



OPEN BRACKET, CLOSE BRACKET: PARENTHETICAL  
STATEMENT IN A SELECTION OF POEMS  
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With the creation of the printing press, modern European writing acquired many conventions, of which the lunulae, or parentheses in the form of round brackets, have proved one of the most versatile and enduring. The author of a landmark study on the exploitation of parentheses in English printed verse has provided a case history of the phenomenon, accounting for its development from the time of the Elizabethans, through the crucible of Romantic poetry, down to English writing of the 1990s (Lennard 1991). From a broader comparative perspective, an abundance of examples could be adduced from Spanish poetry of the seventeenth century and North American poetry of the late nineteenth: several love sonnets by Quevedo incorporate lunulae, as do fragments of *Leaves of Grass* by Whitman. In Spanish-American poetry, parentheses appear sporadically in *Prosas profanas* by Darío and in *Lunario sentimental* by Lugones, demonstrating the rootedness of the convention in a tradition which informs both the poetry and the prose of Jorge Luis Borges. The antecedents just cited are not random choices: rather, they stand out as cardinal points on a landscape surrounding Borges's development as a poet whose lyrical gifts and formal artistry have yet to receive the full recognition that they deserve.

In Borges's works, parenthetical statement is a practice that has almost infinite ramifications, extending into literary history, intertextuality, poetics, metaphysics, and other areas of knowledge. The notion that the study of the use of brackets in his poetry might reveal a secret motivation and key to his art is a tantalizing hypothesis soon dispelled by recalling Borges's axiom that "[N]o hay clasificación del universo que no sea arbitraria y conjetural" ("El idioma analítico de John Wilkins," *Obras completas*, II: 86); the scenario of the man who "se propone la tarea de dibujar el mundo" and succeeds only in reproducing "la imagen de su cara" (II: 232) acts as a further deterrent to the misguided pursuit of totalizing explanations. Taking a more pragmatic approach, I intend to examine four specific instances of parenthetical statement in selected poems from the early and the later collections, with a view to elucidating the operations and the possible rationale of lunulae in a sample of Borges's verse.

"Arrabal" and "Benarés" provide a serviceable starting point for this enquiry. Included in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), they illustrate the presence of parenthetical statement in Borges's early work. Of the thirty-two poems that make up the inaugural collection, four display this formal feature. (The ratio for *Luna de enfrente* of 1925 is two out of seventeen, and that for *Cuaderno San Martín* of 1929 three out of nine.) "Arrabal" and "Benarés" also demonstrate differences in length and in kind in the use of parenthetical interpolation. The parenthesis of "Arrabal" amounts to no more than two words in a verb phrase, while that of "Benarés" extends over ten lines and comprises almost a third of the entire poem.

#### ARRABAL

El arrabal es el reflejo de nuestro tedio.  
 Mis pasos claudicaron  
 cuando iban a pisar el horizonte  
 y quedé entre las casas,  
 5 cuadriculadas en manzanas  
 diferentes e iguales  
 como si fueran todas ellas  
 monótonos recuerdos repetidos  
 de una sola manzana.  
 10 El pastito precario,  
 desesperadamente esperanzado,  
 salpicaba las piedras de la calle  
 y divisé en la hondura

15 los naipes de colores del poniente  
 y sentí *Buenos Aires*.  
 Esta ciudad que yo creí mi pasado  
 es mi porvenir, mi presente;  
 los años que he vivido en Europa son ilusorios,  
 yo estaba siempre (y estaré) en Buenos Aires. (I: 32)

This poem comprises two philosophical propositions, in line 1 and lines 16-19, and a narrative of urban enclosure. The narrative section of "Arrabal" begins by relating the curtailment of the poetic subject's footsteps and his feeling of imprisonment amidst blocks of buildings on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. In that suburban landscape, difference and variety dissolve and are replaced by a sense of sameness and monotony rendered in the measured polysyllables of line 8 ("monótonos recuerdos repetidos") and anticipated in the reference to "nuestro tedio" of line 1.

