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ALLUSION IN THE WORK OF JORGE LUIS BORGES

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In Borges's work the theme of everything and nothing and the related theme of construction and destruction are used to symbolize the struggle between the different meanings that a text may embody. Borges often uses the technique of reference or allusion to other authors to explore this struggle and to show the way in which one text may aid in the construction or destruction of particular meanings in another.

Throughout Borges's work there is a preoccupation with the idea that opposites entail each other, and that the union of opposites can lead to a higher synthesis. These have been preoccupations since his early days. In his *Ultraísta* period Borges wrote: "En álgebra, el signo más y el signo menos se excluyen; en literatura, los contrarios se hermanan e imponen a la conciencia una sensación mixta; pero no menos verdadera que las demás" (De Torre 323). In his essay "Indagación de la palabra" from *El idioma de los argentinos* of 1928 he wrote: "Todas las ideas son afines o pueden serlo. Los contrarios lógicos pueden ser sinónimos para el arte; su clima, su temperatura emocional suele ser común" (28).

Opposites are seen by Borges as fairly regular or perfect reflections. He says that the words, "vemos ahora por espejo, en oscuridad; después veremos cara a cara; ahora conozco en parte; pero después conoceré *como ahora soy conocido*," are the "perfecto reverso" to Pascal's words "combien de royaumes nous ignorent!" (O.C. 703). The most pure opposite of all, the one that involves the most perfect symmetry, is that of everything and nothing. Borges shows a constant preoccupation with the idea that everything is equivalent to nothing, and he often uses this idea when writing about Shakespeare. In the essay "De alguien a nadie" he writes: "La magnificación hasta la nada sucede

o tiende a suceder en todos los cultos; inequívocamente la observamos en el caso de Shakespeare" (*O.C.* 738). This essay contains perhaps Borges's clearest statement of the idea. He writes: "Ser una cosa es inexorablemente no ser todas las otras cosas; la intuición cõnfusa de esa verdad ha inducido a los hombres a imaginar que no ser es más que ser algo y que, de alguna manera, es ser todo" (739).

The opposites of everything and nothing as they relate to meaning find their fullest expression in "La biblioteca de Babel." Infinite meaning is equivalent to no meaning. The library of Babel contains all books that could possibly be written with the conventional orthographic symbols: "En efecto, la Biblioteca incluye todas las estructuras verbales, todas las variaciones que permiten los veinticinco símbolos ortográficos. . ." (*Ficciones* 98). Hence, we would presume that the amount of meaning contained in the books of the library would also be vast if not infinite. But then we read: "Hablar es incurrir en tautologías" (99). The possibility of infinite meaning means the actuality of no definite meaning. Any one book could have so many different meanings, that no one meaning has any greater claim upon our attention than any other.

"La biblioteca de Babel" makes it clear that an infinite number of words are capable of producing almost no meaning. The stories "El espejo y la máscara" and "Undr" from *El libro de arena* make it clear that one word is capable of producing infinite meaning. These two situations form a kind of "perfecto reverso" similar to that described by Borges in his essay "Pascal" (*O.C.* 703). Hence, it need not surprise us that he draws our attention to their similarity. In the epilogue to *El libro de arena* he writes: "'La biblioteca de Babel' (1941) imagina un número infinito de libros; 'Undr' y 'El espejo y la máscara', literaturas seculares que constan de una sola palabra" (102).

Another closely related pair of opposites that entail each other in Borges's work are the construction of meaning and the destruction of meaning. This pair is closely linked to the previous pair. In fact, the previous pair is the most extreme form that the latter pair can take. Construction of all possible meanings corresponds to everything, and destruction of all possible meanings corresponds to nothing. Borges uses them to symbolize the nature of literature, both as it is written and as we read it. Homer, who is the main representative of the universal author in Borges's work, is both everything and nothing. As such he represents another idea that is met throughout Borges's work: that of the universal author. In "La flor de Coleridge" he cites Valéry, Emerson and Shelley as having believed in the universal author. Borges quotes Emerson who expresses the belief thus: "Diríase que una sola persona ha redactado cuantos libros hay en el mundo; tal unidad central hay en ellos que es innegable que son obra de un solo caballero omnisciente" (*O.C.* 639).

