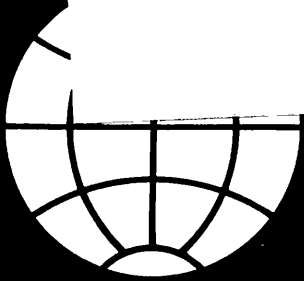


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in Borges' Essays.



# Oxymoronic Structure In Borges' Essays

By JAIME ALAZRAKI

Borges the fiction writer and poet has been a subject of greater appeal and interest for critics than Borges the essayist. Among the twenty-odd books dealing with his work, and throughout extensive periodical criticism, his essays are presented and discussed not as a separate genre but rather as "a necessary complement to the stories of *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*,"<sup>1</sup> or as "fundamental reading for the full understanding of his creative works."<sup>2</sup> They most certainly could be considered complementary to his narrative, but it is clear that they are a separate creative endeavor and should be studied accordingly. Yet we don't have critical work devoted to the essayist. A few explanations for such an anomaly can be suggested: (a) the overpowering success of his short stories, which have earned Borges the reputation he enjoys as a writer; (b) the misleading tendency, on the part of critics, to exclude the essays from his creative oeuvre; (c) the error of viewing the essay not as an entity in itself but rather as exegesis or supplement to poem or short story (an almost inevitable heresy when the essayist is also a poet and a short story writer); (d) the thin borderline between Borges' essay and short story and the consequent need to study one in conjunction with the other. Other reasons could be added. They might help to explain the void, but not to justify it. Just as Borges' short stories have been included in universal anthologies of this genre (*The Contemporary Short Story*, Columbia University Press), so his essays are now finding their way into similar collections. In the anthology entitled *50 Great Essays* (Bantam), next to the all-time masters of the genre, Borges is represented with four essays. There can be no doubt that Borges is as much a master of the essay as he is of the short story.

Borges has produced excellent studies on Lugones, Evaristo Carriego, and *Martin Fierro* by José Hernández. While his views and evaluations may be debatable, no serious student of Spanish American literature can overlook them—they represent definite contributions to criticism of the three poets' works. Yet it is not these lengthy essays (more than 60 pages) which lend full stature to Borges as an essayist. His contribution to the genre stems from the short essays collected in *Discusión* and *Otras inquisiciones* (Eng. tr., *Other Inquisitions*, 1964). The originality of these essays arises not from the manifold and erudite scope of their themes: the works of at least two well-established Latin American essayists—Alfonso Reyes and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada—are equally as manifold and erudite. Reading the essays of Martínez Estrada and those of Borges, the reader immediately perceives a similar intention; both deny the efficacy of photographic realism and both mistrust Aristotelian logic. Speaking of Kafka, Martínez Estrada states: "he is not a writer of the fantastic except in respect to naive realism that accepts an order based on God, on reason, or on the logical happening of historical events. The world of the primitive has a greater functional resemblance to his. There, God is an inscrutable constellation; logic is a system of inferences based on observable analogies; and the organic process of events is filled with wonder, always

