

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Paradoxes of Paradoxes

Now we do not define each deed that incites our song;  
we cipher it in one sole word that is the Word.

—Borges, "UNDR"

In this case it would be valid to modify the formula of the Hebrew superlative, since it is not only a question of distinguishing a level of superiority that exalts a king of kings for being the greatest, or a song of songs that was the best and is his. Despite these grammaticized excellences, it is necessary to point out that the superlative used here is not applied in order to exalt in the same way. Similarly, Borges announces in his book *Prologues*<sup>1</sup> the presentation of a "prologue of prologues." I would be interested in anticipating by way of this double plural the apex of paradoxes that Borges's oeuvre and its author multiply, those of a Borges, who writes, and the other, who also does.

I would not want to attribute solely to the Balkan hospitality of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, to his convocation to reflect, in Dubrovnic, in 1989, on "Collapses, paradoxes, cognitive dissonances," the necessity to recur thematically to Borges's paradoxical imagination with such *naturalness*. Above all because, attending to themes of this nature, naturalness could be alarming. It is true that if unforeseeability constitutes one of the conditions of the paradox, then dealing with paradoxes one need not speak of Borges nor, dealing with Borges, would it be necessary to speak of paradoxes: "in the Koran there are no camels; this absence of camels would be enough to prove that it is not Arabic."<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, these reflections are initiated in the *key of preterition*, a figure that seems to me more paradoxical than paradoxes themselves, although, as it is limited to accessory metadiscursive rhetorical recourses, one does not always remember that in saying that one does not

say what one says, the rhetorical figure reveals one of the complicated dualities that are a condition of the word. Between paradoxes and preteritions would be the sententious occurrence of the first and the perverse redundancy of the second, two of the scarce differences between figures that have in common an ambivalent autoreferential *renvoi*: without interrupting the consecutiveness of discourse, they are terms that remit it to itself, formulating a verbal autoreferentiality at the same time as they suspend it. The suspended reference remains and does not, goes and comes, as much what one says as what one does not say is said, is negated, and is maintained.<sup>3</sup>

Paradoxical literature has always existed, but there are works and moments in which this frequency explodes, and it is already difficult to pass them by, their lights and blinding flashes. Borges is a paradoxical event of such a kind that his analysis would overflow the specifics of whatever description, or the limits of inventory. Because of the logical vastness and variety of this recourse, one of the first problems would be to pose again the question, Where to begin? But the beginning, in the same way as the end, once mentioned, moves away. There is always a discourse or witness that refers the phrase, the judgment, the solution, the catastrophe, like the messengers who recount the calamities of Job to Job and believe, or say, that they exist only to recount to him his misfortunes. Through the word, even the greatest disasters, verbalized, are normalized. From the moment that someone recounts it, once it is named, the ending becomes a deferred end, postponed; through the phrase, mentioned, the beginning also becomes posterior. Because of something "at the beginning," at the beginning of Genesis, as "*Bereshit*" was translated, does not begin with aleph but with the next letter. In the indicative ambiguities that deixis claims to avoid, the uttered beginning refers to itself from the beginning, two times: "In the beginning was the Word." In the same way, in the oft-discussed "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*," the initial autoreferentiality formulated as deixis (*ceci*: this) is part of an indication of circularity that problematizes the formulation. Perhaps more than the Beginning, it was in the End that there was the Word: "*début*" is a beginning that in French would seem to negate the end from the beginning. Hegel had always observed this complex circularity: "The result is the same thing as the beginning because the beginning is the end (*parce que le commencement est le but / weil der Anfang Zweck ist*)."<sup>4</sup> Similar to the designation "the perfect crime,"<sup>5</sup> one does not take into account that once it is said, it ceases to be perfect, although it does not cease to be a crime. Its perfection, perfection itself, would not tolerate the commentary; because of the mention, not only would it be known, but the perfection is destroyed and

it is only a matter of a crime; without the mention it would not be known and would not even be a crime.

It is in the recognition of this naturalness or paradoxical nature that is rooted one of the obstacles that impede the comprehension of Borges's vision because, precisely, his paradoxical imagination is as *natural* as his *blindness*, because, as well, his *vision is paradoxical*. That precariousness of his biographical, genetic, hereditary condition has been so often alluded to that it would seem obvious at this point to speak of Borges's blindness, above all when he himself accepts that contradictory gift "from God, who with magnificent irony / Gave me at the same time books and the night."<sup>6</sup> He says he accepts it without thinking, without sorrow, like the days and the darkness. It is not a question of resignation; hesitating among shadows, Borges praises them, like Oedipus, he makes out in this way another light. Borges, who never boasted about the pages he had written but rather about those he had read,<sup>7</sup> has no compunction about demanding the virtues of his defect. "Escrever é uma forma de / ver" for Haroldo de Campos,<sup>8</sup> although neither for him, creator of concrete poetry, does seeing manage to evidence the truth. For some time now the theoretical and methodological statements that insist on the question of the observer have been numerous. It is possible, as a consequence, to consider Borges as a paradigmatic observer: perspicuous, clever, lucid, and blind, the paradoxical observer par excellence.

