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Subtext as Reported Speech in Borges's Stories

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sin estar ya conmigo ni ser un otro otro
Oliverio Gironde, "Aridandantemenc"

In "El inmortal", the narrator, ostensibly Joseph Cartaphilus, establishes his own identity through literary analysis and, in particular through the finding of the "subtexts" underlying many of the sentences of his confession. The story suggests, therefore, that the speaking or writing *subject* is a function of a set of texts, that the ego that seems to generate the tale is in fact nothing more than a crossfire of intersecting texts. A Cartesian tradition which is far from dead in our time would prepare us for the opposite assumption: the speaking subject is immediately conscious of itself and it guarantees the unity and coherence of its own experience. On the contrary, Borges presents a subject that can only find itself through the subtexts which underlie its own words, and that moreover is a "cleaved" or "split" ego: both Homer and the Roman officer Flaminio Rufo. Borges goes further: he insinuates that his narrator (whose name, "Joseph Cartaphilus" is that of the Wandering Jew in the medieval texts of the legend) is all men, that his expressions imply an infinite number of related texts —namely, that he embodies what some contemporary French critics would call "the infinity of the code". Borges shows that the speaking subject is dependent upon, and has its origin in, a differential system of texts, *and not vice versa*.

María Rosa Lida studied the so-called "sources" of some of Borges's works in a brilliant essay published by *Sur* in 1952.¹ In order to justify my choice of the term "subtext" rather than "source" I shall examine briefly its implications. The concept of "subtext", introduced by Prof. Kiril F. Taranovsky, may be defined as "a reference or allusion within a given work to a previously existing literary text, the knowledge of which is presumably important to the meaning of the work containing the allusion".² Hence, for example, the reference to Dante's *Purgatorio* in Borges's "Poema conjetural" allows us to consider the former as a subtext of the latter. Professor Taranovsky establishes a distinction between "context" on the one hand, which he defines

a "set of texts (by the same author) which contains a similar image", and "subtext", on the other hand, denoting "an already existing text (or texts) reflected in a new one" (Taranovsky, 1974). "Subtext" refers usually to a text written by *another* author, even though a writer may quote himself (it happens often in Ezra Pound's work), case in which "context" and "subtext" overlap.

I propose a threefold distinction among "context", "subtext" and "intertextual space". "Context", as in Taranovsky's paper, denotes a set of texts by one author which includes a similar image. It is possible, for instance, to study all the passages in Borges's works which refer to the image of the "labyrinth", thereby establishing the *context* of any given, isolated passage where that image may appear. In the case of "subtext", however, I suggest a definition that is both more narrow and broader than Taranovsky's. "Subtext" may be seen microscopically and/or macroscopically. From the microscopical point of view, a text A is a subtext of another text B, if and only if B *reproduces* —more or less literally— a given passage of A. For instance, T. S. Eliot's line "Because I do not hope to turn again" ("Ash Wednesday") has a subtext —literally translated— in Guido Cavalcanti's "Per ch'io no spero di tornar giammai". But subtext need not be such a literal rendering. Thus, when Ezra Pound writes in Canto LXXIV: "yet say this to the Possum: a bang, not a whimper,/ with a bang not with a whimper", his subtext is the famous line by Eliot on the "end of the world" ("The Hollow Men"). This example shows one of the most important functions of a subtext, viz., a polemical confrontation with somebody else's word.

From the macroscopical standpoint, both texts may be related in a way that does not imply any direct or indirect quotation of the one in the other. This could be the case of some parodies. But the macroscopical subtext must be somehow indicated, signified, singled out by the text whose subtext we claim it to be. For example, we could say that Galdós's novel *La desheredada* has as a multiple subtext the set of all novels —such as "La gitánilla" and "La ilustre fregona"— whose plot is based on the recognition of a seemingly lowly child by its real, prominent parents. In this case, as in the previous one of Pound and Eliot, Galdós's work alludes polemically to those so-called "idealistic" novels, even though he may not quote any passage from them. However, if it

is the case that a macroscopical subtext does not require the presence of microscopical ones, the converse is not true. In fact, a quoted passage almost always "spills over" the entire text which contains it, so that the whole of text A permeates the whole of text B. This means that a microscopically determined subtext is always relevant macroscopically.

