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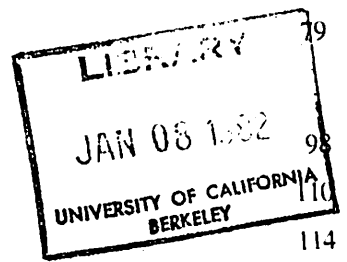
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Social Text.

The Utopia of a Tired Man: Jorge Luis Borges

JEAN FRANCO

ABSTRACTION

It is hardly possible to open a book of criticism these days without encountering a reference to Borges. The name magically transports writers from the drier labors of analysis and explanation to the oasis of parable. His "fictions" have the force of a demonstration whilst remaining eminently *disponibles*, which possibly explains why they appeal to the avant-garde left like Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, to the quietist skeptic in the University profession as well as to those who take the unequal balance of power between metropolis and periphery as part of the natural order of things. In effect, the graph of Borges's reputation outside the Argentine began to rise rapidly after 1961 when he was co-recipient with Samuel Beckett of the Formentor prize. This was precisely the time when Gérard Genette, Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, the *Tel Quel* group, and others had begun to challenge the procedures of discourse and the assumption on which traditional narrative, history, metaphysics, science, and anthropology based their authority. The fictions opportunely became the exemplary texts. The laughter provoked by reading Borges's imaginary Chinese taxonomy¹ shattered, according to Foucault "all the familiar landmarks of my thought, *our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography."² Everyone would surely want to join this particular revolution which involved no bloodshed. Borges's fictions could be claimed as examples of *écriture*, as religious, metaphysical, or skeptical demonstrations, as existential searches, as demonstrations of stoical quietism, and, more modestly, as proof that Latin America was indeed in the avant-garde.³ On the other hand, Borges's works also hold comfort for conservatives. They do not shatter the peace and order of military governments. They confirm metropolitan critics in their belief that Latin America, and Argentina in particular, do not deserve the civilized pleasure the fictions provide. According to one critic, it is only Borges's "triumphant overflow of civility and intelligence that salvages the entire continent of brutality and stupidity." In all that barbarism, he is held up as the exception that proves the rule.⁴

What is surprising is not that the fictions are read in these different ways nor that they become arguments both for the right and for the left, but rather the critical consensus:

¹"El idioma analítico de John Wilkes," *Otras Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires, 1960), p. 142.

²Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. xv.

³See, for instance, the special issue of *Revista Iberoamericana*, XLII, 100-101. (June-Dec., 1977).

⁴Paul Fussell in his review of Paul Theroux's *The Old Patagonian Express* in the book supplement of the *New York Times* (August 26, 1979).

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everyone agrees that what the fictions display is mastery. There is no argument about the fact that they mime other kinds of writing—narrative, literary criticism, encyclopedic writing, learned disputation, philosophy, and religious exegesis—in order to open up the whole bag of tricks; that they reveal how the disparate fragments of culture, how linguistic rules, deictics, and narrative strategies combine to suggest the illusion of an order and a direction; that like Nietzschean genealogy, they suggest the magnitude of mental constructs which seem to have a life of their own, so magnificently have they been able to conceal their origins in human power and gullibility; that what is offered in the canonical fictions *El Aleph* (1949) and *Ficciones* (1944) is usually an enigma, fragments, arguments designed to frustrate interpretation. As the reader is drawn into the game of interpretation, it gradually becomes clear that what seemed to be a solid path is actually a stage set which can be rearranged for quite a different play or performance. It is this control on the very edge of chaos that constitutes the mastery. The fictions conceal nothing. As in tight rope walking the skill is visible to all. Any reader (any reader with “competence”) can pick up some of the clues, for they are meant to be deciphered. Much Borges criticism, for this reason, tends to become a second-level demonstration of the skill and mastery of the fictions. The few hostile critics, mostly on the left, have been forced to attack on the ungrateful terrain of *ad hominem* argument. They assail his conservative political opinions and actions, his oligarchic alliances and his snobbery.⁵ At best, left criticism has only been capable of appealing for an approach to Borges which will put the textual strategies back into a “context.” The disadvantage of this is that it denies the very capability—the abstraction from concrete situations—which give the fictions their power. Yet it is precisely mastery, and the abstraction mastery is based on, that demand analysis. If Borges’s fictions are machines that reveal the interests behind both empirical and hermeneutic knowledge the better to detach the reader from the knowledge effects, they properly participate in a widespread contemporary tendency to regard science, technology, and the interpretative sciences as ideological (Habermas) or as discourses of power (Foucault). In effect, the Borges fiction deploys the agonistic struggle (or dialectics in the traditional sense), the search for meaning, archaeological reconstruction, and narrativity in all its forms, as epistemological paradigms. The fact that two or more paradigms often appear in a single story undoubtedly subverts their claim to represent truth. It is not surprising, therefore, that Pierre Macherey finds in the Borges fiction the ideal model for “literary production” by means of which ideology is made visible. Yet the fictions are not only subversions of epistemological paradigms: they destroy in order to instruct in a new kind of reading activity and as such they are didactic. The fictions can, indeed, be compared to a spiritual exercise in which the world must be read skeptically in order to provide the motor force for spiritual withdrawal and privatized intensity.

COMMUNITY

The most powerful motors of knowledge-production in Borges’s fictions are rivalry and enigma: these stand in analogy to two different cognitive processes—disputation and hermeneutics. Only when combat is exhausted, when one of the protagonists is defeated or dies, or when the search is completed, does the possibility of withdrawal and self-

⁵See, for instance, Juan Fló, *Contra Borges* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1978), and Pedro Orgambide, *Borges y su pensamiento político* (Mexico: Casa Argentina, 1978). For reception in the Argentine, see María Luis Bastos, *Borges ante la crítica argentina, 1923–60* (Buenos Aires: Hispamérica, 1974).

knowledge arise. The *askesis*⁶ which results from these sequences—struggle/victory (or defeat)/revelation; or, search/discovery (or frustration)/revelation—functions on two levels: both as the outcome of plot and as a readerly activity. The implied reader of the Borges text is thus often the allegorical shadow of its protagonists and vice versa. Both, however, undergo conversion, the privileged place for which is a limit or frontier.

The spatialization of conversion is well illustrated by the story, "The Theologians" (*The Aleph*, 1957) in which two medieval scholars, Aureliano of Aquilea and John of Panonia, are called on to refute the beliefs of the "monotonous sect" who hold that every event is destined to be repeated. John's refutation is direct and literal, so that his rival Aureliano must strategically adopt a different mode, that of allusion and reliance on the words of others. Thus the need to differentiate himself from his rival is the productive principle of an indirect style. Years later, John is himself considered to be heretical since the arguments he had used against the "monotonous sect" become suspect in the context of a new struggle—the one now waged against the heresy of the "histrionics" who believe that no two moments are ever the same. Aureliano, whose arguments were veiled, escapes criticism and, indeed, denounces his rival, who is then burned at the stake. Deprived of his antagonist, Aureliano seeks "the arduous limits of the Empire, the heavy swamps and the contemplative deserts so that solitude might help him understand his destiny." It is here, beyond power and self-interest, that the revelation comes to him that he and John are the same person in the eyes of God.

The dispute between John and Aureliano occurs at the center of the empire and serves its larger strategy, for which their knowledge is instrumental. Only on the frontier, physically removed from the demands of the State and without the stimulus of rivalry, does Aureliano experience a moment of intensity and of reflection: "In Hibernia, in one of the huts of a monastery surrounded by the forest, the sound of rain surprised him towards morning. He remembered a Roman night in which the same meticulous noise had surprised him." Thus, like Juan, Aureliano is burned to death when lightning strikes the trees around his hut and sets it on fire. But unlike John he has been allowed the god-like vision in which identities disappear, and the illusion that has produced them is laid bare.

The experience of the frontier necessarily involves distancing and this in turn permits change. The frontier is a place of reversal where the old values are transformed, where the civilized may become barbarian and the barbarian civilized, and where traditional moral categories acquire a quite different force. In "The Theologians," Aureliano's self-knowledge had involved destruction of the Other through treachery. By abstracting both the polemic of the theologians and the treachery from any current situation and relocating them in the remote past, Borges blocks conventional moral judgment and allows a "transvaluation" of values. Treachery and disloyalty can now become positive terms insofar as they are triggers of change. As such they may be grouped with the positive terms in other opposing pairs—nearness/distance, committed/free, state/individual, national/extra-national, tradition/change—where the second term is the positive one.

These terms occur not only in the fictions but in the essays as well. Consider, for instance, Borges's often repeated statement that the Argentinian like the Jew is not entrenched in any particular national tradition; he paraphrases Veblen to the effect that

⁶Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) p. 116, terms *askesis* "a way of purgation, intending a state of solitude as its proximate goal."

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⁷The Spani House, 1964, p. *Discusión* (Buc

"though the Jew lives, let us say, in Western culture, he does not feel bound to it by any particular loyalty and thus he may invent, may change, may become a revolutionary, may be really important."⁷ On this general plane where Jews and Argentinians are equivalent, lack of tradition becomes positive and loyalty negative or, at the very least, uncreative. If we substitute "solidarity" and "commitment" for "loyalty," we can see why Borges should be so ambiguous a figure for the left. On the one hand, he takes apart metropolitan knowledge production, which had imposed immaturity, backwardness, barbarism, underdevelopment, instability, and dependency on Latin America. In the face of the imbalance which gave Europe and then the United States an immense capacity for both material advance and technico-practical knowledge, Borges like other Third World intellectuals has unmasked the disinterested and apparently universal knowledge of the metropolis as an exercise of power, and has brought the destructive force of parody to bear on these knowledge effects. Yet, at the same time, the fictions hold out no possibility of solidarity. For, as allegories of reading and of writing, they equate these activities with *askesis*; in other words, they accentuate the process of privatization.