When Borges presumes that Oscar Wilde "realized that his poetry was too visual and intended to cure himself of that defect," he was not referring only to Wilde. Mostly he is also speaking of himself when he recalls that Wilde had said to himself:

The Greeks maintained that Homer was blind in order to mean that poetry should not be visual, that its duty is to be auditory. [. . .] We may think that Homer did not exist but that the Greeks liked to imagine him blind in order to insist on the fact that poetry is before all music, that poetry is above all the lyre, and that the visual can exist or not exist in a poet. I know of great visual poets and I know of great poets who are not visual: intellectual poets, mental, there is no reason to mention names.<sup>9</sup>

The irony of his verses, like the discretion of confidence, does not diminish a stubbornness that is no more paradoxical than it is literal, because poetry brings together those contradictions of the written word. In the first of his last poems, Octavio Paz said:

Poetry  
 is said and is heard:  
 is real.  
 And hardly do I say  
*is real*,  
 it dissipates.  
 Is it more real that way?<sup>10</sup>

From the beginning Borges was determined by contradictions. Like few others, his is an adventure properly verbal, nominal: "His adventure is having been *named*." In this case it is Geoffrey Hartman who, inspired by "French reflections,"<sup>11</sup> quotes J. P. Sartre and validates his hypothesis on the notion that the literary work constitutes the elaboration of a specular name, the proper name proper. Nor did Roland Barthes exaggerate when he understood that in Marcel Proust the decision or disposition to write his novel begins in the moment in which he finds or invents proper names: "Once he found the system, the work was written immediately."<sup>12</sup> For this reason we can say that the "constitutive power" of the name, of the proper name, may well have consolidated the great literary adventure of Jorge Luis Borges—Georgie, to his closest friends. An adventure in which he risks more than the opposing forecasts of a proper oxymoron that celebrates in his texts the bestowing of necessary names in order to recall in a contradictory way the labors of farmers, the barbarous victories of *gauchos* on the plains, and the travels through villages and suburbs.

Onomastically ciphering country and city, the extremes that his texts reconcile interminably, Borges used to rejoice recalling the literary consequences of this specular expansion of his proper name, of his own name, as a natural phenomenon, as part of the denominative pact that "slips between the yes and the no,"<sup>13</sup> the allusions of poetry and the verbal vertigos of the quotidian abyss.

If "*le sententia fuori del comun parere*" (sentences outside of common seeming) can be considered paradoxical, the legitimacy of rescuing the contradictory constants of his texts or of his person remains permanently in question. It is already known that the observation of this constancy is a *common place* of criticism that is not worried about falling back into the same topics, registering, immutably, *mirrors and doubles*, deciphering enigmatic *writings*, reciding in a cosmos that is assimilated into paradise ordered under the species of the *library*. The same *tigers* abbreviate a limited bestiary, stalking through *infinite labyrinths*, controlling acts of violence framed in the sly adventures of *chess*, partly open cells in the prisons engraved by G. B. Piranesi or dissimulated with spatial

humor by M. C. Escher in fixed corridors and useless staircases. It is difficult to blaze a path so well marked, discover the discovered, invent outside of the inventory. As if what were required were the *genii loci* that Borges appeared to avoid, the poor protector genies of my land, the scarce intellectual ascendant of Indians who were confused from the beginning, men or Indians, Indians or beasts, Indians with soul or without, Indians without *h* or with *h*, as Francis Drake registers them;<sup>14</sup> so many ab-original confusions appear determined by the paradoxes of an occidental discovery by accident, of a *dis-orientation* to the letter. America continues to be utopia, an id-ENTITY always in flight.

As for Borges, the greatest paradox is precisely that the paradoxes and the *topoi koinoi* are not distinguished. In the past, in more recent times, criticism has not ceased to indicate the paradoxical frequencies of a dubious eccentricity. A little while ago, the *Magazine Littéraire*,<sup>15</sup> which dedicated once again a special issue to Borges, brought together an abundant series of articles in which I believe that nobody failed to observe the variants of his paradoxical imagination.

It is not strange that the author of a character-author who is the author-reader of a character-reader should be the great author of this age, author of the author of a *Don Quijote* identical to that of Cervantes, although superior. It is strange, on the other hand, that Pierre Menard, one of the authors most analyzed in recent times, is no more than a fictional character; even more strange is the fact that his partial and unknown oeuvre—no one read or even managed to see the draft that he himself destroyed—should provoke so many commentaries and so much praise. It would not surprise us if it turned out to be a matter of emblemizing as well the perplexities of a critical exercise that does not hesitate to pronounce on texts that it does not know—or that do not exist—in the same way that it simulates not knowing texts that it does in fact know.

