

RE-READING “KAFKA AND HIS PRECURSORS”

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The influence of the Czech writer Franz Kafka on Jorge Luis Borges has often been noted. Critics suggest that Borges first came across Kafka’s writings some time around 1917 when his family was in Geneva and Borges was immersing himself in German Expressionism (*Conversations* 213). However, unlike many of his other early infatuations, Kafka was to remain an abiding presence throughout Borges’s career. Borges translated Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” for the weekly *El Hogar* in 1938 and a selection of Kafka’s stories in book form as *La metamorfosis* the same year.¹ Borges himself spoke of the influence of Kafka upon his first attempts to write fiction, and even of his attempts directly to imitate aspects of Kafka’s work, which we might see in his use of non sequiturs, the introduction of logical gaps within his narratives and the way initial premises gradually expand into vast and unchecked conspiracies. Borges even directly pays homage to Kafka in one of his stories by naming the “sacred latrine” that would permit access to the all-powerful Company in “The Lottery of Babylon” “Qaphqa,” which phonetically spells out the word “Kafka” (*Collected*

1 Among the Kafka stories included in *La metamorfosis* are “La metamorfosis” [Metamorphosis], “La edificación de la muralla china” [The Great Wall of China], “Un artista del hambre” [A Hunger Artist] and “Un artista del trapecio” [The Trapeze Artist]. Borges also included translations of “Ante la ley” [Before the Law] and “Josefina la cantora o El pueblo de los ratones” [Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk] in *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, the collection he put together with Adolfo Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo in 1940. It should be noted here that there exists a view that not all of the translations of *La metamorfosis* are by Borges himself. See on this “El kaffkiano caso de la *Verwandlung* que Borges jamás tradujo” by Fernando Sorrentino. This does not affect, of course, the overall point that Kafka meant a lot to Borges and that he read his stories very closely.

Fictions 104). It is a connection that Borges's commentators have not been slow to recognize, with many devoting considerable pages to the relationship between the two authors. Typical is Gene Bell-Villada, who in his *Borges and His Fiction* seeks to show on a thematic level how Borges's "The Library of Babel" and "The Lottery of Babylon" follow such Kafka stories as "The Great Wall of China" and "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk" in their "portrayal of a remote or imaginary society whose quaint absurdities dimly but unmistakably evoke our own" (115). Or on a stylistic level Beatriz Sarlo in her *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge* speaks of the way that Borges seeks to imitate Kafka in "the perfection of his plot, in its simplicity and in the nightmarish accumulation of minor and uncertain details and repetitions" (57).

But, beyond his attempts to imitate Kafka in his fiction, Borges also wrote a number of critical essays on Kafka throughout his career. He reviewed Kafka's *The Trial* for *El Hogar* in 1937 and that year composed a capsule biography of the author for the same magazine. He wrote the introduction to *La metamorfosis* in 1938 and much later wrote a brief prologue to Kafka's *Amerika* for his *Biblioteca personal (Obras completas 4: 454)*. Kafka was the subject of the essay "Las pesadillas y Franz Kafka" [Nightmares and Franz Kafka], which was published in *La Prensa* in 1935, and Kafka's work was a constant point of reference and comparison throughout all of Borges's writing on literature. Undoubtedly, the most important essay Borges wrote on Kafka was "Kafka y sus precusores" [Kafka and His Precursors], which originally appeared in the newspaper *La Nación* on 15 August 1951, and was subsequently included in the collection *Otras inquisiciones [Other Inquisitions]* of 1952. The essay was first translated into English in the pioneering anthology *Labyrinths* of 1962, and today finds its perhaps definitive place in the 1999 selection of Borges's non-fiction, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*. It is an essay that is unquestionably amongst the best known and most widely discussed of all of Borges's writings. Indeed, it could even be argued that a few lines from the essay make up one of the most influential and commented upon statements of all twentieth-century literary criticism. These lines, of course, are those in which Borges declares that "each writer *creates* his precursors" [cada escritor *crea* a sus precusores] (*Total Library* 365; *OC* 2: 90). They are lines that have led with various degrees of directness to Harold Bloom's psychoan-

alytically-inflected theory of "the anxiety of influence" ("Yeats" 77), Gérard Genette's semiotically-inflected theory of "intertextuality" ("Figures" 123-32) and Umberto Eco's pragmatics-inflected theory of the "open text" ("The Mirror and the Encyclopedia" 155).

