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Borges versus Proust: Towards a Combative Literature

Fuera de algunas amistades y de muchas costumbres, el problemático ejercicio de la literatura constituía su vida; como todo escritor, medía las virtudes de los otros por lo ejecutado por ellos y pedía que los otros lo midieran por lo que vislumbraba o placaba.

Jorge Luis Borges (*OC* 5:161)

Apart from a few friends and many routines, the problematic pursuit of literature constituted the whole of his life; like every writer, he measured other men's virtues by what they had accomplished, yet asked that other men measure him by what he planned someday to do. (*SNF* 158-59)

FANFARE AS THE LIGHTS come up in the arena. In this corner, the challenger: the blind Argentinian librarian, sometime poet, essayist and lecturer, erstwhile poultry inspector, eclectic yet conservative. And in the other corner, the beloved recumbent French champion, weighing in with seven weighty volumes of protracted sentences and winding (perhaps literally breathtaking)¹ meditations on the slightest sensations. An unlikely match, it may be soberly remarked, with unlikely combatants. Why should these two authors be in contest with one another, how should they combat, what title is at stake—quite simply, what purpose is served by placing them in opposition? The opposition is actually not just a whim: Borges, in whom we find such impeccable literary knowledge and taste, disliked Proust, that other paragon of cultural refinement. Why this should be so is a question that inspires this essay, a speculation upon a possible antagonism—for, after all, Proust could not be bothered to foresee, let alone fortify against or rebuke in anticipation, his future adversary.

Borges and Proust: crudely compared, both are Nobel-lacking mamma's boys; both might be termed or criticized as (in the manner of Paul Claudel) literary anchorites; both have steered startlingly into and through the maelstrom of metaphysical solipsism, wherein so many other artists have foundered. Weighty is the cultural capital attached to either of their names and yet light their touches (Borgesian, Proustian, both mind-warping adjectives, tricks of shadows and

¹ I defer to Walter Benjamin: "Proust's syntax rhythmically, step by step, enacts his fear of suffocating. And his ironic, philosophical, didactic reflections invariably are the deep breath with which he shakes off the crushing weight of memories" (246).

existence by function, or the variety of disparate elements by the diversity of roles to be filled. Its purpose is to vindicate individuality. It is right for the best to have first place. As for second place, it does not correspond to a subordinate function in the economy of the whole. Second place belongs to the individual who proves to be second best. (Descombes 122-23)

In an essay considering between Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens "whose era" of poetry the twentieth century may be said to be, Marjorie Perloff recognizes "the problem that came to obsess Modernism: whether poetry should be lyric or collage, meditation or encyclopedia, the still moment or the jagged fragment" (23). In a spirit akin to Perloff's, the present essay reorients the problem by substituting prose as its focus and suggesting that the differences between the two authors examined here typify some of the primary choices available to avant-garde prose. Proust and Borges are among the greatest non- and perhaps even anti-totalizing (*pace* Sartre, who recognized Proust as a totality, an overwhelming mythology located in a person) prose writers of the twentieth century, and they are almost certainly the most ardent resisters of completion. As such, they are eminent examples of the tendency towards authorial abortion, self-sabotage, and error that is the idea (in place of an ideal) of modernism and postmodernism.³

The literary criticism of Tlön permits the invention of authors by attributing texts that might otherwise seem unrelated to "a single author, and then in all good conscience determin[ing] the psychology of that most interesting *homme de lettres*" (CF 77). If we were citizens of Tlön, then, a natural approach to the problem of comparison here would be to determine what sort of author penned both *À la recherche* and *Ficciones*—an approach that would, I think, result in the emergence of the ideal author of Tlön, whose oeuvre explodes with contradictions, theses, and antitheses at every degree of style and substance. Borges-Proust, as this Tlönist construct may be christened, is as unstable a compound as any chemist might wish for. Just as the transposition of respective authorial function and works, as elegantly exemplified by the case of Pierre Menard, is a technique that "fills the calmest books with adventure" (CF 95), to imagine "The Library of Babel" as written by Proust is a proposition that enthralls by its potential as much as it eludes real possibility. Differentiating between authors so often characterized as incomparable is a difficult imperative to face because it seems counter-intuitive, but it is for this quixotic reason (like the impossibility of remembering the world without oneself) that it is an imperative.