The culmination of the narrative in the experience of Buenos Aires as an overwhelming totality (see line 15) prompts the personal reflection of the final quatrain. There, the poetic subject dismisses a period of time spent in Europe as illusory and maintains that he never really left a city that he now acknowledges categorically as "mi porvenir, mi presente." A minimal parenthesis serves to reinforce the point about future connections with Buenos Aires, elaborating on the main clause "Yo estaba siempre (. . .) en Buenos Aires," and in the process converting a nine-syllable line into a line of thirteen syllables, which is quite unique in the context of the poem.<sup>1</sup>

The placing of the assertion "y estaré" within brackets rather than, say, between commas, is of particular interest here. Not only is the bracketed phrase set off visually against the surrounding material, but its place in the line is dead-center, between symmetrical groups of 5 syllables: "Yo estaba siempre (. . .) en Buenos Aires." The visual and prosodic patterns of the line give added prominence to the

<sup>1</sup> A metrical analysis of "Arrabal" produces the following results: lines 2, 4, 6, 9, 10, 13, and 15 are heptasyllabic, and 3, 8, 11, 12, and 14, hendecasyllabic. The remaining lines include one alexandrine (line 1), three lines of nine syllables (5, 7, and 17), one of twelve (line 16), and one of fifteen (line 18). The syllabic structure of the final line is: "yoes ta ha siem pre yes ta re'en bue nos ai res." where the closure of [i] prevents synalopha between "siempre" and "y estaré," resulting in a line of 13 syllables. I am grateful to Dr. John Rutherford of The Queen's College, Oxford, for sharing his expert knowledge of Spanish versification with me on this occasion.

parenthesis, which is best interpreted not as a casual addendum to an existing statement, but rather as the expression of a conviction on the part of the poetic subject that he is destined to remain enclosed, prisoner-like, within the bounds of an *arrabal* of a city which he feels is all-embracing. That feeling of being circumscribed is both the thematic nucleus of "Arrabal" and the rationale for the brackets that surround the poetic subject's acceptance of his destiny. In "Arrabal," Borges furnishes an instance of parenthetical statement which functions as a pictorial equivalent of the emotional and intellectual propositions that are put forward in his poem, coincidentally recalling the use of *lunulae* in the work of Coleridge, where, according to John Lennard, they also tended to be associated "with vision and futurity" (Lennard 136).

## BENARÉS

Falsa y tupida  
 como un jardín calcado en un espejo,  
 la imaginada urbe  
 que no han visto nunca mis ojos  
 5 entreteje distancias  
 y repite casas inalcanzables.  
 El brusco sol,  
 desgarrar la compleja oscuridad  
 de templos, muladares, cárceles, patios  
 10 y escalará los muros  
 y resplandecerá en un río sagrado.  
 Jadeante  
 la ciudad que oprimió un follaje de estrellas  
 desborda el horizonte  
 15 y en la mañana llena  
 de pasos y de sueño  
 la luz va abriendo como ramas las calles.  
 Juntamente amanece  
 en todas las persianas que miran al oriente  
 20 y la voz de un almuédano  
 apesadumbra desde su alta torre  
 el aire de este día  
 y anuncia a la ciudad de los muchos dioses  
 la soledad de Dios.  
 25 (Y pensar  
 que mientras juego con dudosas imágenes,  
 la ciudad que canto, persiste

30 en un lugar predestinado del mundo,  
 con su topografía precisa,  
 poblada como un sueño,  
 con hospitales y cuarteles  
 y lentas alamedas  
 y hombres de labios podridos  
 que sienten frío en los dientes.) (l: 40)

Compared to "Arrabal," "Benarés" offers a more substantial and technically more complex instance of bracketing. "Benarés" is Borges's tribute in verse to the sacred Hindu city of Varanasi, also known as Benares and Rasi. A reference to "la imaginada urbe que no han visto mis ojos" (lines 3-4) establishes the ontological status of the urban landscape conjured up in lines 1-24 of the poem. The temples that emerge from the "compleja oscuridad" alongside garbage tips, prisons, and courtyards nonetheless correspond precisely to the hundreds of Hindu and many Buddhist temples that fill the city of Varanasi; situated on the banks of the river Ganges (the holy river of line 11). The evocation of a voice calling the faithful to prayer and telling "la ciudad de los muchos dioses" of the "soledad" of the God of monotheism bears witness to the co-existence of Hindus and Moslems in this northern Indian city which experienced three centuries of Moslem occupation beginning in 1194.<sup>2</sup>

The evocation of Benares in Borges's poem rings true, despite the fact that it is the product of the imagination and not of first-hand acquaintance. Yet Borges had forewarned his readers against the illusion of verisimilitude in the poem's opening couplet, where the imagined city is described as "falsa y tupida como un jardín calcado en un espejo." Before the reader attempts to decipher the poem's coded references to history, architecture, physical geography, and religion, s/he has been prepared to expect falsehood and artifice: to be precise, Borges describes his imagined city as a fiction ("falsa") dependent on a comparison with a correlate ("como un jardín") that only exists in the form of a copy and a reflected image ("calcado en un espejo"). The degree to which readers actually heed the poet's words of warning is not certain: some may choose to ignore them as they proceed to reconstruct a vivid mental picture of Benares, while

