

## **TRANSLATING THE SELF: A LOOK THROUGH ROUSSEAU, WORDSWORTH, AND BORGES**

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Everyone is an expert on his or her own life. The ability to write about it does not require years of schooling or a library to conduct research. But anyone who has ever attempted to put on paper the events and emotions he or she has experienced will soon discover the complexity of such a task. The writer, in the act of writing, must master a topic that is subject to inconsistent memories, understand the perspectives of his or her readers, and find a way to express personal experience in a universal language. The problem of translating the self onto the page is as complicated as translating one language to another. What is lost in translation when trying to convey the private, inner workings of one's essence into a common language? What complications are faced by a writer who does not know who his or her readers are? Can the writer be held responsible for the words written by a younger self?

In this paper, I will explore three writers who have struggled with writing the self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Wordsworth, and Jorge Luis Borges. My examination of their self-narratives reveals some problems they have encountered. In their attempts to translate the self onto paper, they are confronting the slippery tasks of pinning down an inconsistent identity, finding a universal language to describe what is inherently unique, and struggling to develop an original voice. These writers hail from different eras and different genres, and as such, their struggles are very much tied to their times. By choosing writers that represent vastly different categories, I want to show how writing the self is a universal struggle that transcends time, language, and genre. Even the best writers cannot convince themselves of their success. The self-narrative works of Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Borges are more successful as chronicles of the difficulties of writing the self than as conventional autobiographies. It would appear that writing the self, then, is an undertaking attempted only by the most ambitious or masochistic.

### **Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Subjectivity**

In the study of the modern autobiography, most critics credit Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions* as the first text to introduce the self-narrative as a mode of self-expression and self-discovery. *The Confessions* is considered the seminal work from which all Western self-narratives are derived. It is a particularly good example of the problems autobiographers run into when tackling the topic of the self. Rather than coming to an understanding of who he is,

Rousseau begins to discover the difficulties of translating his sense of self onto paper to an unknown readership.

A product of the Enlightenment, Rousseau believed that the key to knowing the self was to make a study of the very components that made up a life. Truth could be obtained only through thorough and objective analysis. At his disposal were all the events and details of his life, even his emotions. His sources were not firsthand accounts and recorded documents, but his personal, utterly unique, memory. Armed with this, he set out to reveal the true Jean-Jacques as only Jean-Jacques would know.

*The Confessions* would be Rousseau's revolutionary experiment of finding the self through writing. He soon finds the experiment problematic and begins to question the concept of objective truth. His issues with influence and a reading audience would cause him to arrive at an important realization. His life could not be told objectively; it was very much subjective. Grappling with the morass of life's details, faulty memory, and the question of structure, Rousseau comes to realize that objectivity becomes moot as soon as there exists the possibility of a reader. A study of Rousseau's struggle with writing *The Confessions* becomes a study of how readership affects the subjective expression of the writer.

One of the most difficult challenges an autobiographer will encounter is the question of for whom he is writing. *The Confessions* is structured in a form that was familiar to the readers of Rousseau's day: the confessional. The purpose of the confessional is objective truth, ascertained only by an omniscient God. But rather than to a priest, Rousseau confesses to paper:

I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself. Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different. (1)

Rousseau's tone is confident. He is prepared to reveal all for the sake of his scientific "enterprise." But Rousseau is faced with a dilemma. He must edit all of his self-knowledge in a presentable way to ensure reader comprehension, but by editing, he inevitably influences the way a reader will receive the material. As a man of the Enlightenment, it is important to Rousseau to present as much objective evidence for the reader as possible so he or she can make a fair and unbiased judgment.

At the time he begins writing *The Confessions*, Rousseau is a notoriously persecuted public figure. He is well aware of his reputation and makes clear his intent is not to fight propaganda with propaganda, but to portray the "true" Rousseau with the belief that the truth will clear his name. He explains, "Since my name is fated to live, I must endeavour to transmit with it the memory of that unfortunate man who bore it, as he actually was and not as his unjust enemies unremittingly endeavour to paint him" (373). Rousseau is hoping that the reader, presented with

an unbiased, complete account of his life and character, will naturally come to the conclusion that Rousseau is innocent of the accusations against him. However, restoring his good name was not the primary goal of his self-narrative, but rather, it is integrity that takes first priority. Rousseau sincerely believed that if the reading public were granted access to his unique perspective, its opinion would not be as harsh.

