

FROM BLACK TO PINK
SHADES OF HUMOUR IN BORGES'S FICTIONS



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Humour is epiphanic, it exists in that momentary revelation which lies beyond conventional reasoning, defying its authority and uncovering the evanescent reality of its own internal logic. Humour, like metaphor, depends on brevity, drawing on perceived connections between fundamentally dissimilar things. It is essentially an aesthetic experience, and as such, exploits uncertainty, so that every attempted explanation is bound to destroy its effect, taming it into the conformity of the explicable, reducing the sensuous into 'common-sense' (Nuñez Ramos 105-106). In the words of Voltaire, "*La plaisanterie expliquée cesse d'être plaisante*" (Sauvy 19), a sentiment echoed more dryly by Freud's remark that "abstract intellectual thought is an unfavourable condition for comic effect" (cf. *Jokes* 283-285). But, as defensively observed by a well-known British comedian, 'Freud never had to do a performance at the Glasgow Palais on a wet Monday night.¹ *Salvando todas las diferencias*, nor do I: humour will be the subject, not the medium, of this article. I do not aim to amuse the reader with new and better ways of laughing with

¹ Ken Dodd; see J. Palmer.

Borges but to explore the use that Borges has made, wittingly or otherwise, of traditional mechanisms of humour, and their possible effect in his work. What makes a study of humour particularly relevant to Borges is his uniquely original handling of incongruity which, as will be argued, is the key element in all humorous situations.

The importance of humour is clearly suggested in the ancients' definition of man as *homo ridens*, underlining the fact that laughter separates us and distinguishes us from the rest of the natural world.² In the last few centuries, in particular, it has gained increasing recognition in all fields. In academia, for example, there is a proliferation of courses on this subject, with international conferences held regularly, and dedicated research published in specialist journals such as *Humor* and *Thalia*.³ Humour has become increasingly important in the way we see the world around us. It has moved from the margins of serious discourse to all areas of intellectual discourse, including science.⁴

The word 'humour', etymologically and conceptually linked to the bodily fluids known as 'humours'⁵ has but comparatively recently been used in connection with merriment or amusement.⁶ Although the connection between mental humour and bodily humours was not made explicitly until the 17th century, the effects of the humours on the body were perceived by the pre-Socratics. As Hippocrates knew and modern neurology has discovered, humour has a therapeutic effect: it induces the right neurons to release natural pain killers or opiates, and can be a liberating force conducive to psychological feelings of well-being. Freud considers that the most

² Aristotle, *De anima*. It should be noted, however, that Aristotle saw humour in mainly negative terms.

³ *Humor* : *International Journal of Humor Research*, Berlin-New York; *Thalia*, University of Ottawa.

⁴ This idea is extensively discussed in Patrick O'Neill *The Comedy of Entropy: Humor, Narrative, Reading*. I wish to thank Dianna Niebylski for bringing to my attention this fascinating book, on which I have based many of my ideas. Also for her generous and informed contribution to this article.

⁵ From the Latin *humor*, fluids, moisture.

⁶ Louis Cazamian traces the development of 'humors' into 'humour' in *The Development of English Humor*.

significant psychological function of humour is the release of tension. This refers to the relief felt when feelings of distress, commiseration or pity are avoided because the event which would have roused them does not happen and the saved energy or affect can be diverted into laughter (*Jokes* 282-285, 293).

According to Freud's famous treatise *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* humour and its resulting laughter operate a kind of 'emotional economy' on the psyche, one that consists in short-circuiting pathos (and pity and self-pity) by rising above it. It could be argued that Bergson had expressed very similar ideas a few years earlier when he argued that laughter required something like 'an anaesthesia of the heart'. But whereas for Bergson the corrective mechanism existed on the purely social level (cf. 4, 9-10, 20, 39), for Freud it was a psychic affair (*Jokes* 281).

As already mentioned, incongruity is the key element in humour as noted by its principal theorists who all point to a confrontational element underlying every humorous situation. Bergson's main theory, that laughter is produced by "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" (*du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant*) maintains that repetition removes spontaneity and the ensuing mechanical inelasticity, or automaton, becomes the object of comic effect. This establishes an oppositional situation between the living and the automatic. For Freud, humorous pleasure derives from the coupling of dissimilar things or ideas bringing to light an "appropriate incongruity" which is, albeit fleetingly, resolved through humour. Koestler also focuses on the oppositional nature of humour, maintaining that when two mutually incompatible, or incongruous codes clash the resulting explosion of tension may find its release in laughter, two other avenues being scientific discovery and art. Both Freud and Koestler saw the relationship between the workings or semantics of humour and of creative art, a topic that will not be argued here in its particularity but which underlies this study (cf. Koestler 35-56)⁷.

