

# Literary Philosophers

## Borges, Calvino, Eco

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## Borges's Monsters: Unnatural Wholes and the Transformation of Genre

The probing of the philosopher is deliberate, as the role of logic in philosophy demonstrates. . . . On the other hand, the probing of the poet is fortuitous.

—Wallace Stevens, *Opus posthumous*

Every object whose end is unknown to us is provisorily monstrous.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "A Vindication of the Cabala"

Jorge Luis Borges would be pleased with the fervor surrounding the centenary of his birth, and also a little perplexed. Pleased to wander into the bookstores of Mexico City or Buenos Aires and encounter great quantities of new and reprinted editions of his work, stacked on tables devoted solely to him. Perplexed, though, to find that these stacks do not routinely include the work that has made him, for many early twenty-first-century readers, *the* indispensable writer of our time. There are new collections of juvenalia, journalism, and miscellany,<sup>1</sup> new editions of Borges's lectures and literary conversations,<sup>2</sup> and an illustrated collection of his *milongas*.<sup>3</sup> There are also recent critical studies of Borges's work from a variety of disciplinary perspectives: psychoanalysis,<sup>4</sup> cultural history,<sup>5</sup> and philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Yet despite this array of critical commentaries and new anthologies of his occasional writings, fully two-thirds of Borges's work remains uncollected, and thus inaccessible to all but the most diligent, Spanish-speaking researchers. Borges's *Obras completas* are, alas, far from complete.<sup>7</sup>

Everywhere present and yet two-thirds absent, Borges's work is apparently also endlessly polysemic. He has become *the* man for all seasons and disciplines, a multipurpose postmodernist, a marvelously mobile source of authority for every point of view. His work is routinely invoked to illustrate a vast array of theories and critical positions—some held by such diametrically different critics as, say, Michel Foucault and Harold Bloom, each of

whom cites Borges at the outset of his most influential book, Foucault in *Les mots et les choses* and Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Not to mention Umberto Eco, who casts Borges as both medieval monk and paradigmatic postmodernist. Of Borges's amazing versatility, the Argentine critic Beatriz Sarlo writes that he

obliquely discusses in his texts the major topics of contemporary literary theory. This has turned him into a cult writer for literary critics who discover in him the Platonic forms of their concerns: the theory of intertextuality, the limits of the referential illusion, the relationship between knowledge and language, the dilemmas of representation and of narration.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Borges's narrative strategies are designed to suspend authorial adjudication in favor of interpretative possibility: ideas are presented for their narrative and symbolic potential, not for their superior truth claims. Borges recognizes this fact in his epilogue to his 1952 collection, *Other Inquisitions*. He writes that these "miscellaneous essays" revealed to him his own tendency "to evaluate religious or philosophical ideas on the basis of their aesthetic worth and even for what is singular and marvelous about them."<sup>9</sup> It is as much the shape of an idea as its substance that draws Borges to it.

The present collection of essays recognizes this fact, for we, too, have cast Borges as Everyman, and his writings as Everything. We cross not only disciplinary boundaries but also geographical, cultural, and historical ones. The Argentine Borges is housed here with two writers who are both of a subsequent generation and both Italian. Eco and Calvino inevitably occupy a common position with respect to European and Latin American traditions that Borges did not—not the least difference being the presence of Borges in those traditions.<sup>10</sup> So, then, our interdisciplinary undertaking necessarily implies this question: what is it about Borges's expressive forms that makes them move so fluently across disciplines and cultures, even though his subject matter is often dense and difficult? What is it about his miniature narratives that makes them seem to expand to contain the universe?

I will approach these questions by invoking the animal oddities that Borges loved to catalogue and describe, and then move to speculate about Borges's narrative oddities, his idiosyncratic combinations of disciplines and genres. Indeed, as we will see, these oddities are related: monsters are associated with, or inhabit, Borges's most characteristic metaphoric structures—the labyrinth, the mirror, the dream, the circular ruin—and become themselves metaphors of being. His monsters are part of their creator's lifelong exploration of the status of the real, and more particularly, his exploration of the relations of philosophical idealism and literary form.

First, though, we must consider the intellectual culture of Argentina in the 1920s and 1930s. Disciplines are not immune from their changing cultural

and historical contexts, so we will want to inquire about the cultural priorities and textual traditions that Borges inherited as he developed his own idiosyncratic art. How did the fervor of Buenos Aires, as he titled his first volume of poems, compel (and empower) him to redraw the boundaries between disciplines and genres, to universalize the particular, and to make myths and monsters of all kinds?

### Borges's Argentina

Among the stacks of Borges's newly reprinted work in the bookstores of Mexico City and Buenos Aires are his first three books of prose from the 1920s: *Inquisiciones* (*Inquisitions*, 1925), *El tamaño de mi esperanza* (*The Measure of My Hope*, 1926), and *El idioma de los argentinos* (*The Language of Argentines*, 1928).<sup>11</sup> These volumes are filled with the elaborations of a young writer who had not yet established his style. Borges opposed their republication for fully sixty years, but before his death he did give permission to the editors of La Pléiade edition of his complete works to add a selection from these early repudiated books.<sup>12</sup> Then in 1994, eight years after his death and despite his stated wishes, Seix Barral reprinted all three volumes. The contrast of his early work to the spare Borgesian style we have long taken for granted suggests how self-consciously during the late 1920s and 1930s Borges worked to free himself from prevailing Argentine aesthetic norms. These reprinted collections from the 1920s have focused my attention on the collections of the 1930s to see how, in them, the great work of the 1940s, collected in *Ficciones* (1944) and *El aleph* (1949), became possible. I will attend in particular to the work in Borges's collections from the 1930s: *Discusión* (1932), *Historia universal de la infamia* (*A Universal History of Infamy*, 1935), and *Historia de la eternidad* (*A History of Eternity*, 1936).

Beret Strong's study *The Poetic Avant-Garde: The Groups of Borges, Auden, and Breton* compares Borges's avant garde movement, *ultraísmo*, in Buenos Aires in the 1920s, to the somewhat later avant garde groups of Auden in England and Breton in France. She reminds us that these were years of cultural crisis and artistic response, and also years of personal exploration for the young cosmopolite polyglot Borges, struggling with his identity as an Argentine writer. Despite his residence in Europe during World War I and following, and also because of it, Borges returned to Argentina in 1921 with the sense that it was his duty and his calling to write like an Argentine.<sup>13</sup> His three essay collections of the mid-1920s reflect that sense of duty. Underlying mere duty, though, is the larger question of cultural nationalism facing virtually all American writers at the time, both in the United States and in Latin America: how to establish a literary culture distinct from that of the colonizing elite, how to separate authentic cultural identity from imposed identities, how to validate local traditions and at the same time face their

limitations. In fiction, *costumbrismo* (social realism in a regionalist mode) reigned not only in Argentina but throughout Latin America. Beatriz Sarlo affirms that Borges sought to “avoid the pitfalls of local colour, which can only produce a regionalist and narrowly localist literature, without relinquishing that density of culture which comes from the past and is part of our own history.”<sup>14</sup> Of course Borges eventually *does* embody universal categories in regional Argentine figures—gauchos and *compadritos*: as we will see, the stories in which he does so ten years later are breakthrough stories for him, surely in part because he had discovered the means to instantiate the ideal in the most particular of Argentine popular types. For now, however, his challenge was to create a usable past larger than the local and situate himself in relation to it as a citizen of the New World.<sup>15</sup> His later insistence that there is no original idea or text, only commentaries on previous texts, surely derives in part from this historicizing process.

This dual imperative of recuperation and renovation is clear in the poetics of *ultraísmo*, the avant garde movement that Borges single-handedly transplanted from Spain to Argentina upon his return in 1921. “Make it new” was hardly the battle cry of the *ultraístas*, despite their rejection of certain Argentine precursors. Their stated purposes were to create a “new” poetics that would avoid worn-out metaphors but nonetheless foreground metaphor as such, eliminate rhyme in favor of free verse, and, in Beatriz Sarlo’s terms, “construct a literary language for Buenos Aires and also give to the city a mythic dimension.”<sup>16</sup> In their call for cultural recovery and reconstruction, the *ultraístas* proposed an essentially conservative project that more resembles their contemporaries in England, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, than it does expressionism or surrealism or any other European avant garde movement of the time. Pound’s imagism, with its focus on metaphor, and Eliot’s preference for the seventeenth-century “metaphysical” conceits of John Donne and George Herbert parallel Borges’s emphasis on the renovation of figurative language in poetry. Furthermore, Eliot’s antiromantic conception of the impersonality of poetry, the poet’s embeddedness in all literature (as opposed to the poet’s singularity or originality), and the transindividual nature of tradition *per se* parallel Borges’s universalizing aesthetic, which was taking shape at the time. In Eliot’s poetics, as in Borges’s, the priority of the individual poet’s feelings was replaced by the priority of poetic structure, and by the relations among the parts that make up that structure. Wimsatt and Brooks say of Eliot that he “transposed poetic theory from the axis of pleasure versus pain to that of unity versus multiplicity”<sup>17</sup>—a statement that might be equally applied to Borges. As early as 1920, Borges wrote that “ultraism is perhaps nothing other than the splendid synthesis of ancient literature,”<sup>18</sup> thus foretelling his own aspiration to enter and extend the Western literary tradition by creating synthesizing narrative strategies and structures of his own.

I have already suggested that *Inquisiciones*, *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, and *El idioma de los argentinos*—1925, 1926, and 1928—adopt the ornate style current in Argentine letters at the time and focus on Argentine literary topics and attitudes. Immediately after the publication of the third of these volumes, however, Borges began to work on quite another project, which he called an “invisible” style—the style that we now take for granted as Borgesian. This must also have seemed to Borges an “international style,” and thus a help in laying aside the idea current at the time that an Argentine must write *about* Argentina. During the 1920s, the nation was struggling to establish its identity amidst a flood of European immigration and internal relocation. Fully one-third of the population of Buenos Aires at this time was foreign born. As Beret E. Strong notes:

Because foreign influences were so strong, the nation had to make a special effort to remain aware of its colonial roots. *Hispanismo*, or Spanish heritage, became a positive value in the quest for Argentine identity. . . . For writers who came of age when Argentina was torn between the pressures of international cultural exchange and an urgent need to assert national identity, the conflict between the domestic and the foreign was divisive and confusing. . . . Borges had contradictory loyalties to both sides of the decade’s binary division between European cosmopolitanism, characterized by Domingo Sarmiento’s “civilization,” and the innate “barbarism” of *argentinidad* based on violent folk heroes and the sprawling pampas. (pp. 43–44)

Beatriz Sarlo puts it more succinctly: “The tension created by this double origin is at the heart of Argentine literature” (p. 47). What we know is that Borges used Argentine types and locales in several of his best *ficciones*, but we also know that during the late 1920s and early 1930s, he was able to liberate himself from the culturally imposed obligation to do so.

He also liberated himself from the generic conventions of literary realism. During this period, Borges was consciously engaged in dismantling the barriers separating genres and disciplines, particularly those between literature and philosophy. I have said that he had inherited Argentine *costumbrismo*—precisely the “local color” fictions of “violent folk heroes and sprawling pampas”—and also the ornate Argentine literary language of the time. Both of these legacies would seem to separate what was considered “literary” expression from the more abstract discourse of European philosophy. But genres and disciplines have never been as cleanly separated in Spain as elsewhere in Europe. There are no specialized words for either “nonfiction” or “short story” in Spanish, only recent coinages of convenience, and the word *historia* means both history and story. Romanticism, which still conditions literary representation in the rest of Europe and the United States, did not flourish in Spain or in Latin America. And the

baroque, never an important demarcation in English literary history, marks the apogee of Spanish letters and still operates importantly in Latin American literature, including (as I will argue) in the work of Borges. Nor were the Spanish philosophical traditions that Borges inherited the same traditions inherited by writers in much of Europe or the United States. Put another way, he inherited what they did, and more.

