

## Pure line: An essay in Borgermeneutics

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Para la otra vez que lo mate — replicó  
Scharlach — le prometo ese laberinto, que  
consta de una sola línea recta y que es  
invisible, incesante.

— Borges, 'La muerte y la brújula'

'What are the underpinnings of Borges's interpretation?' is the double question to which the lines below attempt to provide side-effective answers. The question is pressing because all of Borges's prose texts are largely interpretative essays. They are so in two senses, of which the first appears to be false at least in part, and the second entirely debatable. It stands to conventional reason to consider that texts such as 'The *Biathanatos*', 'Chesteron and the Labyrinths of the Detective Story', 'The Translators of *The 1001 Nights*', or 'New Refutation of Time' are, by and large, essays, while 'The Zahir', 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius', and 'The South' certainly count as fictions. That certain Borgesian prose, of which 'Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*' is a much invoked example, dwell on the border between the two established genres, does not seem to unsettle the genre establishment of the republic of letters. In this sense, it is false to claim that Borges's prose and his essays are one and the same thing. However, the other sense of 'essay' concerns us here.

While blasting the likes of Apollinaire for trying to be only modern, even at the price of betraying themselves, Borges always took good care to present himself as *un vecchio* (yet not as old as to be postmodern).<sup>1</sup> His essays turn — unfailingly, one would believe — to Montaigne's inaugural work with an engaging respect filtered through the grand tradition from those he never tired of quoting: De Quincey, Pater, Wilde, Chesteron. The essay, the genre of the emerging modern subject's

heterogeneity of experience, appeared in Montaigne's work as a tentative form of securing a habitat for the said subject's perplexities. Neither surprisingly nor merrily, Montaigne is charged with having been the last Westerner whose writing was rooted in experience. As *Don Quixote* counts as the nonoriginary but first articulated novel and metanovel, Montaigne's *Essais* contain the consciousness of their unprecedented genre form: they are interpretations, thus interpretations of other interpretations. The essay delivers the past to a consciousness that does not shun experience. Each past age's solitude of an untimeliness that Montaigne recognized as 'its own', was let to repeat itself in essayistic writing, and thus engender a difference unfathomable from without the limits of this consciousness.

Borges's essays are fragmentary, shortcut crises, rather than well-rounded processes-as-products of a Romantic 'organicism' that our author was certainly not keen on. For him the fragmentary was the expression of an incisive resistance to that inclusion of experience into knowledge which is the ideological resorption of the lived into the mastered. Not once does he, at the outset of a number of his essays, in partially humble exercises of *captatio benevolentiae*, acknowledge that this or that text is just the recapitulatory ruin of a 'history I will never write'.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Borges's essays usually end in turns of phrase that match the closing ceremonies of punch lines and of twisted moralities. So that the often violent endings<sup>3</sup> of his paratactic<sup>4</sup> essences detailed act as sphincters for both the terror of enigmatic monsters and for the texts themselves. The latter are thus prevented from further spillage into the babbling of the 'everything', and delivered to the same exhaustion that the reader is seduced to experience.<sup>5</sup>

Montaigne's generic castle of essays is one notable abode among those that Borges's oeuvre inhabits uninhibitedly. The essay is 'on' something but 'up to' something else: while essays conventionally circumscribe objects of knowledge (*Gegenstände*): love, suicide, memory, books, time, and so forth, they tend to — finally and more profoundly — become objective correlates of the heterogeneity of the subject's experience of those objects of knowledge. In other terms, the essay's aboutness is the indispensable somersault for its leap of faith from faith rigid into the heterogeneous. This Montaignian legacy has often been obliterated by a contrary, hermeneutical tradition, that, over the last two centuries or so, has manifested itself as biblical and literary criticism, history of literature, theory of interpretation, semiotics, and 'hermeneutics' itself.