<sup>2</sup> The source for my remarks about Benares is the eleventh edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* (New York 1910), vols. III-IV, pp. 714-15, which Borges was able to consult in the 1920s.

others may adopt an ironic attitude to the poem's description of an exotic setting. What is undeniable is the deconstructive swerve that the poem takes in and through the ten-line parenthesis which brings "Benarés" to a conclusion. The barely adorned imperative, "Y pensar," invites intelligent reflection, and is followed by a frank admission that the city that the poet has been celebrating ("la ciudad que canto") is constructed out of "dubious images." A rereading of two of the four tableaux describing Benares (lines 7-11 and 18-24) reveals, first, a mechanism of selection in line 9, which has reduced the urban setting to "templos, muladares, cárceles, patios," and second, a focus on a geographical and cultural landmark—"un río sagrado"—which functions as a cipher of what the Western reader can be expected to recognize as "the Orient." Some lines further on, the reference to the "almuédano" functions as a metonymy for the worship of Allah, and beyond that, for oriental culture in general. Long before the Western academy embraced the critique of Orientalism,<sup>3</sup> Borges shows a writer's scruples about having employed reductive and stereotypical images to represent Asia. And he does so through the device of the parenthetical statement, which completely transforms "Benarés" and our reading of that poem.

The significance of the parenthesis in "Benarés" extends further still to encompass an exploration of relations between the imagination, on the one hand, and worldly reality, on the other. In a nutshell, the parenthesis at the end of "Benarés" asserts that the city of Benares/Varanasi exists within precise temporal and spatial coordinates ("en un lugar predestinado del mundo") and is endowed with a set of social and economic characteristics that contradict stereotypes. Those social and economic realities are detailed in the last few lines of the poem as "hospitales y cuarteles / y lentas alamedas / y hombres de labios podridos"—presumably a reference to people afflicted with leprosy. What the parenthesis seems to insist on is the gap which separates discourse, or linguistic representation, from a worldly reality "con su topografía precisa." Ironically, the features of the "real" Varanasi can only come to life, in the poem, through the very same processes of selection and naming as those used in the

<sup>3</sup> The critique of Orientalism begins with the publication by Edward Said of *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Borges anticipates the essence of Said's concerns over half a century before they took the Western academy by storm.

lyrical recreation of lines 1-24 (where the poet admits to having played with "dudosas imágenes"). Yet, the force of the rhetorical contrast between *imágenes* and *mundo* preserves intact the integrity of the extra-literary world and the poet's ultimate commitment to it. Through a calculated dialectic, "Benarés" upholds the claim of a first-order reality and debunks its own literary contrivance of a second-order, Orientalist version of Varanasi. And it derives its full force and significance from the device of the parenthesis, which qualifies what goes before and invests the poem with an additional dimension of meaning.

More than thirty years separate the publication of the collections *El hacedor* (1960) and *El otro, el mismo* (1964) from *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, although many of the poems included in *El hacedor* were written as early as 1930, and the others over the course of the following two decades. In any case, several of the later poems exhibit the device of the parenthesis, expanding the range of its formal functions and expressive possibilities. A frequent kind is the parenthetical acknowledgement of a source, as in the following couplet from "Poema de los dones": "De hambre y de sed (narra una historia griega) / Muere un rey entre fuentes y jardines" (where Borges evokes the fate of Tantalus) (II: 187). Further examples include "La noche cíclica," "La luna," and the third poem selected for consideration here, "Ajedrez."

#### AJEDREZ

##### I

- En su grave rincón, los jugadores  
Rigen las lentas piezas. El tablero  
Los demora hasta el alba en su severo  
4      Ámbito en que se odian dos colores.
- Adentro irradian mágicos rigores  
Las formas: torre homérica, ligero  
Caballo, armada reina, rey postrero,  
8      Oblicuo alfil y peones agresores.
- Cuando los jugadores se hayan ido,  
Cuando el tiempo los haya consumido,  
Ciertamente no habrá cesado el rito.
- 12      En el Oriente se encendió esta guerra  
Cuyo anfiteatro es hoy toda la tierra.  
Como el otro, este juego es infinito.

## II

Tenue rey, sesgo alfil, encarnizada  
 Reina, torre directa y peón ladino  
 Sobre lo negro y blanco del camino  
 Buscan y libran su batalla armada.

5 No saben que la mano señalada  
 Del jugador gobierna su destino,  
 No saben que un rigor adamantino  
 Sujeta su albedrío y su jornada.