It is not an exaggeration to affirm that Borges's entire imagination is articulated paradoxically, and it would even be paradoxical to do away with this articulation. How to avoid then the common sense that paradox avoids? How to observe, in that "alliance of words, the artifice of language through which ideas and words, which ordinarily oppose and contradict each other, come to approach each other and combine with one another in such a way that they surprise the intellect,"<sup>16</sup> if novelty, surprise, is rooted in the fact that here are confounded common place and genies of place, doxa and paradox? Once again the paradox is paradoxical, and tends to accredit itself ambivalently; yes and no, one diction against the other, they oppose and support each other in a reciprocal way. Indeed, paradoxes are most dangerous,<sup>17</sup> hardly are they invoked and it becomes impossible to interrupt their occurrence, whenever it occurs. Once again,

what is said is said against itself, like Plato, "accusing<sup>18</sup> writing in writing," a less well known version of the liar's paradox, which does not cease to be believed because it is not merely coincidental that *mention* and *mendacious* are hardly to be distinguished: Who is *L'homme qui ment*?<sup>19</sup> Literature accuses itself of tempting him, and the accusation is as much burden as justification, since not only in Latin does *accusing* recall the *cause*, and all of Borges is a cause for contradictions.

I do not know if Borges, in the same way as the metaphysicians of Tlön—who "do not search for truth or even for verisimilitude: they search for amazement"<sup>20</sup>—only searched for amazement because amazement is all too natural for Borges, so much so that it surprises him that amazement can still surprise. When referring to the admirable perfection of a poem, the narrator hits on the idea of commenting on "the true, the incredible."<sup>21</sup> The consecutive incompatibility of the oxymoron is neither suspicious nor noteworthy in an author who is so well read (in both Spanish and English, one who reads much is not to be idiomatically distinguished from one who is much read). Among so many inexhaustible bookish references in his literature, among libraries, books, poems, stories, letters, where everything is quoted, it is not unusual that the contrarities of a topsy-turvy world should abound. Nevertheless, the inadvertence of the oxymoron goes beyond the recurrences of a narrator well planted in the literary universe. "Incredible" is also the most frequent commentary even for the normal events registered by the certitudes of everyday information. As much about the news that appears in the press as among the informalities of spontaneous communication, it is said of everything that everything "is incredible." Not only in fiction is "truth stranger than fiction," it is in media less literary—journalistic or historical—that truth seems even stranger.

Other oppositions form part of known and established structures: *History of Eternity*<sup>22</sup> or *The Other, the Same*,<sup>23</sup> are titles that are adjusted to the well-known rhetorical reconciliations of titles to which, like so many other authors, Borges tends to accede. As if from the title itself an author would cipher, as *mot-de-passe*, the "No pasarán" [They will not pass],<sup>24</sup> a contradiction that defines ambivalently the condition of literature, of art in general, that converts into equivalents the terms of the tragic alternative and, without discarding them, maintains it. Before Socrates and after Hamlet, in the strongest moments as much of philosophy as of poetry, to know and not to know, to be and not to be, although they oppose one another, do not exclude one another.

Attentive to the inevitable contradictions of an antonymic semantics, Borges deconstructs, from his first writings, the conflictive accumulation of an *undecidable* language: "Let us not marvel excessively; in our lan-

guage the verb *to cleave* means both to rend and to adhere," he translates thus, between two languages, the observation of an Anglophone character, a fracture similar to the indiscernible irreducibility of the properties confronted by the oxymoron: "the public and secret representation."<sup>25</sup> It is an "inversion" in narrative structures, where a narrator uses the correction of grammatical rules to occult under a third person the folds of his own betrayal, using the double edge of the word-sword, the word as thought in English: (s)word(s)word(s)word(s).

Starting out from the title of the story "The Form of the Sword,"<sup>26</sup> the segmentation becomes less abusive. It is a question of a story that has as a protagonist an Irishman whose name is hidden until the end but whom they call in the hacienda "the Englishman." In the same way as the sword cuts on two sides, the word identifies problematically nationalities, identifies victim and executioner, a confusion that the narration enables and grammar guarantees. Barely a minimal prestidigitation, a pronominal transition (third person for Latin, *persona*)<sup>27</sup> and the cases appear to be interchanged: a name for another, a man for another; the displacement manages to make the fundamentals of reason oscillate. How to know if they identify with one another because they are distinguished from one another or if they identify with one another because they are no longer distinguished from one another? In either the narrations or in history, little can be extracted from the *confabulations* that nourish writing. Derrida says that

writing does not have its own essence or value, be it positive or negative. It is played in the simulacrum. It mimes in its type memory, knowledge, truth. For this reason the men of writing gather under the eye of god, not already as wisemen (*sophoi*), but in truth as pretend or self-proclaimed wisemen (*doxosophoi*).<sup>28</sup>

In "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero,"<sup>29</sup> the play of challenges is joined contradictorily between the possibility of searching for truth in theatrical representation (*Julius Caesar*, an imperial tragedy set in Ireland) and the juggleries that historical research does not avoid when, on discovering the crime, it hides it. Once again history and poetry confront one another: if a crime is registered, it is the version of the historian that says the last word or does not say it, even when the crime occurs in the middle of a fiction, as in this case. The two discourses remain vacillating between diegesis and mimesis, between history and poetry, between verity and version. It is too well known that history as well has its origin in writing. That is the first *inversion* of writing, its *investissement*. The figures take

shape in *chiasmus*, an *x*, the letter that obliterates identity or represents it ambiguously in the anonym that cannot sign its name; the incognate identity of the crossed figure.

