

Preface

LISA BLOCK DE BEHAR

For some time now it has been frequently observed that there are striking similarities between the specific questions of semiotics and Borges's literary imagination, as much in his critical fiction as in his poetic speculation. Despite their frequency, these affinities continue to attract attention. Nevertheless, it is not appropriate to consider Borges a semiotician, or to compare him with any other bourgeois prosaist who is unaware of — and dazzled by — his own rhetorical skills. Even so, Borges himself remarks in the epilogue to his *Obras Completas* that 'He enjoyed belonging to the bourgeoisie'. His foresight and parody of the prejudiced simplifications of an entry to be eventually found in the *Enciclopedia Sudamericana* (to be published in Santiago de Chile in 2074) communicate the sceptical confidence he bestows upon this kind of widespread superstition, a form of survival that the encyclopedia tends to engage. Bourgeois or otherwise, Borges shares his amusement at his social condition, which is attested to by the urban references to his surname and opposed by the georgic recollections of his first name (more clearly in *George* than in the Spanish *Jorge*). Borges was probably aware of the fact that the reflective quality of his writing and the aesthetic alternatives of his thought are akin to notions elaborated in the fields of philosophy, epistemology, logic, poetics, history and, as well, by semiotics — academic institutions of which he knew how to do without.

On the other hand, if present-day aesthetics, critical theory, or hermeneutics struggle for a position in the widening sphere of an arguable disciplinary topography — if gnosiological definitions question their own limitations and their doctrines — if methodological foundations collapse — if taxonomic doubts impugn the rigidity of inventories that do not encompass the inventions they try to classify — if oppositions fail to justify the ordered series because they criss-cross them — if other uncertainties elude present-day science — perhaps it is then unnecessary to recall that for well over a century numerous thinkers, philosophers, and writers have been reading Borges. After Borges, presumably,

they started to hesitate, interpreting as metaphors the aporias of his rhetoric of indecision, as allegories the paradoxical variations of a poetics of preterition that bridge the chasm between the imagination of the possible and its opposite, convinced, like some characters of Borges's fiction, that time mingles differences, multiplies doubts, and plots suspicions that are ultimately filtered by an unforeseeable net that intercepts and lets them through.

It is true that Borges does not speak about semiotics at any time, but we might consider the fact that many of those who devote themselves to the doctrine of signs talk about Borges and establish comparisons between his findings and the enlightened intuitions of Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce followers produce and describe the correspondences among the subjects they approach, starting from the revealing games of Borges's curious literary imagination, verifying contrastively and without forcing the terms, the similarity of Peirce's theoretical principles, the parallelisms of his best argumentation, with the vision and the ubiquitous writing of Borges, which refer to other multifarious writings.

These same scholars examine the vision and the endless writing of Borges and find in his poetical arguments a sequence of deep coincidences that cannot be ascribed to chance, logic, or the conventional fixations of chronology.

It is possible to conjecture that, rather than being explained by fate, these coincidences and parallelisms are those of an arguable *Zeitgeist* or signs of the times that leads to simultaneity. Such is the case when similar topics are unexpectedly approached at the same time. While a gnosiological instance defines the knowledge of an age, the contemporary relevance and intellectual proximity of the philosopher, that is Peirce, and the writer, that is Borges, may be explained by aspects that are half-historical and half-biographical. Nevertheless, neither the signs of history nor biographical data are enough to explain so many and such suggestive similarities.

The close relationship that Charles S. Peirce and William James developed on the northeastern coast of the United States has been mentioned in numerous accounts. A similar relationship developed on the coast of the River Plate, with Macedonio Fernández (a singular Argentinean anarchist philosopher, whom Borges considered his '*maître à penser*') and Borges's father, who was a professor of psychology, as he is inclined to make us aware in the mentioned epilogue. There were, and there are, some traces — rather more than a presumption — of a relationship between William James and Macedonio Fernández across the continent, although so far records of their correspondence have not been found, except the commentaries of those close to them and the

profound impression made by the reading of James on Macedonio's thought and work. Neither are there any doubts about the weight of the thought of both men and of the amical acquaintance of Macedonio with Borges's father: Jorge Guillermo Borges (another William, as he himself used to point out), who passed his convictions on to his son. The personal presence of Macedonio, as well as the peculiarities of his behavior, were decisive during the years of the writer's youth. These links establish the transitivity of an ascendancy, an influence or a triangulation of influences, far beyond simple conjecture, important enough not to be discarded.