⁷ For a critique of Freud and Koestler's resolution theories, see English, 3-5 and 11-12.

Looked at from a social point of view, a fundamental aspect of humour is its aggression against all forms of authority or orthodoxy of thought. It is an artful means of unmasking what is repressed or prohibited in any contemporary society, for when something is ridiculed, not only is its authority undermined but an alternative, aberrant version is being tacitly insinuated.

The different aspects of humour discussed so far, i.e., the deviation from potential pathos to uninvolved humour, the relationship between the mechanisms of humour and aesthetic experience, and an iconoclasm which functions crucially through humour, are important constitutive elements in the fiction of Borges.

There is, and can be, no comprehensive definition of humour, a concept that constantly overlaps with adjacent terms such as irony, satire, sarcasm and comedy, but at the centre of each of these intersecting genres there are some features which share in the humorous in certain fundamental ways.

The overlap between humour and satire has been explored by many theorists. Freud has noted the aggressive element of all humour but there are variants in the quality and extent of this aggressivity and it might be useful to point to some of the different gravitational pulls of concepts such as humour, satire and irony. Humour unmasks, but unlike satire, it is not primarily concerned with a corrective purpose but with the immediate pleasure of insight and enlightenment.

The Rumanian critic Val Paniatescu, in an influential article entitled "Une description possible de l'humour" states that humour is a particular way of looking at the world, an engagement with the real which while critical, is conciliatory and tolerant. Its aim is to enlighten, awakening understanding and even compassion. A much different view is taken by Bergson when he emphasises the derisive characteristic of laughter. In this respect, humour would seem to coincide with satire which is essentially censorious and critical. But Paniatescu makes a nice distinction between the two genres, observing that while the humorist would include himself in the judgment, the satirist adopts a superior moral position, despising the ridiculed.

Importantly, a relevant distinction with respect to Borges, the satirist believes in a true moral alternative, whereas the humorist does not.

It is more difficult is to draw a clear distinction between humour and irony as the overlap zone seems greater, to the extent that the terms are often used indistinctively, as near synonyms. But, as pointed out by Linda Hutcheon in her excellent book on irony, there are notable differences between the two. To begin with, there can be humour without irony and not all irony is humorous. Humour depends on immediacy and brevity for its effect, whereas irony is more reflective. In Hutcheon's words, "irony is an interpretative and intentional move, -it is the making or inferring of meaning in addition to what is stated, together with an attitude" (11).

Irony, like satire, has an evaluative edge that humour may lack, though it does not share in satire's corrective faith. According to Northrop Frye, irony is a vision of ethos concerned with the ideal, the good that ought to be, whereas humour is primordially engaged with the real, with what is (286). Humour delights in concrete terms, in technical details and definite facts. So does the sceptic Borges

My readings of Borges will be framed by considerations of humour rather than irony, parody or satire, which have received critical attention elsewhere.⁸ Needless to say these readings are not meant to be exclusive but are suggested as alternative and complementary. In short, the same passage may be read for its immediate humour, its ironic, parodic or satiric overtones to be reflected later.

Interestingly, the writer who has been called the greatest Latin American humorist of the twentieth century (Rodríguez Monegal 5) does not use the word humour either in his poetry or in his fiction: possibly, we should read this omission bearing in mind the solution to the riddle in "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan", according to which the word that held the key to the solution was the one that was missing, this being considered "el modo mas enfático de indicarla". Humour pervades his work so that to map Borges's humour

⁸ Murillo focuses specifically on irony, but it could be argued that most of the critical literature on Borges deals in some measure with this issue.

would mean quoting most, not to say all, his writing.⁹ And the writing it generates. Perhaps that is why in the past most critics have shied away from confronting the topic directly, this one included.