### Argentina and Spain

Borges's own dual heritage of English and Spanish is well known, and is epitomized in the detail that he himself liked to recount: as a child, he first read *Don Quixote* in his father's library in English, and when he later read it in its original Spanish, "it sounded like a bad translation."<sup>19</sup> In the cultural context of Buenos Aires of the 1920s, Argentine intellectuals felt compelled to position themselves with respect to Spain and Spanish, and Borges was no exception. His ambivalence in this regard—his "*querella hispánica*" (quarrel with Spain)—has been widely discussed by Latin American critics, as has his countervailing passion for certain Spanish writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Quevedo, Gracián, Cervantes, Góngora) and his affinity with certain contemporary Spanish intellectuals and writers (Américo Castro, Ortega y Gasset, Gerardo Diego, Unamuno, García Lorca, Rafael Cansinos-Assens). Although not wishing to limit Borges's enormous range of reference to his Spanish precursors and contemporaries, I do want to suggest that these passions and affinities form an enduring substratum that will affect both his philosophical *and* his literary modes of expression.

Borges goes back to medieval Spain, to the three-part flowering of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity that lasted for 700 years, until Muslims and Jews were expelled from Spain by the Catholic Kings in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes celebrates this historical recuperation as Borges's "supreme narrative synthesis" of the cultural heritage of Spanish America: "I certainly would not have had this early, fraternal revelation of my own Arab and Jewish heritage without such stories as 'Averroes' Search,' 'The Zahir' and 'The Approach to al-Mu'tasim.'"<sup>20</sup> Because these traditions are theological as well as philosophical, they depend upon story to a far greater extent than most European philosophical discourse. In the Jewish and Arabic traditions of medieval Spain, Borges found confirmation of his intuition (cited below in the section "The Monstrous Trinity") that theology is a branch of fantastical literature. The Kabbalah and the tales of Scheherazade are prime examples of sources from these alternative traditions, and certainly not the only ones. In many of his stories, Borges's cryptic reference to Hebrew and Arabic texts and contexts heightens their mysterious ambiance and mythic resonances.

During the 1920s, Borges internalized the work of the Spanish Basque

philosopher Miguel de Unamuno. Borges had returned to Europe in 1923, where he established himself for the better part of a year in Madrid. There he read Unamuno exhaustively, corresponded with him, and later sent him his books as they appeared.<sup>21</sup> This is significant for our purposes because Unamuno himself crossed the boundaries between fiction and philosophy in generic experiments he called *nóvolas* or *ficciones*. Unamuno's promotion of Spanish mysticism over European science, his theme of life as a dream, his commentary on the Quixote as a philosophical text, and his expressive strategies are reflected in the *ficciones* that Borges would himself eventually write.

At this same time, Borges met another forbiddingly versatile Spanish intellectual, José Ortega y Gasset, a philosopher and great cultural conduit: Ortega was *the* disseminator of European philosophy and literature to Latin America at this time, through his *Revista de occidente* and also through the press he helped to found, Espasa-Calpe. And yet another polymath would cross Borges's path two years later, in Buenos Aires: the Mexican writer, Alfonso Reyes, who was posted as Mexico's ambassador to Argentina in 1926. Essayist, poet, fiction writer, and philosopher in the same intellectual tradition as Unamuno and Ortega, Reyes was deeply aware of his own American need for a usable past: he mastered the Western tradition and placed himself, as a Mexican, within it. Borges's association with these nonsystematizing philosophers surely inspired and nurtured his creation of his own inclusive, hybrid *ficciones*.

### José Ortega y Gasset's Phenomenology of Form

Unamuno and Reyes became mentors to Borges, but it is Ortega's phenomenological speculations that matter most during this period, as Borges searched for adequate expressive forms. If the relations of Unamuno and Reyes with the young writer were cordial and supportive, that between Ortega and Borges was otherwise. Borges explicitly dismissed Ortega's influence in an essay published at the time of Ortega's death in 1955.<sup>22</sup> But the break would have come long before—after Borges's return from Spain to Argentina in 1924, probably around 1930, when Ortega began to make offensive pronouncements about the Argentine national character.<sup>23</sup> Critics have tended to accept Borges's repudiation of Ortega at face value. This is too bad, for it is impossible that the young Borges, writing for the new magazine *Revista de occidente* while in Madrid and then actively organizing avant garde movements and magazines in Buenos Aires, would not have been aware of Ortega's cultural production.

Clearly Borges's quarrel with Ortega was political and social. Ortega's condescension to Latin America is well known, even as he published widely in Argentina and resided there for nine months in 1916, five months in 1928, and again for three years from 1939 to 1942. Cultural historians affirm

Ortega's immense influence on Argentine intellectual life beginning with his first appointment to the Chair of Spanish Culture at the University of Buenos Aires in 1916.<sup>24</sup> His analysis of Argentina's traditions of positivism and idealism (and his forceful critique of the former), his seminar on Kant, and his introduction of Husserlian phenomenology began a process of reassessment and renovation that the Argentine cultural historian José Luis Romero refers to as a "revolución filosófica." Ortega was an intellectual catalyst in Argentina, but more to the point here is the fact that his aesthetic concerns coincided with those of the young Borges, especially in his exploration of the expressive potential of literary genres, and in his phenomenological engagement of the competing claims of idealism and realism. Although I recognize that to focus on any one of Borges's precursors is to risk a reductive argument, I would nonetheless assert that Borges's transition from ultraist poet to *ficcionista* reflects the literary and philosophical explorations of Ortega during the same period. Without depriving Borges of his explicit disavowal and clear dislike of Ortega, but also feeling that he protests too much, I want to outline briefly their shared conceptual territory.

Two of Ortega's early works, *Meditaciones del Quijote* (*Meditations on Quixote*, 1914) and *La deshumanización del arte e ideas sobre la novela* (*The Dehumanization of Art and Ideas on the Novel*, 1925), are crucial. Borges would have read *Meditations on Quixote* and taken Ortega's discussion of literary genres into serious account. Borges, in the process of recognizing the need to create his own narrative genres, would have understood perfectly Ortega's assertion that the writer's choice of genre reflects "at one and the same time a certain thing to be said and the only way to say it fully."<sup>25</sup> Ortega insisted: "Literary genres are . . . the poetic functions, the directions, in which aesthetic creation moves" (p. 112). Borges would, of course, move beyond Ortega's notion of the strict separation of genres according to particular historical epochs and cultural needs, but Borges's attentiveness to the expressive potential of literary form is surely informed by Ortega's. Beyond Ortega's detailed discussion of genre and his implied comparison of literary and philosophical discursive modes, his use of the melancholy idealist Don Quixote would have compelled Borges's attention. Ortega engages Cervantes' fiction in order to negotiate the extremes of idealism and realism and to adjudicate his own dual attraction to German formalism and phenomenologically based existentialism. For Ortega, it is the psychology of character, not the structure of plot, that is memorable in literature. In a later text, he writes: "We are fascinated by Don Quixote and Sancho [as characters], not by what is happening to them. In principle, a *Don Quixote* as great as the original is conceivable in which the knight and his servant go through entirely different experiences."<sup>26</sup> Borges, who disagreed about the centrality of psychology, would nonetheless prove him right.

Borges would also have shared Ortega's understanding of Cervantes'

historical circumstances. Ortega locates Cervantes on the cusp of modernity, with its foreclosure of myth and magic in favor of psychological and material causation. Ortega applauds this modern turn as Borges does not, but the question of the relation between myth and mind is nonetheless urgent for him.<sup>27</sup> Ortega's short chapters on the mythic potential of realistic narration are relevant. In chapters entitled "Myth, Leaven of History" and "Reality, Leaven of Myth,"<sup>28</sup> Ortega laments the limitations of modern scientific rationalism with a reference, as it happens, to monsters. In a footnote in the latter, he writes: "For Aristotle the centaur is possible; for us it is not, because biology, natural science, does not tolerate it" (p. 138).

Ortega's discussion of modern art was certainly also well known to Borges. *The Dehumanization of Art and Ideas about the Novel* was published in 1925, the year after Borges's stay in Madrid, and its argument corresponds in certain ways to Borges's ultraist poetic practice. As I have said, *ultraísmo* departed from contemporary European avant garde movements in its aim to recover a more traditional metaphoric poetics. Ortega celebrates metaphor as "one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic. . . . The metaphor alone furnishes an escape; between the real things, it lets emerge imaginary reefs, a crop of floating islands."<sup>29</sup> Himself using a metaphor that again resonates with Borges's attention to monsters, Ortega returns to his emphasis on expressive form: "Just as every animal belongs to a species, every literature belongs to a genre. . . . A literary genre, the same as a zoological species, means a certain stock of possibilities."<sup>30</sup> Given Borges's interest in *zoología fantástica* and its connection to generic hybridity, Ortega's metaphor evokes uncannily Borges's eventual morphology of genres.

Ortega's apology for modern art and its counterrealisms would not have escaped Borges's notice as the young writer challenging the conventions of Argentine local color realism, nor Ortega's idea that each generation has new circumstances to address, and must create new modes of being. Furthermore, Ortega's consideration of the status of the real no doubt nourished what was to become Borges's central philosophical concern: the relation of real instances to ideal categories. Ortega's defense of counterrealism was at once a critique of idealism in art and a confirmation of its necessity. If, as Rockwell Gray paraphrases Ortega, "all we can ever really have of the world is the ideas we form of it, it [is] idle to cling to overt representations of man and nature." For Ortega, "painting solved the problem by eschewing representational images; the experimental novel did so by reducing the narrative element to an absolute minimum."<sup>31</sup> Borges's own defense of narrative minimalism—his preference for the short story over the novel, for metaphorical suggestion over detailed physical description—echoes Ortega's position. In the following passage from the final paragraph of *The Dehumanization of Art*, another "imaginary centaur" resonates powerfully with Borges's literary practice. Ortega, echoing Husserl, writes:

There may be no corresponding reality to what our ideas project and what our thoughts think; but this does not make them purely subjective. A world of hallucination would not be real, but neither would it fail to be a world, an objective universe, full of sense and perfection. Although the imaginary centaur does not really gallop, tail and mane in the wind, across real prairies, he has a peculiar independence with regard to the subject that imagines him. He is a virtual object, or, as the most recent philosophy expresses it, an ideal object. This is the type of phenomena which the thinker of our times considers most adequate as a basis for his universal system.<sup>32</sup> (pp. 129–30)

Surely Borges is such a thinker. His “ideal objects”—the aleph, the library of Babel, the labyrinth, the garden of forking paths, the circular ruins—are universalizing, as are the creatures of his “intellectual teratology”—his centaurs, minotaurs, the Trinity, and all the other composite wholes in his fantastic zoology.

In sum, to reread Ortega is to find Borges everywhere—a classic case of a writer influencing his precursor. Borges’s keen awareness of the logic of literary form and his phenomenological understanding of universals as showing themselves in particular instantiations were, I propose, nurtured by Ortega’s work, as were his lifelong negotiations between conceptual and perceptual realms—between philosophical abstraction on the one hand and narrative realism on the other. Borges extends and enriches these Ortegian concerns in many ways, including those that I will explore below. Whether this relation amounts to direct influence (including resistance and misreading) or to a coincidence of concerns in a shared cultural context is less important to my project than to suggest the ways in which the philosophical and literary ideas of Ortega and Borges overlap. More generally, their shared concerns call attention to the unusually close conjoinings of philosophical and literary discourse at this moment in Spain and Latin America.

### The Argentine Writer and Tradition

Borges, having considered the nature of literary realism for fully a decade, declared his independence from prevailing literary constraints and cultural myopias in his essay “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” published in *Discusión* (1932). A religious text provides the metaphor for Borges’s developing conception of narrative realism. He famously (if incorrectly<sup>33</sup>) points out that there are no camels in the Koran. Declaring this circumstance analogous to that of Argentine literature, he argues that Argentine writers need not depict local Argentine realities.

[W]e should feel that our patrimony is the universe; we should essay all  
 . . . limit ourselves to purely Argentine subjects in order

to be Argentine; for either being Argentine is an inescapable act of fate—and in that case we shall be so in all events—or being Argentine is a mere affectation, a mask.

