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THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF JORGE LUIS BORGES

THOMAS R. HART, JR.

Outside the Spanish-speaking world, Jorge Luis Borges is known almost exclusively as a writer of short stories. His books of essays, with a few exceptions, have not yet been translated.¹ Yet the short stories, as Ana María Barrenechea has pointed out, form a relatively small part of Borges's work; most of them were written during a period of some fifteen years, from the middle thirties to the early fifties.² Borges's career as an essayist, on the other hand, begins with the publication of *Inquisiciones* in 1925 and continues without a break down to the publication of *El hacedor* in 1960. Though he has written, or at least published, hardly any new works of fiction in the past ten years, he remains active as a poet and essayist.

The value of Borges's essays has been, and continues to be, hotly debated by critics. There is surely much less agreement about their worth than about that of his short stories.³ While the lasting value

¹ The exceptions are *Otras inquisiciones*, translated by Paul and Sylvia Bénichou as *Enquêtes, 1937-1952* (Paris, 1957), and *Historia de la eternidad*, trans. Roger Caillois and L. Guille, *Histoire de l'infamie. Histoire de l'éternité* (Monaco, 1958). A number of essays are included in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York, 1962).

² *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (Mexico, 1957) pp. 9-11. Hereafter cited as *Irrealidad*.

³ For César Fernández Moreno, Borges's essays are "la parte más débil de su obra; los defectos de Borges parecen resaltar y sus virtudes oscurecerse en este campo. . . . Los ensayos de Borges se apartan de [la] vocación de verdad inherente al género; buscan más bien el asombro, la paradoja, el funcionamiento del pensar como un fin y no como un medio." (*Esquemas de Borges* [Buenos Aires, 1957], p. 27.) Adolfo Prieto, in a generally hostile book, declares that Borges "rara vez ha corrido la aventura de la crítica con todas las precauciones y supuestos que ésta implica. Las numerosas notas que ha publicado hasta ahora son, en

of the essays may well be largely in the light they throw on the mind of the artist who created the stories, they are, nevertheless, of considerable interest in themselves. Many of the themes found in Borges's poems and stories appear also in the essays; some, already present in his youthful writings, recur again and again in his later books. Borges's thought, however, has not remained static. In this paper I shall attempt to trace the development of some of his central ideas on the nature of literature and of literary criticism.⁴

* * * * *

The most important influence on Borges's literary criticism is doubtless that of Benedetto Croce. Borges, however, has not followed Croce slavishly. Some superficially Crocean passages in his essays reveal important differences in point of view, and Borges has not hesitated to make explicit his disagreement with Croce on particular issues. It is, nevertheless, true that Croce is mentioned in Borges's essays more often than any other critic; true, too, that, while Borges's attitude toward certain features of Croce's doctrine has changed with the years, his critical practice has remained consistently true to Crocean principles.

Borges's first book of essays, *Inquisiciones*, published in 1925, presents an apparent exception. Croce is not mentioned and the idea of poetry which Borges defends does not seem specifically Crocean. There are, however, as we shall see, a number of passages in the book which, if not drawn from Croce himself, do suggest substantial agreement with his views.

buena parte, comentarios circunstanciales de un lector hedonista. Abunda en observaciones agudas. [Pero] los puntos de vista valen aislados del contexto, mejor dicho, valen mucho más que el contexto." (*Borges y la nueva generación* [Buenos Aires, 1954], p. 33.) For Marcial Tamayo and Adolfo Ruiz-Díaz, on the other hand, "la personalidad de Borges se mantiene idéntica tanto cuando aborda notas o ensayos críticos como cuando redacta un relato. [Si] hemos preferido como punto de vista los relatos . . . nada debe a un criterio valorativo. No es que juzguemos al Borges inventor de ficciones como el más alto o el más auténtico." (*Borges enigma y clave* [Buenos Aires, 1955], pp. 13-16.) Señorita Barrenechea, a sympathetic and perceptive student of Borges's work, also finds that in it "poesía, ensayo, cuento son las diversas manifestaciones de un mismo espíritu." (*Irrealidad*, p. 11.) See also Allen Phillips's review of Borges's *Leopoldo Lugones* in *NRFH*, X (1956), 449; for Phillips, too, "el Borges crítico sigue siendo el Borges creador."

