

TEXTUAL SERIES IN *DISCUSIÓN*¹

James Irby

...this network of discourses, arguments, replies, and paradoxes...

Michel Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum"

Discusión, Borges' fourth collection of essays, came out in July 1932, gathering fifteen short pieces previously published in periodicals between April 1928 and May 1932. These were the years when he wrote *Evaristo Carriego*, ceased to write poems, and was about to write his first stories. *Discusión* is shorter and more compressed in utterance than the earlier collections. It also notably drops or alters several of their concerns. The confident, expansive view of Argentina expressed in the title essays of *El tamaño de mi esperanza* and *El idioma de los argentinos* is replaced by the sharp critique of "the Argentine's most immediately distressing traits" (11) in the opening essay "Nuestras imposibilidades". The interest in metaphor and poetic language is replaced by a scrutiny of other rhetorical means at work mainly in narrative discourse. The philosophical or metaphysical curiosity shifts more toward cosmology and theology: the Cabala, Gnosticism, eternal damnation and the Eleatic paradoxes, so pervasive in the later Borges, are here examined in detail for the first time. Notes on film are another novelty. And, throughout all this, there is also a greater sense of what I will call the power of text, both as a topic and as a practice,

1 Paper read at conference on "Borges' Beginnings", University of Chicago, April 16, 1982.

and this will be the subject of my paper.² Though an early work, *Discusión* partakes remarkably of that power and is more akin, in that respect, to Borges' great fictions and essays than, say, *Historia de la eternidad*, which follows it.

When Borges began in the 1950's to reprint his earlier books in the Emecé series of so-called *Obras completas* in small grey volumes, *Discusión* was the oldest essay collection included. That re-edition of 1957 discarded or recast some pieces, added others of much later date and extensively reworded those that were retained. My comments consider only the first edition of 1932 and the translations are my own.

I use "text" much in the same sense outlined by Roland Barthes in his article "Prom Work to Text". Text is a productive network, an open-ended activity, not a closed representation, a product, a work. Text cuts across works, genres, classifications. Text is always paradoxical, not only because it transgresses the limits of *doxa*, of common opinion, but also because it moves in continual displacement with regard to itself. Text does not close down upon the signified, but continually defers it by opening up an expanding field of play for the signifier. Text is—and here I quote Barthes—"a serial movement of dislocations, overlappings and variations . . . [which] coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy" (76). Text is irreducibly plural or multiple in its voices, and these voices show themselves to be inseparable from quotations or echoes of the already read, of a vast pre-existing intertext, which has no beginning. Text, therefore, also undermines the idea of authority or authorship, of the work as offspring or property or law of an author.

Such a concept of text has become prevalent in our day. It can be, often is, applied retroactively to the elucidation of writings of other times. What we find in Borges' writings, however, is that such a concept, more than merely applicable, is already operative, and consciously so, even as far back as fifty years ago, in *Discusión*. To show this, I will trace a few of the series of textual "dislocations, overlappings and variations" running through some pieces in the book.

2 The parts of this paper referring to "La postulación de la realidad" and "El arte narrativo y la magia" summarize, with no modifications of substance, the contents of an unpublished paper I read in a symposium on the early Borges at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, October 21, 1978.

I will begin with a great source of energy in *Discusión*, one of the most perplexingly suggestive and elusive essays Borges has ever written: "La postulación de la realidad". Its strangeness calls for a word-by-word analysis of a kind I can barely outline here. The only critic I know of who has effectively scrutinized it in detail is Sylvia Molloy, who devotes several pages to it in her book *Las letras de Borges*. Initially at least, "La postulación..." purports to be a study of how classic writers "postulate" reality, instead of "expressing" it as romantic writers do. (Borges explains that "classic" and "romantic" have no historical meaning here and refer only to two ways of writing.) Borges then defines three types of "postulation" and illustrates them with a variety of quotations: 1) "a general notification of the important facts" (95); 2) "conceiving a reality more complex than the one declared to the reader, and mentioning its derivations and effects" (95); and 3) "circumstantial invention" (97), which means setting up in the text an elliptical or oblique system of allusive details. Molloy shows very well that, as it progresses, the essay implicitly blurs or even undermines its own distinctions, not only the initial difference between "classic" and "romantic" but even to some extent the three categories just mentioned, with the effect that the nature of "postulation" always seems to be shifting. She shows also that the essay focuses mainly on ways in which a text, as she puts it, may "incorporate (and textualize) extratextual elements" (111) by varying the sense of its frame or limits and extending the internal repercussion of its significant details. Central to her argument is the idea of a disturbing "differential residue," (106 ff.) which she sees at work in the movement of the essay itself and which she applies in a most successful and original way, throughout her book, to an analysis of Borges' writing in general.

