

FICTION AT THE FRONTIERS OF NARRATIVE
BORGES AND STRUCTURALISM, REVISITED



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*Wir sind davon überzeugt,
daß diese alten Gesetze genau eingehalten werden,
aber es ist doch etwas äußerst Quälendes,
nach Gesetzen beherrscht zu werden,
die man nicht kennt.*

F. Kafka

One of the imperatives of recent Borges criticism has been to situate historically the writer and his work, to find a place for them in literary and cultural tradition. To a considerable degree, these attempts have focused on the national canon of Argentina—and, occasionally, on its place within a broader, Latin American tradition. Borges has been read in terms of the ideological implications of his work, as a representative of what Josefina Ludmer describes as “la historia de la autonomía literaria” which according to her coincides with “la historia de la alta cultura argentina a partir de 1880” (294). Evidently, this is a perspective which in the age of Post-Colonial Studies and New Historicism has come to replace—or at least to supplement—more intrinsically textual approaches to the problems of language and meaning. In this essay I shall propose a

different context and one that transcends both national and continental frontiers: Let's return to the question of Borges' involvement with theory. Let's have another look at his connection with the upsurge of theory in the discourses on literature in the past century. The case of Borges is particularly illuminating since his work seems to anticipate some of the most basic theoretical tenets of his own times—while simultaneously tracing their limits and articulating some of their inherent paradoxes.

I.

Granted a certain amount of Coleridgean suspension of disbelief, Borges' *œuvre* could be read as a recapitulation of the major trends in modern literary theory. Some of his earliest essays evince a theoretical stance which borders on formalism. "Las Kenningar"—whose first version dates back to 1932—is perhaps the most remarkable (but far from the last) episode of Borges' formalist adventure: The translated and annotated catalogue of Icelandic figural periphrases (the *kenningar*) which appears on its pages is renowned, if not notorious.¹ A Borgesian theory of narrative also began to crystallize in the early 1930s, especially in some of the essays recollected in *Discusión*. For instance, "La postulación de la realidad" addresses the problem of *verisimilitude*, a theme dear to both formalist and structuralist thinkers. From a blend of rhetorical and ideological observations, Borges arrives at the conclusion that the invention of circumstantial details represents a crucial device in the representation, or postulation, of reality. Vivid details conjure up an entire world

¹ Less adverted, perhaps, is the theoretical justification embedded in the profusion of examples and circumstantial details. Borges writes: "El signo pierna del omóplato es raro, pero no es menos raro que el brazo del hombre. Concebirlo como una vana pierna que proyectan las sisas de los chalecos y que se deshilacha en cinco dedos de penosa largura, es intuir su rareza fundamental. Las kenningar nos dictan ese asombro, nos extrañan del mundo. Pueden motivar esa lúcida perplejidad que es el único honor de la metafísica, su remuneración y su fuente" (OC 1: 379). Borges here seems to ground metaphysical thinking in the effects of figural language rather than vice versa—a gesture which is significantly ahead of its own context and which clearly echoes the ostranjenje of the Russian Formalists.

which has the rhetorical effect—synecdochally, as it were—of appearing as *real*. Interestingly, Borges goes on to suggest that this seemingly innocent stylistic trait might actually be expanded so as to constitute a structural matrix. There are, he claims, “dilatadas obras (...) que no frecuentan otro proceder que el desenvolvimiento o la serie de esos pormenores lacónicos de larga proyección” (OC 1: 220-21). Such a perspective is carried further in “El arte narrativo y la magia,” a text which focuses more closely on the logico-temporal organization of narrative sequences. Borges draws on Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* in order to substantiate his view of magic as the workings of a frantic and precise causality. Such a causality gone awry corresponds to that of the plotted stories which are Borges’ main preoccupation in this text: “Todas las leyes naturales lo rigen, y otras imaginarias”; “[t]odo episodio es de proyección ulterior” (231). Accordingly, the prophetic episodes determine in advance the destiny of the plotted text, drawing up certain limits within which the story line is allowed to advance.