Hermeneutical precepts allow for a cohesion between unitary experience and totality of life: this link, as Gadamer points out, is provided

by intention: 'the unity of experience determined by its intentional content stands in an immediate relationship to the whole, to the totality of life' (1975 [1960]: 62).<sup>6</sup>

For Gadamer (and the same goes for Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and partially, Ricœur), an 'organic' relationship grants a principle of discourse and reading organization. The relationship is presumed existent, in the sense that it can be neither organized any further nor deconstructed beyond the bedrock of the organic. Mainstream hermeneutics thus abides by the beliefs of Romantic organismism that, in its hands, becomes a game with wholes, empathies, and asymptotic constructions: no less a game with a world united by intention than Renaissance magic's was by love.

Hermeneutics reduces the art of polemics to a filling out of the blanks of war with peaceful intentions. The dream of nonpolemical, un-Heraclitean hermeneutics appears to be the attainment of the abstract peace of logicians, while translating feasts of words from the sacred into the secular, from hierarchy into higher/archy. From Schleiermacher to Gadamer and Ricoeur, all representatives of this not so laid back peace of mind have not moved even a bit away from that desire to be at peace that has periodically vacuumed nothingness out. Hermeneutics has lived and has died, lives and dies reasonably, for the avoidance of conflicts, ingrained in it, grounds the activity of the white-collar workers of meaning. Hermeneutical secularization is only justificatory: meaning is made public and thrown against the forgotten and thus obscure workings of the sacred. If Schleiermacher is the first theorist of hermeneutics, Luther is its first practitioner who has considerably contributed to opening, between the sacred's ecstasy and its fury, the abyss where morality dwells. Hermeneutics' business is, second handedly, and therefore historically, that of providing band aids for this abyssal wound that stigmatizes modernity this side of redemption. Unlike the essay, which knows too well that meaning is a bait, hermeneutics, which has historically replaced enigmas with intentions, remains to be the 'too little' of its taken-for-granted world's 'too much': a dance of wholes where parts take part, and nothing is left outside, for everything is processed.<sup>7</sup>

Like Kafka, Robert Walser, Artaud, and — to mention only one more of these difficult magnificents with whom the twentieth century goes down to the hell of history — Beckett, Borges has written in the proximity of animal and material anonymity and impersonality: beyond the vice of versatility, he was a writer of the inorganic (book).<sup>8</sup> The dangers of this proximity to these sites of resistance-to-understanding are to be first

perceived as the unsettling of familiar grounds: individuality (including the proper name), historical givenness, chronology, universal sympathy (underlying the possibility of limitless rhetorical comparison), clear-cut differences between the actual and the fictional — all of which are relativized by the slow poisons of his cunning writing — come to disappear. The conditions of familiar experience are underlined as they are erased. A wasteland, no more, seems to be left after the dark and witty brilliance of his deconstructions. But like Góngora's and Quevedo's, the baroque masters Borges much admired, his risky business does not stop here, and the dangers he assumes do not lie in empty lands, where they are scarecrows for the weak.

It is on a different level of reading that dangers become more strict and require something more from readers than an encyclopedically overcooked cultural background, good for coping with the Borgesian heavy artillery of cultural references; they require intellectual discipline to both face the dangers and be redeemed through them. This second reading, one suspects, emerges as the other of the first, as a procedure that can occur only after the first has exhausted all interpretative potentialities. The critical relation of mutual alteration between the two readings cannot be but a nightmare for hermeneutics' unitary experience. Like all other writers of the impersonal, anonymous resistance of inorganic matter, Borges sees in the appeals to transcendental solutions only self-righteous forms of weakness. He is a writer of unfailing immanence. He is also an essayist whose literature embodies the Montaignian heterogeneity of experience in a proper, moral sense: the second reading of his texts offers a realm of otherness that is not lured by the irresponsible automatism of the *différance* unto transcendence.

