

# Borges and the new Latin-American novel

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*Hence the final meaning of Borges' prose—without which there simply would not be a modern Spanish-American novel—is to attest that Latin America lacks a language and, consequently, must create it. To do so, Borges confounds all genres, rescues all traditions, kills all bad habits, creates a new order of exigency and rigor over which there may rise irony, humor, play—indeed—but also a profound revolution that matches freedom with imagination, and with both he constitutes a new Latin-American language which, by sheer contrast, reveals the lie, the submission and the deceit of what traditionally was taken for "language" among us.*

—Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*

At a time when Borges' work is being acknowledged as a driving force in what has been called "the Borgesian phase"<sup>1</sup> of recent

1. I quote Morris Dickstein, *The New York Times Book Review*, April 26, 1970: "... in the last three years an important segment of American fiction has entered a new and more unexpected phase, a more deliberately experimental one, far less likely to issue in best-sellerdom and *succès de scandale*. Call this the Borgesian phase, though Borges has not been the only model for the short, sometimes dazzlingly short, and multi-layered fiction that is involved. (Interestingly, Borges' example has served to release the influence of others, including his own master, Kafka, and even such different writers as Beckett and Robbe-Grillet.)" I should

American fiction, little or nothing has been said about his impact on contemporary Latin-American fiction. One reason for this anomaly is that Spanish-American students and critics take Borges so much for granted that the extent of his influence has been deluged in vague generalities. While Fuentes' statement that "without Borges there simply would not be a modern Latin-American novel" is sweeping enough to supply an epigraph, I believe it is time to move from a notion which is accepted as axiomatic to the specifics of its verification: "technicalities," warns Harry Levin, "help us more than generalities."

In Ernesto Sábato's novel *Sobre héroes y tumbas* (On Heroes and Tombs), two of the characters, Bruno and Martín, walking down a Buenos Aires street, meet a man moving cautiously aided by a cane. "Borges," says one to the other. Bruno engages in a short conversation with Borges, and Sábato reproduces some of Borges' habits of speech. This fictional Borges seems also to be acquainted with Alejandra, one of the novel's axial characters. After this encounter, Bruno and Martín discuss various aspects of Borges' writings and Argentine literature in general. To one's question as to whether Borges, as a writer, is more European than Argentine, the other replies: "What else can he be but an Argentine? He is a typical national by-product. Even his Europeanism is national. A European is not a Europeanist but simply a European."<sup>2</sup> In explaining the non-Argentine traits of Borges' writings as only another true manifestation of Argentine temperament, Sábato paraphrases a belief long held and defended by Borges himself. In his essay "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," Borges maintains that *La urna*, a book of sonnets by Enrique Banchs, is no less Argentine than *Martín Fierro*, which is, by definition, the Argentine poem. Borges goes on to explain that in lines like "The sun shines on the slanting roofs / and on the windows. Nightingales / try to say they are in love . . .," from a poem written in a

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add that American writers such as John Barth and John Updike have dedicated enthusiastic and lucid essays to Borges' work. See also Tony Tanner's remarks on Borges in his recent book, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London, 1971).

2. Ernesto Sábato, *Sobre héroes y tumbas* (Buenos Aires, 1969), p. 164.

suburb of Buenos Aires, where there are neither slanting roofs nor nightingales, "Argentine architecture and ornithology are of course absent, but we find [in these lines] the Argentine's reticence and constraint. . . ." <sup>3</sup> The conversation between Bruno and Martín, in Sábato's novel, is a critique of Borges' work in the context of Argentine literature. Here Sábato airs opinions on Borges he has previously cast in essay form,<sup>4</sup> mixing his great admiration for the author of *Ficciones* with a relentless aversion to the formal rigor (he calls it "Byzantinism") which has always characterized Borges' prose. Sábato gets his point across through Bruno:

Can you imagine Tolstoy trying to dazzle the reader with an adverb when one of his characters' life or death is at stake? <sup>5</sup>

Yet, not everything in Borges is Byzantine, really. There is something very Argentine in his best pages—a certain nostalgia, a certain metaphysical sadness. . . . Actually, many stupidities are said about what Argentine literature *should* be like. The important thing is that it should be profound. All the rest is derivative. And if it is not profound it will not help to display *gauchos* or *compradritos* [Argentine hoodlums]. The most representative writer in Elizabethan England was Shakespeare. However, many of his plays do not even take place in England.<sup>6</sup>

This attack on Borges is strange on two accounts. First, Sábato accuses Borges of local color when it was Borges himself who fought the decisive battle against local color in Argentina;<sup>7</sup> Borges

3. Borges concludes as follows: "The fact that Banchs, when speaking of his great suffering which overwhelms him, when speaking of this woman who has left him and has left the world empty for him, should have recourse to foreign and conventional images like slanted roofs and nightingales, is significant: significant of Argentine reserve, distrust and reticence, of the difficulty we have in making confessions, in revealing our intimate nature" (*L*, 180).