⁴ For an account of the evolution of Borges's ideas on language, see Ana María Barrenechea, "Borges y el lenguaje," *NRFH*, VII (1953), 551-569; for the development of his poetry, see Juan Carlos Ghiano, "Borges y la poesía," *CA*, LXXXV (enero-febrero, 1956), 222-250.

Borges explicitly declares his adherence to Croce's theory of art as expression in an essay, "La simulación de la imagen," first published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Prensa* on December 25, 1927, and incorporated in his second book of essays, *El idioma de los argentinos*, in the following year: "Indagar ¿qué es lo estético? es indagar ¿qué otra cosa es lo estético, qué única otra cosa es lo estético? Lo expresivo, nos ha contestado Croce, ya para siempre. El arte es expresión y sólo expresión, postularé aquí" (p. 83).⁵ In another essay included in the same collection, "Indagación de la palabra," Borges is just as explicit in *dissenting* from Croce's theory that the ultimate unit of speech is not the word but the sentence and that the latter must be understood, not in the usual grammatical way, but as an expressive organism whose meaning is complete, and which, therefore, may extend from a single exclamation to a long poem.⁶ Such a view, Borges insists, is "psicológicamente . . . insostenible [y] una equivocación psicológica no puede ser un acierto estético. Además, ¿no dejó dicho Schopenhauer que la forma de nuestra inteligencia es el tiempo, línea angostísima que sólo nos presenta la cosas una por una? Lo espantoso de esa estrechez es que los poemas a que alude reverencialmente Montolíu-Croce alcanzan unidad en la flaqueza de nuestra memoria, pero no en la tarea sucesiva de quien los escribió ni en la de quien los lee. (Dije espantoso, porque esa heterogeneidad

⁵ The dates of publication of the individual essays are taken from the very useful bibliography by Nodier Lucio and Lydia Revello, "Contribución a la bibliografía de Jorge Luis Borges," *Bibliografía argentina de artes y letras*, number 11 (abril-septiembre, 1961), 43-112. Citations from Borges's writings will be incorporated into my text; wherever possible, they are to the *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires, 1953-60). The full titles of the books cited, together with the date of publication in this edition, are as follows: *Historia de la eternidad* (1953); *Ficciones* (1956); *Discusión* (1957); *Otras inquisiciones* (1960); *El hacedor* (1960). Citations from *Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires, 1925) and *El idioma de los argentinos* (Buenos Aires, 1928) are to the first editions.

⁶ I have paraphrased the argument presented by Croce in his *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale*, 9th ed. (Bari, 1950), p. 159. See Gian N. G. Orsini, *Benedetto Croce: Philosopher of Art and Literary Critic* (Carbondale, 1961), p. 68; my treatment of Croce is heavily indebted to Professor Orsini's excellent book. We may note, in passing, that, while Borges correctly attributes to Croce the idea that "la oración . . . es indivisible y las categorías gramaticales que la desarman son abstracciones añadidas a la realidad" (p. 15), he mistakenly considers the extension of the concept of the sentence to include an entire poem to be the contribution of Croce's Spanish disciple, Manuel de Montolíu, in his book *El lenguaje como fenómeno estético* (Buenos Aires, 1926).

de la sucesión despedaza no sólo las dilatadas composiciones, sino toda página escrita.)" (*Idioma*, pp. 16-17). Twelve years later, in the short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," we find Borges writing that on his imaginary planet Tlön, "hay poemas famosos compuestos de una sola enorme palabra. Esta palabra integra un *objeto poético creado por el autor*" (*Ficciones*, p. 21).

Croce's identification of art with expression which Borges accepts in this essay is questioned in "La postulación de la realidad," published in the review *Azul* in 1931. The difference in tone between the two essays is striking. "Hume notó para siempre," Borges begins, "que los argumentos de Berkeley no admiten la menor réplica y no producen la menor convicción; yo desearía, para eliminar los de Croce, una sentencia no menos educada y mortal. La de Hume no me sirve, porque la diáfana doctrina de Croce tiene la facultad de persuadir, aunque ésta sea la única. Su defecto es ser inmanejable; sirve para cortar una discusión, no para resolverla.