In addition to the features of "La postulación..." noted by Molloy in her indispensable comments, I would like to suggest some others. Much of what Borges calls "postulation" amounts to what linguists today call "presupposition". All texts, in order to assert directly certain propositions, assume the existence of others which they do not state. As Jonathan Culler observes in his book *The Pursuit of Signs*, this "treating the fact in question as already given . . . undermines referentiality" (113) and is an aspect of the larger phenomenon of intertextuality, that is, intertextuality seen not just as the echoes in one text of others but as the relation of any text to

the “discursive space of a culture”, with its “anonymous discursive practices” (103). Now intertextuality is strongly implied by the series of Borges’ examples in “La postulación...”. In fact, the examples form several series whose similarities and divergences set up a variety of remarkable resonances. One series is that of the most prominently displayed examples—the passages from Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, Tennyson’s *Morte d’Arthur*, Morris’ *Life and Death of Jason*, Larreta’s *Gloria de don Ramiro*—, all of which (though Borges does not point this out explicitly) are texts that evoke a distant time not known directly to the author and are therefore necessarily erected upon prior texts. By offering as its first example a passage from a prestigious work of historical writing, the essay initially implies that “postulation” may be simply a matter of selectively transcribing known facts. But this implication is soon destroyed when we notice that that first example has been inserted into a series the rest of which is made up of fictional and poetic examples, some even taken from works of a fantastic nature. In other words, “postulation” is found in many kinds of texts, no matter what their genre or supposed degree of truthfulness. And so, the essay implies, the reality “postulated” here does not come from outside of writing, but is created from within, by textual means.

Three other concurrent series enrich these implications. One is traced by the key words defining each type of “postulation”—“notification”, “conceiving”, “invention”—, which suggest in their progression a growing autonomy of signifying power within the texts. Another is that each example focuses on smaller and smaller textual features until, at the puzzlingly abrupt end of the essay, even the use of an indefinite article in place of an expected possessive is also deemed an instance of “postulation”, thus suggesting that that power can irradiate from even the simplest words in connection. (It is also curious to note, in relation to this second series, how the essay turns back upon itself as it ends: after explaining the third type of postulation, Borges returns to the second, saying that it is actually the most literary of the three, since it “usually functions by sheer syntax, sheer verbal intelligence” (98). This return contains the reference to the individual connecting words. Strictly speaking, the essay has no conclusion. It concludes by making yet another move to rewrite itself, to extend further the field of “postulation”, and precisely when it speaks of syntax or word order, it permutes its own order of presentation.) Finally, the most

disturbing feature shared by the passages Borges cites—and yet, a feature he impassively refrains from acknowledging in his comments on them—is their repeated evocation of bodily violence, with strong incursions of the erotic.

This last series opens with the climax to Gibbon’s passage on events during the Invasion of Gaul by Attila the Hun:

... two hundred young maidens were tortured with exquisite and unrelenting rage; their bodies were torn asunder by wild horses, or their bones were crushed under the weight of rolling wagons; and their unburied limbs were abandoned on the public roads as a prey to dogs and vultures. (90-91)³

And the series concludes with the long footnote on H. G. Wells’ *Invisible Man*, summarizing its tale of hounding to death a body paradoxically made all the more vulnerable by its transparency. (Note how we begin with history and conclude with science fiction.) In between, come the seduction of a woman seen as a violent siege, fatal wounds, the abduction of a warrior by some nymphs, assaults of hunger, a kiss and a breast, and the slaughter of animals. These references intermingled with the essay’s own abrupt breaks and shifts, along with its attention to the smaller parts of discourse produce an effect of signifiers laterally reinforcing one another. Borges’ “postulation”, driven or sustained by syntax, by language as a largely unconscious field of attractions and repulsions, acquires an elemental force partaking of a deep confluence of the drives that may both join and dismember human bodies. Here one thinks of Barthes’ claim in *S/Z* that the substitutions by which we give overall sense to a text, by which we gather the smallest units into global meanings, are governed by what he calls the symbolic code, and that the center of that code or field “is occupied by a single object from which it draws its unity... the human body” (214). One thinks also of Culler’s gloss on this in his *Structuralist Poetics*: “the body... is an image of the force which ultimately subjugates

