In Translation

“The Indefensible Story”

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Our admirable princess studied the duties of those who composed History with their life: there she insensibly lost the taste for novels and their colorless heroes; careful to attend to truth, she paid no heed to those dangerous and lifeless fictions.
—Bossuet, 1670[1]

One time, an Argentine girl proclaimed that she abhorred gossip and that she preferred the study of Marcel Proust; someone made her realize that Marcel Proust’s novels were gossip, that is (I belatedly clarify) private human news.
—Borges, 1935[2]

I

Gossip and the novel (or, less restrictively, the stories of fiction) have so frequently coincided in the indignation of serious minds and noble souls, that it does not seem unjustified to study the shared traits that made possible this coincidence.

Bossuet opposes the taste for novels to the virtue of looking for narrative passages in history. It is likely that he did not consider novels more dangerous than any other irrepressible stimulus of fantasy; in judging that these fictions lack life and their heroes are colorless, it is probable that he would not criticize the literary values of *Clélie* or of *Grand Cyrus* by Mademoiselle de Scudéry, or *L'Astrée* by Honoré d'Urfé; he denounced, rather, the fact that these stories were works of an idle imagination, satisfied by its capacity to string together invented mishaps, deriving pleasure from seeking that of the reader.

"The duties of those who composed History with their life," however, perhaps roused in Henrietta of England a curiosity not that different from that which gossip provokes in less distinguished children. The earliest hagiographies, as well as the courtly chronicles of Saint-Simon illustrate a conception of the historical tale articulated in two clearly differentiated tenses, although in the text they occasionally intertwine: in the first tense, events unfold with all the richness of trivial observations of conduct and transcriptions "of reality" whose oral reference is often deserving of the condemnation traditionally reserved for gossip; in the second, moral reflection or political philosophy cover for (justify) that inescapable foundation of respected authority.

But the story that tends to call itself with certain lightness "History" is, most of the time, historiography, and each era implements it according to the rules sanctioned for the novel form of that period.

Stevenson warned that there is only one art of narration, whether it applies to "the selection and illustration of a real series of events or of an imaginary series. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (…) owes its success to the same

technical maneuvers as (let us say) *Tom Jones*: the clear conception of certain characters of man, the choice and presentation of certain incidents out of a great number that are offered, and the invention (yes, invention) and preservation of a certain key in dialogue" (279).

The "truth" that gives so much dignity to history is scarcely the absence of contradiction between received versions of an incident; but no incident is immune to interpretation, nor can it elude its status as a function, whose value is modified according to the historical context of each new reading. The fictional story derives its hybrid condition, perhaps spurious, no doubt healthy, from being a mere "possibility." It situates itself at a distance both from the demonstrable chronicle, whose authority demands an irreproachable referentiality, as well as from the explicit game in which poetic language celebrates its autotelic properties. Fiction establishes a field of "as if," where language, precariously sustained between perfect transparency and absolute opacity, discovers a particular richness in such a vacillation.

Bossuet, unsympathetically impartial towards Cromwell, would not have been bothered by an involuntary run in with the Puritans. This disdain, the most spontaneous distrust of any verbal exercise that does not satisfy a practical end and seems to wear itself out in the pleasure of its repetition, has an illustrious genealogy in Western thought.

Almost two centuries after those Puritans had discovered a docile scene for their rigors in New England, one of their descendants wrote in the introduction to his novel:

> ...either of these stern and black-browed Puritans would have thought it quite a sufficient retribution for his sins, that, after so long a lapse of years, the old trunk of the family tree, with so much venerable moss upon it, should have borne, as its topmost bough, an idler like myself. No aim, that I have ever cherished, would they recognise as laudable; no success of mine- if my life, beyond its domestic scope, had ever been brightened by success- would

> they deem otherwise than worthless, if not positively disgraceful. "Where is he?" murmurs one grey shadow of my forefathers to the other. "A writer of story-books! What kind of a business in life—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!" Such are the compliments bandied between my great-grandsires and myself, across the gulf of time! (Hawthorne 9).

