

Literary Philosophers

Borges, Calvino, Eco

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Mimesis and Modernism: The Case of Jorge Luis Borges

For Sylvia Molloy

"Ignoro si la música sabe desesperar de la música y si el mármol del mármol, pero la literatura es un arte que sabe profetizar aquel tiempo en que habrá enmudecido, y escarnizarse con la propia virtud y enamorarse de la propia disolución y cortejar su fin."¹

("I do not know whether music can give up hope in music, or marble in marble, but literature is an art that is able to foresee the moment when it will have grown silent, to scorn its own virtue, to become enamored with its own dissolution and to court its own death.")

"It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist."²

During the years that have followed the publication of John Barth's provocative essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," the reading public has come to accept the fact that the writings of certain late and postmodernist authors—Borges, Calvino, and Eco among them—could not be measured by the same yardsticks of creative "originality" that served their romantic predecessors so well.³ This may have come as no surprise, as it was modernist practice itself that helped solidify the critique of romantic ideals. What greater challenge to the desires that supported romantic creativity than the deflationary gestures of minimalism, irony, parody, and pastiche? What is surprising is that so many "high modernist" writers continued to make a large investment in the principle of artistic innovation. Indeed, a central imperative of high modernist art was to "make it new." But just how to "make it new" was a very difficult question, given the realities of literary history and social circumstances. Nonetheless, the task could not be set aside by the heirs to the high modernist tradition. And so among many such writers, and Borges most prominently for my concerns, the great modernist call to innovation had to

ments. Indeed, it would have been just as false for art to forget its world-making powers as it would have been for it to think that it could ever reclaim their full force. Flaubert knew one side of this problem quite well—the side that leads to a resigned skepticism, if not to a full-blown cynicism, about modern art's apparent inability to escape the cycle of repetition to which it seemed to be consigned. Witness the story of Bouvard and Pécuchet, the summary account of which I draw from an essay on Flaubert written by Borges himself ("Vindicación de Bouvard et Pécuchet"). An inheritance bordering on the age of fifty, develop a close friendship. An inheritance allows them to leave their regular jobs and take up residence in the countryside. There, they try out gardening, archaeology, hydrotherapy, veterinary medicine, history, philosophy, politics, and religion; in short, they explore the full array of the arts and sciences known to man, hoping in each case to find satisfaction. Yet each of these endeavors individually, and all of them together, leave them unfulfilled and so, after twenty years of trying, they decide to return to their "old" jobs as copyists. The return to copying is a repetition of their past, but it is also a return to writing as a means of mechanical reproduction and as a repetition of what "literature" once was as it was practiced by scribes and clerks.⁶

To be sure, Hegel was quite a bit more optimistic and "progressive" in his thinking, and quite a bit less cynical in his overall vision than Flaubert.⁷ This is largely because Hegel maintained that the "exhaustion" of one mode of spirit's self-expression in the world—art—would eventually lead it to another, higher, form: to a full flowering of philosophical ideas. Which leads me all but directly to Borges. If Borges's fiction can be taken as a provocative model for thinking about mimesis and repetition in the context of modernity, this is in part because Borges seems to accept the possibilities marked out by Hegel and Flaubert while giving both yet another turn of the screw. On the one hand, Borges's fictions seem to veer away from literature as such to critical and philosophical reflections about it, for all intents and purposes certifying the exhaustion of the kind of original creativity that would meet "romantic" ideals. Indeed, some of Borges's most important works seem to forsake the desire to imagine a world, choosing instead to limn the possibility of alternative worlds in concept and thought. The Borgesian imagination often yields to discursive ruminations on issues such as the nature of time and space, the question of causality, and the problem of personal identity. But we should not be too quick to say *either* that Borges forsakes the world-making ambitions of imaginative literature for the speculations of philosophy, *or* that he leads us to a place where the distinctions between literature and philosophy can be declared null and void. After all, Borges couches his fictions in familiar literary genres (the detective story, the mock-essay), and some of his most interesting and important works are engagements of literature's central concerns: the nature of authorship and originality, the power of reading and

be answered in the face of some very sobering facts: that in the literary past everything seemed already to have been said, done, thought, and even felt; and that the social circumstances in which literature was produced seemed to deprive it of the very powers to which it once laid claim—if not to conjure a world, as the quasi-magical incantations of poetry might once have been thought capable of doing, then at least to transform the world, and especially to undertake a transformation of the social world: to act as a shaping force rather than simply as one among the many conditioned elements of a reality whose motor springs lie outside of our control. If the history of art in the culture of modernity corresponds to the gradual erasure of what Walter Benjamin famously called the "aura," then modernism took one of its challenges to be a search for whatever factors might be able to establish the artwork's irreducible difference in a world that seemed to have grown indifferent to its very existence. To be sure, the dissolution of "aura" might well seem to consign art to the mere repetition of the *déjà dit*, or to relegate art to nostalgic glances at the past. And yet this is not necessarily the case. By thinking of the artwork's particular difference as a matter of inflection within a world seemingly bereft of originality or aura, I hope to draw the discussion of Borges away from the tendency to regard his works as the repetition of familiar philosophical problems, such as the "problem of fictional worlds," the ontology of texts, or the question of personal identity, interesting and important though those questions may be.⁸ My more constructive hope is to identify the particular modes of inflection that allow Borges to imagine and articulate difference within historical conditions that might well be called the "age of mimesis as mechanical reproduction."