"Intertextual space" (a term not used by Taranovsky) is the field of differences created by the interaction of a new work and the preexistent constellation of texts in which it is inserted. This totality of the texts which exist at given point, we could call, borrowing a term of Michel Foucault's, the "Library". As those imagined by Borges, this Library is infinite: Every new work, every new reading of a work enriches and multiplies it. Borges himself provides an excellent instance of intertextuality in his essay on "Kafka y sus precusores" (Borges, 1960). Borges shows how the works of Kafka create their own forerunners, i. e., they transform the past by generating a new intertextual network, which includes Zeno's argument of Achilles and the turtle, a Chinese text of the IX century, two works of Kierkegaard, a poem by Browning, one of the *Histoires désobligeantes* by León Bloy and one of Lord's Dunsany's stories:

... las heterogéneas piezas que he enumerado se parecen a Kafka; si no me equivoco, no todas se parecen entre sí. En cada uno de esos textos está la idiosincracia de Kafka, en grado mayor o menor, pero si Kafka no hubiera escrito, no la percibiríamos; vale decir, no existiría. El poema *Fears and Scruples* de Robert Browning profetiza la obra de Kafka, pero nuestra lectura de Kafka afina y desvía sensiblemente nuestra lectura del poema. Browning no lo leía como nosotros lo leemos... cada escritor *crea* a sus precusores. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción del pasado, como ha de modificar el futuro. En esta correlación nada importa la identidad o la pluralidad de los hombres. El primer Kafka de *Betrachtung* es menos precursor del Kafka de los mitos sombríos y de las instituciones atroces que Browning o Lord Dunsany.³

The text I have just reproduced contains a fundamental insight: intertextual space should be understood *synchronically*, as a simultaneous and open totality. I think that we should also interpret Taranovsky's "context" and "subtext" without any diachronic, chronological bias. In fact, the concept of "context"

virtually implies the elimination of diachrony: an earlier text by a given author can explain a later one, and vice versa. In practice, we are accepting this bracketing of the diachronic dimension whenever we study a writer's early, unpublished texts in the light of his later, published work. That is why I prefer the term "subtext" rather than the traditional one, "source", which implies a commitment to the diachronic approach and completely excludes the synchronic one. At this point it should be obvious that "context" and "subtext" are particular cases for the wider "intertextual space".

Finally, the study of subtext in the microscopical sense, i. e., the more or less literal, but always recognizable, reproduction of somebody else's word, leads one to establish a connexion between "subtext", on the one hand, and the different forms of reported speech, on the other. Prof. Omry Ronen of Tel Aviv has already pointed out this relationship, comparing the phenomena of subtext with the theory of the "double-voiced work" developed by the great Soviet theoretician Mixail Baxtin in his epoch-making book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.⁴ According to Baxtin, when an expression, a "word" by one speaker bears in itself the trace of another's voice, because it foresees, polemicalizes with, or casts a "sideward glance" upon, the word of another speaker, we have a "double-voiced" word, i. e., an expression in which two or more voices intersect.

Obviously, subtexts which are reproduced literally and between quotation marks or in italics, like a certain line of the *Illiad* ("los ricos teucros de Zelea que beben el agua negra del Esep") in "El inmortal" closely resemble direct discourse. Recently Barbara Hall Partee has shown that "there is a close match between the permissible dialog phenomena and the phenomena that occur in direct quotation".⁵ She has made a very good case for considering direct quotation as akin to what we could call a "microdialog". However, any attempt to correlate types of subtext and the other forms of reported speech encounters serious difficulties, due to the insufficient development of both the theory of subtext and that of the types of discourse. The study of the so-called "free indirect style" or "quasi-direct discourse" may provide a useful model for the theory of subtext if we recall Pierre Guiraud's observation that "the function of free indirect

style is to combine and superimpose the words (voice and linguistic forms) of the narrator and his characters".⁶ Provisionally, we may suggest that the phenomena of subtext, microscopically considered, seem to occupy a wide and varied spectrum between two poles: the "microdialogs" studied by Hall Partee, which are so reminiscent of Unamuno's "monodialogos", and the monological texts in which the author speaks, or tries to speak, with an unmodulated voice.

