

## Beyond solipsism: The function of literary imagination in Borges's narratives and criticism

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### Borges's justification of literary imagination

We shall consider the status of the literary work and imagination according to Jorge Luis Borges. An examination of the critical works and articles, on the one hand, and the narratives and poems on the other hand, are the basis for this study, which avoids mingling an analysis of Borges's narratives and poems with the literary thought that Borges's criticism develops. Not to dissociate the narratives, poems and criticism can only blur the very words of that thought, and make the reader unaware that the whole of Borges's work is not self-interpretive.

Consequently, we exclude two stands: first, one that reads a thinking in poetics into the narratives and poems, and second, one that applies criticism's tenets to the literary works. These two stands refer to two hypotheses. A writer's thought is the basis of his work. The work of a writer, as well as the poetics and thinking that the reader can deduce from a writer's works, cannot be at odds with the principles of that writer's criticism. Any counter-argumentation that rejects the continuous link between a writer's literary work and criticism or points to the discrepancies between both, as deconstruction exemplifies, does not run against the two hypotheses. In the case of counter-argumentation, the two hypotheses are still the conditions for negating the link and deconstructing. The two critical stands and any kind of counter-argumentation that refutes them are supported by the belief that the whole of a writer's work is a continuous self-referencing game that includes the writer's *persona*. Moreover, regarding the status of imagination in Borges's work, these critical stands compel us to assume that the imagination can only be viewed as the agency of Borges's imaginary, which makes him able to impersonate any spectacle of reality and unreality.

Against these critical trends, we choose to underline that Borges's literary works and criticism can be read as reciprocal *aporias*. Of course,

this reading cannot invalidate what is obvious in Borges's literary works. Many of Borges's narratives are self-referential and self-explanatory in some ways. Moreover, Borges often inscribes his own image in his narratives and poems; he less often discloses his writing's genealogy. However, he never discloses the reading he made of his own work although many hints of this reading are available. These hints are not straightforward because most of them refer to the readings of other writers' works. Consequently, Borges's literary works and criticism do not encompass one another because neither the literary works nor the criticism complies with Borges's critical tenets: any characterization of a literary work includes the definition of reader and reading; no literary work is free from the particulars of the relation to the reader that it bears or implies, nor is it independent from the relations that are proved or set up by the reader or critic. Borges, the reader, never reads Borges, the writer, as if his literary works did not respond to their author and his criticism could not embrace his creative writing. Establishing this fact compels us to conclude that Borges's works and criticism do not achieve a reciprocal self-referential game. This conclusion is not a surprise to the reader since he can read in Borges's criticism, on the one hand, that the subject's self-reflexive attitude is indefinite and does not restore the subject's identity or image, and, on the other hand, that the validity of any thought about an object should relate to the object as a map relates to the ground it represents: it should be the quasi-analogical presentation of the object. Because of the failure to characterize Borges's criticism as mediating his own literary work, and his literary work as mimicking his criticism, the application of Borges's criticism to his own literary work leads either to an indefinite regressive move or to the reiterations of the literary work's arguments and of his critical formulations. In other words, as the dreamer is enslaved by the dream of another dreamer, the literary works and their authors are enslaved by the whole of literature and writers by the whole of time. Reiterations, or a failure to disclose a specific mediation about the literary works in the criticism, makes reading both kinds of texts an exercise in reciprocal analogy. Borges's literary works and criticism cannot validate one another in an explicit and continuous way.

Borges formulates this discontinuity of his creative writing and criticism by saying that his creative intention and literary production are heterogeneous, and the objective value of criticism cannot be proved. Therefore, literature cannot be aware of its own effects, since the creative intention remains foreign to the literary work's final version; and criticism appears to be irrelevant *per se*, since it cannot account for the whole of the literary works. The result is that knowledge of criticism

proper cannot be fitted to the literary works. The latter remain estranged from any kind of knowledge, specifically the one exemplified by a writer's intention.

These observations can be interpreted in a way that may confirm the reciprocal implication of Borges's literary works and criticism. Literary works are fictions of the imaginary and display its systematic images. Literary criticism is the fiction developed by a thought that identifies reading with a repetition of the imaginary that the literary works display. If creative writing and criticism seem to be exercises in skepticism, the imaginary is the prison of literary works and criticism. It makes the acts of writing and reading solipsistic. Everything that has been written about Borges's mentalism amounts to commenting upon this solipsism.