"Su fórmula—recordará mi lector—es la identidad de lo estético y de lo expresivo. No la rechazo, pero quiero observar que los escritores de hábito clásico más bien rehuyen lo expresivo" (*Discusión*, p. 67).⁷

"Classical" here, as Borges goes on to explain, does not designate the writers of a particular historical period. The classical writer is one who has confidence in the power of the accepted language to say anything he may wish to say: "Distraigo aquí de toda connotación histórica las palabras *clásico* y *romántico*; entiendo por ellas dos arquetipos de escritor (dos procederés). El clásico no desconfía del lenguaje, cree en la suficiente virtud de cada uno de sus signos."⁸ The classical writer "no escribe los primeros contactos de la realidad, sino su elaboración final en conceptos" (p. 68); as examples, Borges cites Gibbon, Voltaire, Swift,

⁷ Borges's exposition may be confusing to a reader unfamiliar with Croce's thought. He is not so much attacking the identification of art and expression as the related premise that literature—Croce would say, "poesía"—is built up, not from abstract propositions, but from "intuizioni." See the excellent discussion of Croce's use of the latter term in Orsini, pp. 31-36.

⁸ For a more elaborate definition of classicism conceived in similar terms, cf. *Idioma*, p. 67: "Entiendo por clasicismo esa época de un yo, de una amistad, de una literatura, en que las cosas ya recibieron su valoración y el bien y el mal fueron repartidos entre ellas. [Las voces] son designación de las cosas, pero también son elogio, estima, vituperio, respetabilidad, picardía. Poseen su entonación, su gesto."

and Cervantes. Such a view is obviously very different from the Crocean doctrine of intuition, as Borges himself makes clear: "Pasajes como los anteriores, forman la extensa mayoría de la literatura mundial, y aun la menos indigna. Repudiarlos para no incomodar a una fórmula, sería inconducente y ruinoso. Dentro de su notoria ineficacia, son eficaces; falta resolver esa contradicción" (p. 69). Borges attempts to resolve it with the argument that "la imprecisión es tolerable o verosímil en la literatura, porque a ella propendemos siempre en la realidad. . . . El hecho mismo de percibir, de atender, es de orden selectivo: toda atención, toda fijación de nuestra conciencia, comporta una deliberada omisión de lo no interesante. . . . Nuestro vivir es una serie de adaptaciones, vale decir, una educación del olvido" (pp. 69-70). Readers of Borges's stories may recall the case of Funes *el memorioso*, who was incapable of forgetting anything he had once experienced and equally incapable of grouping his experiences—we might say, in Crocean language and not without a certain malice, his *intuizioni*—into any more general categories. As a result poor Funes "no era muy capaz de pensar. Pensar es olvidar diferencias, es generalizar, abstraer. En el abarrotado mundo de Funes no había sino detalles, casi inmediatos" (*Ficciones*, p. 126).⁹

One consequence of Croce's theory of poetry as a perfectly realized expression of an immediate intuition is his rejection of allegory as a literary form. "For Croce," as Orsini explains, "allegory is essentially a kind of cryptography. . . . By an act that is purely arbitrary, and therefore belongs to the sphere of the practical will and not that of the imagination, a writer decides that a certain sign shall stand for a certain thing with which it is not usually connected."¹⁰ Borges presents Croce's argument, with appropriate quotations from the *Estetica* and from *La poesia*, in an essay of 1949, "De las alegorías a las novelas." To Croce's denial that allegory can ever be aesthetically successful, Borges opposes Chester-

⁹In the prologue to his recent *Antología personal* (Buenos Aires, 1962), Borges returns once more to Croce's theory: "Croce juzgó que el arte es expresión; a esta exigencia, o a una deformación de esta exigencia, debemos la peor literatura de nuestro tiempo. . . . Alguna vez yo también busqué la expresión; ahora sé que mis dioses no me conceden más que la alusión o mención." One might equally well say, using the term in Borges's special sense, that his own writing has become increasingly "classical." An analysis of the evolution of Borges's prose style would surely confirm this view.

¹⁰Orsini, p. 234.

ton's view that language is not an adequate instrument for the representation of reality: "Declarado insuficiente el lenguaje, hay lugar para otros; la alegoría puede ser uno de ellos, como la arquitectura o la música" (*Otras inquisiciones*, p. 213). Though Borges begins his essay with the assertion that he believes Croce to be in the right (p. 211), he later shifts his position and declares that "no sé muy bien cuál de los eminentes contradictores tiene razón; sé que el arte alegórico pareció alguna vez encantador . . . y ahora es intolerable" (p. 213). Borges's explanation of how allegory came to lose favor with both readers and writers need not concern us here. It will be enough to remark that his sympathy with Chesterton's position is probably greater than it appears to be in this essay; we shall return to this point a little later in connection with Borges's views on the nature of language.

