (Nyman 1997: 55). Notably, “The Wild Palms” is not merely an inversion of gender stereotypes that effectively uphold traditional masculinist values even as they are being performed by a woman.⁷ For at other times, the values underlying hard-boiled language are ironically undercut by Harry’s insight into the motivations behind tough-guy speech: fear, isolation, powerlessness, and the masking of pain. In the following example, Charlotte’s husband, Rittenmeyer, has accompanied the couple to the train, should his wife decide at the last minute not to leave him. This is one of the few scenes of homosocial triangulation in the novel, ripe for conflict in a classic competition for a woman’s love.⁸ Rittenmeyer’s tough talk nevertheless fails to create the suspense it might in a traditional hard-boiled novel as a result of its framing by Harry’s direct thought:

(1)
Why, he’s suffering, he’s actually suffering, thinking how perhaps it is not the heart at all, not even the sensibilities, with which we suffer, but our capacity for grief or vanity or self-delusion or perhaps even merely masochism. “Go on”, Rittenmeyer said. “Get out of the aisle”. His voice was harsh, his hand almost rough as he pushed her into the seat and set the bag beside the other one. “Remember now. If I don’t hear by the tenth of each month, I’m going to give the detective word. And no lies, see? No lies”.... “I want to talk to you”, he said in that seething repressed

voice. "Come on"... [Wilbourne]... thought again: *He is suffering; even circumstance, a trivial railroad time table, is making comedy of that tragedy which he must play to the bitter end or cease to breathe.* (50)

Harry's sensitivity, his ruminating on causes of suffering, make a caricature of the husband's toughness, intimating that it is nothing more than a shallow veneer to cover his pain. "The Wild Palms" thus moves beyond simply switching gender attributes between the male and female protagonists while still aligning itself with hard-boiled values regardless of who enacts them. The reader still identifies with Harry, even as he not only fails to speak and perform hard-boiled masculinity but effectively mocks the actors who do.

3. Repackaging *The Wild Palms*

3.1. Extraction

In direct conflict with the author's subversive approach to pulp-fiction, various stakeholders in the publication of *The Wild Palms* ironically pushed the novel into the very models of literary consumability Faulkner had originally set out to interrogate. When the New American Library of World Literature, Inc. published *The Wild Palms* as its first paperback title in 1948, they extracted –with Faulkner's express permission– the "Old Man" sections of the novel entirely (Schwartz 1988: 59). Not only did they assess the illicit love story as the more marketable aspect of the text, the foreclosure of suspense that "Old Man" had exacted on "The Wild Palms" was eliminated, producing a smoother, faster read. The paperback cover featured a bikini-clad woman with a parasol behind her; across the bottom a red banner announced, "From the author of 'Sanctuary'", Faulkner's most salacious novel.

3.2. Omission

Previously, in 1939, Chatto & Windus, Random House's counterpart in the UK, not only localized the novel to conform to British orthographic conventions and regional word use, but censored the text extensively. Intentionally or not, the British Charlotte was pushed back in line with the heteronormative standards, as her coarseness was softened by the omission of her most vulgar comments. In the Chatto & Windus edition, gone –in addition to most of her cursing and sexual innuendos– are her accusation of Harry working as a crossing guard "...so you can rape little girls in parks on Saturday afternoons!" (1939a: 220, 1939b: 202); her explanation for how she became pregnant: "...when the stove went out, my douche bag was hanging behind it. It froze and when we lit the stove again I forgot it and it burst" (1939a: 205, 1939b: 188); and her crude joke just

before Harry performs the abortion: “We’ve done this lots of ways but not with knives, have we?” (1939a: 161, 1939b: 203). Crucial to the legacy of *The Wild Palms* in Spanish, when Borges translated the novel, he used the censored British version –whether or not he was aware of this censorship is still a mystery.⁹ Yet, as we will see, even the pairing down of Charlotte’s vulgar language, which pushed her into more traditional standards of femininity, appears insufficient to produce convincing enough suspense for the author of *Ficciones*.

