

## THE ESSAY AS FORM: PRESENTATION, REPRESENTATION AND THE SELF IN JORGE LUIS BORGES

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Although Jorge Luis Borges has achieved international fame mainly as a short story writer, he was also a very productive essayist. His initial essays appeared in the magazine *El Hogar* (1936-1939) in newspapers such as *La Nación* and *Crítica*, and in literary journals like *Sur*. Borges wrote thousands of pages of essays, including prologues, book and film reviews, and short articles on politics and culture. In 1925 he published his first book of essays, *Inquisiciones*, which he later rejected and prohibited any reprints to be made, as he also did with reprints of his second and third books of essays, *El tamaño de mis esperanza* (1926) and *El idioma de los argentinos* (1928), respectively. Beginning with *Inquisiciones*, his essays spanned some fifty-seven years until the publication of *Nueve ensayos dantescos* in 1982,<sup>1</sup> and includes five more volumes of essays: *Evaristo Carriego* (1930), *Discusión* (1932), *Historia de la eternidad* (1936), *Otras inquisiciones* (1952), and *Siete noches* (1980).

The purpose of this article is not to attempt an interpretation of Borges's essays as a whole: such an interpretation would render only oversimplification and sweeping generalities. I intend to enhance an understanding of issues of philosophy—which are perhaps best expressed by an essayistic mode—through the selective examination of three of Borges's essays: “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins” (1942), “Nueva refutación del tiempo” (first published in its entirety in 1947; the first part appeared

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1 Five of these nine essays were first published in 1948 and one in 1951.

in *Sur* in 1944), and “El escritor argentino y la tradición” (1951). The first section of this article shall discuss briefly the history of the essay as a genre in order to provide the selected essays with a context within which to place and interpret them.<sup>2</sup>

## I. THE PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEM AND ITS DISCONTENT

Historically, the essay emerged out of discontent with the rigidity of philosophical systems, which hampers philosophy’s ability to approach reality in its complexity and fluidity. Rejecting the philosophical systems of their times, Michel Montaigne, who has traditionally been credited with the invention of the modern essay, repeatedly complained about the “rigid method” used in philosophy, which, with its syllogisms, deductions, and demonstrations, makes reality conform to these rules of logic rather than allowing it to emerge and then accounting for this emergence (Hartle 79). Within this context, no doubt the fragmented essay provided Montaigne with a less coercive tool to approach reality. It is perhaps appropriate to be reminded here of the meaning of the word “essays” and its derivation from the word “esayer,” that is to say, “to try” or “to attempt.” This *tentativeness* contained in the etymology of the word “essay” is perhaps nowhere better captured than in the English empiricists’ use of the word (and the form for their philosophy). John Locke and David Hume called their philosophical writings essays “because the power of freshly disclosed reality upon which their thinking struck, continuously forced upon them the risk of experimentation” (Adorno “The Actuality of Philosophy”, 38). Thus, the essay was, for the English empiricists, the most appropriate expression for a philosophical reflection understood as the adventure of one who seeks to submit to “what there is” in a way that is radically different from the philosophical system’s coercion upon reality. With the post-Kantian century, however, the risk of experimentation was not valued any longer and with its disappearance, the possibility of submitting to the power of “what there is” was also lost. Consequently, from a

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2 For a study of the oxymoronic structure in Borges’s essays, see Alazraki. For the examination of the essayistic qualities of his short stories, see De Obaldia (247-82). For a discussion of Borges’s philosophical essays, see Jaime Rest.

form of a philosophy that did not shy away from intellectual risks, the essay became a minor form of aesthetics.

A reaction, however, against the rigidity of the post-Kantian philosophical systems did not take long to emerge. It was carried out by philosophers born in the generation between 1840 and 1870. Thus, philosophers as diverse as Fritz Mauthner, Edmund Husserl, Henri Bergson, Georg Simmel and Max Weber believed that systematic philosophy was no longer adequate to address the complexity of reality. For these thinkers, the inflexible methods and modes of expression previously used for philosophical inquiry seemed to have run their course. Rejecting every form of dogmatism, these philosophers refused to place their intellectual work “under the rule of a single system” (Husserl, quoted by Luft 19). Over the inflexible, unalterable order imposed by philosophical systems, they privileged the essayistic mode, in which the issues of philosophy of language and philosophy of culture which they were concerned about would be, they believed, best expressed. Members of a younger generation such as Georg Lukács, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin also welcomed the fragmentary essayistic mode as a more adequate vehicle for their inquiries. Simultaneously, in the decade before 1914, while philosophers moved away from abstract, rigid systems toward more flexible and fluid forms of expression, writers such as Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, and Hermann Broch, to name just a few, also began to move toward essayism, transforming their novels into the more “hybrid” forms existing between philosophy and literature (Luft 16-20).

Lukács, and more than a decade later Thomas Mann, identify the important influence that Friedrich Schlegel’s and the romantics’ notion of the literary “fragment”—filtered by Friedrich Nietzsche’s contributions to the genre—had on the essay as form (Luft 20). For Schlegel, no philosophical system has ever produced more than a “polemical totality”—a limited view of the whole which “does not suffice to legitimize the philosophy of its possessor” (*Philosophical Fragments* 81). That totality, Schlegel explains, is invariably constructed by means of violence, through the power that syllogisms, deductions, and demonstrations exert on their organization of reality. Schlegel is concerned about the *remainder* that evades or escapes the controlling philosophi-

cal system and its concepts. In an attempt to rescue that “excess” that is excluded or locked out from rigid philosophical systems, Schlegel puts into action the fragment. With an emphasis on the broken form and ironic distance, the fragment sets out a process of release or liberation of that which lies at the border between system and non-system—between the necessity of the organizing, dominating concept and the recognition of the always rebellious reality.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, for his part, takes up the romantic notion of fragment, modulating it within the context of his own philosophy into his notion of “perspectivism.” In this sense, Nietzsche’s perspectivism may be regarded as a manifestation of the transgressive order of the fragment.<sup>4</sup> Thus, just as for Schlegel the world can be better approached through a broken form (the fragment) than from a polemical totality, for Nietzsche, in turn, the world for us consists of an infinite series of perspectives (fragments) of the same totality.

It is perhaps Theodor Adorno’s article, “Der Essay als Form,” which best articulates the meaning of the essay for the philosophers and writers who were gravitating toward this form since at least the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Written in the late 1950s and under the influence of thinkers such as Nietzsche, Lukács, Bloch, Benjamin and Karl Kraus, Adorno develops his theory of the essay as form. By means of this theory, Adorno “attempts” to introduce into philosophical inquiry the dangerous uncertainty that philosophical systems try to eliminate and that was alive at the time of Locke and the English empiricists. In traditional philosophical texts, Adorno argues, both the form of the text and the order of experience are determined in advance. Traditional philosophical systems preconceive the form in which our thoughts are to be presented. By contrast, the task of the essay, in Adorno’s view, con-

3 This position is most succinctly stated in the often cited *Athenaeum* 53: “It’s equally fatal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It will simply have to decide to combine the two” (quoted by Carter 28-29). On F. Schlegel’s “theory of the fragment,” see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (40-45).

4 Nietzsche claims: “The will for system: to a philosopher, morally explained, a superior form of perversion, a character’s disease; immorally explained, this will is the will of appearing more naïve than you really are” (*Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 8: 246).

5 For a discussion of different conceptions of the essay, see Georg Lukács, Edouard Morot-Sir, Jacques Derrida, and Max Bense.

sists in allowing us to approach philosophical thinking in a different way, promoting a form, the essay, that is not predetermined or preconceived, that rather, as Lukács claimed as early as 1911, “has to create from within itself all the preconditions for the effectiveness and validity of its vision” (11). But let us now turn our attention to Borges’s essays and the ways in which they create, from within themselves, the conditions for their own effectiveness.