In such a social climate, Hawthorne decided to dedicate himself to literature. Henry James, in evoking this wasteland, not only laments that history does not deposit in its pages the sediment of customs or personal relations or language or landscape, he not only enumerates the many complexities that make quotidian life more dramatic and nuanced wherever disagreement makes its nest, where an ideal life that society should realize does not unanimously prevail; he imagines, as well, that in New England in the times of Hawthorne, there did not exist a considerable group of people that would aim to enjoy life:

> I say he must have proposed to himself to enjoy, simply because he proposed to be an artist, and because this enters inevitably into the artist's scheme. There are a thousand ways of enjoying life, and that of the artist is one of the most innocent. But for all that, it connects itself with the idea of pleasure. He proposes to give pleasure, and to give it he must first get it. Where he gets it will depend upon circumstances, and circumstances were not encouraging to Hawthorne. (James, *Hawthorne* 30).

Through his narrative method, Henry James, who almost certainly was unaware of the existence of Freud, had discovered that the field of the imagination forms the margin of the painful landscape between the "pleasure principle" and the "principle of reality," where the satisfactions that he needed to abandon in real life found compensation. Furthermore, the author of "The Private Life" also knew that even if the artist, like a neurotic, can retreat from

an unsatisfactory reality to the world of the imagination, unlike the neurotic, he recovers the solid terrain of reality: although his works, like dreams, may represent the imaginary satisfaction of unconscious desires, they are fabricated to interest and captivate; in order for pleasure to circulate, like an impalpable coin, between the ghostly figures of "sender" and "receiver." And what is gossip but the most modest circumstance in which the tale accomplishes this mission?

II

These tenacious critiques define a condemned space, the space of narration without any enlightening purpose; therefore, this plebeian, incipient form of literature (the esthetic anomaly of Rabelais, Cervantes, and Fielding; the popular entertainment, child of journalism, of Balzac and Dickens) that was the novel until Flaubert discovered for it rules no less strict than those of poetry; therefore, the space of the novel in how it connects with gossip. And, in the case of both, the space of women.

In English, the word *gossip* refers in an archaic sense to any woman, and also more precisely to the charlatan and the transmitter of news; another sense of the same word is the literary composition with free form about social people or incidents. (Stevenson titled one of his essays with this name). In French, the word *potin*, where *pot*, like pot in English, is extremely visible, derives from this kitchen utensil by way of *potine*, a term coined in Normandy for a portable stove women would bring to their winter meetings; from there, the verb *potiner*, or to speak around the *potine*, and finally the fruit of this conversation: the *potin*, or gossip.

In Spanish, the *Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada*, by Espasa Calpe— surely not irrefutable— ventures two quite attractive Germanic etymologies for "chisme": the first, a "razor"; the second, "woman's genitals". The first is not contradictory with the Latin *schisma* and the Greek *sxisma*, discord, dissension,

fissure, that is to say *schism*, from which *schizophrenia* comes. Both definitions accepted by the Real Academia are there, the transmitted story and the "insignificant recipient". The second denotation would coincide with the archaic sense of *gossip*, linking once more a transmitted tale with the female sex.

The thing is that woman, the "second" sex, "incomplete" or mutilated man, has always been seen as overwhelmed by the subjective part and the prohibited part man hurls far from himself. Medieval Christianity submits the woman to a double process: on the one hand, a glorification that dispenses with sex, or it disembodies sex through the system of courtly love. Nobility here has a double sense of moral quality and social condition and therefore the woman is identified, in a purely ideal sense, with the Virgin Mary. On the other hand, we have the denigration of the vulgar woman, turning her into a Witch.

At the start of the 20th century, Simmel summed it up admirably:

> Despite the slights and mistreatments, women, since primitive times, have always been object of a peculiar sentiment: the sentiment that they are not only women, that is, correlative entities of man, but rather something more altogether; and that in such a sense they should trade in hidden powers. They should be sibyls or witches, beings in sum capable of transmitting blessings or curses from their hidden cosmic bosoms; beings, therefore, that we should mystically revere, carefully avoid, or curse like demons.[3]

Michelet had described the condition of the vulgar woman in primitive times: she guards the fire and tends to children while the man makes war or practices hunting. In her ample free time, she studies the sky and the earth, the unstable forms of the clouds as well as the humble properties of the herbs and flowers. While her clear mind establishes relations between the phenomena of nature, close but foreign, memory recuperates legends bequeathed from mothers to

daughters, where the gods of pagan antiquity found a fragile but persistent survival: despite the ecclesiastic persecutions, in the 8th century European peasants still held processions in honor of those abolished gods, represented by crude dolls made of cloth or flour.