4. See Sábato's articles "En torno de Borges," *Casa de las Américas* (Havana, 1963), III, No. 17–18, 7–12; "Los dos Borges," *Indice* (Madrid, 1961), XV, No. 150–151, 6–7; "Borges y Borges el argentino y la metafísica," *Vida Universitaria* (Monterrey, Mexico, April 12, 1964), pp. 3–18; and, particularly, "Borges y el destino de nuestra dicción," in his book of essays *El escritor y sus fantasmas* (Buenos Aires, 1964), pp. 245–57.

5. What Sábato does not seem to realize is that Tolstoy (as any other writer) deals with his characters' lives or deaths by means of words, and that in a reality constructed with words (literature), one adverb too many or too few is often decisive. Also, if one takes Sábato's irony at its face value, the importance of one adverb varies in degree according to the genre. In poetry, for example, or in the short story, one word (even an adverb) may sometimes be the key to its success. Finally, as Borges has not written any novel, Sábato's example of Tolstoy is, to say the least, rather imprecise.

6. Sábato, *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, p. 174.

7. On this aspect of his work, see "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," *Labyrinth*, pp. 177–85.

was also the first Argentine writer to achieve genuine universality in spite of the *gauchos* and *compadritos* one finds in his stories. Second, the arguments Sábato uses to remedy a nonexistent evil (since one can safely say that the most representative writer of contemporary Argentina is Borges, although many of his stories are set in such places as Tlön, Babylon, the land of the troglodytes, and similar extraterritorial territories) are, oddly enough, of pure Borgesian extraction. Consciously or unconsciously, Sábato is repeating one of the arguments Borges uses in his fight against local color: "I think," Borges writes, "Shakespeare would have been amazed if people had tried to limit him to English themes, and if they had told him that, as an Englishman, he had no right to compose *Hamlet*, whose theme is Scandinavian, or *Macbeth*, whose theme is Scottish" (*L*, 180–81).

Sábato, along with other Latin-American writers, accepts Borges even when attacking him.<sup>8</sup>

The very device of mixing real beings (Borges) with fictional characters (Bruno and Martín) is of unquestionable Borgesian lineage. It could be argued that the reference to Borges in a novel that aims to portray all the features that shape the face of Buenos Aires is only natural, in the same degree that the references to Gardel, Firpo, or Roberto Arlt give expression to some of the myths which are part of that city. Yet the difference between these and other figures mentioned or commented upon throughout the

8. In the case of Sábato, it should be pointed out that he worked with Borges on the editorial board of the magazine *Sur* during the years when Borges published most of his prose writings. Many of his stories and essays appeared in the same magazine, and the least one can assume is that Sábato read them and discussed them thoroughly with friends and colleagues.

Obviously the question of what is Argentine and what is not was a problem that troubled most Argentine writers who, from the twenties on, engaged in a search for alternatives to the regionalist themes that dominated Argentine fiction. Borges was not alone in that quest, but undoubtedly the flourishing of fantastic and detective literature that followed can hardly be explained without bearing in mind Borges' efforts in that direction. Cortázar, another Argentine writer deeply preoccupied by this question, has said of this matter: "Like Borges and a few others, I seem to have understood that the best way to be an Argentine is not to run around broadcasting the fact all the time, especially not in the stentorian tones used by the so-called autochthonous writers. . . . I think there's a deeper way of being an Argentine, which might make itself felt, for instance, in a book where Argentina is never mentioned." L. Harss and B. Dohmann, *Into the Mainstream* (New York, 1967), p. 238.

novel, and the allusion to Borges, lies in the fact that the latter is presented not just nominally but as a living presence. The reader sees Borges walking through the streets of Buenos Aires and stopping casually to chat, as no doubt has occurred many times in the life of the town. It is this experience that Sábato probably strove to capture: Borges, the author of a mythical Buenos Aires, now strolling the streets of a real Buenos Aires. A novel that seeks to re-create the very pulse of Buenos Aires cannot afford to miss such a ponderable dimension. The result, however, goes far beyond Sábato's intention. Borges appears in the novel not only as one more reality among the many that cluster under the roofs of the city, but also as a symbol of the impact produced by his work on contemporary Latin-American fiction. Borges' passage through the pages of one of its fairly representative novels becomes a symbol—a *lapsus linguae* through which Latin-American fiction of the last three decades acknowledges its debt to Borges.

Let us now ask the obvious questions: What is the nature of Borges' impact, and what is the extent of his influence? I have already pointed out how the very fact that fictional characters in Sábato's novel intermingle with real ones responds to an imaginative freedom which—although it is already found in Spanish-American fiction since *modernismo* and its first explorations into the realm of the fantastic—only gained momentum with the publication of Borges' first *ficciones* from the forties on. The concept of the fantastic as found in modernist short stories—Lugones being the exception—is one of overrefinement and virtuosity. The point of departure in their stories is the split between the real and the unreal, and also the assumption that the story moves within the limits of the latter, where everything is permissible, however whimsical. This fracture between the real and the unreal ends by producing estrangement: the former seems to be ruled by laws and norms identical to those which govern historical life, while the latter appears to repudiate and break those very laws and norms. In the fantastic stories of the modernists, one finds a flat acceptance of this break, and no bridge is provided to cross from one territory to the other. Thus, these stories are closer to a super-

natural and marvelous world—a mixture of Poe and H. G. Wells with the lyricism of a Maeterlinck. Their sole purpose seems to be to re-create our imagination, and the difference between this type of fancy and the fantasy that nourishes a wide area of children's books is only one of degree.<sup>9</sup> Not only does Borges move freely between the literature of the real and the unreal, but he has gone so far as to efface the borderline between the two. The fantastic in his stories springs less from the subject than from the treatment of it. His premise is that "unreality is the necessary condition of art." His *ficciones* are not only a way of freeing imagination but also a form of suggesting a new understanding of the world. Borges seems to be saying that we cannot de-realize the world we have so neatly constructed and that to grasp the reality that lies on the other side of our obedient mirror is a privilege of gods, not a task of men. His treatment of the fantastic therefore differs intrinsically from the stories of marvel and astonishment of his modernist predecessors, and this approach to the fantastic has opened a wide road in Latin-American fiction.