open to the unforeseen. In short, a magic world . . .”<sup>3</sup> And Borges: “It is venturesome to think that a coordination of words (philosophies are nothing more than that) can resemble the universe very much” (*Labyrinths*, p. 207). And again: “A philosophical doctrine begins as a plausible description of the universe; as the years pass it becomes a mere chapter—if not a paragraph or a name—in the history of philosophy” (*Labyrinths*, p. 43). Like Borges, Martínez Estrada seeks to transcend an image of the world invented by “the deductive logic of Aristotle and Descartes” in order to draw near to a world which no longer can be categorized, a world perceived by intuition rather than thought by reason, a world closer to Lao Tzu than to Socratic Greece. But while Martínez Estrada seeks cognitive alternatives, because essentially he believes in the possibility of grasping “the true order of the world” (hence his enthusiasm for Kafka as a return to myth and the language of myth), Borges does not polarize Western reason and Oriental myth. He sees in Buddhism a form of idealism, and Schopenhauer—who had in his study a bust of Kant and a bronze Buddha—represents for Borges more than just a doctrine; it is a veritable reality or, as he puts it: “few things have happened to me more worth remembering than Schopenhauer’s thought or the music of England’s words” (*Dreamtigers*, p. 93). In opposition to Martínez Estrada’s enthusiasm—an enthusiasm for a true order—Borges expresses a flat skepticism: if there is an order in the world, that order is not accessible to man. In both writers we find rejection of philosophical idealism, but in Borges this rejection is also a form of acceptance. Borges rejects the validity of philosophical idealism as an image or sketch of the world, but accepts its value as “a branch of fantastic literature.” Borges’ fiction is nurtured by the failure of philosophical theories or, as he says, by the “aesthetic worth [of those theories] and what is singular and marvelous about them” (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 201). By making them function as the coordinates of his short stories, Borges evinces their fallacy and their condition of being not “a mirror of the world, but rather [of] one thing more added to the world.” Yet, despite differences (a transcendental faith in Martínez Estrada and a radical skepticism in Borges), in both authors the reader perceives a genuine effort to overcome the narrowness that Western tradition has imposed as master and measure of reality.

It is in the element of form that Borges’ essay outweighs Martínez Estrada’s. The essays of Estrada fall, with regard to form, within the rational orthodoxy they seek to refute. One might claim that such rationality is the distinctive mark of the essay, and that even when dealing with the most abstruse and least malleable of themes, the essayist is bound to elucidate in accordance with a system of reasoning that, in the final analysis, frames and defines the very essence of the essay. But it is precisely in this aspect that Borges offers an alternative. In his *Inquisitions* there is an imaginative dimension which is new to the Spanish American essay. Borges uses a technique similar to that of his fiction: the material of his essays is in some way subjected to metaphysical and theological ideas which make up, to a certain degree, our context of culture. Bearing this in mind one finds that his poems, short stories, and essays share certain constants which could be considered recurrent motifs or, as they have been called, Borgesian *topoi*. For example, the theme of order and chaos, basic to the short stories “The Library of Babel,” “The Lottery in Babylonia,” and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” is set forth fully in the essay dedicated to “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins.” The invention

of John Wilkins receives precisely the same treatment as the short stories: "we do not know what the universe is. This world is perhaps the first rude essay of some infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his own performance . . . . But the impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe cannot dissuade us from outlining human schemes, even though we are aware that they are provisional. Wilkins's analytical language is not the least admirable of those schemes" (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 109). The same idea that forms the frame on which the stories are woven also constitutes the backbone of the essay: the analytical language of John Wilkins is just as powerless to penetrate reality as the efforts of the librarians to decipher the illegible books of the library of Babel. The analytical language of Wilkins and the ordered world of Tlön are both expressions of the same yearning for an order that is unattainable to human intelligence.