10 También el jugador es prisionero  
 (La sentencia es de Omar) de otro tablero  
 De negras noches y de blancos días.

Dios mueve al jugador, y éste, la pieza.  
 ¿Qué dios detrás de Dios la trama empieza  
 De polvo y tiempo y sueño y agonías? (II: 191)

As is revealed at a glance, "Ajedrez" comprises two parts, each in the form of a sonnet with a parenthetical interpolation at the beginning of the middle line of the first tercet of sonnet II. That interpolation acknowledges a borrowing from Omar Khayyám who had likened the situation of human beings to the place of the pieces on a chessboard centuries before Borges reiterates the idea in "Ajedrez." Several of Borges's commentators have written about this poem, and most of them have picked up on the reference to the *Rubáiyat*. Paul Cheselka regards it as Borges's "way of letting the reader know of his immediate literary source for this piece—the *Rubáiyat* of Omar Khayyám in which the chess game is used as a metaphor for the human condition" (Cheselka 162). Nancy Mandlove also identifies Borges's source in the course of a close reading that seeks to locate the reference to Omar within the formal and conceptual design of "Ajedrez" (Mandlove 1980).

Essentially, Borges's poem explores the dichotomies of order and chaos, and control and freedom, and uses the form of the sonnet to mirror an archetypal concept of order. Omar's dictum about the human predicament is itself archetypal, and therefore fits properly within Borges's reinterpretation of the theme. The fact that Borges uses the sonnet form as a vehicle for his subject prompts Mandlove further to consider the role of the literary tradition in the "interweaving of archetypal patterns" that she describes in this and other poems by Borges (Mandlove 297). I wish to elaborate on the symbolic and

the literary-historical dimensions of Mandlove's reading, and to correct a single, startling omission from her essay: for the fact is that Mandlove, like Cheselka and others, simply ignores the brackets around the reference to Omar, treating them as if they were invisible.<sup>4</sup>

Looked at from a formal perspective, "Ajedrez" is built on the principle of repetition with variation. An analysis of the two pairs of quatrains reveals the workings of that mechanism. Descriptions of the chess pieces, the board, the players, and their antagonism, are repeated, yet are also subject to obvious changes in the choice and order of adjectives and the places occupied by each of the elements of the description in the quatrains of the two sonnets. By way of example, the tight control of the chess players over their pieces is rendered by the verb "rigen" in lines 1-2 of sonnet I and "gobierna" in line 5 of sonnet II; the hatred between two colors in line 4 of sonnet I is reformulated as a battle on the black and white squares of the board in line 3 of sonnet II; the king is described as "rey postrero" in sonnet I and, in a chiasmic variation, as "tenue rey" in sonnet II. For their part, the tercets display obvious formal and grammatical differences, but both pairs comply with the reader's expectation that the tercets of a sonnet should accommodate "a shift of thought ['volta'] which develops the subject by surprise or conviction to its conclusion" (Fuller 2).<sup>5</sup>

Within the larger circumference of "Ajedrez," it is the tercets of sonnet II which encapsulate the essence of the poem's accumulated meanings. This is due, partly, to the function of elaboration that they perform vis à vis the proposition formulated in the tercets of sonnet I. There the poet reflects on the universality of the game of chess pictured as a model of conflict, and considers it infinitely enduring. An enigmatic simile ("Como el otro, este juego es infinito") likens the ritual conflict of chess to another game, which it views as infinite also. That game may be a reference to human conflict, including

<sup>4</sup>Another commentator who takes no notice of the parentheses in "Ajedrez" is Vicente Cervera Salinas in an otherwise observant study, *La poesía de Jorge Luis Borges: Historia de una eternidad*.

<sup>5</sup>Cervera Salinas considers the architectural design of the sonnet form in *La poesía de Jorge Luis Borges...*, pp. 128-41. Citing Dámaso Alonso, he foregrounds considerations of numerology as well as geometry in his explanation of the standard division of the (non-English) sonnet into quatrains and tercets. For further reading, see Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet*.

warfare as described in a vignette in "Guayaquil" (ll: 445), but other interpretative possibilities cannot be ruled out at this stage in the poem's development.

When in sonnet II the quatrains give way to tercets, the proposition that conflict is universal and infinitely enduring is implicitly still valid. But the new tercets emphasize a different, if related point, which maintains that the chess player "es prisionero de otro tablero de negras noches y blancos días" and which the interpolated reference to Omar helps us to interpret as a metaphor for the constraints of time and fate. The significant word "otro" reminds us of the enigmatic *other* game alluded to at the end of sonnet I, retrospectively broadening its range of possible meanings.

