Prefatory Conventions and Invention: Recreating Borges's Prologue to La invención de Morel

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Prefatory Conventions and Invention: Rereading Borges’s Prologue to *La invención de Morel*

Prologues traditionally present works through a series of conventional gestures: introducing the author, providing contextual information and otherwise preparing a reader for proper understanding of the work. In this sense, they appear to reinforce a classic distinction between the philosophical text, whose words efface themselves in the act of understanding, and the literary text, which resists such neglect of textuality and demands rereading. In a variety of ways throughout his work, Borges questions the neat distinction between literature and philosophy, and “Prefatory Conventions and Invention” examines how he does this in his prologues. After examining theory of the prologue in Borges, Gerard Genette’s *Paratexts*, and Jacques Derrida’s “Outworks,” this article focuses on Borges’s prologue to *La invención de Morel*, showing how it both conforms to philosophical task of delivering knowledge and demands multiple readings in the manner of a literary text. Following apparently accidental details of the prologue, and building on the work of previous critics, I propose that we view the borgesian text not as a fusion of literature and philosophy but as a textual movement or passage back and forth between two distinct types of discourse.

In the epilogue to *El libro de arena*, Borges warns that “Prologar cuentos no leídos aún es tarea casi imposible, ya que exige el análisis de tramas que no conviene anticipar” (*Obras completas* III: 82). The *Obras completas* allow us to enumerate Borges’s prologues for his own books (whose stories he had not only written but also, presumably, read) and add to the list those written on behalf of other storytellers and published in *Prólogos* in 1975 (*Obras completas* IV). If we take into account the volume of prologues that were featured in the 1988 collection *Biblioteca personal: Prólogos* (at the end of *Obras completas* IV) and the handful of prefatory texts included in the two-volume *Textos*
recobrados in 2001, we can see that the “near impossible task” hardly deterred Borges. As he acknowledged in his 1940 prologue to Adolfo Bioy Casares’s *La invención de Morel*, his friend’s novel counts among those works that should constrain a prologuist to avoid untimely revelation, engendering a “temor de incurrir en prematuras o parciales revelaciones” (vii). The novel’s anonymous narrator (and, implicitly, the fictitious editor who provides footnotes to the narrator’s text) present the text as a journal of his efforts to understand a series of strange phenomena—among them, partygoers dancing in a rainstorm and swimming happily in a snake-infested pool—that he characterizes on page one as an “adverso milagro” (1). A single revelation accounts for all of the strange events about two-thirds of the way through the novel (60), and the final third of the book tells of the narrator’s somewhat bizarre response to this unexpected factor. Borges’s prologue does not spoil the experience for the reader, although he describes how Bioy “despliega una Odisea de prodigios que no parecen admitir otra clave que la alucinación o que el símbolo, y plenamente los descifra mediante un solo postulado fantástico, pero no sobrenatural” (vii). However, a close examination of Borges’s prologue shows that it adds to the conventional prelusory gestures many elements that can only be understood when reread in light of the novel as a whole. For *El libro de arena*, Borges apparently chose to avoid the problem of untimely disclosure by placing his commentary after the text proper, but he more often chose to face head-on the conflicting demands on the prologuist, providing readers with a wary elucidation of stories whose details ought not be betrayed. Borges’s prologue to *La invención* refuses to acquiesce to the subordinate and exterior role often assumed for this kind of text, forging instead a space of encounter for the inventive realm of fiction and the cognitive, argumentative forum of critical discourse. Borges scholars surely agree that his *Ficciones* create such a space, but we may not yet recognize the extent to which some of his prologues accomplish this, too.

I will be analyzing the preface to a book, considering the novel *La invención de Morel* as a context for understanding its prologue, rather than the other way around. While this might seem a perverse task, my analysis also takes as its object a type of text that has been characterized as eccentric. Borges’s “Prólogo de prólogos” opens the 1975 collection of prefatory texts that appear without the books for which they served as introductions. If the volume itself were not unlikely enough, Borges
displays some ambivalence on the issue of prologue theory, noting, first, that there is as yet no theory of prologues, and, furthermore, that we apparently have no need of one, since we all know perfectly well what they are. Finally, no more deterred by the unnecessary than the near impossible, he sets out to provide just such a theory (Obras completas IV: 14).

Borges’s characteristic dismissal of his own discourse immediately becomes caught up in his abyssal irony when he notes that writers of prologues often settle for careless, impulsive, or trite “oratoría de sobremesa” (Obras completas IV: 14). Should we laud his own prologue for adhering to the genre or scorn it for its casual impetuousness? Borges goes on to compare the prologue to a “panegírico funebre” that includes “hipérbolos irresponsables” (Obras completas IV: 14). As I will mention, these characterizations do not simply describe how not to write a prologue, but in fact play a role in Borges’s presentation of his friend Bioy’s first novel. However, Borges then notes that some prologues stand out above the “forma subalterna del brindis” and become “una especie lateral de la crítica” (Obras completas IV: 14). As such, he adds, these texts have the potential to move from the outside of the book to the inside, to become a “parte inseparable del texto” (Obras completas IV: 14). Alongside the custom of casual, laudatory remarks exists an alternate practice, the prologue that would provide a sort of analysis and interpretation. Such a commentary, as we have already seen, might adapt itself to its position in and before the object of analysis. In fact, Borges stresses that these good prologues—his examples are all, like the epilogue to El libro de arena, written by the author of the work—become a part of the work they introduce. Although it casts suspicion on all prefatory texts, Borges’s “Prólogo de prólogos” would presumably be one of these good prologues. It begins by denying the use in its own title of a (hyperbolic) “locución hebrea superlativa” analogous to the Bible’s Song of Songs (Obras completas IV: 14), that is, by insisting this is not a “Prologue of Prologues,” and turns out to offer not only a “Prologue for Prologues” but a “Prologue about Prologues.”

