

Partial approaches to truth through 'legitimization' and 'sight'

JORGE MEDINA VIDAL

Semiotics, like some other disciplines, may present us with seemingly nonsensical investigations which, as Sterne remarked in his *Tristram Shandy*, 'when they are once set a-going, whether right or wrong ... away they go cluttering like hey-go-mad; and by treading the same steps over and over again, they presently make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk' (1760: 3). In the study of the works of Jorge Luis Borges, one such nonsensical investigation is related to the idea of 'truth'. We could pose, for instance, that no one has ever read the 'true' Borges, not even Borges himself. Borges read by a modern reader, Borges read by one of his contemporaries, Borges read by Borges: none of them is the 'true' Borges, yet none can be dismissed as 'false'. This is because the sign and all its forms must be actualized by a user, a being who exists in spatial and temporal dimensions. These actualizations, each user's individual reading, his 'truth', is as valid as the abstract truth of that secret entity, the so-called 'literary work'.

Borges himself gives us an insight into certain aspects of 'truth' in his literary works by establishing the boundaries separating his 'real' person and his 'persona', the producer of literary texts: 'el otro, el mismo', his distant 'I am another', inherited, among others, from Arthur Rimbaud's 'Je est un autre'.¹ Another nonsensical investigation, some readers might think, since it poses the complete separation of an organization of 'signs' — the literary work — and the 'internalization' of this organization — each reading, actualized by each individual user of the system. On closer analysis, however, this separation allows us to consider the literary work from two different points of view leading to two strikingly dissimilar conclusions.

On the one hand, we could postulate the sacredness of the author and his work. In so doing, however, the whole process of approaching intention — both explicit and tacit — could be reduced to a merely mechanical investigation. When one starts to investigate, detective-like, what Borges was thinking when he wrote, for instance, 'La espera'

(Borges 1989/96: 3.192), one arrives at a barely anecdotal conclusion; what is more, one realizes that in the end one has been investigating Borges instead of his poem — which is an illusion anyway, since one will never find out this 'truth' either. Perhaps this point is best illustrated by the well-known anecdote about Lamartine being asked what was the meaning of his poem 'The shepherd's hut'. He replied: 'There was a time when only God and myself knew; now only God knows'.

On the other hand, we could look at the work from the point of view of the reader, which would allow us to witness the creative co-participation of the acts of diction and of internalization — the work as an abstract entity and the work actualized by the reader. The concept of 'truth' becomes meaningless once we stop looking a literary work as an abstract concept and we focus on it as an interaction.

When organized signs overcome the temporal barrier of 'speech acts', they may come to signify themselves. This is a historical development, since each reading causes changes in two senses. In the first place, each reader causes a change in T. S. Eliot's (1933) generic sense that each book that is published changes all the books that were published before it. Secondly, in an individual or historical sense, since meaning changes as the work is read by chains of individual readers from different generations. Semiotics, insofar as 'the study of the life of signs within the life of society' (de Saussure 1983: 80) draws from traditional discourse. 'Society', unlike an individual, is not a historical moment; it becomes meaningful only when understood as a collective and macro-temporal development. Hence we should consider, with regard to the 'truth' of texts, a third ingredient, a generational ingredient, added to the impact of the author, in this case Jorge Luis Borges, and of the reader, who can act in several historic stages of 'social life'. As historical circumstances change so does the environment of the work of art; this brings about a change in the user's appreciation of the work. This generational element allows us to perceive Borges's truth as another reader's truth, not unlike the truth of the other users of the text, who actualize in time the repertoire of organized 'signs' proposed as the work of a historical being, namely Jorge Luis Borges. The true 'work' of Borges is but an entelechy, actualized through certain channels: the truth, recognized in a series of social movements, influences the occasional reader and is influenced by them, and to some extent the reader recreates the work, or re-semantises it. Borges was the first privileged reader of his own work, and the chain of narrative proposals which continued his production record the mutations of that first privileged reader, who would later admit a series of other readers — privileged or otherwise — who appear after the publication of his works. But Borges was also a being

in time, someone who had received extremely complex significations from other sources, be they social meta-discourses or the contact with other readers. We could go as far as saying that Jorge Luis Borges is not the author of his works. What we call 'Borges's works' is in fact the work of a 'society' made up by Jorge Luis Borges plus the innumerable influences he received, influences that not only filter through his works but that also enabled him to write 'Borges's works'. Hence it is only fair to propose the semiotic investigation not just of what his narrative production 'is', but also the syntactic, semiotic, semantic, and pragmatic process of certain texts which could aspire to projecting into the future basic elements and mutating components, valid for several generations. This 'process' of organized signs could be considered, in an extravagant 'metaphor', the investigation into the cultural 'genes' of a certain society and in a considerable period of time.