## II. “EL IDIOMA ANALÍTICO DE JOHN WILKINS” (1942)

In the seventeenth century, several attempts at creating a universal language emerged in Europe, in many cases associated with the Royal Society in London. The goal was twofold. On the one hand, the hope was that such a language would be used by every scientist, thinker and scholar all over the world as an efficient means of communication. On the other hand, since the characters or signs that constitute a name were conceived as “*real* characters”—that is to say, those signs were supposed to correspond directly to things—every name emerging out of the combination of those signs or “*real* characters” would necessarily reveal the nature of the world itself (Eco, *On Literature*, 114). Once one was able to remember both the classification or system of concepts and the characters assigned to those universal concepts, one would then be able to articulate a sort of mathematics of thought. Thinkers as diverse as Bishop Wilkins in England, Leibniz in Germany, and Descartes in France believed it was possible to create such a language. Those seventeenth-century thinkers, however, show different degrees of confidence in this project, with Leibniz perhaps being one of the more optimistic.

The theme of universal language is pervasive in Borges’s work.<sup>6</sup> From his first essays published in the magazine *El Hogar* through subsequent stories such as “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote,”<sup>7</sup> to later

6 On Borges and universal language, see Dapía “The Metaphor of Translation: Borges and Mauthner’s Critique of Language” (49-56).

7 For a discussion of Borges’s use of the motive of universal language in “Pierre Menard,” see Dapía “Pierre Menard in Context.”

stories such as “El informe de Brodie” (1970)<sup>8</sup> and “El Congreso” (1975),<sup>9</sup> this theme surfaces in Borges’s writings in diverse fashions. Certainly, the most complete discussion of a universal language within Borges’s works is to be found in “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins.”

No doubt Bishop Wilkins created the most complete project for a universal language in the seventeenth century. Based on Fritz Mauthner’s *Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Borges discusses how Wilkins intended to formalize a real script, claiming that Wilkins created first a world-catalogue, and then describing how the Bishop progressed from his world-catalogue to a universal language by assigning arbitrary vowels and consonants to each class, subdivision, and subsubdivision of his world-catalogue.<sup>10</sup> Borges next points out a precursor system in a Chinese encyclopedia enti-

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8 In 1970, Borges revisits the subject of universal language in his short story, “El informe de Brodie,” as he describes the language of the Yahoos. Yet Borges conceives here of a language that forces us to seek out meaning for every “word” admitted by the “ars combinatoria,” in its context of production. The narrator claims: “Cada palabra monosílaba corresponde a una idea general, que se define por el contexto o por los visajes. La palabra *nrz*, por ejemplo, sugiere la dispersión o las manchas; puede significar el cielo estrellado, un leopardo, una bandada de aves, la viruela, lo salpicado, el acto de disparar o la fuga que sigue a la derrota. *Hrl*, en cambio, indica lo apretado o lo denso; puede significar la tribu, un tronco, una piedra, un montón de piedras, el hecho de apilarlas, el congreso de los cuatro hechiceros, la unión carnal y un bosque. Pronunciada de otra manera o con otros visajes, cada palabra puede tener un sentido contrario” (OC 452). [Each monosyllabic word corresponds to a general idea whose specific meaning depends on the context or upon accompanying grimaces. The word ‘nrz,’ for example, suggests dispersion or spots, and may stand for the starry sky, a leopard, a flock of birds, smallpox, something bespattered, the act of scattering, or the flight that follows defeat in warfare. ‘Hrl,’ on the other hand, means something compact or dense. It may stand for the tribe, a tree trunk, a stone, a heap of stones, the act of heaping stones, the gathering of the four witch doctors, carnal conjunction, or a forest. Pronounced in another manner or accompanied by other grimaces, each word may hold an opposite meaning] (*Reader* 301).

9 “El Congreso” (1975) again takes up the idea of a universal language. There are many similarities between the narrator of the story, Alejandro Ferri, and the real Borges. Among other parallels, both the real Borges and the fictional Ferri have in common their interest in the universal language created by Bishop Wilkins and both have devoted a work to it. Thus, Ferri’s mention of his work entitled *A Brief Examination of the Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, reminds us of Borges’s essay “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins.”

10 On Borges’s debt to Fritz Mauthner, see Dapía “The Metaphor of Translation.”

tled “Emporio celestial de conocimientos benévolos.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, through the most shockingly incongruous classification, Borges undermines the certainty of arriving at *the* “true” classification of the world. However, rather than emphasizing the historical character of all systems, Borges suggests here (and in other works) that those classifications fail—and will always fail—because “no sabemos qué cosa es el universo” (*Obras completas* 2: 86) [we do not know what the universe is] (*Other Inquisitions* 104). But let us briefly examine Borges’s argument.

No doubt that a classification, or any system whatsoever, implies some kind of violence upon the reality that it “attempts” to explain. The very act of selecting a certain classification necessarily entails silencing or excluding those aspects of reality that do not fit into the chosen categories or concepts. Within this context, we should read both Schlegel’s claim about the “militaristic” character of the demonstrations and deductions of philosophical systems<sup>12</sup> and Nietzsche’s assertion that “every concept arises from the equation of unequal things” (“On Truth and Lies” 83). Ultimately, along these lines, Adorno argues for a new approach to concepts, according to which they are no longer understood as static, rigid signs that reliably designate an object.<sup>13</sup> However, the unrealized possibilities that concepts or classificatory systems lock out from reality—exclusions that in light of their theories, I believe Schlegel, Nietzsche or Adorno would have challenged had they “attempted” to write an essay on Bishop Wilkins’s or any one else’s universal language—do not seem to be the

11 “En sus remotas páginas está escrito que los animales se dividen en (a) pertenecientes al Emperador, (b) embalsamados, (c) amaestrados, (d) lechones, (e) sirenas, (f) fabulosos, (g) perros sueltos, (h) incluidos en esta clasificación, (i) que se agitan como locos, (j) innumerables, (k) dibujados con un pincel finísimo de pelo de camello, (l) etcétera, (m) que acaban de romper el jarrón, (n) que de lejos parecen moscas” (OC 2: 85-86).

12 Schlegel states: “The demonstrations of philosophy are simply demonstrations in the sense of military jargon. And its deductions aren’t much better than those of politics; even in the sciences possession is nine-tenths of the law” (*Philosophical Fragments* 82).

13 Adorno challenges both the reliance on stable, fixed concepts and the attempt at eliminating uncertainty, ambiguity, vagueness and all other intrusive, “‘particular’ elements that would hinder the construction of reproducible knowledge” (Plass 23). Indeed, crucial to Adorno’s theory of the essay is the paradoxical declaration that the concept must give voice to the non-conceptual. With this demand, Adorno counters Wittgenstein’s prohibition to say the unsayable with language (*Philosophische Terminologie* 1: 88).

main issue for Borges. Borges does not seem to be concerned about that “excess” of reality that does not match the concepts or categories used by Wilkins’s universal language. Rather, Borges focuses on a different issue: the arbitrary and conjectural character of those concepts or, for that matter, of any system of concepts whatsoever. Why?

Rather than existing independently of us, free of our subjective rule, the world and things “out there” depend, in Borges’s view, on our minds; they are our own creations. Borges, unlike Adorno, does not consider the “priority of the object.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly, Borges believes that our experience of the world is entirely subjected to the control exerted by our minds upon it. But is there anything outside our systems or representations of reality for Borges? All there is for us, according to Borges, is representations, classifications or systems—what belongs to our minds, to our subjectivities. If there is a reality outside our representations, it is inaccessible to us. The world outside our perceptions, systems or classifications amounts to the unknowable (as philosophers would say, “the thing-in-itself”) or, as Borges puts it elsewhere, a world “de ángeles” [of angels] that is beyond our human comprehension (OC 1: 443). Therefore, for Borges, there is no “remainder” of reality or unrealized possibilities that Wilkins’ universal language or, for that matter, any system whatsoever may exclude or lock out: if there is, it remains inaccessible to us.