Another circle, neither the one of enthusiastic presupposers like Dilthey nor that which viciously perpetuates guilt, appears in Heidegger's — excessively called 'hermeneutical' — early writings. Here a new line of thought, germane to Borges's, emerges, with the major difference that for the latter the abandonment of the fore-known is not effected in the sense of an overcoming.<sup>9</sup> Rather, Borges inscribes the fore-known in an eternal return in which names and social roles, memories and entire civilizations disappear only to have their disappearance come around once more, and then again. It is within this circularity that a second reading of Borges's 'essays' imposes itself with the playful necessity of fate; and it is here that the abandonment of binary logic opens itself to a realm of otherness ruled by silence, simplicity, and linearity.<sup>10</sup>

One of the privileged texts where the jump from a first level of reading to a second one can be expressed is 'La muerte y la brújula'

[The death and the compass]<sup>11</sup> a text that usually elicits retelling by the critic, as if the reader were compelled to take up the detective's procedure and better it. Let it be said now that its second reading — as any Borgesian second reading — can be understood not as improved detective work, but rather as entrance into what Peirce has called — and Deleuze has reanalyzed pertinently in *Mouvement-Image* — Firstness.<sup>12</sup> In other terms, the second reading is the entrance into *ekstasis*. Hermeneutics' going round finds here no longer grounds in the excuses provided by dialectical procedures.

'The Death and the Compass', a text played by names (Erik Lönnrot, Red Scharlach) whose reddishness evokes Babylonian-whorish geometries of doom, is a detective story of over-interpretation.<sup>13</sup> The enthusiastic Lönnrot applies the principle of 'Greek' logic to a Hebraic affair; in the process, he misses both the part that the accident can play in taming logical necessity, and the Hebraic sanctification of the letter. 'Writing is holy because it is God's instrument' ... It is, Borges says, 'an end in itself, not a means to an end' (1989/96: 2.118). This is the notion that must shock the West of our minds, and empty out the Tetragrammaton. The Kabbalah, which appears as a supplement to Greek deductive thinking, promises to offer synthetic (i.e., a posteriori) knowledge: it is the bait of meaning that magnetizes Lönnrot's impressionable mental instrument *mesmerized* by numbers. The *brújula* plays the ironic double role of a misplaced tool and of a fantastic 'aport', an object whose presence can be explained only through a fantastic origin that it perpetuates in a deterministic world.<sup>14</sup> Why does Lönnrot use the *brújula* to find the fourth point on the map is as much beyond him and beyond us as is 'death', the word which pairs off with *brújula* in the title. The over-orientation provided by this silly supplement splits the text into two instances of Firstness that cannot be tied together in any unitary experience. This is the heterogeneity inscribed in Borges's 'essays' and in what goes by the name of the fantastic in them.<sup>15</sup>

At the very end of 'The Death and the Compass', and after getting the whole picture, Lönnrot suggest to Scharlach to kill him once more in a future avatar. He wants the dandy to find him in an aporetic labyrinth, in a *D* point, that is the middle of an *A-C* distance (*C* being the middle of an initial *A-B* distance): the unreachable middle of a Zeno tract. The two exchange punch lines rather than punches: in a zero-sum game, like the eternal return, in Zeno spaces, there is only zero movement. A Zeno space is, like a reversed Hamiltonian space, one of absolute friction. Like the Kantian dynamical sublime, the Zeno space is conducive to chaotomic dismeasurement. Here the minimal unit is negative: Every/thing gets lost in the middle of the distance; everything passes

through the condition of its physical nonexistence. The real triviality (a single step is enough to prove Zeno's nonsense) and the ideal one (a single thought suffices to prove his detractors' nonsense) are infinitely distant from one another. And this distance is the irreducible, ironic, and frightening 'middle' of time. This time does not need to return to fuel our fears — it simply is, it just happens, and the distinction between once and many times disappears in its eventness.<sup>16</sup> The existence of movement is *ekstatic* there where measure precedes movement. Beyond the polemical response — movement makes measurement impossible — there is nothing one can contemplate, except for the fulfillment of language that is the nothingness of contemplation. At which point, one has to — on aesthetic and ethical grounds — fall silent.<sup>17</sup>