It should be understood, however, that for Borges the stakes are higher than they might at first appear. If he makes literature into an intensely privatized experience, it is because he believes that experience can only be individual: the more intense the experience the more it satisfies our immortal longings: "intensity" is thus what is at stake for Borges in literature. He differs from many of his predecessors in allowing this intensity to be readerly rather than reserving it to the poet or creator as representatives of the *comunitas*. In this respect, he is obviously different from the committed or existentialist left in Latin America who have tried to envision a collective response to the enforced relegation of Latin America into the realm of the phenomenal. Consider two contrasting examples. In Neruda's *Canto General*, the poet's voice becomes the unproblematic voice of underground and hitherto suppressed history, responding to the oblivion into which the common people have been thrust. In the narratives of García Márquez, oblivion is turned into a creative force. Indeed, García Márquez used as the epigraph of his first novel, *The Leafstorm*, Creon's command that the bones of Polinices should be abandoned outside the city wall and left as the prey to the carrion birds, suggesting the power of metropolitan discourse which has the authority to draw the boundary between the memorable and the forgotten, between the honored and the unhonored. Not to mark Polinices' grave means not to commemorate, and not to commemorate means being condemned to the oblivion of the phenomenal.

The project of García Márquez and Neruda was to defy Creon's injunction. At the same time, both writers retain an identification of culture with community. Neruda creates a poetry that can be read aloud, thus reviving the power of the communal and orally-transmitted culture which in Latin America has often afforded a strategy of resistance. García Márquez situates his narratives at the very moment when this traditional communal lore is on the point of disappearing and is about to be replaced by the privatized solitude of print culture. Both writers, emblematic of different kinds of relation to the idea of community, project Utopian possibilities by inverting the values imposed by the metropolitan discourse of power. For Neruda and García Márquez, community (whether nation, class, or family) is productive of resistance to economic and to cultural

⁷"The Spanish Language in South America: a Literary Problem," in *Diamante XV* (London: Canning House, 1964) p. 6. He has frequently made this comparison. See also, "El escritor argentino y la tradición," *Discusión* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1957).

domination. Liberation therefore must be national, social and cultural. Borges, in contrast, attaches no value to community since, for him, "reality" belongs only to the level of individual perceptions. His social philosophy (if such it can be called) is purely pragmatic. Because of the "asiatic disorder" of the real world, it is better that "gentlemen" control politics. On this level, he acknowledges that there are nations with national characteristics but speaks as if international politics were conducted as duels to gain respect.⁸

Borges also stands in a curiously oblique relation to Argentina's historic debate between civilization and barbarism. The ur-text in this debate is an essay written by the post-Independence liberal politician, Domingo Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (1845). From his exile during the dictatorship of General Rosas, Sarmiento analyzed the dissolution of urban and civilized life that had resulted from the destructive onslaught of gaucho *caudillos* (exemplified by Facundo Quiroga); he demonstrated that this was the reason for Argentina's degeneration into barbarism and its eventual submission to dictatorship. For Sarmiento the classical parallel immediately came to mind. Argentina was like Thebes ravaged by a monster which had to be exterminated before the country could attain its age of glory. The argument for civilization would imply the repression and genocide of the nomadic peoples, now stigmatized as "barbarians."

General Rosas was overthrown in 1852. The labor of turning Buenos Aires into the Thebes of La Plata began with the conscription and integration of the nomadic gauchos into the army and the regular work force and continued with the war to exterminate the Indian tribes. The final step was the importation of hundreds of immigrants, mostly from southern and eastern Europe, and the transformation of Buenos Aires into a megalopolis. The familiar figures of 19th-century popular lore—the Indian, the gaucho, and the captive woman who lived in the Indian tents—would survive only as myths.

This policy did not, however, remove barbarism from within but merely transferred it from the nomadic gaucho to the new immigrants who would become a political force at the beginning of the 20th century when a populist president, Bernardo Yrigoyen, came into power. In 1930, soon after he had been elected president for a second term, a military regime seized the government and succeeded for a decade in stemming the growing power of the masses who would eventually put Perón into the government.

The terms "civilization" and "barbarism" had by now shifted ground. The independent gaucho came to incarnate individual freedom of a kind that was certainly beyond the possibility of the struggling immigrant. The poem of gaucho life, *Martin Fierro* (first part, 1872, second part, 1879) was raised to the status of a national epic. It was no longer the gaucho who was stigmatized but "cabecitas negras" (the little black heads)—the new arrivals from southern Europe, with their uncertain Spanish, their violent gangs, and their vulgar life style. Torn from communities and families, marginalized by poverty, the immigrant experience was privatized in the extreme. Education was the one means of social mobility for the middle-class, which was itself ambivalent in its attitude to history and to its own social role. Irony was not just a literary style for such people, but a way of thinking and a gut fear of the spontaneous reaction that might betray their carefully acquired *persona*. Irony was, moreover, a manner of marking a distance from the *vulgo*: it was as if the very avowal of any loyalty or commitment constituted a social solecism.

⁸See, for example, Richard Burgin, *Conversation with Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Avon Books, 1970), pp. 46–7, and Paul Theroux, *The Old Patagonian Express* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), pp. 362–377.

Cortázar's *Hopscotch* captures the style to perfection. Not surprisingly, Borges's early desire to express "the noble pathos of the creole"⁹ was quickly eroded not only by the prevalent skepticism but also by his own distrust of the masses, a distrust intensified in the 1930s when he was obliged to live a "demeaning existence" working in a small library among people who only talked of football or exchanged smutty stories.¹⁰ During this period, he collaborated on the journal *Sur*, whose role in Argentina—that of maintaining taste and discrimination—offers analogies with that of *Scrutiny* in England.¹¹ The full force of his irony and satire would, however, only become apparent during the Perón regime (1943–53) which, persecuting him, his family, and friends, exacerbated his already covert dislike of the masses and their charismatic leaders and representatives. In 1945, soon after Perón had taken power, he wrote a satirical parody, *A Model for Death*, in collaboration with his friend, Adolfo Bioy Casares, which ridicules in devastating fashion both populism and nationalism, the satire being directed against a mythical organization, the A.A.A. (Aboriginal Association of Argentina), whose aims were to protect the purity of the Argentine language and to catalogue the lexicon of the tango, and whose members speak a graceless *argot*, drink national champagne, and refer to themselves as "Indians" to affirm their legitimate national sentiment.¹² With some impartiality the authors also parody the snobbish Europeanized Argentinian, thus ridiculing both sides in the tired old argument between cultural nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

This "plague on both your houses" owes much to Borges's conviction that the aesthetic experience is individual and beyond social strategies, and that the social arena is best occupied by those who will defend order (*disorder* meaning mass participation). The Perón regime became the deterrent, the exemplary instance of what happens when the populace are given access to power. It was during this period of the Perón regime that Borges revised his own earlier inclination to consider the gaucho Martín Fierro a national hero and declared that had Argentina celebrated Sarmiento instead of Martín Fierro "another and better history would have been ours."¹³ Perón was a hoodlum, outside the category of the civilized (but so was Robert Lowell whom he met in the 1960s).¹⁴ Gentlemen (i.e., those who maintained order) returned to power after the fall of Perón: General Videla is adjudged a gentleman.¹⁵ Borges's support of Nixon and of the Americans during the Vietnam war, his celebration of the North American victory over the Mexicans at the Alamo, his support of the military juntas in the Argentine and Chile, his astonishment in Texas at hearing ditchdiggers speak English (a language he had thought

⁹This is particularly evident in a series of essays which he now repudiates, *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (Buenos Aires, 1926).

¹⁰Jorge Luis Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933–69*, trans. Norman Thomas Di Giovanni (New York: Dutton, 1970), pp. 240–2.

¹¹Frances Mulhern, *The Moment of Scrutiny* (London: New Left Books, 1979).

¹²Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, *Un modelo para la muerte* (Buenos Aires, 1970). The first edition was privately printed. Other parodies written under their joint pseudonym, Bustos Domecq, include *Crónicas de Bustos Domecq* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1967) and *Seis problemas para Isidoro Parodi* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1942).

¹³Prologue to Domingo Sarmiento, *Facundo* (Buenos Aires, 1974), including in J.L.B., *Prólogos* (Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero, 1975), p. 139. For an account of the changes in Borges's position, see Humberto N. Rasi, "The Final Creole: Borges's View of Argentine History," *Triquarterly* 25 (Fall 1972), pp. 149–171.

¹⁴R. Burgin, *op. cit.*, p. 129–130. Also Ronald Christ, "Borges at NYU," in *Triquarterly*, p. 458. On Lowell, see Enrique Hank Lopez, "An Audience with Borges," *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle* (Sept. 23, 1979). Borges has, of late, revised his attitude to the *junta* and expressed criticism.

¹⁵Paul Theroux, *op. cit.*, p. 373.

reserved to the educated classes) not only denote an exacerbation of the snobbery which he once described as the sincerest passion of the Argentinian but also a tendency to equate the social good with keeping the masses and the Third World in a position of inferiority. In this sense, Borges's project is not comparable to the fascism of Céline and Wyndham Lewis. If it is akin to any political philosophy at all, it is to libertarianism—an extreme form of individualism—which privileges the freedom of the powerful and is not concerned with liberation from scarcity and economic oppression. Indeed, he has himself aptly written its motto: "Blessed are those who do not hunger for justice, because they know that our destiny whether adverse or benign is the result of chance and is inscrutable."¹⁶

THE BETRAYAL PARADIGM

I felt ashamed quite early to be a bookish kind of person, not a man of action.

—*Autobiographical Essay*

Borges has established control over his past by emphasizing certain moments in the development of his writing and displaying these with translucent though misleading candor. In his *Autobiographical Essay*, he appears enchanted with the symmetry of a lineage which, on both his father's and his mother's side, kept a balance between arms and letters. He has chosen not to give prominence to the mercantile members of the family, preferring the legend of his grandfather, Colonel Borges:

In the complicated circumstances surrounding his defeat at La Verde, he rode slowly on horseback, wearing a white poncho and followed by ten or twelve of his men, towards the enemy lines, where he was struck by two Remington bullets. This was the first time Remington rifles were used in the Argentine, and it tickles my fancy to think that the firm that shaves me every morning bears the same name as the one that killed my grandfather.¹⁷

This "amusing" incident connects the Borges of the present with a Borges in the past; without knowledge of Argentinian history the reader might miss the fact that the Colonel was in reality committing suicide. The "complicated circumstances" are interesting enough. Colonel Borges, an Indian fighter and veteran of the war against Paraguay as well as civil war between Buenos Aires and the provinces, had, in 1874, become involved in an anti-government plot against Sarmiento and his candidate for the Presidency. Challenged by Sarmiento, he promised loyalty until October 12, the day the uprising was to take place. However, the date of the coup was advanced, and Colonel Borges, evidently a stickler for the letter of his promises, refused to participate. To his friends, he appeared to be a traitor. When October the twelfth came, he joined the rebel forces under Mitre and when these were forced to retreat, Borges rode out, arms across his chest, towards the enemy lines and was fatally wounded.