In another story, "Three Versions of Judas,"<sup>30</sup> access to the mystery of knowledge, to the knowledge of the mystery, is even more capricious. Truth passes through three versions according to which what was even greater than Christ's sacrifice on the cross was the sacrifice of Judas, who betrayed him. Because of a betrayal, similar to "*le Christ en gloire*," his damnation is eternal: the three versions are those of Borges's narrator, against the four of the Gospel. Beyond the uncertain probability of the hypothesis it is the faith in the word, it is the word that counts, not the number or the name. In truth, and for God in eternity, those differences are minor. All differences, even the religious ones. In "The Theologians,"<sup>31</sup> the absentminded mind of God

is not interested in religious differences either, as far as taking one theologian for another. [ . . . ] for the unfathomable divinity, he [Aureliano de Aquilea] and Juan de Panonia (the orthodox and the heretic, the abhorrer and the abhorred, the accuser and the victim) were one and the same person.<sup>32</sup>

According to Harold Bloom, if the misreading fits the reading ("Reading, if strong . . . is always a misreading"),<sup>33</sup> its deconstructive operations of *reversal* and *reinscription* could also be applied to writing. It is a recurrent recognition that the twentieth century has multiplied on the basis of diverse notions and doctrines. Nevertheless, several decades before, the erudite offensives of Lautréamont and "the viper Letter" in which Jules Laforgue wrote, spatialized a poetry that inscribed itself ambiguously *between* different texts.

When Charles Sanders Peirce said that "A sign is something which we know by knowing something more,"<sup>34</sup> he understood by it, doubtlessly, that by knowing something more one would know something different, such that the knowledge of that difference necessarily implies the variations of an inevitable opposition. In part, this is what Umberto Eco reiterates when he considers that, "Starting from the sign, one goes through the whole semiotic process and arrives at the point where the sign becomes capable of contradicting itself (otherwise, those textual mechanisms called 'literature' would not be possible)."<sup>35</sup>

Like the imaginary regions of Tlön, where a book that did not include its counterbook would be considered incomplete, in the universe ordered by Borges, or in his ordered universe, everything occurs or is

explained by mechanisms of contradiction. Beyond the interiority of the text, a story is limited by another story to which it is counterposed ("The Aleph"/"The Zahir"). A letter (*aleph*) is unfolded into two signs (*yod*) that confront each other; a book against another book: *Other Inquisitions* (1952) against *Inquisitions* (1926). There remains in specter the disquiet of a prohibited book, submitted to the censorship of its own inquisition: the book that is object of the most severe interdiction, that of its author, despite his intention of writing it only to relieve the concept of "*sambenitos* and the smoke of bonfires," separating it, "purely by coincidence," from those other, more famous, more atrocious *inquisitions*. Although historical, they do not cease thereby to be the same. Is it a question of words, of rhetorical figures, of books, of religious abuses, of absurd criminal abuses?

Paradoxes exist to reject such divisions as those between "thought" and "language," between "thought" and "feeling," between "logic" and "rhetoric," between "logic," "rhetoric," and "poetics," and between all of these and "experience." In paradox, form and content, subject and object are collapsed into one, in an ultimate insistence upon the unity of being.<sup>36</sup>

In this way Borges discovers in the semasiological reserve of one and the same word conceptual divisions, internal oppositions, and although lexical propriety registers and authorizes them, adverse coincidence recalls incompatibilities of meaning that the pragmatic reductions of context tend to attenuate or discard. Usage avoids those semantic collisions that the dictionary guarantees but that the speaker prefers to forget. Beyond those objections, Borges's language has its foundation in simultaneous usage, at the same time, of different, contrary meanings. That simultaneity discovers in the instant an instance of eternity. It is "The Secret Miracle,"<sup>37</sup> a story in which Borges makes of the "temporality" of time a secondary condition of permanence. It is the moment in which the fugacity of *maintenant*, of "now" is detained, *se maintenant*, maintaining itself. The diegesis of the story initiates it at dawn, when "the armored vanguards of the Third Reich entered Prague."<sup>38</sup> The story was written in 1943.