The relations between Firstnesses are linear, and the line is the last line of visuality, the collapse of form into the point that marks its disappearance. Two eyes are not enough to see it, but one and another one. Borges's style arrests confident perspectivalism — the Firstnesses are anamorphic to one another, and vision's blind spot is contained at the very core of his writing (yet, not of any writing, as Blanchot will say later). Rather than a contour that grants germinations of shapes and lends legitimacy to geometricians (who, since Plato and Euclid, should be better called *géomâitres*), the pure line is a demarcation between form and its disappearance, between the circle and the point. The pure line is a limit: stylized to the point of blindness, its empirical visibility has almost no consequence. I call the Borgesian second reading 'linear' in that it goes on on a 'line' that links the Peircean 'First entities'. At the same time, the pure line is the limit between them and the sign of the disappearance of shapes. Once effected, the latter's effect is to throw the reader back into a premythical time, where the shaping function of myth were there not yet — to systematize mankind unto guilt and fear. It is never too early yet always too late to recognize in Borges un *molto vecchio*.

With Cathars of lost gestures like Borges, in whose 'essays' we do not see those who have seen God's luminously lethal face, where we unlearn to fear apocalypses of sulphur, it is the solid silence of rocks that gives us some strength; at least, the strength to locate the underpinnings of his interpretation in a rebellious, abstract model that contradicts inherited common sense models of hermeneutics and temporality.

The distinction between 'cold' and 'hot' (Lévi-Strauss), or 'mythical' and 'secular' (Eliade) civilizations, by now informing other truisms in cultures popular or not, are based on two ways of geometrically spatializing time, or 'chronometries'. The circularity of mythical time

(of 'cold' societies) is enforced by the periodical, ritual repetition of myth; the linearity of historical time, by dominant change that retains ritual traces only in the secular ideology of 'progress'.

Circular hermeneutics has emerged only after the simple form of an 'arrow-shaped' history had already unsettled the Christian *Heilsgeschichte* and crystallized in a chronology to which the modern subject could always turn for assurance or comfortable sparing partnership. Chronology emerged as both the backbone and the blackmail of history. It also emerged as the essentially dis/quivering ground for hermeneutics' ornamental addenda, even for its more extreme pronouncement, Dilthey's 'the foundation for the study of history is hermeneutics'.<sup>18</sup> If we superimpose a circular interpretation (where circularity exists both between parts and wholes, and between reader and text) over a linear history, it stands to analogical reason to invert the relationship, and contemplate the superimposition of a linear hermeneutics over a circular, 'cold' civilization.

Let us leave things at this: Borges provides elements of a 'linear hermeneutics' for myth, and thus a deconstruction of myth that does not follow the trodden path of stubborn reason. The *ekstasis* of Firstnesses that make up his 'second readings' leave us to confront his texts as distant others, rather than myths to identify with in rituals of reading. Borges's ritual is — maddening or illuminating — play: after his century, literature is no longer fair game.

## Notes

1. At odds with both the style and the repeated confessions of Borges *il vecchio*, the postmodern mechanics of dis/illusioned self-consciousness effortlessly found in him one of its masterful precursors. Not to say that sassier falsehoods have not been voiced about the Argentinian writer — who would rather smile at the celebration of his centenary — but this one is not entirely devoid of a certain legitimating and sanitary nefariousness either. Most of Borges's confessions given in interview form can be found in *Dos palabras antes de morir y otras entrevistas* (Mateo 1994); *Borges, el memorioso: conversaciones de Jorge Luis Borges con Antonio Carrizo* (Carrizo 1982); *Borges — imágenes, memorias, diálogos* (Vázquez 1980); *Borges — Bioy: confesiones, confesiones* (Braceli 1997); *Diálogos últimos* (Borges and Ferrari 1987); and *Jorge Luis Borges: Conversations* (Burgin 1998).
2. A not atypical example opens the 'Avatars of the Tortoise': 'There is one concept that corrupts and perplexes all others. I am not speaking of evil, whose limited empire is that of ethics; I am speaking of the infinite. I once wished to compile its mobile history ... . Five, seven years of metaphysical, theological, and mathematical apprenticeship would enable me to plan such a book properly. It is unnecessary to add that life denies me that hope, and even that adverb' (Borges 1981: 105).