In his epic world, riding on his horse.

I leave him almost untouched by my verse.

—"Allusion to the death of Colonel Francisco Borges"

¹⁶"Fragmentos de un evangelio apócrifo," *Elogio de la sombra* (Buenos Aires). See also *An Autobiographical Essay*, p. 233.

¹⁷*An Autobiographical Essay*, p. 233. For relations with the family see E. Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Dutton, 1979).

Borges

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What is so striking in this story is the literal power that Colonel Borges attached to pledging his word, even though it made him a traitor both in the eyes of his friends and of the government. What attracts Borges the writer is the abstract purity, the willingness to break with both state and loyalty to friends in order to preserve a personal pledge, however absurd. Colonel Borges's heroism and his faith in the word is not unlike that of the writer himself.

The son of bookish and cultivated parents, Jorge Luis Borges was educated in Switzerland during the First World War and then spent some years in Spain. He returned to Buenos Aires in 1921 as an "Ultraist" (an avant-garde literary movement initiated in Spain) and during the 20s was actively involved in several avant-garde journals in Buenos Aires. In his autobiographical essay, he gives prominence to two decisive breaks in his career as a writer—the first stylistic, the second having to do with genre. The first he describes as a gradual process which made him abandon the mannered baroque style of his early writing. The second break was more drastic; indeed, it is described in religious terms as an entry into paradise. In 1938, he was working in a small provincial library, reading among other things, *The Divine Comedy*, when his father died. Shortly afterwards he had a severe accident, lost the power of speech and feared his mental integrity. On convalescing "I decided I would try to write a story." The result was "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote." As he gained confidence in his writing, he withdrew more and more from his colleagues, who "thought of me as a *traitor* for not sharing their boisterous fun" (my italics). Though it is tempting to read this crisis in Oedipal terms, the account is perhaps most interesting as Borges's own version of a vocation which announced itself when speech was lost; and of the treachery to family ties and loyalties that this vocation involved. He himself had asserted that both his father and mother, who had definite ideas about what constituted good literature, had at times voiced their disapproval of his subject matter (in particular, they thought his essay on a minor writer, Evaristo Carriego, to be a waste of time). His father's death may thus have given him a greater sense of artistic freedom. Yet to reduce the antagonistic struggle and betrayal of the stories to the Oedipal conflict with the father ignores the social investment of the unconscious of which Oedipal figures are representations; and, as René Girard has shown, concentration on the remote influence of the father may mask more immediate rivals.¹⁸ Certainly, the theme of treachery occurs in Borges's writing long before the crucial date of 1938. One of his early poems, "General Quiroga rides in his carriage," records a famous historical case of treachery, while in 1927 he wrote the first outline of a never completed story which became the paradigm for his later works: "Pursued by the police, an outlaw is betrayed by a guitar player. He escapes prison one night and has a single night in which to avenge himself. By following the sound of a guitar, he finds the man who has betrayed him and kills him."

"This story," he confesses, "I have been retelling with small variations ever since."¹⁹ It is, indeed, essentially the plot of the very first story he wrote, "Street-corner man," in which a young man kills the knife-fighter he admires because he cannot bear to think of him as a coward. In the canonical fictions, treachery, the theme of the pursuer and the

¹⁸René Girard, *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), especially chapter 5.

¹⁹*An Autobiographical Essay*, pp. 231–2. A translation of the story which was written in 1927 appears in *Triquarterly*, p. 182.

pursued, recur again and again—in "Death and the Compass," in "The Garden of Forking Paths," in "The Form of the Sword," "The Theologians," "Deutsches Requiem," "Three Versions of Judas," "The End," and "The Waiting."

Such a repetitive pattern—the list is by no means exhaustive—suggests the re-enactment of some primary obsession.²⁰ What is fascinating, however, is the way that this anachronistic theme (it is the theme of the Argentine classic, *Martin Fierro*) becomes displaced, first through a process of defamiliarization (in the exotic imaginary lives of *The Universal History of Infamy*²¹) and thereafter by a process of abstraction which turns violence and treachery into an allegory of writing and reading. Thus, for Borges the writer, treachery not only motivates the device but involves a necessary suspension of loyalty to all other commitments but that of writing. The power and effectiveness of the writing will now depend on the writer's ability to redeploy material, while readerly ability will depend on freedom from preconceptions. The reason Borges's paradigm story made it difficult for him to "begin" as a writer was perhaps its association with Argentine regionalist and popular literature. Hence, the necessary stage of *The Universal History of Infamy* in which anecdotes and tales of trickery and deceit were borrowed from obscure secondary sources in order to defamiliarize the theme and abstract it from its social context. The exotic and infamous characters of this book include Billy the Kid (Nat. Turner), Monk Eastman, and the Tichbourne Claimant; in these tales, Borges adopts the voice of the traditional storyteller who must secure the attention of his listeners by recounting marvellous events. By removing the paradigm of treachery to Japan, China, and the United States, Borges performs the displacement required to discourage the reader from placing the tales back into the concrete context of the Argentinian situation. Even at this early stage, however, it is interesting that the fable of betrayal and loyalty is not simply a cloak for the Oedipal but often involves the betrayal of public duties in favor of a private obsession and the adoption of a mask or *persona* in order to attain the required end. The story of the Tichbourne claimant who successfully posed as the heir to the Tichbourne name and fortune despite his lack of resemblance to a long-lost heir is one obvious example of this fable of betrayal. In "The Insulting Master of Etiquette Kotsuke no Suke," the master who is a representative of the state makes rules and insults those who do not obey them. The retainers of a lord who have been forced to commit hara-kiri because of his failure to observe the rules plot vengeance. Their leader adopts the persona of a debauchee to throw Kotsuke no Suke off his guard so that he can be cornered and killed (he is too cowardly to commit suicide). The forty-seven loyal retainers now commit hara-kiri, having achieved their vengeance. We note here that disloyalty to the state implies loyalty of a higher (and more personal) kind, for it is carried to the extreme test of death.

The difference between these early tales and the mature fables of *The Aleph* and *Ficciones* is that in the later stories Borges secures the participation of the reader in the process of seduction, betrayal, and mastery. The "Garden of Forking Paths" affords a particularly good example of this since it deploys a complexity of epistemological procedures. It is, first of all, a story embedded in a framing device which appears to give high value to empirical evidence. Liddell Hart's *History of the War in Europe* serves as the

²⁰For an Oedipal reading, see Mary H. Lusk, "Pierre Menard Autor," *The Texas Quarterly* XLVII: 1 (Spring 1975), pp. 104–116.

²¹*A Universal History of Infamy*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: Dutton and Co., 1972), pp. 11–12.

undisputable authority that the historical event on which the story is based—a British offensive against the Germans in July 1916—really took place. The confession of the spy Yu Tsun thus supposedly fills a gap or space in Liddell Hart's text and therefore shows up the incompleteness of history, which can never know the personal and subjective factors operating at any given time.

Yu Tsun's story is, however, fragmentary. It begins *in medias res* with the discovery by Richard Madden, an agent on the British side, that Yu Tsun is spying for the Germans. The latter must now attempt to warn his German masters of the impending British offensive before his inevitable capture. This spy thriller quickly moves from the empirical reality of the First World War to a more abstract level. The rivals, Madden and Yu Tsun, are both traitors to their national origins, since Madden is Irish and Yu Tsun Chinese; characteristically, this frees them for creative action. In his flight from Madden, Yu Tsun makes for the mysterious garden of forking paths and the house of a certain Albert whom he discovers to be a Sinologist, the only person in the world to have unravelled the secret of the labyrinth constructed by his own grandfather, Ts'ui Pên. He is thus the one person really worthy of Yu Tsun's loyalty. Yu Tsun however must kill Albert because he is needed in another strategy—his name, Albert, is that of the artillery park which the British are to attack and hence the signal Yu Tsun needs to warn the Germans. Because Albert's murderer is Chinese, the code is easily deciphered by the Germans from the newspaper accounts of the murder. Yu Tsun's strategy, devised out of pride (to prove that a yellow man could save the German army), overcomes the loyalty to a brother: Albert has to be killed in order to become a sign. "The Garden of Forking Paths" thus operates the detachment of the sign (Albert) from its empirical matrix, exactly on the lines that Roland Barthes outlined in *Mythologies*.²² As in the Barthesian definition of myth, the sign is defined by its intention (as a warning to the Germans) rather than by its literal sense (Albert the man). But this is not the end of Borges's story, for Yu Tsun's treachery also produces a vision of the labyrinth of possibilities which Albert's death forecloses as well as "innumerable contrition and fatigue" which anticipate his own death.

Yu Tsun's communicative strategy is paralleled by another epistemological procedure—the hermeneutic strategy which enables Albert to solve the riddle of the labyrinth. But where Yu Tsun's model is that of *instrumental* knowledge and technical control, Albert's decipherment of the labyrinth is a *hermeneutic* process: the object of knowledge (the labyrinth) being detached from any concrete historical situation and made available for study as a de-historicized enigma. Albert's solution—that the labyrinth is a book—is elegant but also makes understanding seem absurd, since the labyrinthine text he envisages allows for all the unthematized possibilities in any situation, thus reproducing the vast, ungraspable variety of unactualized possibilities inheret in any act. The critic Pierre Macherey points out that this labyrinthine text reflects Borges endeavour as a writer, for it "constitutes the possibilities of one text . . . and allows the importance of what has been lost to come to light." In this way, "through the insufficiencies of the story, Borges manages to show that we have lost nothing."²³ However, precisely the problem with Ts'ui Pên's text is that it is like a map so accurate and complete that it becomes equivalent to the actual geographical location and therefore redundant.

²²Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), pp. 109–59.

²³Pierre Macherey, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* (Paris: Francois Maspéro, 1966), p. 285.