Elsewhere but by similar mechanisms, his textual strategies manage to dissimulate in one and the same unity philosophical, religious, political, historical, personal, circumstantial antagonisms. Of him as well it could be said that he considered human beliefs to be like children's toys,<sup>39</sup> since for him as for Coleridge

all men are born either Aristotelians or Platonists. The latter believe classes, orders, and genres to be realities; the former, that they are generalizations; for these language is no more than an approximate game of symbols; for those it is the map of the universe.<sup>40</sup>

One of the most suggestive uses of that paradoxical reserve is constituted by the production of opposed and simultaneous meanings, which is one form of the principle property of the term but which manages to disarticulate it in a literary use that reaches the apex of meaning (*Literature of Replenishment*) at the same time as its refutation and questioning (*Literature of Exhaustion*).<sup>41</sup> One meaning *against* another: Do they impugn or support one another? One meaning *for* another: Do they multiply or exclude one another? "This text, then, begins from/by/because of (*por*) the word from/by/because of (*por*)" recalls Derrida.<sup>42</sup> The fable, "Fable," by Francis Ponge, two times fable, is a poem of (the) truth. Nevertheless, not only in the complexities of a poem is it possible to verify the singular cross of irony and allegory with which Derrida celebrates Paul de Man. Whatever word, the mere voice, evokes and revokes at the same time. "The action takes place in an oppressed and tenacious country: Poland, Ireland, the Republic of Venice, some South American or (o)Balkan state"<sup>43</sup> which the ambiguity of the conjunction convokes. A *mysterium conjunctionis* is to be verified in this conjunction (*conjunctionis oppositorum* par excellence), a word almost not articulated, a vocal cry that the letter imitates in the original and primary emblematic circularity of its elliptical trace: multiplication of meanings that attract and reject each other in opposite directions, the oval nucleus from which proceed all contradictions.

Perhaps in the word *cipher*<sup>44</sup> is rooted one of the keys of the word, its gematric or geometric virtuality, the representative aptitude of a word that names the number, the secret writing of a figure that is number and secret, quantity and silence, each one of the numbers and its set, that one with which the enumeration begins, part and whole, the void in Arabic (*sifr*), nothing and the circle that encircles all of the plenum, the apex, the zero: O the letter, 0 the cipher/numeral.

His preoccupation for these different tensions into which opposite meanings enter, that ironic bidirectionality that is the power of meaning, or potential meanings, is hindered by the paradoxes of identity and difference that, although they are among the oldest formulations, are not for that reason the least disquieting: "They do not know how the discordant accords with itself, agreement of inverse tensions, like in the arc and the lyre."<sup>45</sup> It is precisely in the mouth of a foreigner that Plato affirms being to be both one and several, both hate and friendship make its cohesion. In

"Funes the Memorious,"<sup>46</sup> the protagonist of one of Borges's master showpieces of epistemology-fiction suffers, like "A Reader,"<sup>47</sup> "the passion of language."<sup>48</sup> The suffering is as strong as the attraction. Funes is a gaucho from my country who "since that afternoon when the blue-black horse threw him [. . .] he lost consciousness [. . .] Now his perception and his memory are infallible."<sup>49</sup> And for that reason, precisely, he is incapable of thinking what it is to remember and forget. He lies prostrate in an obscure corner of the rancho because he cannot tolerate, he cannot conceive that "the dog of three fourteen (seen in profile) would have the same name as the dog of quarter after three (seen from head on)."<sup>50</sup> For Funes, "the generic symbol *dog* is an archetypal exaggeration."<sup>51</sup> The question is as old as the word. Although Parmenides does not, in the alternatives of his dialogue, manifest it in such a perturbing way, I am not sure that Plato any more than Parmenides had not foreseen the occurrence of this native rustic passion.

The problem is posed poetically when Borges recognizes that the individual is in some way the species, a duality that is dissimulated under the same name: "Keats's nightingale is also Ruth's nightingale."<sup>52</sup> By virtue of one sole word all times coincide, eternity and an instant; all space, the universe in a point; in one word, a word that is also a letter: the aleph. There begins the conflict.

It is worth recognizing in the homonymic lability of the word one of the decisive reasons for the paradoxical constancy. It is in the tendentious and inevitable confrontation that is produced in the interior of the word, of the word with itself, that is rooted the origin of so much contradiction:

Language says the opposite of what we try to say. We attempt the singular, and its says the universal. But it does not maintain only an opinion against ours; because it says the universal, what it says is true; it refutes our opinion. Hegel, in the decisive conclusion of his analysis of sensible certainty, says precisely that language has "divine nature because it is absolvent, because it absolves us of unilateralness and makes us say the universal, the true."<sup>53</sup>

In the same way that "The true theme of poetry, although always secret and never explicit, is poetry itself,"<sup>54</sup> Borges's writings elaborate the conflict of that dual and contradictory condition, of the paradoxical ambivalence of the word that distinguishes and confounds, that rescues and annihilates at the same time. "How to Undo Things with Words" would be a necessary title to complete some that are already circulating.