3. 'Borges has been always the celebrator of things-in-their-farewell, always a poet of loss', writes Harold Bloom in the introduction to the collection he edited (1986: 2). While 'his stories are about the style in which they are written', writes Paul de Man 'God appears on the scene as the power of reality itself, in the form of a death that demonstrates the failure of poetry. This is the deeper reason for the violence that pervades all Borges's stories. God is on the side of chaotic reality and style is powerless to conquer him' (1986 [1964]: 23, 27).
4. 'This style in Borges, becomes the ordering but dissolving act that transforms the unity of experience into the enumeration of its discontinuous parts. Hence his rejection of *style lié* and his preference for what grammarians call parataxis, the mere placing of events side by side without conjunctions; hence also his definition of his own style as baroque, "the style that deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) all its possibilities"' (de Man 1986 [1964]: 26).
5. 'Being exhausted is much more than being tired ... The tired person no longer has any (subjective) possibility at his disposal; he therefore cannot realize the slightest (objective) possibility ... The tired person has merely exhausted the realization, whereas the exhausted person exhausts the whole of the possible ... There is no longer any possible: a relentless Spinozism' (Deleuze 1995: 3-4). Borges's image of Spinoza's 'exhausted sameness' appears in one of his two sonnets dedicated to the philosopher: 'Las traslúcidas manos del judío/Labran en la penumbra los cristales/ Y la tarde que muere es miedo y frío/(Las tardes a las tardes son iguales)' (1989/96: 2.308). ['The Jew's hands, translucent in the dusk,/ Polish the lenses time and again./ The dying afternoon is fear, is/ Cold, and all afternoons are the same'] (for the translation see Borges 1972: 193).
6. Gadamer invokes as examples porting his definition Bergson's insistence on the 'representation of the whole', Natorp's discussion of the organic relationship of part to whole, and Simmel's pronouncements about lived experience (*Erlebnis*). 'Intention' means here either 'meaning' or 'intention', or both.
7. 'The circular relation between the whole and the parts (scripture understandable through its parts). Classical rhetoric compares perfect speech with the organic body, with the relationships between head and limbs. Luther and his successors applied this image, familiar from classical rhetoric, to the process of understanding and developed the universal principle of textual interpretation that all the details of a text were to be understood from the *contextus* (context) and from the *scopus*, the unified sense at which the whole aims' (Gadamer 1975 [1960]: 154).
8. Symbol and perception of the last animal that the dying sight of the blind can hope to 'see', the tiger is suspected of carrying God's magic writ. In 'La escritura de Dios' [The handwriting of God], Tzinacán, the 'magician of the pyramid of Quaholom, which Pedro de Alvarado devastated by fire', considered 'that we were now, as always, at the end of time and that my destiny as the last priest of the god would give me access to the privilege of intuiting the script. ... I imagined that net of tigers, that teeming labyrinth of tigers, inflicting horror upon pastures and flock in order to perpetuate a design. In the next cell there was a jaguar; in his vicinity I perceived a confirmation of my conjecture and a secret favor' (Borges 1989/96: 1.596-599).

In 'El inmortal' [The immortal] the name of Homer becomes the name of everyone, one becomes everyone and everyone — one, and immortal life, closer to animality than to the divine, happens in the universal graveyard of the City of the Immortals. In eternity nothing *has* meaning, for eternity is the materiality of time elevated — or lowered — to absolute resistance. The loss of temporal and individual differences remain carved in undecipherable stone. See also Ronald J. Christ (1986: 49-77).