3.3. Recreation

Borges was not exactly a fan of hard-boiled fiction, preferring instead puzzle-style detective novels such as those by C.K. Chesterton and Robert Louis Stevenson.¹⁰ Yet, as indicated in numerous essays and book reviews, the plodding pace and extraneous details –which, as mentioned above, abound in both stories in *The Wild Palms* as integral parts of Faulkner’s project of deconstructing pulp-fiction– Borges found practically insufferable. Given the Argentine’s translation aesthetic of creative infidelity,¹¹ it is perhaps no surprise that, wherever possible, Borges picked up the pace and increased elements of danger and suspense through the elimination of the very stylistic details Faulkner had employed to distinguish *The Wild Palms* from traditional crime fictions. Interruptions in character dialogue, experimental discourse strategies, narrator interjections, parenthetical asides lasting several paragraphs were all eliminated or standardized in the translation through added punctuation, quotation marks, and italics.¹² Yet the most notable instances of increased suspense and danger in the text are carried out through Borges’s exchanging of roles between Charlotte and Harry, confirming a foundational, cross-cultural assumption about the relationship between gender and genre in the 1930s and 40s: stable relations between a hard-boiled male and *femme fatale* being the necessary conditions for convincing suspense. In the examples that follow, it is clear that a deliberate choice has been made to alter the feminized characterization of Harry to bring him more in line with traditional, hard-boiled masculinity, and likewise, to push Charlotte back into heteronormative representations of femininity.

3.3.1. Shifting line breaks, shifting power

Continuing from the train scene above (see section 2.4.2.), one stop before the station at which Rittenmeyer intends to depart the train, Charlotte asks Harry if she may go speak with him. Harry is confused by the question, finding it absurd that she should ask permission to speak to her own husband. He imagines

Charlotte may be thinking of going back to him, and that if she turns to look at Harry, she is actually saying goodbye:

- (2)
ST. "Can I go back and speak to him a minute?"
"Can you go? —"
"Hammond is the next station".
Why, he's your husband, he was about to say but caught himself. "It's the men's room", he said. "Maybe I had better—" But she had already risen and passed him; he thought: *If she stops and looks back at me it will mean she is thinking, 'Later I can always know that at least I told him good-bye'* and she did stop and they looked at each other, then she went on. (Faulkner 1939: 52)

In the Spanish version, a very different scene occurs. When Charlotte asks permission to see her husband, Harry coldly grants it, his question transformed into a reluctant concession. But in a displacement of Charlotte's words to his mouth, he then reminds her that the next station is the one at which Rittenmeyer will be leaving the train, as if warning her not to get off the train with him. When Charlotte walks away, Harry does not imagine *what* she is thinking, but merely *that* she is thinking:

- (3)
TT. —¿Puedo ir un momento a hablarle, un minuto?
—Puedes... Hammond es la próxima estación.
Pero es tu marido, estuvo a punto de decir, pero se contuvo.
—Está en el compartimiento de los hombres —dijo—. Tal vez sería mejor que yo... Pero Carlota se había levantado y seguía adelante; él pensó: *Si se para y me mira querrá decir que está pensando. Más tarde sabré que al menos le dije adiós*, y se detuvo y se miraron y ella siguió. (Faulkner [1939]1940: 54)

Here, dominance is asserted as Harry is now in a position of power in which he may grant Charlotte permission to speak with her husband, and violence comes into play as he holds back anger rather than confusion when containing his, "pero es tu marido". Whether the removal of the quotation marks surrounding Charlotte's imagined dismissal were intentional or mere carelessness, the effect on Harry's characterization is a fatalistic attitude typical of hard-boiled males. He nonchalantly notes that at least *he* said goodbye, staunchly bracing himself for Charlotte not to return.

Charlotte does not get off the train with Rittenmeyer but follows through with her intention of running away. In the conversation that ensues, Charlotte concedes that she has returned, but admits that "it's not finished"; she might not be strong enough to resist the urge to return to her husband, should he purchase another ticket and get back on the train to allow her a few more stops to change her mind:

- (4)
ST. “So you came back”, he said.
“You didn’t think I was. Neither did I”.
“But you did”.
“Only it’s not finished. If he were to get back on the train, with a ticket to Slidell—”
She turned, staring at him though she did not touch him. “It’s not finished. It will have to be cut”. (Faulkner 1939: 53)

The “cut” to which Charlotte is referring is a break to her emotional ties to Rittenmeyer. Knowing that only a passionate emotional experience will have the power to break those bonds, she demands that Harry book the couple a private cabin on the train, so they may make love for the very first time.

In the Spanish translation of this passage, Harry again takes on an air of authority and coldness more appropriate to hard-boiled fiction. Borges eliminates any sentimentality on Harry’s part, and gives him one of Charlotte’s lines to emphasize his dominant role.