Strangely, perhaps because of its overwhelming influence on literary theory in general, "Kafka and His Precursors" is relatively rarely discussed within Borges criticism itself. Or when it is taken up, the whole essay is not read but only the same particular section of it, along with a remark as to the widespread effect it has had upon literary criticism. So, for example, in his *You Might be Able to Get There from Here: Reconsidering Borges and the Postmodern* Mark Frisch summarizes the essay in the following terms: "In 'Kafka and His Precursors', he [Borges] argues for the fluidity and subjectivity of the past when he asserts that each writer creates his own precursors. Thus, our understanding of history, literary or otherwise, continuously changes with changing events in the present" (66). But "Kafka and His Precursors" is a much more interesting essay than this reductive treatment suggests, and indeed this much-quoted passage may not even be the most interesting thing about it. There is another section that is rarely if ever discussed that could be argued to constitute the real significance of the essay. In it we find not only a profound commentary on what Kafka means to Borges but a challenge—beyond even the logical and temporal inversion Borges effects—to the nature of any possible influence of Kafka upon Borges. In a way that goes beyond Borges's commentators and even Borges himself, it produces a truly uncanny image both of Kafka and of the nature of literary influence. To summarize, we would say that Kafka as well as influencing Borges also makes it possible to think that the real subject of Borges's work (like Kafka's) is something like literary influence itself.

"Kafka and His Precursors" certainly gives the outward impression of conventional literary criticism. Indeed, it is almost exaggeratedly orthodox with its dry, dusty tone and its diligent listing of the great author's influences. Borges begins his essay: "At one time I considered a study of Kafka's precursors. I had thought, at first, that he was as unique [singular] as the phoenix of rhetorical praise after spending a little time with him, I felt I could recognize his voice, or his habit, in the texts of various literatures and ages" (*Total Library* 363; *OC* 2: 88). Borges, then, in seeking to describe this "uniqueness," proceeds to list a number of the occasions in which he

has encountered something of Kafka's "voice" in his reading. The first is the pre-Socratic philosopher Zeno, who put forward a series of arguments supposedly refuting motion. Zeno argued that, for an object to get from A to B, it must first cross a point C, half-way between them; and to get from A to C, it must first cross a point D, half-way between them; and so on. The logical consequence of this is that motion is impossible because there would always be another point we would have to cross, half-way between where we were and where we wanted to get to. The second is the 9th-century Chinese author Han Yu, who argued that the unicorn is hard to classify because, although it is like a horse, insofar as it has a mane, and like a bull, insofar as it has a horn (and even like the wolf and deer), it is not exactly like any of them. The third is the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard and a parable he tells regarding Danish clergymen instructing their parishioners that a trip to the North Pole would be good for their souls. Actual trips to the North Pole being difficult to undertake, however, these clergymen end up declaring that "any journey—from Denmark to London, say, in a steamship, or a Sunday outing in a hackney coach—could be seen as a veritable expedition to the North Pole" (*Total Library* 364; *OC* 2: 89). The fourth is the poet Robert Browning and his poem "Fears and Scruples," which tells the story of a man who believes he has a famous and noble friend and shows this friend's letters to others. When others cast doubts on this friend's nobility and even on the genuineness of the letters, the man replies: "What if this friend happened to be—God?" (*Total Library* 364; *OC* 2: 89). The fifth is the late 19th-century French novelist Léon Bloy and one of the stories from his *Histoires désobligeantes*, which concerns a group of would-be travelers, who accumulate atlases, train schedules and suitcases, but who die without ever leaving the town in which they were born. And the sixth and last precursor Borges adduces is perhaps the opposite of this. It is the 20th-century English writer Lord Dunsany and his poem "Carcassonne," in which an army of warriors sets out from an enormous castle for Carcassonne; but, despite crossing mountains and encountering monsters, they never reach their destination, although they do once glimpse it from afar.

