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BORGES AND HIS PRECURSORS

JORGE Luis Borges once shockingly announced that "every writer *creates* his own precursors"[1] That is, like T. S. Eliot, he thinks that a new work, by reminding a reader of similar features in earlier works, necessitates a new conception of literary history. A writer is not an effect of earlier writers; rather, he makes them important in a new way, because of himself. One can apply this insight to Borges. He and some earlier writers will make more sense if one scans literary history to determine the line of development that leads to Borges. There also occur in painting and philosophy developments similar to this literary development. To point out these three developments requires simplification and schematization, but it will cast valuable light on Borges.

One needs to understand Borges before he can search for his precursors. John Barth's assessment of him makes a good deal of sense.[2] Borges, he contends, belongs among the writers of the "Literature of Exhaustion," a category that includes, I believe, nearly all of Borges' work, Barth's last four books and Nabokov's *Pale Fire, Lolita* and *Ada*. Borges, who has written the earliest and most significant work in this vein, is the quintessential writer of this kind of literature. These writers base their works on the hypothesis that at this point in literary history no one can create original works, or perhaps any work at all. Next, according to Barth, a writer can write *about* this situation, as Borges does, thereby producing more work and turning his basic hypothesis into a paradox. Barth describes only briefly this kind of literature, but from his rough outline one can discern the tradition to which Borges belongs. It consists of two streams—self-regarding literature and literary theory based on an apprehension that literature may be impossible or irrelevant—which commingle in Symbolism, the watershed out of which the Literature of Exhaustion flows.

Self-regarding literature is about literature or underscores the fact that it is fictive, not real. The earliest modern examples of self-regarding literature differ significantly from later works of this kind. Borges has pointed out two masterpieces from the early seventeenth century that will serve

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[1] "Kafka and His Precursors," *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 201.

[2] *Atlantic* 220:2 (August, 1967), 29-34.

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as examples. In "Partial Magic in the *Quixote*" he writes, "why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the *Quixote* and Hamlet a spectator of *Hamlet?* I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious" (*Labyrinths*, p. 196). Shakespeare exuberantly writes about literature, brashly confident because he has mastered a form he can use to organize experience in a meaningful and satisfying way. *Don Quixote* is also self-regarding in several ways. Cervantes appropriately discovers for fiction a fascinating theme, time, which became a bulwark of realism and a major theme in the history of the novel. Because he makes this and other important discoveries in the process of writing *Don Quixote*, he seems to invent the genre of the novel before his readers' eyes. As Cervantes proceeds he becomes more aware that he is creating something new, and more interested in watching himself create it. Soon his narrator states that he merely recounts the work of an Arab writer, and near the beginning of the novel's second part Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are said to have read the first part. Like Shakespeare, Cervantes does not scrutinize himself neurotically, nor does he fear that he is writing poorly; rather, his confidence and interest in his genre cause him to use self-regarding devices.

Cervantes probably uses these self-regarding techniques to blur the boundary between the fictive and real world, thereby making his fiction credible. He also began a process that eventually caused trouble for literature. Watching oneself do something—observing one's creative powers with one's analytic powers—resembles "dissociation of sensibility," the fragmentation whose beginning Eliot traces to the time during which Cervantes wrote. When it became acceptable to watch the process of making literature, it became acceptable to analyze literature. This kind of analysis, second-nature to the twentieth-century reader, at first disturbed readers, and it has increasingly disturbed writers. But besides its impact on criticism, the beginning of self-regarding literature opened up for the writer new possibilities, like allusive literature and the *Künstlerroman.* Later, however, writers began to doubt the validity of the types of literature that grew in this way. This doubt forms the basis of much of Borges' work.

Just as a self-regarding interest in their work caused trouble for later writers, so, too, did an almost universally accepted theory about the nature of literature. Horace's belief that literature consists of form and content, which can be divided easily and neatly, appealed to Sidney and numerous other theorists. Nineteenth-century writers recognized the perils of this position because most educated people then considered science to be the repository of knowledge, and they began to question literature's relevance. Someone who respects science and accepts literary men's conception of literature will weigh the relative merits of the two disciplines and will probably consider science superior because it can more exactly deal with weightier

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content and does not complicate its task of communicating truth by trying to create a pleasing form.

When men did come to this conclusion, they forced writers to defend their discipline. For example, in "Literature and Science" Arnold describes a function that literature, unlike science, can perform: unifying man. Late in this essay, however, he begins to tear down his own bastion by defining science as all systematized knowledge, which makes it a larger and more powerful discipline than ever. Moreover, he begins to write about literature as a source of comfort in a world made unpleasant by science. Pater decided to give to science the task of dealing with content, and to define literature as pure form, aspiring to the condition of music. Accepting Pater's belief, however, trivializes literature, which I. A. Richards does by dividing language into emotive (literary and also meaningless) and referential (scientific and meaningful) facets. If Arnold with one hand helped the invading scientists tear down the wall he was building with the other hand, Pater and Richards simply opened the gates and ran up over literature's camp the white flag of surrender. Borges' solution was still to come.