Indeed, the old belief survived as a story, a transmitted story, transformed in turn into a fairy tale. The woman rescued for herself the knowledge of that same nature that man combatted: *bella donna* is the thankful name given to the plant whose venom alleviated the pains of childbirth.

Soon, people did not know any other medicine than the one administered by *that* woman, the *bonne femme*, who would later receive the fearful denomination of "witch." And what is this witch if not a woman who would have empirically advanced in the study of homeopathy? "The emperors, kings, popes, and richer barons had indeed their doctors of Salerno, their Moors and Jews; but the bulk of people in every state, the world as it might well be called, consulted none but the Saga, or wise-woman" (Michelet 4).

There is a beautiful justice in this encounter of diverging etymologies in a similar form: the woman who knows, "la sabia," who later had to be the prudent one—*sage* from Latin's *sagio*, to discern—and the historic and mythological tale from Scandinavia, *saga* from the old Norwegian *saga*, to say...

Does Latin's *narrator* not contain *narus*, "he who knows," the same *gnarus* that is opposed to *ignarus*? (Faye).

It is also fair that gossip and the novel encounter one another once again as predicates of the woman: activity and reading as leisure that man needs but whose need he disdains, an object of ridicule because, obscurely, it is an object of dread. At the base of it, two recurring traits constantly stir: the transmission of the story, the activity that satisfies itself in the pleasure it procures. The tale is the fearsome vehicle of profane knowledge. Pleasure is the dangerous alchemy that the woman administers as Witch and ignores as Virgin.

III

Gossip is, first and foremost, a transmitted story. Something is told about someone, and that story is transmitted because either that someone or that something is exceptional: one could conceive of a trivial detail being told about someone prestigious, or something incredible about an unnoteworthy subject; gossip is rarely a banal detail about an unknown person, and it is also infrequent that a famous person and a fantastic feat coincide.

This disjuncture, however, is more plausible than verifiable. "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" Henry James asked himself, and his intricate novels, just like gossip, derive their value from a certain live, organic relationship between the elements that compose them, and that only the critical examination, a secondary instance, can isolate (*Partial Portraits* 392).

This is because the story of gossip is a story put on stage. Sender and receiver (in linguistic terms), narrator and narratee (in terms of literary theory), celebrate through gossip the ceremony of transmission of the tale; they visibly represent the relationship that the printed text bridges between an author and a reader, both absent. "Literature in many of its branches is no other than the shadow of good talk," observed Stevenson (145), and the novel, which would not have become the representative genre of modern times if it had not had the printing press at its service, sanctions the intersection of speech and writing: the materials of oral tales accept the authority of immutable text, which was refused to them, in the very moment in which the text, through mechanical reproduction, desacralizes that same authority (Kristeva 152).

The story could not breathe outside the precarious sphere of transit. Without tension between the terms that define its arc, incessantly impugned, successively reestablished, the narration would exhaust itself into an elegant dream of forms without risk. Walter Benjamin believed that tales are told only so that they could be repeated, that they stop being told when those

tales are not preserved and that if they are not preserved it's because, in hearing them, the weaving and spinning have stopped (Benjamin 5). Gossip participates in this transitory condition, a link in a chain whose other links repeat it only approximately. The story as purely transitory, gossip also puts on stage the impossibility of an identical repetition, the inevitability of an incessant transformation. Reproducing without change is unthinkable: a trace of insanity, the presence of death. The story, in transmitting itself, also installs a tension between continuity, whose persistence offers a warning about the margins of change while it exorcizes the threat of an identical repetition, and alteration, which in turn allows for the recognition of a continuous background, and to think about change and not about an absolute difference.

