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One always inherits from a secret—which says “read me, will you ever be able to do so?”

Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

I’ve always found it difficult to read Derrida.

Emir Rodríguez Monegal, “Borges and Derrida: Apothecaries”

In the introduction to this volume, I emphasize the importance not only of identifying Derrida’s effects upon the field(s) of Hispanism and Latin Americanism, but of attending to the *marrano* inflection in Derrida’s work. These tasks are neither identical nor autonomous. Rather, each exposes blind spots and opens possible avenues of reflection in the other. In this chapter—the concluding chapter of *The Marrano Spirit*—I want to consider two possible “precursors” of deconstruction, from two quite different traditions: Emmanuel Levinas and Jorge Luis Borges. In the first half of the essay I will trace the concept of the illegible demand (for reading) in the thought of Levinas and Derrida, suggesting that the most significant consequences of Levinas’s can only begin to be traced “after” Derrida. (“After” here meaning, in the wake of Levinas’s response to Derrida’s reading of his work: a double mediation.) I will then, through a reading of
Borges’s short essay “Kafka y sus precursores,” argue that if literary and philosophical precursors can be determined retroactively and anachronically (Borges “after” Derrida), intempestive reading—reading after whatever is untimely in the work before it—might serve as the condition of possibility for indisciplinary, *marrano* thinking.

*Marrano ethics*

As I detail in the introduction to *The Marrano Spirit*, many scholars of deconstruction identify an ethico-political turn in Derrida’s “late” work (“Racism’s Last Word,” *Altérités*, *Of Hospitality*, *Specters of Marx*, *The Politics of Friendship*, *Rogues*, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, *The Death Penalty* seminars, to give just a few examples). In his contribution to the present volume, Patrick Dove warns against dividing Derrida’s work into “late” and “early” periods, a gesture made, he says, intentionally or unintentionally, in the interest of “saving” deconstruction from criticism in the wake of the de Man affair. Dove suggests that such a periodization eclipses the ethical consequences of Derrida’s first books, and the concepts developed in them. Yet it is indisputable that while we may be able to identify ethical consequences of his early work, which more often address concepts related to language and form, ethical issues (as well as political concerns, though I will not discuss it here) are more frontally treated in seminars and books from the mid-1980s on. *Specters of Marx* strikes me as a particularly compelling example that might bridge what we think of as two distinct epochs (thus showing them to be related, not disparate at all). Specifically, I am interested in the by now over-cited ethico-political injunction from *Specters* that appears as the epigraph to this chapter: “read me, will you ever be able to do so?” This demand appears as unreadable while also, paradoxically, acting as a demand for more reading. I will call this ethics of opacity, of the secret, a *marrano* ethics, and the reading called
for a *marrano* reading practice: a mode of reading that pursues that which is untranslatable in a text, a reading that identifies the text’s precursors, counterintuitively and anachronistically, in its future interpretations.

Where does this so-called ethical turn come from? Is it possible to identify Emmanuel Levinas as a precursor to Derrida’s ethical concerns, or even his thinking about politics? As a first step, let us turn to Levinas’s concept of the ethical injunction, the demand of the other over the same. Martin Hägglund has convincingly argued in *Radical Atheism* that Simon Critchley and others misguidedely establish a relation of equivalence between the concept of the ethical (and the related concepts of the trace, the other, and the infinite demand) in Levinas and Derrida—to produce what Critchley calls “an ethics of deconstruction.” Hägglund is onto something important: it is a mistake to rush to forge Levinas into Derrida as we would metal into metal as Drucilla Cornell, Robert Bernasconi and Critchley have done (*Radical Atheism* 76). He recalls Cornell’s characterization of deconstruction as “aspiration to a nonviolent relationship to the Other” in *The Philosophy of the Limit* (Cornell 61, qtd. in *Radical Atheism* 76). Critchley, for his part, has become something of a sensation in the U.S., especially following his appointment at the New School in 2008 (he is series moderator for The New York Times column *The Stone* and, in 2014, Edinburgh University Press issued the third edition of *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*). He is perhaps the most widely read of the three and has most significantly shaped the idea that deconstruction is somehow *inherently* ethical.