“El idioma analítico de John Wilkins” is perhaps one of the best examples of how Borges addresses the possibility of non-systematic and playful philosophical expression by means of an essay. In the seventeenth century, many philosophers, as in Wilkins’ universal language, began by establishing a fixed and firm inventory of “what there is.” In this essay, Borges challenges those systems and classifications that seem to propose the existence of a world with firm contours and clearly defined objects and end up forcing reality into their own definite, clear-cut categories. Yet the question arises: Should we interpret Borges’s conclusion about the con-

14 The expression “primacy of the object” encapsulates Adorno’s anti-nominalist attempt to link philosophical concepts through aesthetic experience to concrete objects (Plass 21). “The qualities the traditional critique of epistemology eradicated from the object and credited to the subjects are due in subjective experience to the primacy of the object” (Adorno *Critical Models* 250). “Primacy of the object” means that the subject-object relation called “experience” is completely free of subjective control over the object—the object does not become detached and objectified (Plass 21).



jectural and arbitrary character of our classifications as a kind of “technical” criticism, by which I mean a criticism intended to question rigid, aseptic systems that do not adequately account for the ambiguity of our world? Or is Borges’s emphasis on the conjectural and arbitrary character of our classifications and his subsequent statement that “no sabemos qué cosa es el universo” [we do not know what the universe is] rather at the service of some pessimistic, romantic despair, in the sense of Schopenhauer (*OC* 2: 86; *Other Inquisitions* 104)? To formulate it differently: Is Borges here, by means of his criticism of the arbitrariness of Wilkins’s universal language, attempting to criticize any account of the world that denies the multiplicity of possible, perspectivist interpretations as a feature of our world? Or is he rather invoking idealism—the assumption that what there is depends on our own mental structure and activity—to dissolve the solidity of the world into a multiplicity of representations of it?

Since Borges’s understanding of idealism, particularly in the forms it adopts in Berkeley’s and Hume’s philosophies, is at the center of our discussion of Borges’s “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” we now turn our attention to this essay.

### III. “NUEVA REFUTACIÓN DEL TIEMPO” OR A PLAY OF FRAGMENTS

It was approximately in the way that an essay, in the sequence of its paragraphs, takes a thing from many sides without comprehending it wholly—for a thing wholly comprehended instantly loses its bulk and melts down into a concept—that he believed he could best survey and handle the world and his own life.

Musil, *The Man without Qualities*  
(1: 297, italics are mine)

I attempt to begin the discussion of “Nueva refutación del tiempo” in the light of Borges’s favorite philosophical point of view, that of idealism. Thus, within the framework of idealist philosophy, after examining his understanding of George Berkeley’s notion of “thing” and David Hume’s notion of “self,” I shall focus on Borges’s attempts both to construct and deconstruct the very concept of time along the same lines of Berkeley’s and Hume’s idealist thought. Because this idealist perspective is crucial

both for the development of the essay as genre and for many of Borges's writings, I intend to examine it in some detail. Furthermore, I attempt to show how, adopting an almost Nietzschean perspectivist theory of consciousness—and therefore of reality—Borges redefines his object (time) by means of a shift of frameworks at the end of his essay. But let us first turn our attention to the notion of idealism, to Borges's understanding of it, and its relationship to the essay as form.

According to idealism, to be is to be known by a subject. Therefore, what things there are in the universe depend, in this view, on our own mental activity and structure. The mind embraces the whole of reality; reality coincides with the entire mental human activity; nothing falls outside its scope or range. Thus, according to this doctrine, everything, including my body and my mind, is an idea in a mind. Borges has the highest regard for idealism and for Berkeley's and Hume's idealist philosophies. In fact, Borges's admiration for these two philosophers did not decrease at all throughout the years. From his essay, "La nadería de la personalidad," written in 1922, to his essays contained in *Siete noches* published in 1980, there remains at their centers his endorsement of what he sees as the achievements of Berkeley and Hume. His assessment of these philosophers' accomplishments is so high that in the essay "Nueva refutación del tiempo" Borges attempts to venture further in the same direction than his two heroes. Given that the world and the self are refuted, Borges understands his task as consisting in refuting time. Borges does not even appear to be dissuaded by Bertrand Russell's statement that Hume "represents, in a certain sense, a dead end; in his direction, it is impossible to go further" (*A History* 659).

Borges starts his "attempt" to refute time, characteristically, with an apology. Thus, in the prologue to this essay, he claims:

*Publicada al promediar el siglo XVIII, esta refutación (o su nombre) perduraría en las bibliografías de Hume y acaso hubiera merecido una línea de Huxley o de Kemp Smith. Publicada en 1947—después de Bergson—, es la anacrónica reductio ad absurdum de un sistema pretérito o, lo que es peor, el débil artificio de un argentino extraviado en la metafísica (OC 2: 135)*

*[If published toward the middle of the eighteenth century, this refutation (or its name) would persist in Hume's bibliographies and perhaps would have merited a line by Huxley or Kemp Smith. Published in 1947—after Bergson—, it is the anachronistic reductio ad absurdum of a preterite system or, what is worse, the feeble artifice of an Argentine lost in the maze of metaphysics] (Labyrinths 217).*

Subsequently, Borges conveys his awareness that through the very election of his title, “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” he has put in danger his own attempt. Indeed, at the outset of this essay, Borges admits that its title goes against his intention. “*No se me oculta que éste es un ejemplo del monstruo que los lógicos han denominado contradictio in adjecto*” [I am not unaware that it is an example of the monster termed by the logicians *contradictio in adjecto*], he explains, “*porque decir que es nueva (o antigua) una refutación del tiempo es atribuirle un predicado de índole temporal, que instaura la noción que el sujeto quiere destruir*” (OC 2: 135) [*because stating that a refutation of time is new (or old) attributes to it a predicate of temporal nature which establishes the very notion the subject would destroy*] (*Labyrinths* 217). Moreover, there is another factor that also compromises the success of Borges’s refutation: that factor is the temporal nature of language. Borges is, of course, aware of this. As he knows perfectly well, language is not an appropriate means to refute time: “*tan saturado y animado de tiempo está nuestro lenguaje que es muy posible que no haya en estas hojas una sentencia que de algún modo no lo exija o invoque*” (OC 2: 135) [*our language is so saturated and animated by time that it is quite possible there is not one statement in these pages which in some way does not demand or invoke the idea of time*] (*Labyrinths* 218). Despite these two endangering factors, Borges decides to venture further in the direction of Berkeley and Hume. But what direction is represented by Berkeley and Hume? In which direction does Borges try to go further in his essay “Nueva refutación del tiempo”? In order to address this question, I shall turn to Borges’s understanding of Berkeley’s and Hume’s philosophies. He claims:

Berkeley negó la materia. Ello no significa, entendiéndose bien, que negó los colores, los olores, los sabores, los sonidos y los contactos; lo que negó fue que, además de esas percepciones, que componen el mundo externo, hubiera dolores que nadie siente, colores que nadie ve, formas que nadie toca. Razonó que agregar una materia a las percepciones es agregar al mundo un inconcebible mundo superfluo (OC 2: 144).

[Berkeley denied the existence of matter. This does not mean, one should note, that he denied the existence of colors, odors, tastes, sounds and tactile sensations; what he denied was that, aside from these perceptions, which make up the external world, there was anything invisible, intangible, called matter. He denied that there were

pains that no one feels, colors that no one sees, forms that no one touches. He reasoned that to add a matter to our perceptions is to add an inconceivable, superfluous world to the world (*Labyrinths* 227-28).