But as the narration continues, his conviction wavers. He has feelings and motivations that can be translated only through vague adjectives: "My passions are extremely strong . . . I am cynical, bold, violent, and daring . . . I am a sensualist but not a glutton . . ." (43). Rousseau is confronted with the problem of anticipating a reader's definition of such words: *strong*, *cynical*, *bold*. Words are based on the subjective experiences of the reader, and Rousseau is continually faced with the difficulty of translating his own experiences into language, which readers will construe according to their own experiences.

Rousseau's answer to his reader's unknowable subjectivity is to express his own subjectivity. He has a perspective no one else has and it is this additional perspective, antithetical to that of his enemies, that will reveal the objective truth. Rousseau felt that objectivity could be achieved by the sheer number of details he provided. He would attempt to reveal all, leaving no corner unexamined. This strategy poses two problems: faulty memory and reader interest. These two problems, in turn, reveal a much larger problem—a question that lies at the very heart of how Rousseau understands his life and how he writes it.

At first, Rousseau is prepared to reveal all, leaving out as little as possible, and whatever he cannot remember, he fills in. Rousseau insists, ". . . if I have used some immaterial embellishment it has been only to fill a void due to a defect of memory" (1). As a rhetorical artist, Rousseau realizes that including all the details of one's life can be a little tedious. At times in the narrative, Rousseau wants to bring attention to his strategy of objectivity. To avoid being manipulative with his disclosures, he may appear unorganized and tedious. He inserts a disclaimer:

I must present my reader with an apology, or rather a justification, for the petty details I have just been entering into. . . . Since I have undertaken to reveal myself absolutely to the public, nothing about me must remain hidden or obscure. I must remain incessantly beneath his gaze, so that he may follow me in all the extravagances of my heart and into every least corner of my life. Indeed, he must never lose sight of me for a single instant, for if he finds the slightest gap in my story . . . he may wonder what I was doing at that moment. . . . I am laying myself sufficiently open to human malice by telling my story, without rendering myself more vulnerable by any silence. (65)

Occasionally, he will violate chronology to recount an event because it didn't seem to fit into the narrative at the time. He writes, "I took this opportunity to carry out a plan which I had been considering for several months, but which I have not yet been able to mention, *for fear of*

*interrupting my story*" (587; my emphasis). Rousseau here reveals a fundamental assumption he holds as a writer: a life can be told like a story.

Rousseau wishes to lay at the feet of his readers as much anthropological evidence as possible. But what eventually foils his attempt is his deep-seated belief that a life can be ordered into a cohesive narrative that would be accessible and appealing to readers. In a study of the teleology of Rousseau's *Confessions*, D. G. Wright points out, "The decision to structure his *Confessions* as a plot reveals Rousseau's commitment to the belief that the past is amenable to this kind of narrative reordering, that the events that have occurred in one's life are appropriately organized as a developing story that centers on the self" (4). In his *Confessions*, Rousseau saw his life as a carefully constructed fiction.

Rousseau eventually finds the task of putting into words every event that he ever experienced impossible. On one hand, he can't possibly remember everything that ever happened to him. On the other hand, his memories are so overwhelming in number and variety, he fights to hold them all together in a coherent narrative.

Rousseau realizes that he must edit and thus introduce bias into his narrative. But how to do so in such a way as to be both as objective as possible *and* engaging enough to maintain reader interest? How should he tell his story? The structure he decides upon is a detailed chronology, starting from the beginning and outlining every important event and emotion to the very end.