Another, more detailed exposition of Croce's attack on allegory and Chesterton's defense of it may be found in the long essays on Nathaniel Hawthorne, also of 1949. Here again Borges's own position is somewhat ambiguous, though he is, I think, rather more sympathetic to Chesterton than to Croce: "La alegoría, según esa interpretación desdeñosa [that of Croce,] vendría a ser una adivinanza, más extensa, más lenta y mucho más incómoda que las otras. Sería un género bárbaro o infantil, una distracción de la estética. Croce formuló esa refutación en 1907; en 1904, Chesterton ya la había refutado sin que ayuel lo supiera" (*Otras inquisiciones*, p. 74). Borges, however, still refuses to commit himself fully: "No sé si es válida la tesis de Chesterton; sé que una alegoría es tanto mejor cuanto sea menos reductible a un esquema, a un frío juego de abstracciones" (p. 75). There are, he declares, two kinds of writers: those who think in images (Shakespeare, Donne, Victor Hugo) and those who think in abstractions (Julien Benda, Bertrand Russell). Neither group is inherently superior to the other, but difficulties arise when a writer attempts to change groups: "Cuando un abstracto, un razonador, quiere ser también imaginativo, o pasar por tal, ocurre lo denunciado por Croce. Notamos que un proceso lógico ha sido engalanado y disfrazado por el autor. . . . Es, para citar un ejemplo notorio de esa dolencia, el caso de José Ortega y Gasset, cuyo buen pensamiento queda obstruído por laboriosas y adventicias metáforas" (p. 76). Hawthorne is an example of the opposite tendency. It is worth noting

that Borges's division of writers into two groups may not be simply a matter of difference in temperament; indeed, his choice of examples suggests that the distinction is rather between creators of imaginative literature and writers who cultivate discursive forms, with the implicit corollary that what is appropriate in one kind of writing will be out of place in another.¹¹

Croce's sharp distinction between the poetic and the 'practical' personality of the writer has fared much better in Borges's hands than his summary dismissal of the aesthetic possibilities of allegory.¹² There is, however, no evidence that Borges considers the distinction peculiarly Crocean.¹³ We find it already in an essay of 1922, "La nadería de la personalidad," in which Borges declares that "yo, al escribir [estas inquietudes,] sólo soy una certidumbre que inquiera las palabras más aptas para persuadir tu atención. Ese propósito y algunas sensaciones musculares y la visión de la límpida enramada que ponen frente a mi ventana los árboles construyen mi yo actual.

"... Fuera vanidad suponer que ese agregado psíquico ha menester asirse a un yo para gozar de validez absoluta, a ese conjetural Jorge Luis Borges en cuya lengua cupo tanto sofisma y en clylos solitarios paseos los tardeceres del suburbio son gratos" (*Inquisicones*, p. 85). Borges here insists that many things a writer has said and done may have no bearing at all on his work. There are, however, some books in which the reader's interest is centered on the personality of the writer himself. Whitman is a case in point; another, less obvious perhaps, is Valéry. In an essay, "Valéry cómo simbolo," written on the occasion of the French poet's death in 1945, Borges compares him with Whitman and declares that although the two seem wholly unlike each other, they are,

¹¹ Borges had drawn a similar distinction as early as 1925: "El pensativo, el hombre intelectual vive en la intimidad de los conceptos que son abstracción pura; el hombre sensitivo, el carnal, en la contigüidad del mundo externo. Ambas trazas de gente pueden recabar en las letras levantada eminencia, pero por caminos desemejantes. El pensativo, al metaforizar, dilucidará el mundo externa mediante las ideas incorpóreas que para él son lo entrañal e inmediato; el sensual corporificará los conceptos" (*Inquisiciones*, pp. 148-149).

¹² For an exposition of Croce's views, see Orsini, pp. 159-160, and Lienhard Bergel, "Croce as a Critic of Goethe," *CL*, I (1949), 352.