But reading skepticism and solipsism into Borges because his literary works and criticism do not apply to each other accurately results in failing to recognize that the inadequacy of literary works and criticism should be interpreted on their own ground. This specific interpretation must put the function of the imagination to the fore and prevent us from reading Borges's literary works and criticism as a mere equivalent to fiction and a display of the imaginary.

From a general perspective, reading the discontinuity of literary works and criticism on their own ground amounts to defining them as free games, or imagination's function. Literature cannot think its own effect, although it can represent it. Literature is a kind of performance of which the implied competence and knowledge cannot be disclosed. Criticism is a knowledge that cannot be fitted to the performance of the literary act. Literature is problematic because it cannot justify the knowledge it bears. The open self-reflexive move of the literary work is the consequence of this lack of justification. Criticism is a knowledge that does not lead to any conclusion about the literary work. Criticism's bearing on literature is contingent. Since literature does not display any criteria of knowledge and since criticism is unable to impose criteria upon literature, both are free games.

Borges exemplifies these observations, in relation to literature, by noting that a library cannot be deciphered, and, in relation to criticism, by recognizing the right the reader has to impose meanings on the literary work. Both examples must be looked upon according to their implications. In order to be able to say that a library cannot be deciphered, we dream that it can be deciphered. In order to justify the meanings that the reading imposes on the literary work, we must dream that this work holds meaning and knowledge although it cannot disclose them precisely. Consequently, the free game of literature, which Borges

often symbolizes with dream presentations, presupposes a kind of regulation, as the free game of criticism does since the hypothesis of criticism holds that the knowledge of criticism should have its counterpart in the literary work.

The fact of being undeciphered and of imposing meanings are the tokens of the imagination's game. To be 'undeciphered' does not mean that the literary work holds a secret, but that the imagination's game allows many meanings and pieces of knowledge. The imagination's game makes the literary text a kind of homophony. Homophony implies that the literary work is not without any rule but with many rules, and even changes the way they are stressed. The many meanings imposed on any reading of a literary work are also the effects of the imagination's, whose prop is the literary text. These meanings are also homophonic — their homophonic basis is the very literary text — and in a homophonic relation to the literary work's knowledge — the homophonic mediation is the literary text again. Criticism can neither fit the literary text accurately nor impose its criteria, but its imagination's game presupposes that criticism shares rules with the literary text.

When Borges asserts that dreams are aesthetic creations, he not only underlines that they can be beautiful artifacts, but also affirms that they reactivate various meanings, and can always be understood and consequently written. The literary work of art and the dreams that are its tokens cannot disclose their own knowledge, but exhibit their changes in meaning. When Borges reminds us that Scott Origen thought that the Holy Scriptures withheld an indefinite number of meanings and that a Spanish Kabbalist wrote that there are as many Bibles as there are readers of the Bible, he does not deny the authority of the Bible or Holy Scriptures, but he regards any reading of them as relevant. Criticism cannot be equated with any final relevance, but it proves itself relevant through the various meanings it imposes on the work. The dream may be an illusion; the critical analysis may be wrong. In both cases, the imagination may be misleading and solipsistic: the man who dreams that he is the object of another dream is enclosed in the solipsistic prison of dreams; the critic who offers one more interpretation about a literary work is enslaved to his desire to interpret. But whatever the illusion and ensuing mistakes may be, they are exercises in imagination. Imagination is a faculty that belongs to our life perspective since it allows many perspectives upon the human act that creative writing symbolizes, and upon human production and the world that is figured in the literary work. The imagination at work and represented in the literary work and critical analyses allows changes in self-presentation and self-reference of the literary work and in the interpretations that the

critical analyses offer. These changes have a rationale although they may seem arbitrary.

