

The feeling of strangeness and the 'unknown relation'

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Writing around the work of Borges, writing on the work today, may appear to be an act of infinite pretention. I would not be attempting it but for the friendly insistence of Lisa Block de Behar, who has published not one but several major books on this body of work that is so emblematic of our century.¹ It is she who pursues me through the Thebaid, where we taste the pleasure of reading without having to sort out the diverse flavors.²

Since I am trying to rediscover the origin of this taste, I shall speak of an *inexhaustible* text. Not in how it offers a thematic of the inexhaustible (the library, sand, the labyrinth), but in how, from a poetic and semiotic perspective, the reader must always sniff out meaning, or, to put it as Dante would, must always pursue the 'fragrance' of that wild beast that haunts language: at the heart of Latin, Dante tells us, is the odor of the Vulgate. One recalls the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, in which Dante states (and in Latin, no less!) that he must choose the maternal language, which is 'at the heart' of the fourteen Italian languages. But he must invent that language from these fourteen others, and hunt down his proper language as one would hunt down a panther whose scent one picks up in the woods, unforeseen, labile, ever elsewhere, like the sense of smell itself:

Now that we have hunted among the wooded hills and meadows of Italy without discovering the panther we are stalking, let us seek its traces in a more rational way, so that with ingenuity and zeal we may entrap in our net that animal who scatters its fragrance everywhere and shows itself nowhere. (Dante 1981: 73)

Poetic language flees through the Italian forest, because it has its roots in maternal language, the most archaic, most noble language — most noble because it is the oldest, although it is called the vulgar tongue:

I will proceed to define the vernacular as the language which children gather from those around them when they first begin to articulate words; or more

briefly, that which we learn without any rules at all by imitating our nurses. (Dante 1981: 43)

The *scent* of maternal language and the *inexhaustible* character of language, such are the poles around which I shall seek to translate my impressions of reading.

My impression corresponds, as I see it, with what Guy Rosolato means, in a more conceptualized way, by 'the unknown relation'.³ His idea derives its meaning from the contemporary psychoanalytic notion, itself post-Freudian, of the 'object-relation': the term 'that designates the mode of relation of the subject with his world, the relation that is the complex and total result of a certain organization of personality, of a more or less phantasmatic apprehension of objects, and of such privileged types of defense' (Laplanche and Pontalis 1976 [1968]).⁴ The contemporary application of the term 'object-relation' modifies the equilibrium that Freud had established, in a perhaps too rational way, between the source of a drive, its object, and its aim. The source, or organic substrate, passes cleanly to the second plane, and the very notion of aim fades in connection to that of relation:

What becomes the center of interest in 'oral object relation', for example, are the avatars of the incorporation and the means by which it finds itself again as signification and as phantasm prevalent at the heart of all relations of the subject to the world. As for the status of the object ... [one would have oriented oneself] rather toward a conception of a typical object for each mode of relation (one speaks of oral objects, anal objects, etc.). (Laplanche and Pontalis 1976 [1968]: 406)

Rosolato, however, looks to explore a field other than the one in which symbolic organization develops in relation to the father — notably the object-relation. He is specifically interested in the interaction between the mother and the *unknown* — an infinitely broader term than that which indicates the illusory object — and more precisely the 'perspective object', which substitutes for and embodies the maternal penis in the phantasm of the child. As André Green put it, in a synthesizing article, Rosolato builds his thought on the Lacanian triad language/father/symbolic, but he further constructs a sort of symmetrical triad, which is the inverse or complement of the Lacanian triad (Green describes it as its 'pendant'), and this is the triad mother/death/unknown.

From that moment on, the 'perspective object' — the concept elaborated upon by Rosolato, a 'highly polysemic' concept, as Green described it, and an elusive representation that continues to evade one's grasp — is an interface between antinomial fields: visible/invisible,

known/unknown. Ultimately, the perspective object marks the conclusive location of the visual, united with the maternal order of things, and perhaps its archaic primacy over the other senses.⁵

I would like to reveal the marks and traces of this *unknowable unknown*, and to outline its semiotic, specifically in Borges's work because the inexhaustible interrogation that one finds in Borges's texts on art and on the inexhaustibility of man is not a vague and imprecise *lamento*. Let's not forget that the *unrecognized* (the knowable unknown) is often best perceived by critics: as for French criticism on this theme, it was Didier Anzieu who listed in an acutely pertinent article (1971: 177–210), following Gérard Genette, the 'systems of identification' that the tales follow.⁶ All the processes of repetition, symmetry (or more precisely 'double specular symmetry'⁷), solipsism, the horror of death and its corollary, the pursuit of the divine, are tied together in a knot, which is the central problem of writing: '*Every person is a system of permutation of many persons*'. In the tale 'The Immortal', Homer, as any creator, created a hero in his image: he calls him '*outis*' [nobody] as Ulysses describes himself to Polyphemus. 'Soon, like Ulysses, I shall be Nobody; soon, I shall be all men — I shall be dead' (Borges 1998: 194).⁸ Anzieu comments: 'For the same reason the author, who is nobody, is understood by so much of the world because it is he who can make everyone understand that man is, like him, nobody and everybody at the same time' (1971: 185).

