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JOSÉ MIGUEL OVIEDO

Borges: The Poet According to His Prologues

Borges' readers will have noticed that nearly every book he has written has been accompanied, at some moment in its published history, by a prologue which fulfills more important functions than those usually attributed to these preliminary texts. In the case of his poetic works, these functions are much more precise and revealing than those in other collections, thus meriting particular attention.

His *Obras Completas*[1] of 1974 brings together sixteen books of poems, essays and fiction, thirteen of which are preceded by prologues. The other three (*El aleph, Otras inquisiciones, El hacedor*) don't have, strictly speaking, prologues (although *El hacedor* presents us with a dedication "A Leopoldo Lugones" which almost constitutes a prologue); however, all three do have epilogues and one (*El aleph*) includes a postscript to the epilogue. There is, it seems, in Borges, a very personal tendency to present his works with preliminary or concluding texts, as if establishing between them and the body of the book a textual dialogue—a verbal sequence which attempts to close the circle of text, author's voice and reader's response. The *Obras Completas* also closes with a general epilogue, a brief autobiography disguised as a note in the apocryphal *Enciclopedia Sudamericana*, "to be published in Santiago de Chile in the year 2074" (*OC*, 1143). In that ideal autobiography the author writes: "The renown that Borges enjoyed during his lifetime, documented by an accumulation of studies and polemics, continues to amaze us today. Yet he was the first to be surprised at his fame, always fearful that he would be

declared an impostor or a bungler, or a mixture of both" (*OC*, 1144).

This is how Borges wishes to be remembered: as a humble practitioner of literature, diligent but not completely satisfied with his merits, or rather, disdainful of them.

Of course, a number of these prologues were written later than the works they accompany, the majority in 1969. This was a key year in the life of the author: he turned seventy years old; for the first time he reissued his three earliest books of poetry in independent volumes;[2] and also published a new book of poems, *Elogio de la sombra*, of which he said: "This . . . is my fifth book of verse. It is reasonable to assume that it won't be better or worse than the others. To the mirrors, labyrinths, and swords, which my patient reader already expects, two new themes have been added: old age and ethics" (*OC*, 975). It is this confrontation between his earlier and his present poetry which seems to have awakened in him the need to write new introductory texts. In them one sees Borges in the process of rereading the poet that he was, who in turn announces the poet that he is. In this way, his older collections can be read as parts of a fluid process unified in the memory of the man who wrote the poems and these new texts. In a poem from *Elogio*, evidently written a year before, titled "Junio, 1968," Borges gives us a clue to his personal and intellectual views which preside over his production from that time forward. The poem speaks of an afternoon during which a man reviews the books in his library:

> On a golden evening,
> or in a quietness whose symbol
> might be a golden evening,
> a man sets up his books
> on the waiting shelves,
> feeling the parchment and leather and cloth
> and the satisfaction given by
> the anticipation of a habit
> and the establishment of order.

And later, remembering his models (Stevenson, Andrew Lang, Alfonso Reyes, and Virgil) he concludes:

> (To arrange a library is to practice,
> in a quiet and modest way,
> the art of criticism.)

> The man, who is blind,
> knows that he can no longer read
> the handsome volumes he handles
> and that they will not help him write
> the book which in the end might justify him,
> but on the evening that perhaps is golden
> he smiles at his strange fate
> and feels that special happiness
> which comes from things we know and love. (*OC*, 998)

Those "handsome volumes," those "things we know and love," are his own early books which the now older apprentice poet would like to have written differently, although these books, mysteriously, explain his recent poetry.[3] The justification of which the poem speaks should not be understood as only referring to the critical reaction that his poetic work produces, but also to his own reaction, as author and reader of his own books, books which dictate "the establishment of order." This order is indicated by the prologues.

It is interesting to observe that, in at least two instances, Borges has rejected the prologues which appeared in the original editions and has written new ones. Such is the case with "A quien leyere" from *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923) and "Al tal vez lector" from *Luna de enfrente* (1925). Today we would barely recognize Borges in them: they are arrogant defenses of a literary program, which at that time combined Expressionist traces, Ultraist novelties and a certain "criollista" belligerence.[4] They are written in that style—sharp, emphatic, bellicose, and extremely conceptual—which he refers to as his "baroque period," perhaps to indicate his literary pretension and his worship of new form.