Since the “Prólogo de prólogos” appeared, Gerard Genette has published a theory of the prologue as one of a collection of elements he calls “paratexts,” which “(enable) a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public” (1). His Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (originally published in French as
Seuils in 1987) provides an important survey of the variety of prologues and establishes terminology that can help us maintain a clear critical view of the topic, alongside Borges’s possibly idiosyncratic one. To begin with, his first of three chapters devoted to prologues (easily the paratext that requires the most comment and analysis) receives the name “The Prefatorial Situation” and maintains that no strict difference exists between introductions, prefaces, prologues, forewords, etc. (161). The essential role of these anterior paratexts is to spark interest and guide the reader’s interpretation, expressed in the epithet “to get the book read and to get the book read properly” (197). For this reason, Genette even includes epilogues and other posterior paratexts as part of the “prefatorial situation” (161). Though Genette considers the whole range of prologues—including playful fictional ones and the “disavowing” ones that seem to assert little but the pointlessness of a prologue—the most important distinction is between autographic prefaces, which receive their own chapter, “Functions of the Original Preface,” and allographic, which are discussed along with some of the stranger varieties of “authorial” prefaces in “Other Prefaces, Other Functions.” Genette confirms, then, Borges’s point that allographic prelogues function as tribute and/or critical intervention. He also recognizes that prefaces sometimes lose their paratextual status to become part of the text itself (177). Borges’s examples in the “Prólogo de prólogos” and Genette’s in Paratexts suggest that this phenomenon only seems to occur in the case of autographic prefaces, but Borges’s prologue for Bioy Casares may qualify as an exceptional case. In a final connection to Borges, Genette actually cites the epilogue to El libro de arena to contend that the preface writer suffers from “an unbalanced and even shaky situation of communication” since he comments upon a text as yet unfamiliar to the reader (237). To the extent that this asymmetry is caused by reader and writer possessing different knowledge about a prefaced text, it is remediable by placing the prefatory text at the end of the book. In part, then, the strangest feature of the anticipatory preface consists in its most ordinary characteristic, its position before the text.

For Genette, this peculiarity of the preface also gets bound up with that most deviant of communicative acts, literature. In a preface, the author is “least the creator” and “most the literary man” (292). For Genette, the writing of introductory paratexts is the most rigorously literary practice because of its inherent ambivalence: it might serve as
a stimulant or an impediment to the text proper; it might, as it were, move in and out of the text, determining interpretation or remaining indifferent; and it might even be read attentively or ignored completely. Referring to his earlier analysis of Borges’s “Prólogo de prólogos,” Genette describes a “prefatorial malaise” that often overcomes the writer of prefaces (275). This is “a kind of generic hyperconsciousness”: “no one writes a preface without experiencing the more or less inhibiting feeling that what’s most obvious about the whole business is that he is engaged in writing a preface” (275). He quotes at length from Barthes’s “veritable little organon of the allographic preface,” which situates a preface-writer as a third position between reader and writer (275). Being neither the reader nor the writer, the writer of the allographic preface seems completely superfluous. As Genette says elsewhere, the reader is “poised for an imminent reading of the text [proper] . . ., without which its [the prefatory text’s] preparatory or retrospective comments would be largely meaningless and, naturally, useless” (194). The writer of the preface cannot expect to be completely understood, at least not yet. Unless we are reading a particular text by Borges, there is not a prologue to the prologue that inspires and guides its reader. Moreover, the prologuist’s best efforts can only be appreciated if the reader performs the unnatural act of turning back after completing the book. Structurally, then, the preface embodies the anxiety of serious writers, unsure of whether their texts deserve the status of literary work or merely serve a secondary, ancillary function, of whether they are original or mere footnotes to literary history.

Borges’s prologue to Roberto Godel’s Nacimiento del fuego (from 1932) also includes relevant comments on the inherent strangeness of the prologue. “Un libro (creo) debe bastarse,” he says; however, Borges notes that a “convención editorial” declares that the book is not enough until it includes a prologue (Obras completas IV: 78). The publisher prefers to introduce a new work with an “estímulo en letra bastardilla que corre el peligro de asemejarse a esa otra indispensable página en blanco que precede a la falsa carátula” (Obras completas IV: 78). Borges mocks editors for believing the prologue should be distinguished from the work proper by something as grossly material as ink and typeset. Ironically, he also suggests that a prologue’s text can just as easily appear as blank as the flyleaves that separate the book itself from its cover and thereby from its physical and spiritual exterior. The risk he will run, he
says—“arriesgo, pues, las solicitudes que siguen”—has to do with producing a superfluous or meaningless speech, and he assumes this risk in accordance with “la insegura autoridad que nos da despachar un prólogo” (Obras completas IV: 78). Working with authority and insecurity at once, Borges commends Godel’s poems to the reader, who possesses a combination of traits that is equally oxymoronic: “sé que también intimarán contigo, preciso aunque invisible lector” (Obras completas IV: 79). Individual readers can be identified precisely, in spite of their invisibility. Borges’s preface might fall outside of the book or, as he says in the “Prólogo de prólogos,” be absorbed into it. A preface puts readers and writers both in an awkward position.