Yet the conception of *time and body* that underlies this thematic and these principles of poetry — and Didier Anzieu makes this perfectly clear — has a side that, far from attaching itself exclusively to the Oedipus complex, is also the concern of circular ties to the maternal image (Anzieu 1971: 192, 198). Anzieu further remarks, in his preface to the 1989 French translation of Julio Woscoboinik's *Le Secret de Borges*, that 'the narcissistic dimension is simultaneously preponderant, natural, and authentic', in contrast to the Oedipal themes, which are more exceptional, more affected, and more artificial. This is the first trail that I would like to follow, in wondering what 'odor' of Borges's language — what signs and tracks, what semiotic, in short — we can define by using the conceptual networks adopted from Rosolato, understanding perfectly well that I am using them less as elements of a body of psychoanalytic doctrine than as the horizon of a certain psychoanalytic reflection bearing on culture and the relationship to knowledge. In the present essay I shall limit myself to citing Borges the prose author, since I am not sufficiently fluent in Spanish to risk a similar reading of his poetry.

First, however, I would like to emphasize the unique position of the subject of writing in Borges's narratives. One could say that the shiftings

of history and of the stories the author indulges in come under the floating aesthetic of the 'true-lie' (to recapture Aragon's expression), or of the delicate work of forgery, to use the term that Borges himself used when comparing his 'Universal History of Iniquity' [*Historia universal de la infamia*] to Marcel Schwob's *Vies imaginaires*:

In my *Universal History*, I did not want to repeat what Marcel Schwob had done in his *Imaginary Lives*. He had invented biographies of real men about whom little or nothing is recorded. I, instead, read up on the lives of known persons and then deliberately varied and distorted them according to my own whims. (Borges 1978: 239)

But this, however, is not quite the difference between Schwob and Borges. For both, the issue is how to focus the look and memory of the reader through the signifying anecdote. For both, the problem lies in writing biographies in which the reference of detail is nonexistent or unverifiable. From that moment on, the biographer must 'choose from among the realms of human possibilities that which is unique'. In his preface to *Vies imaginaires*, Marcel Schwob clarifies the biographer's actual responsibility and his awesome freedom, in which a sense of humor and a taste for the strange crystallize. This choice, at the heart of a 'chaos' of possibilities among distinctly human psychological traits, is made in the most irrational way, and is based on whatever it can dream up — a taste for the bizarre, or a taste for the unique. Schwob brilliantly notes:

The ideas of great men are the common patrimony of humanity: each one of them really only possesses his own peculiarities ... Histories remain mute on these things. In the collection of raw materials that records provide, there are not many remarkable and inimitable breaks ... Plutarch's genius sometimes makes him an artist; but he wasn't always able to understand the essence of his own art, since he thought in terms of 'parallels' — as if men properly described in all their details could resemble each other! (Schwob 1979: 172–173)⁹

And in the preface to *Roi au masque d'or*, Schwob, speaking through a character from another world, insists on the meager assistance that psychological analysis can provide, an idea that converges with his comments on the notion of choice:

Although your psychologists have divided the passions into light swatches of extremely delicate nuances, their work seems restricted, in short, to a few acts necessary for the conservation of your species. (Schwob 1979: 41)

A comparison with Aragon's poetics is profitable: it leads to a better understanding not only of the floating position of the writer, but also of

the connection to the visual, something obvious in Borges, but hidden in Aragon. The latter — in effect recapturing the poetic reflections of the Russian formalist V. Kavérine, who analyzed all the opening sentences of Chekov's narratives¹⁰ — emphasizes both the beginning of the signifier (the *incipit*, which imposes itself on the writer as a necessary syntagma¹¹) and the rewriting of literature. The example that Aragon provides, however, allows us to understand that 'rewriting' is, above all, a mechanism that infuses the audible dynamic with visual elements. When Fénelon (1987 [1699]) tells the story of Telemachus to his student the Duke of Burgundy, he writes: 'Calypso cannot be consoled after the departure of Ulysses. In her grief, she is unhappy at being immortal'.¹² Aragon recovers the same sounds of the beginning, but enriches them with interpolated clauses which generate visualizable images:

Like a seashell on the beach, Calypso disconsolately repeated the name of Ulysses to the foam that carries ships afar, unmindful in her sorrow of her immortal self.¹³ (Aragon 1997: 22)

The connection that Borges established between film (a visual art if there is one) and biography is well known. The title of the article he published in *La Prensa* in 1929 captures it perfectly: '*El cinematógrafo, el biógrafo*' [The cinematograph, the biograph]. Thus, as he sees them, Josef von Sternberg's 'cinematographic novels' [las novelas cinematográficas] are characterized by the editing of their significant moments, as well as the 'long-range development or sequencing of laconic details' (Borges 1974: 221).¹⁴ If editing is a matter of choice, which is moreover more metaphoric or emblematic than metonymic, then, focusing on the laconic detail — a gesture or expression without obvious psychological content — is a matter of using enigma, sometimes as a visual figure (as emblem) of the unknown, sometimes as speech in a double or triple sense.