In each case here, Borges selects an author who reveals to us something of Kafka's distinctive qualities. The implication, obviously, is that Kafka once read and was influenced by these precursors and tried to incorporate

aspects of them into his work. However, as we move through this various and far-flung list, featuring authors from such vastly different times and places, we become more and more doubtful whether Kafka could actually have read all of them. As we gradually realize, it is not that Kafka actually read these authors, or at least we could never conclusively prove this, but rather that Kafka operates as an excuse allowing his interpreter to put together this erudite and heterogeneous list. It is not that these authors have an obviously Kafkaesque quality or can be seen as naturally belonging together, but rather that, in the light of Kafka’s work, we are now able to find some Kafka-like quality about them and a commonality between them. As Borges writes in the famous conclusion to his essay:

The word “precursor” is indispensable to the vocabulary of criticism, but one must try to purify it from any connotation of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. (*Total Library* 365)

En el vocabulario crítico, la palabra *precursor* es indispensable, pero habría que tratar de purificarla de toda connotación de polémica o de rivalidad. El hecho es que cada escritor *crea* a sus precursors. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción del pasado, como ha de modificar el futuro. (OC 2: 89-90)

As we say, it is for this idea of a writer creating their own precursors, influencing not only the future but also the past, that “Kafka and His Precursors” is best remembered. It is this passage of the text that has become a cornerstone of contemporary literary theory. In it Borges seems to be post-modern in his rejection of historical progression and artistic originality, and post-structuralist in his decentering of authorial intentionality and the passing over of responsibility for making meaning of the text to the reader.² But, for all of this, there is nevertheless a much more profound and productive consequence that Borges draws from this exercise that is taken up in only a handful of discussions of the essay. It is something that

² Typically – recursively – Borges attributes his idea to T.S. Eliot and his 1941 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (*Total Library* 365). In this essay, Eliot speaks of all existing works of art as forming an ideal order, which is then changed by the addition of new works of art. As Eliot writes: “Whoever has approved this idea of order [...] will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (*Points of View* 26). Of course, we now largely read Eliot through Borges. It is Borges who “refines and diverts” [afina y desvía] (*Total Library* 365; OC 2: 89) our reading of Eliot and makes it relevant to today.

complicates the usual reading of “Kafka and His Precursors” and that offers a wide-ranging insight into Borges’s work in general. Immediately after listing the last of those six “precursors” to Kafka, Borges remarks as though in slightly surprised conclusion:

If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have listed resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. The last fact is what is most significant. Kafka’s idiosyncrasy is present in each of these writings, to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had not written, we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist. (*Total Library* 365)

Si no me equivoco, las heterogéneas piezas que he enumerado se parecen a Kafka; si no me equivoco, no todas se parecen entre sí. Este último hecho es el más significativo. En cada uno de esos textos está la idiosincrasia de Kafka, en grado mayor o menor, pero si Kafka no hubiera escrito, no la percibiríamos; vale decir, no existiría. (*OC* 2: 89)

What does Borges mean by this? How is it possible that all of those pieces Borges lists resemble Kafka and yet not all of them resemble each other? What exactly is going on here in Borges’s game of literary comparison? Obviously, each of the authors Borges lists is an attempt to specify the peculiar quality Kafka brings to literature. And, just as obviously, he lists a *number* of precursors because no single one of them is able to exhaust Kafka, to summarize what he represents. Indeed, we might even say that each new name added to the list is an attempt to supplement the ones before, to speak of some particular quality of Kafka that the previous precursors did not encompass. It is this feeling that something has not yet been taken account of that allows us to keep on adding names to the list. In a sense, each new comparison represents a *failure* to define Kafka, a failure made clear by the one that comes after. Each successive entry on the list, we might say, seeks to speak of what Kafka and the one before it have in common, what the real Kafka is that allowed those previous comparisons to be made.³ And the same goes for even that first entry on the list. It too is not merely a comparison but already an attempt exhaustively to define Kafka and to speak of what it is about him that would allow any possible comparison.