As Rousseau continues to write and as his narrative proceeds, he runs into the dilemma of how to end his life narrative while he yet lives. As the narrative approaches the writer's present, Rousseau loses control over the narrative thread—indulging in tangents, bristling over the most recent of offenses, and meandering over already covered terrain. Purpose, it seems, is more easily ascertained after some time has passed. When writing about the present, Rousseau cannot seem to fit it in with the rest of his life. Rousseau's autobiography stubbornly tries to adhere to the model of a developmental narrative—with a beginning, an end, and a logical march through the events from points A to B—perhaps because it is the framework he as a reader is accustomed to. Wright says: "It is not simply that Rousseau struggles with the artistic task of recasting his life as a story, though this is also true. What is most remarkable rather, is that Rousseau believes that the 'story' itself is immanent in his own history, awaiting discovery and explication but not creation" (3). This is the crux of Rousseau's dilemma. He is trapped by the structure that he as a reader is accustomed to when encountering life narratives. In a way, not only is he trapped by an external readership, he is trapped by his own internal reader that wants a familiar structure, a structure the artist in him cannot seem to deliver.

It would seem that Rousseau's scientific experiment is a failure. His attempt at objectivity is rendered impossible by an element that is inherent in the act of writing itself: the audience. Inseparable from the act of writing, the reading audience forces Rousseau to acknowledge an infinite variety of unknown values and beliefs. He is torn by the unknown multitudes and finds himself compromising his narrative to be more palatable to his imaginary audience. Rousseau's

attempt to appeal to this reading public becomes an M. C. Escher-like trap, in which he continually tries to present his true self only to realize he cannot escape the eyes of his imaginary readers. In their book *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write, "In his *Confessions*, [Rousseau] turns the lens of his analysis upon himself . . . 'confessing' . . . to a diverse 'public' that rejects him and evokes his hostility" (96). Rousseau's rhetorical contortionism reveals more about his paranoia and self-esteem than any statement he could have written. With growing frustration, Rousseau realizes the difficulties of presenting a "true self" to an unknown and fickle public. With increasing despair, he realizes that he cannot satisfy even the reader in himself, suspecting that his life cannot be ordered around an artistically constructed plot. Writing the self, then, becomes a war on two fronts: against the subjectivity imposed by outside readers and against the subjectivity of the reader in the writer.

### **William Wordsworth and Capturing the Evolving Self**

Wordsworth also grappled with the issue of self-expression versus effective translation. Wordsworth's poetry as a young man and his later revisions and poetry are so different as to have sparked in-depth scholarly debates. It is believed that the drafts of his revisions leave a paper trail that allows one to trace the growth of Wordsworth's philosophical ideas of writing the self and why.

The most notable difference in Wordsworth's poetry is how he changes his focus from artistic expression to teaching. His relationship with the reader becomes more formal as Wordsworth matures. Wordsworth's poetry as a young man is a study of the expression of spontaneous emotions and pure feelings. His purpose is to express emotion, not to instruct readers about a way of life. But as Wordsworth grows older, there is a change in the poet's ideology. Unlike Rousseau, who intended to offer readers a continuous narrative, Wordsworth began narrating his life in spontaneous, youthful bursts of poetry. Young Wordsworth's memories were fodder for re-creating "spots of time" through poetry. They were not used as landmarks by which to justify himself or to cite as evidence pointing toward an all-encompassing truth. As Wordsworth grew older, though, he would go back and revise, even after publication, to assert an emerging unifying thread. He began to believe that there existed a path to maturity, and by using his early poems, he could show others how to do it. The results are several versions of existing poems, reflecting Wordsworth's different states of mind. Critics have spent much time and energy trying to decide which Wordsworth is the most representative. His revisions resulted in the odd paradox that has him competing against himself for the title of Wordsworth. Like Rousseau, Wordsworth believed there was a universal nature in the self. Where Rousseau believed the truth could be unearthed, Wordsworth developed a philosophy of *building* the self through a process of self-analysis and self-editing, a practice he would draw inspiration from in his own works.

To understand Wordsworth's poetry, one cannot examine a single version of a single poem.

Wordsworth's poetry is the process. It has been said that more than the poems themselves, Wordsworth's revisions evidence a truth about writing, language, and representation (Leader 662). More than the telling of his life memories, Wordsworth's poetic subject can be found in his revisions and what they imply about his view on writing the self and why.