But these transformations that gossip puts on stage are not just those of all narratives when they are uttered. They are also the transformations of one single story in the process of its formation: what Henry James called "the noted inevitable deviation… that the exquisite treachery even of the straightest execution may ever be trusted to inflict even on the most mature plan" (*The Art of the Novel* 325)

The impossibility of "illustrating" this plan without altering it even minimally, without enriching it in the very act of "realizing it" through writing, illustrates the internal economy of the narrative event and betrays a hallucination of esthetic vocabulary: what is truly impossible to do is to isolate the ideas of story and transformation. Similarly, it is impossible to confer an existence that is not ghostly, that is to say, merely retrospective, to this prior state: the concepts of "plan," "project," and "idea" are only conceivable because a written text exists, the only materiality through which it is possible to postulate a prehistory. In conjugating "characters" and "anecdote," like in the Borgesian garden of bifurcating paths, pure possibility exceeds the narrator's capacity for choosing. A part of this boundless richness is recovered in the transmission of the story while also being alienated in the fulfilled choice of

the text; and gossip, which also cannot be transmitted without alterations, represents this condition through its conveyance.

Gossip occupies a privileged place in the novelistic practice of Henry James and Marcel Proust. In the precise moment in which the genre had reached its splendid plenitude and leaned toward that critical consciousness of its own nature that irrecusably precedes its dissolution, James and Proust derived from gossip the initial impulse to concoct their complex narrative edifices; but instead of canceling it discretely, as with a disgraceful ancestor, or even burying it like the stoney altar drizzled with the blood of a propitiatory sacrifice, they exhibit it, they canonize it turning it into a method and recognize in its apparent triviality the key to all knowledge.

IV

The methods that consecrate gossip within literature function divergently in Proust and in James. For Proust, gossip challenges the overly accessible surface that calls itself reality; breaking it, gossip allows the novelist to reveal unsuspected links, reordering the fragments produced by its intervention and turning them into unknown, eloquent, and veracious figures. Gossip proceeds like exact sciences do in their struggle to dominate "information" and to possess a "truth." Proust writes:

> And yet this simple situation is enough to show that even that thing which is universally decried, which would find no defender anywhere: the breath of scandal, has itself, whether it be aimed at us and so become especially disagreeable to us, or inform us of something about a third person of which we were unaware, a psychological value of its own. It prevents the mind from falling asleep over the fictitious idea that it has of what it supposes things to be when it is actually no more than their outward appearance. It turns this appearance inside out with the magic dexterity of an idealist philosopher and rapidly presents to our gaze an unsuspected corner of the reverse side of the fabric. (*Sodom and Gomorrah* 491).

What is gossip if not the only accessible avatar for the novel of that "wittiness" which, for Gracián, allows people to comprehend that they did not know what they believed they knew?

Proust demands that the writer take on that fragile husk of trivialities just to break it and pursue the signs of an always mediated truth. His paradoxical labor does not aspire to signify anything beyond the accomplished trajectory: that elusive truth, as a mere intellectual object, could not aspire to a place within the literary system. For Proust, writing "intellectual works" is a "vulgar temptation," and "a work in which there are theories is like an object upon which the price is marked" (*Time Regained* 278).

That discipline is necessary—a requirement for both Proust and James—for the writer to defeat the implicit dispersion in the simple fact of living:

> This labour of the artist to discover a means of apprehending beneath matter and experience, beneath words, something different from their appearance, is of an exactly contrary nature to the operation in which pride, passion, intelligence and habit are constantly engaged within us when we spend our lives without self-communion, accumulating as though to hide our true impressions, the terminology for practical ends which we falsely call life. (*Time Regained* 300).

When the narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu* finally recognizes in the thousand humdrum circumstances of his life a design resembling a vocation, he admits: "It was, therefore, necessary for me to discover the meaning of the slightest signs that surrounded me (...) which I had lost sight of owing to habit." (*Time Regained* 302).

Polarity of surface and depth, of the declared and the tacit, of fallacious evidence and elusive truth, this play establishes its metonymic eroticism in the mere possibility of knowing. The known object, stripped of the occult transcendence granted by desire, displaces that indefatigable value toward an

always external space and becomes the precarious signifier of ghostly signifieds.