Although we might make much of the malaise in Borges’s “temor de incurrir en prematuras o parciales revelaciones” (vii, my emphasis), we can read the prologue to La invención in perfectly conventional terms, that is, as publisher-mandated advocacy for the author and guidance for the reader. Although he provides almost no biographical information on Bioy Casares, Borges praises the work and, by implication, its author. After insisting on the high degree of conscious artistry involved in writing a “novela de peripecias” (v), Borges attributes this mastery to La invención when he compares it to other celebrated works: “considero que ninguna otra época posee novelas de tan admirable argumento como The turn of the screw, como Der Prozess, como Le Voyageur sur la terre, como ésta que ha logrado, en Buenos Aires, Adolfo Bioy Casares” (vi).\(^4\) The book not only takes a coveted place alongside two undisputed classics, it also practically inaugurates a new style in literature written in Spanish, which he calls “imagination razonada” (vii). Perhaps we should read this compliment as one of the “hiperboles irresponsables” that Borges will later, in the “Prólogo de prólogos,” recognize as a common characteristic of the genre (Obras completas IV: 14). The final words of the prologue hyperbolize farther: “He discutido con su autor los pormenores de su trama, la he releído; no me parece una imprecisión o una hiperbole calificara de perfecta” (vii). How better to praise writers than to call their work perfect?

In a 1931 essay in Discusión (included in Obras completas I), Borges focuses directly on the concept of perfection, lending it a meaning that would mitigate the laudatory nature of this attribution to Bioy’s novel. “La supersticiosa ética del lector” begins by arguing against a “superstición del estilo” (attributed more to the critic than to the reader
mentioned in the title, a reader he wants to understand “en el sentido ingenuo de la palabra”; *Obras completas* I: 214) and goes on to describe an ineffable quality in texts that causes them to transcend the time and place of their production. Literature has a particular temporality, but it also exists in the medium of language, which has an independent historical character. Borges warns of the precarious nature of perfection, joking that he knows of no literary work whose formal flawlessness has rendered it “invulnerable e indestructible” (*Obras completas* I: 215). In fact, he says, “la página de perfección, la página de la que ninguna palabra puede ser alterada sin daño, es la más precaria de todas. Los cambios del lenguaje borran los sentidos literales y los matices; la página ‘perfecta’ es la que consta de esos delicados valores y la que con facilidad mayor se desgasta” (*Obras completas* I: 216). A text’s formal perfection at the moment of production can be determined, detected, and even, perhaps, produced, but there is no telling whether a language’s subsequent development will preserve the formal characteristic of perfection to which the literary text initially conformed. Ironically, the unrelenting evolution of language destroys perfect writing more than it does other types of discourse. Other, imperfect pages live on by some mysterious power: “la página que tiene vocación de inmortalidad puede atravesar el fuego de las erratas, de las versiones aproximativas, de las distraídas lecturas, de las incomprensiones, sin dejar el alma en la prueba” (*Obras completas* I: 216). He goes on to characterize the translations of *Don Quijote* as ghosts haunted by the Spanish text, attesting to the life of the original with lives of their own, “el fantasma aleman o escandinavo o indostánico del Quijote” (*Obras completas* I: 216). Borges implies that wise writers do not strive for perfection but resign themselves to the hope that some mysterious quality in their work might live on, nurtured by an unforeseen imbalance in the work. Perfect works will surely become imperfect, while imperfect works have the chance for survival that is often, superstitiously, ascribed to works praised as perfect.

In a final paragraph of “La supersticiosa ética del lector,” Borges remarks that he has reread what he wrote, suggesting once more that he had this essay in mind when he wrote the prologue to *La invención*. It occurs to him that, in contrast to music and architecture or sculpture (mármol), “la literatura es un arte que sabe profetizar aquel tiempo en que habrá enmudecido, y encarnizarse con la propia virtud y enamorarse de la propia disolución y cortejar su fin” (*Obras completas* I: 217).
Only when Borges becomes a reader of his own writing does he arrive at his most general formulation. In its “saber profetizar” (Obras completas I: 217), literature anticipates the reader’s journey; it foresees how the reader will pass from ignorance to knowledge of a work, in the same way the text passes from initial publication to incorporation into the canon. But it also anticipates its own disappearance; the very forces that make a work immortal foretell its passage into translation and new editions, a sort of end—transformation into an Other—that amounts to its survival. Prefatory texts, as I have pointed out, are peculiar, but so is the exceptional writing known as literature. Reading the prologue to La invención de Morel with “La supersticiosa ética del lector” claims that perfection leaves room for improvement, since the perfect inevitably becomes imperfect and the imperfect survives intact.

Genette also says that prefaces offer guidance for understanding the work, and Borges’s prologue provides this, too. His description of Bioy’s novel as “imaginación razonada” (vii), like the attribution of perfection, gives the reader a general orientation toward the book, considering the interplay of reason and fantasy, the way fantasy is guided by rationality rather than mere whimsy. He provides similar instructions, in fact, when he indicates that Bioy Casares’s departures from reality are limited to a single “postulado fantástico” (vii). Readers will be attentive to this, waiting for the revelation that fits the pieces together. Borges reinforces his judgment by claiming to have read the book twice (“la he releído”; vii), the second time to confirm that what leads up to the revelation does not stray from the book’s overall architecture. Guidance does not limit itself to identifying beforehand the dynamic of the work, but also provides clues to its understanding. Borges’s prologue prepares us for Bioy’s poetics, but also for his ideas. Returning a second time to the prologue’s beginning, readers will note that it presents itself as an explicitly philosophical argument, a polemic against claims that the possibilities for narrative invention are on the verge of exhaustion. Even more than before, Borges adopts a philosophical stance, going so far as to acknowledge at one point his commitment to both theoretical and empirical argumentation (“he alegado un motivo de orden intelectual; hay otros de carácter empírico”; vi). Borges summarizes José Ortega y Gasset’s claim that a novel focused on unforeseen events has lost its appeal to serious readers, quoting specific pages he attributes to La deshumanización del arte: “es muy difícil que hoy quepa inventar
una aventura capaz de interesar a nuestra sensibilidad superior” (qtd. in Prólogo, v). Its theme suggests and I can confirm that the quote comes from Ideas sobre la novela, although a 1925 edition combines these two texts, making this a matter of bibliographic imprecision or oversight rather than an outright error. Borges reiterates, integrating a reference to the title at hand along with another quote from Ortega: “esa invención ‘es prácticamente imposible’” (v). Borges says that he and the author of La invención de Morel “disienten,” that they disagree with the renowned Spanish man of letters, and that this prologue has the task of summarizing “los motivos de ese disentimiento” (v).