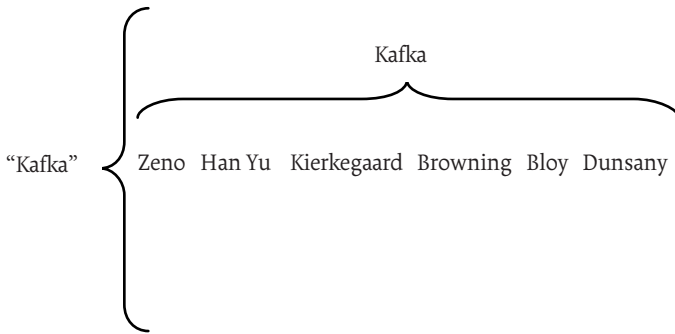
3 This is both why each entry is “various” [diversas] (*Total Library* 363; *OC* 2: 88) and why Borges says that he has recorded only a “few” [pocos] (*Total Library* 363; *OC* 2: 88) of the precursors to Kafka he has discovered so far.

However, as Borges makes clear when he speaks at the end of his essay of the way that "the first Kafka of *Betrachtung* [the early short stories] is less a precursor of the Kafka of the gloomy myths and terrifying institutions than is Browning or Lord Dunsany" (*Total Library* 365; OC 2: 89), any attempt to say what Kafka is is only to reduce him to one of his precursors. It is to see him as merely one of a potentially infinite series of qualities, thus allowing *another* to come along afterwards and say what they all have in common. That is, what is missing in any comparison and what each successive comparison tries to fill in is the "Kafka" that allows the comparison between these precursors and Kafka. Each new comparison draws out another quality of Kafka, and yet the "Kafka" that allows this comparison is always missing. This is the irony of all of those books of the form *Shakespeare and...., Joyce and... or, indeed, Borges and...* They seek to put their finger on the unique and unreproducible quality of their chosen author, but they are able to do so only through a comparison with another, thus making them appear unoriginal, a lesser version of their precursor. Indeed, pushing this argument to its fullest extent, it might be that it is greatest of authors who inspire the most comparisons. It is only they who of all authors can actually appear unoriginal, to add nothing to literature, to repeat what has already been written.⁴

However, for all of the sense that we miss the essence of Kafka in each comparison made with him, Kafka would also be nothing outside of these comparisons. The activity of the critic in finding sources or influences in

4 With this in mind, it is interesting that in a lecture delivered even before "Kafka and His Precursors," "Nathaniel Hawthorne" (1949), Borges is already comparing Kafka to yet another author: the 19th-century American novelist and short story writer Nathaniel Hawthorne. As Borges says: "The circumstance, the strange circumstance, of perceiving in a story written by Hawthorne at the beginning of the nineteenth century the same quality that distinguishes the stories Kafka wrote at the beginning of the twentieth must not cause us to forget that Hawthorne's particular quality has been created, or determined, by Kafka. 'Wakefield' prefigures Kafka, but Kafka modifies and refines the reading of 'Wakefield.' The debt is mutual; a great writer creates his precursors" (*Other Inquisitions* 56-57). ["La circunstancia, la extraña circunstancia, de percibir en un cuento de Hawthorne, redactado a principios del siglo XIX, el sabor mismo de los cuentos de Kafka que trabajó a principios del siglo XX, no debe hacernos olvidar que el sabor de Kafka ha sido creado, ha sido determinado, por Kafka. Wakefield prefigura a Franz Kafka, pero éste modifica, y afina, la lectura de Wakefield. La deuda es mutua; un gran escritor crea a sus precursores"] (OC 2: 56).