Hägglund’s critique of Critchley centers upon two principal issues: violence and temporality. He claims that Critchley is wrong to detect in Derrida’s work a nonviolent ethical valence, to establish a conceptual parallel between ethics in Levinas and unconditional hospitality in Derrida: “The ethical is […] a matter of responding to alterity by making decisions
and calculations, whereas the unconditional is the non-ethical opening of ethics, namely, the exposure to an undecidable other that makes it necessary to decide and calculate in the first place” (Hägglund, “The Non-Ethical…” 301). This is of course a reference to Derrida’s “The Violence of the Letter,” in which he defines “arche-writing” as “the origin of morality as of immorality. The nonethical opening to ethics. A violent opening” (140). His argument concerning the relation between unconditionality and the ethical, non-violence and violence in Levinas and Derrida is convincing, but less important to our reading than the question of temporality. Hägglund insists that we must distinguish between a Levinasian concept of time (in which ethical responsibility is antecedent, comes prior, to everything else) and the Derridean notion of untimeliness. He reminds us that Derrida’s reading of Hamlet, “The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!” (I.5.211-212), downplays the lines’ more common interpretation—that Hamlet is complaining that he was born at an unjust time, or that it is unjust that he should have to bear the burden of the times—and proposes instead the concept of a time out of time with itself, an a-synchronous time.

But I am not sure that Hägglund’s argument concerning temporality is right. Temporality seems to belong to a cluster of concepts that Levinas revisits in response to Derrida’s critique of his earlier work (in “Violence and Metaphysics”), so that when we read Otherwise than Being we are already reading Levinas-after-Derrida. Derrida’s principal claim is that while Levinas, in Totality and Infinity, aims to move beyond being, ontology, he does so within the confines of metaphysical language (“VM” 102). We thus find in Otherwise than Being that Levinas has undertaken a radical experimentation with language: we may recognize some of the key concepts of metaphysics, but they are rearranged, unsettled, through a proto- or para-deconstructive syntax. The concept of passivity would be one example: it does not appear to counter “activity,”
its ostensible opposite, but rather aims to evade this opposition altogether: “passivity more passive than all passivity” (OTB, 15).

Temporality in Levinas undergoes the same unsettling experimentation. What at first appears as a chronological relation—saying (le dire) as “antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages” (5), a “pre-original language” (6), “the saying which signifies prior to essence, prior to identification” (45), “a prior signification proper to saying, which is neither ontological nor ontic” (46), “the very respiration of this skin prior to any intention” (49)—is explained to be other than a past moment, locatable on a linear continuum. Rather, Levinas is interested in an anarchical past, a past-before-the-past, “a diachrony refractory to all synchronization, a transcending diachrony” … “a past more ancient than every representable origin, a pre-original and anarchical passed” (9). We can claim that this is a not-yet or insufficiently deconstructive gesture, but it seems to serve as a kind of opening to the Derridean “always already.” This is not to say that Levinas and Derrida describe identical concepts of time; rather, we witness the beginnings of what will arguably acquire a more radical form in Derrida. I want to suggest that it becomes possible to read Levinas in this way only after having read Derrida. (This is not a strictly anachronistic reading since, as I have noted, we are already dealing with Levinas-after-Derrida.)

Of course, “prior” may not, or may not only, signify temporal precedence. If we say that “ethical responsibility is prior to everything else,” we can mean prior in importance (the arrival of the other is a definitive moment for my ethical being; of all the moments that constitute me as an ethical being, it is the arrival of the other that is the most important, inasmuch as it alone is definitive: hence it has priority in respect to its importance, its definitiveness); prior in time (the
other arrives and then I make a decision); or prior in terms of logical structure (the arrival of the other is the necessary condition for there to be an ethical response: if the other arrives then necessarily my response to the arrival of the other takes place in, even defines, the domain of the ethical). Hägglund perhaps confuses these senses of antecedence or priority: an axiological one (definitive importance), a temporal one, (succession of moments), and a logical one (for x to be the case, y has to obtain). But the sorts of metaphysics that Derrida is interested in dismantling (Levinas too, on this reading) depends upon this confusion, is at core this confusion. (“Beyond,” in Levinas, poses this same problem.) Levinas’s experimentation with language addresses frontally the confusion of axiology, temporality, and logic in order to come up with a way of thinking otherwise. When we arrive, in the next section, at the notion of the precursor, we can reconsider these differing senses of priority or priorness, and suggest that a precursor text doesn’t have to precede another chronologically, it can precede it logically or axiologically.