As David W. Foster has argued, Borges reveals a proto-structuralist stance in his depiction of man’s efforts to “give shape or structure” to questions and intuitions “concerning human experience” (151). There is a common insistence on the mediated nature of experience and a common fascination with literary and philosophical works which elaborate vast structures in order to cover up a fundamental vacuousness. Characteristically, when Gérard Genette, in 1964, claimed that “[l]a littérature selon Borges n’est pas un sens tout fait, une révélation que nous avons à subir: c’est une réserve de formes qui attendent leur sens” (327), he was basing his judgement on a selected repertoire of relevant quotes which reveals an intimate affinity between theorist and author, as well as between a theoretical and a literary project. However, there is also a more “deconstructive” concern in Borges’ fictional texts.² Consider, for instance, the

² Borges’ presence as a source of influence for the various versions of deconstruction is beyond dispute. On the French scene, Blanchot, Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault are but a few examples of theoreticians who in one way or another have admitted their intellectual debts to Borges. In the US, the so-called Yale critics all included Borges in their personal canons of precursors. Thus, apparently out of a sentiment of spiritual

title story of Borges' first "Borgesian" collection of stories, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*. Here the narrator's comments on Ts'ui Pên's quasi-infinite and truly labyrinthine novel read like glosses on a structuralist theory of narrative functions. The passage in question is so oft-quoted that it should suffice to indicate its whereabouts:

En todas las ficciones, cada vez que un hombre se enfrenta con diversas alternativas, opta por una y elimina las otras; en la de (...) Ts'ui Pên, opta (...) por todas. *Crea*, así, diversos porvenires... etc (478).

A grammar of fiction is thus folded into a story line which, in its turn, represents but an infinitesimal portion of the former's potential for textual production. At the same time, however, the singularity of the event is constantly insisted upon; everything occurs right now, the narrator thinks to himself; and the final act of communication-by-killing is insistently momentaneous and irrevocable. The result is a double undermining of the structural scheme figured in the embedded novel: On the one hand, the very act of framing a textual model which somehow represents the sum of possible narratives amounts to a situation which cannot be accounted for by that model (i.e., a rather traditional paradox of self-reference); on the other, there is a relation of mutual cancellation between the poetics of singularity, associated with the narrator's mission, and the iterability which inheres in the poetics of the labyrinthine novel.

Thus, although stories such as "El jardín..." presuppose the rhetoric and ideology of a classical narrative apparatus, they do so in an idiosyncratic way which ends up encountering fundamental paradoxes at the heart of a seemingly normal narrative situation. Accordingly, the figurality of Borges' writings places the readable narrative *en abyme* in a manner which carries it beyond structuralism. The Borgesian "juegos con el tiempo y con lo infinito" (OC 2: 186) open up a different *space* of literature in which the laws of narrative are temporarily suspended. Such a presence of anomalous figuralities can be considered as a stratagem of foregrounding the normality

fraternity, Paul de Man admitted in a late interview that he at any time felt ready to write on Borges (120).

of narrative. In the words of Michel Lafon, Borges' texts are characterized by the "*extrême visibilité de ses procédures d'écriture*" (116). And it is precisely through such a rendering visible or "re-marking" of the rhetorical apparatus of narrative that Borgesian *fiction* becomes involved with theoretical issues.

Tentatively, one might venture the hypothesis that Borges moves—chronologically—from the exposition of the formal aspects of literature in his early essays to an interrogation of structural paradoxes in the *ficciones*. A similar yet perhaps more gradual advancement can be observed with respect to Borges' narratives. Quite conspicuously, his earliest narrative texts are rewritings more than inventions; and they are frequently marked by a journalistic style which leaves the impression of a somewhat "mechanical" parading the plot line. Conversely, his later essays resemble fictional stories, as if the pendulum had come full circle, the fictional mode now appearing as all-pervasive. In these latter texts it is no longer simply a question of declaring the "truth" about narrative forms but of operating within the frames of narrative in a self-critical and potentially self-effacing manner. In order to substantiate this point I shall start out with some remarks on "El acercamiento a Almotásim," which is commonly (but not unanimously) held to be Borges' first idiosyncratic achievement in the narrative genre; after which I move to "La lotería en Babilonia," a story from the most intense *Ficciones* period.