Hence it is not necessary to insist on a disciplinary reason, widely justified by the recurrence of an association; in any case, and to avoid the eventuality of history and biography, I will resort to one of Borges's oldest and sharpest remarks. In a famous essay, apropos the risk of imposture due to the redundant invocation of that which is already present, he states: 'in the Arab book par excellence, in the *Alcoran*, there are no camels; I believe this absence of camels would be enough to prove that it is Arab'. If 'semiotics' does not appear *litteraliter*, to the letter, in his work, this omission would be a coherent hint, albeit not the only one, of the specificity of the epistemological praise credited to it. It is necessary to recognize, moreover, that Peirce does not often mention the word either.

Borges's inventions, his playful modulation of ideas and keywords appear over and over again in the volumes that the semiotic libraries are still cataloguing and in the files that scholars continue to work on. So much so that it would be redundant to describe the clarifying contributions that they are formulating from their particular disciplinary perspectives, provoked by the lucid revelations of a universe that Borges has charmed with the spell of a secret harmony, with the wisdom to which his prophetic literary adventures have given place. In this sense, Umberto Eco's narrative prodigality and its tight links with his semiotic quest is significantly renowned. After Eco, and thanks to him, the consolidation of a symbolic vision is produced that neither scholarship nor current reading can continue to understand as a division — and Borges is not alien to this event. With a strong grip on Borges's insights, Gérard Genette, for his part, has posed systems of analysis, categories of thought, on the basis of his thorough approaches to the writer. They are only two of the conspicuous academic derivations among the profuse fortune stemming from the inventions of a writer who, unravelled, is the origin of an imminent mythology.

Conjectures constitute one of the strategies of thought that produce the striking similarities between Borges and Peirce. Iván Almeida

examines them, discovering that they respond to the equal fascination both felt for maps. He recognizes the frequency of the conjectural activity in daily life due to the extremes of perplexity in the face of the transcendent, and to the speculation as comprehension of the data that the relations between the mind and the world demand. Almeida considers in particular 'abduction', as a fundamental and primary conjecture, the aesthetic originality presented by Borges's perplexity. He also considers the writer's bemusement and his desire to provoke comprehension, without failing to refer to the careful revision of the concept of abduction in Peirce, pointing out its differences with induction. In this sense, he recognizes abduction as the resource used by interpretation, assimilating it to the geographic category called 'orientation'. Almeida picks up Eco's remarks on abduction in order to take on the recognition of the universe as texts, and of texts as the universe. This identity gives place to a cartographic theory according to which the descriptions of maps contain the maps themselves, just like dreams contain those who dream them, ruling out the possibility that something or someone might be left outside that textual universe.

Jean Bessière's 'method', in the literal sense of the term, is unexpected. It has to do with the particular status of Borges's imagination, avoiding the considerations the writer himself formulates apropos his poetics, the critical postulations woven into it, one of the main objects of analysis of his literary writing. Against a tradition that observes procedures founded on the articulations of a specious self-referential cloister, Bessière directs his attention toward the fabric of aporias that question the very condition of the method and its application. In this area where poetics, rhetoric, and epistemology coincide with semiotics, Bessière chooses a critical itinerary. One of the greatest difficulties of this path consists in avoiding the temptations propitiated by Borges's reflections themselves, by means of a thought that appears to revise the one that the plays of the imagination precipitate. Bessière's approach discovers basic aspects of the writer's universe and of literary myths that continue to multiply themselves around those who, like Borges and few others, have been defined as writers/readers par excellence. For Bessière, Borges is a reader who has read it all but who has not read Borges's texts. It is interesting to face the possibility of this incomplete totality since what it leaves aside is precisely the work with which it is concerned. Hence Bessière's belief that Borges's criticism does not validate his own fiction, nor account for its curious intellectual and intertextual texture that reserves its enigmatic potency, giving place to a daily convergence where the human mind distinguishes and identifies reality and narrativity at once.

