

BORGES, FAULKNER, AND THE WILD PALMS

BY DOUGLAS DAY

THIS essay is for those of you who choose to believe that Jorge Luis Borges actually translated, in 1939, a novel of William Faulkner's called *The Wild Palms*. In your support there is, of course, the artifact, published in October 1940, by Editorial Sudamericana, entitled *Las palmeras salvajes*, with a notation on the title page that reads: "Traducción de Jorge Luis Borges." There is also the vaguely disquieting recollection in his "Autobiographical Essay" of 1970 that some time between 1937 and 1946 (the nine-year span is too broad to offer us much comfort), while on holidays from his work as municipal librarian, he "translated Faulkner and Virginia Woolf." And there is his comment to Norman Thomas di Giovanni, in *Borges on Writing*: "I remember when I translated Faulkner's *Wild Palms*, that people told me the sentences were far too involved, and I was blamed for that."

Against your belief there is, sadly, this distressing information about Borges' mother, in the "Autobiographical Essay": "She translated some of Hawthorne's stories, one of Herbert Read's books on art, and she also produced some of the translations of Melville, Virginia Woolf, and Faulkner that are considered mine."

The American South fascinated Borges, to be sure: one has to look no further than "El Espantoso Redentor Lazarus Morell" ("The Fearful Redeemer Lazarus Morell") in the *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935) to find him speaking with awe of the Mississippi River and the barbaric land through which it ran; but it is nonetheless difficult to imagine stranger literary bedfellows than the meticulous, lapidary miniaturist

Borges and William Faulkner, that Dixie Gongorist (the epithet is Allen Tate's, not mine, and presumably meant pejoratively—though one feels sure Faulkner would have relished it, and taken it as praise, had he known what Gongorism was.)

But there is abundant evidence that Borges was one of Faulkner's earliest Latin American admirers, and that he was writing rather discerningly about Faulkner at a time when most North American critics and reviewers were confused, annoyed, or addled by the works of a man condescended to by the likes of Clifton Fadiman or Ellen Glasgow, who liked to dismiss her uncouth fellow-Southerner as "Our Corncob Cavalier."

The years between 1936 and 1939 were for Borges a time of really intensive immersion in the novel. He seems during this period to have read very nearly every piece of extended fiction that came out of Europe and both Americas, with a sort of treble intention: he wanted to tell his fellow Argentinians what was going on around them, and to this end contributed a series of brief essays on foreign books and authors twice a month to a popular society weekly called *El Hogar*; he hoped to evolve for himself a set of theories about fiction that would let him know where he stood on the possibilities for that genre; and he wanted (most importantly for our purposes) to discover what the literatures of the two Americas had in common—what it was that made them, however diverse, *American*.

The essays in *El Hogar* are scarcely profound—which is not surprising, given the rather social orientation of this elegant magazine. But if we concentrate only on the three pieces Borges wrote on Faulkner, we can see him using his space in *El Hogar* to work toward fulfillment of his three intentions.

In the first of these (on Jan. 22, 1937), concerning *Absalom, Absalom!*, he announces that there are two kinds of writers: those whose anxieties are with verbal methods (with what, I suppose, we should call *form*), and those "whose central concerns are the passions and works of man" (with, let us say, however simplistically, the concerns of *content*). The first, he

says, may either be denigrated with the epithet "Byzantine," or exalted with the title of "pure artist." The second group may be praised as "profound," "human," or even "profoundly human"; or may be accorded the "alluring insult" of "barbarian." In the first category he places Swinburne and Mallarmé (and might have added Valéry, the Valéry of *Monsieur Teste*); in the second, he mentions another pair of strange literary bedfellows: Céline and Theodore Dreiser.

Rarely, for Borges, a writer emerges who practices the virtues and joys of both categories. Joseph Conrad is such a one—and the last such, until the "formidable appearance of Faulkner." Finally turning to *Absalom, Absalom!* itself, he says:

Faulkner likes to express his novel through its characters. The method is not absolutely original—*The Ring and the Book* by Robert Browning details the same crime ten times, through the mouths of ten souls—but Faulkner infuses this technique with an intensity that is almost intolerable. An infinite decomposition, an infinite and black carnality are in this book by Faulkner. The theatre is the state of Mississippi; the heroes, men disintegrated by envy, by alcohol, by solitude, by the erosions of hatred.