3 Borges quotes Gibbon in Spanish. I give here the original English from Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The passage (from chapter XXXV) relates atrocities committed not by the forces of Attila but by his opponents, the Franks under Meroveus. Immediately following the words quoted here, Gibbon exclaims: “Such were those savage ancestors whose imaginary virtues have sometimes excited the praise and envy of civilised ages!” (287).

other meanings” (227). And, in another context, one thinks of the bodies mingling and wounded in battle that Gilles Deleuze evokes in his recreation, in *Logique du sens*, of the Stoics’ theory of meaning, of meaning not as essence or attribute but as event, as “surface effect”, at the paradoxical limit of things and words.⁴

Some last remarks about “La postulación...”. Molloy has suggested that the opening distinction between “classic” and “romantic” is a false start, that the remainder of the essay does not bear it out (107-9). On one level this is true, but it is also valid to say, I think, that connotations of those words resonate significantly in the essay’s overall effects. “The romantic, generally with scant success,” Borges says, “incessantly wants to express” (89-90). The rest of the essay makes clear that “expression” is representation by images and also self-expression, and that “postulation” is neither of these. “Postulation” assumes the pre-existence of meaning as system, as intertextuality, whose force is not that of the individual. Of course, some conventional connotations of “romantic” and “classic” are discarded, even violently so. This is also an effect of the opening example from Gibbon, a stately, measured writer, conventionally “classic” in that sense, but who is used to bring an explosion of barbaric force into the essay. For this effect of violence, so surrounded with an aura of remoteness and yet so much there, on the immediate surface, we could use the term “archaic”, retaining even its psychoanalytic connotation, but not “archaic” in the root meaning of *arche* (beginning, origin), a sense obliterated by Borges, as we shall see, in the essay on versions of Homer.

The companion piece to “La postulación...” is, of course, “El arte narrativo y la magia”, where similar forces are at work, but with more emphasis placed on intratextual series within narratives, indeed on a conception of the narrative text as a body to itself, “an autonomous orb of corroborations, presages, monuments” (121). (“El arte narrativo...” has been much more noticed by critics, since its translation over twenty years ago into French by Philippe Sollers in *Tel Quel* and its employment by Jean Ricardou in his *Problèmes du nouveau roman*.⁵ However, “El arte narrativo...” is a

4 On “surface effect”, see chapter two, “Des effets de surface”, pp. 13-21. On battle and event, see chapter fifteen, “Des singularités”, pp. 122-32. On the serial nature of meaning, see chapter six, “Sur la mise en séries”, pp. 50-56.

5 See especially the opening epigraph and pp. 198-200.

less striking, more neatly rounded off transposition of only *some* aspects of “La postulación...”) Just as “La postulación...” seems at first to see writing as selective notation of facts, “El arte narrativo...” seems at first to see narration as an art of verisimilitude, of likeness. But the initial series of examples are all from Morris’ retelling of the myth of the Argonauts and the figures whose exemplary plausibility is offered for study are the centaur and the sirens, age-old products of a verbal tradition, of *ars combinatoria*. In other words, we are again signalled that we move in the realm of intertextuality. The term “postulation” is not used here, but the phenomenon is the same: the centaur and the sirens emerge as plausible—i.e. as textually effective—by means of a gradual series of partial allusions which continually presuppose an entity never set forth as a whole. And again we are in the field of bodily forces, not of wounds or dismemberment, but of half-bestial male and female bodies and of the fear they inspire: the fear of the centaur that men overcome to seek him as mentor, the fear of the sirens that moves men to resist their seductive call. (The other example here is from Poe’s *A. Gordon Pym*, where, Borges claims, the fearful color white is suggested by elaborately avoiding all mention of the word “white”: the power of omission in discourse.)⁶ Halfway through the essay Borges declares openly that his subject is not verisimilitude but causality, the series of meaningful linkages within the text, a causality as all-embracing as that of magic, where all things, distant and near, may attract and repel, prefigure and confirm one another. Here “magic” does not mean the marvelous or supernatural *per se*, but rather a comprehensive textual system of significant details, as in the “circumstantial invention” category of postulation. And, in this last part of the essay, there is a return of the violent context of the other essay: the charms and omens taken from *The Golden Bough* and the recurrent motifs taken from stories of Chesterton and from films of von Sternberg evoke wounds, hunting, murder, birth, love. And, again, this is “archaic”: “the primitive clarity of magic”, “lucid and ancestral” (117).