Although we may credit modernism with having brought such issues to the foreground, some of the news about the modernist predicament is not in fact all that new. It is part of a received tradition of literary and philosophical thinking about the status of art in the modern world. Already in the nineteenth century Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* confronted something like the problem of the "end of art." And yet when Hegel proclaimed that art had become "a thing of the past" he was not necessarily prophesying a future in which no new artworks would be ever produced. Nor was he envisioning that art would be confined to a secondary or peripheral role within the spectrum of human culture. Rather he was suggesting that art could serve a reflective function—that it could afford the chance for us to recall how sensuous forms could (and once did) play a role in the shaping and disclosure of the truth.⁹ To understand the reflective function of art in this way is to recognize the very conditions of art's situation in the modern world, as standing at a distance from, but nonetheless as remembering, such powers. To bring this reflexivity to full self-consciousness, to claim the recollection of the loss of aura as art's most authentic mode of consciousness while nonetheless forging ahead with some version of art, was one of modernism's principal achievements.

criticism as modes of engagement of the past, and the problem of fictional worlds. Moreover, there is throughout Borges's texts the commitment to a distinctive verbal inflection of ideas that marks them as irreducible to whatever notional content they may convey. Indeed, to regard Borges as a philosopher *manqué* is to overlook the excess of language and feeling over what mere thought would require. Likewise, to see Borges as a writer who has resigned himself to a vision of mimesis as the endless repetition of the same is to miss his sustained fascination with fabulation even while he thinks about the limits of fiction making, or to ignore his efforts to speak in a distinctive voice even in the face of worries that authoring is at bottom nothing more than a vehicle for the "mechanical reproduction" of ideas. Rather than confine this discussion to the question of literature and its exhaustion, or its possible supersession by philosophy, it may be more insightful to frame those issues in terms of the larger question of mimesis and/as repetition that shapes the modernist predicament. Doing so may allow us better to respond to the self-reflective qualities of a body of work that took shape at a historical moment when literature's continued existence as an autonomous discourse seemed to be in doubt.

One of Borges's most often-cited texts, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," raises these questions incisively. Pierre Menard, a relatively minor French author, dedicates his efforts to what Borges describes as "repeating a pre-existing book in a foreign language" ("repetir en un idioma ajeno un libro preexistente"). Menard rewrites Cervantes' text exactly and completely. But although Menard's *Quixote* is "verbally identical" to Cervantes' novel it is also said to be "richer" and "more subtle." How is this possible? In essays in the present volume, Deborah Knight and William Irwin treat this question as an instance of the problem of indiscernibles and the ontology of texts: if texts are identical in their constitution then are they the same?⁸ But the problem of Menard's *Quixote* in relation to Cervantes' is that they are at once identical and different. That is why my attention is drawn to what the question of indiscernibles leaves out. What is it that an understanding of mimesis as repetition fails to take into account? Borges's "Pierre Menard" raises a question that is at once a philosophical puzzle and a modernist predicament: how to account for the kind of difference that literature can make when art seems obliged simply to repeat the past.⁹ One prong of an answer seems clear enough: to bring the limits of mimesis to consciousness, to make those limits explicit in discourse and in practice, is already to shift the terms of discourse and to add something "new" to what has already been said. Menard's *Quixote* is just as much *like* Cervantes' "original" as it is *unlike* it, and Borges's text is of course identical to neither one: "The Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More *ambiguous*, his detractors say—but ambiguity is richness)."¹⁰ The result—wherein two apparently identical passages are reproduced

within Borges's text—may well involve a form of "repetition," but Borges's commentary renders the conventional literary distinction between "original" and "copy" of relatively little use in describing it.

"Pierre Menard" addresses the questions of identity and difference with all the literary self-consciousness characteristic of modernist texts. To that "literary" self-consciousness Borges adds a philosophical spin that becomes further apparent in other texts. Consider "Funes, El Memorioso" as a case in point. For Ireneo Funes (the character with the prodigious memory who is the subject of the story), memory is a form of cognition that requires a full and complete correspondence with the world. It is also a form of mimesis, by which Funes repeats the world not just in conceptual or verbal terms, but sensuously and materially. He grasps the world by means of an internal mimesis that reproduces it in minute physiological detail rather than merely in concept or outline. In Funes's mind "every visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, and so on."¹¹ Moreover, his reconstruction of the world in memory is conceived to be complete. It leaves no gaps: "He was able to reconstruct every dream, every daydream he had ever had. Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day; he had never once erred or faltered, but each reconstruction had itself taken an entire day." He is said to have remarked: "*I, myself, alone, have more memories than all mankind since the world began.*"¹² Memory is a talent that grants Funes enormous power, and yet it immobilizes him. Funes is godlike "as monumental as bronze—older than Egypt, older than the prophecies and the pyramids"¹³—but he is also a vanishing and ghostlike figure, as impotent as he is powerful. His memory is at once excessive and inadequate. Its contents are wholly unfiltered (he himself describes it as "like a garbage heap" ("*como un vaciadero de basuras*"), and its structure renders him "incapable of general, platonic ideas" ("*incapaz de ideas generales, platónicas,*" *F*, p. 125). This mimesis of the world in memory treats everything as different and new and so undermines the very criteria by which what is "new" might be distinguished from what is familiar and old. Little wonder, then, that there is scant room for Funes' own identity to take root: he remains unable to establish continuity with himself over time ("his own face in the mirror, his own hands, would surprise him each time anew"¹⁴). And so, at the age of only twenty-one, Funes dies what might best be described as a minor death, having suffered first from insomnia and then from a pulmonary infection.¹⁵ There is a certain pathos in this detail that does not escape the narrator's notice. It is worthy of further remark because of the affinity between Funes's burdensome memory and the "memorial" work of narrative itself. Indeed, the narrator insists on this conjuncture from the very beginning of the text:

I recall him (though I have no right to speak that sacred verb—only one man on earth did, and that man is dead) holding a dark passionflower in his

hand. . . . I recall him—his tacturn face, its Indian features, its extraordinary remoteness—behind the cigarette. I recall (I think) the slender, leather-bridger's fingers. I recall near those hands a *mate* cup, with the coat of arms of the Banda Oriental. . . . I clearly recall his voice. . . . My first recollection of Funes is quite clear. (CF, p. 131)