Among those who have followed that road, Julio Cortázar is the most obvious and distinguished example. Although his short stories go their own way, responding to a fictional outlook quite different from Borges', it is clear that Cortázar found the way to fantastic literature under the stimulus of Borges' achievements.<sup>10</sup> Cortázar's poem in prose *Los reyes* (The Kings) was first published in *Los anales de Buenos Aires*, a magazine edited by Borges. Its subject—like Borges' "The House of Asterion"—is a

9. In this regard, Roger Caillois distinguishes between marvelous (*merveilleux*) and fantastic art; while the marvelous encompasses "*les oeuvres d'art créés expressément pour surprendre, pour dérouter le spectateur par l'invention d'un univers imaginaire, féerique, où rien ne se présente ni se passe comme dans le monde réel,*" the fantastic is a more permanent and universal art: "*le fantastique me parut venir, plutôt que du sujet, de la manière de le traiter.*" *Au coeur du fantastique* (Paris, 1965), pp. 8–9. For further discussion on the differences between the two concepts, see Roger Caillois' preface to *Anthologie du fantastique* (Paris, 1958), and also his *Images, images . . .* (Paris, 1966).

10. In a recent interview, Cortázar said: "*Borges nous a beaucoup marqués, nous les écrivains de ma génération. Il nous a montré les possibilités inouïes du fantastique. En Argentine, on écrivait plutôt une littérature romantique, réaliste, un peu populaire parfois, le fantastique est né vraiment à haut niveau avec Borges.*" C. G. Bjurström, "Entretien avec J. Cortázar," *La quinzaine littéraire*, 100 (August 1970), 16.

re-creation of the myth of the Minotaur. Cortázar's choice of a motif (the labyrinth), already so clearly dominant in Borges' work, is in itself indicative of close affinities. Other examples of this osmotic influence are Cortázar's stories "Las puertas del cielo" (The Gates of Heaven) and particularly "El móvil" (The Motive). The reader immediately associates the latter with Borges' "Street-corner Man."<sup>11</sup> There are no knife fights in Cortázar's stories, but the vindication of the literary worth of low life out on the raw edges of Buenos Aires deepens a trend in Argentine letters which, if not initiated by Borges, was certainly updated and renewed by him from the thirties on. In addition to stories like "Streetcorner Man," "The Dead Man," and "The South," which deal directly with old-time Argentine hoodlums (*compadritos*), Borges published in 1945 an anthology whose title alone is informative—*El compadrito: su destino, sus barrios, su música* (The *Compadrito*: His Destiny, His Barrios, His Music). It was an invitation to write the poem that would do for the *compadrito* what *Martín Fierro* did for the gaucho. It seems unlikely that a poet as Mallarméan as Cortázar, was at the time he wrote the narratives of *Bestiario* (Bestiary) would have chosen characters from the *compadrito's* underworld as the protagonists for his stories without the incentive of Borges' early efforts to vindicate the literary potential of this segment of Argentine society.

Other instances of Borges' influential presence in contemporary Spanish-American fiction can easily be singled out. Traces of this presence are found in works far removed from the Borgesian scope of theme and genre. His influence resonates through the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, whose story of an imaginary family, the Buendías, in a fictitious community, Macondo, is so skillfully told that it becomes a microcosm of all Latin America—with the legends, myths, history, and magic of a whole continent. While it is true that one of its themes is "the wonder and strangeness of a continent in which *the fantastic*

11. Elsewhere, I have studied these two stories in an attempt to show how the same theme is resolved differently at the levels of structure and style. See "Dos soluciones estilísticas al tema del compadre en Borges y Cortázar," in a forthcoming issue of *Nueva narrativa hispanoamericana*.

is the normative”<sup>12</sup> (a face of Latin America that has nurtured much of Miguel Angel Asturias’ novels), it is equally true that the magic of the book stems not from a reality historically chronicled but from a view of life imaginatively and fantastically elaborated. To explain the nature of this alchemy, García Márquez has, in an interview, told the story of a Colombian girl who eloped. To avoid the shame, the family declared that the last time they saw her she was folding linen sheets in the garden, but then she rose to heaven. In the novel, this experience goes through a Borgesian transmutation. (“Funes the Memorious,” as the literary sublimation of Borges’ own insomnia, and “The South,” as the metaphor of an unhappy experience, are obvious examples at hand.) One of the characters—Remedios, *la bella*—is asked to help Fernanda fold her linen sheets in the garden, and when a mild wind begins to blow, Remedios rises with the sheets until she and they vanish into heaven. The naive excuse becomes a literary reality which now functions not as a metaphor nor as an allegory but according to a strength of its own. Imagination blends fantasy and experience into an autonomous world, with loyalties to both.