Borges's concept of the universe is, arguably, filled with the despair of our not being able to understand it, of not even possessing a language through which such an understanding would be possible, yet he expresses this dark vision in a prose that is often jocular in tone and through absurd situations which are funny in their absurdity. Indeed, one might note that the twin preoccupations of humour, summarized by Freud as the giving of pleasure and the avoidance of pathos, are intimately linked in Borges's work. His humour does not provoke the Rabelaisian belly laugh, nor the ethical laughter of satire but is a wry wit that counterbalances horror with a twinkle and brings forth an intellectual smile.

To include an epigraph by Borges has become almost *de rigueur* to introduce all manner of theories, particularly critical theory, and in support of all sorts of different positions. The reason for this is his well-known eclecticism, a characteristic found, unsurprisingly, in his use of humour. Borges's humour spans the whole palette, from black to pink (*humour rose*), often simultaneously.

Borges's existential anguish is in tune with the century's lack of faith in there being an organising principle sustaining the world. His use of humour to cope with this disconcerting instability can also be seen to conform to a general tendency in modernist aesthetics which considers humour to be the essential tone of modernity. In *The Comedy of Entropy*, Patrick O'Neill argues that in this century humour has an increasingly important role to play in helping us cope with this loss of belief and sense of purpose observing two opposite responses. One, such as Becket's, is apocalyptic, and recalls the anger and savage humour of a Sade or a Swift in rejecting all order, and the other, which he terms "entropic humour" is a self-reflective humour, a laugh about laughter which instead of seeking to demonstrate the non-existence of order "replaces the vanished order with a new and overtly humorous fictional order" and, moreover, derides

⁹ This thought was inspired by Borges's invention "Del rigor en la ciencia", in *El hacedor*.

the intent (50). It is clear that this last definition could constitute a perfect fit for borgesian fictions such as "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", "La biblioteca de Babel", "La lotería en Babilonia" and many others, in which the distance between the ideal and real is humorously exposed, mocking all attempts to find meaning or purpose in the universe. In all these stories, an ideal, or coherent universe is depicted which is then undermined. For instance, in "Tlön", the reader is first led to understand the meticulously constructed ideal universe of "Tlön" to be a mirror of our own; then, as its contrasting ideal, totally fictitious and utopian, and finally, when the difference between the two universes has been fully understood, the ideal Tlön turns out to be a powerful invading force whose missiles partly constitute and shape our 'real' existence. The momentousness of this discovery is undercut by the narrator's laconic indifference:

Yo no hago caso, yo sigo revisando en los quietos días del hotel de Adrogué una indecisa traducción quevediana (que no pienso dar a la imprenta) del *Urn Burial* de Browne. (*Ficciones* 34)¹⁰

The entropic humour I discuss, that is, the setting up of an overtly humorous fictional order, can be seen in "La lotería en Babilonia", where order and chance are juxtaposed in the story's famous lottery. This is the reverse process to "Tlön's" in that something that starts off as a diversion or entertainment, a playful game of chance, turns out to be a description of our universe. Misfortune is explained as a welcome introduction of excitement to the game of lottery and justice happens to coincide with the draws of the lottery: when a slave steals a lottery ticket, the prize is to have his tongue burned whilst the legal sentence for stealing the ticket is the same.

Algunos babilonios argumentaban que merecía el hierro candente, en su calidad de ladrón; otros, magnánimos, que el verdugo debía aplicárselo porque así lo había determinado el azar... (*Ficciones* 70)

¹⁰ Borges quotations are from the following volumes of the *Obras Completas*, Emecé, Buenos Aires: *Ficciones*, 1956; *El aleph*, 1957; *Discusión*, 1957. Borges published his translation of chapter V of *Urn Burial* (in collaboration with Bioy Casares) in *Sur* January 1944. The disclaimer was made in 1944 in a Postscript fictitiously dated 1947.

Any suggestion of a meaningful system or order is clearly cancelled by the equivalence between chance and justice. It is possible to see here an illustration of Lyotard's notion that "the disjunction between a system of command and one of justice, of ethics, is humorous in its most refined sense" (64-65).

One might argue that these stories with their ironic capitulation to chance can partake only of a particularly bleak sense of humour. Black humour, the refusal to treat tragic topics as tragedy, relates to the humorous treatment of uncertainty and disorientation, and the loss of faith in a right order. There are a number of characters in Borges's fiction whose belief in having searched and found the 'truth' may be read as instances of black humour. Some examples are the first person narrator in "La escritura del dios", Lönnrot in "La muerte y la brújula" and Nils Runeberg in "Tres versiones de Judas". 'Enlightenment' in Borges's fiction is consistently ridiculed in that it is shown to lead to either madness or death.