Lo recuerdo (yo no tengo derecho a pronunciar ese verbo sagrado, sólo un hombre en la tierra tuvo derecho y ese hombre ha muerto) con una oscura pasión en la mano, . . . Lo recuerdo, la cara ticturna y andiada y singularmente *remota*, detrás del cigarrillo. Recuerdo (creo) sus manos afiladas de trenzador. Recuerdo cerca de esas manos un mate, con las armas de la Banda Oriental. . . . Recuerdo claramente su voz. . . . Mi primer recuerdo de Funes es muy perspicuo. (F, p. 118)

If we were to follow some of the dominant directions in contemporary literary theory we might attempt to explain the erasure of personal identity, or the recursive structure of certain of Borges's texts, as socially embedded and conditioned. That Borges seems almost studiously to refuse to acknowledge the weight of the social world might serve simply to increase suspicions about its importance. And at some level we do indeed want to know what kind of a world might have provoked such careful avoidance on Borges's part, what material conditions of existence his fictions might have sought to refuse by wandering off into the maze of ideas. If there is indeed a historical transformation in the nature of mimesis that corresponds to what Benjamin described as the "loss of aura," then we might well want to know the circumstances surrounding Borges's case.

There are compelling reasons to link Borges's "fabulation" to certain social forms of rationalization, including some that can be tied to the role of the avant garde in the globalization of culture. Indeed, Borges saw himself not only as a modernist writer but also as a cosmopolitan man of letters able to "transcend" local and national culture. This is at least one way to explain the range of his literary and philosophical interests, which embrace Homer, the presocratic thinkers, Shakespeare, the Icelandic sagas, the poetry of Quevedo, and the Jewish Cabala. Borges's philosophical preoccupations are likewise played out in universal terms; themes like the cyclical nature of time and the eternal return of the same are designed to defy the limits of history and place. And yet Borges's "cosmopolitanism" is laden with details drawn specifically from the Río de la Plata. The final story of Borges's most famous collection, *Ficciones*, is set in Buenos Aires in 1871; "El Aleph" takes place in the house of one Carlos Argentino Daneri on the Calle Garay; the back alleys and knife fights of Buenos Aires form the fabric of "Hombre de la esquina rosada," published in the *Universal History of Infamy*. Funes himself appears to be of creole blood.¹⁶

As far as the lottery itself is concerned, this dubious institution appears to give us a world in which the dutiful fulfillment of administrative obligations rules out the possibility either of establishing meaningful differences or of identifying any deep, structural coherence lying beneath them. We are in a social structure that marries the conditions of Pierre Menard (the repetition of identity) to that of Funes (the proliferation of difference). Behind the ostensible perfection of the lottery's administrative rationality is said to lie mere chance. Stray matter and unpredictable events foil its administrative efficiency. In one instance, the narrator notes that "the purchaser of a dozen amphorae of Damascene wine will not be surprised if one contains a viper."²⁰ And yet it seems that such flaws serve a positive and

repetition itself. More important, any approach to Borges's works that appeals strictly to the pressures of commodity capitalism, the conditions of bureaucratic organization, or the globalization of culture in the twentieth century flies in the face of what I take to be certain essential Borgesian insights about the ability of literature to exceed the bounds of socially encoded and enforced forms of rationality.¹⁷ To be sure, stories such as "The Lottery in Babylon" or "The Library of Babel" acknowledge the conditions of rationalization and reification that prevail in modern bureaucracies. Those texts are all but unintelligible unless regarded as reflections of the systematic imposition of organizational controls. But seen only in such terms it would be impossible to account for the moments in which the systems they describe draw attention to their own flaws; likewise it would be difficult to give an account of the distinctive pathos and irony that color the narrator's voice at crucial moments in their development. "Like all the men of Babylon," writes Borges in "The Lottery in Babylon," "I have been proconsul; like all, I have been a slave. . . . I have known omnipotence, ignorance, imprisonment. Look here—my right hand has no index finger. Look here—through this gash in my cape you can see on my stomach a crimson tattoo."¹⁸ Is this one of those characteristic instances in Borges's works where the uniqueness of personal identity seems to be lost in the wake of repetition? Perhaps. Remember Herbert Ashe, a figure mentioned in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," whose very name speaks his anonymity ("in life, Ashe was afflicted with unreality, as so many Englishmen are; in death, he is not even the ghost he was in life").¹⁹ Ashe is said to resemble all Englishmen, just as the narrator of "The Lottery in Babylon" is said to be all men. Such figures are nearly lost in sameness, and yet in each case there are certain distinguishing marks (in the case of the narrator of "Lottery in Babylon" the missing finger and the tattoo), and each is presented with the force of the new, each one impresses itself upon consciousness through the subtle insistence of the narrator's voice: not only "look" but also "look again." And so there is still wonder in this world of repetition and sameness, even if this is a diminutive wonder that derives from

constructive goal: by defeating the semblance of a perfect order, they help secure the reality of the real. There is, it seems, a crack in the otherwise sealed system, a flaw in the social structure of repetition for which we might in the end be grateful. Borges continues: "the scribe who writes out a contract never fails to include some error; I myself, in this hurried statement, have misrepresented some splendor, some atrocity—perhaps, too, some mysterious monotony."²¹

