



Puentes

Real fictions: Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine

Victoria Pérez Royo

Every dream is a prophecy;
every joke an earnest intention in the womb of time.
Father Keegan, 1904, in *Chronicles of Bustos Domecq*

Ramon Bonavena, in his masterpiece of six volumes, *North-Northeast*, describes the corner of his desk with an extreme thoroughness. His accuracy is such that just the description of his pencil takes him 29 pages. Lambkin Formento, with a similar eagerness for excessive precision -though applied to another field of work- was the creator of a literary critique he defined as perfect: one that coincides word-for-word with the analyzed poem. In this way, he published a description of *The Divine Comedy* that exactly matched the original. Nierenstein Souza created books in another manner: assuming the changeable character of oral literature, he decided to stop writing and to devote himself to telling stories. It didn't matter whether they were good or bad, since the subsequent narrations and time would take care of selecting, improving, and even writing them.

These are some of the literary fantasies that Borges and Bioy Casares devised in their unforgettable book, *Chronicles of Bustos Domecq* (1967). Among them, the final pages of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) could have perfectly been included: the description of a society of thousands of individuals spread-out and connected all over the country, in which each one of its members has memorized a classic book word-for-word. These people assume the names of the book's author (Schopenhauer, Byron, Pablo, Marco), or of its title (*The Republic*). Although the context in which both texts were written and the intentions differ substantially, it is worth linking them in order to create a possible framework within which to think about the project *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*. In this, Mette Edvardsen makes Bradbury's utopia real: an increasing number of people dedicate themselves to the individual task of memorizing a book of their choice. This activity, as a project presented and developed for festivals and similar encounters, is practiced intermittently, with intensive periods of work that involves several weeks of residency and a presentation. At the moment there are 30 book-persons and in seven languages (English, French, Arabic, Spanish, Dutch, Norwegian, Greek). The participants of the project are in a library, a bookshop, or a café, memorizing their books, prepared to be read by any visitor; that is, to recite the whole book or the part they have memorized up to that moment. This project is certainly ambitious: it is very far away from any pragmatism, and its initial impulse departs from a utopian image, a fiction conceived as such, not as a feasible project.

In this sense, it is worth continuing with fictional tales in order to be able to approach such a singular project that relates much more easily to that, rather than to the usual sorts of art pieces. Borges, in *Averroes's Search* (1947), imagines the philosopher trying to figure out the meaning of two mysterious terms: comedy and tragedy, which he has discovered in

an Aristotelian text he is commenting upon. Borges allows western readers to observe how Averroes, inserted as he was in the Arabic culture of Spain in the 12th century, is blind to the forms of theatre that actually surround him. While he is puzzled and meditating over these two terms, three children are playing in the backyard, simulating the call to prayer. The other information that goes unnoticed to Averroes comes during a dinner with some friends in which the traveller, Abulcasim, participates. He is asked to describe a wonder he has seen on his multiple adventures, and decides to relate a visit he made to a wooden house in which he observed that the inhabitants "suffered prison, but no one could see the jail; they travelled on horseback, but no one could see the horse; they fought, but the swords were of reed; they died and then stood up again" (Borges, 1947:126). Borges refers to a theatre that is clearly based on representation and that does not correspond with some trends in the making of contemporary performing arts. Less than a decade after the writing of that text there would be a convergence between the performing and visual arts that would transform both fields. Experimental theatre and performance have since been less oriented to the representation of fictions than to the creation of real situations and experiences for performers and for audiences. The work in the performance field is not understood as the organisation of signs to be deciphered hermeneutically, but as the display of a situation that allows for experience and for the transformation of the participants. It is a theatre in which the performers do not carry out actions that mean 'to learn a book by heart', but propose actions that consist of executing, in an effective way, what they signify. When we see Kristien Van den Brande memorizing *Bartleby the scrivener*, she is doing exactly that: memorizing *Bartleby the scrivener*. There is no second degree of interpretation and formalization. And herein lies one of the most interesting dimensions of this project: the radicality of assuming a utopia of science fiction (written as something imaginable but not feasible) as a score for real practice. And this practice is precisely the producer of an experience worth going through, both for the reader (spectator) and for the book (performer).

