

Once I planned to make a survey of Jonas's precursors. At first I thought she was as singular as the fabulous Phoenix; when I knew her better I thought I recognized her voice, or her habits, in the art of various cultures and various ages. I shall record a few of them here, in chronological order.

The first is Noh, the Japanese dance-theater tradition. Dating back to the 14th century, Noh theater is highly stylized, with codified choreography and a narrow narrative repertoire determining the courses of action. Its performers usually wear masks, which deemphasize their personal identity and make them more like mediums. With all-male casts playing both male and female roles, Noh theater on some level presents gender as social performance, an idea which is theoretically refined in Jonas's work. On a formal level, the clapping blocks used in Noh, which provide a percussive undertone to the actors' vocal performances, prefigure Jonas's strategies for exploring the disconnection between sound and image. Noh performers would be perfectly at home in her *Delay Delay* (1972).

In the second tradition that happened to come to my attention, the affinity is of both form and subject. It is the ritual drawing practices of Haitian voodoo, which are included in the admirable *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* by Maya Deren (edited and released posthumously in 1977). These ritualistic drawing practices emphasize the action of drawing rather than its product; its practitioners are focused on performance instead of authorship (to borrow a formulation from Roland Barthes). Voodoo drawing specifically concerns itself with the spiritual and mythical work of imagining the border between life and death, and the role the artist can play in that important imaginative task.

Kafka and His Precursors

Once I planned to make a survey of Kafka's precursors. At first I thought he was as singular as the fabulous Phoenix; when I knew him better I thought I recognized his voice, or his habits, in the texts of various literatures and various ages. I shall record a few of them here, in chronological order.

The first is Zeno's paradox against movement. A moving body on *A* (declares Aristotle) will not be able to reach point *B*, because before it does, it must cover half of the distance between the two, and before that, half of the half, and before that, half of the half of the half, and so on to infinity; the formula of this famous problem is, exactly, that of *The Castle*; and the moving body and the arrow and Achilles are the first Kafkian characters in literature.

In the second text that happened to come to my attention, the affinity is not of form but rather of tone. It is an apologue by Han Yu.

The third prefiguration I found is in *Repetition* (1843) by Søren Kierkegaard. The affinity of both Jonas and Kierkegaard for repetition is known to almost everyone; what has not yet been brought out, as far as I know, is that Kierkegaard, like Jonas, addressed such questions of content through experimental form and structure, all the while with an eye to psychological effect. Indeed, how many remember that *Repetition* was published under

the pseudonym Constantin Constantius (itself a repetition!) and with the subtitle "A Venture in Experimenting Psychology"? In Kierkegaard's book, which ranges widely in its examination of ancient philosophy, personal reverie, and religious narrative, Constantius seeks to experience "authentic" repetition, only to discover this to be an impossible goal. In particular, the aesthetic sphere proves particularly inauthentic, characterized as it conventionally is by absorption and recollection, actions that are always backward looking. By self-consciously thinking through repetition as a formal structure to enter present history, Kierkegaard models the re-conceptualization of time and experience in a way that rhymes nicely with concerns central to emergent postmodernism.

The fourth text proceeds from a more foreseeable source: the writings of Jorge Luis Borges. The Argentine's obsession with mirrors, loops, and non-linear time is famous, as is his engagement with myth, the dream, and labyrinths. However, as much as his dazzling iconography and formal prowess loom large, Borges's writings also tackle questions of time and artistic subjectivity in particularly pointed ways. In "Kafka and his Precursors" (1951), for example, the author reverses the traditional trajectory of models of influence, arguing for a past that is written in the present. Problematizing teleological narratives of history and classical notions of subjectivity in both this text and in his *oeuvre* as a whole, Borges rethinks causality, originality, history, and identity: all issues that Jonas's work also incites us to consider anew.

in the presence of the unicorn and we would not know for certain that it was one. We know that a certain animal with a mane is a horse, and that one with horns is a bull. We do not know what the unicorn is like.¹