I take this passage and others like it as evidence of a peculiarly Borgesian way of marking difference through a process of self-reflection that asks us to go beyond the claim that modernist literature is condemned to practice mimesis as mere repetition. On such occasions, the articulation of the significant difference that "makes it new" comes about through what Adorno might call the process of a "second reflection" on the place of mimesis within a socially conditioned framework of repetition. In contrast to mere repetition, "second reflection" allows the work of art to reassert its claim to be something more or other than a mimesis of the world, in part by reflecting on the impossibility of it ever being a full and complete mimesis of the world. "Second reflection" grants art its autonomy; it acknowledges the status of art as not just as *like* the world it resembles but as definitively *unlike* it. There is a passage from Novalis that Borges cites in the essay "Avatars of the Tortoise" that makes the point in a compelling way—by suggesting that the *imperfections* in the work of artistic "creation" ensure the artwork's claim to truth: "The greatest wizard would be the one who could bewitch himself to the point of taking his own phantasmagorical creations as autonomous apparitions. Would that not be our case? I conjecture that it is so. We (that is, the undivided divinity that is at work in us) have dreamed a world. We have dreamed it resistant, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and fixed in time; *but we have consented to the presence of tenuous and eternal interstices of irrationality in its architecture in order to know that it is false.*"²² This admission is the paradoxical key to a discovery of the artwork's claim to truth. The "flaws" that prove it false, like the extraneous elements that intervene in the perfectly administered society, are imperfections that suggest how art remembers what it was like to *be* a world, and not just to *be like* the world.

ADORNO: "Art is actually the world once over, as like it as it is unlike it."²³

BORGES: "Mirrors and copulation are abominable, for they multiply the number of mankind."²⁴

Borges is himself so subtle and compelling on such points that rather than turn further to someone like Adorno or Benjamin for elucidation of the relations of mimesis, repetition, and difference, I want to proceed by reconstructing what I think of as the archaeology of their relations using some of

Borges's own texts for the purpose. Said in other terms, I think that Borges himself provides models for the process out of which his distinctive mode of fiction-making emerges. This is, admittedly, a speculative or mythopoetic account that involves a reflection upon origins—speculative because such origins are accessible only through the powers of memory and desire, as the counterfactual, fictional, or "fantastic" image of conditions that would be ungraspable in a more disenchanting world. But it is nonetheless a Borgesian account, and so consistent with the material under scrutiny. It begins from Borges's interest in certain archaic forms of mimesis that are related to what I call "fabulation" and it proceeds from there to include various forms of reflection—both literary and philosophical—on the fate of art as both *like* the world and categorically *unlike* it. It leads to some of the distinctively Borgesian ways of marking the transformation from mimesis to repetition and then of articulating difference within repetition, of which we have already seen some examples.

Fabulation: this Borgesian version of what Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* speculatively called the moment of "myth" provides a point of reference for the reconstruction of what Benjamin described as the power of the "mimetic faculty" in art. Unlike certain forms of philosophy, which give us notional worlds, fabulation is mimetic in the more archaic and potentially powerful sense. It works by nonsensuous similarities rather than by conceptual representations. Unlike other forms of world- or image-making (architecture and building, for example), or creature-fashioning (the kind involving sex and childbirth), fabulation dreams of creation at a safe and clean distance, without sweat or labor; it would proceed purely, exactly, and absolutely. Correspondence and sympathy are its archaic modes, a familiarity with which Borges draws from James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, although it could just as well have been from Benjamin's essay "On the Mimetic Faculty."²⁵ For instance, Borges suggests that sympathy "postulates an unavoidable link between different things, either because its figure is the same—imitative magic, homeopathy—or because of some previous contiguity—contagious magic. An illustration of the second was the curative ointment of Kenelm Digby, which was applied not to the bandaged wound, but rather to the guilty steel that inflicted it—while the wound, without the rigor of barbarous cures, was forming a scar. . . . The redskin Indians of Nebraska dressed up in bison skins . . . and danced wildly on the desert day and night to make the bison arrive."²⁶ Mimesis in this archaic form has the power to establish connections remotely, as in certain instances of superstition and magic: "For the superstitious person, there is a necessary connection not just between a bullet and a dead person, but between a dead person and a tortured effigy of wax or the prophetic breaking of a mirror or the salt that one throws over the shoulder."²⁷ The subtlety of Borges's development of this point—easily the

match for anything that Forkheimer and Adorno or Benjamin might have to say—lies in his ability to identify the rational kernel of causality in magic just as well as he locates the kernel of magic within the seemingly rational relations of the causal world: "Magic is the crowning moment or the nightmare of causality," he writes, "not its contradiction. Miracles are no less alien in that universe than in the work of astronomers. All the laws of nature govern it, as well as other, imaginary laws."²⁸ The coherence of a novel also recalls the sympathetic correspondences of the archaic world: "The worry that a fearful event may be caused by its mere mention is impertinent or useless in the asiatic disorder of the real world, but not in the novel, which must be an exact play of vigilances, echoes, and affinities. Every episode in a carefully created story is a projection from outside."²⁹

Among the most powerful accounts of the mimetic origins of fiction in Borges is the dream-like mode of creation imagined in "The Circular Ruins." In this text, Borges imagines that a dreamer sets out to fashion a person, a purpose characterized as "not impossible, though supernatural." His hope is for creation by means of a complete and total mimesis. He proposes to create a set of correspondences that would be full and exact, "to dream a man . . . in minute entirety and impose him on reality."³⁰ But here the labor of making real involves arduous work: "This magical objective had come to fill his entire soul; if someone had asked him his own name, or inquired into any feature of his life till then, he would not have been able to answer." "He understood that the task of molding the incoherent and dizzying stuff that dreams are made of is the most difficult work a man can undertake, even if he fathom all the enigmas of the higher and lower spheres—much more difficult than weaving a rope of sand or minting coins of the faceless wind."³¹

Borges's fable of creation proceeds in detail, and the contours of narrative itself mime the meticulous labor required for it. The dream is nonplattonic in some crucial ways. Borges tells of the fabrication not just of a structure that would serve as a template for further production or repetition, but of the creation of the specific, differentiated, irreducibly particular being—the creation not just of "Being" as such, but of *this* being, of a being whose concrete particularities and points of difference from Being as such attest to the authenticity of its creator's powers:

He dreamed the heart warm, acute, secret—about the size of a closed fist, a garnet-colored thing inside the dimness of a human body that was still faceless and sexless; he dreamed it, with painstaking love, for fourteen brilliant nights. Each night he perceived it with greater clarity, greater certainty. He did not touch it; he only witnessed it, observed it, corrected it, perhaps, with his eyes. He perceived it, he *lived* it, from many angles, many distances. On the fourteenth night, he stroked the pulmonary artery with his forefinger, and then the entire heart, inside and out. And his inspection made him

proud. He deliberately did not sleep the next night; then he took up the hearing again, invoked the name of a planet, and set about dreaming another of the major organs. Before the year was out he had reached the skeleton, the eyelids. The countless hairs of the body were perhaps the most difficult task! The man had dreamed a fully fleshed man—a strippling—but this youth did not stand up or speak, nor could it open its eyes. Night after night, the man dreamed the youth asleep. (CF, p. 98)

Lo soñó activo, caluroso, secreto, del granodor de un puño cerrado, color granate en la penumbra de un cuerpo humano aun sin cara ni sexo; como minucioso amor lo soñó, durante catorce lucidas noches. Cada noche, le percibía con mayor evidencia. No lo tocaba: se limitaba a atestiguarlo, observarlo, tal vez a corregirlo con la mirada. Lo percibía, lo vivía, desde muchas distancias y muchos ángulos. La noche catorcena rozó la arteria pulmonar con el índice y luego todo el corazón, invocó el nombre de un planeta y emprendió la visión de otro de los órganos principales. Antes de un año llegó al esqueleto, a los párpados. El pelo innumerable fue tal vez la tarea más difícil. Soñó un hombre íntegro, un manecbo, pero éste no se incorporaba ni hablaba ni podía abrir los ojos. Noche tras noche, el hombre le soñaba dormido. (F, pp. 62–63)

The narrator continues:

Under the pretext of pedagogical necessity, he drew out the hours of sleep more every day. He also redid the right shoulder (which was perhaps defective). . . . His days were, in general, happy; when he closed his eyes, he would think *Now I will be with my son*. Or less frequently, *The son I have engendered! waiting for me, and he will not exist if I do not go to him*. Gradually, the man accustomed the youth to reality. Once he ordered him to set a flag on distant mountaintop. The next day, the flag cracked on the summit. He attempted other, similar experiments—each more daring than the last. He saw with some bitterness that his son was ready—perhaps even impatient—to be born. That night he kissed him for the first time, then sent him off through many leagues of impenetrable jungle, many leagues of swamp, to that other temple whose ruins bleached in the sun downstream. But first (so that the son would never know that he was a phantasm, so that he would believe himself to be a man like other men) the man infused in him a total lack of memory of his years of education. (CF, pp. 99–100)

Con el pretexto de la necesidad pedagógica, dilatada cada día las horas dedicadas al sueño. También rehizo el hombro derecho, a caso deficiente. . . . El general, sus días eran felices; al cerrar los ojos pensaba: *Ahora estaré con mi hijo*. O, más raramente: *El hijo que he engendrado me espera y no existirá si ni*

voy. Gradualmente, lo fué acostumbrando a la realidad. Una vez le ordenó que embanderara una cumbre lejana. Al otro día, flameaba la bandera en la cumbre. Ensayó otros experimentos análogos, cada vez más audaces. Comprendió con cierta amargura que su hijo estaba listo para nacer—y tal vez impaciente. Esa noche lo besó por primera vez y lo envió al otro templo cuyos despojos blanquean río abajo, a muchas leguas de inextricable selva y de ciénaga. Antes (para que no supiera nunca que era un fantasma, para que se creyera un hombre como los otros) le infundió el olvido total de sus años de aprendizaje. (F, p. 64)

There is more than just a trace of the Promethean desire to appropriate cosmic creative energies in a passage such as this. But there is also a purposeful weakness in the Borgesian version of creation, a flaw in the mimetic pattern that in turn confers a semblance of consciousness upon it. It seems that Borges's dreamer cannot himself endure the complete repression of origins that he imagines or wishes for his creature. The dreamer may well be able to conceal the contingency of existence from his creature, but he cannot repress the fact that his own existence may be feigned. He is himself rather stunned and humiliated by this possibility: "To be not a man, but the projection of another man's dream—what incomparable humiliation, what vertigo! Every parent feels concern for the children he has procreated (or allowed to be procreated) in happiness or in mere confusion" (CF, p. 100). "With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he realized that he, too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him" (CF, p. 100).³² With this admission comes the awareness that mimesis has an edge or a fold at the very core of its creation. (Think of all the seam-like scars that mark the body of the monster in the 1994 Kenneth Branagh film, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*.) With it, Borges opens the door to a panoply of further reflections on the problem of mimesis and/as repetition.³³

Always, the question "why" is prominent in Borges's thinking: not just why such resemblances should be imperfect, but why the conditions giving rise to them should affect us so. In a text entitled "Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote*," published in *Otras inquisiciones*, Borges asks: "Why does it make us uneasy to know that the map is within the map and the thousand and one nights within the book of *A Thousand and One Nights*?" And also "Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is a reader of the *Quixote*, and Hamlet is a spectator of *Hamlet*?" He offers a speculative response that most readers would recognize as the source of a constant preoccupation in his texts: such inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, may likewise be fictitious.