As Borges suggests here, Berkeley believed that only what is subjectively “perceived” can be trusted; we cannot therefore assert the objectivity of the material world. Any characteristic that we “believe” to be an “objective” characteristic of the material world is, for the Bishop, an attribute of our perception of the world. Thus, in his dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, Berkeley makes Philonous—the character who, we may say, speaks for Berkeley—claim:

[w]hen I see, and feel, and taste, in such sundry certain manners, I am sure the *cherry* exists, or is real; its reality being in my opinion nothing abstracted from those sensations. But if by the word *cherry* you mean an unknown nature distinct from all those sensible qualities, and by its existence something distinct from its being perceived; then indeed I own, neither you nor I, nor anyone else, can be sure it exists. (*Three Dialogues* 81)

What Philonous claims here is at the same time very bizarre and not easy to prove false. The question is: How could we affirm the existence of a material world, totally external to our perceptions, when what we really “know” exists in our minds? How could we prove that there are external things, if everything happens inside our heads? Or, to say it differently, how can we be justified in inferring that any external object exists at all? According to Berkeley’s model, the individual has no direct access to the world but only to her own sense-impressions and “assembles” the world out of those impressions. Berkeley accepts nothing other than the individual’s immediate sense-impressions. Moreover, in Berkeley’s view, the individual is never in the position to verify any kind of correspondence between her sense-experiences and anything external to them. In this sense, we may conclude that for Berkeley the self eventually becomes the world.

Idealism has certainly made a strong impact in philosophy. As earlier as 1886, the famous empiricist and physicist Ernst Mach insists that we do not know physical objects but only sensations of them. For Mach, as for Berkeley, the sensation is the primary thing, while the things “out there” that we suppose to cause sensations are only inferred but never observed. All that is observed are sense-impressions that are attributed to those things. Hence, Mach encourages us to resist the tendency to think

of something that transcends our sensations. In his critique of language, Mauthner, for his part, proudly declaring Mach his predecessor, asserts that nouns are the most misleading parts of language since the existence of material objects cannot be verified by experience. Actually, in Mauthner's view, material objects are, for this reason, "transcendental," that is to say, they are beyond our experience. And at this point we should not forget to mention Bertrand Russell, whose philosophical work, just as Mauthner's critique of language, was consulted by Borges on many occasions. Russell asserts: "Everything that we can directly observe of the physical world happens inside our heads and consists of mental events. The development of this point of view will lead to the conclusion that the distinction between mind and matter is illusory" (*Our Knowledge* 42). Given this "sample" of the impact of idealism on philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century, it cannot come as a surprise that Borges did not remain indifferent to it.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, we can hardly apply to Borges his own statement about being "*un argentino extraviado en la metafísica*" [an Argentine lost in the maze of metaphysics]—or, if he was, he was in "good company" (OC 2: 135; *Labyrinths* 217).<sup>16</sup> Instead, we might apply to Borges's "attempt" Musil's definition of the essay. Musil claims: "Were I to let my thoughts go beyond the bounds of that which I could possibly justify, I would call that an essay, an attempt.... I, who am neither scholar nor character, but in this case still want to be a writer, can only give my thoughts a personal connection" (*Tagebücher* 643-44). Thus, like Musil's essayism, Borges "attempts" here to let his thoughts "go beyond the bounds" that

15 This same Berkeleyan-Humean idealist tendency that we have traced in Mach and Mauthner reaches its full development in the Austrian "Vienna Circle" of the 1920s—with thinkers as diverse as Moritz Schlick, Hans Hahn, Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap and Kurt Gödel, among others. Along the same lines of Mach and Mauthner, members of this group remind us that the propositions that we use to talk about material objects are meaningless. "[N]o statement which refers to a 'reality' transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance" (Ayer, *Knowledge* 34).

16 Floyd Merrell relates Borges's refutation of time to Kurt Gödel's article "A Remark About the Relationship Between Relativity Theory and Idealistic Philosophy." After examining Gödel's essay, Merrell concludes that the point of Gödel's paper is that "linear experience is not given; it is a mental construct" (144). Certainly, in light of Merrell's insightful discussion, Borges's refutation does not appear as the "anachronous *reductio ad absurdum*" that Borges himself claims it to be.

Berkeley and Hume established for idealism. But let us first see how Borges moves from Berkeley's idealism to Hume's own version of it before he "transgresses" its boundaries.

#### IV. A "BUNDLE" OF PERCEPTIONS CONSTITUTES A SELF?

Following the traditional narrative of histories of philosophy, Borges sees Hume's writings as completing Berkeley's idealism. Borges claims:

Berkeley afirmó la identidad personal, "pues yo no meramente soy mis ideas, sino otra cosa: un principio activo y pensante" (*Dialogues*, 3); Hume, el escéptico, la refuta y hace de cada hombre "una colección o atadura de percepciones, que se suceden unas a otras con inconcebible rapidez" (obra citada, I, 4, 6) (*OC* 2: 138).

[Berkeley affirmed the existence of personal identity, "I myself am not my ideas, but somewhat else, a thinking active principle that perceives" (*Dialogues*, 3); Hume, the skeptic, refutes this identity and makes of every man "a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity" (op. cit., I, 4, 6)] (*Labyrinths* 221).

Borges invokes Hume's views often in his essays and stories, and almost always in reference to his notion of self. Hume, like Berkeley, believes "that nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas, and that external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion" (*A Treatise* 67). Regarding the self, Hume remarks:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception [ ... ]

But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. (*A Treatise* I iv. 6: 252)

Given these "particular perceptions," the question immediately arises as to what it is that integrates them into that entity we generally refer to as a "self." In a first approach to this question, we might say that these perceptions perhaps are inherent to some substantial self. However, for Hume, all we have are sense-impressions or perceptions. Precisely because we

have no sense-impression or perception of substance, Hume denies that we have a self as we traditionally understand it, that is to say, as maintaining a certain identity throughout life.<sup>17</sup> The question remains: If, as Hume claims and Borges seems to share, the self is a collection or bundle of discrete perceptual experiences, what accounts for its continuity? “What then are the relations in virtue of which a bundle of perceptions constitutes a self?” (Ayer, *Hume* 52).<sup>18</sup> Perceptions might be distinct existences—“in the sense that we can consistently conceive of their separation” (53). Yet we still need to find some way of linking those discrete perceptions. As A. J. Ayer claims, “to be content to say that they belong to the same mind is unhelpful, if it is just a way of saying that they stand in whatever the relation we are looking for happens to be, and unintelligible if it refers them to the same underlying mental subject” (*Hume* 53).

But we should not entertain any doubts regarding Borges’s intentions. Berkeley started the erasing of the world, collapsing it into the subject. Hume, in turn, dissolves the subject into a bundle of isolated perceptions. Borges, who has already accepted Berkeley’s claim that the external world is constructed out of our sense-experiences, now accepts Hume’s claim that “no hay detrás de las caras un yo secreto, que gobierna los actos y que recibe las impresiones” [behind our faces there is no secret self which governs our acts and receives our impressions] and concludes: “somos únicamente la *serie* de esos actos imaginarios y de esas impresiones errantes” [we are, solely, the *series* of these imaginary acts and these errant impressions] (*OC* 2: 139; *Labyrinths* 221; italics are mine). Once we accept that there is no external world outside our own perceptions and that the “I” is a mere bundle of perceptions, we should be forced to conclude, Borges believes, that neither does time exist—at least not “fuera de cada instante presente” (*OC* 2: 146) [outside each present moment] (*Labyrinths* 230). He states:

17 “We have therefore no idea of substances distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it” (Hume, *A Treatise* I. i. 6: 16).

18 Hume barely attempts to answer this question. In fact, in his appendix to the *Treatise* he confesses that “there are two principles which [he] cannot render consistent; nor is it in [his] power to renounce either one of them.” These two principles are: (1) “that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences,” and (2) that the mind never perceives any real connection among distinct existences” (636).

negadas la materia y el espíritu, que son continuidades, negado también el espacio, no sé con qué derecho retendremos esa *continuidad* que es el tiempo. Fuera de cada percepción (actual o conjetural) no existe la materia; fuera de cada estado mental no existe el espíritu; tampoco el tiempo existirá fuera de cada instante presente” (OC 2: 146; italics are mine)

[once matter and spirit—which are continuities—are negated, once space too is negated, I do not know with what right we retain that *continuity* which is time. Outside each perception (real or conjetural) matter does not exist; outside each mental state spirit does not exist; neither does time exist outside each present moment] (*Labyrinths* 230; italics are mine).