It finally became clear that, in order to negate science's blandishments to literature's adherents, literary men would have to redefine their field. The Symbolists made the most convincing and influential new definition, because they went to the roots of the problem, arguing that literary works, being unified, cannot be neatly divided into form and content. In his admirable *The Romantic Image* Frank Kermode explains their movement toward, and elaboration of, this idea, particularly as they developed it by means of tree and dancer images. To lessen the danger that literature will become irrelevant or impossible, the Symbolists denied that it is rational and therefore a competitor with science and all other rational disciplines. Instead they proclaimed literature's supra-rationality. They also took a clue from self-regarding literature, which by their time had become quite common, and claimed that the proper study of literature is literature. They thereby created for literature its own domain, one nearly impregnable to science. Thus, the Symbolists brought together two strains already present in literature to produce a new conception of literature's nature and function.

Two other important works of literary criticism regard Symbolism and post-Symbolism in different lights, and therefore may help clarify this last stage before Borges' Literature of Exhaustion. Charles Feidelson in *Symbolism in American Literature* constructs a model of literature based on perceptual theory and claims that the Symbolists, particularly in America, tried to interpose the symbol between perceiver and object. In other words, he claims that literature turned in on itself and tried to find a new domain where it needed not compete with science and other rational disciplines that depended on the older, two part model of perception. Susan Sontag's title *Against Interpretation* spells out the role she sees for literature. She claims that contemporary literature's flight from interpretation leads to a hyperdevelopment of

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style. She follows and elaborates on Pater and relates his insight to the contemporary literary scene, where criticism is so powerful that it intimidates writers.

Like Symbolism, the Literature of Exhaustion combines the fear of irrelevance and impossibility with self-regarding literature. For example, Borges writes about imaginary books instead of writing these books themselves, and in his "fictions" he meditates on problems of literary theory. Unlike Symbolism, the Literature of Exhaustion does not try to refute the charges of science. Rather, it admits them and, like a judo expert, turns this attack to its own advantage, by using the supposedly damaging claims of its enemies in order to produce new literature. Borges admits, tentatively and with veiled disbelief, that literature has used up its possibilities, and then he employs this idea as a theme for yet more literature. He also aids this process of exhaustion by using a *regressus in infinitum* technique, perhaps most notably in the levels of reality in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," which form a Chinese box system. As Borges uses up possibilities, however, he produces more literature, and a writer of the Literature of Exhaustion knows where this process leads: *infinitum*. Borges also takes two clues from self-regarding literature. First, he pushes to a logical conclusion its high evaluation of literature, claiming that the world is fictive, especially because some of its bulwarks like time and memory have no reality. His "New Refutation of Time" and many of his "fictions" attack time, and "Funes the Memorious" shows the dangers of memory. Secondly, he recognizes the intrinsic interest of form and genre, aside from their use as vehicles for content. He again pushes an insight as far as it will go: imitating, parodying, mixing and tracing the history of old genres and inventing new ones. Most obviously, he mixes the short story and the essay in his "fictions."

Some similar developments in other disciplines may further clarify the literary tradition that culminates with Borges and the other writers of the Literature of Exhaustion. Mannerism in painting resembles the beginning of modern self-regarding literature in works like *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote*, and this period falls in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, about the time of those two literary classics. El Greco and Tintoretto worked self-consciously like the writers of their era and unlike most earlier painters. Partly because of the rise of academies, the Mannerists knew a great deal about earlier art and occasionally even used it as subject matter. Just as later writers were to deny the reality of time, Mannerists denied the reality of space. For example, Tintoretto's "Last Supper" dramatically contrasts with da Vinci's treatment of the same subject. Tintoretto places the table at a strange angle and, by cleverly using light and shadow, makes it appear to be suspended in air. He emphasizes technique, not the sacred subjet, as da Vinci does in his painting. El Greco's elongated figures also make space seem problematic, if not unreal. Preoccupation with style—for example, in Tintoretto's painting and such works as El Greco's "Laocoön"—is another

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Manneristic quality. These painters also worried about the theoretical basis of their art, particularly about the relation between painting and nature, since they would not take for granted the realistic premise that they were imitating nature. In *The Social History of Art* Arnold Hauser attributes some of these aspects of Mannerism to social forces that also may be among the causes of early self-regarding literature: the insecure status of the artist, the fervid spirituality of the Counter-Reformation, the spread of political realism and the general chaos of the times.