In spite of the prolonged and profuse exegesis dedicated to Borges's work, its reading continues to cause the same impression of strangeness even in the most forewarned of readers. This strangeness is part of the mystery his imagination reserves, duplicating it. Therefore Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron sets out to examine the traces of the 'unknowable unknown' that, formulated in different ways, continues to be the object of semiotic, hermeneutic, and psychoanalytic research. These are traces presented by language, even in its most codified or current forms. But they are also registered by visual images and their details, a complex vision of the world and its complexity, which transmits and ciphers the enigmatic statute of the sign. Borges's texts do not avoid this perplexity. Considering him as an author of fables, insofar as they not only constitute a genre but also configure the ways of thinking that generate polysemia, Chénieux-Gendron observes the difficult statute of the subject in his stories, the proceedings of fragmentation, of collage, thought, language. These resources preserve the bemusement and animate the presence of the mystery in daily life. The uncertainties, the irony, the confusion between the truth and the relative possibility of this certainty, of erudition as a form of fiction, converge in the identification of author and reader. The latter traverses an encyclopedia so as to corroborate the shortcomings of knowledge, always incomplete, lying on the border between the world and the words.

Claudia González Costanzo is interested in crossing Borges's poetic vision with Peirce's theoretical conception, starting from some logical alternatives allowed for by disjunction. Starting from this figure of logic, González Costanzo observes the mechanisms through which Borges reverts the negation. The way he transforms it into one of the possible forms of affirmation, overcoming the antagonistic limits of contradiction, of the mechanisms of reasoning when they are polarized in a binary form, giving way to a plurality that weakens the limits of definitions. In this sense, she approaches the unlimited depths of semiosis by means of the recognition of an enigmatic characteristic that is the name and the key of knowledge. It constitutes one of the fundamental resources of Borges's imagination and Peirce's speculations. Even in their differences, they share an indeterminacy that turns out to be of special interest, from the epistemological doings founded by semiotics, to the illustrations of an intuition that this discipline orientates rigorously. González Costanzo underscores the attention to those resources of inconclusion and coincidence in Borges's fiction that have configured, from many years and increasingly so now in our changing times. These references contribute to the understanding of temporality, because it is not conceived as necessarily successive. She observes that a reading

of Borges's fiction through Peirce's notions highlights the adverse relationship between successive temporality and disjunction.

Jorge Medina Vidal begins his essay with some considerations on semiotic research and the contributions that this discipline offers to the determination of the 'truth' in a literary text. In Borges's writings, this question constitutes one of its constant features, for instance, finding out the differences between his 'real' self and his 'persona' who is the producer of texts, such as he himself opposed repeatedly. Medina Vidal thus contributes to the knowledge of the unfolding that is necessary for the poetic practices of a tradition Borges did not ignore, and the detectivesque strategies unravelled by his literary disposition. Through the convergence of different ways of semiotic examination, Medina Vidal proposes an approach to the truth of the author, the privileged first reader, to the truth of the reader with whom the former establishes several links and to the majority of the users, who actualize in different times the repertoire of signs that Borges organizes for this purpose and to which he is not himself foreign. This quest of truth is not alien, from Medina Vidal's perspective, to the processes of legitimization. From the times of epic antiquity, it bestows on the poet the faculty of transmitting the song of the divinity who, according to historic posterity, has passed down the power of myths or of beliefs to a less mystical stadium. The linguistic system or the wide landscape of literary quotations constitute themselves into a similar legitimization. In this space the look of the author, the look of the readers or of the others, present the communitarian dimension that duplicates the transit of a semiosis analyzed by Medina Vidal from the starting point of several stories by Borges.