Not only does Borges consign these original prologues forever to oblivion and replace them with others more in line with his mature thoughts, but he subjects the books themselves to substantial changes, suppressions and substitutions—while assuring us that he has made only indispensable corrections, not wanting to make new books of them.[5] Besides the fact that a writer is entirely free to suppress or revise his *juvenilia* as he sees fit, we have here a model case with which to examine the masterful exercise of a fundamental aspect of Borges' art: the rereading of himself, the first step towards self-criticism and rewriting. In the new prologue (1969) to *Fervor de Buenos Aires* he indicates that the very process of correction has taught him something: in spite of the

book's "baroque excesses," the "harsh notes," the "sentimentalities and vagaries," "I feel that the youth who wrote it in 1923 was already, essentially, the man who now resigns himself and corrects" (*OC*, 13).

In other prologues, that notion of an identity which blankets the differences yields to a certain sense of distance with respect to the accompanying works: the author doesn't recognize himself in them. In *Luna de enfrente*, for example, the final line of the prologue summarizes: "I have changed this book very little. It is no longer mine" (*OC* 55). Yet it is surprising to find this same distance in the epilogue of a much more recent book like *El hacedor* (1960) where he excuses himself for "the essential monotony of this miscellany" due to the fact that it contains "previous pieces which I haven't dared to alter, because I wrote them with a different concept of literature" (*OC*, 854). The task of rereading is infinite if it searches for the unity of the process; it is useless if it seeks unattainable perfection: between these two poles moves Borges, the prologue writer. Publishing one's past works usually puts an end to a process which otherwise would be endless; it is not strange therefore that Borges uses a quotation from his beloved Alfonso Reyes as an epigraph to *Discusión*: "This is the trouble with not publishing one's works: a lifetime is spent in reworking them" (*OC*, 175).

Actually, the reader discovers in the prologues to his lyrical work, that Borges, always so unwilling to give aesthetic definitions or to formulate literary creeds, has been sketching, subtly, a poetic theory and ethics of the creative act. This theory begins with the criticism of the poet he once was. That young poet of the 1920s—remembers the mature Borges in his later prologues—wanted, above all, to be two things: *modern* and *Argentine*. The novelty of the form, that sensational manner of capturing the instantaneous, dominant in the spirit of the era, coupled with the proud affirmation of his own culture (the Argentina that Borges knew and which was reduced to a particular Buenos Aires, to certain neighborhoods which generated a domestic mythology), are dominant stimuli in the poetic inspiration of those first three books. With them, Borges wanted to create a new poetic tradition, specifically Argentine, which although it may have echoed notes of European origin (avant-garde, idealist philosophy, German metaphysical speculations, etc.), was a challenge to tradition and the Hispanic legacy, a gesture of radical independence. The argentinisms and neologisms of his early poetry (which

have been erased or revised in later editions) were a defiant sign of his literary stance of that decade: a verbal schism that gave him the feeling of beginning anew, of being original. Borges has repeatedly abjured this pretension. In the new prologue to *Luna de enfrente*, he suggests that his modernity doesn't affect him, or rather, that it exists in spite of him, in the same way that he is Argentine:

> To be modern is to be contemporary, current; we are all fatally modern. . . . There is no art that is not of its age. . . . We know nothing of the literature of Carthage, which was presumably rich, except that it could not include a book like Flaubert's. Forgetting that I already was one, I also wanted to be an Argentine. (*OC*, 55)

For similar reasons, he distrusts all aesthetics, including his own, because "they are no more than useless abstractions" (*OC*, 975). But in the prologue to *El otro, el mismo* he points out an appropriate kinship for his mature poetry, and converts his first avant-garde affinities into echoes of another aesthetic direction: "On rereading these pages, I have felt closer to *Modernismo* than the subsequent sects engendered by its corruption, sects which now deny it" (*OC*, 858). What is surprising is that in the original prologue to *Fervor* . . . he had attacked Rubén Darío's rhetoric and had praised Carriego's *criollista* simplicity;[6] now he abjures those early excesses, accepting the linguistic ideals of *Modernismo*:

> I am doubtful of literary schools, which I judge didactic stratagems to simplify that which they teach, but if I were obliged to declare the origin of my verses I would say it is *Modernismo*, that great freedom, which renewed the many literatures whose common language is Spanish and which reached, certainly, to Spain. (*OC*, 1081)

His identification with Lugones is both the vehicle and the result of that process of encounter with his true poetic self, which is, for Borges, one of the higher rewards of writing poetry. In fact, in a recent introduction to an anthology of Lugones' work, Borges writes a very revealing passage on his relationship with the great Argentine poet, and clarifies the context in which his own work belongs:

> Lugones was a simple man, a man of elemental passions and convictions, who forged and manipulated a complex style. Two great Spanish American poets, Ramón López Velarde and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, inherited and elaborated his style which is now more their own than his.[7]

It is an almost irresistible temptation to add Borges' name to that list of heirs, precisely because the conclusion of the paragraph reiterates one of his most deeply rooted ideas: an author can recognize himself better in the books of others. Styles and literary modes are transitive and creation is nothing more than the patient exercise of possibilities which another author discovered and did not exhaust. To find one's own identity and know what it is one writes, is a slow process which offers more surprises than certainties. For Borges, this exercise has taken the form of a progressive refinement—stylistic as well as conceptual—which in his latest poetic works might seem extreme. His poetry has narrowed its limits, his motifs have been reduced to a minimal group which restructures itself in predictable forms; his diction has become increasingly oral—an utterance rather than a written text. Upon rereading Borges' poetic work in chronological order, one has the impression of retracing one's steps on a road, of passing places already explored but now devoid of detail, more austere in the images they evoke. It might seem a loss, yet is actually a secret gain, which charges each word, no matter how simple they may be, with a more intense and deeper significance. The author confesses:

> A writer's fate is strange. At first he is baroque, vainly baroque, as the years pass, he can achieve, if the stars favor him, not simplicity, which is nothing, but modest and secret complexity. (*OC*, 858)

In his prologues, Borges discreetly indicates the direction in which his idea of poetry has been evolving. Not only readers and critics have associated his work with "intellectual poetry." He himself has maintained that of the two basic poetic attitudes (the lyrical and the intellectual), unfortunately only the latter is visible in the poems of *Cuaderno de San Martín*: "I now believe that in all poets which deserve to be reread, both elements co-exist . . . In reference to the exercises of this volume, it is evident that they aspire to the second category" (*OC*, 79).

The reason is clear: "the baroque is intellectual" (*OC*, 39) because it is an aesthetic of distortion and exaggeration that is close to the grotesque. Rejecting Poe's theory that "writing a poem is an operation of the intelligence" (*OC*, 1021), and refuting Walter Pater who sees poetry as "an abstract system of symbols" subjected to the musical necessities of language (*OC*, 858), Borges subscribes to a theory of the essentially magic character of the poetic word. He sees the poem as an instrument which

can restore to us that mysterious vibration of the original word, a word which can stay the tide of time and defeat death:

> The root of language is irrational and of a magical character. Poetry wants to return to that ancient magic. . . . Poetry is a mysterious chess, whose board and pieces change as if in a dream and over which I will yet lean after I have died. (*OC*, 1022)

Following this line of thought, Borges will say something which may seem quite strange to the readers of his poetry: "As for the rest, literature is nothing more than a directed dream" (*OC*, 1022). It's not that he is subscribing, of course, to the Surrealist theory of automatic writing, but underscoring the idea that the writer is only the partial author of a work, and that he is manipulating and adapting forces largely beyond his control; just as the reader responds to these stimuli with his own intuitions and affective preferences, dictated by the dominant ideas of the age. Poetic communication is a spark ignited by the friction and coincidence of many elements only implied in the text. The importance lies in the protagonists' participation in that communication, not in the identity of the actors. At the beginning of *Fervor* . . . there is a note "A quien leyere":