The ending of "El Zahir" (a story to which I shall return later) shadows the narrator's search for enlightenment and his labyrinthine descent into madness and is one of many examples of the black humour to which Borges exposes those characters who are foolish enough to pursue a search for truth.

Borges's concept of human experience as taking place in a labyrinth has been identified as "a near perfect metaphysical conceit" for the cruel vision which informs the century's black humour.¹¹ This is a view widely accepted, but what distinguishes the undisputed darkness underlying Borges's fiction is the paradoxical lightness of his touch. For Borges is also a master of gentle or seemingly gentle teasing (*raillerie*). Sometimes, the laughter is raised for its own sake, delighting in its own wit, which does not mean to say that it is in entirely devoid of hostility. As in all humour, there is an aggressive element ready to disturb our complacency. At its most benign form, it expresses itself through an overtly outrageous witticism such as, "qué son todas las noches de Shahrazad junto a un argumento de

¹¹ Max Schultz discusses this issue at some length in his study of black humour. See 23 and 69-72.

Berkeley", or a quip such as "la literatura española era tan tediosa que hacía innecesario a Emerson", a statement whose humour is enhanced by knowledge of Borges's admiration for the American poet. Or, less benignly, "los gitanos son pintorescos e inspiran a los malos poetas" (surely an indirect reference to Lorca whom Borges did not like).

These tongue-in-cheek judgments have the effect of "bewilderment and enlightenment", a process identified by Freud as corresponding to two successive stages in the mechanism of humour, the first, that fleeting recognition of something pleasingly funny and disturbing followed by the perception of another truth that detailed analysis will surely kill as it is being revealed.

In "El acercamiento a Almotásim", a book's success is marked by its astonishing applause not merely in London but in Allahabad and Calcutta. Certainly, accepted criteria of cultural centre and marginality are being inverted, but the joke does not stop here. With Borges there is always another twist: most probably he is also mocking the pretentious cosmopolitanism of Buenos Aires in the 1930's.¹² The collection of such *jeux d'esprit* grows with each reading, the pleasure to be derived from them seemingly inexhaustible.

One of the playful means through which Borges rebels against authority and order is through his unorthodox use of allusions as when he links two or more concepts which normally exist in different cultural contexts. I have dealt elsewhere and in considerable detail with Borges's uncanonical use of allusion, pointing out how in many instances the allusion is used not only humorously against the grain of the original but also as a playful opening for a new layer of interpretation based upon a reading of the sources given. (Cf. "Hidden Pleasures") Thus in "La otra muerte", a story dealing with our reconstruction of the past within a context of machismo, a discussion about God's ability to undo the past is referred to an argument expanded in a medieval text, *De Omnipotentia*. However, scrutiny of the chapter reference given reveals the discussion to be centred not

¹² I should like to express my gratitude to Dr. Eliezer Gutwirth for drawing my attention to this idea.

on questions of heroism but of virginity, that is, on whether God has the power to make a woman who has lost her virginity recover it. This ludic use of intertextuality, drawing together machismo and virginity is only one of many examples of witty subplots waiting to be unearthed by the attentive and dedicated reader.

A known objective of humour is to unmask the falsehoods upon which orthodoxies are erected by positing a ludicrous alternative outside of the foreseen channels. This, as previously mentioned, is often achieved through the juxtaposition of incongruous elements, and Borges famous invention of a Chinese encyclopaedia has become the standard reference for this type of exercise in chaotic enumeration as a parody of order.¹³ But, as so well observed by Foucault, Borges's use of incongruities to attack conventional thought is far more radical than the surrealists' quaint juxtapositions of an umbrella, a sewing machine and a dissecting table, for these are all everyday objects which, while not usually found together, belong to the same order.¹⁴ Borges breaks new ground in that he brings together concepts which are uncomfortably discrepant because they belong to different thought processes. Foucault calls this the disorder of the heteroclite, "the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry" (xvii).

Borges is justly famous for his provocative connections. In his fictions, he intermingles reality and fiction, orthodoxy and heresy, the trivial with the transcendent, often inverting their terms, the one given as the other, a teasing way to emphasize the arbitrariness of the divisions which we impose upon an essentially random universe. Finding or proposing similarities between dissimilar things has been identified by Freud as a fundamental technique of the joke (*Jokes* 41); it resembles closely the way in which metaphor operates, but humour is more playful than metaphor, and in Borges more slippery. His humour is self-generating, every perception opening up another, and yet another, often its opposite.

