

BORGES, "CREATOR" OF CERVANTES; CERVANTES PRECURSOR OF BORGES

In "Kafka y sus precursores" Borges formulates a judgment of ample resonance: "El hecho es que cada escritor *crea* a sus precursores. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción del pasado, como ha de modificar la del futuro."¹ The issue, prefigured by T.S. Eliot, finds reiterated expression in Borges' prose work. Borges accredits his point of view by insisting upon the verb *crear*, rather than *recrear*. "Creating," in the sense considered here, is an act that allows the writer to organize literary matter according to his own criteria and sensitivity. To "recreate," of course, is to organize such matter from someone else's point of view. Only as a creation does an author's labor modify our concept of the past and of the future. A recreation, like a translation, has no vision of its own. When it does, it betrays the original text.² Borges chooses Kafka in order to substantiate his idea, because Kafka at first recommends himself as a writer of disconcerting originality: "A éste, al principio, lo pensé tan singular como el fenix de las alabanzas retóricas; a poco de frecuentarlo, creí reconocer su voz, o sus hábitos, en textos de diversas literaturas y épocas" (II, 226). Borges discerns Kafka's literary presence in one of Zeno's parables, in Margouliè's apology of Han Yu (*Anthologie raisonnée de la littérature chinoise*), and in Kierkegaard's writings (II, 226-27). Borges offers more examples, eruditely diversifying the point. The ground that they share is that of common idiosyncrasies (II, 228). The order is unambiguous. It is not that Borges detects other literatures and times in Kafka, but that Kafka's voice and literary habits are discernable in other literatures. These authors' works may not resemble each other, but they resemble Kafka's, and this is significant (II, 228).

The short story that illustrates with paradigmatic clarity Borges' proposition is "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote." Even before considering the idiosyncratic irrelevance of textual identity, central to the story, Borges' point emerges unambiguously. Speaking of Pierre Menard and Cervantes' *Quijote*, Borges states: "Noches pasadas, al hojear el capítulo XXVI —no

¹ All citations are from *Jorge Luis Borges. Prosa completa*, 2 vols. (Barcelona, Bruguera, 1980).

² Within Borges' notorious economy of expression, the problematic nature of translations occupies a fairly important place. See "Las versiones homéricas," and "Los traductores de las 1001 noches."

ensayado nunca por él— reconocí el estilo de nuestro amigo y como su voz en esta frase excepcional: *Las ninfas de los ríos, la dolorosa y húmida Eco* (I, 429). The traditional critical perspective is inverted.

Pierre Menard writes a few chapters of the *Quijote*. His ambition, it will be recalled, is not that of copying or recreating the *Quijote*—a simple enough matter, as Borges would have us believe—but of creating it. In doing so, he does not aspire at being Cervantes' contemporary or Cervantes himself (I, 429). Borges insists that Menard's fragmentary *Quijote* is more subtle, and almost infinitely richer, than that of Cervantes (I, 430-31). Three hundred years apart, Cervantes and Menard wear the same costume, so to speak, but with different esthetic effects. In spite of textual identity, Menard *is* the author of the *Quijote*, just as Cervantes *is* the author of *Quijote*. Menard invents a different *Quijote*, and Borges invents his own Cervantes.

Borges' Cervantes is a realist writer, but one whose realism differs radically from that of the XIXth century. We are told that, unlike Joseph Conrad or Henry James, Cervantes does not judge reality to be poetic: "A las vastas y vagas geografías del Amadís opone los polvorientos caminos y los sórdidos mesones de Castilla" (II, 172). Borges presents Cervantes as a classic writer, and facilitates our understanding of the term by providing a definition. The definition rests on the correlation between writer and reality. In the *Quijote*, Cervantes takes the reader through the indigent provincial realities of his country. Menard, a French symbolist from Nîmes, chooses as reality not France, but Spain, the Spain of the battle of Lepanto and Lope de Vega. Menard eschews local color. There are no *españoladas*, his work does not induce excessive patriotic effusions. Spain is not his country. In the famous debate on the virtues of letters and arms, (*Quijote*, XXXVIII), Don Quijote defends the military profession. In an old soldier like Cervantes, such a fallacy is understandable. Not so, Borges insists, in Pierre Menard, the contemporary of Bertrand Russell (I, 431).