Not exactly a specific anatomy of the novel, perhaps; but the esteem, the awe, are there.

Seventeen months later, writing in *El Hogar* (June 24, 1938) of *The Unvanquished*, Borges is still adulatory. He acknowledges that Faulkner's characteristic wrenchings of tense and chronology might give him a certain vogue among those who look only for experimentalism with form, and admires his ability to force his readers to accept as true that which is really improbable; but he saves his real praise for Faulkner's ferocity of vision:

William Faulkner has been compared with Dostoevsky. The comparison is not unjust, but the world of Faulkner is so physical, so carnal, that next to Colonel Bayard Sartoris or Temple Drake that explanatory homicide Raskolnikov is as flimsy, as

delicate, as one of Racine's princes. Rivers of dark water, destroyed estates, black slaves, equestrian wars that were indolent and cruel: the peculiar world of *The Unvanquished* is blood-brother to *this* America and its history, is *criollo* as well.

In other words, this rather unremarkable novel of Faulkner's (if it is a novel, and not a pasted-together collection of Civil War stories, as might be argued) is valuable not for its formal innovations, but—in Borges' view—for its moving presentation of something essentially American, something North and South America could share in their mutually terrible histories.

Then, curiously, comes Borges' review in *El Hogar* on May 5, 1939, of *The Wild Palms*—which he was shortly to cause to become the first Faulkner work to be translated in Latin America, and only the second to be translated into Spanish (a Madrid publisher had brought out a translation of *Sanctuary* in 1934). Borges does not much like *The Wild Palms*. He speaks once again of Faulkner's technique, shared only with Browning, Wilkie Collins, Jules Romains, and Conrad, of entrusting the development of a novel to its characters; but now he finds this technique annoying. "In the chief works of Faulkner," he says, "the technical novelties seem necessary, inevitable. In *The Wild Palms* they are less attractive than bothersome, less justifiable than exasperating."

Borges offers us a short (and, for him, rare) plot summary of the novel:

The book consists of two books, of two parallel (and antagonistic) stories that alternate. The first—"Wild Palms"—is that of a man annihilated by carnality; the second—"Old Man"—that of a pale-eyed boy who tries to rob a train, and who, after many blurred years in prison, has bestowed on him by the flooding Mississippi a useless and atrocious freedom. This second story, admirable at times, cuts again and again across the painful course of the first, in long interpolations.

Finally, Borges acknowledges that Faulkner is the premier novelist of our time. But, in spite of the occasional presence in

The Wild Palms of "pages of an intensity that clearly exceed the capabilities of any other author," the book is so flawed that he cannot recommend it to anyone who wants to learn what Faulkner is about. Sixteen months later, Borges' translation of *The Wild Palms* appeared, both implicitly and explicitly an introduction in Latin America to our greatest novelist.

II

Why, if he held the novel in such low esteem, should Borges (or Borges and his mother) have done the translation? Why would Faulkner's Latin American reputation not have been better served by renderings into Spanish of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, or even *The Unvanquished*? Here there are, so far, no certainties; but there are probabilities. The translation rights to *The Wild Palms* may have been bought by Borges' friend Victoria Ocampo for the publishing house, Sur. Those rights were then presumably transferred to Sudamericana, which had only just been founded. It is possible that the deal involving the transfer might have stipulated that Borges be the translator—not an unreasonable assumption, especially given Borges' prominent championing of Faulkner. It is also possible that Borges later wished to give the impression that his mother had done the translation, either wholly or in part, because it was a task undertaken primarily not for love of Faulkner, but for the fee paid the translator. It is more than likely, finally, that Borges' modesty about the attribution came as much as from anything else from his growing disenchantment with the novel as an art form, and more specifically with Faulkner as a practitioner of that form. More about this last point in a moment; for now, let us look briefly at the translation itself.