Legitimization

The reader's quest for the 'truth' of a literary work is, to some extent, fostered by the author's efforts to invest his discourse with credibility, efforts which can be perceived from the very beginning of the work, from the beginnings of the so-called 'aesthetic discourse'. It is possible to trace back the legitimacy and legitimization of the so-called aesthetic discourse to the first hexameters of the *Iliad*. Everything in the semantics of 'Sing, O Goddess' seems to point to the ambiguity between the legitimate and the legitimized.

Legitimacy can only be justified by the profound difference between man and his gods: Homer informs his audience that the determining Power does not come from Homer the Man, but from a superior entity: the Muse.

Even common speech comes from a nebulous source, namely the Power that exists at the root of all legitimacy and legitimization, basically because there must be a positive linguistic ability to be able to talk effectively. Hence the legitimacy of speech becomes perceptible when the supra-human Power condescends to express itself in a language suitable for descriptions, narratives and behaviors. For a modern reader, however, there is no legitimacy here: claims such as Homer's are considered an attempt to legitimize his work by appealing to a higher source than himself. This is the main difference between legitimacy and legitimization; the former is granted, the latter has to be claimed.

Nowadays legitimacy — understood in its primary sense of a supra-human Power speaking through a mortal — is acknowledged only in the case of sacred texts. The legitimacy of the aesthetic discourse, on the other hand, rests exclusively on the intrinsic Power of the linguistic system, hence some writers feel the need to seek legitimization. Cervantes (1911), for instance, presents his work as a story written by someone else, Cide Hamete Benengeli. San Juan de la Cruz (1965) resorts to an extensive collection of quotations from the Bible to legitimize his propositions, and shows his awareness of the inadequacy of human discourse by his repeated use of phrases like 'One does not know ...', 'One just stutters ...'. José Hernández (1979) is a particularly interesting case, because he starts by requesting illumination from the saints, but then he goes on to say 'aquí me pongo a cantar', showing that it is he who is in charge of transmitting the story. It is common among contemporary writers to try and legitimize their work by taking up historical subjects. Two well-known examples are Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), where the narrator tells us that he is describing real events that took place in the Middle Ages, and García Márquez's *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* [Chronicle of a death foretold] (1981), in which the narrator claims to be retelling a true story just as it was told to him.

Borges generally secularizes his discourse: he writes almost obsessed by a connotative bias; he accumulates quotations, he appears aware of the possible aporias of language. In 'The Aleph' (1989/96: 1.617-630), for example, the narrator sets the scene not just on a hot day in February, but he adds that it was the day Beatriz Viterbo died, and he goes on to describe the agony of her last days, his feelings about it and then gives the reader some details about her life. He mentions innumerable names and places: Carlos Argentino Daneri, Delia San Marco Porcel, Roberto Alessandri and so many others; the Club Hípico, Calle Garay, Biblioteca Juan Crisóstomo Lafinur, among so many others. He mentions literary works and authors, he quotes from real and fictional literary works. There comes a point in the story, however, in which he breaks down: 'Arribo, ahora, al inefable centro de mi relato; empieza, aquí, mi desesperación de escritor'. [I arrive, now, to the indescribable center of my story; here is where my desperation as a writer begins.]

Even though authors follow different paths in this search for legitimization, they all start from one basic request: May I demand the attention of the reader with my texts, as long as I admit the limitations of language and its system?

Different authors seek different ways of legitimizing the potential for behavior in their social environments. However, a literary work becomes

a classic — always renewed and meaningful — when its author sets himself apart from the rest; he legitimizes his discourse when he surprises us with the unexpected — which is also a way of legitimizing all of the above.

The act of looking

Another way in which the author attempts to persuade the readers that there is 'truth' in his narration is by playing with what is 'seen' in the text. The 'act of looking' and its consequence, 'what is looked at', become separated when they are transposed to a 'discourse'. In other words, when 'the act of looking' is repeatedly mentioned in a written discourse, it is invested with a much wider, quasi communitarian intention; what is looked at becomes charged with connotative elements that the speaker may wish to highlight for various reasons. Jorge Luis Borges privileged the act of looking in his narrative so as to further legitimize his narration.

In the highly class-conscious societies Borges so often describes in his stories, the 'look' tends to be vertical, either ascending or descending. A case in point: 'La gente me miraba por encima del hombro' [People looked down on me] in 'El indigno' (Borges 1989/96: 2.407). In 'Funes el memorioso' (Borges 1989/96: 1.485–490), sight is playing a role of even greater importance. The first time the narrator visits Ireneo he is lying on his cot, staring at a fig tree or perhaps at a cobweb. On his second visit some time later, Ireneo is lying in the dark, since the slightest visual stimulus would trigger overwhelming sensations. In 'La espera' (Borges 1989/96: 1.608–611), the references to the 'act of looking' are even more extensive. In this story, the act of looking is also associated with Alejandro Villari's social surroundings, since he describes in detail his visual sensations: the trees, the small square of soil in which they had been planted, the houses, everything he 'noticed' in the neighborhood and in his lodgings. Sight is so important that the narrator even describes what he had seen in a film, in the cinema that he sometimes visited: 'vío trágicas historias del hampa' [he saw tragic stories of the underworld] (Borges 1989/96: 1.609).

