

## **BORGES THE HERESIARCH *MUTAKALLIMUN*\***



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—every cultivated man is a theologian,  
and faith is not a requisite.  
—“The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald”

**THE INEVITABLE CONSEQUENCE OF BORGES' WRITING** will be (if it is not already) a new literary genre, self-reflective not only in emulation of Borges' work but, like the mirrors which the Argentine author finds abominable, reflective cumulatively and algebraically multiple in the projected images.

The authors of this new literature will be self-effacing individuals, constantly plagued by a necessity to note shadowy yet persistent vincula which weave a conspiring Totality with an all-pervasive intelligence. The model for these unceasing individuals, as well as for their self-demeaning attitude, will also be Borges. I venture to say that the inevitable process toward this new genre has already begun. In actuality, it was in some rudimentary way consummated when the first man who was not Borges expressed himself on Borges' work.

Two years ago Ronald Christ went so far as to put forth a “modest proposal” for a form of criticism and analysis of this literary process. The hazards of such a proposal are self-evident. At best, its implementation would border on nothing less than the preposterous:

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\* The term refers to the Moslem theologian-dialecticians who, along with their Hebraic counterparts, sustained the memory of Western man's philosophical tradition when the lights went out in Medieval Europe.

The device I have in mind is the one of presenting brief projections or synopses (or even evaluations, since critical writings are criticized too) of imagined but not yet written critical and interpretative works as if those works had already undergone the tedious process of development, elaboration, and extensive documentation, not to mention stylistic refinement.<sup>1</sup>

The philosophical implications of such a device represent an Aristotelian progression in reverse, an infinite regress not to a prime mover but toward an ultimate effect, constantly reducing essence into evanescence *ad absurdum*. Borges is not only the inspiration for such a proposal, he is the very model. He begins one of his "inquisitions" stating that "perhaps universal history is the history of a few metaphors." He concludes by conjecturing that "perhaps universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors."<sup>2</sup> What transpires between the first and the last conjectures is a progression to a more distant locus from the essence (the universe) which is the object of understanding. A metaphor is already a tertiary representation, for between it and essence there is logos (abstraction, language). Diverse intonation of these metaphors removes us one step farther.

Metaphors pertain to the realm of literature. Their diverse intonation stands for the variations within this sphere. The cosmos may, therefore, be taken as an archetype of a book, its contents being our interpretations of the cosmos' essence. As Borges notes in the concluding paragraph of one of his essays, certain men of books within our literary heritage go so far as to treat the book and the universe with equanimity:

According to Mallarmé, the world exists for a book; according to Bloy, we are the versicles or words or letters of a magic book, and that incessant book is the only thing in the world: or, rather, it is the world. ("On the Cult of Books," p. 120)

The schematic process outlined above demonstrates how far we have strayed from the primary object of our understanding. Criticism takes us one step further. Its main concern is not the essence in question (the cosmos), but the mode of its representation. At this juncture the universe becomes incidental. (In another epoch this inevitable consequence would have been considered a blasphemous heresy.) Adaptation of Ronald Christ's proposal would necessarily imply that not only the universe but the author Borges, who provides his own diversity in the metaphor's intonation, would become a pretext as well.

In our attempt to comprehend the universe, we have transformed it into

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Christ, "A Modest Proposal for the Criticism of Borges," *The Cardinal Points of Borges*, eds. Lowell Dunham and Ivar Ivask (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), pp. 7-15.

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 6. All subsequent references to Borges' work will be from this volume and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

a book. We have, in turn, subjected that book to analysis and interpretation. Cumulative distance seems to have blurred the primary object of our focus. Ronald Christ's proposed critical device would bring into perspective neither the universe nor the book representing it but, rather, its conjectured interpretations. Thus, it follows that according to his proposal, we are now to speak of an analysis of an inexistent interpretation. This is perhaps a logical end for man and his peculiar capacity for reason and abstract. Borges himself articulates the inevitable end of this process. He traces it as follows:

That man progressed directly from the written symbol to intuitive perception, omitting the mark of sonority; the strange art he initiated, the art of silent reading, was to lead to marvelous consequences. It would lead, many years later, to the concept of the book as an end in itself, not as a means to an end. ("On the Cult of Books," p. 118)