To say 'laconic' is to say concision by moral exigency. Laconia, where the inhabitants of Sparta principally resided, is an austere province where such qualities as endurance, modesty, and, ultimately, the virtues of silence are valued. Laconia valued action over discourse, which was presumed to be narcissistic and rhetorical — in short, an Athenian form of flattery. The Borgesian notion of the 'laconic detail' thus brings together two specific aspects: the reduction of the visual field and the scarcity of words.

Let us first address this *reduction* of the visual field, and in so doing, the very nature of the visual itself. In 'The Automatic Message', André Breton (1978: 97–109) described the notion of the 'unverifiable visual' as

if the epithet denoted its very nature.¹⁵ In Borges's work, visual details abound, which are both extremely cinematographic and enigmatic in their signification. Recall how Borges cites José Hernández's *El Gaucho Martín Fierro*: 'There was once a young Italian prisoner / Who always spoke of a boat / And we drowned him in a pond / because of the plague. / He had blue eyes / like a young albino foal'.¹⁶ Borges's commentary on this passage is also relevant: 'the supreme effectiveness of the stanza resides in the postscript or the moving addition of memory: "he has the blue eyes of a young albino foal" is very characteristic of someone [a writer] who assumes an event to be already known and to whom memory restores one more image' (Borges 1974: 196).¹⁷ In effect, this detail conveys straightforwardly, without symbolism or rhetorical effect, the absurd singularity of a destiny. It is magnificently silent on the execution, restricting itself to the brutal merging with water — this superb *element*, bearer of dreams, possibly rich in storms, which might have born magnifying associations, as it had carried the young Italian from Europe to the Americas, turns out instead to be diminutive, possibly muddy, and in any event a vehicle for death. It is a pond. And it is in a pond that the young Italian will have been drowned, in a gesture of everyday horror.

Those scenes in Borges's work also come to mind in which we see falling bodies, already stiffening from imminent death. Villagrán the giant Mexican, for example, walks into a bar of drunkards and is cut down by Bill Harrigan ('The Disinterested Killer Bill Harrigan'): 'The glass falls from Villagrán's hand; then, the entire man follows' (Borges 1998: 33).¹⁸ The Yardmaster, already stabbed to death ('Man on Pink Corner'), comes back into the shed where everyone is dancing: 'He came in, and he took a few unsteady steps into the clearing that we all made for him, like we had before. He stood there, tall and unseeing, and then he toppled like a post' (Borges 1998: 50).¹⁹ Death, as an event, announces itself like an incomprehensible gesture, as the place of the mechanical and already inanimate in man (the post). Rainer Maria Rilke understood this instant when everything would again become possible, specifically life, and when the fate of the Fall is already ineluctably inscribed: in the *silence* that precedes the collapse of the house's retaining wall in the great fire.²⁰

In the course of great conflagrations ... noiselessly a black cornice thrusts itself forward overhead, and a high wall, behind which the flames shoot up, leans forward, noiselessly. All stand motionless and await, with shoulders raised and brows contracted, the awful crash. The silence here is like that.

But one also encounters the enigma in the preconceived, laconic expression, or in the simultaneously unrefined and decisive speech of

provocation: “‘Seems like you’re always in the way, asshole,” he muttered as he passed by me — I couldn’t say whether it was to get it off his chest or because he had his mind on something else’ (Borges 1998: 49).²¹ One could relate such constructions to the art of the insult or, in another narrative, the juxtaposition of disparate, scenic places, but the latter forms can both still be analyzed by traditional rhetorical devices. They are thus far less enigmatic:

In the rhetorical figure known as *oxymoron*, the adjective applied to a noun seems to contradict that noun. Thus, gnostics spoke of a ‘dark light’ and alchemists, of a ‘black sun.’ Departing from my last visit to Teodelina Villar and drinking a glass of harsh brandy in a corner bar-and-grocery-store was a kind of oxymoron: the very vulgarity and facileness of it were what tempted me. (Borges 1998: 244)²²

On the other hand, the *mise-en-scène* of this fascination appears in the critical article upon the Icelandic Kenningar (in ‘A History of Eternity’), in which Borges examines the enigmatic and powerfully archaic expressions belonging to the Icelandic poetic tradition. Are these coded, rigid, and formulaic metaphors, of which Borges gives us a comical list, only ‘sophisms, deceptive and languid exercises’, to which metrics traditionally refers by the term ‘padding’?²³ Or rather, is their primary role not to put us face to face with the strangeness of the world: ‘they can provoke the lucid perplexity that is the unique honor of metaphysics, its reward and its source’.²⁴

Such enigmas as these, which ordinary, everyday words or coded language utters and reports, are like the visual detail, ‘unverifiable’ by nature. They seem to me to be the anchor points of the ‘unknown relation’ in the work of Borges.