Borges begins with a simple, if not simplistic, empirical argument: he names a series of authors and books that manage to catch the interest of what Ortega y Gasset refers to as an “sensibilidad superior” (qtd. in Prólogo v), like Borges’s own. A double irony operates here, since neither the form nor the content of the argument would satisfy an empiricist. Borges names a series of contemporary novels, as if a simple display of an adequate number of specimen could disprove the extinction of inventive, intellectually satisfying fiction. In fact, naming The Turn of the Screw, Der Prozess, and Le Voyageur sur la terre along with Bioy Casares’s novel could put into question Borges’s sensibility instead of establishing definitively the fact that interesting novels continue to be written. His first two examples are indeed canonical writers—Henry James and Franz Kafka—although they are certainly not thought of as writers of adventure stories. Written in French by the American expatriate Julien Green, Le Voyageur has not really stood the test of time; it tells of a young man in a university town in the United States South who appears to have committed suicide. Though the motive remains elusive, he may have been possessed by a spirit, insane, hounded to death by a ghost, or simply the victim of a cruel joke on the part of a fellow student. Choosing three examples of writers with a tension between linguistic and political identity (James being an American in Great Britain and Kafka a German-speaking Jew in the heart of Bohemia), Borges seems to dare posterity to deny these writers canonical status. Still, although an empirical argument appears to suffice to dismiss Ortega’s assertion that the novel is in its death throes, Borges makes a much more compelling theoretical argument.

Borges attacks Ortega on two fronts. The first involves the way, for Ortega, the psychological novel displaces and kills off the adventure
Borges acknowledges the philosophical value of the psychological novel, saying that “los rusos y los discípulos de los rusos han demostrado hasta el hastío que nadie es imposible” (v). Restricting it to the realm of fictional characters, on whom the psychological novel concentrates its effort, Borges says that all human types have been represented in literary “informes” (v). Moreover, the psychological novel, with its aspiration to realism, encourages “vana precisión” by justifying it as “verosímil” (vi). In contrast to the pretended contribution to documenting human diversity, Borges and Bioy propose the “intrínseco rigor” of the adventure novel: “es un objeto artificial que no sufre ninguna parte injustificada” (vi). If science is defined by the rigor of its method rather than its subject matter, the adventure novel is more serious than psychology. Borges’s pronouncement might seem, on a first reading, to disparage the psychological novel, but the reader familiar with La invención de Morel will recognize the format of the “informe” and, with a little effort, the plot. “Nadie es imposible,” Borges says, and he gives the following examples: “suicidas por felicidad, asesinos por benevolencia, delatores por fervor o por humildad” (v). While Borges suggests that this investigative quality might be burdensome in the psychological novel, he acknowledges that it can also exist in other novels. Both the narrator and Morel, after all, commit suicide to spend eternity with Faustine. Morel kills a group of his own friends in the conviction that they will relive the week of happy leisure ad infinitum. His act can be understood as both humble and authoritarian, as he asks for neither reward from his beneficiaries nor permission from his victims. Borges thus insists that psychology in itself fails to provide the key to innovation in the novel. 3 If La invención deserves our interest and exemplifies invention in general, it does so in spite of its repetition of psychological themes supposedly exhausted by “los rusos y los discípulos de los rusos” (vi). Such a fearless approach to repetition or appropriation of previously used plots should not surprise those familiar with Borges’s Historia universal de la infancia, with its retelling of stories whose source material is openly acknowledged in an “Índice de las fuentes” (Obras completas I: 337).

The rigor of the “novela de peripecias” distances it from the childishness that Ortega attributes to it (v), for it requires a degree of technical mastery that Borges does not see in Proust, the novelist whom Ortega championed as “el hecho literario de mayor trascendencia en este tiempo último” (qtd. in Craig 452). In an apparent joke, Borges
says, “hay páginas, hay capítulos de Marcel Proust que son inaceptables como invenciones: a los que, sin saberlo, nos resignamos como a lo insípido y ocioso de cada día” (vi). Instead of engaging in a direct critique of the mimetic ideal of literature, Borges pushes it to its logical limit, or rather, claims that Proust does so by creating a work whose imitation of life integrates its most negligible and tedious moments. Proust becomes like Funes el Memorioso, who on two or three occasions reconstructs an entire day in his memory before realizing that, since he must devote a whole day to such a project, he has better things to do (Obras completas I: 523). In contrast to the resignation Borges associates with the psychological novel à la Proust, the adventure novel inspires the reader and solicits attention to every last detail.