The second tercet of sonnet II opens out an infinite perspective on the situation of subordination, or imprisonment, of the chess player who stands for the human individual on the board of life. In the form of a question which has truly vertiginous implications, the poet wonders what transcendental principle or being lies behind the Christian God, playing the role of a first cause or primordial source of the forms of life. Paradoxically, this interrogation of the notion of a first cause constitutes the culmination or final development in the sequence of ideas that is plotted throughout the poem. The two-line question provides a formal conclusion to sonnet II and to "Ajedrez" as a whole, and is also the final variation on the pattern established in sonnet I. As a concluding statement on the theme of the opposition between free will and fate, it describes a vista of infinity that is deeply enigmatic and unsettling.

It is at this point that Nancy Mandlove's thoughts about connections with the literary tradition become relevant to the present reading. One of Mandlove's keenest observations concerns the last line of sonnet II, which she suggests "recalls that of Góngora's famous sonnet [Mientras por competir con tu cabello]." In that unforgettable poem, a woman is urged to enjoy the beauty of her youth before the inevitable and unflattering prospect of its degeneration "en tierra, en humo, en polvo, en sombra, en nada." Mandlove comments: "Whether by design or by coincidence arising from the archetypal nature of both sonnets, Borges's sonnet is linked to Góngora's which expands the literary resonance [of line 14 of sonnet II] to include another tradition" (Mandlove 296). For Mandlove, a literary echo from the Hispanic canon adds to the density of meaning of "Ajedrez," enhancing its archetypal status through the evocation

of a famous precursor poem by Luis de Góngora. My own reading of this literary echo is rather different. For me, the echo functions as a pointer to a concern about the derivative nature of all poetry and the subordination of writers and their work to the system of literature, or intertextuality.

It is surely unnecessary to emphasize the seminal role of Borges in the development of theories of intertextuality.<sup>6</sup> Taking his relation to those theories for granted, what I wish to do here is to re-read "Ajedrez" as a model of the principles of this view of literature, which can be summarized as follows: Literary texts derive from other texts. They are not original creations. They take the form of transcreations, transliterations, and translations as in the example of "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*." Authors have a limited role to play in their production. Literary texts are made possible by sets of rules, and they also grow out of a formal tradition. The sonnet is such a form. It provides poets with a preexisting framework within which to practice their art. Those poets must work within the constraints of rhyme, prosody, and structure that are peculiar to the sonnet form. The range of themes available is equally limited as is the scope for verbal invention. Borges sums much of this up in the following statement from the Prologue to *El informe de Brodie*: "[C]ada lenguaje es una tradición, cada palabra un símbolo compartido; es baladí lo que un innovador es capaz de alterar" (ll: 400).

A number of structural similarities between the activities of writing and playing chess permit a reading of "Ajedrez" as a metaphor of the constraints that prescribe and circumscribe literary production. Writers and chess players are both constrained by a set of rules, or a grammar, that determines whether they operate inside or outside the bounds of the system. Writing and chess are both complex activities involving a varied but finite number of parts of speech, or pieces. And writing and chess both involve the manual execution of a decision that has been taken at the level of the intellect. The most succinct and evocative formulation of the equivalence is provided by Borges himself in the final sentence of the Prologue to *El otro, el mismo*: "Ajedrez misterioso la poesía," he ruminates, "cuyo tablero y cuyas piezas cambian como en un sueño

<sup>6</sup>Borges is the subject of sustained comment in the editors' introduction to *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. Michael Worton and Judith Still (12-15).

y sobre el cual me inclinaré después de haber muerto" (II: 236). In this depiction, the board connotes the spatial and temporal coordinates of human existence, and perhaps also the desk on which sits a sheet of paper waiting to be covered in writing. The chess pieces that change as in a dream stand for the archetypal forms and images with which the writer plays and which make up the elements of an *ars combinatoria*. The image of the writer slumped over the chessboard in death is both a prefiguring of that event and an acknowledgment that the board and the board game will outlive him.

The writer's situation and physical attitude are represented vividly in "Ajedrez" in the second quatrain of sonnet II, where the fate of the pieces on the board is seen to lie in the hand of the chess player. The "rigor adamantino" mentioned in the same quatrain is a reference to the rules which apply to chess, and, by analogy, to the grammar of forms that governs literary creation. If we recall the image of the poet as one who played with dubious images in "Benarés," some light is cast on the situation of the *jugador* of lines 9-10 of sonnet II. He is the writer who has manual control of the pen but who is otherwise subordinated to a metasystem; that system comprises an infinite number of author-figures, who act as relays on behalf of the system. The variation on a line by Góngora at the close of "Ajedrez" emphasizes the metaphorical meaning of the question about origins: "¿Qué dios detrás de Dios la trama empieza / de polvo y tiempo y sueño y agonías?" Through this couplet Borges provides a graphic representation of his own terminal position in a long-established chain of transmission of standard literary and philosophical themes.