I believe that if we surrender ourselves to that voluntary dream which is artistic creation, we shall be Argentine and we shall also be good or tolerable writers.<sup>34</sup>

One can be an Argentine writer and also be universal: with this essay, Borges grants himself permission to begin his move from Buenos Aires to Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius. That is, he identifies the process of generic transformation, impelled by a powerful dynamic between realism and idealism, whereby his *ficciones* will become a vehicle for philosophical speculation.

Achieving the balance between camel and Koran had become, by 1932, Borges’s central aesthetic and philosophical concern. And it clearly continued to be so until the mid-1940s, as witness Borges’s anachronistic reference in this 1932 essay to his 1941 story “La muerte y la brújula” (“Death and the Compass”). *Discusión* was reprinted in 1942, and Borges obviously took the opportunity to revise the essay by adding a reference to the story he had just written. (He also added book reviews, to which I shall refer shortly.) Borges names “Death and the Compass,” notes that it was written “about a year ago,” and asserts that he has at last managed to negotiate the competing claims of realistic description and his universalizing intention. He writes that he inadvertently captured “the flavor of the outskirts of Buenos Aires. . . . Precisely because I had not set out to find that flavor, because I had abandoned myself to a dream, I was able to accomplish, after so many years, what I had previously sought in vain” (pp. 181–182).

In this same essay, Borges considers the Argentine tradition of gaucho poetry. He notes that *Martín Fierro* is for Argentines “our Bible, our canonical book” (p. 177). Tracing its generic lineage and language, he locates the moment in which it, too, manages to transcend the local and universalize:

*Martín Fierro* is cast in a Spanish of gauchesque intonation, and for a long while never lets us forget that it is a gaucho who is singing; it abounds in comparisons taken from country life; however, there is a famous passage in which the author forgets this preoccupation with local color and writes in a general Spanish, and does not speak of vernacular themes, but of great abstract themes, of time, of space, of the sea, of the night. (p. 179)

Borges does not mention the other “Bible” of Argentine literature, but he might as well have. *Facundo, o la civilización y la barbarie* (*Facundo, or Civilization and Barbarism*) (1845), by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, is in prose what *Martín Fierro* is in poetry: an idiosyncratic mixture of genres and styles that

is firmly located in Argentine culture while at the same time aspiring to universality (as Sarmiento's subtitle makes clear). Argentine literature offered Borges a rich heritage of hybrid genres and narrative styles.

My point is this. Both the philosophical and the literary climate of Buenos Aires in the 1920s and 1930s would have lent themselves to a young writer with a metaphysical bent looking for appropriate narrative forms. For despite Borges's claim to have abandoned himself to dream, he had set out to develop a realistic style that could encompass reality's mythic dimensions—a project quite compatible with the literary and philosophical currents that I have mentioned here. Borges recognized early that to engage narrative realism in the service of his more abstract intentions, he must devise forms that could turn something commonplace into something mythic without distorting its status *as real*. How can the single self, realistically represented in narrative, transcend its singularity? How does the writer turn one man into all men and still work in a realistic medium? How does the writer represent the physical reality of ideas, the flesh and blood of forms, while at the same time conveying their status *as ideas*, as archetypes? Devoted to philosophical speculation as he was, these questions place Borges firmly in the realm of literature, not philosophy. His concerns involve realism and representation, the multiple relations of signifier to signified, the narrative forms and uses of metaphor, archetype, myth—in short, the concerns of a writer. Borges was devising a logic of possibility through a logic of literary form, and he used monsters to assist him in doing so.

### Borges's Monsters: Natural Parts, Unnatural Wholes

Borges was fascinated by imaginary beings of all sorts. Beyond his taste for monsters and the literature that contains them—Germanic saga, Greek myth, fantastic tales from Homer and Scheherazade to Poe—he was interested in monstrosity as such. Monstrosity is a state of being that he defines as the unnatural combination of natural parts, the possible permutations of which, he tells us, “border on the infinite.” This definition, from Borges's preface to his *Manual de zoología fantástica* (*The Book of Imaginary Beings*, 1957), is buttressed by examples: the centaur combines horse and man; the minotaur, bull and man, and so on, his list implying an interminable proliferation of possible combinations: “it seems we could evolve an endless variety of monsters—combinations of fishes, birds, and reptiles, limited only by our own boredom or disgust.”<sup>35</sup> Borges's monsters are not, then, necessarily grotesque or terrifying or even marvelous, but they are *always* dangerous because they challenge the Western binarism between nature and culture. Monsters inhabit at once the realms of nature *and* artifice—they are man-made species, so to speak. Because monsters slip suggestively between nature and culture, between real and imagined, they often open the way to chaos,

deformity, and dream. Their combinatory capacity, their “infinite” possibility, makes them volatile, unpredictable, and fortuitous. Perhaps it is this kind of creative possibility that Wallace Stevens has in mind when he asserts that writers probe fortuitously.

Borges's interest in *ars combinatoria*—its disjunctions and permutations—might have led him to ally himself with the European surrealists, but it did not. At precisely this time, the surrealists were surrendering themselves to related principles of juxtaposition—recall the famous example of the umbrella and the sewing machine. However, to assume that Borges's combinatory monsters were a predictable outcome of avant garde poetics of juxtaposition is to impose European ideologies upon Argentine practice. Borges's *ultraísmo* did not engage combinatory tactics as a creative principle, nor did any other Latin American avant garde movement, for that matter. There was no call to create metaphors out of disparate elements, as in European surrealism, nor any investment in psychic automatism, as there would have been if metaphors were to be created out of sheer unlikeness. Borges would have viewed such arbitrary juxtapositions as invention without discovery and, indeed, in a list of the century's ills, he includes “traffickers in *surréalisme*.”<sup>36</sup> Borges was not seeking to *transcend* the real by means of disjunctive combinations, as were the surrealists, but rather to use disjunction to *amplify* the real, and to discover and develop expressive capacities commensurate to the task. The result is not surrealism but magical realism, or what I will eventually call Borges's magical idealism.

The *ars combinatoria* or, rather, *ars disjunctoria* of Borges's monsters has more to do with T. S. Eliot than the surrealists. I have already mentioned Eliot's recovery of certain seventeenth-century poets on the basis of their poetics of disjunction. Recall the eighteenth-century English critic Samuel Johnson's depreciation of Donne and Herbert as “metaphysicals”: Johnson charged that their metaphors “yoked by violence together” the “most heterogeneous ideas.”<sup>37</sup> To which Eliot, almost two centuries later, responds that heterogeneity and incongruity are necessary to poetry: “a degree of heterogeneity of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's mind is omnipresent in poetry.”<sup>38</sup> The poet's task is to synthesize in his literary structure what resists synthesis in the world. This is not juxtaposition for its own sake but rather a movement from separation to integration. Borges's monsters may well be considered in Dr. Johnson's terms as “metaphysicals” “yoked by violence together,” and also in Eliot's terms, as “amalgamating disparate experience” in the whole of the literary structure.

Indeed, Borges stresses the yoked nature of his heterogeneous monsters. As early as 1926, in an essay entitled “A History of Angels,” published in the second of his three self-banished collections, Borges writes about the proliferating meanings of monsters, among which he included angels. Angels are, after all, an unnatural combination of human and bird: they are, according to

a certain German theologian whom Borges cites, immaterial yet capable of materializing, aspatial (“neither taking up any space nor being enclosed by it”) and everlasting (“with a beginning but without end”). Furthermore, he reports, the Hebrews had no trouble in merging angels with the stars. Borges asserts that of all the monsters created by the human imagination, only angels survive.

The human imagination has pictured a horde of monsters (tritons, hippogriffs, chimeras, sea serpents, unicorns, devils, dragons, werewolves, cyclopes, fauns, basilisks, demigods, leviathans, and a legion of others) and all have disappeared, except angels. Today, what line of poetry would dare allude to the phoenix or make itself the promenade of a centaur?<sup>39</sup>

Yours, we want to answer, for hindsight allows us to glimpse in this very early essay Borges’s as-yet-unformulated intention to rescue these extraordinary beings from oblivion. Why else his delicious catalogue of extinct monsters, why his delicate approach to “this world of wings and mirages”?

Borges’s monsters evolve during the 1920s and 1930s in ways that are carefully designed to unsettle our usual sense of the relations of parts and wholes. They are at once unique *and* universal—universal *because* they are unique. They violate the law of compossibility, of simultaneous mutual coexistence, for each species is its own genus, each individual a type, their identity not a matter of communal likeness but of unlikeness to all but themselves. Consider Borges’s most psychologized monster, in “La casa de Asterion” (“The House of Asterion”). We discover only at the end of the story that Asterion is the minotaur and his house is the labyrinth. He is alone and knows that there is no other like him. At first he proclaims his uniqueness and equates it to “all that is vast and grand,” but soon enough he invents a game with an imaginary other—“the other Asterion.” As if to justify his desire for an alter ego, he lists the things in his house that are repeated—the mangers, drinking troughs, courtyards, pools. Then he realizes that seas and temples are also many. “Everything exists many times, fourteen times, but there are two things in the world that apparently exist but once—on high, the intricate sun, and below, Asterion.”<sup>40</sup> The pathos of this monster is unusual among Borges’s imaginary beings, and it emphasizes Asterion’s status as one of a kind. His monologue ends wistfully with his speculation about who will liberate him: “Will he be bull or man? Could he possibly be a bull with the face of a man? Or will he be like me?” (CF p. 222). The narrator concludes by reiterating Asterion’s desire for a duplicate, and dramatizing the futility of his hope.

Borges’s monsters, like the stories that contain them, oscillate between the poles of phenomenological particularity and philosophical abstraction, between realistic parts and ideal wholes. Their hybridity includes the human longing for its opposite: for unity, uniformity, identity both in its literal sense

of likeness and in its figurative sense of self-knowledge based on shared characteristics, whether biological, tribal, familial, national. Borges’s monsters, again like the *ficciones* that contain them, address this human instinct for wholeness. Consider Borges’s homage to the dragon in his preface to *Manual de zoología fantástica*:

We are as ignorant of the meaning of the dragon as we are of the meaning of the universe, but there is something in the dragon’s image that appeals to our human imagination, and so we find the dragon in quite distinct places and times. It is, so to speak, a necessary monster, not an ephemeral or accidental one.<sup>41</sup>

A necessary monster: not “ephemeral or accidental,” but rather archetypal, essential, a synecdoche of being. Borges’s monsters combine Aristotle and Plato, substantial nature and ideal form. They are baroque in their asymmetrical inclusiveness: as such, they become for Borges realistic devices by means of which the universal may be embodied and materialized.

This ontological complexity is underscored by Borges in this same preface to the *Manual de zoología fantástica*, where he distinguishes between the “zoo of reality” and the “zoo of mythologies.” Envisioning the visit of a child to the “zoo of reality,” Borges invokes Plato:

A small child is taken to the zoo for the first time. This child may be any one of us or, to put it another way, we have been this child and have forgotten about it. . . . Plato (if he were invited to join in this discussion) would tell us that the child had already seen the tiger in a primal world of archetypes, and that now on seeing the tiger he recognizes it. (p. 13)

Then Borges shifts his view to the “zoo of mythologies,” and although he does not mention Aristotle here, his reference to the endless possible permutations of monsters recalls his discussion of Aristotle and metaphor in an essay entitled “La metáfora,” published in *Historia de la eternidad* in 1936. He writes:

In the third book of his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle observed that all metaphors arise from the intuition of an analogy between dissimilar things. . . . Aristotle, as we see, bases the metaphor on things and not on language. . . . [my translation]<sup>42</sup>

Aristotle’s metaphors and Borges’s monsters are closely related: they reorder reality by joining dissimilar things. Physical dislocation reveals metaphysical possibility, and allows the archetypal to enter.