Borges shares Nietzsche's suspicion that "philosophy" may have its origins not in wonder but in anxiety, in the desire to quiet the fear that comes from

this abandonment of reality's metaphysical grounds. And because Borges also shares the view that there may be no final quieting of this anxiety, no reducing the basic contingency of the world, he is inclined to regard philosophical discourse as a series of puzzles to be enjoyed, in their multifarious versions and inversions, rather than as presenting definitive solutions to problems. Indeed, what often is recognized as "philosophy" within Borges's texts frequently takes the form of "baroque" reflections on the embedding of worlds within worlds, or the doubling of the self. Philosophy in this "baroque" guise revels in the enigma. It takes an intellectual, bookish, even literary delight in the paradox. Here we think of such Borges texts as "New Refutation of Time," "Avatars of the Tortoise," or "The Next-to-Last Version of Reality." In "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain" Borges comments on a book purportedly entitled *April March*. It is said to have all the features of games—among them "symmetry, arbitrary rules, tedium."³⁴ As yet another kind of game, philosophy helps relieve the boredom of a world ruled by repetition. A short passage from the important and elaborate story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" captures the point especially well: "The fact that every philosophy is by definition a dialectical game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, has allowed them to proliferate. There are systems upon systems that are incredible but possessed of a pleasing architecture or a certain agreeable sensationalism. The metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility—they seek to amaze, astound. In their view, metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy."³⁵ Why? The answer lies in the suggestion that the world may itself be the product of an aberrant mimesis. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" attributes the origins of a fantastical world, Uqbar, to "the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia" (CF, p. 68). The encyclopedic Enlightenment project may be every bit as exhausted in Borges as it is in Flaubert, and yet here it becomes the source of a new productivity. The terror it produces is worthy of special remark ("mirrors and copulation are abominable").

In the "mimetic" universe of doubled worlds, the heated debates among philosophers, all ostensibly in search of some final truth, become rather like rhetorical "points" in a process of argumentation that never ceases to unfold, ultimately substituting its discursive folds for the world it attempts to fathom.³⁶ We think of Borges's observation that in the land of Tlön "century upon century of idealism could hardly have failed to influence reality."³⁷ As for Uqbar, it is a place where entire schools of thought collide and conflict, although always inconclusively. One school of thought denies time whereas another declares that everything has already taken place and that our lives are but repetitions of the past; some theorists propose that the history of the universe was written by a demiurge, whose secret script we must seek to decipher, whereas others gesture toward a different secret: that each person's existence is doubled by someone living on the other side of the earth. More-

A diferencia de Newton y de Schopenhauer, su antepasado no creía en un tiempo uniforme, absoluto. Creía en infinitas series de tiempos, en una red creciente y vertiginosa de tiempos divergentes, convergentes y paralelos. Esa trama de tiempos que se aproximan, se bifurcan, se cortan o que se unen laramente se ignoran, abarca *todas* las posibilidades. No existimos en la mayoría de esos tiempos; en algunos existe usted y no yo; en otros, yo, no usted; en otros, los dos. En este, que un favorable azar me depara, usted ha llegado a mi casa; en otro, usted, al atravesar el jardín, me ha encontrado muerto; en otro, yo digo estas mismas palabras, pero soy un error, un fantasma. (F, pp. 109-110)

Whether reality is one or many, there remains the possibility that structures of repetition can disclose the possibility for what might be called "knowing wonder."⁴⁰ Neither the baroque philosophical speculations of text like "Tlon, Uqbar" nor the labyrinthine structure of Ts'ui Pen's novel "The Garden of Forking Paths" precludes the possibility of an aesthetic reflection on the predicament in which everything seems to be *either* a mimesis or a failed mimesis. At the edge of representation, at the limits of verisimilitude, standing in the space that is cleared by literature's apparatus of exhaustion, there lies a new and subtle pleasure that Borges knows well how to savor. Indeed, what Borges seems to appreciate is that forsaking the ambition to fashion anything radically new affords the possibility of an affective relationship to reality—as evidenced in the momentary awe we might feel the vertiginous structure of resemblances, in the paths that marks the narrator's response to the erasure of personal identity, or in the abject sequence of events, not just one: "In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, thereby, 'several futures,' several *times*, which themselves proliferate and fork. That is the explanation for the novels' contradictions."³⁸ Such contradictions can be resolved only if one accepts the fiction of a "total book":

over, it turns out that the very text containing these seemingly irreconcilable, "baroque" speculations is enfolded within yet another text; what we are reading is eventually disclosed to be the citation—the repetition in writing—of an essay supposedly drawn from a forty-volume work entitled *Ambology of Fantastic Literature*.

Borges remains fully aware that the modernist engagement with mimesis as repetition poses special problems for narrative. To recognize that the world may be the product of a prior mimesis is to acknowledge its indifference to human action, and yet to engage in narrative at all is to accept the demands of plot. And so, just as personal identity is subject to the laws of a certain "erasure" in Borges, so too Borgesian plots attempt to register the contingency of action. Instead of the grand climax, the astonishing reversal, or the resolution of "suspense," Borges is drawn to the subtleties of the witty conclusion, to the odd concurrence, and to coincidental events. Insofar as action is itself subject to the rules of repetition, plot is the product of a combinatorial matrix. And yet Borges frames his own resistance to plot by those narrative genres, such as the detective story, that tempt us to locate the consequences of agency within a determinate chain of events.

To take what may be the most outstanding example of the Borgesian refashioning of "plot" so as to reflect the contingency of the world and the vertiginous nature of actions and their consequences within it, consider "The Garden of Forking Paths," where Ts'ui Pen's labyrinth-book is governed by the possibility of permutations and combinations rather than by the linear structure of time. In what the narrator describes as this "chaotic novel," plot embraces various possible future times; there are several outcomes of a given sequence of events, not just one: "In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, thereby, 'several futures,' several *times*, which themselves proliferate and fork. That is the explanation for the novels' contradictions."³⁸ Such contradictions can be resolved only if one accepts the fiction of a "total book":

Unlike Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform and absolute time; he believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are snipped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains *all* possibilities. In most of those times, we do not exist; in some, you exist but I do not; in others, I do and you do not; in others still, we both do. In this one, which the favouring hand of chance has dealt me, you have come to my home; in another, when you come through my garden you find me dead; in another, I say these same words, but I am an error, a ghost.³⁹

and finds solutions consistent with the philosophical work of figures whose names could well have been more prominent in the foregoing remarks. His work meets Adorno's description of art all too well. As Adorno writes in the passage from *Aesthetic Theory* cited in one of the epigraphs above, "art is actually the world once over, as like it as it is unlike it" (*AT*, p. 336). I think that Borges proves the point.