For example, in the "Parable of the Palace,"<sup>55</sup> the narrator discloses the variants of an obliteration literal insofar as literary: the word suspends the thing or, if the thing is in turn a name, the name of a name, it names it two times, through two voices, a species of *re-vocation* that makes it disappear like the palace that, described by the poet, remains suspended, that is to say, does not remain.

Without making any reference to the dream of Caedmon,<sup>56</sup> or to Coleridge's poem, Borges recounts the story of a Yellow Emperor (he does not name him) who accuses a poet (he does not name him) of having robbed his palace (which he also does not name). "In the poem the palace was entire [. . .] It was enough for the poet to pronounce the poem for the palace to disappear, as if abolished and annihilated by the last syllable."<sup>57</sup> Because of this double *lack* (of the palace, of the poet), the Emperor did not hesitate to have him killed. In the same way as with the poet of the story, for whom the poem brought about immortality and death, by means of the word one palace is destroyed and another rises, like the successive temples of which Nietzsche spoke, which were capable of being placed and displacing themselves at the same time. By virtue of the same word, things begin to exist and cease to exist. The word re-presents them, and by means of that contradictory prefix, the things are not present (which is why they are represented) and are there again; they are presented two times. But as the parable recounts, all representation is suspicious, in reality there are no two things alike in the world.

The "Parable of the Palace," beyond Borges's page, alludes to more than one *palabra* (word), parable of the *palace* or, a *parabola* of the *palabra* itself. More precisely, a *paradox* of the *palabra*, a repetition of the word that contradicts it while repeating it and that designates as much the vault of the palace that the emperor constructs and the poet makes disappear, as the "palate" (Fr. *palais*) where the word "takes place." When the repeated particulars are crossed they are sublated, like another form of *Aufhebung*, which exalts while degrading, disclosing even while suppressing, describes and destroys at the same time. If it is known that all paradox tends toward self-contradiction and toward selfdestruction, the word can do no more and no less.

Between a *counterfeiting* that is to imitate and *contradict*, Borges does not hesitate and insists on both procedures, such that from the moment they are said, facts become counterfeits.

But let us not speak of facts. No one is interested in facts anymore. They are mere starting points for invention and reasoning. In the schools they teach us questions and the art of forgetting.

[. . .] The images and the printed letter were more real than things. Only the published was true. [. . .] After walking for fifteen minutes, we turned to the left. In the distance I made out a sort of tower, crowned with a cupola. —It is the crematorium — said someone. —Inside is the death chamber. They say that it was invented by a philanthropist whose name was, I believe, Adolph Hitler.<sup>58</sup>

For that reason, from his first writings to the most recent, Borges laments that "there is not one sole beautiful word, with the dubious exception of 'witness,' which is not an abstraction."<sup>59</sup> Perhaps Borges doubted, anticipating in those terms, what Lyotard asserted several decades after: "the unstable state and the instant of language in which something that should be able to be put into words has not yet been."<sup>60</sup> And if the witness professed the vocation of *martyr* (from Gr. *martur*: "witness"), doubting the word, believing in the sacrifice? If, as has occurred so many times, victim and witness coincided? What testimony can a victim present? What words could he or she find for so many losses, for so much destruction? "*Il ne trouve pas ses mots*" (he does not find his words), it is not only that he cannot find them. And if he found them? "*Il ne trouve pas ses morts*" (he does not find his dead), when there is nothing but damage, any pronouncement will be useless. Nor would silence be less useless. Like the dilemma of the crocodile<sup>61</sup> ready to devour a baby, it has no solution.

Lyotard defines the *differend*<sup>62</sup> as a case in which the plaintiff has been deprived of the means necessary for his argumentation, and for this reason is turned into a victim. He wonders if the victim has the means to establish that he is a victim. What tribunal can judge him when no tribunal and no right foresaw the nature of a crime that shatters any legitimate state whatever? "There is no other witness than the victim, no other victim than the one who has died."<sup>63</sup> Witness and victim disappear at the same time and there is no possible or attenuating plea for the crime. If it is still necessary to convince, argue, deliberate, verify, only rhetoric would remain safe from the disaster, because it is one of its origins. Neither theory, nor history, nor poetry. After Auschwitz, nothing.

Proofs wear out the truth<sup>64</sup> and make it barely *probable*, that is to say, as true as it is uncertain. If it were necessary to prove such a crime, the means would invalidate themselves. Once again, Hamlet is right to put on a *dumb-show*;<sup>65</sup> for one who debates with himself in the confines of a tragedy, a comedy could well be *The real thing*.<sup>66</sup> For this reason he conceives a spectacle with the purpose of seeing the truth put on stage. A

spectacle that repeats in silence a reality ever less real the more it is repeated: the words no longer count. How to resolve the paradox of the word? If the crime does not refer, the crime will not be known. If it refers, it is no longer the same. Lyotard said it would be necessary to examine the means, which "are at least of two types: some proceed by annulment, others by representation. . . . To represent 'Auschwitz' in images, in words, is a way of making it be forgotten."<sup>67</sup>