Rather than project Yu Tsun's text as a model for Borges's own, it would seem more fruitful to note the interplay between Albert's hermeneutic strategy and Yu Tsun's communicative strategy, for in each case, the author/solver appears to be in complete control, to be the subject of one particular process when, in fact, each is from another point of view also a victim. In one configuration, Albert is the emitter of the message (the secret of the labyrinth), whilst in another "plot," he is Yu Tsun's victim. And Yu Tsun, who appears to be the sender of the message to the Germans, is also a sign in the strategy of the German high command. The potentially fraternal bond between Yu Tsun and Albert is sacrificed to the strategic demands of the state. The failure and death of both protagonists are, however, necessary to achieve transcendence of illusion (in Schopenhauer's sense) and so permit access to a higher level of abstraction.

It is now possible to trace a recurrent process in the fictions by means of which a contemporary dispute or problem (rivalry, hatred, the position of the intellectual against the state) is defamiliarized by placing the conflict in an exotic setting. The subject position in the story, which in other writers provides stability to the meaning-making process while suggesting a continuous identity, is in Borges revealed to be a shifter to be filled, sometimes by an acting subject, sometimes by a passive victim. This instability of the subject is, in turn, not intended to produce a multiplicity of meanings. Rather, we are expected to view the characters as exchangeable positions and thus to convert our reading into a more abstract operation by means of which both "understanding" and "communication" can be shown to be misguided and bound to end in frustration.

Such processes are commonly celebrated by commentators as evidence of Borges's "universality," an attribute which for historical reasons is highly regarded by Latin Americans. Yet Borges's "universality" is different from the older humanistic cultural theory according to which literature appeals to universal human nature, universal emotions or taste. The Borges fiction is, instead, a context-free paradigm which can be reactivated through reading at any time and under any circumstances. This is exemplified in "The Search of (or for) Averroes."²⁴ Averroes, like all non-metropolitan intellectuals, is forced to think out problems central to Western culture without having all the relevant data. In his particular case, he attempts to understand Aristotle's discussion of comedy and tragedy though living in a society (Medieval Muslim Spain) which has no theater and no tradition of stage representation. Averroes' "solution" to the problem of the meaning of comedy and tragedy is erroneous if we are concerned with historical accuracy but felicitous in the context of Islamic belief. His quest is universal not because it originates a new discourse or arrives at a truth but because it can be re-actualized by Borges and the reader. Moreover, (perhaps like Borges) Averroes *appears* to be conservative in the eyes of his contemporaries because he sacrifices innovation and engages in act of understanding which depends not on external factors but on reading and glossing texts. In his way, he is able to establish fraternal relationships with other readers across time:

I felt that Averroes, trying to imagine what a drama is without having suspected what a theater is, was no more absurd than I, trying to imagine Averroes with no raw material but a few scraps of Renan, Lane and Asin Palacios. I felt, on the last page, that my narrative was the symbol of the man I was while I was writing and that, in order to write that narrative, I had to

²⁴"The Search for Averroes" appears to have been inspired by the entry "Fatalismus" in Mauthner's *Philosophical Dictionary* (see note 33).

be that man, and that, in order to be that man, I had to write that narrative, and so on *ad infinitum* (at the moment I stop believing in him "Averroes" disappears).

Clearly this process of actualization is more akin to reading than what is normally recognized as "creation." Borges destroys the authorial position which assumes absolute knowledge and control in order to decenter the creative process and abstract it as an intention. The return of Averroes is enabled precisely because his intention is bonded to that of Borges.

MEMORY/INTENSITY/RETURN

Averroes attains a kind of immortality through Borges's actualization of his success (and failure). This intensity on the edge of oblivion is the heroism without heroes for which literature offers the exemplary practice. The hero is a figure of the past, linked to the age of conquest and felicitously commemorated in epic, which, unlike print, retained only the really memorable. Borges is undoubtedly nostalgic for this epic age and celebrates the fact that in the Argentine there is still "autobiographical memory" of it: "the conquest and colonization of these regions," he wrote, "was such an ephemeral operation that a grandfather of mine in 1872 could command the last important battle against the Indians, thus realizing in the latter half of the nineteenth century the conquering project of the sixteenth."²⁵ Characteristically, he lauds the heroism of his grandfather and forgets the pampa Indians who were virtually annihilated in those very battles. But his attempt to commemorate his heroic ancestors—Colonel Borges and Isidoro Suarez, the hero of the Independence battle of Junín—is, in effect, an act of personal piety, and owes much to his conviction that if we survive after death, it is only in the memories of others. In "Inscription on any Tomb," he glosses Sir Thomas Browne and writes, "Blindly the willful soul, / Asks for length of days / When its survival is assured by the lives of others / When you yourself are the embodied continuation / Of those who did not live into your time / And others will be (and are) your immortality on earth." It is a conviction which is reflected in this fondness for poetic epitaphs.²⁶

In modern society, on the contrary, there is no epic celebration of the hero, only the inevitable trivialization of print. Individuals have, therefore, lost their power over posterity. Faced with a similar concern, the Japanese writer, Yukio Mishima would adopt a deliberately anachronistic revival of personal heroism: "Just as Alexander the Great acquired heroic stature by modelling himself on Achilles, the condition necessary for being a hero must be both a ban on originality and a true faithfulness to a classical model; unlike the words of a genius the words of a hero must be selected as the most impressive and noble among ready-made concepts. And at the same time they, more than any other words, constitute a splendid language of the flesh."²⁷ Though Borges regretted not being a man of action, he could not himself be content with such heroic poses, even though in the early 20s, he did conceive a kind of literary heroism which might be achieved by those writers who exercised the "magic" of a "demi-god, the angel whose deeds change the world. To annex provinces to Being, to imagine cities and spaces of contiguous

²⁵ Jorge Luis Borges, *Evaristo Carriego* (Buenos Aires: Gleizer, 1930), p. 88. See also p. 27.

²⁶ See especially the poems of "Fervor of Buenos Aires" in Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems, 1923-1967*, ed. Norman Thomas de Giovanni (New York: Delta, 1973).

²⁷ Yukio Mishima, *Sun and Steel* (New York: Grove Press, 1978), p. 81.

reality—that is a heroic venture."²⁸ But sometime during the late 20s and early 30s, he abandoned even this concept of heroism; in order to achieve the "immortality" of the hero, the modern writer must forego the very notion that it can be invested in an individual: modern heroism has no heroes.

He is, however, obsessed by eternity: and it was after reading the elegy of the 16th-century Spanish poet, Jorge Manrique, for the death of his father (an elegy which is also a meditation on the transitoriness of human life), that he conceived a response "intuited or indicated by this phrase: *what really was is not lost: intensity is a form of eternity.*"²⁹ What he meant by this would be illustrated by an experience so vivid that he described it on two separate occasions. It occurred when he was walking through a Buenos Aires suburb at nightfall, along "streets of unvanquished American clay penetrated by the pampa." There was a "rose-coloured wall in the moonlight," (significantly, the title of his first published story was "The Man on the Rose-Coloured Street-Corner") and on this frontier, between city and pampa, between day and night, he felt himself "to be an abstract perceiver of the world, an indefinite fear imbued with knowledge. That pure representation of homogenous facts—calm night, limpid park, a provincial scent of honeysuckle, basic clay—is not merely identical to what there was on this corner many years ago, it is without similarities or repetitions, the same." Among similar impersonal experiences of "return," he notes "those of physical pleasure and pain, those of drowsiness, those of listening to a single piece of music, those of great intensity and disillusion."³⁰

It is significant that this experience occurs at a kind of frontier between city and pampa, for the frontier as the privileged place for return would never entirely disappear from the fictions. It is the desert of "The Theologians" and "The Immortal" and the pampa of "The South." And the cast of characters in the old civilization-and-barbarism debate could also be abstracted from national myth and marshalled as figures which convert repetition into intensity. For example, in "The Captive" (*Dreamtigers*), the old story of the child carried off by Indians and converted to barbarism becomes just such a fable of intensity. The boy captive, now an Indian, finds himself near his old home, goes straight into the kitchen, puts his hand into the chimney and takes out a knife he had hidden there years before. The narrator comments: "I would like to know what he felt in the instant of dizziness in which past and present fused. I would like to know if the lost child was reborn and died in the ecstasy and if he recognized, if only as a child or as a dog might recognize, his parents and the house." What mediates the return in this particular instance is the symbolic knife. The captive had been brutally severed from his family, but this very separation permits the ecstasy of the return. Without the break (during which the family are forgotten), without the knife (the symbol of death and of castration), and the miraculous recovery of power, there would be no return. The captive, it will be noted, does not return in order to replace the father. Rather, the very symbol of absence, separation, and death becomes the device that produces a rebirth (or a conversion).

Memory provides Borges with an important analogy for the return since it too is discontinuous and activated against a background of oblivion. In "Funes the Memorious," the narrator remembers Funes because of the extraordinary circumstances of the meeting:

²⁸See the title essay of *El tamaño de mi esperanza*.

²⁹"Las coplas de Jorge Manrique," *El idioma de los argentinos* (Buenos Aires, 1928), p. 99.

³⁰The same description appears in "Dos esquinas," *El idioma de los argentinos*, p. 150, and *Historia de la eternidad* (Buenos Aires: Emece), pp. 38–40. See also *Otras Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1952), pp. 179–80.

"We were running a kind of race with the storm. We entered an alleyway that sank down between two very high brick sidewalks. It had suddenly got dark; I heard some rapid and almost secret footsteps up above; I raised my eyes and saw a boy running along a narrow and broken path as if it were a narrow and broken wall. I *remember* his baggy gaucho trousers, his rope-soled shoes. I *remember* the cigarette in his hard face, against the now limitless storm cloud" (my italics). The intensity of the experience (the contrast and differentiation) is what makes memory possible. Funes himself, on the other hand, cannot experience intensity because he cannot forget.

Memory of this intensified kind is not simply repetition, for it is both active and selective. Indeed, repetition, reproduction, and reflection are all anathema to Borges since they disperse or dilute intensity, whilst *novelty*, because it is not a return and is therefore unique, also fades into oblivion. Borges stresses this by choosing as the epigraph for "The Immortal" a quotation from Sir Francis Bacon: "Salomon said: There is no new thing upon the earth so that as Plato hath an imagination that all knowledge is but remembrance, so Salomon giveth his sentence, that all novelty is but oblivion." It is precisely by transcending the oblivion of novelty and the oblivion of repetition that "The Immortal" illustrates the manner in which intensity can be reactivated.