The relations of the part to the whole are also unsettled by the smallness



of Borges's *ficciones*. In Spanish, *monstruoso* can mean "prodigious," "capacious," "enormous." If monsters are often considered to be gigantic and rarely, if ever, minuscule, it is nonetheless true that miniatures are also unnatural wholes. There are small creatures in nature, but no miniatures, for the miniature as such results from the manipulation of perspective. Susan Stewart, in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, argues that the miniature "offers a world clearly limited in space but frozen and thereby both particularized and generalized in time—particularized in that the miniature concentrates upon the single instance and not upon the abstract rule, but generalized in that the instance comes to transcend, to stand for, a spectrum of other instances."<sup>43</sup> Although Stewart is writing about painting, I would propose that her reference to the synecdochal function of the miniature, in which the instance comes to stand for a "spectrum of other instances," is applicable to Borges's *ficciones* as well. I will return to Borges's synecdochal strategies, but here it is enough to say that compression of form tends to enhance the archetypal potential of any narrative, a point that Borges recognizes in his frequent praise of the short story over the novel. So monsters prowl Borges' miniature narratives, an irony of disproportion compounded by the vastness of their universalizing function.

It is obvious by now that Borges's metaphysical engagement of monsters departs radically from their traditional literary uses. Monsters have long terrorized and fascinated fictive enclaves of civilization with their inordinate size, their deformity, and their multiple assaults upon the social and psychic order. Their hybridity is taboo in a very literal sense, for one of the primary functions of taboo is to prevent the confusion of kinds. Anthropologists agree that societies, both traditional and modern, have regularly created mechanisms to discourage (and punish) the crossings of bloodlines, races, religions, gender, and other culturally determined boundaries. In these cases, the survival of the group is deemed by the collective to depend upon the perpetuation of existing structures of exclusion—hence the prohibition of mixture, which is equated with debasement, disaster, and dissolution. In related fashion, both Freudian and Jungian psychology uses monstrosity as a cipher of otherness, and the irruption of monsters in hallucination or dream may be a sign of the return of the repressed. If Borges's monsters seem mild-mannered talismans (his necessary dragon, his angels, Asterion), their hybridity is nonetheless offered as an affront to logic and order. Recall the opposition between civilization and barbarism that had, since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, been a trope in Argentinian literature. Borges's monsters ironize this opposition. Their hybridity transgresses the traditional boundaries between culture and nature, order and dissolution, modernity and its atavistic sources. If modernist writers (Woolf, Forster, Faulkner, Fuentes) have often held their art up against an unruly reality, Borges does something very nearly its opposite. He deploys his monsters to disrupt the realistic

surface of his narratives, to move his stories from their terse rationality to the vast and volatile realms of myth, ritual, and archetype—to a world in which signification always exceeds the capacity of signifiers to express it.

### The Monstrous Trinity

In his 1932 collection *Discusión*, Borges refers three times to a very particular monster, the Christian Trinity. By including the Trinity among his imaginary beings, he confirms his commitment to their ontological complexity, and emphatically calls attention to the point. At the time, Argentina was thoroughly conservative and Catholic; Borges, a self-declared "amateur Protestant,"<sup>44</sup> knew exactly the consternation that his inclusion of the Trinity would provoke. For Borges, the Trinity epitomizes an unnatural whole: it is the quintessential instance of a creature's symbolic slippage from real to ideal. Doctrinally, the three distinct parts of the Trinity are one seamless, universal whole—flesh and spirit, temporal and eternal, finite and infinite, magic and real. In "Una vindicación de la Cábala" ("A Vindication of the Cabala"), dated 1931 and collected in *Discusión*, Borges examines this doctrine at some length, citing the "necessity" of its fundamental mystery and also its "arbitrary" nature. He writes:

It is impossible to name the Holy Spirit and silence the horrendous threefold society of which it is a part. Lay Catholics see it as a united body—infininitely correct yet also infinitely boring; the liberals, as a useless theological Cerberus. . . . The Trinity of course surpasses these formulas. Imagined all at once, its concept of a father, a son, and a ghost, joined in a single organism, seems like a case from intellectual teratology, a deformation which only the horror of a nightmare could spawn. This I believe, but I try to reflect that every object whose end is unknown to us is provisorily monstrous.<sup>45</sup>

Here, Borges amplifies his definition of monstrosity significantly: the monstrous is not only a hybrid combination of disparate parts but also a state whose end is unknown to us. This amplification coincides with the etymology of monster, a word based in the Latin root *monere*, to warn, hence a portent of the unknown, a figure of mystery. Borges continues with images of the Trinity:

Dante tried to depict them as the reverberating of diaphanous circles of diverse colors; Donne, as entangled serpents, rich and inseparable. *Toto coruscat trinitas mysterio*, wrote Saint Paul; the Trinity shines in full mystery. (p. 23)

Again, Borges invokes monstrosity and ends with mystery.

Two short reviews written in 1942 refer to the Trinity as a hybrid and hydra. Establishing a practice that would become habitual—that of including new works in later editions of a given collection—Borges included these reviews in a second edition of *Discusión*. Their posterior inclusion reinforces my thesis that Borges was consciously using monstrosity as a metaphor and motor for his own generic transformations, and the Trinity as an extreme example. One of these anachronistic additions to *Discusión* is “Sobre el doblaje” (“On Dubbing”) and the other is “After Death.”

“On Dubbing” is a review not of a single film but of what was then the relatively recent phenomenon of dubbing, which Borges treats as a monster, the combination of one person’s voice and another person’s body. The review begins: “The possibilities of combining are not infinite but they are often terrifying. Thus the Greeks engendered the chimera, a monster with the head of a lion, the head of a dragon, the head of a goat.”<sup>46</sup> We may object that the chimera is not ordinarily depicted with three heads but is, rather, a being comprised of three parts—the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent or dragon. Nonetheless, it is a three-headed chimera that Borges envisions, so we are not surprised by his next example, also three-headed: “theologians of the second century [engendered] the Trinity, in which Father, Son and Holy Ghost are inextricably joined.” (p. 283, my translation). The paragraph continues with examples of a Chinese bird, a cube that encloses an infinite number of cubes, and the monsters that dubbing creates. How, Borges concludes ironically, is it possible not to admire this “phonetic-visual anomaly”?

The second review added to *Discusión* is of a book by one Leslie D. Weatherhead entitled “After Death.” Here, Borges makes his famous argument that theology is a branch of fantastic literature:

I have recently compiled an anthology of fantastic literature. While I admit that such a work is among the few that a second Noah should rescue from a second deluge, I must confess my guilty omission of the unsuspected major masters of the genre: Parmenides, Plato, John Scotus Erigena, Albertus Magnus, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Francis Bradley. What, in fact, are the wonders of Wells or Edgar Allan Poe—a flower that visits us from the future, a dead man under hypnosis—in comparison to the invention of God, the labored theory of a being who is in some way three and who endures alone *outside of time*?<sup>47</sup>

The paragraph continues with further rhetorical questions, including the following: “what are all the nights of Scheherazade compared to an argument of Berkeley’s?” and “who is the unicorn compared to the Trinity?”<sup>48</sup>

Borges’s repeated reference to the monstrous Trinity in *Discusión* might seem surprising, given his utter lack of interest in critiquing specific aspects

of Christian doctrine or practice. Although Borges certainly expressed his dislike of the authoritarianism of Argentine Catholicism, his monstrous Trinity is obviously not about the church or dogma or theological debate. Rather, it epitomizes for Borges the idealizing potential of the unnatural whole, and foresees a theme that will run throughout his work: the nature of infinity and eternity. Indeed, the relations of parts and wholes will become for Borges a means of symbolizing infinity and eternity—these most unnatural wholes, these otherwise unimaginable states of being. In an essay written at this time, “A Doctrine of Cycles” in *A History of Eternity* (1936), Borges refers to a work entitled *Mathematics and Imagination*, by the mathematician Georg Cantor, and he dwells on Cantor’s conception of infinity. Borges paraphrases Cantor’s discussion of parts and wholes: “an infinite whole is a whole that can be the equivalent of one of its subsets. The part, in these elevated numerical latitudes, is no less copious than the whole.”<sup>49</sup> Paradoxically, the part is equal to the whole and is also infinite. And again in “Personality and the Buddha,” written in 1950, Borges addresses the paradoxical relation between parts and wholes in a second-century Buddhist text: “[Man] is not matter, form, impressions, ideas, instincts, or consciousness. He is not the combination of these parts, nor does he exist outside of them.”<sup>50</sup> And in “Pascal’s Sphere,” referring to the medieval conception of God’s presence in his creation, Borges writes: “God is in each one of his creatures, but is not limited by any one of them. ‘Behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee,’ said Solomon (I Kings 8:27).”<sup>51</sup> Seeing the whole in the part, or the whole as the parts, allows Borges to test the limits of ideal wholes—infinity, eternity, being—and then devise strategies for making realistic narratives into universal structures of meaning.

### Borges’s Morphology of Genres

In a lecture on the detective story, Borges raises the question of whether literary genres exist. Responding to his own musing, he says: “A fitting reply to this would be that although all individuals are real, to specify them is to generalize them. . . . To think is to generalize, and we need these useful Platonic archetypes in order to say anything.”<sup>52</sup> For Borges, literary genres are like his monsters: “useful Platonic archetypes.” Like the child who has “already seen the tiger in a primal world of archetypes” and thus recognizes a tiger in the zoo, so too the reader recognizes literary works in relation to their generic type. Both imaginary beings and works of literature involve the relation of particular instances to overarching categories, the relation of singularity to universality. If, as I have argued, Borges’s monsters unsettle these relations by means of combinatory devices, so, too, his generic experiments during the 1920s and 1930s reflect Borges’s *ars combinatoria*. His literary forms are metaphorical monsters by his own definition: they are

unexpected combinations of disparate parts from fiction, myth, philosophy, theology, bestiaries, travel narrative, folktale, epic, allegory, and from a vast array of historical periods and world cultures, combined to create narrative structures whose “ends are unknown to us.” In Borges’s generic transformations, we come close to the Greek sense of the word “dynamism”—power realized in form—but it is “morphology” that I will engage to describe his project.

Morphology is a branch of both biology and grammar, and in both disciplines, it situates and studies individuals within a generalizing schema. In biology, morphology is the study of the form and structure of plants and animals; in grammar, it is the study of patterns of word formation according to inflection, derivation, composition, and so on. By means of a self-consciously devised morphology of genres, Borges deploys instances to create fictional worlds that are eclectic and inclusive, and narrative structures that, for all their tense compression, remain expansive and open. We might approach Borges’s morphology in Derridean terms by saying that Borges has abandoned the book for the text,<sup>53</sup> or in Hayden White’s historiographic terms by saying that he prefers chronicle to history,<sup>54</sup> or in Eco’s semiotic terms by contrasting the structures of dictionary and encyclopedia.<sup>55</sup> It hardly matters, for as I have said, Borges lends himself to others’ theories.

### Synecdochal Strategies

Borges’s *ficciones* are often presented as single instances of a universal phenomenon, or as parts of a larger whole—a summary, a review, an annotation, a footnote, an epigrammatic event or personage or passage, a suspended series, an erudite commentary on ideas and texts from other cultures and traditions. These partial structures necessarily point to a larger entity beyond the realistic details of the narrative itself, a strategy that depends upon the rhetorical figure of synecdoche. Synecdoche, in which the part stands for the whole, facilitates the transformation of the local into the universal, and narrative realism into idealizing Borgesian *ficciones*. Everywhere in Borges’s mature fiction we find narrative structures that move from particular instances to universal propositions, whether the universal is conceived as infinite and eternal (encompassing all spaces and times), archetypal (encompassing all types), or baroque (encompassing all ideas, places, and persons). Borges’s metaphors also operate synecdochally. The garden of forking paths points to all gardens—all narrative possibilities—even as we read only one. The library of Babel contains all possible books—a complete description of everything under the sun. Pierre Menard writes the entire *Quixote*, of which a small fragment suggests the whole text and an entire literary tradition.