A remarkable function of the enigmatic detail is that the very vacancy of the sign permits its use in a prophetic sense. In some way, the unknown relation is characterized by reproducing itself in time, so that it is identical to itself, and becomes thus a prophet of its own effect.

One recalls the final paragraph of Borges’s article ‘Narrative Art and Magic’ [*El arte narrativo y la magia*]:

I have described two causal procedures: the natural or incessant result of endless, uncontrollable causes and effects; and magic, in which every lucid and determined detail is a prophecy. In the novel, I think that the only possible integrity lies in the latter. Let the former be left to psychological simulations. (Borges 1998: 81–82)²⁵

Yet these ‘magical’, ‘lucid’, and ‘primitive’ details are strongly visual, and strongly affected symbolically, conducting the narrative through

moderated expansions, juxtaposed to one another and cut by intertitles. These sequences are articulated through their medium, following a moral thread, which is neither a narrative (in the chronological sense), nor really even 'logical'.²⁶

Let's reread the story of 'Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv' (Borges 1998: 40–44).²⁷ This narrative is a tale to the extent that we cannot be certain of its verisimilitude. It is, on the one hand, comprised of a series of narratives of veiling and unveiling that elaborates a semiotic of the discontinuous, of problematic or impossible nomination, and that weaves together a series of interrogations of the visual and the theatrical. One recalls the story of the dyer, who learned his trade from an uncle, and who spoke of purple dyes as hitmen speak of blood, or as alchemists speak of gold and mercury — as a middle and mediating domain, a place where things are magically transformed: 'a dyer — the craft, known to be a refuge for infidels and imposters and inconstant men, which inspired the first anathemas of his extravagant career'.²⁸ The subheading of this section is 'The Scarlet Dye' [*La púrpura escarlata*]. Five episodes follow, in chronological, but above all symbolic order, under the intertitles 'The Bull', 'The Leopard', 'The Veiled Prophet', 'Abominable Mirrors', and 'The Face'.²⁹ The first two 'movements' of the text offer stories, under the sign of animalism, of veilings of the face or of blindings: the bull is a mask carried by a nameless man, accompanied by two blind men. The leopard, blinded, it seems, by Hakim, is the emissary victim of a scene in which it serves as a 'touchstone' in order to reveal the extraordinary power of the would-be prophet (specifically Hakim). The other three episodes are also constructed around the register of the veil, of the double, and of unveiling, but this time under the sign of humanity. *The progression of the tale, however, insists on one detail, that of the dyer's craft, functioning as fate.* Just as the dyer in practicing his craft transforms and ennobles his material and is at the same time cunning with it, so too the mask ennobles the leper, and permits him to exercise his guile and his will to power.

What Borges designates by the term 'detail' is thus in this case what theorists of poetry have designated by the term '*mise-en-abyme*': a specular image, a model reduced to an essential function. Through this function, the detail makes itself sacred. Its role in the detective novel, where this function is exacerbated, is well known (and was by both Borges and his friend Bioy Casares).

One 'detail' among others is the proper name, with which Borges plays with insistence, and which manifests its role prophetically. In 'The Aleph,' the figure of Beatriz Elena Viterbo, which traverses the entire tale, is introduced to provoke in the reader an echo of the name of Dante's beloved. In 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (1994), the coincidence

between the name of an individual and the name of a city, Albert, functions as a prophetic metaphor. One could easily cite other examples. The emblematic city of Buenos Aires (in 'In Praise of Darkness' [1969]) is designated, like a herald of the female body from the third verse, by a series of infinitely precise places to which memory attaches itself: 'It is the wall of la Recoleta ...; it is a big tree ...; it is a numbered door.'³⁰

It is necessary to speak here of another place of vacancy: that which surrounds the infinitely *other*, bound occasionally to the undefined. As an epigraph, one might recall here the Borgesian crack about the English and their taste for literature of the sea: 'the sea: the Pampas of the English.'³¹ What amazes me, in the work of this child of the cities, nourished on books in closed spaces, is the introduction of savagery or bestiality: through tigers, for example, which are emblematic of both the work and the 'iniquity' of men. One could say that there had been the accident, as a child, then the death of the father, and in the same year the gravest illness, ultimately blindness, anticipated, ineluctable, and finally occurring, and that this series of obstacles to a fate has something to do with the *savage* beginning of death at the very heart of human life. It is not enough to say that the English speaker encounters here a current of different linguistic origin, that of 'non-English' Hispanicist literature, in this domain where epic, narrative, and popular poetry construct and saturate nineteenth-century Argentine culture. This thematic and linguistic 'other' is in no way restored to alterity, but rather to the unlimited. In effect, on the one hand, if Borges derides the thematic of the *Pampas* and of the *Gaucha*, and of the latter's pretended spontaneous generation, it is in order to restore this literature to the status of *the* literature. I cite his ironic denial:

Pastoral life has predominated in many regions of the Americas, from Montana and Oregon to Chili, but these areas, until now, have fervently resisted writing *El Gaucho Martín Fierro*. It is thus not enough to have a hard cowboy and a desert.³²