The rationale of the imagination is to be interpreted through the paradoxical effect of imagination's game. The more solipsistic the literary work and critical study seem to be, the more commonplace and commonsensical they appear. Literary work and critical analyses cannot aspire to a kind of universal validity, since the first one is unable to disclose the knowledge that is the condition for its performance, and the second one fails to prove that its knowledge applies in the right way. However, both are as common as dreaming or interpreting. Imagination's game allows for a multi-interpretation of its presentation, either in the literary work or in its criticism, and consequently makes the literary work, with its language and symbols, the display of shared language and symbols, and the critical analysis the public examination of the literary work. Since literature is a performance that does not exhibit knowledge, and criticism is a knowledge that does not perform, imagination is, with regard to the literary work, the imagination of knowledge, that is to say that which can justify the literary work publicly, and, with regard to criticism, the imagination of the correspondence between all literary forms and interpretations, that is to say, what makes the criticism always relevant. By underscoring that literature has become mental in modern times, Borges points out that, although literature and criticism are without explicit rules, they tend to delineate the rules that regulate each of them. Imagination allows this delineation and identifies these rules to our life forms: dreams, beliefs, languages, actions, history.

From these remarks, the imagination, in Borges, is to be defined as the faculty that relates his literary work's free performance and his criticism's free knowledge to the worlds that give them rules. These worlds are our very common world that encompasses our life forms. Consequently, the imagination in Borges should be read neither as the imagination of unreality or otherness, nor as the imagination of solipsism, but as the imagination of the commonplaces which exemplify our whole world and life forms. In Borges, the aesthetic literary experience is questioned neither from the self-reference that literary works present, nor from the imaginary transgressions that are narrated, but from imagination's game that supposes the constant agreement upon the life forms that men share. The imagination is ruled by the necessary and free public understanding of its presentations. Consequently, it is deconstructive of all discourse and forms that explicitly display the rules of their meanings and constructions or identify their meanings as secret and refer their forms to cryptic rules of construction. The imagination negates the objective state of affairs and rational language that do not allow us to

recognize the whole of our life forms and private language at once. Because of the imagination, a literary work is not the token of objective or private knowledge but the manifestation of our agreement upon the whole of our life forms. Consequently, literature is a kind of performance whose implied competence and knowledge cannot be disclosed, because it speaks from the beginning the language of knowledge — the language of life forms and commonplaces. Criticism is an act of knowledge that cannot be fitted to the performance of any specific literary work because, from the beginning, it is the knowledge of life forms.

#### The function of imagination as exemplified by the narrative

In order to exemplify the function of the imagination in his literary works, Borges resorts to the evocation of imaginary objects that are strange or secret objects — *Holy Writ* in the narrative 'El libro de arena', 'aleph' in the narrative 'El Aleph'. But strangeness and secrecy, evidence and muteness are not qualities per se of the imaginary objects and books. These features are the tools needed to represent the knowledge of the literary work and the relevance of criticism, and to picture the imagination that produces images of the commonplaces that are our life forms.

The *Holy Writ* book, in the narrative 'El libro de arena', is one and multiple, limited by its cover, and contains an infinite number of pages. Through the infiniteness of the *Holy Writ*, the imagination exemplifies the double status of the imaginary object and the literary work. The object is pictured according to several perspectives but with one single identity. So, the book is said to be monstrous, although it is equal to any book in the National Library and can be handled and read by a man who is not a monster. In other words, the imagination presents its object as a world of its own, and attuned to the whole world. This ambivalence or contradiction can be defined as the consequence of the minimal act of the imagination, that is, to impose the image of what is at once according to a rule and against any rule. Under the conditions of such a minimal act of the imagination, this book is what two men — or many men — share after the book is deposited in the library.

In 'El libro de arena', the imagination allows for the intervention that does not deconstruct the commonplace but makes it a kind of happening. This book is described as an apparition and seems to have a life of its own. The apparition and life proper are not the tokens of the imaginary but symbols of the commonplace, which is not only a *locus* but also a current event. The conclusion of 'El libro de arena' is explicit. The

difficulty in reading and handling the book is not the consequence of a hidden or too-rich meaning, but of the fact that the book bears the description of the whole world and the whole world cannot be under control. The imagination does not communicate any kind of otherness but the world's presentation that presupposes the world is complete and forever has been and will be our commonplace. Literary works do not disclose knowledge because they show the rules or conditions of it, which is the wholeness of the world and the common sense of representation. Borges's imagination is not to be identified with the faculty that makes it possible to construe counterfactuals, alterities, and incalculables, but with the faculty that exhibits the paradox of the commonplace. The commonplace is the rule of discourse and presentation. The rule cannot be specified because it allows the expression of all life forms. *Holy Writ* can be defined as a counterfactual book, an alien book, a book that does not meet any calculus, but these characteristics do not fit the fact that the book can be allotted a location in our world.