There is no more clear an example of Wordsworth's didactic philosophy than in his poem "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." In the eighth stanza, Wordsworth writes:

Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might  
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,  
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke  
The years to bring the inevitable yoke. (122-25)

Wordsworth refers to the yoke, this burden that weighs down the adult with unhappiness through the accumulation of knowledge. By stanza 8, Wordsworth becomes more specific about what tortures him so much about growing old. It is the unnaturalness of self-awareness, the self-conscious analyzing of the soul that "trembles like a guilty Thing surprised" (148). It has not passed the poet's notice that among all of nature, the most unnatural thing about man is his intelligence and his self-awareness that he is an individual. As a child, Wordsworth was closer to the chaotic spirit of life; the unordered passionate bursts of poetry he was capable of as a young man are lost to him as he grows older.

As Wordsworth ceases to be that young man, he ceases to be able to write that kind of poetry. He is unable to write as he did as a youth, but sufficient time has passed that he can look back at his life and detect a developing pattern. Wordsworth reconciles the loss of his youthful voice with this ability to remember, justify, and unify. Using an adult's analytical ability, he reconstructs the spirituality he once had as a child. He rejoices:

Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind;  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering,  
In the faith that looks through death,  
In years that bring the philosophic mind. (178-87)

For Wordsworth, order brings comfort. Looking back on his poetry of chaotic and unordered youth, he sees an emerging pattern. He writes:

See, at his feet, some little plan or chart  
Some fragment from his dream of human life  
shaped by himself with newly-learned art. (91-93)

He has lost the ability to experience the pure and spontaneous emotions of his youth, but another equally spiritual ability has developed in his maturity. Alan Grob writes, "Even the consciousness of lost vitality, when understood properly, is to be borne not as a burden but as a banner, testifying to the possession of an inward calm, mirroring nature's, and to acquisition of that compensatory moral and spiritual awareness by which Wordsworth defines maturity" (35). But maturity for Wordsworth was a constantly evasive goal. His revisions reveal a "principled refusal to settle for false finality or 'closure'" (Leader 662).

Like Rousseau, Wordsworth struggled to come to a conclusion to a philosophy of maturity before he has even reached this ideal state. He worked on his already published poems with a perfectionist fervor, which would inevitably throw future readers and publishers into heated debates about which versions were the best ones or which ones were most representative of what he was trying to say.

The debates over which versions are "more valid," as it were, are dependent upon one's opinion of which Wordsworth was the better poet—1802 Wordsworth or 1804 Wordsworth, and so on. This question, Leader points out, inevitably poses another question—whether the poet is an isolated identity crystallized at every point in which he makes a revision, or if the poet is a series of continuous identities, constantly and perpetually revising his past selves to affect his present and future selves. Wordsworth's famous words return to remind us that "The Child is the Father of Man" (*The Prelude*). The circular nature of the line suggests that identity is a dynamic force, which refuses to be tied down to a man-made chronological format. Wordsworth may have intended his later edits to supersede his earlier versions, but readers, who have access to all of his versions, cannot ignore the fact that they exist. Wordsworth's various publications of a version of a poem place the reader in the odd position of trying to determine which Wordsworth takes precedence. It is an interesting reversal of Rousseau's predicament. Rousseau fought with the influences of his imaginary readers, but here, the reader grapples with the influences of multiple Wordsworths. How is the reader supposed to regard a writer who appears to be plural? Ironically, Wordsworth himself didn't seem to see himself that way. Leader writes: "When [Wordsworth] revises a poem he does so not out of indifference to—or to repudiate—the intentions of a former self, but to assert his identity with that self. Because that self is still felt as, or needs to be felt as, this self, his present self, revision is no violation" (665).

Wordsworth's poetry—his words, his revisions, his life—all reflect this affirmation of the self as a continuous subject connected by the memories and experiences of the earthly body. Grob explains, "but man's uniqueness and special glory, for Wordsworth, reside in what most clearly differentiates man from the nonhuman world, his sensory alertness and receptivity to external impulse and his power to construct from his impressions the edifice of the moral self" (46). For Wordsworth the construction of this unified self is the key to maturity. He returns to his previously published poems to connect them to who he is at the present. And who he became was an older, canonized poet who believed in a responsibility to teach the reader what he has

learned in his life. Where young Wordsworth writes without the intention of translating any sort of unifying idea besides what mood he fancied at the moment, older Wordsworth writes and revises those moods into an language understandable to the reader—and perhaps, more understandable to himself.