Valéry's distrust of the "almost inconceivable art" of the novelist did not prevent Proust, of whose work he only admitted to reading one tome, from rendering an homage to him whose nine pages announce all the themes that in the following decades criticism and theory of narration would explore. More to the point, Valéry recognizes between the novelistic universe and the "real world" a link similar to that of the *trompe-l'oeil* with tangible things between which the spectator circulates. It isn't scandalous, therefore, that Proust had worked on a social body whose superficiality not only is deliberate but also necessary: the figures that on the mundane stage represent beauty, money, talent, and other fantasies, are mere physical supports of a fiduciary value, like the piece of paper for the bank note (66). The only relation that Proust conceives between the surface of an experience and the mediated truth to which that surface can lead is a mechanism of redemption, and in order for it to function, it is necessary that the writer work as officiant. That truth would be shallowly invalid if it tried to illuminate on its own the literary work, without being preceded by the minute investigation that only literature is capable of conducting. In this relation, one can recognize, in modified positions, both moments of traditional, historical narration. Gossip trembles on stage; the idea, invisible and laborious, governs this staging; neither of them could do without the other: gossip guarantees the notion of literature, the idea guarantees the seriousness of this exercise.

V

In James, on the other hand, gossip is the key to a combinatory art that, once in movement, whips the narrator and his or her task away in a vertigo whose only reward is the growing complexity of always debatable discoveries. The woman sitting at the narrator's side, at Christmas Eve dinner, drops in the conversation a "germ."

> The germ, wherever gathered, has ever been for me the germ of a "story," and most of the stories straining to shape under my hand have sprung from a single small seed, a seed as minute and wind-blown as that casual hint for 'The Spoils of Poynton' dropped unwittingly by my neighbor, a mere floating particle in the stream of talk. (*The Art of the Novel* 119).[4]

Metaphors are reiterated throughout James' prefaces, composed with the retrospective wisdom of maturity, from which a statute for art and the task of narration could be enacted.[5] Whether it is the aforementioned anecdote, a true story even when rudimentary, or that particle of reality where the incipient tale pulsates, the metaphors for gossip and its treatment are constant: "germs," "seeds," "finds," that require "developments," "variations," "relations," "extensions," "needful accretion," "right complications," according to a "chemical change," they are "grains growing," another example "of the growth of the 'great oak' from the little acorn" (*The Art of the Novel* 140).

What is also constant is the accent of anticipated joy before the glimpse that will create a development: "there could be something" there for the task of the narrator. "The novel is of its very nature an 'ado,' an ado about something, and the larger the form it takes the greater of course the ado. Therefore, consciously, that was what one was in for—for positively organising an ado about Isabel Archer" (*The Art of the Novel* 48).

Obsessive, unconcealable, James's passion for gossip invades his narrative method and is codified meticulously in a theory on points of view, in a disdain for events presented without a recognizable chronicler, those not reflected through individual perception. A whole cast of reflectors and *ficelles* enters the scene in order to fulfill the requirements of this ideal novel where, as a consequence, that which is ignored, omission, hiatus, that form of narration that is imperfectly concealed (that is: flirtatiously betrayed) by the written narration... all these combine to form the absent center of the composition. "Dramatise! Dramatise!": the voice of order resounds, impatient, throughout

these prefaces. The feverish refraction to which gossip submits any fact is necessary to elude, like in Proust, the destructive action of mere life, "Life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection" (*The Art of the Novel* 120).

And "to dramatize," for James, means to delegate the narration, never exposing or declaring, but rather assembling a set of fragmented perceptions between which the reader must advance, discovering a methodical pleasure in the indirect entries and oblique illumination. "To dramatize" implies the cultivation of privileged points of view: "reflector" characters, first from a sensibility trained to intuit the nuances of conduct and relation conjured by James, and later on (the telegraphist of "In the Cage," the governess of *The Turn of the Screw*, the guest of *The Sacred Fount*), with a mutilated capacity to access the facts—those facts that are only important, in James's system, as absence (preterit motive or unachievable goal) that stirs up the complicating orgy—, a lack that those "reflectors" compensate with an energetic exercise of hypothesis and suspicion.