Consequently, the narrative's stress upon ubiquity, time, and simultaneity does not associate the *Holy Writ* with any kind of imaginary projection, nor does it identify the world of the narrative with any kind of projected world. The imagination shows the imaginary as autonomous and self-developing. Ubiquity, time, and simultaneity characterize the object — in this case, the *Holy Writ* — as if it were one with time and space on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as if it were not in time and space. The imagination presents the intuition of time and space so that they are no longer the frame into which the truth of an object can be expressed, but they become what allows us to perceive whatever is happening anywhere at any time — 'Si el espacio es infinito estamos en cualquier punto del espacio. Si el tiempo es infinito estamos en cualquier punto del tiempo' [If space is infinite we are now at any point in space. If time is infinite we are at any point in time] says Borges (1989/96: 3.69) — and be one with the whole world. Because of the play of the imagination upon time and space, the literary work is always whole and confronted with the idea of the whole. The intuition of time and space shows that the present moment, represented by the book, is the moment of the necessary and of the contingent. Consequently, this representation exemplifies the wholeness of time and space. The imagination does not transgress the rules of time and space — the book *Holy Writ* is handed to the narrator at a specific time and place, and the narrative's timeframe complies with these rules — it frames our world experience and makes possible the presentation of the whole world per se.

Because the narrative cannot be associated with imaginary projection, the imagination links the tautology of the writing — a writing represents what it presents — with the belief in what we can see, and consequently in what we can present and represent. *Holy Writ* is a sacred book and, because it is sacred, it is an object and a sign of belief; but religious belief is not the point of the narrative. The book is the token of the belief in whatever it is we see. Because of the imagination and the objective belief that it bears, we do not have to choose between what we write, present, and represent, and what we see. The imaginary object is a written object, but it does not enslave the reader to this writing. It makes possible a vision — *Holy Writ* is said to be seen. However, this vision does not amount to an entrapment of the reader — the narrator of 'El libro de arena' is able to get rid of *Holy Writ*. Finally, this vision is not counterfactual — *Holy Writ* can be seen in reality because it can be placed on a bookshelf.

As 'El Aleph' demonstrates, no contradiction should be read between the explicitness of these visions and writing, which allows us to represent and recognize daily life, and the opaqueness of the experience — these visions and writing — which cannot be intersubjective. Through *imagination* and *belief*, the writer can illustrate our world, although he can validate neither the world itself nor the presentation of the world that the narrative offers. Though fiction cannot be authenticated by the writer or his persona, it is a pure and truthful representation, because the imagination is one with the word, and the word is expressive, which means that the word is the token of the belief in the world, as any belief is a belief in the world. On one hand, writing is the experience of a quasi-dream. It retains the solipsistic quality of a dream, and expands according to a reflective line that encompasses and demonstrates the vision that is its condition — the dreamlike quality of imagination's representations. On the other hand, both the peculiar vision and writing of 'El Aleph' amount to envisioning the daily and ordinary life of any time, any place in the whole world, and to picturing them.

The belief is adequate to the verbal expressiveness because it is the belief in the minimal identity of the world — the world is the unity and uniqueness of its times, places, events and spectacles. The imagination is adequate to the verbal expressiveness because it neither chooses nor selects any thing among things, any time among times, as the word does. To associate the imagination with the belief allows us to recognize the verbal expressiveness and make up the literary work according to it. Then, writing is freed from the reflexive move which is useless since it does not come to the verbal expressiveness. Consequently, the literary work is assertive truth though it can be compared with reality on a punctual and



temporary basis only — the *aleph* is *one* letter which is seen for a few moments *only*, and the writing of this experience cannot be repeated. The reciprocal integration of the world and literary work is singular, and the literary work is defined as a quasi-happening. Writing, imagining and believing all together are the solution to the inability of writing to proceed when writing is identified with calculus (i.e., with a rule), or the continuous integration to reality (i.e., with negating imagination's game), or with self-reflexivity (i.e., with the imagination of writing only).