Wordsworth's revisions have him replacing words in favor of more conscious religious metaphors, a structure with which he is familiar. Grob sees these religious metaphors as Wordsworth's newfound voice. With this new, mature voice, Grob says, "Wordsworth is provided with a means of gauging the changes undergone by him in the course of his development and of determining whether amidst the flux and multiplicity of experience some element exists within the experiencing self to which the individual can ascribe a personal and continuing identity" (34). Using religious models, Wordsworth achieves the double purpose of understanding his life and casting it into a language his readers will understand. Wordsworth "offers natural man a principle that orders the otherwise random events of his existence with intelligibility and purpose" (Leader 655).

Wordsworth's reconciliation with writing the self is a reversal of Rousseau's. His early poetry began as an exercise of memory recollection; as he grew older, Wordsworth's poetry became more and more methodic, more and more didactic—offering others a patterned way to believe. Elizabeth De Mijolla writes, "This, then, is Wordsworth's autobiographical path from originality to generosity, translated along the way by a Christian figural tradition that renders the individual communal, accessible to all morally and splendidly, but no longer to the poet poetically" (122). Wordsworth's later revisions of his poems into the spiritual undertones of the older confessions reveal an imposition of order, the outlining of a linear thread. For later Wordsworth, poetry becomes a forum for teaching rather than a mode for expression and originality. As opposed to Rousseau, an audience focuses Wordsworth. It gives him a purpose for his poetry.

For most critics, Wordsworth's later revisions rob his poems of the lyrical freshness of his youth. The spontaneity is lost in translation from the private language of his youth to the public language of teaching. Critics have even made the argument that Wordsworth's later poetry is of poor quality. De Mijolla observes, "Speaking too intently the language of others to others, thus he silences a portion of his self, the youthful persona 'capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'" (122). Older Wordsworth found peace in the order of religion, and he sought to adjust everything penned under his name to reflect what he believed, even to the point of revising already published works. Wordsworth may have been convinced of his philosophy, but it would appear readers are unable to relate to an ordered narrative. Maybe order is not the best translation for the heart. As Wordsworth's priorities in his poems shifted from re-creating emotions to teaching others the way, his poetry seem to lose its urgency and effect. What, then, is the best way to translate that indescribable, elusive subject: the self? How does the writer reconcile the subjective pressures



of external readers, the tendency to curb originality in favor of familiar structures, and the ever-evolving self that rejects being tied to something as concrete as publication?

### **Jorge Luis Borges and the Influence of Imagination**

These questions provide space for a writer to challenge familiar structures and renounce the pressures to fall back on these patterns. Jorge Luis Borges' short stories challenged the assumption of a core self by which all experiences are held together. He found the telling of a story in chronological order inadequate. Where Wordsworth and Rousseau felt the need to connect random memories, Borges deconstructs the need for an underlying meaning. Where Rousseau regarded the imagination as a function to aid memory when it failed, Borges brought imagination to the forefront. Where Wordsworth tried to reconcile his past selves with his present, Borges stressed the importance of the future as a formative influence on a person. For Borges, the supernatural, the future, and the subconscious all hold equal sway on an individual's concept of "self," as strongly and concretely as past experiences.

We have looked at the obstacles Rousseau and Wordsworth struggled with when translating the self into a cohesive life narrative. Life, in all its randomness, often does not lend itself to being told like a story with a moral at the end. Rousseau's various attempts to craft a narrative that could be understood by unknown readers and Wordsworth's efforts to make his poems accommodate his aging, shifting selves suggest that a single life cannot be told as the story of one unified person. Borges thematizes the problem of shifting identities in several of his short stories by exploring the future. In "Borges and I," "The Other," and "August 25, 1983," Borges is made aware of himself at different points in his life. In "The Other," the seventy-year-old Borges has a chat with himself as he was fifty years earlier. The older Borges realizes that he cannot find common ground with himself. They are too alike and too different, he realizes. In "Borges and I," the narrator struggles with his private and public identities. In "August 25, 1983," Borges visits himself on his deathbed. In these stories it is his future self that seems to bear the stronger influence. Young Borges, after chatting with the seventy-year-old Borges, will eventually write a line he heard from the latter. Sixty-one-year-old Borges, after taking leave of the dead Borges, writes the book he was told would be written. In "The Other," the narrator cannot figure out where the inspiration comes from—himself or the other Borges.