Also, in parallel, this assumes the proliferation of those secondary figures that James likes to call *ficelles* as if he preferred to relegate them to the level of Sardou instead of granting them an aura of neoclassical tragedy by calling them confidents; these instruments, charged with transmitting to the reader an information that the author does not desire to submit directly, and that the principal "reflector" should disregard, diligently populate the interstices of narration. Soon, the author no longer will need to hide his dependence on them, because they offer him the occasion of new, unforeseen complications: the Assingham marriage, in *The Golden Bowl*, refers, comments, interprets (with a variable margin of error) the most noble passions of the protagonists and contributes discretely to subverting the understanding that the reader could have gained about them through the principal "reflectors" that James

manipulates. The interventions of "Reflectors" or *ficelles* are presided by a single fear: that of the author before his own voice; that is to say, one, sole obsession: that of whisking away the persona of that author through the helpful obstacles that he himself orders in order to direct the course of narration.

The novel as a literary form has, for James, a very prestigious prize: "its power (...) to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould" (*The Art of the Novel* 46). Valery also recognized this paradox that novel represents a form defined by the tensions that seek to break it, having linked it with dreams instead of gossip: "the novel formally approaches the dream; it is possible to define both by means of the consideration of this curious property: all their deviations belong to them" (quoted in Barthes 23).

The image that James conjures up to illustrate his idea of the novel as a rigorous form is another possible apotheosis of gossip:

> The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. (*The Art of the Novel* 46).

With this image, James elevates the partiality of the perception and the fragmentation of knowledge to the category of principles of (his) (all) narrative art. Also, in this image the divergent paths that James and Proust followed in the cultivation of gossip intersect: the narrator of *Le Temps retrouvé* also invokes this fragmentation as an instrument and ultimate value of narrative art; for him the style of a writer is:

> the revelation, impossible by direct and conscious means, of the qualitative difference there is in the way in which we look at the world, a difference which, without art, would remain forever each man's personal secret. By art alone we are able to get outside ourselves, to know what another sees of this universe which for him is not ours, the landscapes of which would remain as unknown to us as those of the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world, our own, we see it multiplied and as many original artists as there are, so many worlds are at our disposal... (246).

If Proust divides—the observation is Valéry's—and gives the sensation of being able to infinitely divide that which the rest of writers have grown accustomed to crossing,[6] James's method also stirs up in the space of perception, and it vindicates a kind of rational vertigo as a literary system: just as Zeno's paradox impugns the notion of movement, gossip, that tale that does not dare to say its name, subverts before the narrator the realist illusion, it discovers innumerable aspects of a reality that habit and laziness had dilapidated. In doing so, it disintegrates this same notion of reality (single, precise, tangible) and it abandons the novelist—timid and blinded—before his freedom as writer.

VI

That freedom, however, is not valid (within the domain of what we agree to call art) beyond the discrete alienation that is made of it. Every tamely obeyed form engenders monotony as soon as the meager pleasures of decorum subside; instead, pure possibility, limitless, is ungovernable: it demands the submission of the mystic or the demented. The discipline of the narrator is in ignoring this disjunction, playing with its terms without invoking an ideal of equilibrium but rather a sort of intellectual juggling; on the verge of pure chance, the narrator discovers the design of a general form in their suppression of themself, just to subvert in that form all that could make it definitive and contaminate it with precarity.

If gossip found an ambiguous consecration in the last, splendid fruits of the 19th-century novel, this recognition could not but be fatal for it. Indefatigable, humble, it had nourished works as distinct as those of Cervantes, Laclos, Austen, Balzac; exposed by James and by Proust to the blinding stage lights, its image, like a butterfly trapped in amber, perpetuates itself through the suppression of its most intimate trait: impermanence. As soon as the novel proposes to access structures no less dignified and severe than those of poetry, it must refuse that unhindered availability that impedes the dignity of art and allows for its confusion with life.

In this wild genre, prior to Flaubert, prior to James, Valéry reflects while writing:

> There should be no essential difference between the novel and the natural tale of things that we have seen and heard. Rhythms are not imposed on it, neither figures nor forms, not even a determined composition (...) It is notable—it could be illustrated easily in the example of popular novels—that a set of indications, all in all insignificant and that seem null in themselves (since they can be transformed, one by one in others of equal facility) produce impassioned interest and the effect of life (66).