¹³ In "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins", *Otras inquisiciones*.

¹⁴ Foucault is referring to Lautréamont's famous definition of beauty.

An example of different codes coming together in incongruous association can be found in the inventive exploitation of several uses of the term 'aleph' in the eponymous story. The 'aleph' figures as a letter, a number, a denominator in the mathematical set-theory called the *Mengenlehre*, the fictional name of a magic disc, and the title of the story.

Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, considered in Cabalistic belief the foremost letter, a symbol of all the other letters. Hebrew letters having numerical equivalents, it is also used to denote the number 'one', symbolic of all other numbers. Calling a small disc believed to be a microcosm of the universe 'aleph' is a ludic allusion to Cabalistic (and Pythagorean) belief in the creation of the universe from the combinatorial power of letters (and numbers). It is also a whimsical reference to the mathematical use of the term 'aleph' in Cantor's above-mentioned set theory, where it denotes a higher power than that of finite numbers and posits the possibility, as in the story, of a plurality of alephs, and by extension, universes.¹⁵

In "El Aleph", mystical experience is flanked by vulgarity. The story's narrator recounts, in one of the most poetic passages in Borges's writing, the extraordinary vision of the total universe contained in the 'aleph' which he perceived while lying prostrate, as instructed, on a dark staircase. The effect of this moment of sublime ecstasy is denial and revenge. Pathos seeks relief in a cruel joke: feigning concern for his rival's mental health, the spiteful narrator suggests rest, and a stay in the countryside.

En ese instante concebí mi venganza. Benévolo, manifiestamente apiadado, nervioso, evasivo, agradecí a Carlos Argentino Daneri la hospitalidad de su sótano (...) y le repetí que el campo y la serenidad son dos grandes médicos. (*Aleph* 166-67)

¹⁵ I have discussed the parodic parallels between "El Aleph" and other universal poems, as well as the 'aleph' and numerous universal mirrors in Fishburn, *Borges and Europe*. Saúl Yurkievich touches on humour in "El Aleph" in his perceptive study "El doblez humorístico".

The momentousness of the epiphanic experience is further undermined by the dismissive, light-hearted reference to the existence of several microcosmos. This disconcerting paradox is expressed with naive simplicity:

Por increíble que parezca, yo creo que hay (o que hubo) otro Aleph: uno, en la calle Garay, otro, en la mezquita de Córdoba, en lo íntimo de una piedra. (168)

In an exercise of playful specularity, the story, "El Aleph", contrary to its name, is the last, not the first story in the collection entitled *El aleph*. This game of reversed infinite regress is one of many the ways in which Borges humorously dismantles the certainties and assumptions which sustain our value-systems.

Another form of incongruous juxtaposition, combining the dignified with the low or familiar, is a constituent part of the burlesque, and some of Borges's stories sail very close to this genre in their deliberate confusion of hierarchies and styles. In "Funes el memorioso" he places trivial examples in the midst of a serious discussion, illustrating Locke's ideas regarding the particularity of language with such ludicrous examples of nominalism as Funes' astonishment that the dog at 3.14 seen from the side should have the same name as the dog at 3.15 seen from the front, ("le molestaba que el perro de las tres y catorce (visto de perfil) tuviera el mismo nombre que el perro de las tres y cuarto (visto de frente)", *Ficciones* 125) or his questioning the necessity of numbers (order, category, precision) when one could easily say Máximo Pérez instead of 7.013 or, as he did, 9 instead of 500. This technique of *reductio ad absurdum* serves as a funny and very effective means of exposing the partial limitations of our mind and language. Funes's pedantic use of his exaggerated memory serves to counteract the pathos of his paralysed and congested mind, or, to use Bergson's terminology, provides the necessary anaesthesia of the heart for humour to operate effectively.