In Borges' understanding, Cervantes is a classic writer because one can infer, but not find, experience in his book: "Dicho con mejor precisión: no escribe los primeros contactos con la realidad, sino su elaboración final en concepto" (I, 154). Unlike Croce, Borges does not believe that the expressive and the esthetic can be fused together: "Quiero observar que los escritores de hábito clásico más bien rehuyen lo expresivo" (I, 153). Classicism undoubtedly implies expressive vagueness ("Los cambios del lenguaje borran los sentidos laterales y los matices." I, 137), certain linguistic impoverishment.³

There is inconsistency in Borges' portrait of Cervantes. If Cervantes is an author whose stark realism is not mediated by poetic vision, how can he also be a classic writer who conceptualized reality? Borges insists that writers like Voltaire, Swift, and Cervantes always, not occasionally, abstract expe-

³ Underscoring the abstracting distance between words and their etymological origin, Serge Doubrowsky, in *Pourquoi la nouvelle critique* (Paris: Editions Denöel/Gonthier, 1966), p. 52, states: "Tout classicisme suppose, a l'origine, un voeu de povreté."

rience (I, 154). He substantiates his claim with two quotations, one from Gibbon (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) and one from Cervantes. The excerpt from *Quijote* is, to say the least, misleading. Ironically, it also discredits the uniformity of technique that Borges ascribes to Cervantes. What the reader contemplates is the fragment of a story interpolated in the *Quijote*, "El curioso impertinente," not a part of Don Quijote's vital experiences. Don Quijote, the man, could not survive in the highly conventional world of "El curioso impertinente" without losing his unpredictable human complexity. Don Quijote, with or without his pretense of knight-hood, is a human being, Lorratio is a literary type. Contrary to Borges' assertion, the Cervantes of the *Quijote* does not merely record conceptualized reality. One may judge Borges in intentional error here, for stylistically and organically "El curioso impertinente" and the *Quijote* are not interchangeable. His point is that there is no objective evaluation of literature. Menards' memory of the *Quijote* like that of Borges, like that of the reader, is simplified by oblivion and indifference (I, 43).

Menard writes chapters IX and XXXVIII of the first part of the *Quijote*. Why, one may ask, precisely these chapters? The observation is inevitable. The two chapters, not unlike "El curioso impertinente," deal with matters largely extraneous to the organicity of Don Quijote's experience. In chapter IX, Cervantes informs the reader that in the previous chapter Don Quijote's story ended in *medias res*, with Don Quijote battling the gallant Basque. The continuation of the story, as everybody knows, is eventually "found" in the Alcaná of Toledo. Given Borges' notorious compactness of expression, the insistence on such matters cannot be casual. The chapter discusses literature, not life, the *Quijote* as a book, not Don Quijote the man. Chapter XXXVIII presents Don Quijote outside of the realm of unmediated experience, delivering the famous speech on the arms and the letters. Yet, with a few notable exceptions, the *Quijote* is a book about Don Quijote. To say, as Borges does, that Cervantes always registers reality in conceptualized form is excessive, and demonstrably not supported by the entirety of the *Quijote*. Personality may well be the emphasis of romanticism, as Borges puts it, but not its discovery. Borges' Cervantes is neither a classic or romantic writer of textbook clarity (I, 155).

Borges circumscribes three classic ways of postulating reality: a) general presentation of facts, b) the imagination of a reality more complex than that put before the reader, c) and the circumstantial invention (I, 156-57). Surprisingly, Cervantes is included in the first category, not in the second or the last one. Don Quijote's experience, however, derives from the confrontation with a reality which he deems to be richer than it is (II, 336). The circumstantial invention—"el desenvolvimiento de la serie de esos pormenores lacónicos de larga proyección" (I, 157)—reduces the reality imagined by Don Quijote to life-size proportions. The protagonist is at the center of the circumstantial invention. Borges maintains that the adventures in the *Quijote* are not well thought out, that the dialogues are slow and contradic-

tory, but that there is no doubt that Cervantes knows Don Quijote and Sancho thoroughly (II, 182). If Cervantes limited himself to providing the reader with general information about the two protagonists, we would not really know Don Quijote and Sancho. Borges projects a challenging image of Cervantes.

The Argentine author insists that for Cervantes the imaginary, poetic world of the novels of chivalry and the real, prosaic one of the XVIIth century Spain are antithetic. The grouping imaginary-poetic stands in symmetrical contrast to real-prosaic. The distinction is somewhat altered in another of Borges' vignettes, "Parábola de Cervantes y de *Quijote*," suggesting other interpretative possibilities: "Para los dos, para el soñador y el soñado, toda esa trama fue la oposición de dos mundos: el mundo irreal de los libros de caballerías, el mundo cotidiano y común del siglo XVII" (II, 326). While "wonderful" and "prosaic" remain clearly antithetic (II, 336), "unreal" is contrasted not with "real," but with "quotidian" and "common." Or "unreal" and "common" are not opposites. The polarity common-uncommon, once retrieved from the realm of real-unreal, affects differently the sensitivity of the reader. Common and uncommon are aspects of reality, not its substitute. El Toboso, Montiel, La Mancha, not the kingdom of Micomicón, will acquire poetry in time.