The main representative of the universal author, the man who is all authors, in Borges's work is the immortal of "El inmortal," who is Homer. As Ronald Christ puts it: "There is one immortal who is all the rest: the story's

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title is pointedly singular; Homer is the universal author" (197). In "El inmortal" we read: "Yo he sido Homero; en breve, seré Nadie, como Ulises; en breve seré todos: estaré muerto" (*El Aleph* 27). The narrator of "El inmortal," who is Homer, is both everyone and no-one. Thus in terms of personal identity he is everything and nothing. Also, however, he represents everything and nothing in terms of meaning. He is an author, and his words are the only thing he leaves. He writes: "sólo quedan palabras" (27). However, he is not only an author but all authors. In "El hacedor" he is the maker or the poet. The words that he has left under the name of Cartaphilus are just one possible selection from the infinite number of words that he could have selected. He writes: "Ninguno de estos testimonios es falso; lo significativo es el hecho de haberlos destacado" (26). He is all authors so he could have chosen to write all stories. However, that would have been the same as writing no story. Infinite meaning would have become no meaning. Instead he chose to select and construct one story. This story alludes to the rest of the universal book.

In the "Posdata" to "El inmortal" we are told of the book *A Coat of Many Colours* by Nahum Cordovero. Cordovero denounces some insertions from other authors in Cartaphilus's manuscript. It would appear at first sight that Cordovero makes no reference to Shakespeare. If this were the case, as Ronald Christ expresses it, "Shakespeare, so appropriate to Borges's theme, would be conspicuously absent from 'The Inmmortal'" (214). However, as Christ points out Cordovero does refer to Shakespeare by means of this reference to Ben Jonson, in which he alludes to "Ben Jonson, que definió a sus contemporáneos con retazos de Séneca. . ." (*El Aleph* 27, Christ 213-14). Christ then cites the words Ben Jonson wrote of Shakespeare:

And though thou hadst small Latine, and less Greek, From thence to honour thee, I would not seek, For names; but call forth thundering Aeschilus, Euripides, and Sophocles to us, Paccuvius, Accius, him of Cordova dead To life again. (214)

"Him of Cordova dead" is, as Christ points out, a reference to Seneca (214).

That this reference to Shakespeare should be recognized as a Kabbalistic or hieroglyphical clue has also been pointed out by Christ (212). The words Cordova and Cordovero are very similar, and Moses Cordovero was a famous Kabbalistic writer. Christ also gives further reasons for interpreting Cordovero's opinions Kabbalistically, but he does not mention that even the allusion to the Moses of Moses Cordovero may have a hieroglyphical significance. He fails to mention that, according to Scholem, Moses Cordovero is associated with the "devaluation of the simple literal meaning" of the Torah. (Scholem 63-64) To illustrate that this doctrine was "no invention of the later Kabbalists" (63) Scholem had quoted a passage from the *Zohar* in which the

following words occur: "This body [the Torah's] is cloaked in garments, which consist of worldly stories. Fools see only the garment, which is the narrative part of the Torah: they know no more and fail to see what is under the garment. Those who know more see not only the garment but also the body that is under the garment" (64). In other words, the garment of the Torah is likened to its literal meaning. The title of Cordovero's book, *A coat of many colours*, may be seen as alluding to this passage. Cordovero's literal meaning, that expressed by the garment of his book, that Cartaphilus's document is apocryphal, is to be allowed to give way to the body that is under the garment, the hieroglyphical meanings that lie below.

Ronald Christ has given other reasons that reinforce this one for the name *A coat of many colours*. For instance, as he expresses it, "*cento* is simply Latin for rag cushion or patchwork quilt" (212). He does not mention, however, the use of this term in the *Religio Medici*. There Browne refers to a beggar's clothes as "these *Centoes* and miserable outsides" (*Major Works* 159). Although Cordovero denounces Cartaphilus's manuscript as apocryphal because it contains various intrusions from other authors, his own work is itself a patchwork garment. As the passage from the *Zohar* warns us, it should not be interpreted literally. In other words Cordovero may not be condemning Cartaphilus for plagiarism, but rather pointing us in the direction of other authors to which he secretly alludes.

One of these authors is Sir Thomas Browne. Borges shares many characteristics with Browne and often alludes to him (Stephens 69-75). However, Browne was also, like Cartaphilus, a master of plagiarism, as has been shown by R. R. Cawley in "Sir Thomas Browne and his Reading." Browne refers to plagiarism in the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* with the following words:

Thus we may perceive the ancients were but men, even like ourselves. The practice of transcription in our days, was no Monster in theirs; Plagiarie had not its nativity with Printing, but began in Times when thefts were difficult, and the paucity of Books scarce wanted that Invention.