The third text proceeds from a more foreseeable source: the writings of Kierkegaard. The mental affinity of both writers is known to almost everyone; what has not yet been brought out, as far as I know, is that Kierkegaard, like Kafka, abounded in religious parables on contemporary and middle-class themes. Lowrie, in his *Kierkegaard* (Oxford University Press, 1938), mentions two. One is the story of a forger who examines Bank of England notes while under constant surveillance; in the same way, God must have been suspicious of Kierkegaard and must have entrusted him with a mission simply because He knew that he was accustomed to evil. Expeditions to the North Pole are the subject of the other. Danish clergymen had announced from their pulpits that to participate in those expeditions would be beneficial for the eternal salvation of the soul. However, they admitted that it was difficult and perhaps impossible to reach the Pole, and that not everyone could undertake such an adventure. Finally, they announced that any journey—from Denmark to London, say, by ship—or a Sunday outing in a hackney coach, was in fact a real expedition to the North Pole.

The fourth prefiguration I found is the poem "Fears and Scruples," by Browning, which was published in 1876. A man has, or thinks he has, a famous friend. He has never seen this friend, and

My notes also include mention of the art historian Aby Warburg. When in 1896 Warburg visited the Hopi people of present-day Arizona, he was particularly interested in the snake dance rituals that he witnessed them perform. Both the look of the snake dance and what it endeavored to do—to communicate to the ancestral underworld through the snakes—touched Warburg deeply, and he returned to this experience in his later thinking about the cultic motives of art-making as a phenomenon. The art historian is also known for his last project: the iconic *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which he began in the late 1920s. By studying the transhistorical migration of visual resemblances and forms in art, Warburg drew novel correspondences between works from different times and contexts and, perhaps more importantly, provided a model of visual thinking at

once analytic and highly intuitive. (In both projects, the topical content and structural logic can be understood as Jonas-like).

If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous selections I have mentioned resemble Jonas's work: if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other, and this fact is the significant one. Jonas's idiosyncrasy, in great or lesser degree, is present in each of these examples, but if Jonas had not worked, we would not perceive it; that is to say it would not exist. Borges's *Labyrinths* are like a prophecy of Jonas's works, but our reading of Jonas refines and changes our reading of these stories perceptibly. Borges did not read them as we read them now. The word "precursor" is indispensable in the vocabulary of criticism, but one should try to purify it from every connotation of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that each artist creates her precursors. Her work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. In this correlation the identity of plurality of men matters not at all. The first Jonas of *Wind* (1968) is less a precursor of the Jonas of the shadowy myths and looped repetitions than is Kierkegaard or Borges.

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sees monsters, conquers deserts and mountains, but never arrives at Carcassonne, although the men catch sight of the city once from afar. (This story is the exact opposite of the other one; in the first story, a city is never departed from; in the second, a city is never reached.)

If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous selections I have mentioned resemble Kafka's work: if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other, and this fact is the significant one. Kafka's idiosyncrasy, in greater or lesser degree, is present in each of these writings, but if Kafka had not written we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist. The poem "Fears and Scruples" by Robert Browning is like a prophecy of Kafka's stories, but our reading of Kafka refines and changes our reading of the poem perceptibly. Browning did not read it as we read it now. The word "precursor" is indispensable in the vocabulary of criticism, but one should try to purify it from every connotation of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.² In this correlation the identity or plurality of men matters not at all. The first Kafka of *Betrachtung* is less a precursor of the Kafka of the shadowy myths and atrocious institutions than is Browning or Lord Dunsany.

Buenos Aires, 1951

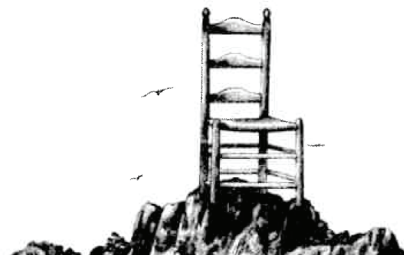
² See T. S. Eliot, *Points of View* (1941), pp. 25–26.

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Joan Jonas is on our mind.

An interdisciplinary research group of CCA faculty members will reflect on the work of Joan Jonas for the entire 2014–15 academic year. Public events will be held each month.

JORGE LUIS BORGES OTHER INQUISITIONS 1937-1952



Jorge Luis Borges. *Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), trans. Ruth L. C. Simms.

*,) The Wattis Institute