Borges calls attention to the belatedness and derivative nature of "Ajedrez" through another graphic device, which is the bracketed reference to Omar in line 10 of sonnet II. According to John Lennard, it was common in seventeenth century English verse for writers to bolster the authority of their work by reproducing sententiae from classical sources, enclosed within lunulae (26). Borges's precise—and punning—attribution, "(La sentencia es de Omar)," elaborates on that convention through the dual procedure of the invocation of a precedent and its containment within parentheses.

In truth, the reference to Omar implies not a single, but multiple precedent, constituted through the process(es) of translation. In two wonderful essays devoted to the figure of Omar Khayyám, Borges puts forward the hypothesis of the fusion of the Persian author's

identity with that of the Englishman, Edward Fitzgerald, who chanced upon a manuscript version of the *Rubaiyat* in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, in the middle of the nineteenth century and published successive versions in English, beginning in 1859. In "Omar Jayán y Fitz Gerald" [sic], published in *Inquisiciones* in 1925, Borges credits the English scholar with transforming a disjointed collection of quatrains ("las estrofas de Omar Jayám son entidades sueltas") into an organic poem, which, thanks to the efforts of Fitzgerald, "puede ya vanagloriarse de eterno" (128). Through the medium of translation, Fitzgerald achieved nothing less than "el inglesamiento de Omar" (128) and effectively fused his own identity with that of the Persian poet. Borges reiterates this striking conclusion over a quarter of a century later in "El enigma de Edward Fitzgerald," where, musing about the "mysterious" literary collaboration between Omar and Fitzgerald, he celebrates the workings of "un azar benéfico" which "sirvieron para que el uno supiera del otro y fueran un solo poeta" (II: 68).

Borges's reiteration of a sententia by Omar in the penultimate stanza of "Ajedrez" consequently involves more than one author. In fact, it involves three, given that the words "el jugador es prisionero . . . de otro tablero" are cited neither in Fitzgerald's English nor in the "original" words of the Persian poet, but in Spanish. We can assume that Borges's version of Omar's aphorism derives directly from an earlier Spanish rendering based on Fitzgerald's transformation of the *Rubaiyat* into what is substantially an English poem. First alluded to in "Omar Jayán y Fitz Gerald," this version is regarded as "un verídico trasunto de la cumplida por Fitzgerald" and praised for its felicitous rendering, in the quintessentially Spanish meter of "cuartetos endecasílabos" of both "los iránicos *rubayat* [sic] y los *quatrains* ingleses [de Fitzgerald]." Quite startlingly, Borges waits until the very final paragraph of "Omar Jayán y Fitz Gerald" before revealing the identity of the Hispanic translator of Fitzgerald's translation (and re-creation) of Omar. It is none other than the poet's father, Jorge Guillermo Borges: "mi padre, cuya es la traducción . . ." (129). Adopting a rhetoric of reticence and obliqueness that is characteristic of so much of his work, Borges registers—almost as an afterthought—the motives that led his father to "troquelar en generosos versos castellanos, la labor de Fitzgerald." These included, principally, the enthusiasm that Jorge Guillermo Borges felt for "la soltura de [la] hazaña verbal [de Fitzgerald]," and "la coincidencia de su incredulidad antigua con la serena inesperanza"

attributed to don Jorge Guillermo by the author of "Omar Jayán y Fitz Gerald" and, some decades later, "Ajedrez."

Massively overdetermined, the reference to Omar acts as a cipher for a tightly-knit group of literary and genealogical predecessors whom Borges summons up through the deceptively simple and relatively inconspicuous device of interpolation. At the most immediate level of expression, the simplicity of the poet's acknowledgement endows his words with a quality of transparency that has persuaded one commentator after another that the material enclosed within brackets is pure content. At this stage of my analysis, I wish to retrieve the element of enunciation in the statement "(La sentencia es de Omar)" and to suggest that the role of the brackets surrounding those five words is, in part, one of necessary enclosure (necessary because without them, the grammar of the tercet breaks down) and, in part, a visible sign of their enunciation. The brackets circumscribe perceptibly a message of acknowledgement, framed within a section of a poem that is explicitly concerned with rules and regulations. By enclosing the interpolated comment on Omar in *lunulae*, Borges fashions an image of circumscription which symbolizes the wider pattern of concerns in "Ajedrez." The parenthesis is thus embedded in the poem's enquiry into questions of metaphysics, including the origins, the operations, and the limits of the literary system. I would suggest that chess is compared enigmatically at the end of sonnet I with the game of literature, played in the shadows of Góngora, Omar Khayyám and his English alter ego Edward Fitzgerald, Homer (brought into play in the description of the rook as a "torre homérica," in line 6 of sonnet I), and countless other precursors including the figure of the poet's own father who together haunt and inhabit the verse and prose of Jorge Luis Borges.