The *topos* of the universe as a dream or book of God, a central theme in the stories "The Circular Ruins," "The Dead Man," and "Death and the Compass," is also presented in all its perplexities in the essay "Forms of a Legend." Borges attempts to elucidate "the defects of logic" in the legend of Buddha, following an expository order characteristic of many of his essays: (a) presentation of the subject or the question the essay intends to answer, (b) a summary of various theories which propound an explanation of the subject or an answer to the question (c) Borges' own solution, and (d) a conclusion, which generally dismisses both b and c as inevitably fallible. In c Borges explains that for the solution of the problem (the defects of logic in the legend) "It suffices to remember that all the religions of India and in particular Buddhism teach that the world is illusory. 'The minute narration of a game' [of a Buddha] is what Lalitavistara means . . . ; a game or a dream is, for Mahayana, the life of the Buddha on earth, which is another dream" (*Other Inquisitions*, pp. 160-61). Once again short story and essay share the same premise. This basic idea renders to the story a generic value that explains and intensifies the events of the fable, and to the essay a perspective that overcomes the "accidental errors" and converts them into "substantial truth." Even in a short story so apparently close to the realistic model as "Emma Zunz," Borges interprets the events of the narration by the same principle. In the last paragraph he says: "Actually, the story *was* incredible, but it impressed everyone because substantially it was true" (*Labyrinths*, p. 137). In the essay he asserts: "The chronology of India is uncertain; my erudition is even more unreliable. Koeppen and Hermann Beckh are perhaps as fallible as the compiler who has hazarded this article. It would not surprise me if my story of the legend turned out to be legendary, formed of substantial truth and accidental errors" (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 162). The "accidental errors" of the essay and the "false circumstances" of the short story represent the contingent immediacy of reality, the limits of a province where Aristotelian logic prevails. In the essay as well as in the short story Borges attempts to cross these logical limits to explore a reality that can no longer be translated into facile syllogisms, because the postulates of the essay are erroneous, yet true, and the events of the story of Emma Zunz are false, but substantially true.

Numerous examples of this correlation between the essay and the short story could be cited. But since the real concern here is to define Borges' contribution to the essay, the above examples will have to suffice. What Martínez Estrada suggests for a more thorough understanding of Kafka's message will also help us, to a certain extent, to

define the mechanics of Borges' essays. In the one on "Literal Meaning of Myth in Kafka" the author of *Radiografía de la Pampa* observes that "in order to understand Kafka's message, his stupendous revelation of a reality previously glimpsed only in flashes, it must be recognized that all that truly occurs does so in conformity with the language of myth, because it is pure myth (mathematics is also a mythical system). Therefore the most meaningful way of expressing that reality is through its logical connotation, that is: myth and allegory."<sup>4</sup> Martínez Estrada understands myth as "a logical system of better understanding the inexpressible."<sup>5</sup> In the case of Kafka, myth represents a form of "not accepting the hideous and conventional order of a reality conditioned by norm and factitious law."<sup>6</sup> We previously stated that in both essay and short story Borges draws upon metaphysics and theology. These two disciplines make up, in essence, the antithesis of myth: the first attempts to substitute myth with reason; the second, exorcism with doctrine. To attribute to Borges, then, the use of myth would be an obvious contradiction. It is not so, though, if we recall his tendency "to evaluate religious or philosophical ideas on the basis of their aesthetic worth and even for what is singular and marvelous about them" (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 201). Thus Borges reduces philosophical and theological ideas to mere creations of the imagination, to intuitions that differ little from any other mythical form. This modus operandi brings several of his narratives to mind: a two or three centimeter disc that encompasses the universe in "The Zahir"; Averroes defining the Greek words "comedy" and "tragedy" without ever knowing what a theater was; a library of undecipherable books; Pierre Menard composing *Don Quijote* in the twentieth century; a pursuer being pursued in "Death and the Compass." This oxymoronic treatment is found with equal success in Borges' essays. Having reduced the products of philosophy and theology to myths, there is no reason not to perform the same operation with other phenomena of culture. Thus the myths of intelligence would be restored to the only reality that befits them: not to the labyrinth created by the gods but to the labyrinth invented by man. Borges approaches cultural values to understand them not in the context of reality but in the only context open to man—his own created culture. John Donne's "Biathanatos" is understood according to the law of causality. The essays "Pascal's Sphere" and "The Flower of Coleridge" are examples which show that "perhaps universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors" (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 8). And the avatars of Zeno's tortoise, as well as the solutions of Aristotle, Agrippa, St. Thomas, Bradley, William James, Descartes, Leibniz, Bergson, Bertrand Russell, and others, are explained in the lapidary phrase: "the world is a fabrication of the will" (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 120), a paraphrase from a book so dear to Borges, *The World as Will and Idea*.<sup>7</sup> The enigma of Omar Khayyám's *Rubáiyát* and the later Fitzgerald version is resolved with the assistance of a pantheistic concept: "the Englishman could have recreated the Persian, because both were, essentially, God—or momentary faces of God" (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 82). A similar solution is applied to the problem of Kubla Khan—a palace built by a thirteenth-century Mongolian emperor in a dream related in Samuel Coleridge's poem of the same name—with Borges' essay "The Dream of Coleridge."