- (5)
TT. –Así que has vuelto –dijo él.
–Tú no lo creías, ni yo tampoco.
–Pero no hemos concluido. Si vuelve al tren con un billete hasta Slidell.
Se dio vuelta mirándolo pero sin tocarlo.
–No hemos concluido. Hay que darle un corte. (Faulkner [1939]1940: 54)

Harry’s “so you came back” takes on an ironic tone when his maudlin rejoinder, “but you did” is removed. Instead, Charlotte’s line, “Only it’s not finished” becomes his own. With Harry insisting that things are not finished, Charlotte’s reply, “No hemos concluido. Hay que darle un corte”, comes as the response to an order, rather than as her personal solution for dissolving the affective ties she still has to her husband. Thus, when she asks Harry to get a room for them, the full force of what she is asking for is lost. More in line with a typical *femme fatale*, Charlotte’s request suggests her to be uncontrollably randy rather than to be making a rational decision about how to most effectively sever the emotional bonds that may hinder her life choices. What has become Harry’s initial assertion that things are not over, that Charlotte’s husband could get back on the train, also introduces the possibility for a showdown between the men in the narrative, adding an entirely new source of suspense to the story and bolstering Harry’s toughness.

3.3.2. From virgin to potential murderer

The introduction of suspense through the suggestion of male competition occurs earlier in the translation as well. Prior to their running away together, when

Charlotte and Harry were deciding how to proceed with their love affair, Borges uses ambiguous line breaks to suggest an entirely new line of possible action:

- (6)
ST. "Can't you get the divorce?"
"On what grounds? He would fight it. And it would have to be here—a Catholic judge. So there's just one other thing. And it seems I can't do that".
"Yes", he said. "Your children".
For a moment she looked at him, smoking. "I wasn't thinking of them. I mean, I have already thought of them". (Faulkner 1939: 42)

The "just one other thing" that Charlotte cannot do is have an illicit affair, she refuses to sneak around. Harry naively understands that the one other thing she cannot do is run away, because she could not leave her children. Contrasting Harry's sentimentalism against Charlotte's cynicism, she corrects him, and makes clear that her children have ceased to be a factor in her decision making. In translation, however, the roles are again reversed:

- (7)
TT. —¿Y tú no puedes pedir el divorcio?
—¿Con qué motivos? Él pleitearía. Y tendría que ser aquí, con un juez católico.
—Sólo queda una solución. Y para ésa parece que yo no sirvo.
—Sí —dijo él—. Tus hijos.
Lo miró, por un momento, fumando.
—No pensaba en ellos. Quiero decir que ya he pensado en ellos. (Faulkner [1939]1940: 54)

In the English, Charlotte's comment, "[s]o there's just one other thing. And it seems I can't do that", is part of the previous section of her speech. In the translation, however, that line is cut off, and put in dialogue below, effectively becoming Harry's in normal turn-taking. Harry, thereby boldly and fatalistically states that only one other solution remains, seemingly implying homicide. Harry's next words remain a separate line of dialogue, yet also must be his, as the dialogue marker "dijo él" clearly indicates. In other words, though tough enough to murder Charlotte's husband, Harry is sufficiently benevolent not to do so for the sake of her children (who incidentally are two girls). Interestingly enough, in subsequent editions of the translation, this scene was amended to repair the double turn-taking that occurs from Borges's placement of Charlotte's "just one other thing" on a separate line. Rather than return the line to her, however, an entirely new line of dialogue was created! The following passage can be found in the one of the latest printing of *Las palmeras salvajes*, released by Delbolsillo in 2006:

- (8)
TT. —¿Y tú no puedes pedir el divorcio?

Leah Leone

–¿Con qué motivos? Él pleitearía. Y tendría que ser aquí, con un juez católico.
–Sólo queda una solución. Y para ésa parece que yo no sirvo.
–¿Qué no sirves?
–Sí –dijo él–. Tus hijos.
Lo miró, por un momento, fumando.
–No pensaba en ellos. Quiero decir que ya he pensado en ellos. (Faulkner [1939] 2006: 45, *my emphasis*)

The addition of the line for Charlotte, “¿Qué no sirves?”, eliminates any ambiguity as to who is speaking –or to whom is in charge. Now without question, Harry proves his toughness as he boldly implies that were it not for his lover’s children he would murder her husband. A revision of all the editions of *Las palmeras salvajes* remains to be conducted in order to determine the point at which this line was inserted into the translation. The fact that editors would take the target text farther away rather than closer to the source suggests that some heteronormative concepts regarding male and female roles are still firmly lodged in place.