In both these essays, bodily conflict and trauma illustrate the textual principles examined. In the rest of the book, they appear much less, and what appears more pervasively, on many levels, is another mode of con-

6 But, as Ricardou points out (p. 199), the word “white” *does* occur in Poe’s text.

tention, which is precisely the one named in the title: *Discusión*. (Let us recall, however, that “discussion” comes from a Latin root meaning “to break, to scatter”.) “Discussion” has many applications throughout the volume, either as word or as activity. Naturally enough, “discuss” or “discussion” means here—in addition to verbal exchange or dialogue—scrutiny, questioning, analysis, posing of a problem. It appears in close connection with “dispute” and “argue” and “vindication”, as well as with a number of other less contiguous but still related terms spreading out into the areas of logic or deduction, such as “reasoning”, “speculation”, “refutation”, “hypothesis”, “conjecture”, “imagination”, “representation”, and, of course, “postulation” and “supposition” or “presupposition”. The latter three appear not only in the narrative sense outlined earlier but in the more logical sense of premise or assumption, all these senses of “postulation” sharing the common notion of forming a possible sense of things or world picture in the form of a verbal construct, either in literature or in religious or philosophical thinking, in the face of what Borges calls, at one point, “incalculable and enigmatic reality” (20). By the activity of discussion, I refer to a frequent way of organizing the sequence of an essay, or a part of it, as a debate of conflicting voices, which may also be at the same time a series of differing quotations or textual fragments. In the course of this sequence, there will be a paradox applied critically to overturn or disrupt some unthinking, commonplace certainty. And the paradox will be linked directly to the idea of generating an endless multiplicity of textual meaning. I will try to show this by looking at three additional essays.

In “Una vindicación de la cábala”, the paradox is the contradiction of a sacred article of faith and the multiplicity is the idea of an absolute text. While setting forth the Cabalist conception of the Scriptures as a totally significant text, down to its smallest particles, no matter in what order or by what permutations they are read, Borges interrupts his exposition to consider the Holy Trinity, the third hypostasis of which, the Holy Spirit, is held by Christians to be the author of the Scriptures. For Borges, the Trinity, this conjugation of three entities that are three and yet one, this eternal generation of the Son and the Spirit by the Father, is a monstrosity, something incomprehensible, an intellectual nightmare (see 73). (The debate here consists of paraphrasing orthodox justifications and arguing against them.) But the idea of the Scriptures as an absolute text, endlessly

productive of meaning, of all possible meaning, actual and hypothetical, past and future, is for Borges an intellectual marvel more prodigious than anything contained in the sacred pages of those Scriptures. It is as if, in order to affirm this marvel of the total text, where nothing is contingent or random and where all is infinite generation of meaning, Borges had to negate at the same time the ideas of authorship and of paternity, of physical generation in that sense, and negate them as sacred horrors.

In “La perpetua carrera de Aquiles y la tortuga”, Borges notes how the paradox of Zeno, which denies motion and time by the mechanism of infinite subdivisibility, stubbornly recurs over the centuries: its refuters, no matter what reasoning they use, can never silence or dispel it. He cites some of their various arguments and notes their fallacies, forming a small annotated anthology of quotations: the paradox appears, then, as a powerful disruptive force, a generator of texts, a persistent ramification of meaning. Indeed, its movement lies very close to the movement of meaning itself, to what Deleuze calls the infinite regress of presupposition: I can never say the meaning of what I say, because in order to say the meaning of a proposition, another proposition is necessary, the meaning of which then requires another proposition, and so on. As Deleuze says: “This regression testifies at the same time to the greatest impotence on the part of the speaker and to the greatest potency on the part of language” (41). Curiously, Borges claims here that Zeno is “unanswerable” unless we admit the truth of idealism, which affirms that all realities are mental. How we can by such admission elude “the pullulation of abysses in the paradox” (161) is not clear, since the mental realities of idealism still have a force independent of the subject. What is clear is that Borges associates the power of paradox with a denial of matter, of reality outside the mind.