I may appear to be defending Critchley against Hägglund, when in fact I, too, want to avoid, even reject, the argument that deconstruction is somehow inherently ethical. My issue with Critchley is another—yet my critique would allow for the possibility that deconstruction is neither reducible to nor incompatible with a Levinasian ethics. In order to expose the differential compatibility of Levinas and Derrida (against both Critchley and Hägglund) I’d focus, instead, upon Critchley’s treatment of what he calls the “infinite demand.” In his 2007 book Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance, Critchley draws a parallel between Danish theologian Knud Ejler Løgstrup’s idea of the “unfulfillable demand” and Levinas’s “demand of a Faktum” (or a “fact of the other”) in order to argue in favor of a politics that is motivated, at its heart, by the ethical demand. For Løgstrup, an exemplary instance of an unfulfillable demand is the sermon on the mount, the injunction that Christ’s followers be perfect
“even as your Father which is in heaven” (52). The impossibility of properly responding to the
demand intrigues Løgstrup for its radicality: we understand the demand, it is legible, transparent,
but we can never succeed in fulfilling it because we are human, we are unlike God, we are
imperfect.

Critchley then turns to Levinas’s own concept of the ethical demand, which he
understands as similarly unfulfillable (and asymmetrical). Critchley makes only one distinction
between the two: in Levinas, the demand is unfulfillable because of its incomprehensibility,
which corresponds to an opacity at the core of the subject: “the ethical relation to the other is not
one of comprehension […] the relation to the other lives on as an imprint in the subject to which
it responds but which it cannot comprehend” (62). Yet there remains a sense, on Critchley’s
account, that the ethical demand exhibits a positive quality: it is a buried secret to which we
would be able to respond properly—or properly translate into what Critchley calls a “politics of
resistance”—if only we could decipher or unearth it. Whatever remains opaque about the
demand is underemphasized or suppressed by Critchley in order to highlight the similarities
between Løgstrup and Levinas (and, elsewhere, Badiou and Lacan). Critchley thus joins the
legions of Levinasians and anti-Levinasians that see in his work an inescapably ontological
quality, and Hägglund is right to take issue with Critchley’s conflation of Levinas and Derrida.

But what do we lose in the attempt to divorce the work of Derrida from that of Levinas?
If a “responsible” reading would aim to make salient the differences between the two thinkers—
to demonstrate, as Hägglund has, the inherent, irreconcilable contradictions between the concepts
of hospitality, violence, and temporality in Levinas and Derrida—wouldn’t a responsible
(deconstructive) critique also aim, irresponsibly, to read Levinas against the grain, to identify the
seeds of concepts that will later appear in Derrida? In addition to the account of temporality that
Levinas’s syntactical experiments uneasily share with Derrida’s discussion of untimeliness, we can cite the Derridean notion of “passive decision” as the decision “of the absolute other in me, the other as the absolute that decides on me in me” (PF 68) as an echo of the Levinasian “command exercised by the other in me over me” (OTB 141). What would it mean, conversely, to read Levinas retroactively, intempestively, from Derrida, to read ideas, still latent, that can’t quite break out of the ontological lexicon of the Lithuanian-French philosopher, but which nevertheless find an afterlife in the work of Derrida?

It is only by reading Levinas through or from Derrida that we can begin to conceive of an ethical demand not as that which cannot be fulfilled because it is impossible, god-like, or impenetrable, but because of its simultaneous call for and denial of interpretation. We know from Specters of Marx that “If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it” (18). Let us pretend, for a moment, that Derrida is not speaking of the specters of Hamlet’s father, or of the specter of Marx, but the specter of Levinas: what would it mean to inherit from Levinas’s ghost, to resist reaching consensus about what this legacy is? If the ethicopolitical, spectral demand, for Derrida, is aporetic in its simultaneous unreadability and demand to be read, if the demand does not communicate a positive content but rather guards a secret that exceeds the play of hiding and revelation, what kind of reading can we attempt today, what kind of anachronic, untimely readings are possible? How does one inherit from, respond to, the marrano specter?