But let us turn our attention to the way Borges actually refutes time, in his attempt to bring to an end the idealists’ “unfinished project.”<sup>19</sup>

#### V. SELVES WITHOUT BODIES

Borges’s acceptance of Hume’s idealist negation of the self can be traced back to his essay “La nadería de la personalidad,” written in 1922. It should be noted here that Borges has remained faithful to this conviction throughout his literary career. If anything, throughout the years, Borges has only enhanced his conviction about the delusory nature of the self by connecting it to Schopenhauer and also to Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> Oriental philosophy also supports his position in this essay in the form of Chuang Tzu’s butterfly dream. Thus, according to the Chinese tradition, some twenty-four centuries ago Chuang Tzu dreamt he was a butterfly, and when he awoke, he did not know “si era un hombre que había soñado ser una mariposa o una mariposa que ahora soñaba ser un hombre” (OC 2: 146) [if he was a man who had dreamt he was a butterfly or a butterfly who now dreamt he was a man] (*Labyrinths* 230). Borges invites us to consider the “el momento del sueño” (OC 2: 146) [moment of the dream itself] (*Labyrinths* 230), disregarding the awakening. He suggests to consider Chuang Tzu’s dream both from Berkeley’s and Hume’s points of view. Thus, from Berkeley’s point of view, we may claim that “no existía en aquel momento el cuerpo de Chuang Tzu” (OC 2: 146) [the body of Chuang Tzu did not ex-

19 For an illuminating study on Berkeleian-Humean principles as they apply to Borges’s short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” see Martín.

20 On the connections between Borges’s notion of the self and Buddhism see Bossart (95-96, 185-193).



ist at that moment] (*Labyrinths* 231); only his dream as perception existed. According to Hume, on the other hand, it would be legitimate to assert that “sólo existían los colores del sueño y la certidumbre de ser una mariposa” (OC 2: 146) [only the colors of the dream and the certainty of being a butterfly existed] (*Labyrinths* 231). Borges explains that those colors and the certainty of being a butterfly existed “como término momentáneo de la ‘colección o conjunto de percepciones’ que fue, unos cuatro siglos antes de Cristo, la mente de Chuang Tzu; existían como término  $n$  de una infinita serie temporal, entre  $n-1$  y  $n+1$ ” (OC 2: 146) [as a momentary term in the ‘bundle or collection of perceptions’ which, some four centuries before Christ, was the mind of Chuang Tzu; they existed as a term  $n$  in an infinite temporal series, between  $n-1$  and  $n+1$ ] (*Labyrinths* 231). As Borges concludes, the only reality that idealism acknowledges is the reality of those perceptions and mental processes: “agregar a la mariposa que se percibe una mariposa objetiva le parece una vana duplicación; agregar a los procesos un yo le parece no menos exorbitante” (OC 2: 146) [adding an objective butterfly to the butterfly which is perceived seems a vain duplication; adding a self to these processes seems no less exorbitant] (*Labyrinths* 231). In other words, from the point of view of idealism, to speak of objects (the object “butterfly”) rather than sense-impressions or to talk about the subject (the self who is dreaming) rather than bundles of sense-impressions does not make any sense.

Borges invites us further to imagine that somebody else, who knows of Chuang Tzu’s dream, also dreams that she is a butterfly and then dreams that she is Chuang Tzu, *repeating* Chuang Tzu’s mental states in their slightest details. Thus, like Chuang Tzu, this individual does not know if she is a human being who has dreamt she is a butterfly, or whether she is a butterfly that is now dreaming she is a human being. Borges argues that this case confronts us with two *identical* moments, two identical perceptions—although they belong to two different individuals. Obviously, Borges appears to believe that once we identify identical perceptions between two moments—even if these two moments belong to two different individuals’ lives—the existence of a repeated term is enough to break down the series of time and thus refute the existence of a linear

time.<sup>21</sup> But how does Borges accomplish the trick? Borges introduces here Leibniz's principle of the identity of indiscernibles. According to Leibniz's principle, there cannot be two things in the universe exactly alike.<sup>22</sup> If two perceptions or mental states are identical, Borges reasons, following Leibniz, the series is disrupted. This disruption, according to Borges, is sufficient "para desbaratar y confundir" [to break down and confuse] linear time and, with it, "la historia del mundo" [the history of the world] (OC 2: 147; *Labyrinths* 231). Borges claims: "¿No basta *un solo término repetido* para desbaratar y confundir la historia del mundo, para denunciar que no hay tal historia?" (OC 2: 147) [Is not one repeated term sufficient to break down and confuse the history of the world, to denounce that there is no such history?] (*Labyrinths* 231).

But Leibniz's principle by itself does not do the trick. For Borges, it seems meaningful to say that two perceptions are "identical" even if they were housed in two different persons. It seems quite obvious that Borges, like Hume, equates personal identity with the identity of the mind, and defines identity of the mind without any reference to the body (Ayer, *Hume* 51). This allows Borges to conceive of perceptions as totally disembodied. Some critics raised the objection against Hume that he totally neglects the body in his notion of self (Ayer, *Hume* 53). This objection seems to be much more pressing in the case of Borges. Borges, not unlike Hume, appears to forget that attributions of our identities also depend upon the identification of our bodies. Rather than belonging to a distinct person with a distinct body—with a distinct history, gender and sexuality—Borges, following Hume, seems to conceive here of perceptions as belonging to some kind of "common store." It is thus vital for Borges's account of the self—and, therefore, for his success in the refutation of time—that we renounce the body as the primary identification. Paradoxically, a theory to which our sense-impressions give rise ends up denying the very source of those impressions: the body. But let us go back to Chuang Tzu's dream, which also appears to endanger the success of Borges's refutation.

21 For the role that the notion of series plays in Borges's essay, see Hayles 165.

22 For a discussion of Leibniz's conception of time within the context of Borges's essay, "Nueva refutación del tiempo," see Bossart (87-93).

VI. FROM A BUTTERFLY TO A TEXT: ANNIHILATING THE SELF  
AND THE WORLD BY OTHER MEANS

In time, I am a river  
that's flowing into Thee.  
When time is not, I am myself  
the ocean of eternity.

Angelus Silesius

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When Chuang Tzu woke up, Borges tells us, he did not know “si era un hombre que había soñado ser una mariposa o una mariposa que ahora soñaba ser un hombre” (OC 2: 146) [if he was a man who had dreamt he was a butterfly or a butterfly who now dreamt he was a man] (*Labyrinths* 230). While Chuang Tzu’s true identity may be an object of debate, “that it is so,” as Colin Butler correctly points out, “can only be the consequence of an act of recollection” (157). In other words, Chuang Tzu’s last experience of perplexity regarding his identity necessarily implies a *series of experiences* that precedes it. But this would mean that every experience is related to previous *memories* or *recollections* of experiences. This *continuity* of memory that we must assume in order to make sense of Chuang Tzu’s perplexity presupposes a *change* in the person who dreams he is Chuang Tzu—and a change necessarily implies the existence of the time that Borges attempted to refute.

Borges appears to give up his “attempt” to refute time—at least within the initially selected context, the idealist philosophical framework of Berkeley and Hume. He asserts the well-known statement:

*And yet, and yet... Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos. Nuestro destino (a diferencia del infierno de Swedenborg y del infierno de la mitología tibetana) no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible y de hierro. El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebata, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego. El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges” (OC 2: 148-49)*

[*And yet, and yet...* Denying temporal succession, denying the self, denying the astronomical universe, are apparent desperations and secret consolations. Our destiny (as contrasted with the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron clad. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges] (*Labyrinths* 233-34).

Borges is not simply abandoning the previous framework of his refutation (the idealist philosophies of Berkeley and Hume), he is actually “switching” frameworks. Time is not “frightful” because it is philosophically “unreal,” but because it is “irreversible and iron clad.” More important perhaps is the fact that Borges identifies himself with “time” instead of feeling its effects on him: “El tiempo es un río que me arrebató, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego” (OC 2: 148-49; italics are mine) [Time is a river which sweeps me along, but *I am the river*; it is a tiger which destroys me, but *I am the tiger*; it is a fire which consumes me, but *I am the fire*] (*Labyrinths* 233-34; italics are mine). Borges is now somehow interested in an aspect of time that is clearly outside the realm of his initial conceptual scheme. Noticeably, he is no longer concerned about the “series” of perceptions, which were previously described and explained from the point of view of Berkeley’s and Hume’s idealism. What is Borges’s new framework about?