If for Borges "forgetting / is one of the forms of memory, [. . .] / the other secret face of the coin,"<sup>68</sup> the word is the best known face. Every thing passes through the word, but in this way nothing really happens (*pasa*) either. The word is trance and transition. If one cannot speak, one must keep silent. It has been said already many times. But what does silence rescue? In Genesis, the interdiction of God is a command in contradiction: He who creates by way of the word does not enable a word to be named himself. As Lévinas said, "the marvel of a thought better than knowing. *Hors sujet*."<sup>69</sup>

The narrator of the parable ends by saying:

Such legends, it is clear, do not go beyond being literary fictions. The poet was a slave of the emperor and died as such; his composition fell into oblivion because it deserved oblivion, and his descendents still look for it, and they will not find the word of the universe.<sup>70</sup>

Until now, commentaries on "UNDR"<sup>71</sup> have not abounded, a story that not even Borges comments on when commenting on all the others in the epilogue to *The Book of Sand*. It is the story of a man who, realizing that the poetry of the *Urnos*<sup>72</sup> consists of one sole word, dedicates himself to search for it and, different from the descendents of the poet executed by the Emperor, finds it: "He said the word *Undr*, which means wonder."<sup>73</sup>

Like its reference, the word is strange, in a language that I do not understand. Its four letters maintain the mystery that the word signifies; *wonder* designates as much marvel as the bewilderment before the paradoxical event of *understanding* (*undr- under . . .*), which participates in an ambivalent way in both forms of amazement. The mystery is greater because the transcription suppresses the vowels, as if they were sacred characters that, read in Hebrew, invoke public prayers in memory of the dead.<sup>74</sup>

Today there is another word that is pronounced like a strange expression, but in Hebrew, which is a known language. Almost inarticulate, it

claims silence as if exclaiming a cry. It disconcerts. It is said in Hebrew but it is already a universal word and is not even translated. It remains enigmatic and distant as if it assured via incomprehension its paradoxical universality: no one comprehends. A unique event, *inconceivable*. Destruction, extermination, annihilation. Even translated into all the languages it resists comprehension. Again because of a word made of four letters, reason remains in suspense; whatever reason fails.



## 9. THE PARADOXES OF PARADOXES

1. Borges, *Libro de prólogos. Con un prólogo de prólogos* (Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero Editor, 1975), 7-9.

2. Borges, "El escritor Argentino y la tradición," *Discusión* in *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974), 270.

3. A valid antecedent to this affinity would be the doctrine of *cassatio*. According to Nicholas Falleta, the scholastics were the first to develop completely the doctrine of the *cassatio* and to examine attentively such utterances as "I am not speaking" or "I am silent." Nicholas Falleta, *Le livre des paradoxes*, trans. J. F. Hamel (Paris: Belfond, 1985), 140.

4. Jean Hyppolite, *Hegel. Préface à la phénoménologie de l'esprit* (Paris: Gallimard 1966), 54.

5. Block de Behar, *Una retórica del silencio* (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1984), 97.

6. Borges, "Poema de los dones," *El hacedor* in *Obra poética* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores 1977), 113.

7. "Let others boast of the pages they have written; / what makes me proud are the one I have read." Borges, "Un lector," *Elogio de la sombra* in *Obra poética*, 353.

8. Haroldo de Campos, "Leitura de Novalis/1977," in *Transideraciones/Transiderações*, recopilación y traducción de Eduardo Milán y Manuel Ulacia (México: Ediciones El Tucán de Virginia, 1987), 76.

9. Borges, "La ceguera," in *Siete noches* (Argentina: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980), 153.

10. Octavio Paz, "Decir: Hacer," *Árbol adentro* (Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 1987), 12.

11. Hartman, *Saving the Text* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 111. "The subject can also appear as being the slave of language, as if it were in addition part of the discourse of a universal movement, in which place would already appear inscribed when it was born, as if it were only by virtue of its proper name." *Ibid.*

12. Barthes, *Les critiques de notre temps et Proust* (Paris: Éditions Garnier, 1971), 160.
13. "Between what I see and say, / between what I say and do not say, / between what I do not say and dream, / between what I dream and forget, / poetry. It slips / between the yes and the no." Paz, *Árbol adentro*, 11.
14. *Sir Francis Drake and the Age of Discovery*, documents exhibited at the Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York, January to May 1998.
15. *Magazine Littéraire*, 259 (Paris, November, 1988).
16. Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), 137.
17. Block de Behar, "Paradoxa Ortodoxa," chapter 3 in this volume.
18. Derrida, "La pharmacie de Platon," in *La Dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 182.
19. Alain Robbe-Grillet's title for his film based on two of Borges's stories (Paris, 1968).
20. Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," *Ficciones*, in *Obras completas*, 436.
21. Borges, "La parábola del palacio," in *Obras completas*, 801.
22. Borges, *Obras completas*, 351–423.
23. *Ibid.*, 856–949.
24. Derrida, *Schibboleth, pour Paul Celan* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), 45.
25. Borges, "Tema del traidor y del héroe," in *Obras completas*, 498.
26. Borges, *Obras completas*, 491–495.
27. "Your mind must leap from a third-person perspective—'he' or 'she'—to a first person perspective—'I.' Comedians have long known how to exaggerate this leap . . . To see ourselves as others see us. . . . This dramatic shift is a discovery." Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett, *The Mind's I. Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 20–21. The text with which the book begins is "Borges and I." It would have been interesting to observe that dramatic chance—in the strong sense of the term, as well—on the basis of the story we are analyzing here.
28. Derrida, *La Dissémination*, 120.
29. Borges, *Obras completas*, 496–498.
30. *Ibid.*, 514–518.
31. *Ibid.*, 550–556.
32. *Ibid.*, 556.
33. Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3.
34. Peirce, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958), 332.

35. Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 26.
36. Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica. The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 517–518.
37. Borges, *Obras completas*, 508–513.
38. *Ibid.*, 508.
39. Heraclitus, fragment 70, quoted in Abel Jeannière, *Héraclite*, traduction et commentaire des *Fragments* (Paris: Aubier, 1985), 114.
40. Borges, "De las alegorías a las novelas" and "El ruiseñor de Keats," *Otras inquisiciones* in *Obras completas*, 718 and 745.
41. I here adopt both literary notions of the two famous essays of John Barth that appear, respectively, under those titles in *The Friday Book* (New York: Perigee Book/Putnam, 1984), 62–76 and 193–206.
42. Derrida, "'Psyche' o la invención del otro," in *Diseminario. La deconstrucción, otro descubrimiento de América*, ed. Lisa Block de Behar (Montevideo: XYZ Editores, 1987), 49–106, 57.
43. Borges, "Tema del traidor y del héroe," in *Obras completas*, 496. Borges combines the disjunctive gesture (an excluding alternative) with equivalence (a copulative union).
44. Although Borges does not explicitly consider this semantic and numeric aspect of the term, he titles one of his last collections of poems *The Cipher* (*La cifra*, Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1981).
45. Heraclitus, fragment 51, quoted in Abel Jeannière, *Héraclite*, 111.
46. Borges, in *Ficciones*, in *Obras completas*, 485–490.
47. Borges, *Obra poética*, 353–354.
48. *Ibid.*, 353.
49. Borges, *Obras completas*, 488.
50. *Ibid.*, 490.
51. *Ibid.*, 490.
52. *Ibid.*, 718.
53. Martin Heidegger, *Phénoménologie de l'esprit de Hegel*, sec. II, trans. Francoise d'Emmanuel Martineau (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 112.
54. Octavio Paz, *Árbol adentro*, 179.
55. Borges, *Obras completas*, 801–802.
56. The Venerable Bede (672–735) recounts in his *Ecclesiastical History* the double poetic revelation that illuminated Caedmon, an illiterate shepherd who receives in a dream his first poem and his poetic vocation at the same time. Both, poem and poet, are begun by "The Beginning of the Created Things." *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin, 1955).
57. Borges, *Obras completas*, 802.

58. Borges, "Utopía de un hombre que está cansado," in *Obras completas*, III, 53.

59. Borges, *La cifra*, 12.

60. Lyotard, *Le différend* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983), 29.

61. "One day, a crocodile trapped a baby who was playing by the back of the Nile. The mother begged the animal to return to her child. — So be it, said the crocodile. If you guess exactly what I am going to do, I will give you the child. But, if you are wrong, I will eat it. — You are going to eat it! — screamed the mother. — I cannot give it to you. Because if I give it to you, you would have been wrong and I had already warned you that in that case your child would be eaten. — On the contrary! You cannot eat it because if you do so, I would have said the truth and you had promised me that, in that case, you would return him to me. And I know you are an honorable crocodile, respectful of the given word. — Who is right? What will happen?" Falleta, *Livre des paradoxes*, 149.

62. Lyotard, *Le différend*, 24.

63. *Ibid.*, 18.

64. This is an expression from Georges Braque. Jean Beaufret quotes it in his prologue to *Le poème* by Parménides (Paris: PUF, 1955), 10.

65. English in the original.

66. English in the original.

67. Lyotard, *Heidegger et "les juifs"* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 50.

68. Borges, *Obras poéticas*, 353.

69. Lévinas, *Hors sujet* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1987), 11.

70. Borges, "Parábola del palacio," *Obras completas*, 802.

71. Borges, *Obras completas*, III, 48–51.

72. Borges attributed to Adam de Bremen the description of a town called Urnos.

73. *Ibid.*, 51.

74. This is the meaning of the Spanish verb *meldar*: "To study," "to teach," "to read Hebrew." Joan Corominas and José A. Pascual, *Diccionario crítico etimológico castellano e hispano* (Madrid: Gredos, 1985). *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged* gives for "to meld," "to show or announce (a card or combinations of cards . . .)."