Thus, treatment of themes in the essays does not differ, basically, from that employed in the narrations. There are some instances in which the short story is merely a variation or an elaboration of material contained in the essay, as exemplified in "The

Library of Babel" with regard to "The Total Library" (essay). This first conclusion reveals in itself the outlook of culture manifest in the Borgesian essay: the various expressions of the human spirit with which his essays deal are understood not as attempts to comprehend or interpret the historical universe, but rather as schemes of a world "constructed by means of logic, with little or no appeal to concrete experience."<sup>8</sup> In essence, this prognosis is the same as that posited by Martínez Estrada for the study of Kafka: "reason first shaped the world, and then enjoyed understanding and explaining it rationally . . ."<sup>9</sup> The originality of Borges, then, does not lie in the premise. He has coined one of the most ingenious and fertile formulations of it—"the impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe cannot dissuade us from outlining human schemes, even though we are aware that they are provisional" (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 109), or "metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature"—but he is far from being the first to express such disbelief. Already Kant, "half seriously and half in jest, suggested that Swedenborg's mystical system, which he calls 'fantastic,' is perhaps no more so than orthodox metaphysics."<sup>10</sup> Levi-Strauss has shown that history as we read it in books has little to do with reality; he later explains that "the historian and the agent of history choose, sever and carve the historical facts, for a truly total history would confront them with chaos, and so 'the French Revolution,' as it is known, never took place."<sup>11</sup> Mathematicians tell us that "the characteristic of mathematical thought is that it does not convey truth about the external world."<sup>12</sup> But the reference that bears closest affinity to Borges' spirit of the metaphor, and also the closest in formulation, is a paragraph from Cassirer's essay *Language and Myth*, which we quote:

Consequently all schemata which science evolves in order to classify, organize, and summarize the phenomena of the real world turn out to be nothing but arbitrary schemes—airy fabrics of the mind, which express not the nature of things, but the nature of mind. So knowledge, as well as myth, language, and art, has been reduced to a kind of fiction—to a fiction that recommends itself by its usefulness, but must not be measured by any strict standard of truth, if it is not to melt away into nothingness.<sup>13</sup>

Why not make fiction out of theories and doctrines that are fictional anyhow? Borges seems to have himself persuaded that "Parmenides, Plato, John Scotus Erigena, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and Francis Bradley are the unsuspected and greatest masters of fantastic literature" (*Discusión*, p. 172). The themes of his stories are often inspired in metaphysical hypotheses accumulated through many centuries of the history of philosophy, and in theological systems that are the scaffoldings of several religions. His originality stems from the creative use of this material in his narratives, as much as in his essays. The results in the latter are no less fruitful than in the former. With Borges the essay attains a new quality in which structure becomes an effective expressive vehicle for the intended theme. As with the oxymoron, where a word is modified by an epithet which seems to contradict it, in his essays Borges studies a subject by applying theories that he has previously condemned as fallible and fallacious. Oxymoron is an attempt to overcome the inherent narrowness that reason has imposed on language; it is a "no" to a reality conceptually ruled by words. This stylistic device best defines the technique of Borges' essay because the ideas being dealt with are evaluated or modified by theories which contradict those ideas, stripping them of all transcendent value in historical

