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## BORGES AND THE CENTER OF THE LABYRINTH

RICARDO GUTIÉRREZ-MOUAT

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“...writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin...”

Barthes, “The Death of the Author”

“TLON, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” perhaps Borges’ most anthologized story, narrates the interjection of one world into another or, to be more precise, of a *fictitious* world into the order of reality. The fabulous planet of Tlon is a fiction contrived by an obscure collectivity of scriptors who record in a meticulous encyclopedia the planet’s topography and metaphysics, its languages and literatures. The anonymity of the authors is in accord with the literary orthodoxy of Tlon, where

The idea of a single subject is... all-powerful. It is uncommon for books to be signed. The concept of plagiarism does not exist: it has been established that all works are the creation of one author, who is atemporal and anonymous.<sup>1</sup>

One of the more notorious wonders catalogued in the encyclopedia is the *hronir*, a category of objects which materialize out of the imagination and which exist in multiple versions of themselves, much like the encyclopedia that records them, itself a revised edition of a nebulous original. The typical self-referentiality of Borges’ narrative is patent: the *hronir* and the encyclopedia are both avatars or transformations of the ultimate referent, that is, of the Borgesian text itself, also a product of the imagination inserted into reality and characteristically a labyrinth without a center, a writing without a signature (or with a false one).

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. James E. Irby and Donald Yates (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1964), p. 13.

The Borgesian text displays this *ex-centricity* in the same evident manner as it displays the artifice of fiction. In some of the stories the motif of the fallacious center operates at the level of *histoire*, a case in point being "The Library of Babel" in which a futile search is undertaken for the Book of Books. In others, such as "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," the narrative voice shifts uneasily and gradually from a tone of parody to direct statement, thus questioning the possibility of a central, authoritative voice to articulate the text. Still in others, the labyrinth with its tantalizing center appears as a structural paradigm. In "The Approach to Al-Mutasim" a law student searches for the eponymous character by pursuing his radiant reflection in other people. When this oblique, indirect approach is about to culminate the, "novel comes to its end."<sup>2</sup> There is no revelation but only the *imminence* of one which, of course, is Borges' tentative definition of the aesthetic phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> Neither is the perverse symmetry of labyrinths absent from this text: the law student's search is *doubled* by the reviewer's search for an analogous kind of center: Mir Bahadur Ali's novel, in itself a double of Borges' text since they both have the same title. The circumlocutory reviewer arrives at the novel in question indirectly, after a textual periple whose stages are the two published reviews quoted by him. The arrival at the center, however, is problematic: the novel exists in two versions and, furthermore, it is an "uneasy combination" (p. 45) of an Islamic allegory and a detective story.

This structure of displacements, curiously enough, is also apparent in some of Borges' essays, particularly in "A Note on (toward) Bernard Shaw," whose self-correcting title should alert the careful reader as to the shifting, unstable quality of the text. Borges opens the essay by enumerating diachronically the different formulations of an idea, that of "making metaphysics and the arts into a kind of play with combinations."<sup>4</sup> This idea, which implies the exhaustion of literature, is then questioned by Borges: "Literature is not exhaustible, for the sufficient and simple reason that no single book is" (pp. 213-14). After further elaboration of this position, the discredited idea is restated in order to submit it to another dialectical attack: "If literature were nothing more

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, tr. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970), p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> "The Wall and the Books," *Labyrinths*, p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> *Labyrinths*, p. 213.

than verbal algebra, anyone could produce any book by essaying variations" (p. 214). But the new attack is mounted by way of a detour, since Borges does not choose a writer as his object-lesson but a philosopher:

The lapidary formula "Everything flows" abbreviates in two words the philosophy of Heraclitus: Raymond Lully would say that, with the first word given, it would be sufficient to essay the intransitive verbs to discover the second and obtain, thanks to methodical chance, that philosophy and many others. Here it is fitting to reply that the formula obtained by this process of elimination would lack all value and even meaning; for it to have some virtue we must conceive it in terms of Heraclitus, in terms of an experience of Heraclitus, even though "Heraclitus" is nothing more than the presumed subject of that experience. (p. 214)

It is clear that in order to dispute again the idea of literature as a combinatorial exercise Borges postulates the *existence* of the author and a genetic relationship between author and text, at which point the elusive Bernard Shaw is introduced:

Can an author create characters superior to himself? I would say no and in that negation include both the intellectual and the moral. I believe that from us cannot emerge creatures more lucid or more noble than our best moments. It is on this opinion that I base my conviction of Shaw's pre-eminence. (p. 215)

This defense of the author's rights (of his copyright) seems blatantly to contradict Borges' literary theory and praxis.<sup>5</sup> But the antithesis ceases to be so radical when one realizes that Borges' *apologia pro auctore* is itself contradicted a few lines below its postulation:

The biography of Bernard Shaw by Frank Harris contains an admirable letter by the former, from which I copy the following words: "I understand everything and everyone." From this nothingness... Bernard Shaw educed almost innumerable persons or dramatis personae: the most ephemeral of these is, I suspect, that G.B.S. who represented him in public and who lavished in the newspaper columns so many facile witticisms. (p. 215)