"The Immortal" is supposedly the transcript of a manuscript found in the pages of Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, and this very genealogy, alluding as it does to intertextuality, serves to distance the fable from empirical reality. The first person and sometimes plural narrator, Marcus Flaminius, describes his search for the legendary river of the immortals, his discovery of the river and of the speechless but immortal troglodytes who, because they cannot die, have reached a state of total indifference. He drinks the waters of the river and, followed by one of the troglodytes, explores the monstrous and deserted city whose architecture is purposeless and incomprehensible. The city of the immortals is so horrible "that its mere existence, even though in the middle of a secret desert, contaminates the past and the future and in some way even endangers the stars. As long as it lasts no one in the world can be strong or happy." Approximate images for it are "a chaos of heterogeneous words, the body of a tiger or a bull in which teeth, organs and head monstrously pullulate in mutual conjunction and hatred." The city is the image of abstract and impersonal forces, now reified into unchanging structures which are both man-made and inhuman. Intensity cannot be experienced within its walls. Marcus Flaminius returns to the desert accompanied by the troglodyte to whom he has given the name of Ulysses' dog, Argos, and to whom he attempts to teach language. Like the dogs and cats in other Borges stories, Argos appears to live in a perpetual present. "I thought that perhaps our perceptions were the same but that Argos combined them in another manner and constructed other objects with them; I thought that perhaps there were no objects for him, but a vertiginous and continuous play of very brief impressions. I thought of a world without memory or time; considered the possibility of a language which ignored nouns, a language of impersonal verbs and of undeclinable epithets." It is easy to recognize in "Argos" another embodiment of the captive who has forgotten civilization, but this forgetting, as Nietzsche pointed out, is also essential for the return: "Isn't forgetting the source and indispensable condition not only for the appearance of his Eternal Return but for transforming the very identity of the person to whom it appears? Forgetting thus raises eternal becoming and the absorption of all identity to the level of being." For Nietzsche as for Borges's narrator, the return brings about the revelation that "all names

of history, finally, are me."³¹ Forgetting, like the captive's knife severs the experience from all that has gone before so that the activation of intensity through differentiation can occur. In "The Immortal," it is a sudden shower of rain in the arid desert which moves Argos so much that he begins to speak and utters not original words but those of Homer's text: "Argos, Ulysses' dog abandoned the heaps of dung." Argos is Homer who is also nobody and everybody (or all the names of history). Borges's aim is not simply to describe intensity but to produce it in the reader by first severing him or her from certainty and stability. Doubts are therefore cast on the authorship of Marcus Flaminius's text. A commentator points out that the manuscript must be the work of two men, one a man of action and the other a man of letters. A second commentator reveals that Marcus Flaminius's text is, in reality, a *collage* of many other texts. Such doubts cast on a unique authorship and on the coherence of the story then send the reader back to verify through a rereading, which is also a form of return since it is a reactivation rather than a repetition. The rereading is intended to convert the "rhetorical" text into a dialectical one. It is stimulated, moreover, by interruption and separation which disturbs the smooth surface of the narration and allows the reader to begin again, freed from the superstition of authorship and originality.

LANGUAGE

When the legionnaire in "The Immortal" imagines Argos as having a completely different perception of the world from himself, he is voicing Borges's view of what happens when any two people try to communicate. "You who read me. Are you sure that you understand my language?" he asks in "The Library of Babel." The skeptical critique of language which is deeply embedded in the fictions has its origin in a precursor of Wittgenstein, Fritz Mauthner, whose *Philosophical Dictionary* Borges frequently mentions.³² Curiously, although critics have often noted a wide range of philosophical references in Borges, from Berkeley and Hume to Schopenhauer, they have tended to overlook Mauthner, perhaps because his work was superceded in the history of philosophical inquiry by Wittgenstein's language games. For Borges, Mauthner's ideas were extremely productive, perhaps more directly so than those of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche whose "return" will prove to be significantly close to and significantly different from that of Argos.

Mauthner believed that all knowledge is based on the senses, which are contingent and which we can only experience as individuals.³³ What perceives cannot be regarded as a ghost in the machine for there is no stable and continuous Ego or Self. This means that only relative and not absolute truth is available to the perceiver. Perception occurs by means of the construction of an inner object. What the individual experiences as a

³¹Pierre Klossowski, "Nietzsche's Experience of the Eternal Return," *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David B. Allison (New York: Delta, 1977), p. 108. For some sources of the story, see Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), pp. 192-225.

³²See, for instance, the interview with James Irby, in James Irby, Napoleón Murat, Carlos Peralta, *Encuentro con Borges* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1968), pp. 43-4.

³³Fritz Mauthner, *Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 2 vols (München and Leipzig: George Müller, 1910), pp. 370-1. See also Gershon Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 182. For Mauthner's relation to Wittgenstein, see Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), pp. 121-132. On the relation of Borges's theory to the Cabbala, see Saúl Sosnowski, *Borges y la Cabala: La búsqueda del verbo* (Buenos Aires: Hispamérica, 1976).

separation between subject and object is illusory, and is in fact created by language itself: "It is language which splits the world into an observer and an object: into things in and for themselves and into things for me. But the world does not occur twice. The world occurs only once. I am nothing if I am not an object. But I have no object. The object is nothing if it is not in me. The object is not outside me. The object is subjective."³⁴ Language thus neither expresses an inner form as Humboldt would have it, nor does it directly refer to objects "out there." In Mauthner's view, language and thought are identical, and the critique of language becomes indispensable because we think in terms of reified substantives such as "race," "humanity," and "cause" which have to be deconstructed in order to reveal their emptiness. Yet he viewed even this task with skepticism, acknowledging his conviction that "man can never succeed in getting beyond a metaphorical description of the world, whether he uses everyday language or philosophical language."³⁵

In Mauthner's system, *parole* (the individual act of speaking) and not *langue* assumes the greatest importance. Since each individual builds up a personal store of memories and associations based ultimately on sense impressions, each individual effectively has a private language. People communicate because they share common conventions but they can never arrive at a complete understanding of one another's meaning since their experiences can never be the same.

Multiple traces of this critique of language are to be found in Borges's writing. For instance, Mauthner argued that sentences and not words form the basic units of communication, that adjectives are more allusive than substantives, that powerful language (like that of poetry) alludes to but never tries to name reality, and that because each person inhabits a different linguistic territory there are no true synonyms—all these arguments appear in Borges's own writing. The invented languages in his fictions are often inspired by Mauthner, as, for instance, with the two languages of Tlon (in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"), one of which is primarily verbal and the other adjectival (and therefore more capable, in Mauthner's view, of conveying sense impressions. Meanwhile, an early essay on "The Nothingness of Personality" also reflects Mauthner's thinking on the coherence and identity of the self. In it, Borges shows that there can be no continuous or overall "I" and illustrates this by describing the process of writing in which the "I" of the text can be described as writerly purpose. "This purpose and a few muscular sensations and the vision of the clear tracery of boughs which the trees place before my window construct my present 'I.'" The "I" of the reader is strategically positioned by discourse and has no more continuity or identity than the "I" of the writer. Thus, the reader is either an "indifference slipping over the argument which I indicated or a judgment about the opinions I demonstrate."³⁶ Early on, therefore, Borges is able to make a crucial distinction between the empirical I and the I of the enunciation, between the empirical and the virtual reader (as well as between the indifferent and the active reader). The model for literature is not, however, a communication model based on the circuit sender/message/receiver. Following Mauthner, Borges does not believe that any two people can read in precisely the same way. Communication is, rather, a strategic game, a purposeful activity which has its own conventions. "The more participants, the more compelling it will be,"

³⁴ *Wörterbuch* I, xi.

³⁵ I am indebted to Peter Biergen for help with translating Mauthner.

³⁶ "La nadería de la personalidad," *Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Proa, 1925), p. 85.

wrote Mauthner. "However, it is neither going to grasp nor alter the real world."³⁷ This strategic game of miscommunication is exemplified in Borges's story "The Other" (*Brodie's Report*) in which the older Borges confronts his younger self on a bench in the park. The older Borges finds he cannot comprehend a younger self who believes in the brotherhood of man and writes social poetry. The younger Borges, for his own part, cannot understand the older man's experience. Yet because they share the same body and mind, they are unable to deceive one another as people normally do and therefore the exhilaration of the game is missing from the encounter. "We were too different and too much the same. We could not deceive one another which makes dialogue difficult." Mauthner's world (and that of Borges) is a vertiginous one, fixed only by the temporary orders which are imposed by an act of will or by the reified and misleading substantives like "humanity" and "race" to which people attach meanings even though they are empty. Since language "came about from the memory of *Zufallssinne* (contingent senses) and was extended through metaphorical conquest to everything knowable,"³⁸ it follows that a critique of language would deconstruct the empty substantives and emphasize the "verbal world" of process and time and the "adjectival world" of qualities, both of which are more faithful to our sensory reality.

One of the substantives that was most in need of deconstruction was, in Mauthner's view, causality: "The oldest belief of mankind, the belief in the world of reality coincides with another very old article of belief, which we are in the habit of parading as science, it coincides with the belief in causality, with the belief in the notion of cause and effect in nature."³⁹ For Mauthner, even laws of nature are metaphorical traces with no existence in reality: there are no such laws, only chance phenomena without any causes. In parallel fashion, Borges would describe natural causality as "the incessant result of endless, uncontrollable processes."⁴⁰ Now this denial of causality takes a crucial place in Borges's thinking and writing. To trace the "causes" of any particular event is equivalent to trying to speak of infinity; to ascribe causality to human events and invoke historical law seems doubly absurd, given the fact that even a meeting between two people depends on a properly infinite chain of accidents and coincidences. According to Borges, a single event such as Bartolomé de las Casas's proposal to introduce black slaves into the Americas to replace Indian labor, could result in a variety of consequences from Martín Fierro's assassination of a black man, the deplorable rhumba, "The Pea-nut Vendor" all the way to the "truncated and imprisoned Napoleonism of Toussaint l'Ouverture."⁴¹

Borges would also agree with Mauthner that "historical study is not an impersonal search for objective laws but a deed, always pursued from the point of view of the present and in the language of the present which is the only language we really understand."⁴² In consequence, historiography is not a science but a matter of personal ideology. Thus "it does not matter whether we study history as a product of free will or of determinism and since nobody knows which system governs the world each one provides

³⁷Quoted by Janik and Toulmin, p. 126. For Mauthner's view of poetic language, see entries under "Kunst" and "Poesie" in *Wörterbuch*.