Through the activity of the reader, some of the conditions of traditional reading are preserved: a quiet place is offered in which concentration is possible. The reader decides the moment to start reading, provided the book is not already *borrowed*. But in the displacement and reconception of reading that this project proposes, new conditions arise: the book is not in the hands of the reader, but in front of her. The reading is constituted by the meeting of two people, by the co-presence of performer-spectator that characterizes the performing arts, in contrast to the solitude of a usual literary reception. Besides,

the moment of encounter is stronger here than in the case of the spectator being comfortably positioned in a row of seating, because the situation proposed in *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine is intimate*: the book has a voice and also a body. The spectator is not safe in the unidirectionality of her gaze, but is also subject to the gaze the book returns.

In the case of the book-person, a correlative transformation happens. The performer could be thought of, once again, as being at the service of a previously written text, as maybe was the case in the theatre that Averroes could not manage to imagine. But in the case of *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine*, the actor does not provide the text with an expression to represent it, but with a body to embody it. The task of the performer does not consist in facilitating the book's understanding and allowing for its transformation into decipherable signs that give an orientation to the reading for the audience, but in giving the book a body that takes it in, creating a reading that is detached from dramatization. The experience the book-persons go through in this project is extremely interesting, since it is precisely in their activity of memorizing a whole book where fiction becomes real, where the gulf of the impossibility of fantasy is bridged. In this process, it is possible to detect again transformations that may be better tackled with Borges's fictions.

A mind that could easily remember one of these books would be a mind similar to that of Ireneo Funes (*Funes the memorious*, 1942), whose vast memory "could not only remember each leaf of each tree of each mountain, but also the times he had perceived or imagined it" (Borges, 1942: 143). Luckily, human memory works in a much more imprecise and uncontrollable way, mixing remembrances from different periods, contaminating and transforming them, and jumping from one to another at the most unpredictable moments. This is the threat sensed by Hermann Soergel at a certain moment in his life. He is the fictional character of *Shakespeare's memory* (1983), an expert on the English dramaturge to whom an unexpected present is offered: to possess Shakespeare's memory, which he accepts. Soergel searches in vain for clear images that might bring him closer to the author, but the elusive character of memory does not allow it. He learns to wait for it, to discover remembrances in dreams or to let them surprise him in everyday actions. Instead of perceiving clear images, Soergel finds himself uttering strange words, or whistling unknown melodies. Little by little, Shakespeare's memory infiltrates Soergel's memory, superimposes itself upon it, conceals it, and starts transforming it. "The memory of man is not a *summa*: it is

a disorder of indefinite possibilities." Shakespeare's memory is so powerful that Soergel even starts forgetting his mother tongue, which makes him fear for his own identity and good sense, and finally causes him to pass this memory to an unknown man.

The books in *Time has fallen asleep in the afternoon sunshine* do not, of course, reach such extremes, but the tale reveals certain truths about the work of memory that shape the experience of memorizing a book. For example, Mette Edvardsen once commented that the language of the book had contaminated her usual verbal expression. The sentences of *Four Quartets* are always present in the mind of the person memorizing it, and continuously shapes his perception of everyday experience. All of the books in this project recall, somehow in Funes's way, the space or the weather at the time certain passages were being learned, or the times they were recited, or even the people that *have read them*. The task of memorizing a book cannot consist only of acquiring some external contents by inserting them into one's own memory, without further consequences. It necessarily implies embodying the contents, which means that the linguistic matter mixes, melts, and integrates with the whole physical and psychic functioning of the person, intermingling with their experiences, altering their remembrances as well as their way to remember, changing their language and their way of reading. But the best way to know is to ask the books personally after having read them. 

Victoria Pérez Royo
Berlin, 28 March 2013

References

- *Borges 1947: Jorge Luis Borges: El Aleph*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1998. (Trans. The Aleph and other stories)
- *Borges 1942: Jorge Luis Borges: Ficciones*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1998. (Trans. Ficciones)
- *Borges 1983: Jorge Luis Borges: Cuentos completos*, Barcelona: Lumen, 2011.
- *Bioy Casares / Borges 1967: Adolfo Bioy Casares / Jorge Luis Borges: Crónicas de Bustos Domecq*, Barcelona: Losada, 1998. (Trans. Chronicles of Bustos Domecq)