9. 'In the circle (which is neither vicious nor merely tolerated) is hidden the positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our forc-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conception, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves'. (Heidegger 1962 [1927]: 153).

10. The emotional austerity that, to one point, Borges shared with Flaubert, translated for both into a great variety of *horror pleni*. For an analysis of Borges's rhetorics of silence, see Block de Behar (1994 [1984]).

'The multifold Hydra (that has become the prefiguration or emblem of geometric progressions) would lend a becoming horror to its portal which would be crowned by the sordid nightmares of Kafka', Borges wrote in 'Avatars of the Tortoise' (Borges 1989/96: 1.254). However, the Borgesian de-Hydrated form encounters Kafka's nightmares: the monsters they both unleashed are guarding the extremes of our imaginary world. The Cusan's infinite line '[which] could be a straight line, a triangle, a circle and a sphere' (Nicholas of Cusa 1981: 13) is the opposite of the 'pure line' in which the universe of forms is absorbed. And then, the God of Cusanus (of Pascal after him and of Alanus de Insulis before both), whose center is everywhere and the circumference nowhere, is the point of nothingness, the point that marks the disappearance of everything and its transformation into itself (no-thing), that is, into a void that neither is nor is not. In all of these three 'relations of otherness', the intensity of immanence unsettles the relevance of the binary and the faint hopes of redemption it carries with it *more geometrico*.

11. 'La muerte y la brújula' (1989/96: 1.499–507), translated in *Fictions* (Borges 1962).

12. In 'Trichotomy', the first chapter of the never-finished volume 'A Guess at the Riddle', Peirce defines the 'First', 'Second', and 'Third' as 'ideas so broad that they may be looked upon rather as modes or tones of thought, than as definite notions. ... The First is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything or lying behind anything. The second is that which is what it is by force of something to which it is second. The third is that which is what it is owing to things between which it mediates and which brings into relation to each other. The First must ... be present and immediate, so as not to be second to a representation. It must be fresh and new, for if old it is second to its former state. ... It is also something vivid and conscious; so only it avoids being the object of some sensation. ... It precedes all synthesis and all differentiation; it has no unity and no parts (not to be articulated in thought, for it would lose its innocence. ... What the world was to Adam on the first day he opened his eyes to it, before he had drawn any distinctions, or has become conscious of his own existence — that is first, present, immediate, fresh, new, initiative, original, spontaneous, free, vivid, conscious, and evanescent. Only, remember that every description of it must be false to it' (Peirce 1999: 188–189). See also his 'theological' considerations of Firstness in 'A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God' (Peirce 1999: 260–278).

Deleuze reads in Peirce's Firstness an 'image' (Peirce had initially called it an 'idea') or a 'category'. 'It is the category of the Possible: it gives proper consistency to the possible, it expresses the possible without actualising it [and one reads in the Peircean Firstness a precursor of both Deleuze's "virtual" and "affection-image"], whilst making it a complete mode ... Maine de Biran had already spoken of pure affections, unplaceable because they have no relation to a determinate space, present in the sole form of a 'there is' ... because they have no relation to an ego

(the pains of a hemiplegic, the floating images of falling asleep, the visions of madness)'. Secondness, by contrary, is the category of the Real, in which these qualities have become 'forces' that are related to each other (exertion-resistance, action-reaction, excitation-response) and are actualized in determinate space-times, geographical or historical milieus, and individual people (Deleuze 1991 [1983]: 98).

13. Paradigmatically, 'The Death and the Compass' is treated as a game of intelligence; see for instance de Lailhacar (1990: 155-179).