As for the undefined, it is undeniably there, be it thematic in a geographical sense (the horizon of the desert), or in a moral sense — perplexity before human wickedness, or before psychological motivation. The undefined always gives rise to vertigo, and mirrors human complexity. And finally this sensitivity to the undefined blends the enigmatic signs that comprise the *details* that I discussed earlier. Therefore, speaking of *El Gaucho Martín Fierro*, Borges makes this commentary:

This coming and going in time prevents us from clarifying certain details: we don't know, for example, if the temptation of whipping the wife of the murdered

black man is the brutal act of a drunk man or — as we would prefer it — the vertigo of despair, and the fact that we are perplexed by the motives makes the gesture more real.³³

All that I have advanced to now progresses toward the idea that a certain major vacancy in Borges's writing lies in the status of his subject. Borges's critical fortune abundantly illustrates this remark, above all, at the thematic level. The subject of the opening tale in 'The Book of Sand' is 'the other' (1998: 411–417). In 'The Circular Ruins,' the subject creates his object but also is thought by it (1998: 96–100). The dreamed object can invade you, like the sand dreamed by the prisoner of 'The Writing of the God' (1998: 250–254). In 'Story of the Warrior and the Captive Maiden' (1998: 208–211) the obverse and the reverse of a medal are one and the same thing. Aesthetic theoreticians have often observed the uniquely autoreflexive status of poetic writing: the writer observes himself writing and gives us some of the keys to understanding literary writing and reading. It is well understood that any new opening on an enlarged domain of knowledge casts light on its proper aporias. One symbolic way of communicating this fact is that in such cases the text 'knows more' than the author. There is an (imaginary) past to the text, of which one finds some examples throughout Borges's work, from 'Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv', to the two initial pages which 'are missing' from 'The Garden of Forking Paths', and from there to the 'Fragments from an apocryphal Gospel'.³⁴

My remark on the status of the subject deals more fully with the relation to knowledge that one finds in Borges's work. The author Borges generates an incommensurate domain of knowledge by gathering from and sorting among diverse, very respectable domains of knowledge, all of which aspire on their own to encyclopedic status.

Yet Borges's borrowing from these diverse encyclopedias is not a work of compilation. The collage effects that he generates do not seek to vividly conjure up the feeling of the 'uncanny', but instead convey the affect of the real, the threshold of which is profoundly enigmatic. Far from the surrealist collage, which seeks to disconcert us so as to drive us away from literature and into the field of the imaginary, Borges's collage binds us hand and foot to the literature of 'ordinary' life, but only along its enigmatic edges. One has seen how the carefully evoked comic gesture, or ordinary speech ('get out of my way') restores us to the field of a precautionary adherence to the truth of all time.

Borges's own identity as author derives from such gestures. More than an 'author' of encyclopedias with hidden levels (as one might say of the magician's hat), more than an 'author' of anthologies, more than an

'author' of critical texts in which poetic reflection opens the way for decades of collective reflection, Borges appears to me as an author of fables — fables, that is, insofar as fable is not understood as truly being a literary genre. It is less a genre than a mode of the functioning of thought, which finds its formal expression in language. Significantly, it is in his *Rhetoric*, not in his *Poetics*, that Aristotle establishes the 'genre' of the fable, and he defines rhetoric as the conduct of a thought in and by the system of language. The definition of fable thus follows not formal criteria, but rather structural criteria that one can enumerate: first, the situation of power that gives rise to it, the writer knowing more than the reader at any given moment; then, the substantiating function that animates it; followed by the detour to fiction to which it proceeds; and finally, the polysemy that it generates. The situation of 'power' and the substantiating function appears at the beginning of fables on the one hand, and in their conclusion on the other, always moralizing, and no longer narrating. Thus, the body of the text, in which at the same time *both* a 'story' and a 'moral' are given (and which one senses, since one is anticipating it before actually obtaining it, explicitly in exoteric language, *in fine*) plays on polysemy. Clearly, it is very much a matter of a 'Library', but it is also a matter of the universe (in 'The Library of Babel,' precisely this polysemy is thick from the start).³⁵ In a more classic, but not dissimilar manner, a fable by La Fontaine *begins* instead by the indication of polysemy, or putting the generalization inherent in the anecdotal story another way: fable 5, 12 ('Les médecins') refers to the roles of its characters, since their proper names already provide the moral of their possessors: 'Doctor So Much the Worse was going to see a sick man / who was also visited by his colleague So Much the Better.' One could easily go on. But in the end, what I am calling 'vacancy' in the writing of Borges is also immanent within the status of the very act of reading to which it gives rise.