But where one most distinctly sees the traces of a Borgesian mode that delights in assembling and disassembling narrative components, as if they were pieces of a Chinese box, is in the treatment of one of García Márquez’ most puzzling characters—Melquíades. He is a gypsy who spends the last years of his life in Macondo with the Buendías, writing enigmatic books on sheets of parchment which nobody can decipher. After Melquíades’ death, his ghost appears to one of the Buendías’ descendants, who struggles unsuccessfully to read the parchments. Melquíades tells him that he is willing to convey to him his wisdom but he refuses to translate the manuscripts because “no one must know their meaning until one hundred years have elapsed.”<sup>13</sup> And indeed, the mysterious contents of the book are revealed only when the reader reaches the novel’s last two pages, which not only conclude the story but also complete the one hundred years predicted by Melquíades.

12. Jean Franco, *An Introduction to Spanish-American Literature* (Oxford, 1969), p. 346.

13. Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad* (Buenos Aires, 1967), p. 161.



Only then does the impenetrable language, which turns out to be Sanskrit, yield its meaning to the last offspring of the Buendías. Thus Aureliano reads the parchments, “as if they had been written in Spanish,” to discover that they contain the history of the family down to the most trivial details as written by Melquíades one hundred years ahead of time. Fascinated, Aureliano reads what the reader has been reading through the novel from the first page on, finally reaching the very sheet which describes what he is doing at that moment: “he began to decipher the instant that he was living, deciphering it as he lived it, prophesying it to himself in the act of deciphering the last page of the parchments, as if he were looking at himself in a talking mirror.”<sup>14</sup> The artifice reminds us of *Don Quixote’s* Chapter IX, in which Don Quixote learns that the whole novel has been translated from the Arabic and that Cervantes acquired the manuscript in the Toledo marketplace. In his essay “Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote*,” Borges has surveyed with some exhilaration the most illustrious examples of this artifice. Along with the *Quixote*, he mentions *A Thousand and One Nights*, and particularly night DCII, “magic among the nights, when the Sultan hears his own story from the Sultana’s mouth.” But the example from which García Márquez seemed to have benefited most is the third one, the *Ramayana*. “In the last book,” comments Borges, “Rama’s children, not knowing who their father is, seek refuge in a forest, where a hermit teaches them to read. That teacher, strangely enough, is Valmiki; the book they study is the *Ramayana* [epic poem by Valmiki]. Rama orders a sacrifice of horses; Valmiki comes to the ceremony with his pupils. They sing the *Ramayana* to the accompaniment of the lute. Rama hears his own story, recognizes his children, and then rewards the poet” (OI, 45). As if the idea of a minor character—Melquíades—writing the story that the novel unfolds, and of a main character—Aureliano—reading it up to the point where both texts overlap, were not close enough to the device used by Valmiki in the great Sanskrit epic of India, García Márquez makes Melquíades write the history of Macondo in Sanskrit—a kind of mischievous wink signaling the remote source. But the existence of a book within a

14. *Ibid.*, p. 350.

book, of a fictional book which already contains what the actual book tells, page after page, reminds us most of all of that Borgesian artifice which suggests that "if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious" (*OI*, 46). Such inversions, by means of which reality and fiction seem to exchange domains, are, of course, one of the constants of Borges' fiction. In his story "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," for example, Ryan, the great-grandson of Fergus Kilpatrick, engages in writing a biography of the assassinated hero, but he realizes at the end of the tale that he too forms part of the assassins' plot. Like García Márquez' hero in the act of deciphering the last page of the parchments, Ryan discovers that in the plan of the assassins he is but one ingredient more, and that even the book he publishes, dedicated to the hero's glory, was perhaps also foreseen in the assassins' work.

The device of turning characters from other works into characters of his own fiction, so common in Borges' narratives that the reader is inclined to think of Don Quixote ("A Problem"), Auguste Dupin ("Death and the Compass"), Martín Fierro ("The End"), Leopold Bloom ("The Zahir"), Cruz ("The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz"), John H. Watson ("The Approach to al-Mu'tasim"), the Negro ("The End"), Theseus ("The House of Asterion"), and others as real beings interpolated in a fictitious world, is a device also found in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. García Márquez himself has spotted for us the guest characters he intermixed with his own fictional beings:

Victor Hughes, a character from Alejo Carpentier's *Explosion in a Cathedral*; Colonel Lorenzo Gavilán, from Carlos Fuentes' *The Death of Artemio Cruz*. There is also another character in my novel who goes to Paris and lives in a hotel on the Rue Dauphine, in the same room where Rocamadur, a character from Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, died. I am also convinced that the nun who carries the last of the Aurelianos in a small basket is Mother Patrocinio from Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Green House*.<sup>15</sup>

When, in García Márquez' novel, Aureliano finally verifies that in the manuscript "Melquíades had not put events in the order of man's conventional time, but had concentrated a century of daily

15. G. Márquez-V. Llosa, *La novela en América Latina: diálogo* (Lima, 1969).

episodes in such a way that *they all coexisted in one instant,*"<sup>16</sup> it is hard not to recall Borges' speculations with time, and particularly the infinite and iridescent Aleph, which Borges introduces with these words: "In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed me more than the fact that *all of them occupied the same point* in space, without overlapping or transparency" (*A*, 26; italics added).