³⁸Weiler, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-9. See also *Wörterbuch* II, p. 603.

³⁹Weiler, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 185-195.

⁴¹Jorge Luis Borges, "The Dread Redeemer Lazarus Morell," in *A Universal History of Infamy*, pp. 19-20. For an extensive discussion of Borges's philosophical concerns, see the pioneer work of Ana María Barrenechea, *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (Mexico: Colegio de Mexico, 1957).

⁴²Gershon Weiler, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

an equally valuable or contingent explanation."⁴³ In this way, Borges trivializes historical study, and this devaluation then becomes a necessary step in the freeing of the fictions from all external determinations.

Radical skepticism about the world, history, the laws of nature, and the self lead both Mauthner and Borges to renounce the ego and withdraw to the godlike abstraction from which individuation is seen to be illusory. Mauthner reaches this position by exercising his radical deconstructive techniques which he describes as if they were spiritual exercises.

For a decade I have been teaching: the feeling of the Ego is a delusion. The unity of the individual is a delusion. If I am not me, yet exist, then I am entitled to believe of all others: they only appear to be individuals, they are not different from me, I am one with them, they and I are one. Are these mere philosophical word sequences? Games of language? No. What I can experience is no longer mere language. What I can experience is real. And I can experience, for short hours that I no longer know anything about the principle of individuation, that there ceases to be a difference between the world and myself. "That I become God." Why not?⁴⁴

Borges, on the other hand, will attain this godless spiritual state through the writing of fictions which allow him to deploy at an abstract level the causality he had removed from history and the world. By introducing controllable causality into the short story, he can both create a well-made plot to seduce the reader and encourage the skeptical conviction that any order is a plotting and therefore contingent.

PLOT

The fact that certain mass cultural forms such as popular film and the detective novel have perfected the well-made plot has led some contemporary critics to deplore this device. According to their view, plot effects a closure of meaning, a subjection of all elements of the text to the final solution, thus making inevitable the priority of an authoritative authorial version. Borges takes a different view. In contrast to the formless psychological novel, he finds in well-plotted stories the essential element which differentiates fiction from the "asiatic disorder" of life. He therefore admires the ability to create well-made plots and this, in turn, accounts for his preference for Chesterton, Stevenson, and Kipling over Proust.⁴⁵ Just as Mauthner believed that causality, although non-existent in nature and history, was necessary in language, so Borges believes causality to be necessary to narrative art. The term "magic" which he used in an early essay, "Narrative Art and Magic," however, also underlines the fact that he regards the causal as simply a device for combining unlikely elements into a narrative coherence. Magic is the "coronation or nightmare of the causal and not its contradiction." "This fear that a terrible event may be brought on by its mere mention is out of place or pointless in the asiatic disorder of the real world though not in the novel, which ought to be a precise play of attentions, echoes and affinities. Each episode in a careful story prefigures something still to come."⁴⁶ He would repeat this maxim in a discussion of Chesterton, in whose stories "everything is justified; the briefest and most fleeting episodes prefigure things to

⁴³"Un método curioso," *Ficción*, no. 6 (Buenos Aires, marzo-abril, 1957).

⁴⁴Weiler, *op. cit.*, p. 295; *Wörterbuch II*, p. 132.

⁴⁵See, for instance, his prologue to Adolfo Bioy Casares's *La invención de Morel* in *Prólogos*, pp. 22-4.

⁴⁶"Narrative Art and Magic," *Triquarterly*. I have offered a more literal translation than this version.

come."⁴⁷ It is important, however, to stress that his plots differ from those of Chesterton in one respect: whereas *The Man who was Thursday* has to be read as Christian allegory, Borges's fictions imply no such allegorical reference.⁴⁸ Rather, plot is important to Borges as a demonstration of control or mastery, the ability to produce what Alfonso Reyes described (with reference to Chesterton) as "an hallucination or a true nightmare."⁴⁹ Borges would similarly describe his stories as "controlled hallucinations" and "controlled dreams." Mauthner's view that "necessity is contingency" applies perfectly to the causality of the Borges plot which is precisely the demonstration of the necessity which creates a certain coherence and verisimilitude at the same time that it unmasks this coherence as merely one possible ordering of the text. Mastery is also demonstrated by the use of oxymoron (a figure of speech which combines seemingly contradictory elements) since this allows extremes to be linked in an ingenious fashion. The manner in which Judas can become Christ, the traitor a hero, the detective a victim is the mark of the writer's skill in bringing together such unlikely extremes.⁵⁰ And this mastery is, in turn, deployed in order to seduce the reader. Like Japanese sword-play, plotting is a kind of archaic skill no longer socially significant, but which nevertheless can be turned into an exercise of individual control. The difference is that in the Borges story the reader position is needed to provide the fragile tension which will propel virtuosity towards self-mastery.

"The South" illustrates this process of control and contingency to perfection. The protagonist, Dahlmann, is of Germanic ancestry on his father's side and Argentine ancestry on his mother's. He is thus a living oxymoron, a Northern Latin or a Latin German. He has lived all his life as a Buenos Aires bureaucrat while longing for the mythic south of the gauchos and the cattle ranches. On his way home from buying a copy of *One Thousand and One Nights* (the paradigm of the power of storytelling to stave off death), Dahlmann wounds himself on a broken window and soon afterwards finds himself, or dreams he finds himself, on an operating table in the hospital. Either he is cured and goes south by train or he dreams on the operating table that he is going south. His first act on reaching the real (or illusory) south is to go into a bar where he is insulted by a gaucho and forced to fight. The unskilled Dahlmann prepares to fight to the death with a skilled opponent; but perhaps he simply dies on the operating table, dreaming of a heroic death. In the dream story, then, Dahlmann is converted from a patient/victim (or a passive reader) into an active though unskillful fighter who will be killed by someone more skillful than himself. If this were all the story was, however, it would be an allegory of reading which simply displayed the unequal power of a writer and reader. Yet despite appearances the dream version of the story and the "real" version are not offered as alternative readings in which the reader is supposed to exercise choice. What is produced, rather, is a necessary second reading in which elements which had once seemed to belong to a particular plot are now seen to be ambiguous and *disponible*. To try and integrate everything into one or other version produces inconsistency. We must either forego Dahlmann's coherence as a character or accept a coherence that allows him to be in two

⁴⁷"Modos de G.K. Chesterton," *Sur* (julio, 1936), p. 50.

⁴⁸In "The Search for Almotasim" (*Ficciones*), he goes out of his way to show his difference from Chesterton. Almotasim reaches no goal; there is no fixed meaning or set of beliefs which would explain the search.

⁴⁹G.K. Chesterton, *El hombre que fue jueves*, trans. Alfonso Reyes (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1938), p. 13.

⁵⁰For a discussion of this figure in Borges, see Jaime Alazraki, *La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges* (Madrid: Gredos, 1968) and *Jorge Luis Borges* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

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places at once. Thus the "causality" of one story has to be sacrificed to construct the coherence of another and vice versa. The causality that induces an "everyday" reading (accident, blood, hospital bed, feverish dream, operating table, death) can be redispersed to form another sequence (accident, operating table, feverish dream, journey, knife-fight, death). There is no hierarchy to tell us that one should be preferred over the other. Both the desire to know what happened to Dahlmann (the empirical level) and the desire to be mastered by the author (in the dream version) lead to death. As in "The Captive," the knife is the symbol of a separation which severs the reader from the desire to know or the desire to be seduced, and the reader is then able to view the totality of devices, the false suggestion of coherence and causality, which have led him or her astray. The reader has, in a sense, been twice "mastered" by the plot—as a passive reader and as an active but less skillful participant—and only after this humiliation is permitted to become godlike by withdrawing from desire.

An even more obvious example of a story which provokes a second reading by tricking the reader is "Death and Compass," in which the detective Lonrot becomes the victim of a murder. In this case, Lonrot is not so much analogous to a passive reader as to a reader who arrives at the text with a decided preference for coherence which leads him or her to look for recurrent patterns. Lonrot's single-minded obsession is to trap Red Scharlach (his own mirror image), and this very obsession together with his high regard for symmetry makes him overlook a veritable forest of symbols which might have warned him of the trap laid by his enemy who has the advantage of knowing the way his mind works. This parallels the writer's ability to forestall the reader. Thus Lonrot takes a train at *nightfall*, notices a railway war on a *dead* end of the track, treads on "generations of rigid broken eucalyptus leaves," passes "glacial statues of Diana and stagnant fountains." When he reaches the villa which is his destination and end he finds himself in a room with a dead rose which crumbles to his touch, much as the scenario he himself has constructed crumbles before the superior strategy of Red Scharlach. What is interesting in this case is the way the symbolic level becomes visible when the hermeneutic and proairetic codes have reached closure.⁵¹

Red Scharlach and Lonrot are, in fact, very similar to Yu Tsun and Albert, for though the pursuers are successful and triumph on the strategic level the puzzle solvers suggest alternative versions of the plot which would, in a sense, destroy it. Albert's book of infinite ramifications reproduces the infinite ramifications of life; Lonrot on the point of death suggests a better plot to Scharlach, one which consists of a single, incessant and invisible straight line (in other words the irreversible labyrinth of human destiny). Now it is interesting that the writer/plotter seduces or entraps by deploying causality, the reader/solver seduces by suggesting meanings out of a desire for coherence. Both attempt to exercise control, yet neither can succeed. To kill the rival as Red Scharlach does destroys the game. To solve the problem satisfactorily, the solution must be as near as possible to life. The solution of the enigma and the completion of the action both destroy the story. However, it is at this point when the desire to know and control can be suppressed that

⁵¹I have used the codes described by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). The difference between the coding of a Borges story and that of a classical realist text is that the solution of the enigma often suggests that it could have been reached by other means. It is therefore both necessary and contingent. For a more extended discussion of Borges's procedures, see Silvia Molloy, *Las letras de Borges* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1979), and John Sturrock, *Paper Tigers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Ronald Christ, *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion* (New York: New York University Press, 1969).