And with that, the bell rings and the first round begins.

Round 1. Time

Probably the most obvious basis for comparison between Proust and Borges is the question of how time and temporality are dramatized and examined (both words seem inadequate) in their respective writings. Because a very considerable

³ John Arthos proposes to "use Post-modernist skepticism to test Modernist pretensions" (259). However, I'm not so sure who is kidding whom about having pretensions, so I will not press any such point here, particularly as it is becoming more and more apparent in critical studies of these respective authors that neither precisely fits the assigned moulds (see Gray's work, for example, on the manner in which Proust overreaches modernism).

and counter-sophistry. Though to an uninformed observer—who likewise sees no difference between this Quixote by Menard and that one by Cervantes—the respective arrows of Proust and Borges seem to be standing still, this is a false similitude. Proust's arrow continues in its flight, is always hurrying but never reaching. Thus the compounding of metaphors and transcriptions of sensations, for *l'écriture* is the flight path both required of the arrow and unable to be taken. Borges's time's arrow, by contrast, has no target: it does not even think of itself as an arrow but as the idea of an arrow.

In other words, the Proustian moment (I will return to this false-bottomed phrase shortly) is measured by desire's intensity, but the Borgesian moment is not truly measured at all, or at least not in this excruciatingly subjective manner. Time for Proust, in the justly famous formulation of Paul de Man, is "truth's inability to coincide with itself" (78), and this is why "Le passé n'est pas fugace, il reste sur place" (*R* 2:418; "The past is not fugitive, it stays put" [M-K 2:433]), and the future is the impossible cradle of all the present's anxieties.

One of Borges's best-known stories, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" ("The Garden of Forking Paths") advances the notion of faith "en infinitas series de tiempos, en una red creciente y vertiginosa de tiempos divergentes, convergentes y paralelos. Esa trama de tiempos que se aproximan, se bifurcan, se cortan o que secularmente se ignoran, abarca todas las posibilidades" (*OC* 5:109; "in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snapped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains *all* possibilities" [*CF* 127]). The plurality is tempered, however, by a force of inflexible destiny: in Borges's universe it is of no real consequence how long the critical moment is in coming. As long as the wait may be, an undoing awaits every malingerer, mystery, and minotaur.

Proust, or rather Proust's aesthetic enterprise, cannot embrace all possibilities of time. Neither, to be sure, can Borges, but he locates vortices, centers of recurrence and coincidence, and in the act of approximation he articulates a knowing but modest respect for the otherwise unfathomable plenitude of alternate "forking paths." I have an unknown degree of freedom, or a serviceable illusion of the same, when I select a path, and yet I never select one but many simultaneously. Proust's route, by contrast, is habitual and, as I shall address in the next round, assimilative (*toujours du côté de chez quelqu'un autre*). Borges's route is one of escape, albeit unworkable because every site in time and space is (after Giordano Bruno) the center of the universe, and this place and moment are ever and again this moment and place. Neither strategy is entirely effective—in and after modernism all aesthetics fail or dissolve in spite of themselves—for Proust cannot contain even himself (he does not, if you will, have time enough to do so) in his "search," and Borges has not the time to escape, negate, or transcend himself because he *is* time:

*And yet, and yet . . . Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos. Nuestro tiempo es un río que me arrebató, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges. (*OC* 8:256)*

herself not a single or distinct figure. She is a woman, but she may be of and with women; she is unique and a type; she is alive and dead, here and gone. Deleuze and Guattari summarize her situation:

Albertine is slowly extracted from a group of girls with its own number, organization, code, and hierarchy; and not only is this group or restricted mass suffused by an unconscious, but Albertine has her own multiplicities that the narrator, once he has isolated her, discovers on her body and in her lies—until the end of their love returns her to the indiscernible. (36)

To scrutinize, to study someone—at least when they are alive—is to find many,⁴ and ultimately to become many. Swann's praise of Robert Louis Stevenson for his investigation of the doubleness of the self (M-K 3:736) suggests Proust's critical awareness of multiple selves as both a trope and story in itself and coincides with Borges's own palpable admiration of the Scottish writer. The Jekylls and Hydes who populate this or that Guermentes soirée are as transient and blurred as the fascinating, fatiguing soirées themselves. These Proustian creatures are observed; they do not themselves observe.