The evolution of Borges’s universalizing strategies can be traced in the collections of the 1930s. In his “Autobiographical Essay,” the author states

that the “sketches” in *A Universal History of Infamy* (1935) are “the real beginning of my career as a story writer.”<sup>56</sup> He writes that at this early point, he considered the short story to lie “beyond my powers, and it was only after a long and roundabout series of timid experiments in narration that I sat down to write real stories” (p. 238). The “timid experiments” are those that comprise *A Universal History of Infamy*, and they are, according to Borges, less stories than “hoaxes and pseudo-essays” (p. 239). “The Approach to al-Mu’tasim,” written in 1935 and published in the subsequent volume *A History of Eternity* (1936), was also a “hoax and a pseudo-essay” that “now seems to me to foreshadow and even to set the pattern for those tales that were somehow awaiting me, and upon which my reputation as a storyteller was to be based” (pp. 239–240).

Borges explicitly relates his narrative dependence upon synecdoche to the universalizing intention announced in his title: *A Universal History of Infamy*. He writes in his preface that “these exercises in prose narration . . . overly exploit certain tricks: random enumerations, sudden shifts of continuity, and the paring down of a man’s whole life to two or three scenes.”<sup>57</sup> It is especially his “trick” of “random enumerations” that allows him to pretend to the encyclopedic coverage promised by his title. A handful of instances stands for all instances. The irony of proposing these seemingly random examples of infamy as a universal history is clear enough when reading the short accounts: a small time hoodlum, a stupid con-man, a Chinese woman pirate, Billy the Kid, and a few others ending with “Streetcorner Man.” These figures are hardly worthy ground upon which to build a universal history of anything, but this is just Borges’s point: “there is nothing, however humble, that does not imply the history of the world and its infinite concatenation of causes and effects.”<sup>58</sup> His oft-repeated insight that one man is all men, that the individual is a microcosm, “a symbolic mirror of the universe,”<sup>59</sup> is an aspect of the same principle, as is his speculation that “universal history is the history of the various intonations of a few metaphors.”<sup>60</sup>

Borges’s *ficciones* frequently dramatize the “involvement” of insignificant facts or single selves with universal history. The author does so, as I have already suggested, by installing in his realist description synecdochal devices that oblige the reader to move beyond the specificity of the singular and turn that very specificity to the service of an idealizing whole. These devices are quintessentially Borgesian and immediately recognizable to his readers: the list-of-unlike-parts—the “random enumerations” we have just seen—are made to stand for all things; so, too, Borges’s handful of metaphors—labyrinth, mirror, dream, monsters, metaphor itself—which stand for all space, all time, all forms, all men, all meanings; and his unnamed characters, who are constructed in order to project the condition of being as such. Take the *compadritos* and small-time hoodlums in *A Universal History of Infamy*, or the Argentine antagonists in “The Challenge,” a reprise of “Streetcorner

Man," of whom Borges writes that they "and many others whom myth has forgotten or has absorbed in these two, doubtless held this manly faith [in their own strength], and in all likelihood it was no mere form of vanity but rather an awareness that God may be found in any man."<sup>61</sup> Borges asks his readers to accept that the instance, however arbitrary it may seem, *is* the whole, that it does not just stand for, but contains the universe.

If, in *A Universal History of Infamy*, Borges is not always successful in maintaining a simultaneous level of realistic particularity and idealizing universality, a decade later, in his stories in *Ficciones* (1944) and *El aleph* (1949), he does so with consummate skill, and synecdoche becomes *the* central device for doing so. One thinks immediately of "The Aleph," where a partial list stands for all things. It is a list whose possible permutations not only border on the infinite but are proposed as infinity itself. "How," the narrator asks, "can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Mystics, faced with the same problem, fall back on symbols."<sup>62</sup> Symbols, it seems, and lists: Borges's narrator, faced with the problem, enumerates. His list *is* a symbol: together its unlike parts symbolize "the unimaginable universe." In his commentary on this synecdochal strategy, Borges describes its challenge: "The task, as is evident, is impossible, for such chaotic enumeration can only be simulated, and every apparently haphazard element has to be linked to its neighbor either by secret association or by contrast."<sup>63</sup> Borges's randomness is carefully constructed. His list points not to a disembodied ideal world but rather to the sum total of everything, everywhere.

"The Circular Ruins" uses a similar strategy to describe an infinite god. The god is the sum of unlike parts, and he is also a monster. A man, who finds himself in the circular enclosure, dreams of a statue that becomes a god: "In the dream it was alive, and trembling—yet it was not the dread-inspiring hybrid form of horse and tiger it had been. It was, instead, those two vehement creatures plus bull, and rose, and tempest, too."<sup>64</sup> This "multiple god" is described by means of a short list (bull, rose, tempest) that is clearly meant to symbolize all things. So, too, in "Funes the Memorious," the improbable list of remembered items is offered as proof of Funes' total recall. And in "The Library of Babel," the combinatorial potential of language *is* the library of Babel, where again, a short list confirms that "everything" is contained therein. Borges's narrative idealism expresses itself in contingent, contradictory, "random" accumulations of all possible phenomena: bull, rose, tempest. The parts of his unlikely lists are unrelated yet compossible; they suggest the plenitude of being, the baroque.

The disorderly orderliness of Borges's lists, and their synecdochal status, is flaunted in Borges's 1941 story "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins." This story is cited by Michel Foucault as the very inspiration for *Les mots et*

*les choses*, his study of the organization of knowledge in the West. The list that Foucault cites is one that Borges's narrator says he recalls because of its "ambiguities, redundancies, and deficiencies." It catalogues all possible categories to which animals can belong in a certain Chinese system. The narrator attributes the list to a certain Dr. Franz Kuhn, who in turn cites an "unknown (or apocryphal) Chinese encyclopedist." The list is itself monstrous in its disjunctions:

- (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance.<sup>65</sup>

Foucault states that "and" has been rendered impossible by Borges's taxonomy: that the "fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately"; that no universal order is implied, nor any possible.<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps. But Foucault fails, in my opinion, to read the rest of the story. After enumerating this list, the narrator muses that "there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural. . . . But the impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe cannot dissuade us from outlining human schemes, even though we are aware that they are provisional" (p. 104). For Borges, the list-of-unlike-parts leads to the contemplation of universal mystery; for Foucault, it leads to the impossibility of meaning. That Foucault reads this story to suit his own position reinforces what we already know: Borges's *ficciones* are endlessly open to philosophical and literary speculation.

### Whitman's Limited Catalogue of Endless Things

In a lecture given in 1964, Borges elevates the list to the status of a poetic figure, saying that "in order to be beautiful, [a list] must consist of heterogeneous elements."<sup>67</sup> He is speaking of Taliesin, a Welsh poet of the sixth century, but he had already written repeatedly of his preferred maker of beautiful lists, Walt Whitman. Borges first read Whitman in German as a youth in Geneva in 1917; he sent for *Leaves of Grass* in English and "for a time, I thought of Whitman not only as a great poet but as the *only* poet. In fact, I thought that all poets the world over had been merely leading up to Whitman until 1855, and that not to imitate him was a proof of ignorance."<sup>68</sup> It is Whitman's capacity to create "limited catalogues of endless things," and his related capacity to universalize the individual, including his own poetic

persona, that Borges consistently celebrates.<sup>69</sup> As early as 1922, Borges refers to Whitman in an essay entitled "The Nothingness of Personality," which explores Berkeleyan idealism and the psychology of the individual.<sup>70</sup> In 1932, he publishes two essays on Whitman in *Discusión*, "El otro Whitman" and "Nota sobre Whitman"; the latter he publishes a second time, slightly revised, in *Otras inquisiciones* (1952), although it is the first version that is included in the *Obras completas*. Beyond these essays, his poem on Whitman in 1964 concludes, "Yo fui Walt Whitman" (I was Walt Whitman);<sup>71</sup> and in 1969, his translation of parts of *Leaves of Grass* carries a prologue celebrating the archetypal persona of the poems.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, Borges refers constantly to Whitman throughout his essays over the course of six decades and more.

Clearly Borges found in Whitman's work a projection of his own literary idealism, with its imperative to create universalizing structures from contingent realities. He begins "Note on Whitman" on this point: "The practice of literature sometimes fosters the ambition to construct an absolute book, a book of books that includes all the others like a Platonic archetype."<sup>73</sup> Recalling his conception, cited above, of literary genres as "useful Platonic archetypes," Borges follows this statement with a long list of authors and the strategies by which they archetypalize their own work. His examples include Joyce, who presents simultaneously the characteristics of different epochs, Pound and Eliot, who manipulate anachronisms to "produce an appearance of eternity," and so on. Naturally, Borges takes Whitman as his central example.

Borges addresses Whitman's pantheism and notices the ways in which pantheist texts use limited catalogues of endless things—"contradictory and miscellaneous things"—to describe a ubiquitous God. To elaborate the point, Borges does the same thing: he provides a "variety of phrases" about a pantheist God from a welter of seemingly miscellaneous sources: a citation from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a fragment from Heraclitus, from Plotinus, from a twelfth-century Persian poet, from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Stefan Georg. Recognizing their repeating formulas, Borges writes:

The prototype of such phrases is this: 'I am the rite, I am the offering, I am the oblation to the parents, I am the grass, I am the prayer, I am the libation of butter, I am the fire' (*Bhagavad Gita*, IX, 16). Earlier, but ambiguous, is Fragment 67 of Heraclitus: 'God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger.' Plotinus describes for his pupils an inconceivable sky, in which 'everything is everywhere, anything is all things, the sun is all the stars, and each star is all the stars and the sun' (*Enneads*, V, 8, 4). (p. 69)

A longer list from the *Bhagavad-Gita* is given in the English translation, which is based on the later version of this essay in Spanish. As Borges revised, he amplified its elements and heightened their seeming randomness, but in both versions, the paradoxical relation of parts and wholes symbolizes

universality—here, the universal spirit of the pantheist God. After more examples, Borges generalizes: "Extension of the principle of identity seems to have infinite rhetorical possibilities" (p. 69). The structure of infinite possibility is what Borges admires in Whitman, and what he himself was striving to create in his own hybrid forms. Referring to the pantheists' beautiful lists, Borges writes:

Walt Whitman renovated that procedure. He did not use it, as others had, to define the divinity or to play with the 'sympathies and differences' of words; he wanted to identify himself, in a sort of ferocious tenderness, with all men. (p. 69)

The parts not only contain the universe but also *generate* it. Borges concludes that Whitman is eternal, and that he is each one of us.

Borges recognizes himself not only in Whitman's enumerations but also in Whitman's narrator, a persona who might mistakenly be confused with the author but who is, Borges reminds us, an archetype rather than an individual. According to Borges, Whitman realized that to write a democratic epic, he would have to avoid the individualized epic hero—an Achilles or Aeneas or Roland or Christ. Rather, he needed a hero "to be innumerable and ubiquitous, like Spinoza's diffuse God. So he came up with a strange creature we have not yet fully understood, and he gave this creature the name Walt Whitman."<sup>74</sup> Whitman, the voice and visionary of the poems, contains Whitman the man, but is not limited by him. Borges continues: this double Whitman now fuses with his reader to become "a triple Whitman, the hero of his epic." So, Borges writes, "Whitman was already plural; the author resolved that he would be infinite" (p. 447). Like the Trinity, the triple Walt Whitman signifies infinity—not in an abstract conceptual sense but in all his disjunctive and contradictory parts.

I have suggested that the dynamic structures resulting from Borges's *ars combinatoria* may be considered in terms of baroque aesthetics. If Borges early abandoned what is frequently referred to as his baroque style, he nonetheless remains a baroque writer in his engagement of mutation, anomaly, and disjunction in the service of a universalizing vision. He also remains baroque in his narrative structures, which are exercises in balance, counterbalance, contradiction, compensation, and sustained ambiguity. His characteristic metaphors—labyrinths, libraries, gardens of forking paths, circular ruins—may seem hermetic and enclosed but they are, in fact, structures of universal inclusion, baroque structures. Without stopping to investigate the fascination with monstrosity that appears throughout the Spanish and Latin American baroque traditions, but hoping that others will, let me say simply that Borges's monsters surely correspond to images and forms in Góngora's *Soledades*, Quevedo's *Sueños*, Sor Juana's *Primero sueño*, Goya's *Caprichios*, and

Valle Inclán's *esperpentos*. They also correspond to Ortega's "core of 'lived' reality, which furnishes the substance, as it were, of the aesthetic body."<sup>75</sup> The "aesthetic body" of Borges's *ficciones* is monstrous in this inclusive, experiential sense, and Whitman's "body electric" is its North American analogue.