Rousseau and Wordsworth attempted to answer the question of identity by taking a look into the past and piecing together a collection of memories to form a cohesive construct. Borges deconstructs this idea by introducing the variable of the future. By creating these encounters with himself, Borges causes us to question our concepts of originality and identity. In "August 25," the dying Borges asks his younger self, "Who is dreaming whom? I know I am dreaming you—I do not know whether you are dreaming me" (490). The fact that the dream may not be "real" does not lessen the impact one has on the other. The possibility of a future yields more

power over the present than the past. In Borges' world, the future is a character, manifested as an older version of himself.

Borges' stories challenge Rousseau's assertion that each experience is unique and belongs to the individual. Borges expects his readers to grant him a certain leeway in imagining a supernatural situation, whereas Rousseau was trapped by his attempts to appease or accommodate readers. Rousseau was trapped in seeing himself as a single entity. Borges cleaves himself into an infinite number of selves, each a different persona constantly influenced by, giving advice to, and dreaming of—the other. In "The Other," Borges chastises himself, "Only individuals exist—if, in fact, anyone does. Yesterday's man is not today's as some Greek said. We two, here on this bench in Geneva or in Cambridge, are perhaps proof of that" (414). But Borges the writer cannot entirely believe the words that this older self is telling his younger self. There is a unifying thread that ties them together, if it is only a name. In these stories, Borges shows how memories and dreams act as editors that travel unconstrained through time and write and rewrite the drafts of a life. The act of remembering is an incestual thing that connects your various selves to other various selves. The question of who is dreaming of whom and who is writing about whom is a question of influence. In Borges' world, the future and the imaginary have as much weight as concrete historical events. This cross-pollination of identities is perhaps the cohesive glue that binds the disjointed aspects of our lives, that is, the memory and acknowledgement of a time and person that is no longer you.

Borges asks himself in "The Other" whether his younger self will read the entire corpus of Dostoevsky. In "August 25," the dying Borges tells the younger Borges that he will publish his masterpiece novel under a pseudonym. The name "Borges" is the umbrella title that encompasses all the works that a group of writers—each calling himself Borges—has produced. Every draft is a fight for each Borges, as a writer, to assert his own reality. Is there jealousy of the others? Is it even possible to imitate oneself? Borges' stories show his various selves lying to the others, curious about the others, but ultimately unable to reconcile themselves with the others. Is it an arbitrary categorization, the presence of your name behind a title? Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write, "The stuff of autobiographical storytelling . . . is drawn from multiple, disparate, and discontinuous experiences and the multiple identities constructed from and constituting these experiences" (35). One is reminded of Wordsworth and his pathological editing. Which version is the "true version"?

"Borges and I" even goes so far as to suggest that at a given time, there could perhaps be multiple selves with different motivations. The struggle of the artist, Borges suggests, is the struggle to capture a fleeting thing, to pin down an identity that is never one thing or another. Thus, for all the words he may write down, these words no longer belong to the vessel that is Borges, but to language itself and to the tradition of literature. The act of translating the self into the language of literature is to plug into established models of written communication: linear narrative threads, the assumption of a core self, the concept that one can even understand and

communicate the multiplicity of identity. Rousseau and Wordsworth, through the confession and religious metaphors, inevitably fell back into established modes of perceiving the self. They fought with the ideas of chronological time and of the self as a concept of continuous progress. But though these established concepts proved problematic, Rousseau and Wordsworth managed to create space for themselves in their own narratives. They have survived to establish a whole set of their own paradigms and patterns for other writers to imitate.