Nor did they only make large use of other Authors, but often without mention of their names. (I: 35)

Browne here seems to consider plagiarism a fairly natural and harmless occupation, an attitude no doubt shared by Cartaphilus. As the representative of the universal author, plagiarism or allusion is central to Cartaphilus's work.

Although Cordovero makes no reference to Joyce there are in fact many allusions to *Ulysses* in "El inmortal," and there are cryptic allusions to Shakespeare. There is, however, a cryptic allusion to Joyce which is linked up with those to Shakespeare. As has been seen, we are told that it is strange that

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Homer should copy "en el siglo trece, las aventuras de Simbad, de otro Ulises" (*El Aleph* 26). We are also told that the testimony given to this effect is pathetic as it was given by Homer. In this story Homer is presented as similar to Odysseus in that he is a wanderer who after many years returns to the place he started from. Borges is alluding to Stephen's discussion in that other *Ulysses*, in particular of Shakespeare's relationship to Hamlet and Hamlet's father, and in general the relationship of his life and his art (Joyce 184-217). Richard Ellman expresses Stephen's view in the discussion as the following: "As for the events that happened to Shakespeare, they were in some manner projections of his image, for he was like Socrates going forth from his house to meet what was not himself, but always meeting himself. Stephen is propounding here not subjectivism, but Vico's notion that the human world is made by man, and that we can only encounter in it what is already implicit in ourselves." (84) Just as Stephen thinks Shakespeare constantly meets himself in his art so does Homer/Cartaphilus constantly meet himself or projections of his image in the manuscript of "El inmortal." For instance, we read: "En el otoño de 1066 milité en el puente de Stamford. . ." (*El Aleph* 24). Thus the immortal encounters the image of his previous incarnation, the soldier Marco Flaminio Rufo. Homer, as has been seen, in a sense meets his previous self in copying out the adventures of Sinbad. Again he does when in Aberdeen in 1714 he subscribed to "los seis volúmenes de la Iliada de Pope" (24) and enjoyed them greatly. As Cartaphilus/Homer discovered, the selection of these facts is significant ("lo significativo es el hecho de haberlos destacado" (26)). They have been selected because they reflect the image of the writer.

Cordovero's hidden allusion to Shakespeare also alludes to that idea. In the piece "Everything and Nothing" Borges writes: "alguna vez pensó que en los libros hallaría remedio para su mal y así aprendió el poco latín y menos griego de que hablaría un contemporáneo" (*O.C.* 803). Borges applies the idea of everything and nothing to Homer and Shakespeare more than to any other authors. In other words the allusion to Shakespeare is relevant. However, the fact that Borges did not refer explicitly to Shakespeare is significant. This decision was part of the selection that led to the construction of one particular story. This story alludes to the universal book. But another different story could also allude to it. That other story, if, for instance it substituted the words "de Shakespeare" for the words "que definió a sus contemporáneos con retazos de Séneca" would be a different story. The task of Cartaphilus, as the representative of the universal author is to leave one story, one selection or construction, from the infinite number of possible stories that the universal book contains. Borges suggests that the alternative to trying to produce all meaning, and hence to produce no meaning, is to select and construct one story. The corollary to this construction, as will be shown, is destruction. This pair of opposites also function both in relationship to the words on the page, and in relationship to the meaning in the mind of the reader. In "El hacedor" Homer

remembers an experience from his youth in which he imagined himself as Ajax and Perseus. He returned from his adventure with "la hoja sangrienta" (O.C. 782). Homer is not just Homer, but all writers, and this blood-stained blade may also represent the writer's paper (Sturrock 195). Writing, that we normally consider construction, is here linked to destruction.

In "La busca de Averroes" destruction is linked to translation, which we also normally consider to be a form of construction. Averroes works on "la traducción de una traducción," which echoes "Destrucción de la Destrucción" (*El Aleph* 93). It becomes clear within the context of the story why translation and destruction should be linked. Averroes's translation of Aristotle is destructive. We read: "Aristú (Aristóteles) denomina tragedia a los panegíricos y comedias a las sátiras y anatemas" (103). Also the title of Averroes's book *Tahafut-ul-Tahafut* was originally the Arabic equivalent of *The Incoherence of Incoherence* but it was translated into *Destructio destructiones*. Also Averroes's original name, Ibn Rushd, was translated into Averroes, and his work was misinterpreted by the so-called Latin Averroists. So in echoing "Destrucción de la Destrucción" with "la traducción de una traducción" Borges is pointing to the fact that Averroes has made a destructive translation of Aristotle, and that the title of Averroes's book *Tahafut-ul-Tahafut* has been destructively translated. He is also pointing to the destruction of Ibn Rushd's doctrines that took place when the doctrines were translated and attributed to a man called Averroes. In all these cases destruction is associated with translation. However, "La destrucción de la destrucción" (or rather "Tahafut-ul-Tahafut") was intended as a refutation or destruction of "Destrucción de filósofos" (or "Tahafut-ul-falasifa") (*El Aleph* 93). So Borges also associated destruction with the critical relationship of one text to another.