Still, these and other analogies<sup>17</sup> are far from sufficient to define the role of Borges' writings as a catalyst for the new Spanish-American literature. They do, however, suggest on the part of the Latin-American writer a great fascination for another Latin-American writer—a rather unusual phenomenon in a literature that has consistently sought its models in foreign letters. The full strength of Borges' impact lies in his having produced for Spanish-American fiction what Rubén Darío produced for its poetry at the turn of the century: namely, the forging of a linguistic instrument, exact, effective, authentic, capable of revealing an undiscovered Latin America. This is not to say that in this quest Borges was alone. Neither was Darío alone in that poetic revolution which brought forth a whole generation of brilliant poets; however, it is generally agreed that it was Darío who not only capitalized on all the achievements and innovations of modernism, but also brought them to their highest accomplishments in his own poetry. Today we accept as a truism that before Darío and the modernists Spanish was a lifeless, inflated language incapable of giving poetic

16. G. Márquez, *op. cit.*, p. 350. Italics added.

17. In one of Octavio Paz's most ambitious poems, "Blanco," I found these verses in which, much as they reflect Paz's own metaphysical preoccupations, no reader of Borges will fail to sense familiar vibrations.

*El espíritu*  
*Es una invención del cuerpo*  
*El cuerpo*  
*Es una invención del mundo*  
*El mundo*  
*Es una invención del espíritu*

For the unfamiliar reader, I quote the following lines with which Borges closes his essay "Avatars of the Tortoise": "We . . . have dreamed the world. We have dreamed it strong, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and secure in time; but we have allowed tenuous, eternal interstices of injustice in its structure so we may know that it is false" (*OI*, 115).

expression to the nuances of modern perception. The poets who came after modernism and who produced the best poetry ever written in Latin America have all acknowledged their indebtedness to Rubén Darío. Poets like Vallejo, Neruda, Borges, and Paz have left some form of testimony of this admiration and recognition. Neruda, for one, has clearly stated: "Many believe that they have nothing to do with Darío, and yet, if they write the way they do it is owing to Rubén's brilliance, which so radically modified the Spanish language."<sup>18</sup> And Paz has written in similar terms:

**Spanish poetry had its muscles numbed by dint of solemnity and pathos; with Rubén Darío the language begins to move. Darío's place is central. He is not a living influence but a term of reference: a point of departure or arrival. To be or not to be like him: in both ways Darío is present in the spirit of contemporary poets. He is the founder. He is the origin.**<sup>19</sup>

Borges himself has referred to Darío as "a great master and poet," and he has pointed out that Darío created with the Spanish language a kind of music which did not exist before him. Says Borges:

**I think that when a great poet passes through the language it matters not if we like or dislike him. Something has happened to the language and that will not be forgotten. We may like or dislike Chaucer but, of course, after *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Canterbury Tales* the English language is not what it was before. The same thing, I think, might be said of Darío.**<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, I believe, contemporary Spanish-American fiction, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, is marked by a prose that did not exist in Spanish before Borges. Shuffling a few words in Paz's statement, one can safely say: "To be or not to be like Borges: in both ways he is present in the spirit of contemporary Spanish-American fiction." A writer like Sábato, who, as we have seen, has branded Borges' writings with facile labels

18. G. Castañeda Aragón, "P. Neruda habla para Colombia," interview published in *Repertorio Americano* (Costa Rica, August 9, 1941). This statement was later elaborated in Neruda's book *Viajes*. There he has written: "Martí has said of Quevedo: 'He penetrated so deeply into what was coming that those who live today speak with his tongue.' Speak with his tongue. . . . What is Martí referring to here? To Quevedo's status as father of the language—a situation similar to Rubén Darío's, whom we will spend half of our lives disowning, to understand later that without him we would not speak our own tongue, that is, that without him we would be still talking a hardened, pasteboard, tasteless language." *Viajes* (Santiago, 1955), pp. 12–13.

19. Octavio Paz, "Rubén Darío," in *Cuadrivio* (Mexico, 1965), pp. 11–65.

20. J. L. Borges, "Leopoldo Lugones," unpublished lecture given at Princeton University, 1967. (The passage is a transcription from the recorded version.)

like "evasion" and "Byzantinism," has openly stated through his character Bruno: "What I am sure about is that Borges' prose is the most remarkable being written today in the Spanish language." And writers like García Márquez and Vargas Llosa have made similar statements. At the invitation of a Peruvian university, these two young novelists engaged in a dialogue on the Latin-American novel, in which Borges became the inevitable subject:

**Vargas Llosa:** . . . I have always had problems in justifying my admiration for Borges.

**García Márquez:** Ah, I have no problem at all. I have a great admiration for him, I read him every night. I just came from Buenos Aires and the only thing I bought there was Borges' *Complete Works*. I carry them in my suitcase; I am going to read them every day, and he is a writer I detest. . . . But, on the other hand, I am fascinated by the violin he uses to express his things. . . . I think that Borges' writings are a literature of evasion. Something strange happens to me with Borges: he is one of the authors I read most and have read most and perhaps the one I like least. I read Borges because of his extraordinary capacity for verbal artifice. I mean that he teaches you how to tune up your instrument for saying things.<sup>21</sup>

From García Márquez' controversial view of literature, one can learn about the understated difficulties that the Latin-American writer must face. What becomes particularly clear is that a linguistic vacuum confronts him, the lack of a literary tradition in his own language, forcing him to resort to foreign literatures, mostly in bad translations. Cortázar has pointed out the differences separating the European writer from the Argentine, and presents the case for the Latin American at large:

**European novelists (genius aside) waged a war with weapons sharpened collectively through centuries of intellectual, esthetic, and literary tradition, while we**

21. García Márquez-Vargas Llosa, *La novela en América Latina: Diálogo* (Lima, 1969[?]), pp. 36, 40.

Undoubtedly, García Márquez' admiration for Borges' "extraordinary capacity for verbal artifice" has left deep imprints on his own prose. In a recent article on this subject, Suzanne J. Levine traces some possible influences on García Márquez' approach to biography. She mentions Marcel Schwob's *Vies imaginaires* and Borges' *Historia universal de la infamia*. She also points out that there are reasons to believe that Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* had a strong impact on García Márquez' novel, and that in all probability he read *Orlando* in the Spanish translation by Borges, "thus assimilating the style and the art of the English writer through the language of Borges in a translation that, in many cases, is more concise and imaginative than the original itself." ("*Cien años de soledad* y la tradición de la biografía imaginaria," in *Revista Iberoamericana* XXXVI, 72 [July-Sept., 1970], 453-63.)

are forced to create for ourselves a language which may rid us of *Don Ramiro*<sup>22</sup> and other mummies with Hispanic bandages, a language which may rediscover the Spanish that produced Quevedo or Cervantes and that produced for us *Martín Fierro* and *Recuerdos de provincia*. . . .<sup>23</sup>

For Cortázar, then, and for the new novelists in general, the quest in the Latin-American novel is "the unavoidable battle for the conquest of a language."<sup>24</sup> "Radical in facing his own past," wrote Carlos Fuentes, "the new Latin American writer undertakes a revision starting from a self-evident fact—the lack of a language."<sup>25</sup> If the problem of the language represents one of the central preoccupations of today's Latin-American novelists (and it does), one begins to understand their attraction to Borges. Borges was the first (after Sarmiento, one must add) to undertake that revision of the Spanish language which contemporary novelists find indispensable if Latin America is to speak with a voice of its own. This is not to say that there were no prose writers in Latin America. There were, and excellent ones: Sarmiento, Martí, Rodó, Alfonso Reyes, to mention just a few. But their prose was written in the mold of the essay. When a powerful essayist like Martí wrote a novel—*Amistad funesta*—he produced the same overrefined prose, consecrated by modernism, which on the one hand created the seminal "new" poetic language but on the other forced fiction writing into a prose of preciousness whose ideal was "the eternal beauty of art." Modernist novels and stories were written in a prose full of color and melody which became ornate for its own sake; the themes of those narratives were either deluged by the color or deafened by the rhythm of the prose. For the modernists, narration was a pretext—although a beautiful pretext—which allowed the author to create a world of sensory impressions, artistic transpositions, and verbal rhythms where all things were valued for their esthetic potential and their capacity for generating beauty.<sup>26</sup>

22. An Argentine novel, written in 1908 by Enrique Larreta, which typifies the archaic and inflated Spanish that Cortázar deprecates.

23. Julio Cortázar, *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* (México, 1967), p. 100.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (México, 1969), p. 30.

26. Juan Ramón Jiménez, theorist and practitioner of this esthetic, has defined modernism as "a movement towards beauty."

The regionalist novel, which came after modernism, described the exuberances of Spanish America—the pampa, the *llano* (of Venezuela), the jungle—in the luxuriant language inherited from Rubén Darío. Borges represents a double renovation in Latin-American fiction: he abandoned the realistic mode that had traditionally prevailed in the regionalist narratives, and sought in the fantastic a more creative treatment of his themes; and with regard to language, he sought a new concept of style. For the modernists, the color and rhythm of language were the most admired characteristics of good prose. A stylist was, consequently, a writer who handled language with the greatest splendor, who showed the greatest display of verbal wealth and achieved the most talented rhythms. In contrast to this external understanding of style, Borges concentrated on the inner effectiveness of language. “Those who labor under that superstition [of style as an end in itself],” he wrote in 1930, “give no thought to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a page, but are merely conscious of a writer’s supposed skills: his metaphors, his ear, the circumstances of his punctuation and word order.”<sup>27</sup> Borges understands style not as ornamentation but as function. The adjective or adverb which in some way is not a living, functioning cell is a dead and useless body that only obstructs the healthy physiology of the text. In opposition to the verbal profusion of modernism, Borges proposed a definition of style which constitutes a veritable turning point: “*Plena eficiencia y plena invisibilidad serían las dos perfecciones de cualquier estilo.*” (“Total effectiveness and total invisibility should be the twin aims of any style.”<sup>28</sup>) Here, as early as 1928, Borges had enunciated a theory of style that only two and a half decades later found a similar formulation in so-called “zero degree of writing.”