Nonetheless, Borges’s reading of La invención not only makes it an example of psychological insight but also a participant in philosophical debates. Although Ortega was on his way to being considered the foremost Spanish philosopher of the twentieth century, his expert philosophical opinion coincided not only with the opinion of Robert Louis Stevenson but with the common, public, low-brow point of view that Ortega so famously disdained in La España inveterada. In short, the idea that “there is nothing new under the sun” (in the words of Ecclesiastes) is itself hardly original, and Ortega’s attempt to use philosophy to steer the novel towards psychology appears to offer a naïve, scientific solution for an age-old literary problem. Later in the prologue, Borges connects the novel laconically to two ancient philosophers, and an essayist and a poet from the nineteenth century. After recalling his intention to avoid giving away the plot, Borges says, “Bástemme declarar que Bioy renueva literariamente un concepto que San Agustín y Orígenes refutaron, que Louis Aguste Blanqui razonó y que dijo con música memorable Dante Gabriel Rossetti . . .” (vii). Minimal research will turn up Augustine’s and Origen’s interest in reincarnation and Blanqui’s discussion of the idea of eternal return in L’Eternité par les astres. We can imagine a reader, or a rereader, bringing this new information to bear on the interpretation of the novel, and on the prologue, where the idea of a soul’s return is echoed in the first line of the Rossetti verse, “I have been here before” (vii). Bioy’s novel “renueva . . . un concepto” (vii), says Borges, that has been both refuted and supported by philosophers. Borges follows the convention of providing an interpretation by way of a conceptual indication. Again, this lends the novel a seriousness that
ought not be associated with other adventure novels, probably, at least, novels like *Treasure Island*. In doing so, he implies that innovation is renovation, a certain kind of repetition from a past already constituted by a series of inventive reiterations. Moreover, Borges surely noticed that this reiteration was simultaneously the theme and its manifestation. The theme of return speaks about the very thing it performs.

The rhapsodic function of Borges’s prologue—centered on canonicity and perfection—overlaps with the exegetical function, attributing to Bioy a defense of inventive narrative and the theme of cyclical time. Likewise, the prologue could be taken as a kind of manifesto. Genette includes the preface-manifesto within his typology, citing Oscar Wilde’s *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and Joseph Conrad’s preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* (228–29). Indeed, in “Borges: Una teoría,” Emir Rodríguez Monegal asserts just such a status for the prologue to *La invención*, noting that it appears at the end of a period of reflection embodied in the essays of *Discusión* and *Historia de la eternidad* and preceding the appearance of the groundbreaking *Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (183). It is at least ironic that Borges should have defined his own fictional practice in the course of introducing another writer’s work. For Rodríguez Monegal, the prologue lays out the fundamental Borgesian approach to writing, “a theory,” as his subtitle indicates, that will henceforth ground Borges’s practice: “todo es ficción y entre la simulación psicológica o realista es preferible el rigor, la lucidez, la causalidad mágica de la literatura fantástica” (189). For Rodríguez Monegal, Borges’s polemic with Ortega points out the artificiality of psychology and realism, in general, and maintains the superiority of fantastical artificiality. The assertion that “todo es ficción” finds little justification in the prologue to *La invención*, although Borges’s casual mix of literary and philosophical references might point in that direction. In any case, not only has the prefatory text become a part of the novel; providing its guiding poetics as a sort of manifesto, the prologue would seem to escape the orbit of the text proper, functioning independently as a blue- print to Borges’s writing, and possibly that of a larger circle of Argentine and Latin American writers.

It would be no exaggeration to say that Rodríguez Monegal celebrates Borges’s elimination of the difference between literature and philosophy in the proposition that “todo es ficción.” He even suggests that Borges’s assertion provided a basic premise for French postwar
thought (189). However, Borges’s prologue does not make this claim, staging, instead, an encounter between a particular fiction and a philosophical debate about invention and knowledge, asserting along the way that La invención already, in advance of its prologue, combines imagination and reason in a unique, innovative way. Such a hybrid discourse does not eliminate the difference between the enunciation of the prologue and the novel, although it certainly ought to motivate us to question this difference. If fiction has a potential for engaging in philosophical debates, the prologue represents the direct, predicative mode of what the novel, by definition, must intertwine with fantasy and indirection. Genette’s survey of paratexts not only renders explicit the common features of prefaces but also calls attention to the inherent strangeness of prefaces’ liminal character, struggling with its commitment to originality and commentary, attempting to claim significance for its apparently superfluous status. Borges’s prologue largely conforms to conventions, discussing real people and working in an argumentative, at times laudatory, discourse. In order to reckon, then, with the other inventive elements, I would like to turn to another touchstone for the theory of the prologue.

As indicated by the title listed in the table of contents to Dissemination, “Outwork, prefacing” and the long list of near synonyms that appear as a title before the English text, Jacques Derrida opens his book with a strange rumination on the place and function of prefatory discourses.” Genette’s characterization of “Outworks” as a “self-referential” preface fails to appreciate the wide implications of the piece, questioning the privilege of consciousness for interpretation and the very philosophy of reflection that grounds this privilege.10 Derrida surveys a number of autographic prologues to philosophical and literary works and presents a number of clear formulations that constitute a theory of the preface; moreover, he ties his inquiry to the larger concerns of his oeuvre. But beyond these conventional prefatory gestures, “Outworks” serves as an occasion to question the relationship between primary and secondary, autonomous and ancillary, inventive and synthetic texts. Indeed, Derrida explicitly disavows a prefatory intention: “This is not a preface, at least not if by preface we mean a table, a code, an annotated summary of prominent signifieds, or an index of key words or of proper names” (8). Although “Outworks” mentions key terms discussed in the other essays in Derrida’s oeuvre and in Dissemination,
in particular—including “dissemination,” “double science/session,” the “pharmakon,” and “deconstruction”—this prologue does not represent a neutral summation of previous achievements. Ironically, this warning still fulfills Genette’s axiom that a prologue strives to “get the book read properly” (197). After discussing the prefatory gestures in Lautréamont’s Les Chants de Maldoror, Derrida offers a dramatically different definition than the one Genette derives from his examples: “the preface, a synthetic mode of exposition, a discourse of themes, theses and conclusions, here as always precedes the analytic text of invention, which will in fact have come before it but which cannot, for fear of remaining unreadable, present or teach itself on its own” (38). In spite of his earlier renunciation of this prefatory gesture, Derrida indeed recapitulates the three essays of Dissemination in “Outwork” while calling attention to a paratextual convention that, rather than providing a sober enabling function, creates a somewhat perverse illocutionary situation. The writer composes the preface after the work proper and places the later text at the beginning; in addition, what ought to serve the primary work actually preempts it.