Both translation and criticism involve the relationship of one text to another. So also does allusion, and Borges points to its destructive properties also. For instance, in "Los teólogos" Borges shows us the possible destructive properties of allusion. In that story a man, Juan de Panonia, is destroyed because his words are quoted out of context. The original meaning which they had when "los monótonos" were important turned into a different meaning when the "histriones" were important. Juan de Panonia did not understand this: "No entendió (no quiso entender) que hablar de los monótonos era hablar de lo ya olvidado" (*El Aleph* 46). Their original meaning in the collective mind had been replaced by a new meaning.

The destructive properties of allusion are also explored in the allusions to St. Augustine and Plato at the beginning of "Los teólogos." Borges writes: "Ardieron palimpsestos y códices, pero en el corazón de la hoguera, entre la ceniza, perduró casi intacto el libro duodécimo de la *Civitas Dei*, que narra que Platón enseñó, en Atenas, que al cabo de los siglos, todas las cosas recuperarán su estado anterior, y él, en Atenas, ante el mismo auditorio, de nuevo enseñará esa doctrina" (37). Borges then tells us that the people who read this

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text "dieron en olvidar que el autor sólo declaró esa doctrina para poder mejor confutarla" (37). So Borges suggests that due to the fact that only a part of St. Augustine's book remained, its meaning in the collective mind was changed. ... > ?

However, there is a further subtlety in Borges's reference to the collective misunderstanding of St. Augustine. The words that Borges uses to describe Plato's doctrines are almost exactly the same as the words he attributes to Sir Thomas Browne in "El tiempo circular." There he writes: "En 1643 Thomas Browne declaró en una de las notas del primer libro de la *Religio medici*: 'Año de Platón - Plato's year - es un curso de siglos después del cual todas las cosas recuperarán su estado anterior y Platón, en su escuela, de nuevo explicará esta doctrina'" (O.C. 393). Browne writes of "Platoes yeare": "A revolution of certaine thousand yeares when all things should return unto their former estate and he be teaching again in his schoole as when he delivered this opinion" (*Major Works* 66). As has already been shown Borges draws our attention in "El tiempo circular" to the fact that Plato did not say that everything would repeat itself, but rather that he said that the seven planets would return to their original position. So not only did St. Augustine misunderstand Plato, but so also did Sir Thomas Browne, as did other people also. In "Los teólogos" Borges quotes words that he attributed to Sir Thomas Browne in the context of that discussion. The destruction of the original meaning of Plato's doctrine has brought about the construction of a new meaning. The collective mind has selectively destroyed and selectively remembered Plato's doctrine. In "Los teólogos" the same happens to St. Augustine's doctrine and, as has been seen, to Juan de Panonia's. That Borges has been concerned with this idea from his youth is made clear from the following words from "La fruición literaria" in *El idioma de los argentinos*: "El tiempo, tan preciado de socavador, tan famoso por sus demoliciones y sus ruinas de Itálica, también construye" (107).

However, the allusion to the *City of God* is even more complex. Borges refers us the the twelfth chapter where we read: "just as Plato, for example, taught his disciples at Athens in the fourth century, in the school called the Academy, so in innumerable centuries of the past, separated by immensely wide and yet finite intervals, the same Plato, the same city, the same school, the same disciples have appeared time after time, and are to reappear time after time in innumerable centuries in the future" (Augustine 488). This does not actually say that Plato taught this. In other words Borges misinterprets St. Augustine in "Los teólogos." Also, the passage just quoted is part of a discussion by St. Augustine of the way in which so many people have misinterpreted words from Ecclesiastes. Yet again the destruction and construction of meaning are seen as complimentary and dependent on particular interpretations of words.