In “Las versiones homéricas”, the mechanism is more subtle in its movement and, at the same time, more insidious in its effect. The series of texts is a set of differing versions produced by English translators over the centuries of the same passage in Homer (the subject of the passage is, it so happens, a battle). The paradox is not openly stated, as was the paradox of Zeno or the denial of the Trinity, but must be inferred. Like “La postulación...”, this essay opens with a plausible move which is soon almost imperceptibly reversed. Borges proposes that the problem of “letters and their modest mystery” (139) is best illustrated by considering, not the

relation between “immediate writing” and the writer’s thought, which is uncertain, but the relation between a translation and the original text. In this way, he claims, we have something visible to start with, an “external object” (139). (Note how subtly the idea of authorship has been replaced by a connection between texts.) Then, in the next step of Borges’ argument, this “external object” also becomes uncertain. He points to the *Iliad*, a single original that has generated a whole library of versions, “all sincere, genuine and divergent” (142), not because it is a pinnacle of perfection but because it is, as he puts it, “a complicated equation that registers precise relationships between unknown quantities” (144). Now there is a hidden debate or divergence of voices here. One series of subsequent remarks in the essay simply ascribes these unknown quantities to the remoteness of ancient Greek, or ancient Greeks, from modern comprehension. But this comfortable series is broken, here and there. When Borges observes, in an aside, that “there is no essential need to change languages” (140) for such a diversity of results to occur, or when he claims that a later version of any text is not necessarily inferior to the original, “since all we can ever have are drafts” (140), then a disquieting perspective begins to open up. Then translation becomes reading, and the classic original becomes a draft. In other words, reading, like translation, becomes a variation, a production of meaning, and the classic, whether near or remote, becomes not a single work to be received, but many works to be arrived at, generated by the paradox of an original that is never fully there, never complete, never an origin: a paradox that, furthermore, upsets the sacred order of model and copy.

One last set of observations before concluding. After *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, *El idioma de los argentinos* and *Evaristo Carriego*, *Discusión* seems relatively devoid of Argentine references. But it is interesting to note that the few such references it does contain are effectively inscribed within the textual series I have outlined so far. In other words, nationalism as unthinking fervor or as cult of unique origins is dissipated by the power of text. “Nuestras imposibilidades” denounces the *porteño*’s “facility for hatred” (16), “poverty of imagination” (12, 17) and readiness with insult, all of which become, in the larger context of the entire book, the antithesis of “discussion”. “El coronel Ascasubi” examines the question of whether Ascasubi is or is not a precursor of Hernández, this uncertain or partial ge-

neology curiously alternating with a series of quotations from the former that equate battle with dance (and, in a final note, battle with sex: “those two intensities of the body”, 41). “*El Martín Fierro*” demolishes the most fatuously extrinsic ways of understanding that celebrated national poem, in order to propose instead a reading of it as a novel based upon another variety of “postulation”. And “Paul Groussac” sees that writer and his elegantly scornful style in polemics as both pre-eminent in Argentina and all but imperceptible in any more universal literary view.

To conclude: *Discusión* has the density, the rich permutability, of certain cycles of poems, where each word takes on an extraordinary gravitation, what we have here of course being a “poetry” at the intersection of many fragments of poetry and non-poetry, of many textual activities. The way in which “La postulación...” rewrites itself, variously overlays its segments on one another with no closure, calling for a very active reading incompatible with any kind of naive realism, is but the extreme of a provocation, an involvement, a discussion that all the essays in the book offer in some degree. In 1933, the year after *Discusión* appeared, several young Argentine writers registered their reaction to that event in the magazine *Megáfono*. The first of many group appraisals of Borges to come.⁷ To read now the dim praise and blind hostility of that distant “Discusión sobre Jorge Luis Borges” is to sense anew the enormous discursive space that Borges’ writing has opened, has integrated, for us.

James Irby
Princeton University

⁷ For a detailed account of the *Megáfono* survey, with extensive quotations, see María Luisa Bastos, *Borges ante la crítica argentina, 1923-1960*.

WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.
- . "Prom Work to Text", in Josué Harari (ed.). *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979. Pp. 73-81.
- 12 Bastos, María Luisa. *Borges ante la crítica argentina, 1923-1960*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Hispamérica, 1974.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Discusión*. Buenos Aires: Gleizer Editor, 1932.
- . "L'art narratif et la magie", *Tel Quel* 7 (1961): 3-10.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975.
- . *The Pursuit of Signs*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Logique du sens*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969.
- Gibbon, Edward, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. New York: The Modern Library, n. d., II.
- Molloy, Sylvia. *Las letras de Borges*. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1979.
- Ricardou, Jean. *Problemes du nouveau roman*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967.