comparing any particular author with others is absolutely necessary. And even to avoid this by speaking of some *real* Kafka behind all of these comparisons is only to produce another comparison. Kafka does not exist outside of literary history, some expectation or presumption as to how he should be read. In other words, to express this in a kind of paradox, Kafka is at once outside of all comparison and only another in an endless series of comparisons. He is at the same time the incomparable Kafka that puts all of his precursors into a relationship with each other and, insofar as Kafka must be named by some quality to be known at all, he is also what *this* Kafka and his precursors have in common. We might attempt to express this diagrammatically:



To say what we see here: each precursor to Kafka does not merely add another quality to our conception of Kafka, but also attempts to say what all of those other qualities attributed to him have in common. And yet, as we have seen, this itself opens up the possibility of *another* coming along and speaking of the “Kafka” that both Kafka and all of those precursors have in common. What is revealed as this series of precursors goes on is that each attempt to summarize all of the previous predicates and to say what they have in common becomes itself merely another in a potentially endless series of predicates, but this only from the perspective of a certain “Kafka.” Importantly, we do not have a simple infinity or series of qualities with nothing in common. This series of qualities with nothing in common would be possible only insofar as they all stood in for a “Kafka” that was the “same.” Kafka, in the end, is neither an endless series of qualities with nothing in common (because this series would be possible only

insofar as they all stood in for the "same" Kafka) nor what they all have in common (because Kafka could be grasped only in terms of his always "different" precursors). Rather, "Kafka" is the very *relationship between* these. "Kafka" is what is in common to this series of predicates and that Kafka that appears to have nothing in common with them.

And if we go back to "Kafka and His Precursors," we can see that it is this complex question of relationship that Kafka's work is already *about*. That is, if we look at the various authors Borges puts forward as possible precursors to Kafka, we find that in each of them there is raised the problem of something that is at once the same and different, incomparable and able to be grasped only through comparison. In Zeno, the distance between A and B is infinitely divisible, so that we can never get from one point to another; but this only because we are already at B, in a sense are counting back from B. In Han Yu, the unicorn is different from the horse, the bull, the wolf and the deer; but can only be compared to them, is made up only of parts taken from them. In Kierkegaard, the North Pole is at once everywhere and nowhere, can never be reached and is implicit in every journey.⁵ In Browning, the absence of God is God and His forgery proof of His existence. And in his final two examples, Borges provides two variants of Zeno's paradox: in Bloy, the travelers arrive at their destination without ever leaving; in Dunsany, they travel forever without arriving. In all of this, we can see that what the various texts cited have in common is not at all any thematic content, literary style, cultural heritage or geographical location, but a *logic*. It is the logic, we might say, of relationship. Precisely what Kafka, as seen through his precursors, can be seen to be introducing into literature is the question of relationship. And it is perhaps first of all the relationship between an author and their reader. This is why it is entirely appropriate that it is *Borges* who in the end is the "Kafka" that Kafka and his precursors have in common. It is Borges who sees the relationship between Kafka and his various precursors, and thus makes of Kafka his own precursor. It is Borges who has read this far-flung list and whom all

5 Even the other parable of Kierkegaard that Borges mentions, involving a counterfeiter required to count banknotes, is equivalent to the coincidence of opposites that characterizes the "Kafkaesque" logic Borges proposes. It is, indeed, not unlike the following Browning example involving the (non)existence of God.

of these authors, who would otherwise have nothing in common, can be seen to have in common.