In "El fin" also Borges points to the destructive properties of allusion. Borges treats the *gaucho* as an archetypal literary figure. In the poem "El gau-

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cho" he writes: "Fue tantos otros y hoy es una quieta pieza que mueve la literatura" (O.C. 1111). The whole of "El fin" can be considered to be an allusion to *Martín Fierro*. In *El "Martín Fierro"* Borges writes: "Podemos imaginar una pelea más allá del poema, en la que el moreno venga la muerte de su hermano" (O.C. en colaboración 556). In "El fin" Borges writes about this imagined fight. He extends *Martín Fierro*, and hence may alter it for ever in the mind of the reader. The reader may reject the alteration or continuation of the original, but he will never be able to rid himself of the possibility of another fight after the end of the story. As John Sturrock expresses it: "The real-life contestants in the *payada*, therefore, are a nineteenth-century poet and a twentieth-century prose writer, who has set out to correct something of which he perhaps does not approve in the other's work" (43). So *Martín Fierro* is in a sense destroyed by "El fin." However, entailed by the destruction of the original text is the construction of "El fin" and of a new imagined *Martín Fierro*.

As has been said "El fin" is an allusion to *Martín Fierro*. It is also, however, a part of the natural process of literature, in which one text is written in relationship to another, or to others. Borges shows he is aware that this is the natural process of literature when in his prologue to *Martín Fierro* he writes: "La verdad es que sin la tradición que Hidalgo inaugura no hubiera existido el *Martín Fierro*, pero también es cierto que Hernández se rebeló contra ella y la transformó y puso en el empeño todo el fervor que encerraba su pecho y que tal vez no hay otra manera de utilizar una tradición" (*Prólogos* 94). His use of the words "se rebeló contra ella" suggest that Borges thinks that *Martín Fierro* destroyed the tradition it came from perhaps in a similar way to the way in which "El fin" destroys *Martín Fierro*. However, the words "y la transformó" show that Borges is aware that the rebellion or destruction entail a transformation or a construction.

In this story the *gaucho* is seen as both a knife fighter and an artist, specifically a singer and a guitar player. Both these aspects of the *gaucho* are presented as part of the same activity. The musical contest is described as "una larga *payada* de contrapunto," and the knife fight as "otra clase de contrapunto" (*Ficciones* 184, 186). In "El hacedor" also, fighting with a knife and artistic activity are presented as part of the same activity. "La hoja sangrienta" with which the young Homer returns could be either the blood stained blade or the ink stained paper (O.C. 782). A similar idea is present in Borges's use of the duel. Many of Borges's stories, not just those actually called "El duelo" and "El otro duelo" could easily have been called by these names (O.C. 1053-1061). In "El duelo" the struggle is as much between two antithetical theories of art and literature as between two people. In "El fin" the "negro" loses the artistic contest with the guitar, but then wins the knife contest. In winning the knife fight against *Martín Fierro* he allows Borges to win the artistic contest against José Hernández. So the competition by the knife has proved itself superior to an artistic competition for the "negro," but in so doing it has enabled

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Borges to win the artistic contest against José Hernández. The knife duel and the artistic duel are both part of the one process, and yet at the same time are in competition with each other.

It is this competition that is both a construction and a destruction that the *gaucho* symbolizes. Construction and destruction entail each other in Borges's work, and they also, as do everything and nothing, symbolize the nature of literature. All of these ideas are contained in the following words used to describe the old *gaucho* in "El sur": "Los muchos años lo habían reducido y pulido como las aguas a una piedra o las generaciones de los hombres a una sentencia" (*Ficciones* 201). The *gaucho* is an archetypal literary figure, so a reference to him alludes to the universal book. In that sense the *gaucho* is everything. However, he is also here imagined as reduced to "una sentencia," reduced to a maxim, aphorism, or wise saying: a string of words. Total meaning has been reduced to a few words that may be meaningless. Or alternatively, these few words entail the whole universal book. He is also a destructive force which symbolizes the competitive element involved in the construction of ideas and of literature. He symbolizes the fact that some destruction of that total universal book is essential for the construction in the mind of the reader of manageable ideas. Just as the writer chooses only certain of the ideas and words of the writers that went before him, so also the reader selects certain meanings from the infinite number available in the given words.

In conclusion, the *gaucho* here described symbolizes both the extremes of meaning, the everything and nothing, and the struggle between those extremes, that by destruction constructs. And we, the readers of Borges's work, if we read it in the way that has been suggested, will also have that struggle enacted in our minds. In interpreting Borges's many allusions we may oscillate between feeling that he is producing the infinite meaning of the universal book, and feeling that he is not achieving any coherent meaning. We will also no doubt resolve the struggle, at least temporarily, by constructing some meaning for Borges's work.*

NOTES

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