Cervantes, Borges states in "Magias parciales del *Quijote*," enjoys fusing the objective and the subjective, the world of the book and that of the reader (II, 173). Once again, the objective and the subjective are presented as forms of perceiving reality, not as reality and unreality. We are also informed that Cervantes' game of ambiguities culminates in the second part of the *Quijote*, where the protagonists of the novel are readers of the novel as well (II, 174).⁴ Borges concludes that the inventions of philosophy are no less fantastic than those of art (II, 174). Menard, perhaps unwittingly, enriches the art of reading through a new procedure: "la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas" (I, 432). Why does the fact that Don Quijote is the reader of the *Quijote*, and that Hamlet is the spectator of *Hamlet*, trouble us? Borges says purposefully: "tales inversiones sugieren que si los caracteres de una ficción pueden ser lectores o espectadores, nosotros, sus lectores o espectadores, podemos ser ficticios" (II, 175).

Three essential Borgesian techniques are to be found in Cervantes. The first is that of a work as a translation. The *Quijote* is a "translation," a Cervantine seminal idea profusely diversified by Borges. "El inmortal," we are informed, is a literal translation in Spanish of an English text. "La secta de los treinta," whose manuscript is in Latin, has been translated from Greek. "Undr" is a manuscript unearthed at Oxford, but published in

⁴ The issue is competently dealt with by Jaime Alazraki, in *La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges* (Madrid: Gredos, 1974), p. 44.

Analecta Germanica in translation. "Deutsches Reguiem," Otto Dietrich zur Linde's confession, is the Spanish rendition of a German text. "Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva," based on Croce's abbreviation of a Latin story, is a translation.

The second Borgesian technique to be found in Cervantes is that of using tangible evidence as proof of reality. The first part of the *Quijote*, as Borges points out, accredits not only the novelesque reality of Don Quijote and Sancho, but their vital authenticity as well, since they are both protagonists and readers of the story. *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön*, eventually discovered in its entirety in Memphis ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"), appears as evidence of the existence of a mysterious planet. The cone of unwordly metal that Borges feels and contemplates is part of the divinity of Tlön. The "aleph," the "zahir," the one faceted Euclidean disc ("El disco"), the book of sand ("El libro de arena") constitute evidence of the mystery. In other words, the existence of the mystery is authenticated as reality by demonstrable evidence. The cause-effect equation is inverted. The effect justifies the cause, rather than the opposite.

A third Borgesian *modus operandi* rests on the same inverted equation of cause and effect, affecting the protagonists this time. The only true recognition that Don Quijote receives as a knight is in the cave of Montesinos.⁵ By the same token, Don Quijote's encounter with Montesinos retrieves the knight of old from the realm of legend, conferring upon him historical authenticity. Don Quijote becomes a real knight because of Montesinos, Montesinos becomes real because of Don Quijote. It is the eery lucidity of his nightmare that gives lived authenticity to Dahlmann's life ("El sur"). It is a dream that allows Dahlmann to be a real Dahlmann, not just an onomastic projection of his ancestors. The existence of the Borges who, on a February day of 1969 sits on a bench in Cambridge, is reiterated by another Borges, who recognized him as Borges ("El otro").⁶ As in Montesinos' cave, the Borges of the past and that of the present accredit each other's reality, both are evidence of each other's existence (II, 461). The younger Borges, like the Dulcinea of Montesinos' cave, keeps the coin, if not the banknote, that the older Borges gives him. Borges' indebtedness to Cervantes is not self-avowedly explicit here, but the technique affinity is unmistakable.

Borges is to be found in Cervantes, but from Borges' point of view, just as we find Pierre Menard in the *Quijote* from his own point of view. Such a perspective allows him to create, rather than to recreate. The inherent transgressions against chronology and literary paternity are, in Borges'

⁵ Ion T. Agheana, "La cueva de Montesinos: Don Quijote's Humanistic Triumph," *Anales cervantinos*, 16 (1977), 85-95.

⁶ Hardly any critic has failed to notice Borges' obsessive preoccupation with dreams and the "other." The matter is biographically circumscribed by Emir Rodríguez Monegal: *Jorge Luis Borges. A Literary Biography* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), pp. 412-17.

view, justified by the spiritual renovation they induce. Borges is the inventor of Cervantes who invents Borges.

*Ion Agheana
Hope College
Holland, MI*

¹ Ion T. Agheana, "La cueva de Montserrat: Don Quijote's Humane Triumph," *Hispanic Review*, 16 (1977), 85-95.
² Hardly any critic has failed to notice Borges' operative juxtaposition with Cervantes and the latter's role in the matter. The matter is biographically documented by Ion T. Agheana, "The Invention of Don Quijote," *Hispanic Review*, 16 (1977), 85-95.