Finally, we might suggest, it is *Borges* who makes of this relationship—which we might also call the logic of representation—the very subject of his work. It is notable, for instance, that in the original running order of *Other Inquisitions*—a connection that is now lost in *The Total Library* selection of Borges’s non-fiction—“Kafka and His Precursors” was followed by “Avatars of the Tortoise” (1939).⁶ “Avatars of the Tortoise” is another of Borges’s efforts, after such earlier essays as “The Perpetual Race of Achilles and the Tortoise” (1929), to grapple with the difficulties of Zeno’s paradoxes of motion; but, more importantly for our purposes, Borges relates them there to Aristotle’s well-known argument concerning the “third man.” This was an attempt by Aristotle to refute Plato’s doctrine of forms, insofar as Aristotle contends that a kind of infinite regress is implied in the attribution of the same form or archetype to a number of different instances. As Borges puts it in his essay: “If there is a separate being that incorporates the attributes of many different beings, and is different from them (as the Platonists claim), then there must be a third man” (*Other Inquisitions* 111; OC 1: 255). But then, as Borges goes on to say, following Aristotle, insofar as this is so, there must also be “a fourth, who will be in the same relation to the third and to the idea and to the individual men” (*Other Inquisitions* 111; OC 1: 255). Finally, as Borges concludes: “Two individuals are not actually needed; the individual and the class are enough to determine the third man postulated by Aristotle” (*Other Inquisitions* 111; OC 1: 255). Of course, as we can see, this is exactly the same problem as we saw in “Kafka and His Precursors,” in which each attempt to speak of the Kafka that his various precursors have in common requires another “Kafka” to say what this Kafka and his precursors have in common. And, as Aristotle suggests, this problem of the “third man” is implied from the beginning: even before any comparison, Kafka is already split between being an instance of himself, say the author of *Betrachtung*, and an archetype,

6 It is a connection also lost in the *Obras completas* edition of Borges’s works, where “Avatares de la tortuga” has been taken out of *Otras inquisiciones* in *Obras completas* 1952-1972 and put into *Discusión* (1932) in *Obras completas* 1923-1949. The two texts are still to be found together in both the stand-alone Spanish and English editions of *Otras inquisiciones*.

what allows us to see *Betrachtung* as less “Kafkaesque” than the sum of his precursors.

But, more than this, as the enormous body of literature on Borges attests in various ways, this split between, or better simultaneity of, the archetype and the individual, the ideal and the empirical, the one and the many, lies at the heart of Borges’s entire fictional enterprise. What is at stake in “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” despite the misreadings of it as simply the skeptical doing away of the author and originality, is exactly the same as in “Kafka and His Precursors.” Cervantes’s *Quixote* can be grasped only in “almost infinitely richer” (*Collected Fictions* 94; *OC* 1: 449)—we might say, almost infinitely different—versions of itself; but this difference would not be able to be remarked unless there were some “*Quixote*,” some underlying meaning of the text, common to all versions. And we would say the same for any number of Borges’s other stories: “The Aleph,” “The Zahir,” “The Library of Babel,” “The Lottery of Babylon” and “The Garden of Forking Paths.” At once their narratives imply an endless series of divergences and differences, and yet all in a way lead to the “same” end point or conclusion. And this, to conclude, is perhaps the real point of Borges’s homage to Kafka in “Kafka and His Precursors,” and why Kafka is singled out for attention, despite Borges suggesting that the same logic could be seen with regard to all authors. Paradoxically, we might say, Kafka is “great,” lives on in history, not because of some special quality or even series of qualities that he introduces into literature and which subsequent generations pass on. Rather, it is precisely because—as we briefly tried to show with those authors Borges lists as his precursors—Kafka is a kind of “nothing,” understands from the first that he exists only in relation with another (his reader or precursor), is always different from himself. It is a lesson that Borges tried to incorporate into his own work: that those writers live on who are able to take the question of their relationship to the outside into account in advance. Borges’s real subject in “Kafka and His Precursors,” as in so many of his critical essays, is the question of cultural transmission: what allows a work of art or philosophical doctrine to live on into the future, to cross other cultures and times. It is something that undoubtedly concerned Borges living in “faraway” Argentina, and it is something he sees raised by the Kafka of “Kafka and His Precursors.” It

is a “tradition” that Borges seeks to attach himself to in the only way possible: as its analyst or reader.

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