**Borges after Derrida**

Let me give you an example.
Let’s consider the relation between Borges and Derrida, two thinkers whose work has traversed, both thematically and performatively, the dangerous, murky border between literature and philosophy, and whose readers see in them—not completely without justification—fertile ground for comparison. They are, we are told, intellectually alike, for better or worse, to the detriment or glory of one or the other. Before I begin, however, I want to alert you to two things, and also to anticipate my conclusion, in the form of a suggestion. The comparison between Borges and Derrida is impossible; what’s more, it’s highly unoriginal: in the 1980s, Latin American literary critics Roberto González Echevarría and Emir Rodríguez Monegal attempted to trace the textual and conceptual links between Borges and Derrida—and others have followed suit since then. What I’ll be suggesting is that the notion of the precursor that each of them, Borges and Derrida, addresses, and which is used by critics to place Derrida and Borges in relation to one another, is tied to a range of undecidable questions that, because they are undecidable, make different forms of exteriority intrinsic to the work of Derrida and Borges. The demand that this undecidable, intrinsic exteriority makes alerts Borges’, and Derrida’s, readers to the constitutive unlikeness of an author to himself, of a tradition to itself, of a discipline to itself. Coming to terms with this unlikeness is the task of Latin Americanism today, still.

Why should we read Borges and Derrida together? Why should we be interested in any of the concerns I’ve only begun to list—relations, grounds, comparisons, foundations, originality—when what we’ve learned from Borges and Derrida, in very different ways, is to be highly suspicious of claims to likeness, identity, foundations, origins? Can we read Borges as a precursor to Derrida, or to deconstruction more broadly, as some critics would have it? In what follows, I’ll opt, instead, to dwell on the sites in which such inquisitions might fail, or fall short,
by proposing *other* inquisitions, such as why the question of the precursor continues to haunt Latin Americanism.

I won’t provide a comprehensive list of the studies comparing Borges and Derrida. Instead, I’ll briefly consider González Echevarría’s 1983 essay “BdeORridaGES (BORGES Y DERRIDA)” and Rodríguez Monegal’s 1985 “Borges y Derrida: boticarios,” not as representative studies, but rather as readings that symptomatize a certain approach to literature, theory, and disciplinarity, as well as to the broader question of identity and origins in Latin American and Latin Americanist thought. I will then turn to Borges’s 1951 “Kafka y sus precursores” in order to “unread” or “misread” Borges as a precursor to Derrida. I will argue that in drawing upon the example of Zeno’s paradox of motion, Borges postulates a theory of precursors as retroactively determined: untimely, *intempestivo*, at once early and belated.

To relate Borges and Derrida, González Echevarría embarks upon an analysis of the three epigraphs of the third section of “La pharmacie de Platon,” the first and last of which hail from Borges’s work: the former from “La esfera de Pascal” and the latter from “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” both of which, the Yale professor would like us to know, were not easy to find. Citation, then, serves as the point of departure for the establishment of a textual relation between the two thinkers: “Dado que Derrida nos ha enseñado a tomar en serio tales elementos exteriores, ‘liminares’ como los epígrafes,” he tells us, “voy a reflexionar brevemente sobre el posible sentido de estos fragmentos […] para, de ese modo, hacer indirectamente algunas observaciones acerca de la relación entre Borges y Derrida” (207).

Already from the title, “BdeORridaGES (BORGES Y DERRIDA),” we have a sense of what will follow. If at first glance the title appears to mimic the play with words, roots, phonemes and graphemes characteristic of at least an early deconstructive tendency, it is
followed by the parenthetical differentiation of the two writers in question, announced in caps and married by the Spanish conjunction y. While the graphic scrambling would, at first glance, seem to upend any thought of essential identity or likeness, the words or semi-words that jump out in fact do a very different kind of work. If we read from left to right, the first fully-formed word in Spanish is de, evoking a sense of belonging, of pertinence or property: either in the sense of home, of national or local origins, (soy de California) or of ownership (este libro es de mi amiga Paola). If I allow my eyes to be captured, instead, by the capital letters, they may be tricked into reading orígenes: again, signaling a desire to identify origins, beginnings, roots. And indeed, that is what the essay seems to do: beyond the veneer of deconstruction (the essay turns on the idea of the supplement, it scrambles letters, it imagines literary and philosophical language as a tissue of citations), it reveals itself as most interested in establishing sources, influences, and origins: “Derrida se arriesga a indicar […] que Borges es una de sus fuentes” (212).