Notes

- Jorge Luis Borges, "La supersticiosa ética del lector" (1930), in *Discusión* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1970; henceforth abbreviated as *D*), pp. 49–50.
- Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (henceforth *AT*), trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 1.
- John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," *The Atlantic* 220, no. 2 (August 1967), pp. 29–34. See also Barth's palinode, "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction," *The Atlantic* 233, no. 3 (January 1980), pp. 65–71.
- The project is consistent with the view sketched by William Irwin in "Philosophy and the Philosophical, Literature and the Literary, Borges and the Labyrinthine," in this volume.
- This view derives from Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row 1971), pp. 17–81.
- In "Philosophy and the Philosophical, Literature and the Literary, Borges and the Labyrinthine" William Irwin (this volume) describes this as a "secondary meaning" of the word "literature," but I would argue that it has become secondary; it remains prior, if not primary, in the historical sense.
- Throughout all this Flaubert displays a discernible sympathy toward his heroes, and thus introduces a mode of articulation that the rhetoric of repetition would not of itself allow. I would suggest that sympathy may be regarded as a form of mimesis concentrated in, or displaced to, the affective domain.
- See Irwin, "Philosophy and the Philosophical, Literature and the Literary, Borges and the Labyrinthine," and Knight, "Intersections: Philosophy and Literature, or Why Ethical Criticism Prefers Realism," both in this volume.
- Cf. Borges's self-conscious repetition of the problem of the Eternal Return in "El tiempo circular": "Yo suelo regresar eternamente al Eterno Regreso," *Historia de la Eternidad* (Madrid: Alianza, 1971), p. 97.
- Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books 1998) p. 94 (henceforth, *CF*). "El texto de Cervantes y el de Menard son verbalmente idénticos, pero el segundo es casi infinitamente más rico. (Más ambiguo, dirán sus detractores; pero la ambigüedad es una riqueza)" in *Ficciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores 1956), p. 54 (henceforth, *F*).
- CF*, p. 135. "Cada imagen visual estaba ligada a sensaciones musculares, térmicas, etc." (*F*, p. 123).
- CF*, p. 135. "Podía reconstruir los sueños, todos los entresueños. Dos o tres veces había reconstruido un día entero. . . . Me dijo: *Más recuerdos tengo yo sólo que los que habrán tenido todos los hombres desde que el mundo es mundo*" (*F*, p. 123).
- CF*, p. 137. "Monumental como el bronce, más antiguo que Egipto, anterior a las profecías y a las pirámides" (*F*, p. 127). The passage echoes Horace, *Odes*, III, 30.
- "Su propia cara en el espejo, sus propias manos, lo sorprendían cada vez" (*F*, p. 125).
- Cf. The character Herbert Ashe in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," who dies from an aneurism (*F*, p. 21). In Funes' case, the name suggests remembrance and death (funereal), and also that which goes up in smoke (*humo*). On matters relevant to the erasure of character in Borges, see Sylvia Molloy, *Las Letras de Borges* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1979).
- For a related discussion, see Daniel Balderston, *Out of Context: Historical Reference and the Representation of Reality in Borges* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).
- As for the Argentine literary tradition itself, Borges addresses the matter in an essay published in *Discusión* ("El escritor argentino y la tradición").
- CF*, p. 101. "Como todos los hombres de Babilonia, he sido proconsul; como todos, esclavo; también he conocido la omnipotencia, el oprobrio, las cárceles. *Miren*: a mi mano derecha le falta el índice. *Miren*: por este desgarrón de la capa se ve en mi estómago un tatuaje bermejo" [*F*, p. 67 (emphasis added)].
- CF*, p. 70. "En vida padeció de irrealidad, como tantos ingleses; muerto, no es ni siquiera el fantasma que ya era entonces" (*F*, p. 17).
- CF*, p. 105. "El comprador de una docena de ánforas de vino damasceno no se maravillará si una de ellas encierra un talismán o una víbora" (*F*, p. 74).
- CF*, p. 105. "El escribano que redacta un contrato no deja casi nunca de introducir algún dato erróneo; yo mismo, en esta apresurada declaración, he falseado algún esplendor, alguna atrocidad. Quizá, también, alguna misteriosa monotonía" (*F*, p. 74).
- "El mayor hechicero . . . sería el que se hechizara hasta el punto de tomar sus propias fantasmagorías por apariciones autónomas. ¿No sería ése nuestro caso? Yo conjeturo que así es. Nosotros (la indivisa divinidad que opera en nosotros) hemos soñado el mundo. *Lo hemos soñado resistente, misterioso, visible, ubicuo en el espacio y firme en el tiempo; pero hemos consentido en su arquitectura tenues y eternos intersticios de simrazón para saber que es falso*" ("Avatares de la tortuga," *D*, p. 136).
- Adorno, *AT*, p. 336.
- CF*, p. 68. "Los espejos y la copulación son abominables, porque multiplican el número de los hombres," "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (*F*, p. 13).
- See Shierry Weber Nicholson, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 139–145.
- "Ese procedimiento o ambición de los antiguos hombres ha sido sujetado por Frazer a una conveniente ley general, la de la simpatía, que postula un vínculo inevitable entre cosas distantes, ya porque su figura es igual—magia imitativa, homeopática—ya por el hecho de una cercanía anterior—magia contagiosa. Ilustración de la segunda era el unguento curativo de Kenelm Digby, que se aplicaba no a la vendada herida, sino al acero delincuente que la infirió—mientras aquella, sin el rigor de bárbaras curaciones, iba cicatrizando. De la primera los ejemplos son infinitos. Los pieles rojas de Nebraska revestían cueros crujientes de bisonte . . . y machacaban día y noche sobre el desierto un balie tormentoso, para que los bisontes llegaran" (*D*, pp. 88–89).
- "Para el supersticioso, hay una necesaria conexión no sólo entre un balazo y un muerto, sino entre un muerto y una maltratada efigie de cera o la rotura profética de un espejo o la sal que se vuelca o trece comensales terribles" (*D*, 89).
- "La magia es la coronación o pesadilla de lo casual, no su contradicción. El milagro no es menos forastero en ese universo que en el de los astrónomos. Todas las leyes naturales lo rigen, y otras imaginarias" (*D*, p. 89).
- "Ese recelo de que un hecho temible puede ser atraído por su mención, es imperitante o inútil en el asiático desorden del mundo real, no así en una novela, que debe ser un juego preciso de vigilancias, ecos y afinidades. Todo episodio, en un cuidadoso relato, es de proyección ulterior" (*D*, p. 90).
- CF*, p. 97. "Quería soñar un hombre . . . con integridad minuciosa e imponerlo en la realidad" (*F*, p. 60).