Subtexts, especially those that function as the ones in "El inmortal" imply a divided, split ego as their "speaker". The voice which says "los ricos teucros de Zelea que beben el agua negra del Esepo" is and is not Homer's, is and is not Rufo's—not to speak of Joseph Cartaphilus, to whom the manuscript is initially attributed, nor of the "Editor" who in the "posdata de 1950" fends off apocryphal criticisms and points out several "subtexts" not indicated by the narrator. The complexity and internal contradictoriness of the text stands out all the more strikingly if we consider the name of Joseph Cartaphilus. In the earliest medieval texts of the legend of the Wandering Jew, this character is not, of course, a Jew but a Greek janitor of Pontius Pilate, and his name, "karta philos" means the "very beloved one". Thus the manuscript of the old bookseller, "de ojos grises y barba gris" is attributed to the most accursed of men, who is called "the most beloved". "El inmortal" may be read, therefore, as emblematic of the condition of the subject caught in the network of the signifier.

The concept of subtext helps us in deciphering the enigmatic last words of another story of "El Aleph", the one whose title is "Deutsches Requiem". We remember that it is a first-person narrative, attributed to a German nobleman, Otto Dietrich zur Linde, who after reading Nietzsche and Spengler, and after being accidentally castrated, sets out to demonstrate in his own life that man can transcend pity and compassion and fully negate the "slave morality" of the Christians. At the end of the Second World War, and just before his execution as a war criminal, zur Linde writes his "confession". He considers himself innocent in spite of his crimes, which he does not attempt to deny or excuse. He is innocent because he has been a participant in a necessary and desirable historical task:

El mundo se moría de judaísmo y de esa enfermedad del judaísmo, que es la fe de Jesús; nosotros le enseñamos la violencia y la fe de la espada... Muchas cosas hay que destruir para edificar el nuevo orden; ahora sabemos que Alemania era una de esas cosas... ¿Qué importa que Inglaterra sea el martillo y nosotros el yunque? Lo importante es que rija la violencia, no las serviles timideces cristianas... Mi carne puede tener miedo; yo, no.⁷

Two subtexts underlie this passage. The most obvious one is the German proverb "Bist du Amboss, sei geüdig; bist du Hammer, schlage zu!", that is, "If you are the anvil, be patient; if you are the hammer, strike!" But the last two sentences reveal a particularly impressive subtext, namely, the words of Jesus Christ in the place called Gethsemane: "tò mèn pneūma próthumon, he dè sàrx asthenés", "the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26: 41 and Mark, 14:38). The pious Christian may feel that this rapprochement is abominable—but it should not surprise us in Borges, who wrote a text, "Tres versiones de Judas" in which it is claimed, through the voice of an imaginary Danish theologian, that the true Redeemer was Judas, not Christ. This subtext does not appear unheralded. Zur Linde refers repeatedly to the Bible, quotes Saint Paul and alludes to the story of King David. He shows an intimate knowledge of the Judaeo-Christian Scripture—therefore, his opposition of self and flesh cannot but remind the reader of the similar words of Christ. We have here a slightly reworked subtext.

The problem consists in interpreting the wealth of connotative meaning carried by this New Testament subtext. The difficulty we encountered when we tried to correlate subtext and reported speech may be due to this complexity of connotation in the subtext, which is not matched by the relative simplicity of the ordinary examples of reported speech. A subtext like this is a highly "overdetermined" one: several interpretations are simultaneously valid. Along the lines of "Tres versiones de Juoas", we may think that the Redeemer *must* be a totally paradoxical, incredible being: the highest can only manifest itself through the lowest. We may point out that zur Linde's confession casts Germany and himself into a sacrificial role: all sacrificial victims are one, Borges could say, who has written that "en el instante supremo del coito, todos los hombres son el mismo nombre, y