In the 1985 essay “Borges y Derrida: boticarios,” González Echevarría’s then-colleague Emir Rodríguez Monegal takes up the question of the relation between the two by once again returning to “Plato’s Pharmacy.” The opening lines of the essay imply that it might not be necessary to read Derrida since the Algerian-French philosopher merely repeats what Borges had already accomplished years before. “I’ve always found it difficult to read Derrida,” the Uruguayan critic begins, in a statement sure to please a reader allergic to philosophy and critical theory, “Not so much for the density of his thought and the heavy, redundant, and repetitive style in which it is developed,” (yes, Derrida’s a bad writer, he seems to tell us, but I’m an agile reader):
but for an entirely circumstantial reason. Educated in Borges’s thought from the age of fifteen, I must admit that many of Derrida’s novelties struck me as being rather tautological. I could not understand why he took so long in arriving at the same luminous perspectives which Borges had opened up years earlier. His famed “deconstruction” impressed me for its technical precision and the infinite seduction of its textual slights-of-hand, but it was all too familiar to me: I had experienced it in Borges avant la lettre. (128, emphasis my own)

The argument is rather straightforward, but has a number of consequences I’d like to outline here. First: we don’t need Derrida, because we have Borges. This might lead to a second, implicit point: we don’t need philosophy, critical theory, etc., because we have literature. Third, deconstruction’s origins are Latin American (echoing González Echevarría’s point that Derrida places Borges, a “marginal” writer, into the “center” of European discourse). This reverses the center/periphery, original/copy formal relation pervasive in literary criticism at least until the Latin American avant-garde movements, but does little to dismantle these oppositions (notice the reference to repetition, tautology, sameness, familiarity: Derrida as mere repetition of Borges). Beyond identifying a (Latin American) precursor of French (and later U.S.) deconstruction, beyond positing a rehierarchization of intellectual geopolitics, the essay affirms the same logic of identity, of origins and originality that we witness in González Echevarría’s piece, and which is at the heart of the most commonly accepted understandings of what a “precursor” is, what work it does.

We see, here, that although González Echevarría’s and Rodríguez Monegal’s canon-expanding projects may seem antithetical to the identitarian impulse beginning in 1980s Latin American literary studies, in fact they are two sides of the same coin: if the former emphasizes
high culture over low, institutionality over marginality, both concern, first and foremost, the
question of origins, and an overdetermined, underthought affiliation between identity and
origins, even when these origins are to be read through a cosmopolitan lens.

But what do we mean when we talk about a precursor, what is it that we seek, that we
desire, when we search for such a thing? In the 1951 essay “Kafka y sus precursors,” first
published in the newspaper La nación and later in Otras inquisiciones, Borges himself reflects
upon the question of influence by enumerating the works that anticipate—in theme, in tone, in
spiritual affinity—the work of Franz Kafka in order to postulate an unorthodox theory of the
relation between precursor and heir. Borges carries out his argument performatively rather than,
or in addition to, constatively. As I hope to demonstrate, by thematizing the idea of the literary
precursor, Borges proposes a method of reading that moves beyond our conventional notions of
source and target, origin and heir, and alerts us to the untimely quality of inheritance and/as the
demand for reading upon which Derrida will reflect decades later.

“Yo premedité alguna vez un examen de los precursos de Kafka,” the essay begins.
(88) The very first verb, the first signifier of action—premeditar—appears as a kind of reverse
performative: Borges’s “I” premeditates, or claims that he premeditates, as a counterintuitive
entry into a meditation on the impossibility of premeditation, what we will come to see as the
performative delinking of subject and effect. The introductory paragraph, however, still
insists—if we are to read it at face value—upon the notion of authorial intention, not yet read as
fiction, which can be understood in relation not only to the work of the essayist who “intends” to
embark upon a study of x or y, but also to a causal relation between precursor and heir, one that
is rooted in time (Borges’s narrative subject explains that he will list Kafka’s precursors in
chronological order). The “pre-” of the premeditación, which here signals, retroactively, that
which shall not or can not come to pass, alludes as well to the “pre-” of precursor (from the Latin *prae*, beforehand and *currere*, to run) so that even in this strange opening paragraph that would seem to propose a timely study of a chronological phenomenon, we begin to sense the untimely quality: of the study and of the precursor itself.