One clearly recognizes the way in which Borges's encyclopedic work, at least until the end of the 1940s, is incessantly thumbing its nose at its readers (who always believe that they possess certain knowledge). This warped and elusive reference, to which Borges's immediate circle turned its attention, with his agreement and sometimes with his help, calls for a critical reading. Alerted, a smile on our lips, our head full of uncertainties — we believe and disbelieve, at the same time, we don't want to. What would we do without the critical apparatus of the beautiful editions that we now read? We would compose other stories of indeterminate status from these texts, telling them to dinner guests or to other friendly readers. Indeed, the half-true, half-false story — in short, the 'plausible' story — possesses the unique power of

self-generation. Recall that 'Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv' begins with the line: 'Unless I am mistaken, the original sources of information on Al-Moqanna, the Veiled (or, more strictly, Masked) Prophet of Khorasan, are but four. ...'³⁶ The 'Index of sources' at the end of his 'Universal History of Iniquity' indicates that the source of this tale is Sir Percy Sykes's *A History of Persia* (London, 1915) and *Die Vernichtung der Rose* (Leipzig, 1927), the anthology elaborated by a certain Alexander Schulz (Borges 1989/96: 1.345). Yet if Roger Caillois turned his attention to the verification of the sources, J. P. Bernès delighted in teaching us that the second source is in fact fictional, its author's name having been taken from that of Borges's friend, Alejandro Schulz. Whatever the Borgesian erudition of the reader of Borges, the cultivated reader *can only* renounce his credibility at the same moment that the author, in accordance with the novel's original use, declares to us that his narrative is authentic or subject to authentication. Such an act gives rise to a unique position of reading, hesitating between the relation to the 'true' and the relation to the 'plausible.' Are we cultivating ourselves by reading an encyclopedia, or are we distracting ourselves by reading fiction? Or again, are we entering an anthropological space, where the citation puts the author in the position of the reader's brother? I have always thought that André Breton's cleverness — his genius — in writing the *Anthology of Black Humor* was to lure us, we not particularly clever humorists of the quotidian, through the vertiginous and dark domains of the fierce humorists Swift and Jarry. When Breton reads Swift, he assumes a fraternal position in relation to us.

My proposal, however, is this: like an anthology, an encyclopedia is 'in essence' made to be *paged through*, and it is precisely this *role* of the interlocutor, in this case, the reader, that Borges seeks. Encyclopedias and anthologies are books that are inherently 'without closure': on the one hand, they are incomplete, unfinishable by their author, and on the other, they are manufactured by *temptation*, offering us both *incitement* and a restless lure. Coming face to face with such a work, we are incited to dream about two parallel poles: the man who knows everything and the man who knows that he knows nothing. We are brought to recognize *both* the roots of the *libido sciendi* and those of intellectual frustration. The role of the reader is thus far more important with respect to encyclopedias or anthologies than with any other type of book, such that it is based on the 'editorial' needs of the public of a particular generation, and in a particular epoch. Unfinished and unfinishable, the encyclopedia can always add one more article. An anthology, for its part, is clearly the work of three figures: the author cited by the compiler of the 'selection', the editor who proposes the selection, but also the

reader who is going to be lured by the editor's selection (one recognizes here the responsibility of the selection). The book's lack of structural completion is of course the last challenge for us to consider. If the reader has opened such a book, he will not be able to close it again because (as in Borges's tale) the letters will proliferate and reproduce themselves. The reader will become the co-author of another anthology, comprised of other texts and other images. Vagueness and subjectivity are essentially the underlying roots of the anthology, just as the drive toward scientificity (which is also at its core a scientificity that calls itself into question) is the root of the encyclopedia.

In Borges's work, the rise of the *Alma Mater* is known to have replaced the paternal library and the maternal readings. Indeed, the place of the mother in these texts seems to me to be locatable in the playful reading implied by the texts' writing. This game was thus less one of *fort-da*, than of miming the circulation of the senses, which establish themselves, according to Winnicott, between what will become the *inside* (the ego) and the *outside*. The place of the mother is also perceptible in the 'complex' status of the writing subject, who on the one hand is more often than not an author of fables, and who is on the other hand also dreamed up fantastically by his own text. Ultimately, what I have most strongly emphasized in this study is the use of the visual detail as a sort of personal herald that elaborates 'perspective objects', the emblem of which was *the aleph* of the tale by the same name. Such objects are comparable to, but different from, those associated with Salvador Dalí's paranoiac-critical method. In an article in *Minotaure* 7, Dalí argued that the wireless spool in the foreground of a photograph of plump shopkeepers gives us a more playful and free equivalent to the textual objects to which I have drawn our attention in Borges's text. 'Deplorable objects of insignificance,' writes Dalí, 'which, at this moment, carry us Surrealists away from the better part of our time, and the better part of our space' (1935: 56-57). What is open to the imaginary without restrictions in the work of Dalí and the Surrealists, and by extension to *loss*, is in Borges's work full of the self and the culture of the strange, *but the signifying strange*, at the edge of the world, at the edge of words.

Translated by Adam Jolles

Notes

Translator's Note: I would like to thank Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft for their kind assistance with this translation.