The production and reception of signs constitute a specifically human faculty that, approached through Peirce's thought and Borges's literature, suggest much more, according to Floyd Merrell, than the most rigorous demonstrations or argumentations. His suggestions favor intuition, premonition, conjectures, and operations that best solve the unlimitedness of a semiosis as slippery as it is unavoidable. He also suggests the unreachability of an interpretant that substracts itself from the possibilities of a clear definition, as could happen with other objects that traditional science believes to observe effectively. In Borges's stories, 'The Aleph' and 'The Zahir', as well as in a novel by Italo Calvino, Merrell recognizes the impossibility of eluding interpretation, an activity as unavoidable as is thinking. In a semiotic world such as ours, crossed by signs everywhere, linguistic signs are but a minor part of this profusion of signs and the *zahir*, albeit prelinguistic, does not fail to be a symbol, an index, and an icon at the same time. As such, it is part

of a semiotic process that overflows the reductive linearity of the linguistic sign. Also in 'The Aleph', Merrell corroborates this 'non-linguicentrism' — a term he coins — which does not stick to that linearity. He observes other stories by Borges's in the light of reflections about different processes of communication. Exposed to the unforeseeability of interpretations, these processes make apparent the futile attempt to encompass all possibilities of imagination.

Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu's essay pits Borges's oeuvre against the hermeneutical tradition running from Schleiermacher to Gadamer to Ricoeur. It argues that the interpretive strategy required for situating the Argentine master's work more properly amounts to an alternative hermeneutics, or 'Borgermeneutics'. Mihăilescu's claim is that Borges's work is by and large made up of 'essays', in the Montaignian sense in which the essay is the genre that memorizes the heterogeneity of experience. Thinkers such as Dilthey and Gadamer perpetuate the romantic legacy of the axiom-like 'totality of life' and 'unity of experience' involved in the interpretation of literary texts. As an anti-romantic writer of the nontranscendental, Borges suggests that heterogeneous experience resists totalization, and that the objects of knowledge (love, death, literary texts, etc.) are objective correlates of an experience, rather than givens to which experience is to be subjected. Experience is thus saved from its exhaustion and from being transformed into a fetish. The first hermeneutic reading of Borgean texts is accordingly overcome by a second one. As the first reading leads to exhaustion, its other, the second reading, picks up a nightmare for hermeneutics' unitary experience. The second reading imposes itself, and requires both defamiliarization and a leap of faith not unlike the leap into the anagogical reading of the Writ. In the leap, hermeneutic circularity is overcome; the exhaustion of texts and readers is overcome by 'pure lines' ecstatically relating instances of what Peirce calls Firstnesses. Borges's arch-detective story, 'Death and the Compass', is analyzed by Mihăilescu as a prime example of the leap from the first to the second reading. The *ekstasis* of Firstnesses that make up his second readings leave us to confront his texts as distant others rather than as myths to identify with in rituals of reading.

Jorge Luis Borges's considerations on the question of translation from the domain of literary writing is read and developed by Susan Petrilli in the light of Charles S. Peirce's general theory of signs, with particular reference to the famous triad that distinguishes between symbol, icon, and index, as well as to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the artwork. Reasoning through Zeno's paradox concerning Achilles and the tortoise, Borges maintains that while a translation will never catch up with the

original text from the point of view of chronology, time, and space, it may indeed even surpass it from the point of view of artistic rendition. Petrilli affirms that if we understand 'fidelity' in terms of creativity and not as imitation, repetition, reproduction of the original in the form of its literal copy in another language, the translating text must establish a relation of alterity with the text-object of translation. A translation must be at once similar and dissimilar. According to Petrilli, this is the paradox of translation. The greater the distance in terms of dialogic alterity between the two texts, the greater the possibility of creating an artistic reinterpretation, understood as another sign interpretant in the potentially unending semiotic chain of deferrals from one sign to the next, in which the so-called original text also takes its place. For translation to be successful, therefore, in terms of creativity and interpretation, the relation to be established ideally between the translated and the translating text should be dominated by iconicity rather than indexicality or symbolcity.