Hence the “essential and ludicrous operation” that says to the reader “you have not yet begun to read” (7). Derrida is no more deterred than Borges from facing the “tarea casi imposible” mentioned in the epilogue to the Libro de arena (Obras completas III: 82). Rather, the former develops the notion of a “double writing” or “double science” that inhabits conventional or institutional systems as the condition of possibility for their destruction. The beginning of “Outwork” proposes that the volume Dissemination might contribute to the “dismantling” of the book (3) and acknowledges that the “deconstruction of philosophy” must remain in a sense a “philosophical discourse” (4); this (non)preface repeats the classical features of the preface in order to account for and question the premises of the preface. “Outwork” operates as a preface in order to practice a double writing that marks an inside and outside of a “deconstructed system” that shapes our understanding of signification in general (4). The stakes of deconstruction, then, are not limited to an apparently restricted theme such as the preface, but the entire range of philosophical inquiry and its consequences for the theoretical sciences and political practice.

Derrida pays equal attention to literature and philosophy in “Outwork” because in both cases the preface implies an exemption
from the struggle with meaning characteristic of philosophical and literary work, as if the prologue did not also need a kind of presentation to make it readable. The preface ceases to be only a convention and instead becomes apposite to a kind of double writing: “The question of the preface, of the double inscription or double-jointed-ness of such a text: its semantic envelopment within the book—the representative of a Logos or Logic (ontotheology and absolute knowledge)—and the left-overness [restance] of its textual exteriority” (44). The preface represents the preaced work, but it also functions as an indicator of the work’s irreducible relation to an outside or Other. In “Signature, Event, Context,” one of his more programmatic works, Derrida describes the sense in which “there is no outside the text,” by distinguishing “general writing” from the conventional idea of writing as a record of possible speech. “Everything is writing” because all phenomenality presumes the essential traits of writing: all experience, communication, and writing in its restricted sense must always already include a “mark that subsists” apart from consciousness; it must be capable of reiteration without complete loss of its signifying function; and it must include an element of “spacing” that sets it apart as a meaningful unit in a signifying chain (9). In Derrida’s philosophical examples from “Outworks,” prefatory texts—works that are outside of works, or outworks—reiterate what needs no repetition, acquiescing to conventions but finding, also, something to add to what was already complete in itself. The literary prefaces, on the other hand, question the authority of the passage from imagination to argumentation or creation to commentary. Prefatory texts double, Derrida says: they repeat the work with the pretense of introducing it in terms that guide and inspire an eventual reader. But this doubling necessarily reveals that the author and the text are never themselves; they remark the lack of autonomy and originality that, traditionally at least, justify their presentation in the first place.

Borges knew about the troubled relationship between identity and invention, and the best work on his oeuvre has grappled with a need to describe Borges’s singularity in relation to his vast project of appropriation. In the prologue to La invención de Morel, this problem makes an appearance via the various types of double writing. I have noted the discursive features that differ from the first reading to the second of the very same text. Examples of psychological inquiries that contribute to Borges’s the polemic against the psychological novel, turn
out to be features of *La invención de Morel*. Furthermore, a cluster of laconic allusions, on rereading, identifies the motif of cyclical time. *La invención’s* unreliable narrator assures himself that the words of his diary “permanecerán invariables” (11), but Borges’s prologue reminds us that texts do not remain identical. Firstly, he explicitly reminds his readers that he has read the text with an interest and eagerness that Ortega had declared all but impossible, before rereading it with attention to the traits that justify his declaration of its perfection. Secondly, in the prologue he encodes statements whose meanings change after reading *La invención*. Though his insistence on citing titles in their original languages might seem like a nod to the authority of the author’s imprimatur, Borges’s departure from English and French conventions regarding capitalization of titles reminds us of the subtle changes that texts undergo through quotation. It might also be said that Borges’s insistence on his close relationship with Bioy accomplishes a kind of doubling that lends his allographic prologue all the interpretive authority of an autographic one, while allowing enough distance to include effective praise for the author.

Borges’s prologue inscribes the novel within a tradition that includes philosophy and literature, a process that Bioy engages from the book’s title onward. Suzanne Jill Levine has analyzed the novel’s echoes of H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and “a whole tradition of utopic island literature” (17), noting veiled allusions to Montesquieu (22) and Twain (25n4). Considering the abundance of literary and philosophical allusions in the novel, and the narrator-protagonist’s classical belief in the immortality conferred by writing, Levine’s characterization of Bioy’s world as “a bookish reality” (25n4) seems to justify her agreement with Rodríguez Monegal that Borges anticipates the “French” critique of philosophy.¹² Borges’s prologue, however, should be seen as an intensification of what the novelist himself began, quoting passages from Ortega to Santiago Dabove so that *La invención* might be quoted in its turn by world-renowned philosophers and local writers whose work has been “olvidado con injusticia” (vii). Each of the references in the prologue provides a new context within which the authors and their work receives at least an implicit interpretation, sometimes departing from the conventional reading, as when James’s and Kafka’s works are read as “novelas de peripecias” (v).
These interpretations, moreover, vary for readers who do and do not yet have familiarity with *La invención*. Ortega appears less obnoxious, less tyrannical in light of the psychological features of Borges’s novel. One pauses, even dwells on the qualifying adverbs in quotations from Ortega—“es muy difícil . . .,” “es prácticamente imposible” (qtd. in Prólogo v)—wondering whether Borges intended to suggest that narrative invention could be easy and abundant if writers embraced rigorous artifice. The slight misattribution of the Ortega quotes points out the irony of the Spanish philosopher’s engagement with art and literature: although he diagnoses increasingly calculated, inhuman procedures in the arts, he foresees a future for narrative only in a return to the human in psychology. Borges and his friend Bioy, by contrast, insist that invention occurs through careful, reasoned construction in light of the ideas and models of predecessors. Such a procedure could also be called impersonal, or even, to use the term that Ortega preferred, dehumanized. Indeed, if we look for an index of the equation of the author not with his flesh and blood but with his written words, the prologue to *La invención* offers it in the rigorous avoidance of providing both titles of works and the names of authors. Instead, for example, we find mention of *Las fuerzas extrañas* but not of Leopoldo Lugones, of Marcel Proust but not of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Writing acts like Morel’s device, turning people into an archival record of their own lives.