cada hombre que lee una línea de William Shakespeare es William Shakespeare". But I prefer another reading, which does not exclude, of course, the ones I have just mentioned. Zur Linde's repetition of Christ's words is a metaphysical *slip of the tongue*: while the Nazi thinks that he has transcended Christianity and its Greek forerunners (Socrates and Plato) he reasserts one of the fundamental presuppositions of Platonic and Christian thought, the dichotomy of spirit (the "true" self of man) and flesh, the radical Western delusion that Porphyry echoes at the beginning of his biography of Plotinus, "who", he says, "was ashamed of being in a body". Zur Linde's tragedy is not his defeat nor his execution but a pathetic inability to transcend the basic assumptions of his cultural environment. Like Averroes in "La busca de Averroes", who cannot find out what is the meaning of "tragedy" and "comedy", because they do not exist in the Islamic world, zur Linde never realizes that he remains inside the metaphysical tradition of the West, that he thinks he has negated and overcome.

NOTES

- 1 María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, "Contribución al estudio de las fuentes literarias de Jorge Luis Borges", *Sur*, 213-214 (1952), pp. 50-57.
- 2 David Borke, "Annenskij and Mallarmé: A Case of Subtext", *Slavic and Eastern European Journal*, vol. 21 N° 1 (1977), p. 46. Kiril F. Taranovsky, "The Problem of Context and Subtext in the Poetry of Ossip Mandelstam", *Slavic Forum*, ed. by M. S. Flier (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), pp. 149-159.
- 3 Jorge Luis Borges, *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1966), pp. 147-148.
- 4 M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973) and *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968.)
- 5 Barbara Hall Partee, "The Syntax and Semantics of Quotation", in *A Festschrift for Morris Halle* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), pp. 410-418.
- 6 Pierre Guiraud, "Modern Linguistics Looks at Rhetoric: Free Indirect Style", in Joseph Strelka, ed., *Patterns of Literary Style* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), pp. 77-89.
- 7 Borges, *El Aleph* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1972), pp. 91-92.

"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius": Historia y desplazamientos

Saúl Sosnowski

Toda lectura de lo denominado "historia" presupone la aceptación de determinados paradigmas objetivos, de datos fijos y básicamente inalterables frente a toda interpretación, que toleran la presencia del vocablo "cierto" o "verídico". Esta categoría se transforma en una convención al integrarse a un texto ficticio. La utilización de datos históricos concretos cede su versión original para transformarse en motivo literario sujeto a la reordenación impuesta por la lógica interna del texto. A partir de ese momento toda relación con lo objetivo cabe bajo el signo de la "coincidencia". Esto permite la re-escritura de todo hecho según los parámetros ficticios impuestos por la versión escogida por el narrador, versión que parecería obedecer a casualidades apenas al desarrollo histórico en sí, pero que constata sus mediatizaciones ideológicas. La participación en el orden ficticio de hechos y personajes que sostienen una presencia "independiente" fuera del texto, denuncia un mayor cuestionamiento de la verosimilitud que recorre y entrecruza los múltiples planos que se aunan en la página del relato.¹ Las modificaciones que registra la traducción de lo "real-identificable" a lo que limita su realidad específica dentro del texto, mide la distancia que registra la función ideológica del lenguaje que ordena el relato.² No se trata con esto de volver a enunciar la noción de "realismo" como medida que capta el factor esencial de las cosas y sus múltiples relaciones,³ sino de acercarnos al posible sentido propuesto por la reordenación del universo que surge de la imposición de los deseos de un momento que, aún en su máxima "creación", no abandona sus características lúdicas.

Los exégetas de Borges se han (nos hemos) encargado de registrar la presencia de determinados motivos fundamentales que atraviesan su texto. La clasificación de estos motivos —su conciencia de la presencia constante— también han promovido la dinámica de huidas y encuentros entre "Borges y yo" y "El centinela"⁴ que no deja de acechar desde los mismos espejos que promovieron el descubrimiento de Tlön.