Because the imagination is identified with the exhibition of life forms in Borges's narratives, and because it cuts across the function of the literary imagination that has been in use for the past two centuries, it is possible to bypass the limits of poetics and aesthetics related to his works. Finally, this results in negating the limits imposed by the imagination of the imaginary, the imagination of realism, and the imagination of writing. These imaginations are kinds of limitations, because each presents or supposes a self-contained world, where everything is given from the start. In the imaginary, everything is possible in extension but nothing in comprehension — we are free to imagine an infinite number of lives and situations, but they are all included in the set of possibilities that the imaginary defines. The imagination of realism excludes any representation or possibilities that are not of this reality. The imagination of writing characterizes writing as one kind of possible world, and so results in challenging the creative process.

Borges does not exclude the representations of these imaginations in his narratives. 'El libro de arena' and 'El Aleph' can be read according to the imagination of the imaginary, the imagination of realism, and the imagination of writing. However, this does not mean that the imagination in Borges's works is inconsistent. Borges plays with these various kinds of imaginations in order to show that nothing is more enigmatic and uncertain than our present time, because, while we can be sure of what we imagine, we always remain uncertain about what we live. This does not mean that our life is cryptic but that reality can have no possible bearing: it can be a happening. The only way to demonstrate this feature of reality is to demonstrate that the imagination of the imaginary, the imagination of realism, and the imagination of writing are inadequate to any particular image of this happening. *Holy Writ* cannot account for the reality in which it appears, although it is related to the whole world of this reality; neither can 'El Aleph' although it discloses daily life.

Consequently, Borges's imagination in the narratives is the imagination of reality in a very specific way. Since reality is a kind of happening that Borges's characters cannot foresee, and since this inability does not prevent them from being aware of the world and its wholeness,

imagination is a schema that provides the representation of the means to obtain the image of the contradictory concept of reality — contradictory because the wholeness of the world does not equate with any whole set of possibilities, and appears extensive and comprehensive at once. This is exemplified by 'La biblioteca de Babel': the library cannot be deciphered and, in order to say that the library cannot be deciphered, we must dream that it can be deciphered. Put in other words, imagination should be characterized as purely intentional: we can neither draw nor picture nor understand what we imagine in this way. The pure intentionality of the imagination enables the narratives to tackle reality's contradiction — the world's wholeness does not equate with any whole set of possibilities — and, at the same time, to represent any reality and its happening. The pure intentionality accounts for the dreamlike character of the narratives, and the ability to tackle reality's contradictions makes useless any reference to solipsism. The paradox of a literary text — the fact that the implied competence and knowledge it bears cannot be disclosed — is a paradox of the imagination, since imagination is only a schema. Imagination is not dissociated from the belief in what we see or represent, because it is the schema that allows representations and images of what cannot be represented *per se*.

#### **The function of imagination in Borges's criticism**

Reminding us of Plato's characterization of books — 'los libros son como las estatuas; parecen seres vivos pero cuando se les pregunta algo, no saben contestar' [books are like statues; they look like living beings, but if asked something they cannot reply] — Borges (1989/96: 3.267–268) points to the public muteness and evidence of books: although they are manifest, they are not active in public communication. Consequently, literary criticism does not aim at interpreting books, but at imitating their public character and at making this imitation the means to experience and show the objective spirit of human kind. This aim entails seeing the various literatures as a unity — the unity of the public space that literary works constitute — and defines reading not as a response to the literary works, but as an act of construing this public space in time. Borges knows that this act is our mind's act, specifically, the act of the imagination that connects books together in order to point to the public space. In order to demonstrate the mind's act and to prove that reading equates with experiencing the public space in history, Borges exhibits the contradictions of any literary criticism and defines them as the ways through which we become aware of the mind's act. Consequently, literary criticism is

different from any reflexive move of the reader and from any entrapment by literature or literary hermeneutics. It shows that man cannot live without believing in himself. Literary criticism is the imagination of this belief, which allows us to affirm the permanent exercise of the objective human spirit. The objective human spirit responds to all books and makes manifest the public sphere that books exemplify.