> If the pages of this book include a felicitous line, may the reader forgive me the discourtesy of having usurped the line first . . . the circumstances which make you the reader of these exercises, and me the writer, are trivial and fortuitious. (*OC*, 15)

The prologue to *Elogio de la sombra* (1969), contains statements that we now find in critics who stress the intersubjective nature of the text: "A volume in itself is not an aesthetic act . . . the aesthetic act can only occur when it is written or read" (*OC*, 975). As a result, Borges declares that he is without an aesthetic theory. He presents himself in the prologues as an author who has, with time, learned a repertory of "artifices," "skills" and "habits" which attempt to diminish in the reader the monotonous effect of "my writing routine" (*OC*, 1081) and to give him an illusion of novelty. For Borges, poetry *pretends* to say for the first time (sometimes successfully) that which the author himself or others have said before; the poetic act consists of borrowing voices until one finds the voice which fits, and then, of projecting that unique voice into the ear of the reader. Borges refers to this process in the prologue to *El otro, el mismo*. He tells a significant anecdote from his avant-garde years, dur-

ing which he was associated with the Peruvian poet Alberto Hidalgo, then an exile in Buenos Aires:

> In his Victoria street dining room, the writer—if we can call him that—Alberto Hidalgo commented on my habit of writing the same page twice, with minimal variation. I regret having answered him that he was no less binary, except that in his particular case the first version belonged to someone else. Such were the deplorable manners of that period, which many view with nostalgia. We all wanted to be heroes of trivial anecdotes . . . What is strange and what I can't understand, is that my second versions, like distant and involuntary echoes, are usually inferior to the originals. (*OC*, 857)

This explains the ethical justification which always accompanies Borges' comments on his own poetry. One can understand that he is "resigned to being Borges," his timid hope that some of the lines of his books do not "dishonor" him, his belief that "beauty is common to all" and that anyone can attain it, as simple manifestations of his intellectual modesty. But if one perceives the very delicate irony of these formulas, one could interpret them another way: as a device to diminish the reader's expectations, inducing him to read the work as Borges himself has read it; seeing, in its totality, not the differences, but the similarities which blend the younger poet, the mature poet and the older artist beneath the mask of one literary *persona*. That is, he has come to conceive the poetry as a destiny, through which he discovered himself and realized his identity, found his true models, and learned his possibilities and limitations. Poetry is an intimate revelation, which the poet tries to share with the reader, attempting to create for him the sensation of a precise act that can "touch us physically, like the proximity of the sea."[8] That essential unity of his search, in which even the detours are a way of confirming the main path, has never been synthesized with greater beauty and precision than in the impeccable final phrase of his new prologue to *Fervor de Buenos Aires*: "At that time, I sought out the afternoons, the suburbs and misfortune; now I seek the mornings, downtown and serenity" (*OC*, 13).

More may be said about Borges' prologues. Their abundance and their specific function within his work require further explanation. I believe that they are a key part of his literary art. Few authors have appended more than he, not only prologues, but as we have seen, epilogues, postscripts, inscriptions, notes, and peripheral texts (sometimes

apocryphal) to his poems, stories and essays. Some of his main texts can, and even should, be read as variations of others, a relationship which pertains to "Hombre de la esquina rosada" and "Historia de Rosendo Juárez" on the one hand, and to "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "Utopía de un hombre cansado" on the other, and yet again to the two "Poemas de los dones." His is the art of a scholiast, of systematic commentary on his own texts, whose web of quotations, images and symbols tends to be represented as a homogenous whole, continuous in time. It is also an art of fragments, palimpsests and textual superimposing, complicated by texts which include falsely attributed quotations and references to real people in fantastic contexts. They are versatile and porous texts, sometimes interchangeable and ambiguous through their lack of generic definition: stories which are false bibliographical notes, essays with the characteristics of poems, poems (like "El Golem") which refer us to specific stories, new versions, parodies, etc. This singular quality of Borgesian texts is certainly associated with their brevity and the cumulative effect that they have on the memory of the reader. Wolfgang Iser has pointed out that while we can perceive certain aesthetic objects in their totality, a literary text is an exception; it can only be grasped "by way of different consecutive phases of reading." That is, in the act of reading "there is a moving viewpoint which travels along *inside* that which it has to apprehend."[9] To read is a game of expectations and memory which do not lie exactly within the text, nor in the imagination of the reader, but in the point of encounter between the two: it is an ideal projection which momentarily fuses their respective realities. Literature is an open experience, not a given product. Borges' texts intensely stimulate that fusion, proposing to the reader to see in them moments of a recognizable and coherent process, while at the same time perceiving the variation which each fragment introduces into the fabric of the work as a whole. On being activated by the reader's performance, these texts are organized into a larger unity which lends them greater significance and heightens the pleasurable effect: they are pieces of a rigorous design whose arrangement we believe to be our own.