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the symbolic code becomes visible as the space where contraries and oppositions dissolve and reader and writer become interchangeable: Aureliano of Aquilea and John of Panonia are the same in the eyes of God. Similarly in Borges's fiction, the reader becomes writer and the writer becomes a reader.⁵²

This superior register can only be attained after a sacrifice which kills desire. "The Intruder," a story from the late collection *Brodie's Report*, dramatizes a fraternal relationship (an allegory of the reader/writer relationship) fraught with rivalry, severed by desire and finally bonded by murder. A woman whom two brothers share interferes with their brotherly relationship. One of them kills her, and over the grave they feel themselves united "by the woman sadly sacrificed and the obligation to forget her." This story is unusually transparent and it is without the surprise ending which helps to activate a second reading. Yet precisely because of this transparency, it also preeminently reveals the didactic and allegorical thrust of the Borges fiction, for, though Borges deplors allegory in the traditional sense, his fictions can be described as allegories of reading and writing in which these two apparently opposing practices are brought together and, indeed, become identical.

DESTRUCTION OF THE RIVAL

The Borges fiction deploys a considerable amount of persuasion in order to activate this level of reader competency and in doing so caricatures, parodies, and otherwise discredits rival literary practices. The fiction thus becomes a more effective way of destroying rivals than the essay, in which some justice has to be done to the opposing position. In "The Aleph," Borges uses the simple device of setting up an absurd personage, Carlos Daneri, making him the proponent of realism (his hobby is photography). The protagonists, Borges and Daneri, constitute rival aesthetics and rival projects of immortality. At the beginning of the story, the death of the narrator's Beatriz, whose life had been dedicated to the oblivion of fashion, occurs on a February morning, and the changing of the tobacco advertisements in Constitution Square appears to hasten her voyage into the forgotten, "for I understood that the incessant and vast universe was already slipping away from her."

Indeed, the narrator's rival and Beatriz's cousin, Carlos Argentino Daneri, has set himself up as the Dante of the age of mass communications. Using telegraphs, phonographs, cinema, timetables, agendas, and bulletins, he is engaged in writing a vast poem, called *Earth*, in which the entire universe can be reflected without the poet having to leave his study. Daneri's project reflects the myth of technological progress of certain sectors of the avant-garde (the Futurists, for instance) and the totalizing and cognitive project of a long tradition of Latin American poetry. From Andres Bello in the early 19th century to Leopoldo Lugones at the turn of the century and Neruda in modern times, a succession of Latin American poets have undertaken the Orphic task of creating the "great song of America." Daneri, it should be noted, is a imperfect anagram of Neruda, and the story dates from 1943 when Neruda had already announced his intention of writing the *Canto General* which would embrace the entire history of the Americas. But it is characteristic that Borges should use Daneri to score not only against the left-

⁵²Gérard Genette, "La littérature selon Borges," *L'Herne* (Paris, 1964), pp. 323-7, pointed out the importance of the reader in Borges's writing. In a more general sense, see Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

wing Neruda but against the conservative Leopoldo Lugones whose style he parodies in the extracts from *Earth*. The Orphic and mimetic fallacies (poetry as a mode of knowing the world, poetry as a reflection of the world) are symbolized in the Aleph, a mysterious object which Borges views in Carlos Daneri's cellar. It is a small aperture in which everything is simultaneously revealed and in which he sees the tiniest detail, down to pornographic letters that Beatriz had written to Carlos Argentino Daneri and the cancer in the breast of a woman living in the north of Scotland. Carlos's Aleph reveals everything that exists; it thus both duplicates the world and reveals its secrets. Following Dante's path, however, the narrator emerges from this cellar of condemned knowledge (condemned at least as far as Borges is concerned) into the light of revelation. He knows that he can destroy Daneri's Aleph simply by not mentioning it and thus consigning it to oblivion. In writing the story, however, he contradicts his own design, perhaps because ridicule is more effective a weapon of destruction than oblivion. But he also believes that a true Aleph exists and can be discovered through the tenuous allusions of written texts and hence through reading. This Aleph, he conjectures, is found in the pillar of a mosque and can be heard as an incessant humming. It is the murmur of the universe, the endless connotations and evocations of language which have been enclosed within the comparative permanence of form and which, alone, will allow Beatriz some measure of immortality. And though this Aleph has its origin on a frontier, it has also been enclosed though not rigidly ordered by a form constructed by settled peoples, for "in republics founded by nomads, the assistance of foreigners is indispensable in all that concerns masonry." Thus, in this elliptical way, Borges permits an allusion to the imposition of foreign cultures on the Americas while, in a more general sense, the pillar constructed in a mosque (i.e., in the service of a religion which does not allow representation) and by foreigners who are anti-Islamic marks the frontier between the "nomadic" oral tradition and the more fixed and permanent forms permitted by writing. Borges has thus destroyed both a rival and rival views of literature by ridicule in order to allusively project his own alternative.⁵³

Borges does not always confine the rhetoric of persuasion to literary rivalry, however. In "Brodie's Report," an even more savage ridicule destroys any possibility that a tribe of Yahoos should be considered human beings.

"Brodie's Report" is an account by a puritanical Scottish missionary of the disgusting customs of a tribe of Yahoos who live in the region of Brazil and Argentina. The story parodies cross-cultural studies and is made all the funnier by Brodie's determination to redeem a tribe whose customs violate all his standards of civilization and decency. They blind and mutilate their king, delight in filth and, from Brodie's point of view, engage in completely irrational customs. Yet, at the same time, his arguments for trying to redeem them are based on their humanity—much like the arguments of some of the earlier missionaries to the Americas: "They have institutions, they have a king, they speak a language based on generic concepts, they believe like the Hebrews and the Greeks in the divine origin of poetry and conjecture that the soul outlives the death of the body. They affirm the truth of punishments and rewards. They represent, in short, culture, just as much as we do, despite our numerous sins." Thus Brodie manages to discover in the welter of disgusting practices those which the Yahoos hold in common with the "highest" civilizations.

⁵³Roberto Paoli, *Borges: Percorsi de Significati* (Firenze: D'Anna, 1977) deals with the Dante paradigm.

On one level, therefore, the story satirically exposes the imperialistic hubris of "higher" cultures seeking to bring civilization to the "primitive." But the story also strikes at some targets nearer home. For the Yahoos are not natural men who have not yet known civilization but have *fallen* into savagery. The branch of the tribe who live near Buenos Aires, for instance, are described as cunning traders even though they cannot even count, suggesting that Borges is settling a score with his fellow countrymen. Moreover, on returning to Glasgow, Brodie feels that he is surrounded by Yahoos on the streets, which suggests that degenerate mass man hides under the disguise of the Yahoo. Though the story satirizes Brodie's persistent desire to find good qualities in people it is best not to meddle with, it also confirms the "otherness" of the masses of the people and their perverse enjoyment of ignorance and filth.

The satire is much broader in the stories that Borges wrote in collaboration with Adolfo Bioy Casares. In one of the chronicles of Bustos Domecq, for instance, "On the Brotherhood Movement," it is directed against "unionism." The protagonist invents a theory of "unions" composed of any people who, at any time, have analogous desires (for the scent of jasmine, for example) or who are performing analogous activities. "Perfectly structured and steered by an expert helmsman, the brotherhood movement would constitute the bedrock of resistance against the lava-like torrent of anarchy. Let us, however, not shut our eyes to the inevitable offshoots of strife that the well-meaning doctrine may awaken: the man getting off a train will pull a switchblade on the man who boards: the incognizant buyer of gumdrops will try to strangle the master hand who dispenses them." Treachery is thus the rule of human interaction and entropy is the most powerful law of Borges's world; solidarity, on the other hand, becomes an absurd and idealist illusion.

CONSPIRACY

Sociability is thus not a quality which particularly interests Borges except as a target for satire. The one social activity which he is willing to entertain in his fictions is, however, conspiracy. Yet his conspiracies are somewhat different from the great conspiracy novels—Dostoevski's *The Possessed*, Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, Chesterton's *The Man who was Thursday*, and the two Argentine conspiracy novels, Ernesto Sábato's *Of Heroes and Tombs* and Robert Arlt's *The Seven Madmen*—all of which, in different ways, reveal the dark and sombre fears behind the liberal facade. Borges's conspiracies, in contrast, are benign and have much in common with the avant-garde hoaxes that he himself had enjoyed perpetrating in the 20s. Yet they also reflect the hubris of authorship, the desire of the conspirators to become authors in the true sense, even though in order to conspire effectively they must also conceal their identities. In "The Theme of the Hero and the Traitor," for instance, a certain Nolan stages an elaborate deception based on Caesar's assassination in order to represent the murder of a traitor as if it were the assassination of a hero. The plan is so brilliantly successful that it is only years later that someone guesses the truth; by that time, it is irrelevant. For time is the true conspirator, and with time the passions that had originally motivated the events disappear, rendering them indifferent. Human intervention, however successful, eventually comes to seem futile, a single wave in a sea of accidents. Yet the urge to play God (and to become an author) is irresistible.

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implicit in Mauthner's discussion of the term "encyclopedia" in his *Philosophical Dictionary*. He considered that the 18th-century encyclopedists and Diderot in particular had attempted to shape the minds of generations to come, notwithstanding the fact that the order of the encyclopedia (an alphabetical order) is particularly absurd and arbitrary.⁵⁴ In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," Borges turns this suggestion into a fable of authorship. At the beginning of the story, Bioy Casares is attempting to trace a quotation about mirrors which he remembers having seen attributed to one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar. A search of encyclopedias takes place and this eventually leads him and Borges away from their original quest and sets them searching for the mysterious planet Tlön mentioned in one of the entries they consult. The discovery of part of an encyclopedia of Tlön appears to give credence to the existence of the planet. However, the encyclopedia turns out to be an elaborate hoax planted by a group of idealist philosophers and an eccentric millionaire, Ezra Buckley, who did not believe in God but nevertheless wished to demonstrate for this nonexistent entity that mortal men were capable of inventing a world. What Buckley desired, therefore, was power; he wished to be an author in the true sense. But Tlön, because it was invented by human beings, is simply the mirror opposite of our world in which everything is seen in reverse, so that instead of being governed according to a realist illusion, its entire system of knowledge assumes an idealist interpretation.