¹³ It is, of course, an article of faith for a great many modern critics; see, for example, T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in his *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (New York, 1932), pp. 7-9, and Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot (New York, 1951), p. 86.

nevertheless, linked by the fact that "la obra de los dos es menos preciosa como poesía que como signo de un poeta ejemplar, creado por esa obra" (*Otras inquisiciones*, p. 105. In a later essay, "Nota sobre Walt Whitman," of 1947, Borges returns to the same theme and develops it in considerably more detail. His point of departure is Robert Louis Stevenson's remark that "the whole of Whitman's work is deliberate," an observation which, as Borges is careful to point out, has also been made by a number of other critics. The protagonist of *Leaves of Grass* must not be equated with the poet: "Imaginemos que una biografía de Ulises . . . indicara que éste nunca salió de Itaca. La decepción que nos causaría ese libro, felizmente hipotético, es la que causan todas las biografías de Whitman" (*Otras inquisiciones*, p. 99). Borges has recently returned to the same theme of the distinction between the writer as a man and as a figure in his own works in a brilliant and witty essay, "Borges y yo," where he asserts that "al otro, a Borges, es a quien le ocurren las cosas. . . . Me gustan los relojes de arena, los mapas, la tipografía del siglo XVIII, el sabor del café y la prosa de Stevenson; el otro comparte esas preferencias, pero de un modo vanidoso que las convierte en atributos de un actor. Sería exagerado afirmar que nuestra relación es hostil; yo vivo, yo me dejo vivir, para que Borges pueda tramar su literatura y esa literatura me justifica. . . . Poco a poco voy cediéndole todo, aunque me consta su perversa costumbre de falsear y magnificar. . . . No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página" (*El hacedor*, pp. 50-51).

Both in his theoretical writings and in his practical criticism, Croce lays great stress on what he calls "characterization" (*caratterizzazione*).¹⁴ In his studies of individual writers, "the method," as René Wellek has remarked, "is always one and the same. Croce selects what he considers poetry, pushes aside what is something else, and tries to define a leading sentiment, something like Taine's *faculté maîtresse*, which allows him to characterize by constant qualification."¹⁵ Here again, Borges's critical practice is much like Croce's, though, as with the distinction between the poetic and the practical personality of the writer, there is no reason to speak of the influence of Croce on Borges. Borges himself sets forth the critic's problem in an essay, "Menoscabo y grandeza de Quevedo,"

¹⁴ Orsini, pp. 151-164.

¹⁵ "Benedetto Croce: Literary Critic and Historian," *CL*, V (1953), 78.

published in 1924 in the *Revista de Occidente*: "Aquí está su labor [that of Quevedo], con su aparente numerosidad de propósitos, ¿cómo reducirla a unidad y curajarla en un símbolo? La artimaña de quien lo despedaza según la varia actividad que ejerció no es apta para concertar la despareja plenitud de su obra. Desbandar a Quevedo en irreconciliables figuraciones de novelista, de poeta, de teólogo, de sufridor estoico y de eventual pasquinador, es empeño baldío si no adunamos luego con firmeza todas esas vislumbres" (*Inquisiciones*, pp. 39-40). He concludes that the unity of Quevedo's work lies not in its subject matter, which is immensely varied, but in the author's constant preoccupation with exploiting the resources offered him by language: "Casi todos sus libros son cotidianos en el plan, pero sobresalientes en los verbalismos de hechura" (*Inquisiciones*, p. 40). The same method is employed in many of Borges's later essays. Thus, the essay on Whitman, to which we have already referred, is centered on the conception of Whitman as a conscious artist who deliberately creates his own personality as poet in the same way that a novelist might create a personality for his protagonist. Nor is the method limited solely to studies of individual writers; the *caratteristica*, to use Croce's term, of the *gaucho* poetry of the nineteenth century is that it presents the life of the cowboy as it appeared to a sophisticated observer from Buenos Aires or Montevideo: "Derivar la literatura gauchesca de su materia, el gaucho, es una confusión que desfigura la notoria verdad. No menos necesario para la formación de ese género que la pampa y que las cuchillas fue el carácter urbano de Buenos Aires y de Montevideo. . . . De la azarosa conjunción de esos dos estilos vitales, del asombro que uno produjo en otro, nació la literatura gauchesca" (*Discusión*, p. 12).

Since, for Croce, art is a perfect realization of the artist's intuition, form and content are inseparable. Croce has no interest in the forms of poetic language, since the forms—not only metrical and stanzaic forms, but also such things as metaphor and simile—are not poetic in themselves; they become so only when they are used to express the artist's intuition, that is, when they are combined with an appropriate content.¹⁶ Borges's position is identical with Croce's, and he does not hesitate to acknowledge his debt. In *El idioma de los argentinos*, surely the most consistently

¹⁶ See Orsini, pp. 64-95.