Borges's characters always return to themselves—we may consider an example such as "La Otra Muerte" of Pedro Damián, though the "Homeric gesture" is, if you like, at its most literal in "El Inmortal"—but Borges never precludes himself from the gravitational rule. He who tells of Jekyll and Hyde is now Jekyll and now Hyde. Always and above everything, "yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges" (OC 8:256), even though it may not be the same "Borges" with whom the tale, or even the sentence, began. This is the sensibility of resignation, quite apart from the vacillation so intrinsic to Proust's memory, thought, and desire.

Although Proustian and Borgesian narrators are multifarious, they are tantalizingly "like" their respective implied author, to the point of sometimes sharing names. Descombes considers *Recherche* to be the story of a "Pseudo-Marcel," "a French philosopher who left no texts and about whom we have no first-hand information. Everything attributed to him is in fact drawn from the remarks and reflections that Proust (the writer) attributes to his fictional narrator" (24), while Kristeva refers to an "imaginary narrator, who is neither *status corruptionis* of the drunken sin [nor] in the *status integritatis* of a pacified conceptual understanding, [but] remains in an intermediate stage, the *status gratiae*" (319). Proust is a biographer with Boswellian devotion to a possible other Proust to whom he sometimes fancies he may be compared. This "other" Proust is not a transparent window but rather an agent of investigation, one who himself looks through windows and, as it turns out, the affectations of other people. As a probe, the graceful Proust-within-Proust is something of a nerve-laden, hypersensitive extension of both author and reader, a pandiculating outgrowth like that imagined to facilitate an ideal kiss.

Borges has no interest in incorporating, containing, or even conclusively arguing with his alternate, external selves, although the dialogue itself is inevitable. The Borges-without-Borges is a stranger and, as the title of one story has it, "The Other":

⁴ Thus James, at least in "Daisy Miller," is a Proustian rather than a Borgesian: Winterbourne's study of the American girl actually complicates her identity for him until the great leveler and simplifier, death, closes the subject.

the narrative representation of experience. For the remainder of this round on selfhood, let us keep our focus upon the way in which characters and narrators interact with these points of intersection, and save consideration of the effects of writing about such points until round 3.

Occasions of violence in the works of both authors encompass all three of these points. In the passage just quoted from Proust, for example, there is a visceral reaction to the invasive, possessive nature of love and the vulgarity of the language that expresses it, though of course this is one of the gentlest instances of so many cracks of this whip. The term "closure" has no meaning when brought to Proust, as even pain, death, and decay are unremitting. Violence is subjectivity in elation. Not so for Borges, in many of whose stories an ending is synonymous with the thrust of a gaucho's blade or the report of a well-aimed pistol. This violence is an argument against fiction, as it exposes the false subjectivities of fictional characters. Sylvia Molloy observes how death, for Borges,

is a form of irony. Cutting reductive readings [such as those of Lönnrot in "Death and the Compass" and Albert in "The Garden of Forking Paths"] short by putting an end, effectively, to the reader. Borges criticizes the latter's excessive respect for texts wrongly considered quiescent. Death highlights a misguided fidelity that is, after all, a form of readerly inattention. (35)

Irony for Proust, on the other hand, is the primary if not the sole consolation of self-awareness: it is, as Kristeva puts it, "what keeps him going" (151). It may be the recognition of death, but it is also the life of his fiction. Contradictions and disappointments in dreams, desires, and death (as tawdry a social function as any *soirée*) compel Marcel and the self-reflexive narrators of Borges to record and examine, albeit on very different scales. Molloy argues that "[i]n Proust, only interference—an *intermittence*—disrupts the unsettling accumulation of objects and makes it manageable," while in Borges (the example Molloy offers is Daneri's interruption of the narrator's "mute contemplation of the infinite universe" in "The Aleph") the disruption is less fortuitous and "more brutal" (119). There is a very fine distinction to be observed between the cruelties of Proust and the brutalities of Borges, however metaphorical they both may be. "It is awful," admits Kristeva, "but Proust's science is a pure science of vice. To which he adds a touch of beauty" (98). Instead of a science of vice, Borges offers a history of iniquity, for which he is criticized by Deleuze and Guattari. They charge that Borges, in his 1935 baroque profiles of the Widow Chung, Monk Eastman, and Bill Harrigan, has not "distinguished between the great realm of deceptions and the great realm of betrayals" (125), but it seems to me that Borges implies in his introduction to the 1954 edition of his early book that such a distinction is antithetical to his fictional enterprise and perhaps also to his notions about the function of character:

Los doctores del Gran Vehículo enseñan que lo esencial del universo es la vacuidad. Tienen plena razón en lo referente a esa mínima parte del universo que es este libro. Patibulos y piratas lo pueblan y la palabra *infamia* aturde en el título, pero bajo los tumultos no hay nada. No es otra cosa que apariencia, que una superficie de imágenes; por eso mismo puede acaso agradar. (OC 3:10)

The learned doctors of the Great Vehicle teach us that the essential characteristic of the universe is its emptiness. They are certainly correct with respect to the tiny part of the universe that is this book. Gallows and pirates fill its pages, and that word iniquity [perhaps not the best translation of *infamia*] strikes awe in its title, but under all the storm and lightning, there is nothing. It is all just appearance, a surface of images—which is why readers may, perhaps, enjoy it. (CF 5)

at least deceptively causal (the inevitability of the conclusion transcends the particulars of logic and approximates the "regular recurrence" Jakobson locates in verse).

There is, then, a (perhaps inevitable) kind of motion in the prose of both writers, though this is the barest of similarities. In her reading of Proust, Kristeva finds that "[w]riting is the act of restoring the sense of time to language, a journey away from the conscious self by way of memories" (209); what she misses is the particular and, given the popular association of the Proustian imagination with lethargy, surprising means by which time is measured and the self waylaid. That is, labor—the antithesis to the cocktail of lassitude and indolence stirred in every superficial gathering. Only in work, the work, can the writer attain the state of grace discussed above and stand outside of time, for the work is all-involving and always. The writer must be at once meticulous and unrelenting, and must sustain many relationships simultaneously with his text:

avec de perpétuels regroupements de forces, comme une offensive, le supporter comme une fatigue, l'accepter comme une règle, le construire comme une église, le suivre comme une régime, le vaincre comme un obstacle, le conquérir comme une amitié, le suralimenter comme un enfant, le créer comme un monde sans laisser de côté ces mystères qui n'ont probablement leur explication que dans d'autres mondes et dont le pressentiment est ce qui nous émeut le plus dans la vie et dans l'art. Et dans ces grands livres-là, il y a des parties qui n'ont eu le temps que d'être esquissées, et qui ne seront sans doute jamais finies, à cause de l'ampleur même du plan de l'architecte. Combien de grandes cathédrales restent inachevées! On le nourrit, on fortifie ses parties faibles, on le préserve, mais ensuite c'est lui qui grandit, qui désigne notre tombe, la protège contre les rumeurs et quelque temps contre l'oubli. (*R* 3:1032-33)

perpetually regrouping his forces like a general conducting an offensive, and he would have also to endure his book like a form of fatigue, to accept it like a discipline, build it up like a church, follow it like a medical regime, vanquish it like an obstacle, win it like a friendship, cosset it like a little child, create it like a new world without neglecting those mysteries whose explanation is to be found probably only in worlds other than our own and the presentiment of which is the thing that moves us most deeply in life and in art. In long books of this kind there are parts which there has been time only to sketch, parts which, because of the very amplitude of the architect's plan, will no doubt never be completed. How many great cathedrals remain unfinished! The writer feeds his book, he strengthens the parts of it which are weak, he protects it, but afterwards it is the book that grows, that designates its author's tomb and defends it against the world's clamour and for a while against oblivion. (*M-K* 3:1088-89)

What an awful lot of work, Borges would likely answer, and for what? Concision is the ally of oblivion, and Borges's guiding principle, whereas Proust's lacunae and overwhelming digressions are the very source of his art. Although there are scholars, monographists, librarians, and hacks aplenty in Borges's work, none of them, as John Sturrock points out, "ever writes anything down" (41). Sturrock posits that for Borges fiction is in general a reprieve from contingency (134), and Molloy points out that the author's rejection of causality is effected by his pronounced structural dependence upon a kind of causality: "[b]ecause of the diversity of the laws that control it, the falsely predictable, busy causality of magic paradoxically confirms the indeterminacy of Borges's text" (128).