The encyclopedia itself, however, strongly reinforces the realist illusion by lending authority to the planet's existence, and the narrator then furthers this illusion by describing heavy objects which have appeared on the earth and which he attributes to Tlön. By attempting to persuade the reader (in a printed text) of the existence of these objects which defy our physical laws, Borges himself joins the conspiracy, which soon takes on Orwellian proportions: "The conjectural primitive language of Tlön has already penetrated the schools: the teaching of its harmonious history (full of harmonious episodes) has obliterated the history that dominated my childhood, already a fictitious past occupies the place of the other in our memories, of which we know nothing with certitude, not even that it is false. A scattered dynasty of solitary men have changed the face of the world. The task goes on."

The reader, by now, is aware that Tlön is analogous to discourse in Foucault's sense. It is authored by human beings out of a will to order but eventually takes on a trajectory of its own, making humanity "forget that its rigor is of chess players and not of angels." Its authors aspire to be godlike but their intervention is trivial, since the discursive practices inculcated by schools, families, professions, and prisons ingest the willed activities of individuals, which are merely fuel to the system.

Where Borges differs from Foucault is in seeing this conspiracy of discourse in purely abstract terms, utterly disconnected from domination, class struggle, biology, or economics. Better still, he distances himself from such conspiracies in such a way that (as in "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero"), the passions of the movement are burned away and the interplay of forces can be seen on a more abstract level.

"The Lottery of Babylon" exemplifies such distanciation with its Borges-like narrator who has retired from the scene, yet attempts to chronicle the history of the lottery with some impartiality, even though he himself has participated in it. The narrator would like to believe that the lottery has been invented by a controlling company, but the system of

⁵⁴Mauthner, *Wörterbuch I*, pp. 250-266.

rewards and punishments that has come into being is so complex as to force him to admit that many people no longer believe in the company but have become agnostics. There has thereby sprung up the vilest of beliefs "that to affirm or deny the reality of the tenebrous corporations is a matter of indifference since Babylon is nothing more than the infinite game of chance." The narrator, on the other hand, is himself a "theist" because the only way he can rationalize the constant redeployment and reinvestment of power among individuals is by attributing the activity to an institution of conspiracy: the mysterious company itself. He has been given the letter Beth to wear as an emblem: "This letter on nights of full moon gives me power over men whose mark is Ghimel but subordinates me to those of Alephm, who, on moonless nights owe obedience to those of Ghimel." According to this account, power circulates among people owing to the "natural" influence of the moon; there is no such thing as a dominant group who attempt to maintain power and, indeed, control its distribution and reproduction.⁵⁵ Those who distance themselves from the system are in the position to uncover rules and speculate on them but are powerless to intervene in the regulation and quantification. Conspiracy, like plotting, conducts us irrevocably towards disillusion and encourages the *askesis* or withdrawal which Harold Bloom has noted in much contemporary writing. The retirement or withdrawal of the narrator at the end of the story (the renunciation of authorship) is meant on the level of plot to be exemplary. At the end of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in much the same way, Borges had resigned himself to the triumph of the illusory Tlön, withdrawing to his house in Adrogué to work on a translation of one stoic writer, Sir Thomas Browne, into the style of another, Quevedo. The stoics are perfect models for a writer for whom power is an illusion and time the destroyer of historical order. As one commentator has pointed out stoicism has traditionally provided a consoling doctrine "for private citizens of large impersonal states."⁵⁶ Borges, in his poems, likes to evoke embattled situations and the lives of lonely survivors during hostile periods—the end of the Roman Empire, Anglo-Saxon England, Medieval Ireland.⁵⁷ At such times, withdrawal from public affairs allows the stoic to disregard "those differences between men which are merely the consequence of externals. The supreme heroism at such moments is renunciation (the paradigmatic suicide of his grandfather) rather than control. The conquering hero is transcended by the hero who withdraws from battle, as Simón Bolívar was eclipsed by the greater heroism of San Martín, the great Independence leader of Latin America who, at the very moment of triumph, left Bolívar in sole command of the armies. This kind of heroism, a commentator in *Sur* noted, is unlikely to appeal to the masses, but "to govern a passion, an ambition, an instinct is, at times, more terrible than to lead an army."⁵⁸

Indeed, Borges specifically relates the renunciation of power by San Martín to the renunciation of authorship in his story "Guayaquil" (*Brodie's Report*). The narrator is a bookish Argentinian whose genealogy bears some resemblance to that of Borges; his

⁵⁵For Foucault's views on this, see his conversation with Gilles Deleuze, "Intellectuals and Power," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald E. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 205–217.

⁵⁶Stoicism thus becomes the ultimate posture in the repudiation of all concrete forms of collective experience.

⁵⁷One of Borges's projects for a movie plot was called *Invasion*. It was a paranoid nightmare in which a few defenders "perhaps not heroes" fight to the end "without suspecting that the battle is infinite," Eduardo Cozarinsky, *Borges y el cine* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1974), p. 83.

⁵⁸Carlos Alberto Erro, "Un filósofo americano: Waldo Frank," *Sur* año II, abril de 1933, pp. 45–95.

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ancestors have fought in the country's greatest battles and have, traditionally, been supporters of San Martín. He is now about to depart for Sulaco (named after the mythical country of Conrad's *Nostramo*) in order to be the official historian and the first to read and transcribe a newly-discovered letter by Bolívar which is thought to hold the answer to the enigma of San Martín's renunciation. The letter, it should be noted, has been discovered among the papers of Dr. Avellanos (a character from *Nostramo*). This plan is spoiled by the appearance of a rival, a certain Zimmerman who is a refugee from Germany. Unlike the privileged narrator, Zimmerman by inclination and by race (he is Jewish) has concerned himself with persecuted and silent minorities. His major work is a study of the Carthaginians whom posterity knows only through the Roman versions of their history. He himself was forced to flee from Nazi Germany primarily because of the hostility and the denunciation of a powerful rival, Heidegger, with whom he had engaged in a polemic. This Heidegger-Zimmerman polemic had concerned the nature of representation. Heidegger believed that the leader should represent the people. Zimmerman, like Borges, opposes representation. Yet he now, in another context, becomes the ambitious and unscrupulous rival whose ingenious arguments force the narrator to withdraw from his project by showing him that his partisan involvement in the outcome makes him unfit for the task. The narrator's renunciation of the opportunity to make a name for himself thus parallels San Martín's renunciation. He also shows his moral superiority to his rival by overcoming his resentment through the writing of a story which he promises to burn. The real Borges has to betray the promise of his own virtual narrator.

It is significant that the only Utopia in Borges is the bleak "Utopia of a Tired Man" (*The Book of Sand*)⁵⁹ and that this should be set in the cold wastes of North America on the eve of the narrator's departure for self-immolation in a crematorium. Yet it is very much a Borges world which the story depicts, one in which people develop only the arts and sciences they personally need, in which empty collective nouns such as "Canada" and "The Common Market" have disappeared, and in which the newspapers that commemorated the trivial have been abolished. It is a world in which each person produces one child: a lonely and isolated Utopia, yet one which marks his distance from the hedonism of many contemporary critics as well as from critics such as Foucault or Deleuze and Guattari—whose deconstructions of philosophy and psychology are not accompanied by withdrawal from the world but are the preliminary steps to new kinds of social action. Borges assumes social action and solidarity to be futile and kills desire. And though it may be inferred that the interest in the reader is a model of brotherhood, this is misleading. Like the smile of the Cheshire cat, the reader/writer relationship is all that remains of the *corps plein* of the phalanstery, once the ideal of humanistic Latin American intellectuals. Reader and writer are coupled only to show that they are interchangeable, once the reader has been divested of hopes and loyalties. Though Borges undoubtedly values the immediacy of orally transmitted culture and of direct speech which can reply to the questions asked of it, the speech act or interpersonal action is not his model for writing, which has to be liberated from its material base. The dialogue is reinvented as a more shadowy encounter which allows the born again reader to be interchangeable with the writer.

As I have argued in this essay, a good deal of persuasion is exercised to produce this

⁵⁹ *Il libro de arena* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1975).

interchange. Once liberated from the "retarding" effect of custom and prior knowledge, the fictions can become an efficient machine which, like modern technology, needs not life experience but only know-how. In this sense, they properly take their place with all those other pleasure machines at our disposal under advanced capitalism. They suppose that all dependency or loyalty to a community are obstacles to the release of energy for the experience of intensity. The exposition of mastery and the powerful weapon of ridicule have to be brought to bear so that the reader can be separated from empirical experience and historical knowledge. This violent separation permits the conversion from the social to the private, "freeing" the reader from the expectations derived from experience and conditioning him or her into enjoyment of literature as a uniquely privatized experience.⁶⁰ Little wonder that Borges has become the *guru* of University circles, since his stories both flatter the reader's smartness while diverting skills into the harmless zone of a game of solitaire. In achieving this, they are didactic, though in a manner different from traditional didactic narrative. They function not by example but by conditioning. In this sense too they are indeed modern, for they school the reader into that freefloating adaptability which has become the very requisite of modernization under advanced capitalism.⁶¹ Thus it seems that the Latin American writer must not only make a sacrifice in order to be invited to the banquet of civilization (to use Alfonso Reyes' term) but must persuade himself and others that no sacrifice has been made.⁶²

⁶⁰In this respect, Borges's debt to Mauthner leads to a concern with language paralleled by that of another Mauthner disciple, Samuel Beckett; see Linda Ben Zvi, "Fritz Mauthner and the Limits of Language," (*PMLA*, vol 95, no. 2. March 1980).

⁶¹Richard J. Barnet and Ronald E. Miller, *Global Reach* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 58. I am at present preparing a study of "modernization" and Latin American culture.

⁶²On the question of "didacticism" in apparently "open" texts, see an unpublished dissertation on Macedonio Fernández, one of Borges's mentors, by Aurea Sotomayer (Stanford University, 1980).

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