A final example of parenthetical statement in the poet's work is to be found in "Mateo, XXV, 30":

El primer puente de Constitución y a mis pies  
 Frigor de trenes que tejían laberintos de hierro.  
 Humo y silbatos escalaban la noche,  
 Que de golpe fue el Juicio Universal. Desde el invisible horizonte  
 5 Y desde el centro de mi ser, una voz infinita  
 Dijo estas cosas (estas cosas, no estas palabras,  
 Que son mi pobre traducción temporal de una sola palabra):  
 —Estrellas, pan, bibliotecas orientales y occidentales,

10 Naipes, tableros de ajedrez, galerías, claraboyas y sótanos,  
 Un cuerpo humano para andar por la tierra,  
 Uñas que crecen en la noche, en la muerte,  
 Sombra que olvida, atareados espejos que multiplican,  
 Declives de música, la más dócil de las formas del tiempo,  
 Fronteras del Brasil y del Uruguay, caballos y mañanas,  
 15 Una pesa de bronce y un ejemplar de la Saga de Grettir,  
 Álgebra y fuego, la carga de Junín en tu sangre,  
 Días más populosos que Balzac, el olor de la madreSelva,  
 Amor y víspera de amor y recuerdos intolerables,  
 El sueño como un tesoro enterrado, el dadivoso azar  
 20 Y la memoria, que el hombre no mira sin vértigo,  
 Todo eso te fue dado, y también  
 El antiguo alimento de los héroes:  
 La falsía, la derrota, la humillación.  
 En vano te hemos prodigado el océano,  
 25 En vano el sol que vieron los maravillados ojos de Whitman;  
 Has gastado los años y te han gastado,  
 Y todavía no has escrito el poema. (II: 252)

Dated 1953, "Mateo, XXV, 30" offers a secular reworking of the Christian parable of the talents.<sup>7</sup> In a noisy urban setting that is likened to the final Day of Judgement, the poet is visited by a sense that he has failed to capitalize on the innumerable gifts that have been bestowed upon him by a prodigal world. The extent of his shameful failure is conveyed through the relentless enumeration of lines 8-23, which comprises a repertoire of quintessentially Borge-sian motifs augmented by a series of biological, geographical, historical, literary, and biographical references. The last four lines of the poem censure the poet for wasting his life and his gifts and culminate in the damning criticism that he has not succeeded in writing "el poema," the goal of Symbolist and post-Symbolist aesthetics striven for by Juan Ramón Jiménez, Pedro Salinas, and others.

The recrimination that is leveled at the poet in "Mateo, XXV, 30" issues from two sources, one apparently external, the other from the depths of the self. This means that the "voz infinita" introduced at the end of line 5 acts as a vehicle of self-recrimination as well as of external

<sup>7</sup>My reading of this poem coincides on a number of basic points with that of Zunilda Gertel in *Borges y su retorno a la poesía*, pp. 130-32. However, it breaks new ground by focusing on the parenthesis and related questions of language in "Mateo, XXV, 30."



disapproval. With the exception of the final line, where an element of irony informs the complaint that the poet has not yet written the poem, "Mateo, XXV, 30" expresses a prevailing mood of guilt and regret, also involving elements of defeatism and humiliation mentioned in line 23.

The "infinite voice" which addresses the poet introduces questions of origin, authority, and language which are highlighted in the parenthesis of lines 6-7. There the distinction that the poet draws between words and things points to a philosophical concern with different models of language. The first model that deserves consideration is associated with mystics and gnostics like Jacob Boehme and with the Cabala. According to this model, there was once a divine language in which things and words were consubstantial. In "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins," Borges refers to "the secret dictionary of God," the nouns and names of which enabled Him to create the world (II: 86). That age and that order of pure identity ceased to exist with the Fall and the fragmenting of the divine language into the multiple languages of men. The poem "El golem" offers a travesty of the idea of creation-through-naming, while "Una brújula" entertains the notion that "Todas las cosas son palabras del / Idioma en que Alguien o Algo, noche y día, / Escribe esa infinita algarabía / que es la historia del mundo" (II: 253).