Borges does not explain how invention happens. He only speculates on the conditions in which a writer might produce something truly original. In addition, he argues and provides evidence that inventive writing continues to appear, even in what he calls, with an irony for which he has prepared us, “este siglo que no puede inventar argumentos” (vi). He praises Bioy for inventing mysteries and resolving them, but the enigma of invention does not admit solution. Borges’s prologue asks, in the most conventional way, how we can explain *La invención*. Normally, one does so by referring to the brilliance of the author and the intricacy, originality or timelessness of the work’s meaning. But Borges also raises the question, how can we account for *la invención*? We might even read a slight multilingual pun into the title, “the invention of more,” and ask, how do we account for ongoing, persistent, rather than diminishing invention? Let me note that the three privileged titles he evokes in the prologue are all, strictly speaking, inconclusive stories. *Le Voyageur sur terre* fails to determine whether
Daniel O’Donovan went insane or was driven to suicide by ghosts. *The Turn of the Screw* will even serve the theorist of the fantastic Tzvetan Todorov as an example of “texts which sustain their ambiguity to the very end, i.e., even beyond the narrative itself” (43). In his gloss, the novella “does not permit us to determine finally whether ghosts haunt the old estate, or whether we are confronted by the hallucinations of a hysterical governess victimized by the disturbing atmosphere which surrounds her” (43). *Der Prozess*, for its part, never enlightens the reader or Josef K. about the charges brought against him. We may even wonder whether they are not a tawdry prosecutorial conspiracy or paranoid fantasy which engulf his life and seem to bring about his death. *La invención de Morel* seems to leave readers with clarity as to the origins of the narrator-protagonist’s confusion and his means of resolving his dilemmas. The solution turns out to have been announced in the very title of the novel. Between the covers of this book, then, the work that most resembles the three novels’ “argumentos” is Borges’s prologue.

By following the conventions, a prologue approximates a literary work to philosophy and begins to appropriate it for a philosophical discourse of proposition and argument. While Borges fulfills this convention in his prologue to *La invención de Morel*, he performs other discursive gestures that emphasize the prologue’s collusion with literary texts, with their indirection, attention to language, inscription in an oeuvre and a tradition, and their responsiveness to rereading. We should be careful not to overstate Borges’s accomplishment, as if a single writer could overthrow the millennial institutional division between literature and philosophy in the double writing of his prologues. Instead, the prologue to *La invención* asserts the possibility of inscribing literature into philosophy, and vice versa, and thus discovers not only what literature has to gain from philosophy but what philosophy has to learn from literature. Borges implicitly accepts invention as a part of philosophy, going so far as to entertain the idea that metaphysics is “una rama de literatura fantástica” (*Obras completas* I: 467). But Borges has always insisted on his commitment to the mysterious inventiveness of literature, even when apparently constrained by the conventions of the prologue.

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NOTES

1 Although this prologue appears in the Obras completas (IV: 28–30), I will refer throughout to the version included in a common, recent edition of the novel.

2 In an article that sets out to expound a Borgesian theory of the prologue, Walter Bruno Berg makes much of Borges’s playful proposal to write a “series of prologues to books that never existed,” concluding that Borges teaches us that no literary text actually exists. Therefore, a Borges prologue, above all else, presents itself as a (literary) text in its own right: “no es—en una palabra—un metatexto sino un texto literario independiente y autónomo (con respecto al texto que le sirve de prólogo)” (129). As I will demonstrate in a detailed analysis of several prologues, Borges indeed expresses a desire to preserve a certain autonomy of effect for the literary text. But my analysis will also show that the prologue works on two levels and offers at least two readings, before and after the prefaced text has been read. While it is true that the prologues assume a sort of literariness that puts their very existence into question, Borgesian literariness can hardly be said to be characterized by autonomy and independence. Rather, literature constitutes itself by combining invention with a network of historical and cultural references and linguistic raw material. Any particular text, in fact, is practically nothing without other texts.

3 Although it refers to contemporary Spanish examples in the introduction, A. Porqueras Mayo’s El prólogo como género literario deliberately focuses on the Spanish Golden Age, relying not only on observation about the prologue’s characteristics, but also on definitions from the Diccionario de la Real Academia Española and the author’s own intuition (47). Porqueras Mayo asserts that “los prólogos son más importantes en España que en otros países, porque nuestra literatura está atravesada, como ha sido tantas veces demostrado, por una constante veta popular” (15). Genette’s wide-ranging study certainly documents the variety and the importance of prologues outside of Spain, including the European and Anglo-American canon, with a few examples of Latin American literature, from the classical period to the 1970s.