In contemporary French fiction, Roland Barthes’ dictum came to define a whole trend against the tradition of stylistic artistry; the intention was to replace estheticist language by a bare, simple, colorless one. “This neutral writing,” according to Barthes, “re-

27. Borges, “La supersticiosa ética del lector,” in *Discusión* (Buenos Aires, 1957), p. 45.

28. Borges, “Eduardo Wilde,” in *El idioma de los argentinos* (Buenos Aires, 1928), p. 158.

discovers the primary condition of classical art: instrumentality. . . . Initiated by Camus' *Outsider*, it achieves a style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style . . . ; it deliberately forgoes any elegance or ornament; it is the mode of a new situation of the writer, the way a certain silence has of existing." <sup>29</sup> But if Barthes found a felicitous designation for this new outlook of style, the style itself was not only, as Barthes himself acknowledges, "a phenomenon invented by authors like Camus," <sup>30</sup> it was also clearly and keenly defined by Camus himself two years earlier. "If," writes Camus in *The Rebel*, "stylization must necessarily be rather exaggerated, since it sums up the intervention of man and the desire for rectification which the artist brings to his reproduction of reality, it is nevertheless desirable that it should remain *invisible* so that the demand which gives birth to art should be expressed in its most extreme tension. *Great style is invisible* stylization, or rather stylization incarnate." <sup>31</sup> This is identical to Borges' formula of invisibility of style. What is even more surprising than the coincidence, however, is its implication. Camus published his essay in 1951. By then, Borges had already published most of his narrative work; back when he formulated his concept of style, Camus was only fourteen. My point is that if it is true that the tradition of a highly wrought language came to Latin America primarily from France,<sup>32</sup> it is no less true that through Borges Spanish-American novelists rid themselves of estheticism much earlier than the French, who only did so, led by Camus, in the late forties. This is certainly a new phenomenon for a literature like that of Latin America, which has traditionally depended on foreign models.

As a theorist of the new language the Latin-American writer was searching for, Borges did not abound in slogans or manifestoes. Instead, he diligently applied himself to the difficult task of dissecting the deadened language in an effort to establish the causes

29. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (London, 1967), pp. 83-84. (First published in 1953 as *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*.)

30. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

31. Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York, 1961), pp. 271-72. Italics added.

32. Although modernism borrowed from many sources, it is generally accepted that it primarily derived from French symbolism and the Parnassian school, bringing from the French much blessing as well as much evil (for *afrancesamiento* and other ills in Spanish literature, see Unamuno).



of its long disease. One has only to look into his half-dozen books of essays to realize the extent of this undertaking. As early as 1927, Borges saw the wealth of words about which the Royal Spanish Academy boasts as "a necrological spectacle" and "a statistical superstition," since "what counts is not the number of symbols but the number of ideas," and he adds that the Spanish language cannot claim "great thoughts or great feelings, that is to say, great poetry or great philosophy."<sup>33</sup> He further assails the Academy for having "always used the Spanish language for purposes of death, of discouragement, of advice, of remorse, of scruples, of misgivings, or—in too many cases—for puns and plays on words, which in themselves are a form of death." Borges finally offers his own program: ". . . we would prefer a pliant and hopeful Spanish, which would be in harmony with our landscape and our own ways and our professed faith."<sup>34</sup> In search of this language, Borges resorted to style analysis long before stylistics became a practiced method in Spanish criticism. Disregarding conventions and canons, he treated established writers with the same rigor as he did his contemporaries. In the close examination of a sonnet by Góngora or Quevedo, in the minute analysis of a line from *Martín Fierro*, in the meticulous "inquisitions" into the expressive possibilities and limitations of the adjective and the metaphor, Borges explored and studied the mechanics of a text. He did not hesitate to disparage established work in an effort to destroy the myths that had stiffened literary language. Thus, for example, in distinguished pieces by Ortega, Lugones, or Gabriel Miró he found that the language was euphoniously beautiful but expressively superfluous. Overwhelmed by the exigencies of studying a writer through close examination, Borges has pessimistically concluded that a consistent esthetic is altogether impossible:

If no word is useless, if even a common *milonga* is a whole network of stylistic successes and failures, how can anyone hope to explain that "tide of pomp that beats upon the high shore of this world"—the 1056 quarto pages attributed to Shakespeare? How can we take seriously those who judge these pages en masse, with no method other than a wondrous flow of awestricken praise, and never looking into a single line?"<sup>35</sup>

33. *El idioma de los argentinos* (Buenos Aires, 1928), pp. 170–74.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 182–83.