To interpret works and literatures according to the unity of literature, and to put them under the aegis of the continuous similarity of literary creation, as Borges does, means that criticism utilizes two representations simultaneously, that of realism, which makes the reading of literature an archetypal reading, and that of nominalism, which defines each individual work as inclusive of every detail of the world and of every literary work. Moreover, readings and the samples of reading that literary criticism offers throughout history presuppose the experience and awareness of time. The unity of literature and the continuous similarity of literary creation do not prevent the writing of criticism from being a time-bound process. It comes after literature and puts the literary works in time since it changes the literary work although it does not alter the texts' words. Consequently, the duality of realism and nominalism that characterizes literary criticism must be complemented by the duality of the time experience that literary criticism brings to the foreground — the experience of eternity and the experience of the present moment.

Because of this duality of the time experience it presupposes, literary criticism attains a kind of contradiction. Negating literature's eternity should entail ignoring many books. Identifying literature with only its eternity should equate disregarding the literary works' diversity because the eternity of literature commands that literature should be thought about only according to its genres. Practicing literary criticism and reading make us perceive the literary work in time and space, and consequently refer to the eternity and presentness at once, while the literary work, as exemplified by 'El libro de arena' and *Holy Writ*, represents its object and time at once. To say that literary criticism is knowledge and competence without performance means that it can never make the eternity and presentness of literature a single spectacle, as the literary work makes one spectacle with the actions, subjects, and objects it represents.

Literary criticism can only imagine this spectacle but cannot be it. When, quoting Paul Valéry, Borges writes that the history of literature should be the story of the mind, he repeats, from the perspective of literary criticism, that literature has become mental in modern times, and he points out the fact that literary criticism should not be the study of the literary works but of literature's eternity. However, eternity is

invisible and literary archetypes are not revealed to men — 'Acaso un arquetipo no revelado aún a los hombres, un objeto eterno (para usar la nomenclatura de Whitehead), esté ingresando paulatinamente en el mundo' [Perhaps an archetype as yet unrevealed to men, an eternal object (to use Whitehead's nomenclature), is gradually entering the world] (Borges 1960: 30) — the only way to outline archetypes is to compare literary works, although no rule for comparison is available since archetypes are not revealed. Consequently, comparing literature is an act of the imagination that is time bound in two ways: it scans various periods of history and it confirms man's sense of time. If one compares the time status of the literary work to the time status of criticism, both appear symmetrical. The literary work anaesthetises empirical time, because imagination is a schema. Literary criticism points to empirical time while outlining archetypes. The critic knows that, although the aesthetic experience is assertive and confirms the autonomy of the literary work, this work is also defined by its situation in the history of literature and in the history of its reading. In other words, and contrary to literary imagination that in literary work neither negates the multiplicity of logos through the unity of logos, nor negates the unity through the multiplicity, the critical reading cannot read logos into the various logoi. With regard to the critical reading, the logos is neither its reason nor its common place. The critical reading can only imagine logos and define it as the ideal that commands its process.

Consequently, the critical imagination does not stop drawing continuities because the critical comparison cannot make the archetypes definitely manifest. Instead of recovering logos, it mediates between time, history, and archetypes in a provisional way. It presupposes that human language and creations are historical, and that man's historical consciousness is the reading's only commonplace. The critical imagination is akin to the very experience of history, as this experience is defined by Borges (1960: 162): 'la historia universal es una Escritura Sagrada que desciframos y escribimos inciertamente, y en la que también nos escriben' [universal history is a Holy Book that we decipher and write with uncertainty, and which is also written to us.] History's paradox — history makes man and man makes history, it is written and man writes it — is the paradox of the critical imagination. This imagination deciphers the archetypes and also writes them in history: 'El poema *'Fears and Scruples'* de Robert Browning profetiza la obra de Kafka, pero nuestra lectura de Kafka afina y desvía sensiblemente nuestra lectura del poema' (1960: 147–148) [Browning's poem 'Fears and Scruples' prophesizes Kafka's work, but our reading of Kafka tunes up and diverts sensibly our reading of the poem].