An important tenet of the mystical philosophy of language is the idea that the language of God is untranslatable into the languages of humankind. The prose piece in *El Aleph* entitled "La escritura del dios" relates Tzinacán's encounter with the form and the formula of the divinity, and his resulting silence and imprisonment, which are the price he must pay for having acquired a hidden knowledge. The language of divinity may be intelligible, but it cannot and/or must not be communicated to other human beings.

The second philosophy of language that has a bearing on "Mateo, XXV, 30" is that of nominalism, which holds thought to be inseparable from language yet also regards language as a flawed cognitive tool.<sup>8</sup> Rooted in the history of Western philosophy, nominalism provides the matrix out of which the modern linguistic thinking of Saussure, Mauthner, Wittgenstein, and others develops. In the nominalist view, the relation between words and things is arbitrary and a

<sup>8</sup>Jaime Rest accounts systematically for Borges's connections with nominalism in *El laberinto del universo: Borges y el pensamiento nominalista*.

matter of convention; this is opposed to the view that words and things are linked by some principle of identity.

In "Mateo, XXV, 30," a transcendental message is articulated in the form of "una sola palabra" which, though intelligible, can only be reproduced through translation into the terms of human discourse. The fracturing of the one into the many is described as a process of "pobre traducción temporal," implying a profound sense of loss on the poet's part. He also denies any essential link between words and things: referring to the "voz infinita," he says, "Dijo estas cosas (estas cosas, no estas palabras. . .)," thereby reiterating the point that the words of men differ from the word of God, and reducing the divine message to an ersatz series of nouns and noun phrases which function merely as linguistic events or "cosas." Notwithstanding this essential limitation, it is nonetheless true that the "cosas" referred to in the poem constitute it as an "objeto verbal" capable of apprehension as an "hecho estético" (See "Quevedo," in *Obras . . .*, II: 44, and other essays). While the enumeration of lines 8-23 is presented as an inferior translation of the divine message, it succeeds in giving formal expression to a congeries of mental perceptions, arranged in a pattern which possesses aesthetic value. "Mateo, XXV, 30" is a poem of considerable philosophical and lyrical depth, which we may agree to interpret (at least in part) against the grain of its own linguistic skepticism. Words such as "amor," "derrota," and "Junín" signal a relation with a world of personal and historical experience that readers of Borges may recognize as essentially his and partly their own. The conventional bond between "palabras" and "cosas" is strong enough to elicit a powerful lyrical and philosophical response to a poem that is Borges's wistful, contrite, and to some degree ironic reworking of the parable of the talents.

In conclusion, "Arrabal," "Benarés," "Ajedrez," and "Mateo, XXV, 30" illustrate different forms and operations of parenthetical statement in Borges's poetry. In the first example, a two-word parenthesis offers an elaboration and a pictorial illustration of the emotional and intellectual concerns expressed in "Arrabal." The parenthesis in "Benarés" operates on a larger scale, dismantling an artificial landscape in order to replace it with another, more authentic one grounded in the real world. In "Ajedrez," brackets are used to accommodate an interpolation which symbolizes the presence and indeed the irresistible power of the literary system. And in "Mateo, XXV, 30," the parenthesis brings to the fore a concern with language, expanding the poet's personal appropriation of

a Biblical theme into a philosophical meditation that complements the lyrical thrust of the poem. Taken together, these four instances of bracketing highlight the formal artistry of a poet who took a device that others such as Quevedo, Whitman, Darío, and Lugones had used before him and with it achieved a remarkable variety of expressive effects in one poem after another. Across the range of his poetic output, the parenthetical statement is a visible and highly productive feature of Borges's verse.

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ARCHITECTURAL CARTOGRAPHY:  
SOCIAL AND GENDER MAPPING IN MARÍA DE ZAYAS'S  
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SPAIN

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María de Zayas's popular framed novels have been the object of significant attention in the last few decades. Critics have highlighted the crucial difference in tone between her two collections, namely, *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* [*Amorous and Exemplary Novels*] (1637), and *Desengaños amorosos* [*The Disenchantments of Love*] (1647), especially regarding the metaphor of the house. According to Amy Williamsen, while "in *Novelas Amorosas* Zayas explores the comic possibilities of this architectural sign, at times demonstrating that the rigid imposition of patriarchal order also restricts men . . . *Desengaños*, on the other hand, portrays the house as an instrument of torture employed against women" (646). Rather than viewing the house as metafiction of the struggle for female authorship, I purport to formulate the house in terms of the mapping of social relations.<sup>1</sup> I propose that the representation of the house, space of the emerging

\* I am highly indebted to Marcia Stephenson's theoretical model. Thanks also to Charles Ganelin and Michael Horswell for their invaluable suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> In her now canonical article, Ordóñez expressed the idea of the house as metafiction.