Erik Lönnrot, a Buenos Aires detective who thought himself a pure 'raisonneur', like Poe's Auguste Dupin, but who, unlike Dupin, was, rather than a poet, an adventurer and a gambler, has to solve a rigorously strange problem: three murders committed in three different locations on the third day of December, January, and February. As the first victim was a renowned Talmudist in whose typewriter a sheet was found with the script, 'The first letter of the name has been articulated' written on it, the detective instinctively takes a 'Cabalistic' line of interpretation to solve the murders' mystery. At the locations of the second and third murders, Lönnrot finds messages according to which the 'second', and the 'last' letters of the name have been articulated. The research he does during the investigation leads him — through half-digested popularized versions of the Kaballah — to the conclusion that the third murder was not the last, but a fourth was supposed to occur: after all, the Greek index for the Jewish God's secret name is 'Tetragrammaton', that which has four, rather than three letters. 'All of a sudden, he felt that he was about to decipher the mystery. A compass (*compás*) and a compass (*brújula*) completed this sudden intuition. He smiled, uttered the word 'Tetragrammaton (a recent acquisition) ...' and left for the location he had calculated for the fourth murder, an isolated spot in Southern Buenos Aires, the quinta 'Triste-le-Roy'. But, instead of catching the murderer, he is caught in turn by dandy Red Scharlach, '*el más ilustre de los pistoleros del Sur*', and Lönnrot's unknown arch-enemy. Disarmed by Scharlach's men, Lönnrot asks, 'Scharlach, is it you who is looking for the Secret Name?' 'No, answers Scharlach, in whose voice Lönnrot hears a weary victory, I am looking for something far more ephemeral and fragile, I'm looking for Erik Lönnrot'. And then proceeds to explain to the detective how he — bitter after a previous and almost lethal encounter with the detective, and betting that both the semidoct and the gambler in Lönnrot will take the 'Kabbalistic' bait — had planted all the signs that led Lönnrot to his chronotope of doom. A few more words are exchanged, then Scharlach carefully opens fire.

14. Spanish distinguishes between *brújula* and *compás*, whereas English uses 'compass' for both instruments (in one Spanglish episode of this work's history, Borges's piece got the second prize in a contest of detective fiction in San Francisco). By way of popular etymology, *brújula*, (which is probably derived, after a contorted history, from the Greek 'pixis') is 'made' into the family of magical tools (*bruja/brujería*: witch/witchcraft). John Irwin, an author who has devoted a great deal of time to Borges's detective pieces, 'The Death and the Compass' in particular, never tackles the bizarre presence and misuse of the *brújula* in his diligent *The Mystery to a Solution. Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story* (1994). Neither Jaime Alazraki (1988) nor Luis Murillo (1986 [1968]: 29-48) tackles the motif of the compass. Borges's poem 'Una brújula' (1989/96: 2.253), first published in 1964 in *El otro, el mismo*, suggests a principle of 'dis-orientation', or mystical loss in the namelessness that dwells behind God's name akin to the function of this tool in 'Death and the Compass'.
15. The phantasm and the real meet in the point of their common vanishing. In Peirce's terms, the fantastic would be the withdrawal of Thirdness, logically followed by the

collapse of the Secondness. For Borges, the fantastic is the theater of Firstness, and 'aletheia' lies in the shining forth of this truth: the truth of fiction is fiction. The theater of Firstness is grounded in freshness, and grounds it in turn: 'every writer creates his precursors', and also every truth is partial, and thus has the potentiality of becoming as impartial as the one just uttered.

16. 'Nietzsche never spoke of mnemonic confirmation of the return', wrote Borges in 'Doctrine of the cycles' (see Rodríguez Monegal and Reid 1981: 70).
17. 'The angel of death, who in some legends is called Samael and with whom it is said even Moses had to struggle, is language. Language announces death — what else does it do? But precisely this announcement makes it so hard for us to die' (Agamben 1997 [1985]: 129).
18. 'I do not believe in history', wrote Borges in 'On the Origins of the Detective Story' (see Rodríguez Monegal and Reid 1981: 147).

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**Special Issue**

**Jorge Luis Borges: The praise of signs**

Guest Editor:

LISA BLOCK DE BEHAR

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