Crocean of all his books, he declares that "la metáfora no es poética por ser metáfora, sino por la expresión alcanzada. No insisto en la disputa; todo sentidor de Croce estará conmigo" (pp. 69-70). In an essay of 1931, "La supersticiosa ética del lector," Borges returns to the same point and develops it at much greater length. Most readers today, he argues, "entienden por estilo no la eficacia o la ineficacia de una página, sino las habilidades aparentes del escritor: sus comparaciones, su acústica, los episodios de su puntuación y de su sintaxis" (*Discusión*, p. 45).

If those who insist that "la numerosidad de metáforas [es] una virtud" (*Idioma*, p. 69) are in the wrong, so are those who consider the number of words in a particular language a valid index of its possibilities as an instrument of aesthetic expression, a fault, incidentally, which Borges finds particularly common among peninsular Spanish critics. Here again, just as with metaphors, "la numerosidad de representaciones es lo que importa, no la de signos" (p. 170), and we find Borges once more proclaiming the unity of form and content: "la sueñera mental y la concepción acústica del estilo son las que fomentan sinónimos: palabras que sin cambiar de idea cambian de unido" (p. 172).

The same point, combined with another which is of great importance for Borges's thinking about the nature of literary language, is made in the essay, "Indagación de la palabra," of 1927: "Es una sentencia de Joubert, citada favorablemente por Matías Arnold. . . . Trata de Bossuet y es así: *Más que un hombre es una naturaleza humana, con la moderación de un santo, la justicia de un obispo, la prudencia de un doctor y el poderío de un gran espíritu*. Aquí Joubert jugó a las variantes no sin descaro; escribió (y acaso pensó) *la moderación de un santo* y acto continuo esa fatalidad que hay en el lenguaje se adueñó de él y eslabonó tres cláusulas más, todas de aire simétrico y todas rellenas con negligencia. Es como si afirmara . . . *con la moderación de un santo, el qué sé yo de un quién sabe qué y el cualquier cosa de un gran espíritu*. . . . Si la prosa, con su mínima presencia de ritmo, trae estas servidumbres, ¿cuáles no traerá el verso?" (*Idioma*, pp. 22-23).

Borges here sees language as a dangerous invitation to the writer to exploit the resources which it offers him without regard for what he himself wishes to say. The danger is obviously greater

in verse than in prose, a point to which Borges returns again and again. In his prologue to *Índice de la nueva poesía argentina*, of 1926, we already find him saying that "la rima es aleatoria. Ya don Francisco de Quevedo se burló de ella por la esclavitud que impone al poeta."¹⁷ In "La supersticiosa ética del lector," he declares that "ya se practica la lectura en silencio, *sintoma venturoso* [italics mine]. Ya hay lector callado de versos. De esa capacidad sigilosa a una escritura puramente ideográfica—directa comunicación de experiencias, no de sonidos—hay una distancia incansable, pero siempre menos dilatada que el porvenir" (*Discusión*, p. 49).¹⁸ The danger, however, is present in prose, too, as Borges demonstrates in his analysis of the sentence he quotes from Joubert; it is a consequence, not simply of the need to fit one's thought into a given metrical scheme, but of the need to express it in a pre-existing language.

Every language, Borges insists, represents an attempt to inject some order into our perceptions of the reality which surrounds us, to simplify it and make it intelligible; we should not be too much surprised if this collective vision, the product of centuries of development, should fail to correspond exactly to the pattern imposed upon reality by the will and needs of any individual.¹⁹ Here Borges, by stressing the writer's subservience to language, his inability to say precisely what he wants to say, differs sharply from Croce, who contends that the writer creates his own language anew, on the basis of his private intuitions.²⁰ Borges's conception of language as a check upon the writer's freedom has important consequences for his theory of literature. Since the writer's ability to create something wholly new is, for Borges, limited by the language he uses, he may as well resign himself to repeating, with minor variations, things others have said before him: "Ni [Spinoza]

¹⁷ Cited by Ghiano, p. 232.