By claiming that he is the river that sweeps him along, the tiger that destroys him, and the fire that consumes him, Borges is clearly identifying time and the “I.” Time appears to be understood here as part of some kind of pantheistic “All,” which guarantees that, as in Plotinus, “any thing is all things” (*Eneads* V, 8, 4).<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the idea of an individual who feels herself to exist in the All, erasing any possible separation between herself and the universe, is emphasized by Borges’s ending quotation from Angelus Silesius. Borges cites Silesius in the original German version:

23 Compare this with the poem “The Unending Rose”: “Cada cosa/ es infinitas cosas. Eres música,/ firmamentos, palacios, ríos, ángeles” [everything is an infinity of things. You are music, rivers, firmaments, palaces, and angles] (OC 3: 116; *Selected Poems* 367).

Freund, es ist auch genug. Im Fall du mehr willst lesen,  
So geh und werde selbst die Schrift und selbst das Wesen (OC 2: 149)

[My Friend, it is now enough. In case you wish to read more,  
Go and yourself become the text, yourself the essence].

Silesius tells the reader that if she wishes to read further, she should become the text herself. But how could the reader become the text? Since Borges evokes here a pantheistic All, the contrast between “I” and universe, between “inside” and “outside,” subject and object, I and text disappears: the external flows into the interior (and conversely, the interior flows into the external). Moreover, denying the boundaries between the self and the universe is tantamount to denying the existence of the self. This conclusion is particularly relevant for our purpose. For, by means of Silesius’s mysticism, Borges achieves the annihilation of the self and the world that he has previously pursued by other means (British philosophy).

It is interesting to mention here that Borges tells us that the essay we are reading is, in fact, the result of putting together two different essays, which were written in 1944 and 1946, respectively. This explanation might partially clarify why some places in the second portion of the essay resonate as echoes of the first part of the essay. But why did Borges not edit those parts that repeat each other? Why did he decide to keep those repetitions? Adorno’s theory of the essay as form may help us interpret Borges’s decision. Let us focus briefly on Adorno’s thought.

Adorno is not interested in the essay as something preconceived and predetermined, but rather in how the essay shapes its reality in the very development of its presentation. For Adorno, thinking is primarily a matter of presentation [*Darlegung*]<sup>24</sup>—only by becoming form does thought take place. He goes as far as to claim that in its commitment to the form (of its presentation), the essay as a genre resembles art (“The Essay as Form” 18).<sup>24</sup> Borges, like Adorno, shows concern about the presentation of his essay. Borges, too, seems to believe that the presentation somehow determines or shapes the thought process. Within this context, we may understand Borges’s juxtaposition of those two almost identical essays as

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24 Adorno claims: “Consciousness of the non-identity of presentation and subject matter forces presentation to unremitting efforts. In this alone the essay resembles art” (“The Essay as Form” 18).

a way of shaping its reality: through their repetition, these two essays “attempt” to evoke in the reader the same experience of indiscernibility of perceptions that the essays discursively propose.

To summarize our discussion of Borges’s “Nueva refutación del tiempo”: Borges’s initial strategy in his attempt to refute time consists of two main steps. First, following Berkeley, Borges accepts the authenticity of nothing other than the individual’s own perceptions, confining the individual to a prison whose limits are indeed those perceptions. Second, once he has dissolved the world into the individual’s own perceptions, Borges, following Hume, dissolves the self into a mosaic summation (“bundle,” as Hume calls it) of perceptions. However, rather than achieving some kind of “closure” of the reflections he articulated within the philosophical idealist conceptual scheme, Borges abruptly shifts frameworks. Does this switch of frameworks mean that Borges attempts to recapture the external reality behind Berkeley’s and Hume’s atomistic perceptions of the world? How should we interpret Borges’s abrupt shift of contexts?

Precisely Borges’s concern about the presentation of his essay as a way of shaping the reader’s thought process may explain Borges’s “switch” of frameworks, ending thus with the well-known Heraclitean statement about the ceaseless passage of time and the erasure of difference between self and world. In the totalized philosophical system, the essayist sees a sort of prison that “bring[s] the world into subjection” and locks us up in the very system (Musil, *The Man without Qualities* 1: 300). But Borges does not lock himself up in the British idealist philosophy that he initially chose as a framework within which to articulate his refutation. Unlike systematic thinkers, Borges does not proceed steadily in the same direction (that of the British idealists). On the contrary, without almost any warning<sup>25</sup> Borges turns in a totally different direction, that of mysticism, where all differences between the universe and the “I” disappear. This interruption in the former direction of his thoughts has at least three consequences upon Borges’s essay. Firstly,

25 The mentioning of the encounter between Milinda and Nagasena in the “Nota preliminar” [Note to the Prologue] as well as the references to Schopenhauer within the body of the essay, might be interpreted as “hints” anticipating the role that mysticism plays in the essay.

it allows him to go beyond the bounds of the system that was originally chosen as the framework for the inquiry. Secondly, by means of the completion of this transgressive shift, Borges suggests the non-existence of an absolute framework within which to place our reflections. Thirdly, and perhaps more importantly, this shift of direction prevents Borges's essay from achieving closure within the initially idealist framework. But this failure to achieve closure should not be interpreted as *Borges's* inability. Rather it belongs to the character of the essay itself, and allows Borges to work in the "interstices" or spaces in-between that emerge between systems as diverse as British idealism and Silesius's mystical thought. In that "in-between" that opens up between these two systems Borges succeeds in extinguishing the world and the "I" and, along with them, time.

Let us turn our attention to Borges's "El escritor argentino y la tradición," where "remainders" of the idealist British framework still can be perceived.

#### VII. GRENZARGENTINIER ("ARGENTINES AT THE BORDERS")

The goal of "El escritor argentino y la tradición" is to define Argentine literary tradition. Borges considers three main possible candidates: gauchesque poetry, Spanish literature, and the Western tradition. Borges begins by examining the first alternative, gauchesque poetry. But before discussing Borges's position regarding gauchesque poetry let us be reminded here of his position regarding realism so as to develop a framework within which to read Borges's claims regarding gauchesque poetry.

Borges repeatedly opposes any kind of realist literary representation that pretends to reflect reality the way it is. In an attempt to make the reader believe that the narrative is about the "real" world, Borges maintains, the realist novelist employs each detail, "de toda vana precisión" [each vain precision], "un nuevo toque verosímil" [as a new proof of verisimilitude], seeing her writing as a "transcripción de la realidad" [transcription of reality] (*Prólogos* 22-3; *Reader* 123). However, Borges contends that no *representation* would ever be able to serve as a *direct* and *faithful* transcription of reality. In every literary text, reality has to be thought of and presented under a certain perspective so that literary representation cannot

but be *artificial*.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Borges contends that the realist novel—as any other representation of reality— will always remain an artificial object because an immediate relationship to reality is impossible. But let’s turn our attention to what Borges has to say about the gauchesque poetry as a candidate for the “authentic” Argentine literary tradition.

Borges claims that gauchesque poetry, like the realist novel, is a representation and, as such, it may not be taken as a faithful “transcription” of the reality of the gauchos but as one more artificial object.<sup>27</sup> Moreover,

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26 Typically, in the realist novel, the relationship between representation and its object has been regarded as a matter of resemblance. This resemblance, moreover, is taken to be objective, visible to all who look. On this view, the more closely a text resembles real events or people, the more realist it is. Borges, however, does not see any resemblance, likeness or similarity to real events or people in the fictional events or figures of the so-called realist novel. Thus, in the Russian realist novel, Borges argues, we may encounter characters that may kill themselves because they are so happy, or “asesinos por benevolencia, personas que se adoran hasta el punto de separarse para siempre, delatores por fervor o por humildad” [commit murder as an act of benevolence. Lovers may separate forever as a consequence of their love. And one man can inform on another out of fervor or humility] (Prólogos 22; *Reader* 122-23).