"From the written symbol to intuitive perception," the implications of this transition, so matter-of-factly posited by Borges, have yielded incalculable consequences in the history of man's understanding. It would appear that in the superseding of the written symbol by intuitive perception man attains what may be called a mystical state in which he comprehends the universe (hitherto represented by symbols) directly and with an unmediated immediacy.<sup>3</sup> Borges places this transition in the early Medieval era, specifically, in the time of Saint Augustine. Such a dating obviously makes for a total absence of incongruence between epoch and event.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition the universe is viewed as a symbol as are the holy Scriptures, representing God, His will, and His power. As a result of the transition stated by Borges, it would not be long before the Judeo-Christian man would forego these symbols and attempt to explain both God and the universe through his own perceptive faculties. (Only a short millenium separates Marsilius of Padua from Saint Augustine.) As the Argentine author observes in his essay "On the Cult of Books," the Moslem tradition considers its Koran not only as symbol but as an attribute of God. The consequences of a transitional process from written symbol to intuitive perception in this case are clearly much graver. Those affected by this process automatically become arch-heretics, for the denial of any of God's attributes is a blasphemy and to place one's faculties above any divine characteristic is to behave as a heresiarch.

I believe we can equate the "intuitive perception" that Borges speaks of with man's capacity to conceive of explications which convince him of comprehension, that is to say, with rationality. In both instances, we witness an attempt at comprehending fundamental phenomena directly and not through symbolic representation (except for words and language which are of course indispensable in both instances, in intuitive perception as well as in rationality).

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<sup>3</sup> The consequences of this process will actually be total secularization since man will feel apt to explain the cosmos directly to himself.

Sometime between the years 1059 and 1111 a dialectical treatise from the Arab world vehemently attacks the proliferating consequences of abnegating the "symbol" in favor of intuitive perception and, consequently, explaining the cosmos and its First Cause through the medium of reason. The author of this attack is the Sufi dialectician Ibn-Hamid Alghazali (d. 1111 A.D.). The object of his refutation is, predictably enough, the progeny of reason, secular philosophy. The treatise is entitled *Tahafut al-Filasifah (Incoherence of the Philosophers)*.<sup>4</sup>

Some eight centuries of indispensable time was able to reduce Alghazali's arguments to one succinct and fecund sentence. Its articulator, not surprisingly, is Jorge Luis Borges: "It is hazardous to think that a coordination of words (philosophies are nothing else) can have much resemblance to the universe" ("Avatars of the Tortoise," p. 114).

Certainly Borges' universe and Alghazali's cosmos have their epistemological differences. The latter attempted to interpret the cosmos so that he could attain a knowledge of the Divinity; the former reaches toward an understanding of the universe so that he may comprehend the ontology of its conception. Both the similarities and differences implicit in these two projects are fraught with meaning. Insofar as both men attempt to understand the cosmos as an act or manifestation of a primary cause (which in the end is the true object of understanding), they are both "theologians." In the terminological context of Alghazali's time, they are *mutakallimun*, literally, dialecticians engaged in the task of interpreting a book which holds within it the secrets of the universe. For Alghazali, the book is a copy of an increate original—the archetypal Koran; for Borges, it is a representation, a symbol of the universe, or the universe itself, as Bloy would have it.

Alghazali is a familiar figure to Borges. The Argentine cites the orthodox Sufi in the latter's defense of the notion of *The Mother of the Book*, the original text of the Koran which is deposited in Heaven:

The Koran is copied in a book, is pronounced with the tongue, is remembered in the heart and, even so, continues to persist in the center of God and is not altered by its passages through written pages and human understanding. ("On the Cult of Books," p. 118)

This pronouncement is clear affirmation that the "symbol" persists in spite of human reason. Borges goes on to point out that according to George Sale "this increate Koran is nothing but its idea or Platonic archetype." An analogy between Alghazali and Borges becomes imperative at this point. The Sufi's *book*, the copy which is read, remembered, and understood, may very well be an eleventh—twelveth-century equivalent of the Argentine writer's *metaphor* or "a few metaphors" which comprise the

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<sup>4</sup> Sabih Ahmad Kamali, trans., *Al-Ghazali's Tahafut Al-Filasifah* (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963). Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

history of the universe. In both writers the representation is "biblioform" with a transcending archetype behind it. For Alghazali, the archetype is the increate original Scripture; for Borges, it is the universe. The first writer is sustained in his project of comprehension by his faith in an ethereal essence; the second constantly belabors at achieving an ephemerality for the cosmos which will transform it into an equally ethereal, archetypal essence and, consequently, make himself into an equally devout upholder of faith:

We (the undivided divinity that operates within us) have dreamed the world. We have dreamed it strong, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and secure in time; but we have allowed tenous, eternal interstices of injustice in its structure so we may know that it is false. ("Avatars of the Tortoise," p. 115)

I am told that the present, the "specious present" of the psychologists, lasts between several seconds and a tiny fraction of a second; that is how long the history of the universe lasts. Or rather, there is no such history, as there is no life of a man, nor even his nights; each moment we live exists, not its imaginary aggregate. ("New Refutation of Time," p. 177)

Fundamentally then, both Borges and Alghazali are men of faith, believers in ethereally mysterious archetypes sustained by enduring conviction. It is only a circumstantial detail that makes a heresiarch of the Argentine and an example of orthodox piety of the Arab. Alghazali sees a divine first mover as primary cause whose manifestations are the universe and its mysteries. Borges sees the universe as a manifestation of a pantheistic deity which operates within every man, thus giving deformity not to one primary, original cause, but to each and every one of us. Although admitting that we too are emanations of this generalized, greater cause, Borges, unlike Alghazali, holds that we are capable of perceiving the deiform effect of that original cause within us. He goes so far as to assert that we can even act through the vestiges of that primordial mover that persist in us:

In the *Rubáiyát* we read that universal history is a spectacle that God conceives, represents and contemplates; that speculation (its technical name is pantheism) would permit us to think that the Englishman could have recreated the Persian, because both were, essentially, God—or momentary faces of God. ("The Enigma of Edward FitzGerald," pp. 77-78)

Borges is, after all, a progeny of that transition from symbol to intuitive perception in which the representation (metaphor, book) has become an end in itself. He now is a progenitor within the same process which continues prodigiously to reproduce itself (as Ronald Christ's proposal and this study would attest) seemingly indefinitely.

These incidental differences notwithstanding, the two men, separated by some eight centuries, as "theologians" retain a fundamental resemblance to each other. Their precepts and argumentation seems to run strikingly parallel. It is only the underlying reasons of their similar propositions which make one a heretic and the other an orthodox. Man's rationality and its consequences (philosophy) are viewed by both writers in the same

way. This human attribute which serves both men as a springboard also becomes a touch-stone for their similarity. They are both keenly aware of reason's inherent contradictions and inadequacy as a vehicle for human comprehension. We can attribute to these misgivings the writer's acute consciousness that their interpretative task is nothing but a lengthy hypothesis.

The affinity between the author of *Tahafut al-Filasifah* and Borges becomes more than clear when the latter tells us that the "inventions of philosophy are no less fantastic than those of art." With this affirmation Borges denies the most illustrious of the philosophers that Alghazali is attempting to refute: Plato. The proposition goes to the heart of the hierarchies posited in the *Republic*.

As an interpreter and defender of the Sacred Book, Alghazali had his faith and the power of his conviction as constant support. Thus, though it is through the very instrument of reason that he attacks philosophy, he does not feel the mocking incongruity of self-contradiction. Conviction justifies his argumentation and, cognizant of its power, he sees his position as invincible. Analogously, Jorge Luis Borges appreciates the vulnerability of reason and the impregnability of conviction:

Reason and conviction differ so much that the gravest objection to any philosophical doctrine usually preexists in the work that declares it. In the *Parmenides* Plato appreciates the argument of the third man which Aristotle will use to oppose him; Berkeley (*Dialogues*, 3) anticipates the refutations of Hume. ("Note on Walt Whitman," third foot-note, p. 71)

Alghazali's first argument is a "Refutation of the philosopher's belief in the Eternity of the World." The Sufi is attempting to refute the notion that the world is eternal since it proceeds from an eternal will, and nothing temporal could ensue from an eternal cause or process. (Paraphrasing Aristotle and a long line of Aristotelians, among whom we find Averröes, author of *Tahafut al-Tahafut [Incoherence of the Incoherence]*<sup>5</sup> in which he emphatically refutes Alghazali, Jorge Luis Borges states this position as "one instant of time was inconceivable without another instant before it and another after it and so on to infinity" ["The Creation of P. H. Gosse," p. 24]. We find more articulate statements of the Aristotelian notion of infinite regress in Borges.) Alghazali's repudiation is based on the absurdity of the principle of reason which gives man the ability to convince himself of the necessary nature of axiomatic conjecture as *fact*:

How do you know the impossibility of ascribing the origin of something to an eternal will? Is it the self-evident rational necessity, or theoretical knowledge, which is the ground of your judgment? Or, to use the terms employed by you in Logic, are the two terms in your judgment joined by means of a middle term? If you claim that they are joined by means of a middle term—i.e., if your method is deductive—you must state what the term is. But if you claim that this impos-

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<sup>5</sup> Simon Van Den Bergh, trans., *Averröes' Tahafut Al-Tahafut* (Oxford University Press, 1954)

sibility is known as a self-evident fact, why do not your opponents share this knowledge with you? (pp. 18-19)

The thrust of Alghazali's work is directed against the philosophical notion of the world's *eternity*. The object of Borges' writing is to combat the chaos and all-devouring quagmire which is *infinity*. I believe we can safely equate the terms *eternity* and *infinity* and say that Borges and Alghazali are combating a common adversary. "One concept corrupts and confuses the others." Borges tells us, "I am not speaking of the Evil whose limited sphere is ethics; I am speaking of the infinite" ("Avatars of the Tortoise," p. 109). We should not fail to note the conceptual (rational, abstract) and not concrete reality of this common antagonist. For Alghazali, it is a product of the philosophers' axiomatic reasoning; for Borges, it is a "concept."

In his essay on "The Creation of P. H. Gosse," Borges puts forth various arguments to demonstrate the eternity of the world. He falls into paradox, however, and it is obvious that the fallability is not unintentional. He does more than to assure us that the thesis contains its flagrant refutation. Although one of the "virtues" he chooses "to emphasize" in Gosse's thesis is "its indirect demonstration that the universe is eternal, as the Vedanta, Heraclitus, Spinoza, and the atomists thought," he goes on to place before us a newer version of the thesis, brought up to date by Bertrand Russell: "In the ninth chapter of *The Analysis of Mind* (London, 1921) he theorizes that the planet was created a few minutes ago, with a humanity that "remembers" an illusory past" (p. 25).

Borges undermines the thesis further when in a preceding paragraph he tells us that according to Gosse:

The principle of reason requires that no result be without a cause, and those causes require other causes, which are multiple regressively; there are concrete vestiges of them all, but only those that are posterior to the Creation have really existed. (p. 24)

Alghazali finds the concept of eternity abominable because, in the end, it leads to the denial of the Divinity. The Aristotelian principle of infinite regress places the Primary Cause into an infinite, hypothetical past. The logical conclusion of such a principle would make this First Mover infinitely nonexistent.

Borges' eschewal of eternity is based on this concept's capacity to "corrupt," to reflect the inadequacies of an imperfect creation ("if the future and the past are infinite, there will not really be a when; . . . if every being is equidistant from the infinite and the infinitesimal, there will not be a where" ["Pascal," p. 93]).

In his defense of a God-created temporal world as an emanation of Divinity, Alghazali was saved from despair by his steadfast faith. In his reflections (attempts to construct an essence worthy of devotion) on the nature of a much less than perfect, but obstinately enduring, universe, Borges has only the rudimentary pieces of what might have been a complete and intact order. To frighten off an ever impending melancholy, he

joins these rudiments together so that he may glimpse traces of perfection that this order might have once embodied. We emulate and carry on this project, not unlike the blinded men of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave."

Metaphors, representations, imperfect symbols of an archetypal essence, long departed into infinite inexistence, become poignantly vague memories in an eternal twilight:

As I reread this essay, I think of the tragic Philipp Batz, who is called Philipp Mainländer in the history of philosophy. Like me, he was an impassioned reader of Schopenhauer, under whose influence (and perhaps under the influence of the Gnostics) he imagined that we are fragments of a God who destroyed Himself at the beginning of time, because he did not wish to exist. Universal history is the obscure agony of those fragments. ("The Biathanatos," p. 92)

In his review and reconstruction of these "fragments" Borges incites a yearning within us, his readers, to identify with that reconstructive process which, in the end, might unite us with an order we can only perceive as in a distant dream. We thus become emanations of that immortal Platonic soul, eternally seeking an ideal state and form which can be glimpsed only in the shadows.