The same confusion of hierarchies can be seen at play in "El Zahir", a sort of modern *parodia sacra* that brilliantly deconstructs the

dividing line between the trivial and the serious by placing these opposing orders in blasphemous juxtaposition.¹⁶

The 'heroine', Teodolina Vilar, is an impoverished socialite who aspires to a model of existence which lies tantalisingly beyond her reach. She is ridiculed for her pursuit of the latest fashion, an endeavour that is equated and compared in its rigour with the mystical search for perfection undertaken by the students of the Mishnah (the Jewish code of ethics) or of Confucius. The portrait of Teodolina, to use modern terminology, was hyped. There was a consensus that she was beautiful because her face appeared persistently on a number of fashion magazines, but, with typical British understatement, the Argentine narrator declares "no todas las efigies apoyaron incondicionalmente esa hipótesis" (*Aleph* 103). The transposition of registers using the terms "effigies" and "hipótesis" in such a mundane context serves to belittle and poke fun at the world of fashion, but it also acts inversely: it trivializes the sacred, the world of mysticism. In Koestler's coinage, it is "a bisociative shock that dismantles the accepted separation between contrasting value systems". This humorous strategy underpins the whole story and is provocatively illustrated in the following excerpt:

La guerra le dio mucho que pensar. Ocupado París por los alemanes, ¿cómo seguir la moda? Un extranjero de quien ella siempre había desconfiado se permitió abusar de su buena fe para venderle una porción de sombreros cilíndricos: al año se propaló que esos adefesios *nunca se habían llevado en París* y por consiguiente no era sombreros, sino arbitrarios y desautorizados caprichos. (*Aleph* 105)

The horrors of war measured for their effect upon the wearing of hats is funny, certainly, as an indictment of Argentina's dependence upon European values, whether in the realm of fashion or ideas, but is even more devastating as a caricature of all totalitarian belief systems and the authority that their followers invest in them.

¹⁶ *Parodia sacra* were, in humorous medieval literature, blasphemous parodies of liturgies and ecclesiastical writings. See M. Bakhtin, 14-15.

The story has two centres of interest, one, Teodolina's obsession with sartorial perfection and the other the narrator's obsessional neurosis with a trivial coin. Eventually, madness leads him to the belief that the coin may be the visible manifestation (Zahir) of the face of God. Through an implicit analogy between Teodolina's silliness and the narrator's delusion, the ridicule attached to the former also obtains for the latter and man's eternal search for metaphysical certainties is thus devalued and mocked. The narrator's pathetic delusion invites laughter rather than pity through the distancing effect of placing a metaphysical search in such a trivial and mundane setting.

"Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote", too, is a story whose lightness of touch belies the serious implications contained in the compressed title. Since humour, as Hamlet remind us,¹⁷ depends upon brevity for its effect, its meaning is mostly implied, that is to say, literally 'folded in' rather than stated. Yet humour is not universally valid but depends upon a shared cultural background, which gives rise to the following thought: that the intended addressee of this story is already a vanishing species and there is a generation upon whom the joke of the title, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" has little impact. Even less understood are the implications of the ending:

[la] técnica nueva del arte detenido y rudimentario de la lectura: la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas (...) Esa técnica puebla de aventuras los libros más calmosos. Atribuir a Louis Ferdinand Céline o a James Joyce la *Imitación de Cristo* ¿no es una suficiente renovación de esos tenues avisos espirituales? (*Ficciones* 57)

The final suggestion can, of course, be accommodated to any frame of reference such as, for example, listening to Verdi's *Requiem* as if composed by the Beatles, or Bach played by Jacques Loussier, but Borges's particular choice, the reading of *The Imitation of Christ* through Joyce's mocking tone offers an experience of startling delight.

¹⁷ "Brevity is the soul of wit", *Hamlet*, II. ii. 90.

"Pierre Menard" is saturated with literary references, many of which are arcane, yet most readers manage to gain the impression that the poet of Nîmes is being ridiculed, his work belittled by the triviality of its objectives, such as publishing "Un soneto simbolista que apareció dos veces (con variaciones) en la revista *La conque* (números de marzo y octubre de 1899)" (46)¹⁸ The story follows the strategy discussed earlier, the confusion of hierarchies, but if in "Funes" and "El Zahir" we saw the serious treated by means of the trivial, in "Pierre Menard" the trivial, as exemplified in the catalogue of the poet's work, becomes the launching pad for a conclusion of groundbreaking literary importance. This is no less than the collapse of all accepted notions surrounding literary creation. The *reductio ad absurdum* in the exposition of its argument, namely, the detailed description of the different stages in the creation of Menard's Quijote and the extravagant praise given to it ("el segundo es casi infinitamente más rico", 54), sets up, as it enhances, the impact of the outrageous proposition, which is not to rewrite *El Quijote*, but to compose pages that would coincide with it.