In his essay, “El arte narrativo y la magia” [Narrative Art and Magic], Borges addresses the problem of realism from a different perspective. He begins by reminding us that a literary reading implies what Coleridge calls “espontánea suspensión de la duda” (OC 1: 226) [the willing suspension of disbelief] (*Reader* 34). Accordingly, the reader must accept the fictional element as inherent to the literary text and suspend verifiability in regard to all the references to reality present in the text. Borges indicates that there are two ways in which an author may achieve this fictional pact with the reader: either by means of “natural causality” or “magical causality.” Borges links the pursuing of natural causality to the realist novel. Thus, in Borges’s view, the realist writer attempts to achieve the reader’s suspension of disbelief by turning fictional events, things, and characters into a system of causal links analogous to the causality we identify as occurring in our daily, empirical world. For Borges, however, magical causality is the only valid causal link between events, characters, or things in a literary text. Magical causality is, according to Borges, a way of emphasizing the constructed nature of a literary object as “un juego preciso de vigilancias, ecos y afinidades” (OC 1: 231) [a rigorous scheme of attentions, echoes and affinities] (*Reader* 38). In the magical causality mode, Borges explains, every detail registered in the narrative is an omen and a cause. Magical causality, Borges concludes, governs both the detective story and the adventure novel.

27 In his *Historia de la literatura argentina*, Ricardo Rojas claims that the gauchesque poetry of Bartolomé Hidalgo, Hilario Ascasubi, Estanislao del Campo and José Hernández derives from the spontaneous poetry of the gauchos, establishing thus a continuity between both genres. Yet Borges contends that Rojas neglects here the fundamental peculiarities of each of those genres. Gauchesque poets, Borges argues further, “cultivan un lenguaje deliberadamente popular” (OC 1: 268) [cultivate a deliberately popular language], which is never used by popular poets themselves (*Labyrinths* 178). Gauchesque



Borges alerts us to the fact that gauchesque poetry should not be mistaken for spontaneous poetry produced by the gauchos for the simple reason that it has been written by urban poets posing as gauchos. In this sense, gauchesque poetry is “*doubly*” contrived: Firstly, because it is a representation and, as such, it is an arbitrary product; secondly, because it has been produced by writers who were not gauchos themselves.

As Edna Aizenberg correctly points out, Borges discussion of gauchesque poetry is extremely suggestive. Reading it within the context of post-colonial literature, Aizenberg connects Borges’s discussion to issues of continuity and discontinuity between oral traditions and literature as it surfaces in African literature (104-05). From a different perspective, it can also be argued that Borges’s discussion of gauchesque genre is relevant to debates on pictorial realism. By emphasizing the element of artificiality or conventionality present in the genre, Borges comes close to Nelson Goodman’s view of pictorial realism. Thus, not unlike Borges, Goodman contends that the very reason why a certain painting is considered more “realist” than another one does not rest in an alleged resemblance to the “real” but in a current pictorial practice that may change entirely with a

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compositions such as Bartolomé Hidalgo’s “trovas” intend to present themselves “en función del gaucho, como dichas por el gaucho, para que el lector las lea con una entonación gauchesca” (OC 1: 268) [in terms of the gaucho, as uttered by the gaucho, so that the reader will read it in a gaucho intonation] (*Labyrinths* 178). However, in Borges’s view, nothing could be further removed from popular poetry or poetry of the gauchos, who “tiene la convicción de ejecutar algo importante, y rehúye instintivamente las voces populares y busca voces y giros altisonantes” (OC 1: 268) [have the conviction that they are executing something important and instinctively avoid popular words and seek high-sounding terms and expressions] (*Labyrinths* 179). Thus, Borges concludes: the gauchesque poetry is a “género literario tan artificial como cualquier otro” (OC 1: 268) [literary genre as artificial as any other] (*Labyrinths* 179).

Interestingly, we encounter a similar reflection in his story “El Congreso.” When the narrator, Alejandro Ferri, attempts to approach the gauchos who live closed to Don Alejandro’s estancia, he is to some extent disappointed: the behavior and acts of the gauchos do not correspond to the expectations that literature has awakened in Ferri. He comments: “poco o nada tenían en común con los dolientes personajes de Hernández o de Rafael Obligado. Bajo el estímulo del alcohol de los sábados eran fácilmente violentos. No había una mujer y jamás oí una guitarra” (*El libro de arena* 30) [They had little or nothing in common with the mournful characters in Hernández or Rafael Obligado. Under the spur of their Saturday alcohol, they could be casually violent. There were no women, and I never heard a guitar” (*Collected* 430). Thus, Ferri suggests here a clear opposition between the reality of the gauchos and the representation carried out by gauchesque poetry.

change of convention.<sup>28</sup> Thus, just as Goodman rejects pictorial realism as an artificial or conventional style, Borges rejects the legitimacy of the gauchesque poetry to stand as the authentic Argentine literary tradition due to its artificiality. And yet the question arises: If gauchesque poetry is a (“doubly”) artificial construct posing as an indigenous genre, what other alternative do Argentine writers have?

Borges considers the likelihood of Spanish literature as the tradition to which Argentine writers should adhere. This alternative, like the gauchesque poetry, was, in fact, a proposal supported by the Argentine nationalists. Borges rapidly disqualifies this option as restrictive, arguing that it is not coherent with Argentine history, which, Borges claims, “puede definirse sin equivocación como un querer apartarse de España” (OC 1: 271) [can be unmistakably defined as a desire to become separated from Spain] (*Labyrinths* 182). Thus, Borges refuses to be limited to narrowly “local” themes and characters, be it those that belong to gauchesque poetry or those that pertain to Spanish literature. He claims for the Argentine writer the right to elaborate themes or any aspect from any literature whatsoever. “nuestro patrimonio es el universo” (OC 1: 273) [our patrimony is the universe], he defiantly asserts—and this is his third and preferred alternative (*Labyrinths* 185).

Borges argues that the Argentine writer’s marginal status with respect to Western tradition paradoxically enables her to play freely with all world literature: “Creo que los argentinos, los sudamericanos en general [...] podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin supersticiones, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas” (OC 1: 273) [I believe that we Argentines, we South Americans in general ... can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortu-

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28 According to Goodman, a picture is classified as realist when the pictorial conventions displayed in it are extremely familiar to the observer. Thus, the reason why a painting of a red hat done in red paint is generally considered to be more “realist” than an otherwise identical green painting, Goodman claims, does not rest in its alleged resemblance to the “real” red hat but in the simple fact that we are used to the convention of using red paint to depict red objects. If artists generally did a painting of a red hat in green paint, Goodman argues, this would eventually be regarded as more realistic than the one done in red paint (*Languages* 35-6). Hence, for Goodman, realism is a product of current pictorial practice: what is generally regarded as realist may change entirely with a change of convention.

nate consequences] (*Labyrinths* 184). Borges's position is not very far from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's influential theory of minor literature and their claim that the potential of a minor literature is written from the margins, from the border, from where it is possible "to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (17).<sup>29</sup> Borges, like Deleuze and Guattari, seems to postulate the artist's marginality as a condition for an innovative, "revolutionary force for all literature" (Deleuze and Guattari 19). It is noteworthy that the privileged position "at the borders," in terms of its distance with and lack of radical commitment to the dominant culture, has also been underscored by a Polish writer who was living in Argentina since the Second World War: Witold Gombrowicz. Gombrowicz's awareness of the position of his Polishness with respect to the "central" cultures generated in France or Germany appears to echo Borges's understanding of his experience of being on the "margins" (Piglia "¿Existe la novela argentina?"). Just as Borges sees his marginal position as paradoxically enabling him to play freely with all world literature, Gombrowicz also interpreted his marginal position as a liberating force, allowing the minoritarian nature of Polishness to emerge more clearly. But Borges seems to have Thorstein Veblen in mind when he articulates his appreciation of the margins.