When writing, one inevitably adopts the language of influential writers. Words one has written will inevitably be used later by one's readers to describe their own unique experiences. When editing, one is basically returning to revise and impose one's older language upon a younger self. Self-narrative, Borges suggests, is not a harmonious process but a battleground of the past, present, and future. The presentation of a cohesive, united identity is undermined by this multiplicity. The narrator of "Borges and I" writes:

I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges can spin out his literature, and that literature is my justification. I willingly admit that he has written a number of sound pages, but these pages will not save me, perhaps because the good in them no longer belongs to any individual, not even to that other man, but rather to language itself, or to tradition. (324)

Here, Borges even questions the concept of a unique identity. His words echo the struggle of Rousseau, who sought to invent his own form of self-expression, only to realize he could not get through to the reader. By sharing one's life, ideas and feelings and thoughts, a writer makes universal what was once uniquely personal. The writer translates into public language the essence of a private notion. And if a writer effectively communicates in a language that is not his or her own, is it truly him or her that comes across? Borges even suggests that one's own thoughts, feelings, and ideas may not actually be one's own, but are born from an unconscious influence that shapes all who are literate.

Borges' ideas about influence and the impact that established literary works and artists have on each other can be read in some of his other stories. Borges wrote a few stories about Shakespeare, including one in which the spirit of Shakespeare is given as a gift—or curse—to whoever will take it. "Shakespeare's Memory" explores an artist's spirit as a summation of memories and regions of shadow. He writes, "The man who acquires an encyclopedia does not thereby acquire every line, every paragraph, every page, and every illustration; he acquires the possibility of becoming familiar with one and another of those things" (512). By writing, an author contributes to a collective memory. Reading is a way of ingesting a life outside one's own physical experience. In this way, Borges suggests that any expression of the self is not only a summation of multiple selves fighting for dominance, but the expression of a thousand other "foreign" experiences that you've absorbed.

Borges questions memory and acknowledges the power of dreams. He wonders who is writing the words onto paper, which influential voice is clamoring the loudest, whose dream he

is remembering. In his stories, he suggests that one's essence doesn't even belong to oneself. The problem lies in the attempt to translate with one voice the plurality that exists under a single name. Borges, by venturing into the supernatural and magical realism, makes this point. It is what sets him apart from Rousseau and Wordsworth, even while he continues their tradition of exploring the self through the written word.

### Conclusion

At first glance, Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Borges appear to write from completely different points of view. Though they come from different nations, genres, and time periods, they share common dilemmas in the understanding and expression of their lives. Rousseau struggles with remembering too much and not enough. He wants to portray how he truly is, but cannot seem to isolate this elusive identity. He worries about how his readers will interpret his work, and he worries that perhaps writing for a reader is the reason his true self eludes him. Wordsworth cannot seem to stay the same long enough to present his reader with a cohesive, publishable identity. The structure that had served him well as a youth no longer applied to how he saw himself later. How he reconciled Wordsworth as a young man and Wordsworth as a mature poet was through the editing of his earlier works. He believed he was still one unit under the name Wordsworth and gave priority to the beliefs and philosophy of his older self. But how does the reader interpret several versions of the same poem? It would seem that one has to treat each version as if it were written by a different man. Borges elaborated on this feeling of disconnectiveness in his short stories. Borges did not see himself as one unit. He saw himself as an uneasy truce between his past, present, and futures selves as well as outside influences. He questioned who was behind his hand when he wrote. He wondered less about how his contemporary readers would perceive him and more about how his future and past selves would read him.

The struggles of Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Borges are but a small sample of the struggles all writers face when choosing to write about their own lives. I chose these three writers because of their established successes. Despite their endeavors to reconcile the disconcerting multiplicity within them, these writers manage to convey a universal sense of the effort behind writing and understanding the self. In essence, they are the best self-translators we have come to know, and their noble—and at times desperate—attempts have been read and reread, establishing our literary tradition. The quest to understand and express the self through writing is an act that will be revisited countless times by many others. But no matter how many life narratives are written, the understanding of the self will always be a personal endeavor, one that can never be perfectly re-created. Each story is different and unique. But it would seem that there is some type of universality in the act of writing the self: a motif that repeats itself in the anxieties and the struggles of all writers, a common thread, perhaps, that unites all the disparate, conflicting forces that make an instance of empathy and harmony seem like a beautiful miracle.

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