1. I have particularly benefited from reading two of Lisa Block de Behar's books (1984; 1998).
2. Being the simple reader that I am, I found the core of Borges's references in the admirable French editions (1993 and 1999).
3. Guy Rosolato, a member of the Association Psychanalytique de France, published the core of his work with Gallimard and with Presses Universitaires de France. For an introduction to this work, now considered a classic in France, see Jean-Claude Arfouilloux (2000).
4. English translation, 1974, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co.).
5. Jean-Claude Arfouilloux explains the orientation of Guy Rosolato's thought by expressing it in relation to two well-known Freudian notions: the feeling of the 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*), on the one hand, and the question of the 'unrecognized' (*unerkannt*), on the other.

In effect, the feeling of strangeness that Freud described to Romain Rolland in 1936, after visiting the Acropolis, can serve as a point of reference for understanding Rosolato's theories: it links together the 'oceanic feeling' to which Rolland himself had given so much importance; the effusional lyricism to which Ernest Renan had given his most eminent literary formulation, some sixty years before; and, moreover, the feeling of the 'uncanny' explored by Freud in 1919. Yet, already according to Renan, the Parthenon was carried away in the fascination with a 'nameless abyss'. And what seems to have fascinated Freud during his tour is an absence: the absence of another temple, one which is no longer — perhaps the temple of Jerusalem, destroyed and rebuilt so many times. The mystery of the renewal of history through the insistence of men to rebuild. This fascination also refers to the similar mystery of the divine, of the sacred, and finally, since the Parthenon is dedicated to Pallas Athena, the mystery of the feminine and of the difference between the sexes. The columns that are fully silhouetted against an empty space, having avoided the destruction of the nineteenth century, figure similarly to the opening of Woman. The look seeks to fill in this hollow, in substituting for it a 'perspective object', an elusive representation that continues to evade one's grasp.

On the other hand, J. C. Arfouilloux remarked that the 'unknown relation' generalizes and displaces Freud's oft-evoked question of the 'unrecognized' (*unerkannt*). One recalls that Freud used the metaphor of the 'navel' in reference to the limits of the interpretation of dreams, showing that the best interpreted dreams guard a node of obscurity, which resists interpretation and does not allow itself to be completely clarified. The navel, in effect a privileged metaphor, condenses (in its form, its appearance, and its symbolic stakes) various interrogations of humanity on what is not recognized in origins, in the maternal, in femininity, and perhaps by extension in the differences between the sexes and among the generations. 'The dream-thoughts, which must generally remain unfulfilled, branch out in all directions in the tangled network [*réseau*] of our thoughts, and it is from a denser point within this network [*entrelacement*] that desire emerges from the dream, like the mushroom from its mycélium. The *unrecognized*, however, refers to what has been known of the mother, of the origin, and what has been subjected to primary repression in inscribing itself in the form of the first *signifiers of demarcation*, enigmatic *signifiers* which are not directly accessible to consciousness' (J. C. Arfouilloux). In 'the navel' of the dream resides the 'unrecognized'. The *unrecognized*, however, assumes at least the virtual possibility of recognition. To retranslate these 'visual-analogical' or 'demarcative' signifiers into their original language, but with some words taken from 'verbal-digital' language, is notably

the object of analysis. Thus, beyond this knowable unknown, necessarily emerges an unknowable unknown, which marks the untraversable limit of absolute knowledge.

6. Julio Woscoboinik's (1989) is more descriptive and much less suggestive.
7. Double specular symmetry [*double symétrie spéculaire*] is Anzieu's term to indicate that which binds the virtual image with the 'real' object, on the one hand, and that which switches the right and left halves of the virtual image, on the other (see Anzieu 1971: 191).
8. 'en breve, seré todos: estaré muerto' (Borges 1974: 533-544).
9. The book contains 'Le Roi au masque d'or', 'Vies imaginaires', and 'la Croisade des enfants'.
10. Aragon sums up Kavérine's argument as expressed in *Novyi Mir* 1 (1969): '[these sentences], astonishingly similar in their structure, often consist of principal clauses, without subordinate clauses and are often made up of a single word, daring the reader straight away with no humming and hawing, and with precision ...'. And to cite also the anecdote that Tolstoy took upon himself to write in *Anna Karenina* in order to have it reread, in the hands of his son, Pushkin's *Les invites s'étaient réunis à la datcha*.
11. 'For me, the sentence when it appears suddenly (dictated?) and from which I leave for something that will be the novel, in the unlimited sense of the word, has this character of a crossroads, not exactly between vice and virtue, but more between remaining silent and writing, between life and death, between creation and sterility. And it happens not at the level of will, of the Herculean decision, but in the choice, the arbitrariness of borrowed words (from whom? why?) like the strange detour of the highway interchange. A constellation of words — ordinarily called a sentence — thus plays the role of fate for thought' (Aragon 1969: 41-42).
12. 'Calypso ne pouvait se consoler du départ d'Ulysse. Dans sa douleur, elle se trouvait malheureuse d'être immortelle' (Aragon 1969: 92).
13. 'Calypso comme un coquillage au bord de la mer répétait inconsolablement le nom d'Ulysse à l'écume qui emporte les navires. Dans sa douleur elle s'oubliait immortelle' (Aragon 1966 [1922]: 13).
14. 'el desenvolvimiento o la serie de esos pormenores lacónicos de larga proyección'.
15. The question Breton passionately addresses is how can we determine the source of the 'visionary' power of the poet: is it a verbal-auditory or a verbal-visual automatism? If I follow this line of argument, he responds from the former, and not from the latter.
16. 'Había un gringuito cautivo / Que siempre hablaba del barco / Y lo ahugaron en un charco / Por causante de la peste / Tenía los ojos celestes / Como potrillito zarco'.
17. 'la eficacia máxima de la estrofa está en esa posdata o adición patética del recuerdo: *tenía los ojos celestes como potrillo [sic] zarco*, tan significativa de quien supone ya contada una cosa, y a quien le restituye la memoria una imagen más'.
18. 'La copa cae del puño de Villagrán; después, el hombre entero' (Borges 1974: 318).
19. 'Entró, y en la cancha que le abrimos todos, como antes, dio unos pasos mareados — alto, sin ver — y se fue al suelo de una vez, como poste' (Borges 1974: 333).
20. 'Everyone is stock-still, shoulders hunched, faces tensed up around the eyes, and waiting for the terrible slow. Such is the silence'. (*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* [Rilke 1984: 5].)
21. 'Vos siempre has de servir de estorbo, pendejo — me rezongó al pasar, no sé si para desahogarse, o ajeno' (Borges 1974: 332).
22. 'En la figura que se llama *oximoron*, se aplica a una palabra un epíteto que parece contradecirla; así los gnósticos hablaron de luz oscura; los alquemistas, de un sol negro. Salir de mi última visita a Teodelina Villar y tomar una caña en un almacén era una especie de oximoron ...' (Borges 1974: 590).