In his essay, Borges compares the marginal situation of Argentine culture with respect to dominant European cultures to that of Jews with respect to Western culture as it is understood by Veblen in his article "The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe" (1919). Postulating skepticism as the ideal point of departure for intellectual innovation, Veblen argued that assimilated, "gifted" Jews, who were living at the margins between two cultures—that of their ethnic origin and that of Europe—became the perfect skeptics. Veblen lays emphasis on the position at the boundary of two disparate cultural worlds as crucial since that allowed them to be simultaneously "insiders" and "outsiders." Although they embraced the culture of Europe, they remained, simultaneously, apart. This ambivalence, in Veblen's view, allowed them to develop

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29 "A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in its language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 16).

an abiding irreverence for the dominant culture which, in turn, is the real catalyst for innovation. In German, one spoke of “Grenzjuden”—literally “Jews at the border,” a word that became synonymous for Jewish cosmopolitans (Mendes-Flohr 21). It is precisely both the ambivalence and freedom connected to the position at the border that Borges is claiming as a right for himself.

Echoes of the image of the borders as elaborated by Veblen resonate in postcolonial theory’s emphasis on cultural hybridity, border-crossing, syncretism, and diaspora. Like the position “at the borders” that Veblen develops or Borges’s talk “from the margins,” hybridity opens up a “third space,” “interstices” or “in-between” sites where meaning is never pure, never uncontaminated, never stable.<sup>30</sup> Critics as diverse as Edna Aizenberg (108), Daniel Balderston (*Out of Context* 98-114) and Sylvia Molloy (19) resort to postcolonial discourse to explain the unsettling power of Borges’s appropriation of themes or ideas that belong to the dominant culture. By means of their insightful discussions, these critics show how Borges produces a hybrid replica of the dominant discourse that “is almost the same but not quite,” and that, in its difference, manages to threaten the hegemonic authority and challenge its model.<sup>31</sup>

In any case, the paradoxical situation of being both insider and outsider, it seems to me, is the position that Borges seeks for himself and the Argentine writer. Despite her nearness, in Borges’s view, the Argentine

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30 As we recognize the liberating potential of hybridity, we have to be cautious about whose interests these hybrid statements serve. That hybridity is an integral dimension of cultural change is, it seems to me, irrefutable. That it is a liberating category *per se* seems to me more questionable. Cultural hybridity always has the potential to be assimilated and thus negated by the dominant culture. We see this tendency particularly in mediums such as film and music. For the perils of hybridity see Chowdhury and Moreiras (395).

31 Both Molloy and Aizenberg point to Borges’s short story “El evangelio según Marcos” as perhaps one of the most emblematic examples of Borges’s *marginal* position with respect to tradition. While Aizenberg stresses “the linguistic-interpretive ambiguity that necessarily occurs in new and hybridized settings” (107), Molloy, in turn, claims that this story shows that cultural binarisms are “always already compromised, contaminated, always already mixed” (“Lost in Translation” 11). Within the postcolonial context, Balderston discusses Borges’s rendition of British India in “El hombre en el umbral” (*Out of Context* 98-114). Furthermore, engaging himself with Harold Bloom’s understanding of the Western canon, Balderston examines elsewhere Borges’s own understanding of classical or canonical literature (“Borges: The Argentine Writer” 37-40).

writer remains an outsider with respect to European tradition, and has thus the potential for creative invention. As Beatriz Sarlo perceptively argues, “Borges’s cosmopolitanism is a condition that allows him to invent a strategy for Argentine literature.” “By reinventing a national tradition,” Sarlo explains further, “Borges also offers Argentine culture an oblique reading of Western literatures. From the edge of the West, Borges achieves a literature that is related to foreign literature but not in any subordinate way” (*Jorge Luis Borges* 5).<sup>32</sup> However, the question arises: Is there any connection between the model of individual postulated by “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins,” “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” and “El escritor argentino y la tradición”? Do these essays invoke different “traditions” or is there inherent here a single tradition that feeds the three essays?

### VIII. CODA

From a historical perspective, Borges’s essays are the result of a dominant modernist concern with an insurmountable abyss opened between language and reality. This concern has been eloquently expressed, among other sources, in Mauthner’s critique of language<sup>33</sup>—which, as we know, has been continuously consulted by Borges, particularly his philosophical dictionary—as well as by other philosophers born in the span between 1840 and 1870 and the subsequent generation of writers born between 1870 and 1900. In fact, the implications of this abyss between reality and representation are not only reflected both in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and in more recent developments such as Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, but are ones we still wrestle with in the twenty-first century. Borges, for his part, does not attempt to circumvent the gulf between reality and our representations: he dwells in it. A clear case in point is “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins.”

Rather than existing independently of us, free of our subjective rule, the world and things “out there” depend, in Borges’s view, on our minds; they are our own creations. All there is for us, according to Borges, is rep-

32 For a discussion of the relationship between Borges’s peripheral or marginal perspective and his use of and interest in translation, see Schwartz and Waisman.

33 On Borges relationship to Mauthner’s critique of language see Dapía, *Die Rezeption*.

representations, classifications or systems. If there is a reality outside our representation, it is inaccessible to us. Clearly a certain tendency to negate an “objective” world that is not of our making is pervasive in “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins,” and it can also be encountered in “Nueva refutación del tiempo.” With the disappearance of an “objective” world, both essays seem to invoke a conception of the individual as a subject who constructs the world out of her perceptions. If we accept nothing other than our own immediate perceptions, the limits of our perceptive worlds become the limits of the external world. In other words, the existence of the external world can never be proved since all we have is our sense-data: the world is *oneself*.

As we have attempted to show, Borges traverses this path in “Nueva refutación del tiempo.” Thus, following Berkeley, he accepts the authenticity of nothing other than the individual’s own perceptions, confining the individual to the prison-house of those perceptions. Following Hume, he converts the self into a summation of atomic sense-impressions, making those bits of sense-impressions cluster together as they come. But if we insist on confining ourselves to our own directly accessible perceptions, not only does the world dissolve (into our own perceptions) but the self also dissolves. In this respect, Borges’s image of the “I” that is simultaneously both its subject and object (“El tiempo es un río que me arrebató, pero yo soy el río; es un tigre que me destroza, pero yo soy el tigre; es un fuego que me consume, pero yo soy el fuego” (OC 2: 148-149; italics are mine) [Time is a river which sweeps me along, but *I am the river*; it is a tiger which destroys me, but *I am the tiger*; it is a fire which consumes me, but *I am the fire*] testifies for the melding into each other of both the world and the self (*Labyrinths* 233-34; italics are mine).

Ultimately, a view that presents the individual as constructing her world by assembling or combining her sense-impressions creates the expectation of unending creativity—for the number of possible combinations seems to be infinite. Not surprisingly, this last feature appears in Borges’s concept of the individual as writer: distrusting “local” culture, the writer as described by Borges seems to be capable of great inventiveness at the margins of two cultural worlds. Hence, what appears noticeable is a certain common thread traversing the three essays: the three essays appear to invoke the same individual, the modern Humean solitary “constructor”

of the world, which creates the world “outside any essential framework of moral questions, outside discursive tradition, outside a narrative which shapes [her life] as a whole” (Van der Veer 95).

The essay as form allows Borges a kind of “transaction” between diverse conceptual frameworks that other genre would probably not allow. Not unlike Adorno’s and Benjamin’s use of the device of “constellation,”<sup>34</sup> Borges’s juxtaposition of different frameworks, like British idealist philosophy and mysticism, allows access to each other in ways that would have been probably impossible within the context of a traditional philosophical system. In the “interstices” or spaces in-between that emerge out of the juxtaposition of these two different systems, Borges seems to have gained access to the world—albeit a shapeless, contourless world, where all differences between the self and the world collapse.

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<sup>34</sup> On the difference between Adorno’s and Benjamin’s use of the “constellation” device, see Helmling: “Constellation and Critique.”

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