Borges has often defended the virtues of literary brevity. These lines from the prologue to *Ficciones* are famous:

> To compose vast texts is a laborious and diminishing extravagance; that of expounding in five hundred pages an idea whose perfect oral exposition takes a

few minutes. A better device is to pretend that those books already exist and to offer a summary, a commentary. (*OC*, 429)

His disdain for the novel as a genre is also well known, an opinion which allows a few exceptions: Cervantes, Stevenson, Conrad. This disdain may be influenced by the ideas of Ortega y Gasset, who called the novel a "sluggish genre."[10] But not only the story teller loves concise expression; the essayist and the poet also cultivate brevity, so that the exposition and images are concentrated in precise focal points. The ridiculous and pedant figure of Carlos Argentino Daneri of "El Aleph," who intends to write a poem which coincides with the universe, transforming each object into words, is an exact opposite of the author. Borges proceeds through concretion and violent syntheses which fuse the remote and the immediate, the immense and the infinitesimal. In the epilogue to his *Obras Completas*, the author explains his own literary taste while speaking in the third person:

He enjoyed stories, a trait which reminds us of Poe's dictum *There is no such a thing as a long poem*, which confirms the poetic customs of certain oriental nations. (*OC*, 1143)

Borges' books tend to be rhapsodic; the unity of his work is not in them, but rather in the texts they contain and in the dialogue between those texts, overflowing the lax and conventional limits of each collection. Asking the reader's indulgence for that lack of formal unity, Borges has repeatedly said that his books are the fruit of "my resignation, my carelessness, and sometimes, my passion" (*OC*, 857). Among his own books those which please him most are the miscellanies, his *Antologías Personales*, books composed of other books, or *El hacedor*, which he calls "*silva de varia lección*" (*OC*, 854). As befits books of brief poems, the prologues are also brief, written in a tone which attempts to be a faithful *mimesis* of the poetic voice. The prologues are not added to the book: they are part of it, an important part because they contain, as we have seen, Borges' poetics, as well as a guide for the reader and an intellectual and moral self-portrait. In that sense, they tend to represent one of the most creative moments of the book: they invent, for the texts which they precede, a synchronic coherence, and connect them diachronically with the previous texts, claiming the reader's attention for the *system* that they compose. Borges surely recalls that once, in antiquity, one of the main

purposes of the prologue was the *captatio benevolentiae* of the reader through simplicity and brevity.[11] We have here an art and a strategy that Borges, the poet, developed after the publication of his first three books of poems. The difficult style of the original prologues which Borges has eliminated from his *Obras Completas* is impossible to translate into English because it is a pretentious language of his own invention, to prove that Spanish could also be written in another fashion:

Suelen ser las prefaciones de antes una componenda mal pergeñada, entre la primordial jactancia de quien ampara obra que es propiamente facción suya y la humildad que aconsejan la mundología y el uso. (*Fervor*, 5)