The first—the “original”—precursor to Kafka, Borges tells us, is Zeno, whose paradox of motion parallels the problem of *The Castle*:

> El primero es la paradoja de Zenón contra el movimiento. Un móvil que está en A (declara Aristóteles) no podrá alcanzar el punto B, porque antes deberá recorrer la mitad del camino entre los dos, y antes la mitad de la mitad, y antes, la mitad de la mitad, y así hasta el infinito; la forma de este ilustre problema es, exactamente, la de *El Castillo*, y el móvil y la flecha y Aquiles son los primeros personajes kafkianos de la literatura. (88)

In his discussion of Zeno’s paradox, Borges not only provides an example of a thematic link between Zeno and Kafka, he allegorizes the very relation between precursor and heir and, subsequently, between text and reader. But what, precisely, is allegorized here? How are we to understand the relation between a moving object and its destination (or its origin)? Suppose we think of the relation between the moving object and its destination (or its origin) as a figure for the relation between precursor and heir (or vice-versa). Let us imagine, Borges seems to suggest, the infinite length of time it would take for the moving object to reach its destination (or conversely, the infinitely small distance the moving object would have to cover in order to begin to move) as an unsuturable gap between the so-called original and target texts. Could this not also serve as an allegory for reading more broadly?
Imagining Borges’s story this way tends to make him a precursor, not just of Derrida, but of Paul de Man as well. (A dramatic and uncontrollable proliferation of precursors is one consequence of reading Borges with Derrida: the closer we get to establishing the influence of a precursor, the more precursors we seem to discover, and the more a single precursor seems to have come before other figures as well. This, too, is a version of Zeno’s paradox.) We know from de Man that “Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading” (AR, 205). Such impossibility of reading, for de Man, has to do with the non-coincidence between allegory and its antecedent: “[A]llegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a non-self” (BI, 207). At the risk of echoing Rodríguez Monegal, hasn’t that point already been made by Borges, if not constatively, then performatively? Isn’t that precisely the problem that “Kafka y sus precursores” stages?

What, then, of the rapport between Borges and Derrida? When asked in an interview published in the blog “Outward from Nothingness” about Borges’s influence upon his work, the French-Algerian philosopher responds in the following way:

What would be my spontaneous attitude to Borges? It’s a pensive one. I am reminded of an interview with Borges, during a visit to Harvard in 1968. His father had a theory of forgetting that lingered with him. “I think if I recall something,” his father said, “for example, if today I look back on this morning, then I get an image of what I saw this morning. But if tonight, I’m thinking back on this morning, then what I’m really recalling is not the first image, but the first
image in memory. So that every time I recall something, I’m not recalling it really, I’m recalling the last time I recalled it, I’m recalling my last memory of it. So that really, I have no memories whatever, I have no images whatever, about my childhood, my youth.” My relationship with Borges works precisely in this fashion; I have no relationship with him whatever. The only relationship I have with him, his writings, is his ghost – the traces of Borges.

A closer look at this interview reveals a Borgesian influence, but not upon Derrida himself: the interview was published in, and refers to, the year 2012, nearly a decade after the death of the so-called father of deconstruction.² The apocryphal quotation appears to hail not from Derrida, but from Derrida’s ghost, bringing together two crucial aspects of the work of Borges and Derrida: forgeries and specters, suggesting that literary inheritances—inheritances from a precursor—are only ever present hauntologically.

The interview with Derrida’s ghost, whether it knows it or not, is acting out an argument that is made philosophically in Specters of Marx, in which a ghost returns from the past to make a demand: “One always inherits from a secret—which says ‘read me, will you ever be able to do so?’” (SM 18). Such a demand is doubly impossible, because it hints at the unreadability of the text, and the aporetic duty to do so. Here, we are faced with the challenge of interpreting the link between precursor and heir and, as such, we are heirs to the generations-old problem, in literary criticism, to establish an impossible relation: a problem that takes on an added cultural and political dimension in Latin American literary studies. An infinitely difficult problem that enjoins us to infinite reading: but what kind of infinity, what kind of reading? Such an injunction teases out the ethico-political quality of reading: in our encounter with that which is unreadable in the text, in the other, we are called upon to venture a guess, to make a decision (an
interpretation) about something fundamentally undecidable. Here, the ever-receding and ever proliferating precursor resembles the ever-receding text: whether we understand the chasm between precursor and heir, text and reader to be infinitely vast or infinitely small does not seem to matter. Rather, we are faced with the dizzying possibility of infinite choice (interpretation) within a given limit, an asymptote approaching a line it will never reach. The necessary decision that reading entails involves a kind of violence: perhaps the very violence upon which disciplines and disciplinarity are formed, and which is never too far from ethics, however counterintuitive it may seem.