Extremely close to the practices of his own characters, Borges includes among his varied literary doings the task of the translator, which is closely related to another one of his priorities, the condition of the reader. Augusto Ponzio attends to the different literary facets that Borges exercises with unusual characteristics, and he reunites them in a unity summarizing the plurality he encompasses. This condition, similar to Pierre Menard's authority, is complemented by the others with which it is confused, in an aspiration of alterity Bakhtin insists on as inherent to writing. According to Ponzio, Borges's knowledge of other languages, and the distance this implies, allowed him to appreciate the limitations of his own language. From this exteriority, natural in a translator who suffers idiomatic resistance and tries to overcome it, the writer leaves traces of someone else's language that establishes its concomitant familiarity and bemusement. The writer/translator shares one and the same attitude, which implies loving what is distant and forgetting oneself. He opts for a textual invisibility that becomes apparent, in Bakhtin's vision, in the visibility of the silence that reveals the author. Ponzio points out the attributes and, according to the same theoretician, they define the literary language and its tendency towards plurivocity, ambiguity, parody, the alterity of the other who, contradictorily, facilitates the proximity that identification demands.

Luz Rodríguez Carranta's point of view is different, since she deals fundamentally with texts published by Borges in the magazine *El Hogar* of Buenos Aires in the thirties. In conformity with her habitual perspective, according to which critical analysis uses a semiotic appreciation of literary communication in a direction compatible with rhetoric,

Rodríguez Carranta observes the double transformation precipitated by Borges's writings. On the one hand, she observes how Borges introduces modifications to his style and thematic options, both conditioned by the objectives of a massive publication in a society accessing to popular modalities and the media with equal familiarity. On the other hand, she notes the influence of Borges's style and the singularity of his subjects on the thinking habits of his readers. Hence Rodríguez Carranta recognizes a function of 'educator journalist', seldom remembered, in the literary work of Borges, she considers above all other aspects, the epideictic and biographic genres, both from the particularity of the same didactic conception but going against the expectations of the genre. Instead of tending towards the conservation of established values — one of the primary didactic aims — Rodríguez Carranta believes that Borges resorts to their forms in order to challenge and impugn them, propitiating the cult of a critical attitude capable of resisting the simplifications of the propagandistic practices that strengthen national and racial determinism.

Through an unusual form of intertextuality, consisting in the deliberate omission of referential data, László Scholz sets out to examine the work of Borges in relation to the thought and the work of Miguel de Unamuno. This omission may constitute yet another variation — paradoxical, unexpected — of a constant exercise of allusion in the writings of Borges. But, in this case, the practice that avoids the mention of Unamuno's proper name, his work, and mainly the quotations he gathers in his writings, is particularly striking in an author who insisted like few others on recording numerous mentions to other authors. It could be interpreted as a form of adverse intertextuality, corroborating Borges's disposition towards different forms of quotation, from one extreme to the other: on the one hand it is possible to verify his excessive tendency to make intertextual data explicit; on the other, the suppression of the quotation, of the proper name of the other, to make them barely implicit. In spite of this absence, or precisely because of it, Scholz looks into Borges's texts to find the clear prints of Unamuno, the similarity of the techniques of both writers, taking care to unravel what is almost a rhetoric of this absence and its reasons. While Scholz is aware of the complex phenomenon of intertextuality and the different modes of its literary instances, it is significant that this has not been an object of consideration or restitution by the investigations of literary criticism. In failing to consider this relationship, literary critics seem to limit themselves to confirming the marks that the author points at without straying from the path he has traced and marked according to his will.

It is still surprising as to what extent the thought of Borges during the thirties and the forties anticipated the formulations posed by prestigious theoreticians well into the second half of the century. Alfonso de Toro turns to these considerations, which are of vital importance not only in the intellectual speculations of these thinkers, but also in the conformation of an imaginary still determining both literature and the postmodern vision. Rarely do we see in the history of ideas and of images a record of filial relationship that the main philosophic and semiotic currents do not hesitate to acknowledge. Their motives originate in Borges's writing, which supports his thought, methods and doctrines. Like those other scholars of contemporary art, de Toro underscores the aesthetics of fragmentation as an antecedent of the tendency toward the quotation of texts already written and of other artistic formulations. At the same time, he finds in this aesthetics the principles of the disposition towards enigmaticity that Borges's work presents and, in his nonmimetic fiction, a lability on the verge of the thinkable. Within this liminar situation takes place the quest for a universality that does not exclude the condition of a purely Argentinean and Latin American writer.