In 'Emma Zunz' (Borges 1989/96: 1.564–568), almost everything is related to sight: a logical look makes reference to what Emma observes, and at the same time it becomes confused with what the omniscient narrator emphasises in his discourse. In the verticality of these looks, the social background against which the action takes place is hinted at, whereas profound personal hatred substitutes the verticality of the social

strata. When Emma walks along Paseo de Julio, she is stared at by 'hungry eyes'; she forces herself to watch the other women's behavior in order to learn the routine of sexual relations. Later, at Loewenthal's factory, Aarón sees Emma arrive: 'La vio empujar la verja (que él había entornado a propósito) ...' [he saw her push the gate (which he had left ajar on purpose) ...] (Borges 1989/96: 1.567). Afterwards, when Emma kills Aarón, 'la miró con asombro y cólera' [he looked at her with surprise and anger] (Borges 1989/96: 1.567). The eye and its look are almost always intentional, since they are the development of a 'semiosis' which involves several social elements. The 'photographic' record can become an act of 'social semiosis' when the author, in the 'montage' of the text, determines, minute by minute, the development of the action. Nevertheless we should not forget that the eye that 'looks' — tacitly or explicitly — signifies (in its present or later register) the fulfilment of a 'semiosis', transformed in an object which proposes meanings and demands answers if it is posed as a problem. The 'look', in the light of these approaches, intensifies the emotions conveyed by the 'discourse', be it visual or linguistic. The addressee is easily drawn into the atmosphere the author intended, while the relationships within the narrative discourse, between the signifier and the signified, may follow an erratic or even contradictory development. Jorge Luis Borges seems to create a very personal framework of reality with his 'look', which plays at being objective. This look, however, is almost always at odds with the structured reality of the others, in conflict with a social reality which, by means of an inverse process, is filled with strong emotional connotations, separating what is 'said' from what is perceived. Let us consider two stories in particular: 'Emma Zunz' (1989/96: 1.564–568) and 'El indigno' (1989/96: 2.407–411). In both cases, what the narrator 'sees' and 'develops' belongs to a pattern of observation, sometimes intensified with quotations from other observers of the same actions, in an attempt to legitimize what has been said and to insist on its 'objectivity'. In both stories, the actions and the emotive component the receptor receives belong to the vast territory of Morality. This Morality, recorded by the absolute 'look' which systematizes the story, is organized through the code of police work or the law, which does not involve the world of so-called personal conscience. It is the objectivity of an external, social law, at the service of the absolute concealment of psychological intimacy, either to deny it or to conceive the reality of the human being as a tiring exercise in behaviors that, in fact, have no transcendental meaning. The inherited rubble of morality must be destroyed, as shows the closing sentence of 'La intrusa' (Borges 1989/96: 2.406) or the indifference with which 'Emma Zunz' (Borges 1989/96: 1.567–578) leaves the police and the judges at the end of her journey of revenge. In all

these examples of human behavior and semiosis, the characters answer to a linear pattern of cause and effect; it breaks a possible law of compensations which would destroy the entropy of pleasure, without major complications and regardless of the methods used to achieve it.

This pattern could be as follows: the eye sees and the look re-presents. What is seen is an environment which determines 'de-compensations' and therefore means 'dis-pleasure'. The acts of 'the Other' proposes the acts of the personal 'I', achieved through more or less complex acts, to recover the serenity of the 'look' that judges society and empties the individual.

Note

1. C'est faux de dire: Je pense: on devrait dire: On me pense. — Pardon du jeu de mots. — Je est un autre. Tant pis pour le bois qui se trouve violon, et nargue aux inconscients, qui ergotent sur ce qu'ils ignorent tout à fait! (Letter to Georges Izambard, May, 1871) <http://www.imagnet.fr/rimbaud/LetIzambar5-71.html>

Les romantiques, qui prouvent si bien que la chanson est si peu souvent l'oeuvre, c'est-à-dire la pensée chantée et comprise du chanteur?

Car JE est un autre. Si le cuivre s'éveille clairon, il n'y a rien de sa faute. Cela m'est évident: j'assiste à l'éclosion de ma pensée: je la regarde, je l'écoute: je lance un coup d'archet: la symphonie fait son remuement dans les profondeurs, ou vient d'un bond sur la scène. (Letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871) <http://www.ac-grenoble.fr/rimbaud/demeny1.htm>

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Special Issue

Jorge Luis Borges: The praise of signs

Guest Editor:

LISA BLOCK DE BEHAR

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