35. Borges, "Elementos de preceptiva," *Sur*, III, 7 (April 1933), 161.

Borges was also among the first in Latin America to stimulate and advise the use of colloquial language in a literature where, as Cortázar jests, the writer "wears a stiff collar and climbs the highest mountain whenever he decides to write." Borges defended the legitimacy of colloquial language in literature, thus anticipating the wide use of it in the present Spanish-American novel, where it has become a significant asset. As far back as 1927, Borges posed the question:

What unbridgeable gap lies between the Spanish of the Spaniards and that of the Argentines? I say none, luckily for the mutual understanding of our speech. There is, though, a nuance of difference: a nuance so slight as not to hamper the full circulation of the language, and yet clear enough to make us fully aware of an Argentine consciousness. I am not thinking here of the many thousands of local colloquialisms that Spaniards hardly understand. I think of the different tone of our voice, of the ironic or kindly coloring we give to certain words. . . . We have not varied the intrinsic meaning of words, but we have varied their connotation.<sup>36</sup>

Among the new Latin-American novelists, it is Cortázar who has best echoed Borges' efforts on behalf of a more expressive and living Spanish and has most brilliantly taken over "the battle of language." While acknowledging that he is neither critic nor essayist, Cortázar has created an original and highly successful type of essay entirely appropriate to his search for naturalness, humor, and anti-solemnity in language. An attentive reading of his essays immediately shows that his revision of Spanish in the framework of Argentine letters is a renewal of Borges' earlier undertaking. In one of his central essays on this subject, Cortázar urges "the revision of our literary impossibilities as Borges once did."<sup>37</sup> Cortázar renews the attacks against "the pseudo-style of surface," "the verbose Spain of *tertulias*," "inflated language," and "the lavish adjective"; like Borges, he praises the Spanish of Cervantes and Quevedo and the prose of Sarmiento. And again, like Borges, Cortázar formulates his own concept of style, one "born out of a patient and arduous meditation of our reality and our word,"<sup>38</sup> which could well be the complement of Borges' "total effectiveness and total invisibility."

36. Borges, *El idioma de los argentinos*, pp. 178-79.

37. Cortázar, *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*, p. 96.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

The alternative to an invisible style has come from the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier. He holds that "our art has always been baroque," and that "the legitimate style of today's Latin-American novelist is the baroque."<sup>39</sup> Thus Carpentier belabors a point that is hardly acceptable, for when he says "today's Latin-American novelist" he is thinking primarily of himself. In his novels he has adopted an Olympian, baroque style which stands at the opposite extreme of Borges' dictum—a style so *visible* that it ends by distracting the reader and even annoying him. Just as Borges struggles to avoid uncouth, archaic, or astonishing words, Carpentier wrestles to display all the treasures of the dictionary—in fact, he has advocated a return to "the forgotten part of the dictionary." The prose of the new Spanish-American novel has carefully avoided this lavish language. The reason is clear: while the baroque style preached and practiced by Carpentier flaunts a bookishness that alienates the reader, the new novel seeks—conversely—to involve him deeply. What Carpentier's dazzling style creates is an estranging distance between author and reader, while in the new novel the effort is toward producing a "reader-accomplice" who, according to Cortázar's explanation, becomes "a coparticipant and cosufferer of the experience through which the novelist is passing."<sup>40</sup> As for stylistic artistry, the same text points out that to reach this reader "artistic tricks are of no use: the only worthwhile thing is the material in gestation . . . transmitted through words, of course, but the least esthetic words possible."<sup>41</sup> Hence the presence of colloquial and informal language in the new novels. Even in the works of younger novelists like Néstor Sánchez, Manuel Puig, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, or Severo Sarduy (the last two are Cuban), where language seems to become a reality in itself, style is straightforward and masterfully plain rather than ostentatiously baroque. It would be accurate to conclude that the new Latin-American novel, instead of choosing the road of baroque language, has followed Borges' formula of invisibility, which in its latest version reads:

39. Alejo Carpentier, *Tientos y diferencias* (México, 1964), pp. 42–43.

40. Cortázar, *Hopscotch* (New York, 1966), p. 397.

41. *Ibid.*

I lay no claim to any particular theories. Time has led me to the use of certain devices: to shun synonyms, which labor under the disadvantage of suggesting imaginary differences; to shun Hispanisms, Argentinisms, archaisms, and neologisms; to employ common words rather than unusual ones; to work into a story circumstantial details, which readers now insist on; to feign slight uncertainties, for, although reality is exact, memory is not; to narrate events (this I got from Kipling and the Icelandic sagas) as if I did not wholly understand them; to bear in mind that the rules I have just set down need not always be followed, and that in time they will have to be changed. Such devices, or habits, hardly make up a theory of literature. Besides, I am skeptical of aesthetic theories.<sup>42</sup>

If one considers that the prose of his early essays suffered the same ills he intended to cure,<sup>43</sup> it was not Borges' patient laboratory of "inquisitions" into the language that truly set a model for the new novelists, but the prose of his short stories. There Borges has created a language that, to use Cortázar's words, "can invent and can open the door to the game; a language that has produced a style born out of a patient and arduous meditation of our reality and our word." The novelists who came after Borges are now writing a prose different from that written by the author of *Dreamtigers*, but before leaving Borges they had first to come to him. In both ways, he is present in the spirit and the flesh of the contemporary novel.

42. Borges, Preface to *Elogio de la sombra* (In Praise of Darkness) (Buenos Aires, 1969), pp. 9-10. Translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author. See complete translation in this issue, pp. 190-192.

43. One can easily understand Borges' adamant refusal to republish those "forgotten and forgettable" early volumes of essays.