The essayistic text, then, is structured as some of Borges' fictions: there is an indirect, circuitous approach to its central theme (Bernard Shaw)

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<sup>5</sup> As striking examples of Borges' position on the matter one may cite his essay on Valéry and Whitman, where the genetic relationship between author and text is inverted, or "Borges and I," which states that the author "Borges" is as fictitious as his texts and different from Borges the man.

followed by a postulation of a center: Bernard Shaw as author or creator of characters, but this center is immediately subverted when Bernard Shaw appears as one of his own characters, dispossessed of authorial autonomy, of authority.<sup>6</sup> His condition thus resembles that of Shakespeare and also of God, the ultimate Author:

The voice of the Lord answered from a whirlwind: "Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one."<sup>7</sup>

The disappearance of the author in Borges liberates the text to an infinite play of allusions in the "homogeneous and reversible space of literature,"<sup>8</sup> that is, it defers its meaning both intratextually (by means of displacements and self-corrections) and intertextually. Like the nebulous land of Uqbar, the Borgesian text cannot be bounded nor its origin determined. To read it induces a perplexity and an uneasiness similar to those experienced by the readers of volume XLVI of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*: "Reading over again, we discovered beneath its rigorous prose a fundamental vagueness."<sup>9</sup> Borges' reader cannot situate himself at the center of the text. A classic mode of passage to that center afforded by the realist or psychological novel is the character, but the character in Borges is undermined by a series of techniques which disfigure, mask, or fragment him, precluding any identification with the reader: Pierre Menard is a character presented through a bibliography; Pedro Damian's identity in "The Other Death" is lost in the labyrinths of time and memory; the narrator in "Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" admonishes that the story he is narrating is "not the story of my emotions but of Uqbar and Tlon and Orbis Tertius" (p. 6), and when he records his personal reaction to the *First Encyclopaedia of Tlon* he does so indirectly, by means of a literary allusion.<sup>10</sup> Along with the questioning of character one must consider the anxiety produced by the

<sup>6</sup> The reading of Shaw which obtains in Argentina constitutes a further deviation.

<sup>7</sup> "Everything and Nothing," *Labyrinths*, p. 249.

<sup>8</sup> Gérard Genette, "La littérature selon Borges," *Jorge Luis Borges* (Paris: L'Herne, 1964), p. 324.

<sup>9</sup> *Labyrinths*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> For a full treatment of the problem see Sylvia Molloy, "La composición del personaje en la ficción de Borges," *NRFH*, 1 (1977), 130-40.

intimidating erudite apparatus which Borges typically sets in motion, for regardless of his cultural baggage no single reader will be able to reconstruct the heterogeneous body of citations which occupies the space of the text and blocks access to its center.<sup>11</sup>

If the Borgesian text exists in that shifting space between an author and a reader who are both unable to claim it, it is because the experience Borges writes about is primarily the experience of reading. Since reading always involves a previous writing, writing can only be re-writing, a predicament which Borges readily acknowledges. When asked about *Ficciones* in a recent interview, for example, he replies: "Oh, I think it's made of half-forgotten memories. I wonder if there is a single original line in the book."<sup>12</sup> In "Borges and I" he declares that the legitimate space of the text is that of language and tradition, both peculiarly mobile entities. One might recall that in the languages of Tlon nouns are unknown; they are either replaced by impersonal verbs or constructed by an arbitrary and theoretically infinite accumulation of adjectives. This conception of a language perennially in flux (doubled at the end of the story by a revision of an "uncertain" Quevedian translation of *Urn Burial*) has a counterpart in Borges' conception of tradition. Pierre Menard's re-writing of the *Quijote* results in a richer, more provocative text, not only because three centuries of history have elapsed, but also because Pierre Menard, a peripheral French symbolist, has arrived at the *Quijote* through Valéry, D'Annunzio, Leibniz, and other writers not available to the initial readers of Cervantes nor to Cervantes as reader. These successors of the Spanish novelist deflect the reading of his work just as Kafka modifies the reading of Browning and Lord Dunsany, his unsuspecting precursors.<sup>13</sup>

Devoid of a center around which to assemble itself, the Borgesian text cannot but allude to its own absence. Like Pierre Menard's invisible masterpiece, Ts'ui Pen's impossible novel, or Hladik's secret miracle, Borges' *écriture* would seem to claim a paradoxical poetics of silence for its realization. If every text is a tissue of anonymous, untraceable citations,

<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Molloy, "Borges y la distancia literaria," *Sur*, 318 (mayo-junio, 1969), p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> L. S. Dembo, "An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 1 (Winter, 1970), 323.

<sup>13</sup> See "Kafka and his Precursors," *Labyrinths*.

of “quotations without inverted commas,”<sup>14</sup> the *visible* writing of Jorge Luis Borges, lucidly aware of its absent center, by naming the citations and restoring the commas, erects a frame of reference that is self-consciously literary and in which it is possible to show an absence, to articulate a silence.

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<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” *Image/Music/Text*, tr. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 160.