

POSSIBLE BOOKS: “The Possible Book and the Preface”



Jorge Luis Borges
circa 1976

On November 26, 1974, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges formulated the first theory of the prologue in his own “Prologue of Prologues.” (This title is not to be read as meaning a “superlative” in the manner of the Song of Songs, the Night of Nights, or the King of Kings but is the name of a page that preceded a collection of his own diverse prologues to actual books by actual authors that he wrote between 1923 and 1974, a prologue to his prologues, as it were.) Borges makes these preliminary observations:

*The prologue, in the sad majority of cases, borders on after-dinner oratory or on funereal panegyric and abounds in irresponsible hyperboles, which the incredulous reader accepts as conventions of the genre. There are other examples—we recall the memorable study which Wordsworth prefixed to the second edition of his **Lyrical Ballads**—that state and reason out an aesthetic. The moving and laconic preface to the essays of Montaigne is not a page less admirable than his admirable book. Of many works which time has not wanted to forget, the preface is an inseparable part of the text. In **The Thousand and One Nights**—or, as [British*

orientalist Richard] Burton calls it, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*—the initial fable of the Sultan who orders his Sultana to be beheaded each morning is no less prodigious than the fables that follow; the procession of pilgrims who narrate, in their pious cavalcade, the heterogeneous *Canterbury Tales* has been judged by many to be the most lively story of the volume. On the Elizabethan stage, the prologue was the actor who proclaimed the theme of the drama.

He follows this exemplary passage with a proposition:

When the stars are propitious, the preface is not a subaltern form of dinner toast; it is a parallel species of critique.

This proposition introduces his real motive. On the same page that Borges recounts the tradition of the conventional preface, he offers to the world of literature the possibility of a new literary genre: the preface to the possible book. Thomas Carlyle, he notes, had “simulated” the genre more than a century before in *Sartor Resartus*, when he invoked the authority of a certain German professor who had published a learned volume on the philosophy of appearances: Carlyle invented the professor and presented his own book as a partial translation of the professor’s vast work, then defended the professor’s philosophy in his commentary. The genre envisioned by Borges, which he was able to see only vaguely, would apply an analogous process: an entire work composed of a series of prefaces to books that do not exist but would abound in exemplary citations from those books. He suggests that the plots introduced in those prefaces should be the impalpable substance of “pages which shall never be written” and of a kind that “offer themselves less to laborious writing than to the leisures of imagination or indulgent dialogue.” It would be a good idea, he thought, to avoid parody and satire and to make the texture of those stories the kind that our mind

accepts and even craves.

Later on the page, Borges offers the plan for this possible book “to whomever desires to carry it out” because to execute this plan himself would demand “hands more dexterous” than his own and “a tenacity that had already left” him. He was seventy-five years of age when he expressed that thought. Borges, the craftsman, had already dreamed universes free of time and space (“Pascal’s Sphere”); Borges, the master of impeccable syntax, had already conceived of the unlimited rhetorical possibilities of the principle of unity (“Note on Walt Whitman”) and practiced them (“The Flower of Coleridge”); Borges, the artificer, had already written a review of an imaginary book (“The Approach to Al-Mu’tasim) and fictions that were not inventions at all but crafted elaborations upon the scant facts of the lives of real characters (“Story of the Warrior and the Captive,” “The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald,” “The Wall and the Books”). Before he passed out of this world in 1986, Borges lived to author dozens of other works—but not the one he had conceived on that day in 1974.

Borges no doubt expected, as I do, that any author who dares to attempt this genre will imitate the literary procedures that Borges himself had applied to form the series and inlays of his own mosaic works—the quest for symmetries, faceted sentences like cut stones that throw more and more light as they turn before the reader’s eye, themes that interlock and recur in variations, brevity that only *seems* fragmentary, generalizations that echo the argument and project it onto other planes, succinct catalogs that comprise paragraphs, allusions to a larger whole that is unnameable, harmonic enumeration of diverse parts, the addition of postscripts and afterthoughts (those structures in which literature is able to extend or enclose itself)—these, or other equivalent procedures. To my knowledge, no one has yet taken up his offer.

Reexamining this all-but-forgotten page written about a new

form of fiction has suggested to me the plan of another genre, the preface to another kind of possible book, a species of nonfiction that is parallel to the one conceived by Borges: an editor's preface to a book whose passages have already been written and published but which, strictly speaking, does not exist in a single ordered volume. This genre has no precedent, yet it is possible to imagine the sets of elements it would share with other kinds of writing. As it is now beginning to appear to me, such a work would share with the scholarly review the virtues of evaluation and accuracy; with the investigative essay, the strategies of exposition and scrutiny; with the white paper of science, the clarity of significant figures; with the tally sheet, the satisfaction of a completed inventory of contents that allows one to make projections; and with the detective story, the hidden geometry that becomes clear in stages and prefigures what is finally obvious.

This new genre of nonfiction, in its features and aversions, would resemble its relative conceived by Borges but with two notable exceptions: First, its documentary method and inherently truthful nature would require no "suspension of disbelief" to serve as antidote to the duplicity inherent in fiction; second, perspective, and not plot, would be the substance of its pages—a perspective that perceives and draws together what years and an insignificant number of intervening pages have held apart. The author of such a work, in the persona of "editor," would assemble, or combine into an essence, a collection of valuable passages in a single new and miniature body of exquisite text and present it to the reader as if in the palm of his hand. It would seem to me beneficial to apply a method that effects Socratic schemes, shared by the author and the reader, that can be continued outside the text for personal transformation.

The work I am imagining would be made of themes and images in the same fashion as a necklace or a ring is made of milled

precious metals and polished stones: the materials remember their essence but not the veins of the mountains from which they were extracted. A few examples of this kind of work already come to mind: the preface to an anthology (that does not yet exist in published form) of significant short stories or visionary poems by an author who is due to be “re-discovered” in our time; a preface to the book of literary criticism that the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung has in effect already written but which lies embedded, unnoticed and unformulated, in the twenty formidable black volumes of his *Collected Works*; a preface to the “Essay on Man” that was unfortunately never written by Alfred Russel Wallace, who codiscovered, with Charles Darwin, the theory of natural selection, but who, unlike Darwin, recognized the spiritual nature of Man. These prefaces, like some other short pieces of prose—the fable, the parable, the note—would be small bright tokens of something else.

Robert Petrovich, 1996/2012