Over time, different theoretical positions concerned with the tripartite relationship between author, message and reader that exists in each act of communication has each been given priority in turn, but Pierre Menard's visible work, his verbatim rewriting of don Quixote as an original version, ridicules all these extreme positions.¹⁹ First, it suggests that responsibility for the meaning lies with the reader, but then this appears not to be the case for the meaning will depend on who the reader imagines the author to have been, so that in a humorous double take the author is reinstated as the determiner of meaning, and so on, *ad infinitum* with the message changing at each turn. Surely the import of deconstruction theory has never been expressed so succinctly, or so with such verve.

One of the areas of Borges's fiction which has received insufficient attention are the footnotes, often a dry, humorous reversal of the

¹⁸ In her penetrating discussion of Pierre Menard's "visible" work, Sylvia Molloy qualifies this assertion. See her *Signs of Borges*.

¹⁹ Such as biographical criticism, formalism, and reception theory.

main story line. Buried (and so far undetected) in the first footnote is a joke against the pompous narrator. Prejudiced, arrogant and condescending towards Mme Henri de Bachelier (“leer el libro *Le jardin du centaure* de Mme Henri de Bachelier como si fuera de Mme Henri de Bachelier”, 48) he fails to see that by including in her catalogue of Pierre Menard’s work “una versión literal” (by Pierre Menard) de “una versión literal” (by Quevedo) his lady rival had in fact understood the purport of Pierre Menard’s oeuvre in a way that he did not and was offering an illustrative example of it. This small footnoted aside sets the narrator up as an unsuspecting target of ridicule when he explains “debe tratarse de una broma, mal escuchada” (48). It is a case of the mocker mocked, bringing to mind Bergson’s observation that a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself.

Mockery is never innocent but is accompanied by varying degrees of aggression.²⁰ It is usually issued from a position of superiority, deriding what is considered inferior. The classical mechanism, as explained by Freud, is a finely balanced act in which A, the teller of the joke, mocks B, the butt of the joke, for the benefit of C, the listener. Put another way, A, the author, establishes a bond with C, the reader at the expense of B, the character in the story. A and C are in on the joke; B is not. But in Borges’s fiction the difference between A and B and even C, narrator, reader and protagonist is often made to disappear.

Borges seems to delight in self-mockery, an exercise to which he invites the reader to join him. Sometimes he uses a first person narrator actually called ‘Borges’ as in “El aleph”, “El Zahir” and “Tema del traidor y del héroe” but more often he inscribes himself humorously into a story through the mention of certain biographical details. In “Guayaquil”, the narrator, like the real Borges, has an ancestor who fought in the battle of Junín; the former lives in a street

²⁰ For Kant, Schopenhauer and Hobbes laughter is the expression of perceived superiority, stressing the duality or contrast between the superiority of the laughter and the inferiority of the victim, but the more modern view stresses the fact of duality, contrast, and incongruity itself. See O’Neil 43.

called Chile while the latter in one called Maipú (the name of a famous battle fought in Chile). Borges, through the narrator, sets himself up as a pompous, self-congratulatory antisemite. This has wide-reaching interpretative implications. Bearing in mind that humour often allows for the presentation of an unpalatable truth which cannot otherwise be expressed, by offering himself as the butt of his derision, Borges may be broaching the delicate subject of the antisemitism of some of his contemporaries in academic and other institutional circles condemning it through self-ridicule.

Other instances of Borges inscribing himself in his fiction appear in "Funes", where he coincides with the narrator in his summer visit to a cousin named Haedo and living in Fray Bentos. Borges can be also be found in "Tlön", as a friend of Bioy Casares, Carlos Mastronardi and Xul Solar and in "La muerte y la brújula" Lönnrot's death occurs in Triste-le Roi, a name that has nostalgic childhood memories for Borges. "La biblioteca de Babel" is set in a context positing the idea that the Universe is like a library, a trope often used by Borges in his non-fictional work. Dahlman's double lineage, in "El Sur" recalls Borges's. More cryptically, the bewilderment of the trapped minotaur in "La casa de Asterión" reflects Borges's vision of human experience and by extension of his own.²¹ And, of course, ours.