Indeterminacy is a gambit both Proust and Borges play, though they cheat in idiosyncratic ways. In a piquant essay (and to my knowledge the only focused, meaningful comparison of these two authors), John Arthos finds that the "oppositions and distinctions between Modernism and Post-modernism are collapsing" in the consideration of a "rhetoric of the ineffable" (274):

the works of more recent composers to this apparently paradoxical and indeed deceptive quality of permanent novelty. (M-K 3:255-56)

Borges's use of Homer in "El Inmortal" is an antidote to such a romantic picture, for although the author is not dead he may as well be: he is wholly subservient to and contained within his poetry and has no sense of self at all. Yet the acknowledgement of immortality is there and so too a sense of *immediacy*. Perhaps this, ultimately, is why Borges has his trepidations in approaching Proust, for each author understands that to read the other (if Proust could read Borges, which may be another speculative essay altogether) is not only to invoke or summon whatever authorial spirit lingers in the aether, but also to *become* that other, to surrender oneself (something, it is interesting to observe, Borges's characters seldom do). Pierre Menard trumps Cervantes by absorbing him, but only because he matches the scope and scale of *Don Quixote* letter for letter, and for Borges to write out an entire *Recherche* seems as wearisome and unbecoming a toil as Perón could have assigned him.

Finally, Proust holds his own against Borges. Neither author concedes the match, as both confine resignation to the subjunctive: Proust writes that his books "finirait un jour par mourir" (R 3:1043; "would in the end one day die" [M-K 3:1101]), and Borges replies by taking all of literature with him, since literature is an art that can "profetizar aquel tiempo en que habrá enumdecido, y encarnizarse con la propia virtud y enamorarse de la propia disolución y coretjar su fin" (OC 6:50; "foresee the time when it will be silenced, an art that can become inflamed with its own virtue, fall in love with its own decline, and court its own demise" [SNF 55]).

Conclusion

Here I have only briefly examined two oeuvres from three significant vantage points, though certainly there are many other fruitful ones to choose from—say, how Proust's uncomfortable fascination with Jewish identity may be read versus the ostensibly apolitical Kabbalist interests of Borges (although, strangely enough, only the latter could have written "I, a Jew" [SNF 110-11])—and indeed, some of the vantage points I have neglected may well make more contentious grounds for argument. To imagine or speculate, without losing sight of the works themselves, the reasons for a contrary essence between literary works is itself to realize a potential for critical discourse both revealing and largely apart from the academic norm. In his incisive *Minima Moralia*, Adorno remarks upon how what he calls the "compulsion to evaluate" may be found

in the works of art themselves. So much is true: they refuse to be compared. They want to annihilate one another. . . . That all art aims to end art is another way of saying the same thing. It is this impulse to self-destruction inherent in works of art, their innermost striving towards an image of beauty free of appearance, that is constantly stirring up the aesthetic disputes that are apparently so futile. While obstinately seeking to establish aesthetic truth, and trapping themselves thereby in an irresolvable dialectic, they stumble on the real truth, for by making the works of art their own and elevating them to concepts, they limit them all, and so contribute to the destruction of art which is its salvation. (75)

From this perspective, the associative "Author X and Author Y" formula of critical study—the kind of combinations noted at the beginning of this essay, usually

Works Cited

- Abbreviations
- CF Borges, *Collected Fictions* (trans. Hurley)
- M-K Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (trans. Moncrieff and Kilmartin)
- LA Borges, *El libro de arena*
- OC Borges, *Obras Completas*
- R Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*
- SN Borges, *Seven Nights* (trans. Weinberger)
- SNF Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* (ed. Weinberger)
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