23. In this sense, Borges deploys a dozen different metaphors to describe a sword, each one more extraordinary than the next: 'Ice of the battle', or 'Fathom of rage', or again 'Fire of the helmets', which end up approximating Surrealist metaphors, 'Oar of blood', 'Wolf of wounds', 'Branch of wounds': 'la espada: hielo de la pelea / vara de la ira / fuego de yelmos / dragón de la espada / roedor de yelmos / espina de la batalla / pez de la batalla / remo de la sangre / lobo de las heridas / rama de las heridas' (Borges 1974: 373).
24. 'Las *kenningar* nos dictan ese asombro, nos extrañan del mundo. Pueden motivar esa lúcida perplejidad que es el único honor de la metafísica, su remuneración y su fuente' (Borges 1974: 379).
25. 'He distinguido dos procesos causales: el natural, que es el resultado incesante de incontables e infinitas operaciones; el mágico, donde profetizan los pormenores, lúcido y limitado. En la novela, pienso que la única posible honradez está con el segundo. Quede el primero para la simulación psicológica' (Borges 1974: 232).
26. To the contrary of what Valéry thinks of the novel, in his intellectualism founded on geometric models: 'Peut-être serait-il intéressant de faire *une fois* une oeuvre qui montrerait à chacun de ses noeuds la diversité qui s'y peut présenter à l'esprit et parmi laquelle il choisit la suite unique qui sera donnée dans le texte. Ce serait là substituer à l'illusion d'une détermination unique et imitatrice du réel, celle du *possible-à-tout instant* qui me semble plus véritable' (Valéry 1957 [1937]: 1467).
27. This is the essay that borrows from Marcel Schwob's *Roi au masque d'or*.
28. 'arte de impios, de falsarios y de inconstantes que inspiró los primeros anatemas de su carrera pródiga' (Borges 1974: 324).
29. 'El toro', 'El leopardo', 'El profeta velado', 'Los espejos abominables', 'El rostro'.
30. 'Es el paredón de la Recoleta ... / Es un gran árbol ... / Es una puerta numerada ...' 'Elogio de la sombra' (Borges 1974: 1009).
31. 'del mar, pampa de los ingleses' (Borges 1989/96: 1.182).
32. 'la vida pastoril ha sido típica de muchas regiones de América, desde Montana y Oregón hasta Chile, pero esos territorios, hasta ahora, se han abstenido enérgicamente de redactar *El gaucho Martín Fierro*. No bastan pues, el duro pastor y el desierto' (Borges 1989/96: 1.179).
33. 'Ese vaivén impide la declaración de algunos detalles: no sabemos, por ejemplo, si la tentación de azotar a la mujer del negro asesinado es una brutalidad de borracho o — eso preferiríamos — una desesperación del aturdimiento, y esa perplejidad de los motivos lo hace más real' (Borges 1989/96: 1.197).
34. 'Fragmentos de un Evangelio apócrifo', *Elogio de la sombra*, originally published in 1969 (Borges 1989/96: 2.389–390).
35. 'The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries' (Borges 1998: 112).
36. 'Si no me equivoco, las fuentes originales de información acerca de Al Moqanna, el Profeta Velado (o más estrictamente, Enmascarado) del Jorasán, se reducen a cuatro ...' (Borges 1989/96: 1.324).

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Special Issue

Jorge Luis Borges: The praise of signs

Guest Editor:

LISA BLOCK DE BEHAR

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