From this perspective the cult of books to which intertextual reading is akin, should not be interpreted as the consequence of recognizing the ideal of the logos, but as the recognition of the very material required to construe the reading in history. Books are the only material that makes the coagulation of individuals' and groups' experiences possible in history. Consequently, for the critical imagination books are monuments, contrary to the literary imagination that identifies the book with instability, and to the Ancients who characterized the book as antecedent to conversations, and to religions that identify it as God's creation. It is why, for the critical reading, the book is a form that is solid and allows the meeting of the writer and the reader. This meeting is the basis for the critical imagination and for the common spirit shared by the writer and the reader, and objectified only through the form of the literary work. Menard writes the *Quixote* again, which does not mean that Menard duplicates it, but that the very writing of the work is the single commonplace for two distinct thoughts that bear specific historical features. This commonplace does not suppose any hermeneutic continuity but writing's stability, which is the only representation of the common spirit shared by the writer and reader.

Strikingly, even when the literary work offers an explicit representation of the world's ubiquity and wholeness as does Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, the critic is not freed from his time and history predicament. Borges's (1989/96: 3.343) *Nueve ensayos dantescos* is not a commentary on the *Divine Comedy*'s fiction and its 'lámina de ámbito universal', but a historical study of the work's meaning that remains enigmatic not because Dante misconceived his characters and the theological implications of his work, but because 'Un libro es las palabras que lo componen' [a book is the words that make it up] (Borges 1989/96: 3.353), which are the only medium of meaning. The work's words are to be read verbatim because the work does not respond to the reader whatever its imagination's span and effects are: the reader remains a stranger to the wholeness hinted at by the work unless he conceives by himself, as Borges does in the preface to the *Nueve ensayos*, a world that is complete. Failing this conception, literary criticism can only be the picture of the work's reading. This picture does not display the hermeneutic debates about the text, since the work means only what it means. It expresses the objective spirit that the various literary works and their readings constitute:

'Un gran libro como la *Divina Comedia* no es el aislado o azaroso capricho de un individuo; muchos hombres y muchas generaciones tendieron hacia él. Investigar sus precursores no es incurrir en una miserable tarea de carácter jurídico o

policial; es indagar los movimientos, los tanteos, las aventuras, las vislumbres y las premoniciones del espíritu humano'.

[A great book like *The Divine Comedy* is not the isolated or random whimsy of an individual; many men and many generations have tended towards it. To investigate its precursors is not to incur in a mundane, juridical or police-like task; it is to look into the movements, the attempts, the adventures, the insights and the premonitions of the human spirit.] (Borges 1989/96: 3.363)

The critical comparison does not disclose a genre or archetype but the activity of the human mind. The critical imagination mediates the various works and defines them as reciprocal mediations in history. Against the imagination of wholeness and the ubiquity of the literary work, the critical imagination delineates the continuous action of the human mind in history.

Finally, the functions of these two imaginations, narrative and criticism, allow us to explain why Borges does not construe his criticism as a reflection of his literary works. The imagination of narratives is devoted to representing the presence and uncertainty of reality — which means that reality is defined as the constant possibility of a future that we cannot prophesize and as an expectation we cannot specify. The imagination of criticism is devoted to the definition of the mind's ongoing activity in time and history — which means that the mind does not expect anything new since it is the unity of thinking. The imagination of narratives offers us the belief in what we see and represent and the imagination of criticism offers us the belief in what we say and write. Each of these beliefs is a way to objectify our belief in our world, our mind, and our spirit. Although these beliefs are connected to dreaming and to the subject's reading power, Borges suggests they are discovered, since the first belief allows man to recognize reality and the second one enables him to identify his own mind's act. Consequently, Borges' criticism cannot reflect his literary works since such a reflection would miss the rationale of criticism and narratives: although the belief cannot be grounded on the exactness of a piece of reasoning, it is necessary to life, because it is the belief in the daily life and its spectacles and in the public sphere that should be associated with the human mind.

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**Special Issue**

**Jorge Luis Borges: The praise of signs**

**Guest Editor:**

**LISA BLOCK DE BEHAR**

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