### Borges's Investigation of Idealism: A Philosophy of Literary Form

Borges often links his unnatural wholes—his monsters and his *ficciones*—to philosophical idealism. As we have observed, he regularly associates Platonic archetypes with both imaginary beings and literary genres. Because references to philosophies and philosophers are ubiquitous in Borges's work, we might think that these references are simply one more feature of his vast, speculative, literary landscape. There is, however, a palpable difference in Borges's narrative approach to idealism. If he often presents philosophical ideas in summary overview—in a kind of minihistory of ideas that verges on parody—his essays on idealism are otherwise. They have a probing quality of personal engagement and aesthetic urgency that, in my view, underlines their centrality to Borges's morphology of genres.

The discussion begins early. In his first volume of essays in 1925, there are two essays devoted exclusively to Berkeleyan idealism, "The Nothingness of Personality" and "The Crossroads of Berkeley."<sup>76</sup> In the volumes that follow in the 1930s, Borges amplified his range of reference and focused his attention on the implications of idealism for literary structure. "The Postulation of Reality," "The Penultimate Version of Reality," and "Narrative Art and Magic," published in *Discusión* in 1932, and in 1936 "A History of Eternity," published in the collection of that name, weigh realist and idealist modes of knowing and writing. Indeed, throughout his career, Borges considers these paired modes under a variety of rubrics: romanticism and classicism, the accidental and the absolute, French philosophy and German philosophy, among others. His most extensive historical survey of the forms of idealism, "Nueva refutación del tiempo" ("New Refutation of Time"), was written in 1946 and collected in *Otras inquisiciones* in 1952. He begins his comprehensive consideration of idealist philosophers with reference to himself and the course of his own life "dedicated to literature and, occasionally, to metaphysical perplexity."<sup>77</sup>

Of the many doctrines recorded by the history of philosophy, idealism is perhaps the most ancient and the most widely divulged. The observation is Carlyle's (*Novalis*, 1829). Without any hope of completing the infinite census, I should like to add to the philosophers he mentioned the Platonists, for whom prototypes are the only reality (Norris, Judah Abrabanel, Gemistus, Plotinus); the theologians, for whom everything that is not the divinity is

contingent (Malebranche, Johannes Eckhart); the monists, who make of the universe a vain adjective of the Absolute (Bradley, Hegel, Parmenides). Idealism is as old as metaphysical inquietude. (p. 186)

Borges's early and ongoing engagement with idealist metaphysics provided support for his confrontation with the conventions of Argentine local color in the 1920s and 1930s, and illuminated his investigation of postromantic positions with respect to self, society, and language. Idealist metaphysics assisted him in developing a form of realism that eschews individualized characters in favor of plotted ideas, it encouraged his impulse to make plotted ideas the vehicles of myth and mystery, and it buttressed his refusal to commit to any one system or set of beliefs. If character, plot, setting, and language are presented as dream or otherwise the product of the imagining mind, then all beliefs are real and all imaginary creatures both real and potentially archetypal. In short, idealist metaphysics allowed Borges to affirm that verisimilitude is not necessarily that which conforms to empirical notions of the real but, rather, that which resonates aesthetically and expressively for the reader. Considering the realist/regionalist agenda of Latin American narrative at the time, this was no small gift.

Borges acknowledges this gift by making his most completely imagined world a monument to idealism. In "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1944), Borges creates Tlön, a "congenitally idealist" planet, and describes its language and literature in exquisite detail. There are no nouns in the languages of Tlön but only accumulations of adjectives; there is no succession in space, which would imply material objects, but only succession in time; and its literature "is filled with ideal objects, called forth and dissolved in an instant, as the poetry requires."<sup>78</sup> The narrator's extended description of Tlönian idealism moves steadily toward its tongue-in-cheek conclusion: "Century and century of idealism could hardly have failed to influence reality" (p. 77). Nor have centuries of idealism failed to influence Borges's literary forms and figures.

### Allegory and the Novel

In his 1948 essay "De las alegorías a las novelas" ("From Allegories to Novels"), collected in *Otras inquisiciones* (1952), Borges compares the history and expressive capacities of these narrative forms in terms of their idealizing potential. The devotion of the novel to individuals and events is contrasted to the affiliation of allegory with abstraction and exempla. Like metaphor and synecdoche, allegory establishes a special relationship between particularity and generality, requiring that the reader draw analogies between the given narrative instance and its hidden "universal" analogue. In this way, allegory and parody (a genre rarely absent from Borges's *ficciones*) are also aligned, for

both are texts that mirror an absent text, both depend upon the reader's recognition of that absence, and both imply a hierarchy in which the absent text is, ironically, the more real. In the case of parody, the absent text is the "original"; in the case of allegory, the absent text is presumed to be the repository of larger significance, significance that exceeds the concretions of the literal text.

In this essay, Borges compares allegory and the novel in relation to their capacity to express or contain abstract ideas, and evaluates them accordingly. He writes:

The allegory is a fable of abstractions, as the novel is a fable of individuals. . . . The passage from allegory to novel, from species to individual, from realism to nominalism, required several centuries. . . . (p. 157)

Borges's literary idealism is grounded in his efforts to reverse, or at least revise that history.

Using the medieval designations of realism and nominalism (i.e., idealism and realism, respectively) Borges writes: "for realism the universals (Plato would say the ideas, forms; we call them abstract concepts) were fundamental; and for nominalism, the individuals" (p. 157). Again, he historicizes these ways of seeing the world, and implicitly laments the triumph of literalism implied in the modern ascendancy of nominalism:

Nominalism, which was formerly the novelty of a few, encompasses everyone today; its victory is so vast and fundamental that its name is unnecessary. No one says that he is a nominalist, because nobody is anything else. But we must try to understand that for the people of the Middle Ages reality was not men but humanity, not the individuals but mankind, not the species but the genus, not the genera but God. (p. 157)

If the term magical realism is an oxymoron offered to describe recent incursions of myth and magic into narrative realism, so too literary idealism is an oxymoron in a world such as that described by Borges here. Where literature only describes the real, idealism enters surreptitiously or not at all. No one would have felt this more acutely than Borges as he challenged the reigning positivism in Latin American letters during fully the first half of this century.

"From Allegories to Novels" includes a list—a double list, really—of realists and nominalists, which Borges introduces in this way:

Coleridge observes that all men are born Aristotelian or Platonist. The latter know by intuition that ideas are realities; the former, that they are generalizations; for the latter, language is nothing but a system of arbitrary symbols; for the former, it is a map of the universe. The Platonist knows that the

universe is somehow a cosmos, an order, which, for the Aristotelian, may be an error or a figment of our partial knowledge. (p. 156)

"A figment of our partial knowledge"—an apt phrase to describe Borges's own generic intentions and procedures. He follows this double list with another of idealists and realists—the "immortal antagonists" whose names, he tells us, change "across the latitudes and the ages" but whose lineage is clear: Parmenides, Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Francis Bradley on one side, and Heraclitus, Aristotle, Locke, Hume, William James on the other. His double list leads Borges to this generalization:

The history of philosophy is not a vain museum of distractions and verbal games; the two theses probably correspond to two manners of intuitively perceiving reality. (p. 156)

Two manners of *intuitively* perceiving reality: thus intuition overarches difference, joining Aristotelians and Platonists and collapsing, at least momentarily, distinction between substantial nature and ideal form.

Complementarity, rather than mutual exclusion, underpins Borges's conception of the reality, and it is G. K. Chesterton, English clergyman and writer of detective fiction, whom Borges singles out as the master of the dual intuition of allegory.<sup>79</sup> Of Chesterton's poetry, Borges writes:

There is something more terrible and marvelous than being devoured by a dragon; it is being a dragon. There is something stranger than being a dragon: being a man. Such elemental intuition . . . shapes all of Chesterton's poems.<sup>80</sup>

Monstrosity and humanity conjoin in this eulogy to Chesterton, "Modes of G.K. Chesterton," written in 1936. Here, as usual, Borges's reference to monstrosity has generic implications. Using Chesterton against Croce in "From Allegories to Novels," Borges writes: "Croce denies the allegorical art; Chesterton vindicates it" (p. 154). According to Borges, Croce refuses the "monstrous" nature of allegory "because it aspires to encipher two contents in one form: the immediate or literal one . . . and the figurative one" (p. 155). Chesterton, on the contrary, embraces this two-headed monster.

For Borges, Chesterton's vindication of allegory is based in his engagement of a multiplicity of signifying forms. Chesterton's work denies "that language is the only way to express reality. . . . With one form of communication declared to be insufficient, there is room for others; allegory may be one of them, like architecture or music" (p. 155). Borges cites verbatim a lengthy passage from Chesterton's 1904 study of the English painter G. F. Watts to affirm his assertion:

Man knows that there are in the soul tints more bewildering, more numberless, and more nameless than the colours of an autumn forest; . . . Yet he seriously believes that these tints can every one of them, in their tones and semi-tones, in all their blends and unions, be accurately represented by an arbitrary system of grunts and squeals. He believes that an ordinary civilized stockbroker can really produce out of his own inside noises which denote all the mysteries of memory and all the agonies of desire. (Chesterton, *G.W. Watt*, 1904, p. 88; cited by Borges in "From Allegories to Novels," p. 155)

Chesterton's irony here affirms the position that Borges ascribes to him: signification always exceeds its signifiers, reality is always richer than any of its definitions, being overarches and includes individual lives. Borges agrees so emphatically with Chesterton's allegorical intuition that he cites it in two other essays as well. We find this same passage again in Borges's 1949 essay "Nathaniel Hawthorne," in which he uses it to defend Hawthorne against charges of "allegorism" and to praise Chesterton's intuition "that reality is interminably rich and that the language of men does not exhaust that vertiginous treasure" (*Other Inquisitions*, p. 50). And again, Borges cites this passage in the concluding paragraph of his 1941 essay, "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," where he prefaces the passage by saying that "these words by Chesterton are perhaps the most lucid ever written about language" (*Other Inquisitions*, pp. 104–105). So Borges repeatedly celebrates Chesterton's achievement: literary wholes that are inestimably larger than the sum of their linguistic parts.

### Borges's Monstrous Persona

We have been tracing the process of generic transformation by which Borges turns realistic narrative parts into ideal wholes. He is well aware of the tension in his own work between Aristotelianism and Platonism, nominalism and realism, romanticism and classicism, or any of the other paired terms with which he describes these "two manners of intuitively perceiving reality."<sup>81</sup> Borges's frequent strategy of setting up this opposition in order to dramatize its tensions belies Mario Vargas Llosa's characterization of Borges's singular devotion to idealism. Vargas Llosa asserts that

[Borges] came to take rather seriously the idealism of Bishop Berkeley, who postulated that reality did not exist, that what existed was only a mirage or cosmic fiction, our ideas or fantasies of reality. He played with that theme, of course, but the game of proclaiming the essential nonexistence of the material world, of history and objective reality, with dream and fiction as the only reality, became a serious belief and gave to his work not just a recurrent and original theme; it also transubstantiated into his conception of reality.<sup>82</sup> [my

This assessment has the value of emphasizing Borges's idealism, but it is overly simple in its conclusion, for Borges knew that however universalizing his intention and however mythic the resonance of his plots, he—a writer of literary fictions—had to tie his creations to the phenomenological realities of shared human experiences. In contrast to Vargas Llosa's contention, Borges dramatizes the constant intrusions of disorder into all human efforts at order. Indeed, the "elegant hope" for order, as the narrator puts it at the end of "The Library of Babel," is one of Borges's great themes—a theme that Henry Sussman traces in brilliant detail in this volume.