As they did in literature, these tendencies became exaggerated later in the history of painting. This development can be clearly seen by comparing a work by a seventeenth-century painter, though one who is not considered a Mannerist, with a work on a similar theme by a painter who traveled far along the path onto which the Mannerists had hesitantly stepped. Vermeer's "The Painter in his Studio" is self-regarding in the way that *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote* are, for no self doubt appears in this painting. Vermeer whises to show that painters should paint historically significant subjects, so in his painting he depicts an easily recognized Clio, the muse of history. The emphasis falls on this figure rather than on the canvas within a canvas, which is obscured, or on the painter, whose back is turned. These latter possibilities for, respectively, a *regreeus in infinitum* and direct self-examination would appeal to a less self-confident painter, but they do not interest Vermeer. This painter knows exactly what he is doing, and he wants to communicate to people as clearly as he can.

Vastly different is another, later self-regarding work, Turner's "Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory)." Like the writers of their era, many painters in the nineteenth century became more desperately bothered by the problems that had amused and fascinated their precursors. Like Vermeer, Turner speculates on the relation between art and the real world, but he does not portray a painter and an allegorical figure. Rather, after considerable examination, a viewer of his work realizes that the little figures in it are visual images, the oblong blur near the borders is the edge of an eye and the squiggle is the optic nerve. This obsessive, worried treatment of the painter's relation to reality presents not what a painter sees but the painter's eye as he sees.[3] Turner, like his contemporaries in literature, was responding to a crisis that threatened his art form.

From Turner it is only a short step to the Impressionists' dissolution of the solid world and their emphasis on light, shadow and color. The painter's world has broken down even further in the twentieth century, when various kinds of abstractionism have dominated art. These recent paintings do not depict recognizable objects but parts of objects or mere patterns. The abstract artists demonstrate that painting, too, may have exhausted its possibilities. They paint about painting, rather than imitating reality, so they resemble Borges. Literature, however, at least the Literature of Exhaustion, has found

[3] A former colleague, Roger Murray, explained to me the meaning of this painting.

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better solutions to this problem than has painting, for it communicates more than its own difficult situation. For example, Borges uses the hero in "Averroes' Search" to communicate meanings about both literature and the poignant situation of a man trying to comprehend a vastly different culture.

Philosophy, too, has gone through a similar development, beginning, like literature and painting, in the seventeenth century, with Descartes. He dramatized the problem that started this development, because his mind-body dichotomy can be translated into thought and feeling or content and form. That is, for him the mind resides in the body as, for Horace and his followers, content resides in form. Most important, Descartes' rigorous and definite separation of man into two parts made possible self-reflection, like that of literature in *Hamlet* and *Don Quixote*. Descartes also made epistemological —that, is, self-regarding—questions urgent for philosophy. Medieval logic in a sense examined itself, but its tone and degree of self-confidence differ considerably from later philosophy. The earlier logicians felt that they were coming to agreement, expanding their field and solidifying philosophy's role as the queen of sciences, not that they were defending their right to exist.

The fear of impossibility and irrelevance appeared in philosophy when its sub-divisions, like physics and psychology, began to break away and become disciplines by themselves. This development culminated in the growth of logical positivism, which agreed to take a menial role serving science, the real source of truth. This school, not coincidentally, rose at the same time that I.A. Richards began wondering which statements were meaningful and which meaningless and as he began subordinating his discipline to science.

Oddly, in philosophy, due to the genius of Wittgenstein, the analogue of the Literature of Exhaustion came before the analogue of Symbolism. Because of his emphasis on language rather than on topics that earlier philosophers considered significant and substantive and because of the radical differences between his early and late works, Wittgenstein communicates a real sense that philosophy is becoming exhausted. That is, the things of which one cannot speak seem to be rapidly multiplying. Wittgenstein, however, uses this ultimacy as Borges uses his, writing about it in order to produce more works of philosophy and opening up, with his linguistic speculations, a new, and perhaps infinitely large, topic and strategy for philosophers. Like Borges, Wittgenstein also sometimes addresses himself to problems other than the ones inherent in his discipline.

Gilbert Ryle, like the Symbolists, solved his seventeenth-century colleagues' problem. Writing specifically about Descartes and the difficulties he created for philosophy, Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* tries to solve the mind-body problem by claiming that when one does something with thought he is doing one thing, not two. Ryle does not deny mind or make all human activity external and visible—he is not a physicalist—he claims that human activity is monadic. That is, he unites mind and body just as the Symbolists united form and content, going to the roots of his problem to solve it as convincingly as they solved theirs.

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Thus, Borges did not appear magically from nowhere. He does have precursors, whether or not he created them. His work suggests a possible turn that literature can profitably take. In fact, his alternative may also indicate useful directions for other disciplines. Borges' position in literary history indicates the importance of his work; he lies at a crucial juncture in a long and rich tradition.

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