reality.<sup>14</sup> At the same time those theories function as oxymoronic modifiers in a different way—they restore the ideas, the subject matter of the essay, to a level where they regain their validity, not as a description of the world but as marvels of human imagination. Thus the seeming contradiction between the two terms (a theory acting as modifier and an idea standing as a noun) is in essence a form of conciliation. The incongruity, then, is only illusory. The two components of the oxymoron clash on a conventional level only to reach a deeper and richer level of reality. Like any other literary trope, it represents an effort to correct through language the deficiencies of language itself. The oxymoronic structure of Borges' essay is likewise an attempt to bring theories and ideas to a plane where their shortcomings find an adequate corrective within the realm of those same theories and ideas. The two terms may often seem to contradict each other. It is only so because we insist on seeing them in the context of reality, where they no longer belong. In their new context—human imagination and fantasy—Borges establishes a new set of values by means of which metaphysics and theology, and for that matter any product of the human mind, is no less fantastic than, say, the Ptolemaic system. Hence Borges' assertion with reference to Donne's theory of time: "With such a splendid thesis as that, any fallacy committed by the author becomes insignificant" (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 21).

Borges' essays would not have reached their high degree of originality if he had merely followed the discursive patterns of structure traditionally accepted in the essay form. Martínez Estrada saw in Kafka and in myth in general the use of magic to perceive a magical world. Borges has renounced that possibility with respect to the world but not with respect to intellectual culture. He has given up the labyrinth of the gods but not the labyrinth of man.<sup>15</sup> His way of perceiving this human labyrinth is based on illustrious ideas: cyclical time, pantheism, the law of causality, the world as dream or idea, and some others. But for Borges they are no longer absolute truths, as once claimed, but marvels, intuitions, myths. Myths by which man attempts to understand not that magic reality unattainable for feeble human intelligence, but rather that other reality woven by laborious undertakings and painstaking endeavors of the human mind in an effort to penetrate the impenetrable. In spite of their rational nature they are myths, because they function in the essay for the creation of oxymoronic relationships that not only challenge traditional order, but open the possibility of a completely new understanding of the subject. According to this understanding, man has been denied access to the world. He is confronted with the only alternative left at his disposal: to sublimate his impotence toward reality by creating another reality; and this man-made reality is the only one accessible to man. One could indeed say, with Borges the world has become Tlön. The poet "makes or invents himself in his poetry," according to Octavio Paz; the writer, in Borges' own words, "sets himself the task of portraying the world . . ., to discover, shortly before his death, that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face" (*Dreamtigers*, p. 93). Man, powerless to know the world, has invented through the products of culture his own image of the world. Thus he lives in a reality designed by his own fragile architecture. He knows that there is another "irreversible and iron-clad" reality which constantly besieges him and forces him to feel the enormity of its presence, and between these two realities, between these two dreams, between these two stories (one imagined by god and another invented by

man) flows the painfully-sore history of humanity. There is a moment in Borges' essay in which he captures this tragic condition of man in a memorable sentence which epitomizes man's plight as both dream and dreamer; it occurs at the end of "A New Refutation of Time," one of his most remarkable essays: "The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges."

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by  
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<sup>1</sup> James Irby, Introduction to *Other Inquisitions*, New York, 1965, p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> Emir Rodríguez Monegal, "Borges, essayiste," *L'Herne*, Paris, 1964, p. 345.

<sup>3</sup> Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *En torno a Kafka y otros ensayos*, Barcelona, 1967, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Borges' contacts with Schopenhauer see notes 13 (chapter I) and 9 (chapter VI) of my study, *La prosa narrativa de J. L. Borges*, Madrid, 1968, pp. 29–30, 82.

<sup>8</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World*, New York, 1960, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Martínez Estrada, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philos-*

*ophy*, New York, 1965, pp. 705–706.

<sup>11</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, 1966, p. 258.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>13</sup> Ernest Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, New York, 1946, pp. 7–8.

<sup>14</sup> On the use of oxymoron in Borges' style see the chapter "Adjetivación" in my *La prosa narrativa de J. L. Borges*, pp. 186–95.

<sup>15</sup> The reference is to a widely quoted passage from the story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." There Borges says: "It is useless to answer that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws—I translate: inhuman laws—which we never quite grasp. Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men" (*Labyrinths*, pp. 17–18).