In a recent article, Eva Alvarez Ramos confirms the basic characteristics outlined by Genette by a survey of canonical Hispanic autographic prologues. Compared to Genette, Alvarez Ramos’s study fails to capture the variety of prefatory practices, but it also highlights the unconventional aspects of Borges’s prologue to La invención. In spite of the predominance of examples by Miguel de Unamuno, and although she certainly makes interesting parallels between conventional twentieth-century prologues and classical rhetoric, she shows no interest in the uncanniness of the prologue.

Berg dismisses Genette’s study for considering the prologue as “un fenómeno de mera técnica—en vez de teoría” (128). Though Paratexts may often seem a mere enumeration of frequent characteristics of canonical texts, it serves as an effort to determine the particularity of the preface as a discursive form. Such, at least, is a perfectly legitimate theoretical definition of theory.
4 I preserve the use of upper- and lower-case letters as it is in the Penguin edition. In the *Obras completas*, the printing is slightly different for the first and last titles, though still with imperfect application of the conventions for capitalization in the English title and the French title: *The turn of the Screw . . . Le Voyageur sur la Terre* (*Obras completas* IV: 29).

5 Daniel Bautista's perceptive reading of the unit formed by Borges's prologue and Bioy's novel equates, unfortunately, an attack on the psychological novel, or, rather, on its importance for the future of the novel, with a dismissal of all psychological elements of fiction. Thus he finds Borges's example of “suicidas por felicidad” merely ironic (408), part of the way in which the meaning of Bioy and Borges's art, like Morel's, “escape (their) intentions” (413). In light of “La supersticiosa ética del lector,” we can see a true irony: that Borges was aware of the way texts escape the intentions of the writer, and tried, nonetheless, to fill them with all kinds of determinate textual mechanisms, like the references in the prologue that only become apparent on rereading. More directly, Borges begins his prologue to Ana María Barrenechea's book about him by saying that it “has taught [him] many things about himself. . . . [T]here are many things in an author's work not intended and only partially understood by him” (vii).

6 This is Ortega's express purpose in the *Envío* (that is, in the preface) of *Ideas sobre la novela*, the work that Borges actually quotes in the prologue to *La invención*, while attributing the words to *La deshumanización del arte*.

7 Ana María Barrenechea's chronology of Borges's work does not support the story that Rodríguez Monegal tells of the emergence of an innovative fantastical literature, whose practice coincides with the pronouncement of “imaginación razonada” in the prologue. See Barrenechea 14–15.

8 In addition to Rodríguez Monegal, a series of critics have treated Borges and Bioy as a single signifying unit. Bautista gives a useful gloss of Hebe Monge's Introduction to the Coloquio edition of the novel, describing its standard interpretation “in terms of the same 'universal' or metaphysical themes that characterize much of Borges's own work” (405). It is also noteworthy that, although one might expect all but autographic prologues to be updated from one edition to the next, and substituted for others in translation, editions of *La invención* invariably include Borges's prologue before the novel.

Borges mentions contemporaries Santiago Dabovich and Leopoldo Lugones in his prologue, and one could certainly include the co-editor of the *Antología de literatura fantástica*, Silvina Ocampo, in a close circle of associates. It is, of course, commonplace to consider the genre of the fantastic characteristic of Latin American narrative in the mid-twentieth century. For a review of authors for whom Borges's “teoría de lo fantástico” would be formative, see Cynthia Duncan (1–11).

9 This is not a feature of *La Dissemination*, in which the title preceding the texts, “Hors livre: préfaces,” matches word for word the one in the table of contents, by French convention listed at the end of the book.
In *The Tain of the Mirror*, Rodolphe Gasché has carefully critiqued the conventional caricatures of Derrida and deconstruction as heightened critical self-reflection, radical skepticism, and negation of philosophical universality in the name of the polysemia of (literary) writing. More recently, Audrey Wasser’s *The Work of Difference* reminds us that such an interpretation of Derrida owes much to the Romantic notion of self-reflection that accompanied the formation of literary studies as a discipline in the nineteenth century.

To name only a few outstanding examples, Ronald Christ’s study of Borges’s allusions, Sylvia Molloy’s account of Borges’s culture, and David Johnson’s readings of Borges’s philosophers manage to illuminate the connection between the man’s vast learning and his literary invention.

In *Unthinking Thinking*, Floyd Merrill notes Barrenechea’s claim that Borges’s impression of mastery gives way to a larger relinquishment of knowledge of the universe (xi). The doubling implied by his intriguing title ought not be limited by the ambiguity he draws out of it: “It implies either the project of unthinking traditional Western thought, or, paradoxically, thinking without there being any accompanying process of thought (an inevitably abortive attempt by sheer intellecction to approach a mystical insight)” (x). By focusing on physics, logic, and mathematics, Merrill aligns Borges with positivist relinquishment of metaphysics in favor of science, rather than a Derridean inquiry into the possibility and impossibility of the metaphysical tradition. Whatever the merits of that approach, Merrill’s hunch that Borges’s “denial of any and all interpretations” resembles Derrida, betrays an excessively negative notion of deconstruction (xiii).

Citing Derrida, Levine refers to Lévi-Strauss’s characterization of science as a “myth,” implying a simple negation of its pretense to objectivity (20). Later, she refers to the apparent mockery in Bioy’s *Plan de evasión* and in Borges and Bioy’s collaborations of “the pseudo-concepts of the original and of authorship” (24). Although we might accept, with Rodríguez Monegal, that literary men anticipated post-structuralist critiques of traditional grounds for interpretation, none of these concepts is simply false or dispensable. Indeed, a certain adherence to the idea of original creation inscribed in the proper names Borges and Bioy, in addition to some implicit criteria of validity, remain important enabling concepts for literary studies in the wake of French post-structuralism.

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