¹⁸ In an earlier essay, Borges had discussed the attempt of the seventeenth-century clergyman John Wilkins to create a universal language and made the significant remark that "esa su música silenciosa no comportaba obligatoriamente ningún sonido. Esa es ventaja máxima y qué más quisiera yo que hablar de ella" (*Idioma*, p. 171).

¹⁹ For a fuller discussion, see Barrenechea, *Irrealidad*, pp. 75-82.

²⁰ Croce, of course, would not limit this creative power to writers, but would consider it the property of every speaker of a language; see Orsini, pp. 70-73. For a more moderate statement of a position rather similar to Croce's see Leo Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History* (Princeton, 1948), pp. 10-11 and note 5, p. 31.

con su metafísica geometrizada, ni [Lulio] con su alfabeto traducible en palabras y éstas en oraciones, consiguió leudir el lenguaje. . . . Sólo pueden soslayarlo los ángeles, que conversan por especies inteligibles: es decir, por representaciones directas y sin ministerio alguno verbal.

“¿Y nosotros, los nunca ángeles, los verbales, los que
en este bajo relativo suelo

escribimos, los que sotopensamos que ascender a letras de molde es la máxima realidad de las experiencias? Que la resignación, virtud a que debemos resignarnos—sea con nosotros. Ella será nuestro destino: hacernos a la sintaxis, a su concatenación traicionera, a la imprecisión, a los talveces, a los demasiados énfasis, a los peros, al hemisferio de mentira y de sombra en nuestro decir. . . .

“No de intuiciones originales—hay pocas—, sino de variaciones y casualidades y travesuras, suele alimentarse la lengua. La lengua: es decir humilladoramente el pensar” (*Idioma*, pp. 26-27).

The idea that the writer cannot hope to create anything wholly new becomes increasingly frequent in Borges's later essays. In *Inquisiciones*, he had defined the creation of a metaphor as “la inquisición de cualidades comunes a los dos terminos de la imagen, cualidades que son de todos conocidas, pero cuya coincidencia en dos conceptos lejanos no ha sido vislumbrado hasta el instante de hacerse la metáfora” (p. 156). In an essay on Norse poetry, “Las kenningar,” first published as a separate book in 1933 and later included in the collection of essays *Historia de la eternidad*, he adopts a somewhat different position. Though he praises certain kennings because they can awaken a sense of wonder in the reader (“nos extrañan del mundo”), he is aware that the kennings do not in most cases represent original poetic intuitions, but simply the use of a learned language; their apparent originality is an illusion created by our ignorance (*Eternidad*, pp. 65, 44). In the lecture on Hawthorne, of 1949, we find him doubting whether a really new metaphor can be found at all: “es quizá un error suponer que puedan inventarse metáforas. Las verdaderas, las que formulan íntimas conexiones entre una imagen y otra, han existido siempre; las que aún podemos inventar son las falsas, las que no vale la pena inventar” (*Otras inquisiciones*, p. 71). “La esfera de Pascal,” of 1951, begins with the suggestion that “quizá la historia universal es la historia de unas cuantas metáforas” and

ends with a slightly more precise statement of the same theme: "quizá la historia universal es la historia de la diversa entonación de algunas metáforas" (*Otras inquisiciones*, pp. 13, 17). Borges thus reaffirms his adherence to a point of view fundamentally identical with that he had expressed in "Indagación de la palabra" nearly a quarter of a century earlier: "No de intuiciones originales —hay pocas—, sino de variaciones y casualidades y travesuras, suele alimentarse la lengua" (*Idioma*, p. 27).

* * * *

Borges's criticism has been attacked on the ground that it rarely aims primarily at the interpretation of a given work but rather uses the work as a point of departure for reflections on all sorts of philosophical problems.²¹ The charge is not without foundation; one might perhaps counter it by saying that Borges is less a literary critic than a theorist of literature.²² Indeed, I think it can be argued that the remarks on books and writers scattered throughout Borges's essays do add up to some clearly definable and coherent ideas on the nature of literature and the function of criticism. These ideas may be expressed in the form of three postulates, though, of course, any such schematization of Borges's thought, expressed in dozens of essays and over a period of almost forty years, runs a grave risk of distorting it by making it seem more systematic than it really is.

The first postulate is that a work of literature is an indivisible whole; the critic cannot profitably consider form and content in isolation from one another. But this does not mean that the union of form and content is always perfectly realized; Borges's objection to the sentence from Joubert, already cited, is that the four parallel phrases do not correspond to a fourfold development of the writer's thought. It does mean that the critic must be concerned, not with form in itself, but in its relation to the whole work.²³

²¹ See Adolfo Prieto, *Borges y la nueva generación*, pp. 33-34.