It is what Borges would call "postulation of reality" through "circumstantial invention":

> I know of dilated works—the rigorous, imaginative novels of Wells, the exasperatingly realistic novels of Daniel Defoe—that do not frequent any other behavior than that of development or the series of those laconic minutia of long projection; [...] the morose novel of characters feigns or utilizes a concatenation of motives that try to not diverge from the real world ("La postulación de la realidad" 5).

Displaced in a novel that endeavors to be a literary work, evaporated in the very moment in which its name is pronounced, gossip finds however a new narrative avatar, possible perhaps because it is tacit. Object and subject of a circulation no less abstract than that of money, more concerned about the very transmission than that which is transmitted, impatient with the fleeting identities it assumes—masks of a central absence that is its only nature, a mere possibility—its transitory nature reappears, theme and procedure, in the erudition of Borges, who, less ascetic than Valéry, puts in practice his disdain for the novel.

Stories and essays by Borges exhibit the same, indisputable narrative condition. "El pudor de la historia" exposes the method and fundamentals of this practice, the necessity of reading, behind the docile information whose accumulation composes the historical simulacrum, another text not necessarily more truthful but always more eloquent because it is covert. This reading binds a collected replica in a saga with the amazement of Goethe, the palace of Kubla Khan with the poem of Coleridge, Kafka with Zeno; among them, Borges proposes the link of the alternative discourse, frankly imaginary, perhaps fictitious: an intellectual and formal operation that stories and essays both put on stage.

What pushes one to read the "Historia del Guerrero y la cautiva" or "La

busca de Averroes," as works of fiction and "La muralla y los libros" or "El sueño de Coleridge" as essays except for the invisible contract signed, perhaps thoughtlessly, by the reader upon opening a book presented as a collection of stories and another presented as a collection of essays? One cannot allege the fictitious nature of the referents: English grandmother and Lombard warrior, perhaps documented in a form no less confirmable than the Chinese emperor or the German poet. Herbert Quain, Kafka, Averroes, Pierre Menard are agents of a same mise-en-scène: that of a transit and transformation of all the data that enters the chain of discourse, a process that illustrates a particular form of commerce called narration.

Borges cultivates a form of skepticism in a gesture recalling Mallarmé's immaterial theater: there are no new arguments, no new metaphors—he repeats—except that "diverse intonation of some metaphors" that is history ("Pascal's Sphere" 353). Erudition becomes the driving residue of this process. "As for the examples of magic that close the volume, I have no other rights to them than those of translator and reader. (...) Reading, obviously, is an activity which comes after that of writing; it is more modest, more unobtrusive, more intellectual" (*Universal History of Infamy* 15). Also: "the task of the translator is more subtle, more civilized than that of the writer: the translator comes evidently after the writer. Translation is a more advanced stage" (Charbonnier 14). From his first stories, Borges writes that "They are the irresponsible game of a shy young man who dared not write stories and so amused himself by falsifying and distorting (without any aesthetic justification whatever) the tales of others" (*Universal History of Infamy* 12). Reading, translating, falsifying, distorting: stages in the narrative practice whose association is not scandalous: they expand themselves over pretexts that are not necessarily fiction, to reproduce with them, in them, the process of gossip.

A phrase attributed to Bioy triggers, if not the apparition, certainly the interpretation (that is: the apparition in the plane of knowledge) of a series

of clues that conduct to the usurpation of this world by another ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"); a note by Croce and a familiar anecdote, associated by memory like a delayed echo, create a hypothesis about the function of divine intelligence ("Historia del Guerrero y la cautiva"). The same mechanism that animates the fallacious naturalism of "Emma Zunz" functions behind the legendary and erudite intonation of "El inmortal": apparently distant examples whose common trait is a way of signaling their own organization, that is the variable sense of an incessant transmission, of a series of framed tales, that propose over and over to infinity the narrative act, at the same time reference and lie, testimony and intrigue.