The narrator of "La busca de Averroes" is linked to Borges through readings of Renan, Lane and Asín Palacios, who was a much admired friend from Spain. He is not named and the story can at first be read as a straightforward third person narrative pouring derision at the hamfisted attempts of the Arab philosopher to understand Western culture. But "Averroes" is the story of a double search, an ambivalence which is embedded in the Spanish title: "La busca de Averroes" means both the search by Averroes and the search for Averroes. The pun in the title, impossible to preserve in English, allows for the surprise ending when the failure of Averroes becomes the reflection or illustration of Borges's failure in creating Averroes. In other words, the story shifts from the protagonist's search to the narrator's own failed search.

²¹ This last point is discussed in "An Autobiographical Essay".

Averroes was one of the most important Islamic thinkers, whose writings on the work of Aristotle became the principal source of Greek thought for medieval Christian and Jewish theology. Yet in Borges's story he is arduously but vainly searching for the meaning of two words, tragedy and comedy. These words refer to concepts which belong to a cultural tradition outside of his experience, and therefore can mean nothing to him. The narrative shows rather than tells of this failure conveying, through the use of Free Indirect Speech, Averroes's (mis)understanding of children's acting for playing:

Miró por el balcón enrejado; abajo, en el estrecho patio de tierra, jugaban unos chicos semidesnudos. Uno, de pie en los hombros de otro, hacía notoriamente de almuédano; bien cerrados los ojos, salmodiaba "No hay otro dios que el Dios". El que lo sostenía, inmóvil, hacía de alminar; otro, abyecto en el polvo y arrodillado, de congregación de los fieles. (*Aleph* 93)

Further on in the story, a traveller's account of a theatre shows similar confusion:

Una tarde, los mercaderes musulmanes de Sin Kalán me condujeron a una casa de madera pintada, en la que vivían muchas personas. No se puede contar cómo era esa casa, que más bien era un sólo cuarto, con filas de alacenas o de balcones, unas encima de otras. (...) Padeían prisiones, y nadie veía la cárcel; cabalgaban, pero no se percibía el caballo; combatían, pero las espadas eran de caña; morían y después estaban de pie. (96-97)

Through these and other examples a bond is established between the narrator (A) and the narratee, or reader, (C) who are jointly amused by the misguided discussion held by the Arabs, (B). When Averroes reaches his odd conclusion that tragedy means panegyrics and comedy means anathema the confusion of the basic characteristics of each of these four concepts is admittedly not immediately hilarious but it causes intellectual mirth by explaining the tragic in

terms of the comic.²² The unmasking of Averroes shifts by implication to the narrator's self-revelation of the absurdity of his own attempt to emulate his derided character and write a story in a 'language' he does not understand. In this sense, "La busca de Averroes", foreshadows the groundbreaking argument of Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

But, of course, there is a third victim of self-dupery and that is the reader, C, who thought he or she was understanding effortlessly and unproblematically the presentation of a transparent Arab culture. C, therefore, is reflected in the narrator's A reflected failure of the protagonist's, B. This leads to a final consideration of the effect of self-mockery. According to Freud, when A laughs at B he is treating him with a sense of superiority "as a father behaves towards a child" ("Essay"). This can be translated as A adopting towards B the controlling stance of the superego, but in self-mockery A and B are conjoined thereby allowing the ego to remain triumphant. This is a narcissistic exercise ultimately affirming the invulnerability of the humorist. In the words of Northrop Frye, "the man who deprecates himself, such a man makes himself invulnerable" (40). In a process of eternal regress, a technique for which he is famous, Borges has used humour self-reflectively, to laugh at himself laughing. By inviting the reader to participate in this exercise of self-mockery, Borges is allowing us to share in his invulnerability and laugh with him, in a laughter that finds consolation and delight in deriding all laughter, including its own.

The foregoing is offered as a mere introductory foray into one particular aspect of a vast topic. It would be a poor borgesian reading which sought to conclude with an overarching statement about something as varied and complex as Borges's use of humour. What I hope to have achieved with my necessarily partial reading of selected familiar passages is an appreciation of the ingenuity and skillfulness with which Borges has exploited classical humorous tech-

²² There is the possibility of finding in this 'mistake' a humorous reference to the tenuous line that separates the two genres, an argument developed among others by Freud and Koestler.

niques such as identified by Bergson, Freud and others. Not surprisingly, it has been a two-way traffic: for me, Borges's work has been as enlightened by the study of the theory as theory has by its witty and imaginative application in Borges.

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