## The Visible Work of Macedonio Fernández

By JOHN C. MURCHISON

Macedonio Fernández, who died in Buenos Aires in 1952, remains unknown to most people, and an enigma to a few. That is what he would have wished. But his influence on Jorge Luis Borges was decisive, and it is our purpose here to find out why, even at the risk of dusting off his memory. To those who knew him, he survives simply as "Macedonio": the unassuming family name, which had long ago paled before that trenchant title, was further whittled away by friendship, by friends.

For thirty years Jorge Luis Borges was fortunate in being the friend of Macedonio, a man to whom friendship was a passion and a deep joy. A friend and a disciple, Borges frankly and quite proudly admits that "during those years I imitated him to the point of copying, to the point of passionate and devoted plagiarism . . . . Not to have imitated his work would have amounted to an unbelievable oversight."<sup>1</sup>

But the imitation of Macedonio was a constant, vital, and by no means merely



literary process, since for Borges all art is an intimate part of life and not to be separated. It could be that one of the lessons of this master, this Argentine *Zaddik*, was precisely that idea. Macedonio's secret skill, the one he practiced best, was to teach the people around him not only to think, but to regard life itself as intense and constant thought. If Macedonio's literary production is limited in bulk and remains obscure, his other art, the invisible one, has borne remarkable fruit in Borges.

Very little can be told of Macedonio's life by someone who did not know him to others who likewise did not know him. He was born in Buenos Aires in 1874; as a young man he went to live in the forests of Paraguay, in the role of a utopian anarchist. Later, as District Attorney for the Province of Misiones, he was fired for never bringing anyone to trial. He was also, for years, a vague sort of lawyer, and at one point he corresponded with William James. But these few facts belong to what one of his friends, Fernández Latour, described as Macedonio's "prehistory." His true existence began around 1923 or 1924, at a homage for the painter Pedro Figari. The occasion marked his public debut as a speaker—to a notoriously reduced audience which was, in fact, not much larger than his own circle of immediate friends. Among these were Borges' father, Jorge Guillermo, and Borges himself, who, on his return from Europe a couple of years earlier, had inherited that friendship. Precisely that friendship, and the meaning it held for Macedonio, concern us here, for these things hold the key to understanding his life and the influence he had on others.

It is difficult to capture, through time gone by, and from so great a distance, the intangible essence of that sense of friendship. Perhaps because Buenos Aires is a city of exorbitant size, of extravagant crowds, Macedonio thought that the closeness and intimacy of a few offered a sort of respite or salvation from the disquieting enormity which, ironically, somehow repeats the vastness of the surrounding pampa. Perhaps because in that "feast of clarity," as Ramón Gómez de la Serna called Buenos Aires at the time, Macedonio felt he was not understood he searched for the solace offered by those few who admired him. The fact remains that he lived for his friends, for the joy of sharing with them—as others with equal ardor give themselves to medicine or high finance—what Borges has called "the quiet adventure of conversation." Macedonio made friendship into a career, a devotedly held vocation. In fact, his life was ruled by friendship; on that basis, everything else was bound to be diminished. His career as a writer, for example, seems frustrated, since only a few of Macedonio's works have been published and then in editions which are as modest as they are careless. But to Macedonio, publication was a form of vanity, and anyway, he was too busy being a friend. Besides, Macedonio felt that writing need be no more than a rough draft, a sketchy and impoverished version of his thought. With this idea in mind, writing came almost too easily:

Writing was no great task for Macedonio . . . He lived . . . in order to think. Daily he would give himself over to the vicissitudes and the surprises of reasoning . . . and that manner of reasoning which is called writing cost him not the slightest effort. His thought was as vivid as its translation onto paper; alone in his room, or in a bustling café, he would fill page after page . . .<sup>2</sup>

The written reproduction of thought was the principal task, not its laborious literary distillation. He felt, for instance, "an incorrigible dislike for verbal sonorities and even