The encyclopedia, a privileged book in Borges's system, assumes this mode in its most complete sign: inventory of facts and knowledge of man whose ordering principle is the mere alphabetical contiguity... Is this an indication of a metonymic or narrative complicity? As in its grim pages, in Borges's prose, a same vertigo simulates the ordering of battles and poems, theology and "events" of the neighborhood of Palermo; in this process, the Manichean antinomies lose all sense, the opposition of high and low, serious and trivial, noble and vulgar, literature and gossip, writing and oral transmission, categories whose very independence value them and devalue them mutually, incessantly: in valuing this same devaluation because it violates the hierarchies of a culture understood as conservation, in devaluing this insidious valorization that rescues that violation in the cultural plane.

From this process that Borges illustrates, new hierarchies do not (should not) emerge. It is defined rather as a field of relations where there is no equilibrium that is not eloquent, productive, equally transitory and transitive. For the requirements of all non-literary logic, it appears to be illusionism, confusion. Roland Barthes already observed that narration proceeds through the systematic cultivation of that which is, technically, a logical error: the "*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*," elevated to the category of "language of Destiny" (Barthes 10).

In its circulation, in its modification, gossip reproduces the general movement of history and human knowledge, as well as the movement of that narrative practice that is a feature of that knowledge and a metaphor for that history.

"El relato indefendible" was originally published in 1973 and included in *Museo del chisme* (2005) and *Nuevo museo del chisme* (2013).

Edgardo Cozarinsky, Argentine writer, critic, and filmmaker, was born in 1939 into a Jewish Ukrainian immigrant family. His career was marked by wide-ranging and impactful contributions to several fields. He studied literature at the University of Buenos Aires and later collaborated with Silvina Ocampo, Adolfo Bioy Casares, and Jorge Luis Borges. He founded a film criticism review, *Flashback*, and proceeded to direct a series of critically acclaimed feature films from *Les Apprentis Sorciers* (1977) to *Ronda nocturna* (2005), including ... (1971) also known as *Puntos suspensivos*, his "most notorious work," which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. During his time living in Paris and Buenos Aires, he wrote extensive collections of film criticism, short fiction, creative non-fiction, literary criticism, and novels. His *Vudú urbano* (1985), a hybrid literary-essayistic work, was prologued by Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Susan Sontag. In the 1970s, Cozarinsky received the best essay prize from the newspaper *La Nación* for his erudite and sprightly poststructuralist essay "El relato indefendible," translated here. This essay—later included in Cozarinsky's gossip anthologies *Museo del chisme* (2005) and *Nuevo museo del chisme* (2013)— theorizes the cultural practice of gossip, previously considered reprehensible and vulgar, unfolding and appreciating its participation in all literary practice, especially in the works of Marcel Proust, Henry James, and Jorge Luis Borges. As Cozarinsky says, "In its circulation, in its modification, gossip reproduces the general movement of history and human knowledge, as well as the movement of that narrative practice that is a feature of that knowledge and a metaphor for that history." Surviving a cancer diagnosis in the 1990s, Cozarinsky continued

to write prolifically and to affectionately guide a generation of literary and cultural contributors until his death in June 2024.

Notes

1 My translation. From here forward, if no translator is indicated for a non-English text in the Works cited, the translation is mine.

2 On February 17, 1927, Alfonso Reyes has lunch with Jules Romains in Paris and hears him say that Marcel Proust was "très concierge" (Reyes 121).

3 My translation of Georg Simmel from Cozarinsky's Spanish.

4 Compare this with an observation by Joseph Conrad: "Solitary life makes a man reticent in respect to anything in the nature of gossip, which those to whom chatting about their kind is an everyday exercise regards as the commonest use of speech" in "The Planter of Malata" (*Within the Tides*) .

5 James wrote the prefaces for the "New York Edition" of his works between 1907 and 1909. They appeared together, with an exhaustive accompanying study by R.P. Blackmur. The alluded "statute" refers to the concept in Blackmur's study and in the book by Percy Lubbock.

6 It is worth to underline that already in 1912, in an essay about Stevenson (collected in *Grata compañía*, 1948), Alfonso Reyes saw *The Sacred Fount*, by James, as an example of a new "critical" novel, "masterpiece of the complete lack of matter (in the underlined sense of the word), a book constructed like a series of sometimes torturous psychological conjectures and analyses." [my translation from Cozarinsky's quote].

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