²² I have in mind here the distinction drawn by René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1949), p. 30.

²³ Cf. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1957), p. 77: "'Every poem must necessarily be a perfect unity,' says Blake: this, as the wording implies, is not a statement of fact about all existing poems, but a statement of the hypothesis which every reader adopts in first trying to comprehend even the most chaotic poem ever written." In pointing out analogies between Borges's critical position and that of Frye, I do not, of course, wish

The second postulate is that a work of literature is self-contained; its critical corollary is that the critic's interest should be centered on the work itself. From this comes Borges's distinction between the writer as a man and as a 'mask' in his own writings. (I use this somewhat unsatisfactory term rather than 'character' since I wish it to include the implicit 'speaker' of an essay or lyric.)

The last, and most important, of the three postulates is closely bound up with the second; it is that a work of literature may best be understood, not as an assertion about something outside itself, but as a hypothesis about something whose existence is neither affirmed nor denied. Borges's critical position here comes quite close to that of Northrop Frye, for whom literature is "a body of hypothetical creations which is not necessarily involved in the worlds of truth and fact, nor necessarily withdrawn from them, but which may enter into any kind of relationship to them, ranging from the most to the least explicit."²⁴

Borges's theory of the autonomy of the literary work is a consequence of his more general theory that man can never truly know reality: "Notoriamente no hay clasificación del universo que no sea arbitraria y conjetural. La razón es muy simple: no sabemos qué cosa es el universo. . . . Cabe sospechar que no hay universo en el sentido orgánico, unificador, que tiene esa ambiciosa palabra. Si lo hay, falta conjeturar su propósito; falta conjeturar las palabras, las definiciones, las etimologías, las sinonimias, del secreto diccionario de Dios" (*Otras inquisiciones*, pp.

to suggest that either critic is dependent upon the other. Borges had not heard of *Anatomy of Criticism* when I mentioned it to him in August, 1962, and the ideas which I have tried to sum up in my three postulates are found, admittedly with important differences of emphasis, in all Borges's books of essays, some of which antedate the *Anatomy* by thirty years or more. I refer to Frye simply because his work seems to be the most comprehensive, and in some ways the most successful, recent attempt to construct a general theory of literature.

²⁴ *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 92-93; see also pp. 350-354. The analogy between literature and mathematics which Frye develops in these two passages is especially suggestive in the light of Borges's often-expressed interest in mathematical problems. See, for example, his note on Kasner and Newman's *Mathematics and the Imagination* (*Discusión*, pp. 165-166); the discussion of number systems in *Otras inquisiciones*, p. 140; or the passage in *El idioma de los argentinos* where Borges argues that the number of words in a given language is no indication of its richness or poverty in concepts, since "el solo idioma infinito—el de las matemáticas—se basta con una docena de signos para no dejarse distanciar por número alguno" (p. 170).

142-143). Borges's philosophical position is thus fundamentally skeptical, as he himself recognizes. In the epilogue to *Otras inquisiciones* he declares that in reading the proofs he has noted "una [tendencia] a estimar las ideas religiosas o filosóficas por su valor estético y aun por lo que encierran de singular y de maravilloso. Esto es, quizá, indicio de un escepticismo esencial" (p. 259).²⁵ Borges surely would agree with those librarians mentioned in his story "La biblioteca de Babel" who "repudian la supersticiosa y vana costumbre de buscar sentido en los libros y la equiparan a la de buscarlo en los sueños o en las líneas caóticas de la mano" (*Ficciones*, p. 88). He is like the metaphysicians of his own imaginary Tlön who "no buscan la verdad ni siquiera la verosimilitud: buscan el asombro. Juzgan que la metafísica es una rama de la literatura fantástica" (*Ficciones*, p. 23). The remark applies with equal force to Borges's own, often fantastic, stories, and to his criticism of other men's writings, of whatever kind. But it is worth stressing that Borges's critical principles, despite the fanciful way in which they are usually presented, are sound enough, and that they do form a coherent, if not a comprehensive, theory of literature.

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²⁵ Barrenchea, *Irrealidad*, p. 76, gives a convenient list of similar passages from Borges's other works.