creciente y vertiginosa de tiempos divergentes, convergentes y paralelos. Esa tra de tiempos que se aproximan, se bifurcan, se cruzan o que secuencialmente se ignoran, abarca *todas* las posibilidades. No existimos en la mayoría de esos tiempos, en algunos existe usted y no yo; en otros, yo, no usted; en otros, los dos. En éste, que un favorable azar me depara, usted ha llegado a mi casa; en otro, usted, al atravesar el jardín, me ha encontrado muerto; en otro, yo digo estas mismas palabras, pero soy un error, un fantasma" (F, pp. 109-110).

40. I borrow this phrase from Lawrence Weschler, from a talk on the work of Tobit Rheberger presented at the Berkeley Art Museum in September 1999.

41. "Abominablemente he vencido" [F, p. 111 (emphasis added)].

42. One of the languages of Tlön is built around adjectives, not verbs; nouns are in turn built of adjectives: "la célula primordial no es el verbo, sino el adjetivo no

silábico. El sustantivo se forma por acumulación de adjetivos" (F, p. 21).

31. CF, pp. 97, 98. "Ese proyecto mágico había agotado el espacio entero de su alma;

si alguien le hubiera preguntado su propio nombre o cualquier rasgo de su vida anterior, no habría acertado a responder." "Comprendió que el empeño de modelar la materia incoherente y vertiginosa de que se componen los sueños es el más arduo que puede acometer un varón, aunque penetre todos los enigmas del orden superior y del inferior: mucho más arduo que tejer una cuerda de arena o que amonedar el viento sin cara" (F, pp. 60, 62).

32. "No ser un hombre, ser la proyección de otro hombre! qué humillación incomparable, qué vértigo! A todo padre le interesan los hijos que ha procreado (que ha permitido) en una mera confusión o felicidad"; "Con alivio, con humillación, con terror, comprendió que el también era una apariencia, que otro estaba soñándolo" (F, pp. 65, 66).

33. Among the prominent literary issues this raises is the question of verisimilitude:

how to make narrative seem *like* the world while acknowledging that its powers are but secondary and "degraded" forms of magic. There is a Borges text published in the collection "Discussion," "El arte narrativo y la magia," that speaks directly to the point. Borges begins from a consideration of the 1867 text by William Morris, *The Life and Death of Jason*. The "problem" of such a narrative is finding the means by which to produce what Borges describes, following Coleridge, as "una fuerte apariencia de veracidad . . . [la] espontánea suspensión de la duda" (D, p. 82). The problem of how to conjure a world becomes the question of how to produce the effect of belief. Insofar as Borges shares the historical self-awareness of modernism, the issue is complicated by the need to take history into account. How to establish the plausibility of the mythological world when a belated in, for example, centaurs or sirens is historically impossible? Borges is fascinated by Morris because he works as if by insinuation; he derives world-making powers from the suggestiveness of language. In one instance Morris simply introduces centaurs, without comment, among natural wild animals—bears and wolves ("Where bears and wolves the centaurs' arrows find," D, p. 82, is a first reference). Then, on a second occasion, he introduces a minimal qualifier ("quick-eyed centaurs," p. 82), as if to suggest that their existence has now been taken for real. The play is of course purely rhetorical, but equally telling is the fact that Borges names it as such. "Morris puede no comunicar al lector su imagen del centauro ni siquiera invitarnos a tener una, le basta nuestra continua fe en sus palabras, como en el mundo real" (D, p. 83).

34. "La simetría, las leyes arbitrarias, el redio" (F, p. 79).

35. CF, p. 74. "El hecho de que toda filosofía sea de antemano un juego dialéctico, una *Philosophie des Als Ob*, ha contribuido a multiplicarlas. Abundan los sistemas increíbles, pero de arquitectura agradable o de tipo sensorial. Los metafísicos de Tlön no buscan la verdad ni siquiera la verosimilitud: buscan el asombro. Juzgan que la metafísica es una rama de la literatura fantástica" (F, p. 23).

36. Cf. the narrator's comment on Tlön's labyrinthine book in "The Garden of Forking Paths," that "la controversia filosófica usurpa buena parte de su novela" (F, p. 108).

37. CF, p. 77. "Siglos y siglos de idealismo no han dejado de influir en la realidad" (F, p. 27).

38. CF, p. 125. "En todas las ficciones, cada vez que un hombre se enfrenta con diversas alternativas, opta por una y elimina otras; en la del caso inextinguible Tlön, opta—simultáneamente—por todas. Cree, así, diversos porvenir, diversos tiempos, que también proliferan y se bifurcan. De ahí las contradicciones de la novela" (F, p. 107).

39. CF, p. 127. "A diferencia de Newton y de Schopenhauer, su antepasado no creía en un tiempo uniforme, absoluto. Creía en infinitas series de tiempos, en una red