4. Conclusion

The transformations to *The Wild Palms*, both at the hands of Faulkner’s editors and his translator, strongly suggest that their visions of credible suspense hinge upon stable and traditional definitions of gender, and that increasing suspense was essential to its success with readers. Compared to censorship, the elimination of “Old Man” and provocative packaging, Borges’s revisions in *Las palmeras salvajes* are perhaps the most creative, and certainly the most subtle. And possibly the most effective. In both the train ride and the plotting of their escape from New Orleans, Borges’s inversions and inventions of Harry’s and Charlotte’s speech are directly tied to a transformation in the dynamics of the plot, creating possibilities for masculine aggression, and hence suspense, that were entirely absent from the source text.

While his attempt to masculinize Harry and feminize Charlotte are impossible to maintain for the length of the novel, Borges appears to use individual passages from the text to create fragments of the sort of story he would have chosen to write. Upon reading Borges’s version, José María Arguedas wrote of *Las palmeras salvajes*, “es una maravilla, la mujer me parece superextraordinaria” ([1940] cited in González Vígil 2000: 88). Yet who might the Peruvian author have encountered had Charlotte not been censored by Chatto & Windus and then subdued by Borges? The words stolen from her mouth and put into Harry’s made him more of a hard-boiled man, one better fit for the role of renegade lover and potential murderer. Rather than pliant and pleading as he is in the English, Harry becomes dominant, calculating and cold, exhibiting exactly the kind of toughness Faulkner sought to undermine with *The*

Wild Palms. While the kinds of changes Borges exacted upon both the plot and the characterization are surprising, we may do well to avoid assuming that they are unique. The oft-lamented invisibility of the translator is the perfect cloak behind which one may hide the creative introduction of her or his own literary aspirations into any translation.

¹ For more on Faulkner's anxiety over and creative response to his association with pulp-fiction, see Wenska (1999-2000), King (1998), Earle (2009) and Breu (2005).

² In *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (2005), Christopher Breu finds this same mass vs. high culture dynamic in Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932).

³ One reviewer of *The Wild Palms* even asked: "What prevents Faulkner from perceiving that his subject matter isn't adequate to the demands of his theme?" (Hart 1995: 202)

⁴ Ted Robinson (1939): "And perhaps we are lucky to get two novels for the price of one. But I can't see the point in mixing them" (Hart 1995: 192); William McFee (1939): "*The Wild Palms* is a curious production likely to confuse the average reader because it presents, intertwined, two separate themes" (Hart 1995: 192).

⁵ All quotations are from the Chatto & Windus edition of *The Wild Palms* unless otherwise noted.

⁶ This essay will deal primarily with "The Wild Palms" sections of the novels. For more on Borges's translation of "Old Man", see Leone (2011).

⁷ Nyman sees a less successful questioning of gender through Horace McCoy's use of role reversal between Robert and Gloria in his 1935 thriller, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*: "Although McCoy's novel points to the possibility of new constructions of gender, it is not extremely radical in this respect. It implies that the only way to cope with the world is to adopt a masculine stance, as can be seen in the significance of the issues of power and domination [...] Thus the novel remains obedient to the genre, as can also be seen in its way of understanding woman as Other" (1997: 133).

⁸ All references to homosocial desire and homosocial triangulation derive from their treatment in Sedgwick (1985).

⁹ Unaware that Borges based his translation upon the censored Chatto & Windus version, a number of scholars have erroneously compared Borges's translation to the Random House edition and come to the conclusion that he censored the text himself – venturing that curse words, and the issues of sex and abortion, were distasteful to him, and possibly, to his mother. See Leone (2011) for an extended discussion of this debate.

¹⁰ In a talk he gave on the subject of crime fiction, Borges stated: "Actualmente, el género policial ha decaído mucho en Estados Unidos. El género policial es realista, de violencia, un género de violencias sexuales también. En todo caso, ha desaparecido. Se ha olvidado el origen intelectual del relato policial" ("El cuento policial" OC IV 2007: 239)

¹¹ For an excellent analysis of Borges's aesthetic of creative infidelity, see Waisman (2005).

¹² The impulse to include clear distinctions between character and narrator is an impulse found ubiquitously across Borges's translations of English language fiction. See Leone (2011) and Willson (2004).

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Reconstructing suspense: Borges translates Faulkner's The Wild Palms

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