The Borgesian irony between the desire for an ideal order and the knowledge of its impossibility would hardly be so pervasive had Borges embraced idealism as univocally as Vargas Llosa suggests. I have cited Borges's statement in "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" affirming the human need for systems, despite the knowledge that they are "arbitrary and conjectural." Similarly, in his 1936 "synthetic biography" of Oswald Spengler, Borges contrasts French positivism with German idealism, recognizing ironically the intentions of the latter: "The perfect symmetry of the systems—and not any eventual correspondence with the impure and disorderly universe—constitutes their zealous purpose."<sup>83</sup> In Borges's story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," the planet of Tlön is so ideally idealistic that parody is certainly intended. The narrator speaks of Tlön's "concept of the universe":

Hume declared for all time that while Berkeley's arguments admit not the slightest refutation, they inspire not the slightest conviction. That pronouncement is entirely true with respect to the earth, entirely false with respect to Tlön. The nations of that planet are, congenitally, idealistic. Their language and those things derived from their language—religion, literature, metaphysics—presuppose idealism. For the people of Tlön, the world is not an amalgam of *objects* in space. . . . There are no nouns in the conjectural *Ursprache* of Tlön.<sup>84</sup>

The irony is clear: there *are* nouns in the languages of earth. Borges concludes his most concentrated discussion of idealism, "New Refutation of Time," with this wistful recognition: "The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am Borges" (p. 187).

This debate between the ideal poetic persona Borges and the (reluctant) Borges of flesh and blood recalls the archetypal "other Whitman," and it finds its most explicit allegory in "Borges y yo" ("Borges and I"). Although the typical trajectory of Borges's stories is from the particular to the universal, in this *ficción* the slippage also occurs in the opposite direction. The first person narrator tells us that he is trapped in the body of Borges, the archetype of the writer and metaphysician, and he expresses the wistful hope of



physical realm now denied him. Like Asterion, the narrator's hybridity—his monstrous composite of two bodies and minds—signals the disjunction between real and ideal, between individuality (personality, corporeality) and the collective outlines of myth. Eduardo González discusses Borges's use of the two-faced Janus in his stories "El Sur" ("The South") and "La muerte y la brújula" ("Death and the Compass") and finds that Janus ushers the protagonists in both stories into a realm of myth and atavistic identity.<sup>85</sup> In "Borges and I" the narrator is himself Janus-like. Despite his wish, he remains fixed, the better to usher others into the realm of myth: "I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges can spin out his literature, and that literature is my justification."<sup>86</sup> The fable ends: "So my life is a point-counterpoint, a kind of fugue, and a falling away—and everything winds up being lost to me, and everything falls into oblivion, or into the hands of the other man. I am not sure which of us it is that's writing this page" (p. 324). In this same volume, *El hacedor* (1960), Borges includes a poem entitled "Los Borges" (The Borgeses), and four years later, in 1964, he publishes a volume of verse entitled *El otro, el mismo*.

These images of self-division and otherness, when considered along with Borges's conception of monstrosity, may lead critics to consider the traces of homosexuality that abide in Borges's work and in his life. That Borges wrote in praise of monsters—unnatural combinations of natural parts—and sought them out in the world's literature and mythology, and that he celebrates their hybridity and their baroque inclusiveness, would, I think, be the place to begin a discussion of Borges's gendered genres. (In Spanish, as it happens, the word for gender and genre is the same: *género*.) Borges's morphology of genres enables his approach to ideal categories, and it conditions his treatment of gender—also elusive, volatile, and metamorphic. His stories and essays, like his monsters, are presented as wholes that encompass all permutations of human experience.

For my part, I return to Borges's status as Everyman. Surely Borges's monsters are partly responsible. The author's metaphysical mixtures, his disciplinary combinations, and his generic hybrids move his reader from the particular to the universal, from reality to myth, from personality to archetype, from realities to Reality. This universalizing impulse Borges shares with philosophy and with philosophers. It is ironic that Borges's monsters—those most illogical, hence unphilosophical beings—are the beings that impel his work toward universality, hence toward philosophy.

The poet Wallace Stevens, in his extended musings on the shared subjects of poetry and philosophy, finds their most significant conjunction in their sense of "something cosmic":

[A] sense of the infinity of the world is a sense of something cosmic. It is cosmic poetry because it makes us realize . . . that we are creatures not of a

part, which is our every day limitation, but of a whole for which, for the most part, we have as yet no language. This sudden change of a lesser life for a greater one is like a change of winter for spring or any other transmutation of poetry. . . . A realization of the infinity of the world is equally a perception of philosophy and a typical metamorphosis of poetry.<sup>87</sup>

Borges's *ficciones* aspire to the same "realization of infinity" that Stevens finds in philosophy. The methods of philosophers are very different from those of Borges, of course, nor are philosophers' modes of expression necessarily "literary" by any standard definition of the literary. But the universalizing impulse that moves Borges to embed ideal objects—imaginary beings, places, times, texts—in his miniature *ficciones* is surely the same impulse that impels philosophers to propose world hypotheses and universal modes of being. In one of his early ultraist essays, Borges proposes that writers "make manifest the whim transformed into reality that is the mind"; they "add provinces to Being" and "envision cities and spaces of a hallucinatory reality."<sup>88</sup> So, surely, do philosophers. Wallace Stevens may be right that writers probe fortuitously and philosophers deliberately. In any case, and in both, the satisfactions of their readers are commensurate.

## Notes

1. *Borges en Sur 1931–1980*, ed. Sara Luisa del Carril and Mercedes Rubio de Sacchi (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1999); *Borges: Obras, reseñas y traducciones inéditas, colaboraciones de Jorge Luis Borges en la Revista multicolor de los sábados del diario Crítica, 1933–1934*, ed. Irma Zangara (Buenos Aires, Santiago: Editorial Atlántida, 1995); *Textos cautivos: Ensayos y reseñas en El Hogar (1936–1939)*, ed. Enrique Sacerio-Garí and Emir Rodríguez Monegal (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 1986). See Mario Vargas Llosa's review of *Borges en Sur*, "Borges, político," *Letras libres* 1, no. 11 (November 1999), pp. 24–26. In English see Eliot Weinberger's invaluable collection *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking, 1999).
2. *Borges oral: Conferencias* (1979; Buenos Aires: Emecé/Editorial de Belgrano, 1997); *Diálogos: Borges Sábado*, ed. Orlando Barone (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1996).
3. *Para las seis cuerdas*, illustrated by Héctor Basaldúa (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1996).
4. Julio Woscoboinik demonstrates how Freudian intuitions permeate Borges's *ficciones*. See Julio Woscoboinik, *The Secret of Borges: A Psychoanalytic Inquiry into His Work*, trans. Dora Carlinsky Pozzi (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998); and by the same author, *El alma de "El Aleph": Nuevos aportes a la indagación psicoanalítica de la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (Buenos Aires: Nuevo hacer, 1996).
5. Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (London: Verso, 1993); Beret E. Strong, *The Poetic Avant-Garde: The Groups of Borges, Auden and Breton* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997).
6. Malcolm K. Read, *Jorge Luis Borges and His Predecessors, or Notes towards a Materialist History of Linguistic Idealism* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Studies in Romance Language and Literatures, 1993).

7. Eliot Weinberger, "Borges: La biblioteca parcial," *Letras libres* 1, no. 8 (August 1999), pp. 36–38. Weinberger writes: "The first three volumes of the *Complete Works* include less than one hundred essays; the fourth adds another three hundred, which still leaves out some two-thirds of the uncollected work."
8. Sarlo, *José Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, p. 5.
9. Borges, "Epilogue," *Other Inquisitions: 1937–1952*, trans. Ruth L.C. Sims (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 189.
10. Floyd Merrell compares Borges and Calvino in his essay "Borges and Calvino: Chaosmos Unleashed?" in *Jorge Luis Borges: Thought and Knowledge in the XXth Century*, ed. Alfonso de Toro and Fernando de Toro (Madrid/Frankfurt: Vervuert/Iberoamericana, 1999), pp. 175–206.
11. There are also three books of poetry from the 1920s and a critical biography: *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), *Luna de enfrente* (1925), *Cuaderno San Martín* (1929), and *Evaristo Carriego* (1930).
12. In his "Autobiographical Essay," Borges refers to these suppressed collections:  

Three of the four essay collections—whose names are best forgotten—I have never allowed to be reprinted. When in 1953 my present publisher—Emecé—proposed to bring out my "complete writings," the only reason I accepted was that it would allow me to keep those preposterous volumes suppressed. This reminds me of Mark Twain's suggestion that a fine library could be started by leaving out the works of Jane Austen, and that even if that library contained no other books it would still be a fine library, since her books were left out. . . . Until a few years ago, if the price were not too stiff, I would buy up copies and burn them.

Borges, "Autobiographical Essay" (1970), in *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933–1969*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970), pp. 230–231.
13. Rita Guibert, *Seven Voices* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 10.
14. Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, p. 4.
15. See my study of this process, in which I foreground Borges: *The Usable Past: The Imagination of History in Recent Fiction of the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
16. Beatriz Sarlo, "Un ultraísta en Buenos Aires," *Letras libres* 1, no. 8 (August 1999), p. 42, my translation.
17. William Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Vintage, 1957), p. 665.
18. "El ultraísmo no es quizá otra cosa que la espléndida síntesis de la literatura antigua." Quoted in Strong, *The Poetic Avant-Garde*, p. 80.
19. See David Huerta, "La querella hispánica de Borges," *Letras libres* 1, no. 8 (August 1999), pp. 50–53.
20. Carlos Fuentes, "The Accidents of Time," in *The Borges Tradition*, ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London: Constable, 1995), p. 53. Originally collected in *Geografía de la novela* as "Jorge Luis Borges: La herida de Babel" (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), pp. 32–55.
21. James Woodall, *The Man in the Mirror of the Book: A Life of Jorge Luis Borges* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), p. 59; Anthony Kerrigan, introduction to José Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p. xix. See also Borges's early essay "Acerca de Unamuno, poeta," in *Inquisiciones* (1925; Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1998), pp. 109–118.
22. David Huerta cites Borges's 1955 essay, "Nota de un mal lector," in which Borges disavows Ortega. Borges writes: "Es posible que yo deba algo a Ortega, autor a quien apenas conozco." (It is possible that I owe something to Ortega, an author

- with whom I am scarcely familiar.) Huerta notes "the bad faith" of Borges's statement. "La querella hispánica de Borges," *Letras libres* 1, no. 8 (August 1999), p. 53.
23. Rockwell Gray catalogues Ortega's insulting commentaries on Argentina and Argentines, and particularly notes Borges's aversion to Ortega's seigniorial attitudes in *The Imperative of Modernity: An Intellectual Biography of José Ortega y Gasset* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 117–122 and 176–183. See also José Luis Romero, *El desarrollo de las ideas en la sociedad argentina del siglo XX*, (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1965), pp. 116–117.
  24. José Luis Romero, *El desarrollo de las ideas en la sociedad argentina del siglo XX*, pp. 107–115. See also Luis Gregorich, "La literatura: Creación e industria," in *Buenos Aires: Historia de cuatro siglos*, ed. José Luis Romero y Luis Alberto Romero (Buenos Aires: Editorial Abril, 1983), pp. 365–375. More recently, and more generally, see David William Foster, *Buenos Aires: Perspectives on the City and Cultural Production* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998).
  25. Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, trans. Julián Marías (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), p. 113.
  26. Ortega, "The Novel as a Sluggish Genre," *The Dehumanization of Art*, pp. 66–67.
  27. Ortega y Gasset writes:  

The Renaissance discovers the inner world in all its vast extension, the *me ipsum*, the consciousness, the subjective. *Quixote* is the flower of this great new turn which culture takes. In it the epic comes to an end forever, along with its aspiration to support a mythical world bordering on that of material phenomena but different from it. It is true that the reality of the adventure is saved, but such a salvation involves the sharpest irony. The reality of the adventure is reduced to the psychological, perhaps to a biological humor. (*Meditations on Quixote*, p. 138)