As a mode of conclusion, I want to turn to the final sentences of Borges’s text, in which he makes the case for a kind of bidirectional relation between precursor and heir, one that complicates the chronological, causal relation announced in the opening lines of the essay. Browning’s poem “Fears and Scruples,” he argues, not only anticipates or foretells Kafka’s work: through Kafka’s work, we can return to the poem and read that which we could not have read at the moment of its composition, that which Browning himself could not have anticipated. The uncanny bond between precursor and heir, then, comes about not only in our reading of Kafka through Browning, but in our untimely, anachronic return to Browning from Kafka. “El hecho es que cada escritor crea sus precursores. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción del pasado, como ha de modificar el futuro,” Borges offers, contradicting the Borges of the opening paragraph, the Borges that “premeditated,” the Borges that would proceed in chronological order, the “introduction-Borges” that anticipated—and would be cancelled out by—“conclusion-Borges.” (89-90)

It is this relation of unlikeness that Borges emphasizes in the final sentences of the essay: “El primer Kafka de Betrachtung es menos precursor del Kafka de los mitos sombríos y de las
instituciones atroces que Browning o Lord Dunsany” (90). Browning has more in common with late Kafka than early Kafka does: or, to put it another way, Browning has more in common with Kafka than Kafka has with Kafka. It is here that Borges gives the fatal twist to the significance—the meaning but also the importance—of a precursor. The precursor, we can now see, is that aspect of exteriority that alerts us to the constitutive unlikeness of an author to him- or herself. Borges is not Borges, Kafka is not Kafka, Levinas is not Levinas, Derrida is not Derrida, the precursor arrives, belatedly, to tell us. And it is here that we can begin to imagine a rapport not only between Borges and Derrida, but between literature and philosophy as two disciplines that, as they approach one another, never arriving, expose the principle of non-identity at the heart of each (literature is not literature, philosophy is not philosophy, and—we could add—deconstruction is not deconstruction, Hispanism is not Hispanism). I suggested that the comparison between Borges and Derrida was impossible. It’s now clear what that impossibility really means: not that we cannot compare them, but that the point of the comparison is its undecidability. But it is an undecidability at the core of our notion of an author or his work: we never know which Borges is writing, early Borges or late Borges, we never know which Derrida we’re reading, Derrida haunted by Borges or Derrida haunted by not-Derrida, “early” Derrida or “late” Derrida. Our search for precursors, then, insofar as it symptomatizes a desire for identity, for likeness, for origins, is doomed not to fail, but to succeed: there are always enough precursors, narrowly understood, to go around, always enough fathers to kill anxiously, following yet another Yale critic.

The strange principle of intempestive unlikeness anticipates (again, retroactively) the words of Levinas, who characterizes ethical experience as the experience of non-coincidence with oneself in the splintering of time: “This being torn up from oneself in the core of one's
unity, this absolute noncoinciding, this diachrony of the instant, signifies in the form of one-penetrated-by-the-other” (OTB 49). When we rethink the idea of the precursor from and through Borges—as a moving object that never departs and never arrives, infinitely early, infinitely late—we find ourselves, writers and readers, torn up from ourselves, penetrated by the other. The discipline that we invent, our Hispanism, “signifies in the form of one-penetrated-by-the-other.” To read Hispanism, or Latin Americanism, through and from Derrida is to embark upon new, absolutely non-coinciding inquisitions, new interdisciplinary or indisciplinary inquiries that hold open the possibility of an outside, or of an outside within: the unknown that structures every event of reading.

1 This essay forms part of a volume I am editing entitled, “The Marrano Spirit: Derrida and Hispanism,” currently under review.

2 “Outward from Nothingness” also includes apocryphal interviews with Kierkegaard and Benjamin.

3 I want to thank Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús for pointing me in the direction of this breathtaking passage from Levinas in a recent public lecture at the University of Southern California, “Time Fails: Reading Ethics in Two Poems of Borges.”
Works Cited