The Wild Palms is indeed a savage, cynical work, perhaps Faulkner's cruelest. The romance of the title story is, to put it mildly, an ironic treatment of the star-crossed-lovers theme most recently adumbrated at that time by Hemingway in *A*

Farewell to Arms. In it, a young and radically naïve intern, Harry Wilbourne, is seduced and hypnotized into an erotic subservience by an implacably feral woman, Charlotte Rittenmeyer. Bearing the full weight of Faulkner's relentless misogyny, Charlotte, aggressively masculine, virtually abducts Harry, ruins his career, takes him away into what Faulkner must have felt were the extreme hinterlands of Illinois and Utah, gets herself pregnant by him, forces him to perform an abortion on her—and dies, leaving him to spend the rest of his life in the dirt-floored cell of a Louisiana prison, surviving only to grieve. The narrative is often arty, usually clumsy, full of heavy-handed parodies of Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson—and very nearly always almost literally unbearable.

It was Faulkner's notion of comedic counterpoint to thread through the "Wild Palms" narrative another tale, "Old Man," concerning a Quixotesque convict who has been sent to prison for robbing trains. He has adopted this career (in a fashion that must have appealed to Borges) because of his reading of detective novels, which he uses as how-to-do-it manuals. The Mississippi floods its banks, and he is set free temporarily to aid in rescue and evacuation operations along the levees. Like Harry in "The Wild Palms," the convict becomes tied to a woman, but the contrast is sharp: the distinctly unromantic convict's consort is already pregnant, a hill-woman whose thoughts are not on passion but on parturition. The convict saves her from the flood, returns to prison with relief, even eagerness, and almost looks forward to an extended, woman-free sentence for attempted escape.

With the Harry-and-Charlotte tale, Faulkner's style is distinctly un-Faulknerian. No *criollismo* here, nothing of Yoknapatawpha at all: only a kind of perverse paean to extreme passion (hatred and love are here, as so often in Faulkner, co-terminous) and endurance. With the convict's tale, Faulkner is more himself, reaching for the mythopoeic, focusing on the mighty Mississippi (the "Old Man," the Father of Waters) and on man's tough and almost cheerful forbearance in the face of near-cosmic disruption. The brutality of *The Wild Palms* es-

tranges us even today from the two tales it contains; and one is scarcely surprised that the fastidious Borges should have been less than enchanted by it in 1939.

The translation is precise, conscientious, and decorous. Much *too* decorous, I had been originally ready to claim—especially in regard to matters sexual. When, early in “The Wild Palms,” Harry thinks of the mass of mankind as “males and females but without the pricks and cunts,” Borges seems to blink, and translates this as “*machos y hembras, pero sin sexo.*” But Borges is not the guilty bowdlerizer here, as I first suspected: the truth is that Chatto and Windus, Faulkner’s London publisher, took it on itself to clean up the original Random House text, and changed the line to read “males and females, but without sex.” Clearly, it was the English text, which appeared in the same year as the American one, that Borges was using; and he translated accurately: when the English were squeamish, so was he.

He has a little trouble with dialogue, especially in “The Wild Palms” tale. He cannot, for instance, catch the harsh slanginess of Charlotte when she says to Harry:

My God, I never in my life saw anybody try as hard to be a husband as you do. Listen to me, you lug. If it was just a successful husband and food and a bed I wanted, why the hell do you think I am here instead of back there where I had them?

Borges gives it as:

—*¡Dios mio! Nunca he visto a nadie en mi vida luchar tanto para parecer un marido. Escúchame: si fueras un marido con éxito y alimento y cama y lo que necesitara, ¿por qué demonios crees tu que estaría aquí en vez de volver allá donde lo tengo?*

Charlotte’s anger is there in the translation, and her exasperation with Harry; but somehow her swaggering mannishness is missing. Scarcely Borges’ fault, surely; English is not Spanish, and Charlotte could never have been transformed, say, into a tough *porteña* talking to her street-corner man. Cortázar

might have come close, and possibly Puig; but not Borges, and not his mother.

The real test of a Faulkner translation comes not in the dialogue of one of his novels, however, but in the baroque and coiled narrative itself, twisting and turning slowly along, almost endlessly ruminative and qualifying. Let us try Borges against a piece of Faulkner at his most characteristic:

But it was late now in the pallid sun-glare of the tenth day of terror and hopelessness and despair and impotence and rage and outrage and it was himself and the mule, his mule (they had let him name it—John Henry) which no man but he had plowed for five years now and whose ways and habits he knew and respected and who knew his ways and habits so well that each of them could anticipate the other's very movements and intentions. . . .