Borges disagrees with Ortega's preference for psychological fiction over the adventure story in his "Prologue to the *Invention of Morel*."
  28. In his chapter "Reality, Leaven of Myth," Ortega asks how  

reality, the actual, can be changed into poetic substance. By itself, seen in a direct way, it would never be poetic: this is the privilege of the mythical. But we can consider it obliquely as destruction of myth, as criticism of myth. In this form reality, which is of an inert and meaningless nature, quiet and mute, acquires movement, is changed into an active power of aggression against the crystal orb of the ideal. The enchantment of the latter broken, it falls into fine, iridescent dust which gradually loses its colors until it becomes an earthy brown. We witness this scene in every novel. So, strictly speaking, it is not reality that becomes poetic or enters into the work of art but only that gesture or movement of reality in which the ideal is reabsorbed. (*Meditations on Quixote*, pp. 139–140)
  29. Ortega, "Taboo and Metaphor," *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*, trans. Paul Snodgrass and Joseph Frank (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 33.
  30. Ortega, "Decline of the Novel," *The Dehumanization of Art*, p. 58.
  31. Gray, *The Imperative of Modernity*, pp. 152–153. See also Antonio Rodríguez Huéscar, *José Ortega y Gasset's Metaphysical Innovation: A Critique and Overcoming of Idealism*, trans. Jorge García-Gómez (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).
  32. Ortega, "Cubism," *The Dehumanization of Art*, pp. 29–30. The translator, Joseph Frank, appends a footnote to Ortega's phrase "ideal object." The footnote reads: "The philosophy to which Ortega refers, but which unfortunately he neglects to name, is obviously Husserlian phenomenology."
  33. In the Koran, camels do appear. I am indebted to Verónica Cortínez for pointing out that Borges erroneously attributes this observation to Gibbon when, in fact, Gibbon referred to Mohammed's preference for cow's milk. In this context,

- Gibbon notes that Mohammed does not mention the camel. Following his character Pierre Menard, Borges's techniques of "deliberate anachronism and erroneous attribution" are well known.
34. Borges, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," *Discusión* (1932); in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 185.
  35. Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, with Margarita Guerrero; trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author (London: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 14. Originally published as *Manual de zoología fantástica* in 1957, this collection was amplified in *El libro de seres imaginarios* in 1967. See Adriana González Mateo's interartistic discussion of the Mexican painter Francisco Toledo's illustration of Borges's monsters, "Borges y Toledo: zoología fantástica," in *Poligrafías: Revista de literatura comparada*, No. 1 (1996), pp. 151–162.
  36. Borges, "Valéry as Symbol," *Other Inquisitions*, p. 74. The entire quote is as follows: "The meritorious mission that Valéry performed (and continues to perform) is that he proposed lucidity to men in a basely romantic age, in the melancholy age of Nazism and dialectical materialism, the age of the augurs of Freud's doctrine and the traffickers in *surréalisme*."
  37. Cited by Wimsatt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, p. 665. Recall that Dr. Johnson was embroiled in a crucial neoclassical debate about the relative nature and value of the general and the particular.
  38. T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Essays: 1917–1932* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), p. 243.
  39. Borges, "A History of Angels," originally published in *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, 1926; trans. Esther Allen in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fiction*, pp. 18–19.
  40. Borges, "The House of Asterion," originally published in 1947 and collected in *El aleph* (1949), was not included in the English translation of *The Aleph*. I cite from *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 221. (Hereafter *CF*.)
  41. Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, p. 14.
  42. Borges, "La metáfora," *Historia de la eternidad* (1936); *Obras completas*, I, p. 382.
  43. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 48.
  44. Borges, "Autobiographical Essay," in *The Aleph*, p. 255.
  45. Borges, "A Vindication of the Cabala," trans. Karen Stolley in *Borges: A Reader*, p. 23.
  46. Borges, "Sobre el doblaje," *Discusión* (1932); *Obras completas* I, p. 283. Not translated into English. My translation.
  47. Borges, "After Death," *Discusión* (1932); trans. Suzanne Jill Levine in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fiction*, pp. 253–254.
  48. Borges concludes the paragraph that I've cited above:  
I have worshipped the gradual invention of God; Hell and Heaven (an immortal reward, an immortal punishment) are also admirable and curious designs of man's imagination. (255)
- About an afterlife, he notes that Argentine Catholics believe in an afterlife but are not interested in it; he, on the contrary, is interested but does not believe.
49. Borges, "The Doctrine of Cycles," published in *A History of Eternity* (1936); trans. Esther Allen in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fiction*, p. 117. Fifty years later, Borges was to select Cantor's book to appear in Spanish translation with his prologue in his series Biblioteca Personal, Borges's last project (1985 and 1986). The prologues are published in *Obras completas*, volume IV.
  50. Borges, "Personality and the Buddha," published in *Sur* in 1950; never reprinted in Spanish, and not collected in *Obras completas*; I cite from *Jorge Luis Borges:*

- Selected Non-Fictions*, pp. 348–349. I am indebted to José Ricardo Chaves for his insights in his unpublished essay, "Borges y el Buddhismo."
51. Borges, "Pascal's Sphere" (1951); collected in *Otras inquisiciones* (1952); trans. Eliot Weinberger in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, p. 352.
  52. Borges, "The Detective Story," collected in *Borges oral*, 1979; trans. Esther Allen in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, p. 491.
  53. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 18, where Derrida asserts that the "book" is a closed, logocentric structure and the "text" is its opposite. The refusal of closure—*différance*, or deferred meaning—characterizes most of Borges's *ficciones*, most explicitly in his recurring proposal that the dreamer is dreamed, and "the Almighty is also in search of Someone." "The Approach to al-Mu'tasim," in *The Aleph*, p. 50.
  54. See Hayden White, who distinguishes between the open-ended list that is the medieval annal, or chronicle, and history, which has been "narrativized" with a beginning, middle, and end. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, 7, no. i (1980), p. 5.
  55. Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1984), pp. 47–66.
  56. Borges, "Autobiographical Essay," in *The Aleph*, p. 238.
  57. Borges, *A Universal History of Infamy*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (1935; London: Penguin, 1970), p. 15.
  58. Borges, "The Zahir," *CF*, p. 286.
  59. *Ibid.*
  60. "Pascal's Sphere," trans. Eliot Weinberger, in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fiction*, p. 353.
  61. Borges, "The Challenge," published in *La nación* in 1952 and collected in *El hacedor* (1960); collected in English in *The Aleph*, p. 143.
  62. Borges, "The Aleph," published in September 1945 in *Sur*; collected in *El aleph* (1949); *The Aleph*, p. 26.
  63. Borges, Commentary on "The Aleph," *The Aleph*, p. 264.
  64. Borges, "The Circular Ruins," published in December 1940 in *Sur*; collected in *CF*, p. 99.
  65. Borges, "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," published in *La nación* in 1941; collected in *Otras inquisiciones* (1952); *Other Inquisitions*, p. 103.
  66. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970; New York: Vintage, 1973), p. xvii.
  67. Borges, "The Concept of an Academy and the Celts" (1962), trans. Eliot Weinberger, in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, p. 461.
  68. Borges, "Autobiographical Essay" (1970), in *The Aleph*, p. 217.
  69. Borges coins the phrase to describe his own intention with his list in "The Aleph." Commentary on "The Aleph," *The Aleph*, p. 264.
  70. Borges, "La nadería de la personalidad," first published in *Proa* in 1922; collected in *Inquisiciones* (1925); trans. Esther Allen as "The Nothingness of Personality," in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, pp. 3–9. Several times in this essay Borges repeats the phrase "There is no whole self." He then mentions Whitman, stating that Whitman "was the first Atlas who attempted to make this obstinacy a reality and take the world upon his shoulders. He believed he had only to enumerate the names of things in order to make their unique and surprising nature immediately palpable" p. 7.
  71. Borges, "Camden, 1892," in *El otro, el mismo* (1964); *Obras completas*, II, p. 291
  72. Borges, "Prólogo: Hojas de hierba." Prologue to Borges's translation of *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1969 and reprinted in *Prólogos con un prólogo de prólogos*, 1975.

- See the prologue in English: "Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*," trans. Esther Allen, in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, pp. 445–449.
73. Borges, "Note on Walt Whitman," originally published in *Discusión* (1923); *Other Inquisitions*, p. 66.
  74. Borges, "Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*," trans. Esther Allen, in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fictions*, p. 447.
  75. Ortega y Gasset, "Invitation to Understanding," *The Dehumanization of Art*, p. 24.
  76. "La nadería de personalidad" and "La encrucijada de Berkeley," in *Inquisiciones* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1998).
  77. Borges, "New Refutation of Time," originally published in pamphlet form in 1947, collected in *Otras inquisiciones* (1952); *Other Inquisitions*, p. 180.
  78. Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *CF*, p. 73.
  79. For an overarching comparison of Chesterton and Borges, see Elmar Schenkel, "Circling the Cross, Crossing the Circle: On Borges and Chesterton," in *Jorge Luis Borges: Thought and Knowledge in the XXth Century*, ed. Alfonso de Toro and Fernando de Toro (Madrid/Frankfurt: Vervuert/ Iberoamericana, 1999), pp. 289–302.
  80. Borges, "Modes of G.K. Chesterton," published in *Sur* in 1936, not included in the *Obras completas*; trans. Mark Larsen, in *Borges: A Reader*, p. 91.
  81. Borges, "From Allegories to Novels," originally published in *La nación* (1949), collected in *Otras inquisiciones* (1952); trans. Ruth L. C. Sims, in *Borges: A Reader*, p. 232.
  82. Mario Vargas Llosa, "Borges, político," *Letras libres*, 1, no. 11 (November 1999), p. 24.
  83. Borges, "Oswald Spengler: A Capsule Biography," published in *El hogar* in 1936; trans. Karen Stolley in *Borges: A Reader*, p. 87.
  84. Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *CF*, pp. 72–73.
  85. Eduardo González, *The Monstered Self* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 39–42.
  86. Borges, "Borges and I," first published in *El Hacedor* (1960); in *Collected Fictions*, p. 324.
  87. Stevens, "The Collect of Philosophy," in *Opus Posthumous*, p. 271.
  88. Borges, "After Images," published in *Proa* in 1924, collected in *Inquisiciones* (1925); trans. Suzanne Jill Levine, in *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Non-Fiction*, p. 11.

JORGE J. E. GRACIA

## Borges's "Pierre Menard": Philosophy or Literature?<sup>1</sup>

In a letter to his wife, to whom he dedicated the Eighth Symphony, Mahler wrote:

It is a peculiarity of the interpretation of works of art that *the rational element in them (that which is soluble by reason) is almost never their true reality*, but only a veil which hides their form. Insofar as a soul needs a body—which there is no disputing—an artist is bound to derive the means of creation from the natural world. But the chief thing is still the artistic conception. . . . [In *Faust*] everything points with growing mastery toward his final supreme moment—which, *though beyond expression, touches the very heart of feeling*.<sup>2</sup>

Mahler's point concerns what is peculiar to works of art: They defy rationality and expression. By this, I take him to mean that works of art are not reducible to ideas and, therefore, cannot be effectively translated.

If works of art are idiosyncratic in this way, then it would be expected that this is also what distinguishes them from works of philosophy. Whereas art is irreducible to ideas and defies translation, philosophy is reducible to ideas and can be translated.

This is the standard modernist view of philosophy and art—and, by extension, of literature—which has been one of the points of attack by postmodernists. The argument is not just that art and literature are irreducible to ideas and therefore untranslatable, but that there is no distinction in this respect between art and literature on the one hand and philosophy on the other. Philosophy is also art.<sup>3</sup>

Postmodernism has found a receptive audience in Latin America, particularly in literary circles and especially on this point. Indeed, the view that there is no distinction between literature, in particular, and philosophy is often treated as dogma. I quote from a recent source: "[I]n fact, there is no substantial difference between philosophical discourse and literary discourse" in spite of "the boundaries that have been traditionally claimed to separate both discourses."<sup>4</sup>