Noemi Ulla is interested in analyzing a dimension that could be inscribed in a metapoetic archive of poetry on poetry. Her perspective consists of collecting those poems by Borges in which the poet celebrates other poets. In this archive she distinguishes different relationships established by Borges the poet with those who preceded him; hence the postulate of four series according to the distance he observes, the definition of the poetic voice, and the semiotic resources with which Borges modulates the enunciative distance. According to Ulla, the first series is defined by poems of open endings, Borges's voice registering the respect imposed by a greater distance. In the second, the dialogue of homage he establishes with the poets brings them together, the voice of admiration gives place to a more human conviviality and a fuller communication. In the third, she includes those poems that resort to plastic, fixed images, almost frozen at the time of the consecration. The fourth series includes poems that do not manifest an homage through figuration, but rather through an intellectual relationship distancing them from Borges's poetic circumstance. Starting from the definitions of A. J. Greimas, Ulla analyzes a poem that Borges dedicates to Cervantes. Like in other poems where Borges celebrates the author of *Don Quixote*, here the relationship between poets becomes closer and Borges ends up by identifying himself with him.

'The inventions of philosophy are no less fantastic than those of art', said Borges and, as can be inferred from the close bonds between his imaginary and the diverse studies that semiotics has propitiated in the past decades, it was necessary, rather than foreseeable, that

a special issue in honour of Borges should have appeared on occasion of the centenary of his birth, something that has been Thomas Sebeok's conviction, as editor in chief, for several years.

Varied and valid are the reasons justifying the profound interest professed by Sebeok for the writer's work. Beyond its inaugural literary significance and the sort of epistemological coherence of its imagination, because Borges and Sebeok share the same time, the endless time of having been, I would juxtapose their affinities in the same way that Sebeok knew to juxtapose, by way of a common "economy of research," the figures of Peirce and Sherlock Holmes. I would observe the exercise of the grace of thought, the play of musement with which both filter imagination through erudition and ideas. If we had to think of a figure who emblemized those rare coincidences between writer and scholar, I would not hesitate to propose Holmes, who manages to discover truth from the vantage of fiction, the detective adventures to which we tend to return, as to a good habit that remains with us; death and dreams are two others, as Borges said in the poem he dedicates to him and to which Sebeok referred with joyful frequency.

Dealing with Borges, however, given his early and still relevant refutations of time, so ubiquitous in all his books, this publication cannot be explained solely by the punctual celebration of anniversaries. The essays included in this volume reveal the multiplication of the curious attention dispensed to Borges's work by those scholars who face the plausible magic of his writings, always amazed to discover in them, with the passing of time, dreamlike precisions which these times confirm. To justify the encounter that his writings foster, one should better resort to Borges's language and take shelter, once again, under the double meaning of the word '*cita*', the homonymy that in Spanish does not differentiate the sentimental or friendly encounter — 'a date' — from the textual citation, 'a quotation', a several times literal encounter from which passions, fiction, and disbelief are not absent. The particular textual properties implied by *cita* and which have not been overlooked by the scholars in this disciplinary semiotic field, present in the writings of Borges an aesthetic relevance not yet exhausted by academic and literary approaches. Since for many years Borges has been constantly quoted in semiotic discourse and in the fictions it approaches, this encounter with Borges, this *cita* ever differed and different, could not be missing from *Semiotica*.

Note

Editor's note: I would like to thank Cecilia Rennie for her careful reading of the translations, which helped solve the problems arising from the complex task of rewriting one linguistic

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Special Issue

Jorge Luis Borges: The praise of signs

Guest Editor:

LISA BLOCK DE BEHAR

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