For this, Borges gives us:

Pero era demasiado tarde en el pálido resplendor del décimo día de terror y desesperanza e impotencia y rabia e indignación y volvió a ser él y la mula, su mula (le habían permitido que le pusiera nombre: John Henry) que ningún hombre más que él había llevado a arar en cinco años y cuyos manías y costumbres conocía y respetaba y que a su vez conocía y respetaba las de él de modo que se preveían los movimientos e intenciones mutuamente.

It is hard to imagine how this might be better. Borges does not try to make Faulkner more economical, less profligate of substantives and repetitive of verbs than he is: the Spanish is stubbornly insistent on taking its own time and stringing itself out as is the original text. If Borges later chose to attribute all or part of the work on *The Wild Palms* to Señora Leonor Acevedo de Borges, he could not have done so because he thought ill of the translation. It is good, very good.

III

I do not know why Michel Berveiller, in his *Le cosmopolitisme de Jorge Luis Borges* (Paris, 1973), should have chosen

to assert that Borges "did not take his usual pains in translating *The Wild Palms* into his own language," but M. Berveiller must have his reasons. I cannot imagine what they are—unless they have to do with Borges' own growing reservations about Faulkner, which M. Berveiller cites in his book. He recalls a lecture Borges gave in early 1952 on "Problems of Language," in which Borges says, in part, "I believe that an admirable writer like Faulkner must become difficult to read, and even unreadable, through his desire to be always *expressive*. I would say that it is better, in the case of the novel, for the novelist to renounce always being *expressive*; that he should limit himself often to enunciating such simple, plain sentences as 'Pierre saw Paul approaching.' A novel-reader would rather read that than, for example, 'Pierre saw approaching a sallow oval, and in the same proportion that the bottom half of the oval grew larger, was able to distinguish on it a red line. . . .'" Against Faulkner, finally, Borges recommends "a calm way of narrating."

Certainly Faulkner cares little in *The Wild Palms* for "a calm way of narrating," except perhaps in the more tranquil moments of "Old Man," as the convict pits himself without particular surprise, horror, or hope against the Mississippi in monstrous spate. But I suspect that Borges in the 1952 lecture is speaking not so much against Faulkner, or against *The Wild Palms*, as he is against the novel (or a certain kind of novel) as an art-form—an art-form that had interested him so much in the 1930's; a way of writing which he had once himself, with growing frustration, tried to employ—in that literary curiosity, "El Congreso"—and which he had concluded, by the early 1940's, was not for him.

By the end of his decade-long examination of the novel, and its possibilities, he had come to believe that Ortega y Gasset was wrong when he predicted, in *The Dehumanization of Art*, that the only mode left to novelists was that of "psychological realism." Borges wanted *plot*; specifically, he wanted a return to the narrative symmetry that was available to the author of fantasy, or of the adventure or detective novel.

In 1940, the same year his translation of *The Wild Palms*

appeared, Borges wrote of his annoyance with the path fiction had taken in a "Prologue" to Bioy Casares' *La invención de Morel*:

The typical psychological novel is formless. The Russians and their disciples have demonstrated, tediously, that no one is impossible. A person may kill himself because he is so happy, for example, or commit murder as an act of benevolence. Lovers may separate forever as a consequence of their love. And one man can inform on another out of fervor of humility. In the end such complete freedom is tantamount to chaos. But the psychological novel would also be a "realistic" novel, and have us forget that it is a verbal artifice, for it uses each vain precision (or each languid obscurity) as a new proof of verisimilitude. There are pages, there are chapters in Marcel Proust that are unacceptable as inventions, and we unwittingly resign ourselves to the insipidity and the emptiness of each day. The adventure story, on the other hand, does not propose to be a transcription of reality: it is an artificial object, no part of which lacks justification.

If the novel as an art-form was now inclined strongly toward the Dostoevskys and Prousts, then he wanted no part of it. And Faulkner, for all his greatness, must have seemed to Borges to reside in the camp of the enemy.

No more than Paul Valéry, who refused to write a novel because, as he said, he could not bring himself to write "The Marquise went out at five," could Borges suit himself to the lengthy and often banal development that novel-writing seemed to demand. Valéry, unable to countenance the novel, wrote *Monsieur Teste*; Borges, for something like the same reasons, grew away from the psychological experimentalism and brutal (one is tempted to say "messy") content of a William Faulkner and turned to a form which for him rendered the novel redundant and irrelevant: *Ficciones*.