Borges has used the prologue with another intention also: to remind us that prologues are a genre of great literary dignity, whose virtues we have today forgotten or misused due to intellectual laziness. Fortunately, we also know precisely what Borges thinks of the prologue as a literary genre. That opinion appears, quite logically really, in a special prologue which Borges wrote to introduce one of his most curious and least read books: simply titled *Prólogos*, it collects various prologues written between 1923 and 1974.[12] The prologue to this volume is titled, predictably, "Prólogo de Prólogos," "a type of prologue," says Borges, "raised to the second power" (*Prólogos*, 7). He complains that "no one has formulated a theory of the prologue" and that it is usually confused with mere hyperbole and eulogy. Borges recalls that in some great works (Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, Montaigne's *Essays*, and the *Thousand and One Nights*) the prologue constitutes "an inseparable part of the text" (*Prólogos*, 8). He also remembers that "in Elizabethan theatre, the prologue was the actor who declared the theme of the play" (*ibid.*). This is particularly significant when applied to his own poetic prologues: because of their theatrical origin, the prologue is, above all, a *voice* which advises us what we will find in the text, and how we should judge it. Thus, Borges concludes, "the prologue, when the stars are propitious, is not a spurious form of toast, but a lateral type of criticism" (*ibid.*). Not only texts require and produce prologues; the process can also be inverted—prologues themselves can constitute a literary work. At the end of this "Prólogo de Prólogos," Borges imagines a utopian work, a book whose hypothetical nature tempts him: "The book which I foresee, would consist of a series of prologues to nonexistant books. It would abound in exem-

plary quotations from those possible books" (*Prólogos*, 9). It is not difficult to discern, in this project, a disciple of Macedonio Fernández, author of the fifty-six prologues which compose the unfinished text of *La novela de la eterna*.[13]

The prologues serve Borges as a field for games played by his imagination, and the exercises of his intellect, always ready to review his texts, leaving on them the signs of his reading: retrospections, self-defenses, definitions, recognition of his debts to other authors belonging to unexpected poetic traditions, quotations and glosses of his own quotations. But even more, the prologues present a moral portrait and rectify and compensate for the inevitable deformation of celebrity. The image offered by those prologues and poems is that of a man reconciled to being himself, perfectly lucid about his capabilities and limitations, intimate but never maudlin, confessional and yet discreet, not only an artist, but a man who has learned from his art. In his prologue to Lugones' work, Borges writes: "A poet is not only an artificer, a maker, but also a man who feels with intensity and complexity" (*Lugones*, 10). His poetry is written in such a way that one sees first, not the artifice, but the man.

Translated by Candelyn Candelaria

NOTES

1. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas 1923–1972* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974). (Further references are indicated *OC*, with a page number.)
2. Jorge Luis Borges, *Fervor de Buenos Aires, Luna de enfrente* y *Cuaderno San Martin* had already been collected in *Poemas* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1943).
3. Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, *Borges on Writing* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973): 78–83.
4. Alfred J. Mac Adam, "Borges the *Criollo*: 1923–1932." *Review*, No. 28 (January-April 1981): 65.
5. Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges. A Literary Biography* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978): 177–178.
6. There we read: "Cómo no malquerer a ese escritor que reza atropelladamente palabras sin paladear el escondido sombro que albergan, y a ese otro que, brillantador de endebleces, abarrota su escritura de oro y de joyas, abatiendo con tanta luminaria nuestros pobres versos opacos, sólo alumbrados por el resplandor indigente de los ocasos de suburbio." *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Cervantes, 1923): 6.
7. Leopoldo Lugones, *Antología poetica*. Selección e introducción de Jorge Luis Borges. (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1982): 12.
8. Jorge Luis Borges, *La rosa profunda* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1975): 10.

9. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980): 109.
10. José Ortega y Gasset, *Ideas sobre el teatro y la novela* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1982): 23. It is well known, however, that Borges differed seriously with Ortega's literary and philosophical opinions. Regarding this, see Rodríguez Monegal (note 5): 182–3, and "Nota de un mal lector" (on Ortega and Unamuno) reproduced in *La Gaceta del Fondo de Cultura Ecónomica*, no. 143 (November 1982): 10.
11. A. Porqueras Mayo, *El prólogo como género literario* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas, 1957): 133.
12. Jorge Luis Borges, *Prólogos* (Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero Editor, 1975).
13. Macedonio Fernández, *Museo de la novela de la eterna* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1967).

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