II.

A fictional review article, "El acercamiento a Almotásim" exploits the method and parlance of a certain academic discourse to unravel the complex structure of an apocryphal, Indian novel—a gesture which allows for an explicit questioning of generic conventions. Thus, from the very beginning there is an internal doubling of Borges' text, a folding of textual structures which supplements the logic of readability. By paraphrasing and interpreting a novel which has never been written, and which moreover is said to exist in two different versions, Borges provides every detail with an over-abundance of meaning, coherence, and motivation. The apocryphal novel is said to contain "una vertiginosa pululación de *dramatis personae*," to

exhaust “los movimientos del espíritu humano,” and to retrace “una peregrinación que comprende la vasta geografía del Indostán” (*OC* 1: 415-416). It is apparently nothing but an extensive sequence of actions which has been minutely “catalyzed” so as to blur the frontiers of the story line. Witness the following account of the “general course” of the novel:

La historia comenzada en Bombay sigue en las tierras bajas de Palanpur, se demora una tarde y una noche en la puerta de Bikanir, narra la muerte de un astrólogo ciego en un albañal de Benares, conspira en el palacio multiforme de Katmandú, reza y fornicación en el hedor pestilencial de Calcuta, en el Machua Bazar, mira nacer los días en el mar desde una escribanía de Madrás, mira morir las tardes en el mar desde un balcón en el estado de Travancor, vacila y mata en Indapur y cierra su órbita de leguas y de años en el mismo Bombay, a pocos pasos de los perros color de luna. (416)

Instead of an advancement towards the end of the story line, the fictional novel whirls out an erratic journey through an excessive textual space. However, the above passage simultaneously indicates a different ratio insofar as there seems to be a circularity at work which arranges the monstrous textual space in accordance with the geometrical purity of the circle. In the same vein, the narrator observes that about halfway in the narrative something happens to the general outline of the schema of wandering. From being a flight from the police, the voyage turns into a strenuous quest for a mysterious figure—Almotásim—and for the probably divine source of his splendour.

Such an enigma would normally restrict and direct the extravagant unfolding of the story line. In Roland Barthes' terms, the realm of the enigmatic belongs to the hermeneutic code—that is, to the code which, alongside the proairetic code of actions, governs the irreversible advancement of the story. In readerly texts—i.e., those that observe the common laws of the genre—this unfolding is experienced as unicursal. The formulation of their “secret” is conceived as the promise of a final solution in such a way that the end coincides with the revelation of its “truth.” What lies between the formulation and the revelation is but a series of delays, equivocations, snares, partial answers, jammings, etc., by which the reader is

held in suspense. Suggestively, Barthes speaks of the middle part of the story—the bulk of most readerly narratives—as an “*errance temporaire du prédicat*” (II 682). As long as this sequential journey endures, nothing is really shown—revealed—in the text. Narratives therefore end with the designation of a truth which has been indicated but never named as such during the development of the story (596).

Thus also in “*El acercamiento*,” where the episodes seem insignificant in themselves. What counts is their share of clarity, of a divine reflection which points towards the final revelation of its origin. What is thus staged is a search for the source that might put an end to any hermeneutic excitement—and to the narrative itself. Hence the nameless protagonist is first and foremost an incarnation of the inescapable tension or *discontent* which motivates the quest for a figure which, in its turn, emblematically represents an ultimate narrative equilibrium. Perhaps even more than an ingenious metaphor of the circularity of human quest for insight (as suggested by several critics³), the story appears as a staging of the basic structure of narrative. In accordance with such a scenario, the novel provides no positive term to disclose the enigma:

Al cabo de los años, el estudiante llega a una galería “en cuyo fondo hay una puerta y una estera barata con muchas cuentas y atrás un resplandor”. El estudiante golpea las manos una y dos veces y pregunta por Almotásim. Una voz de hombre —la increíble voz de Almotásim— lo insta a pasar. El estudiante descorre la cortina y avanza. En ese punto la novela termina. (416)

If this is to be understood as a final revelation, the phrase must be taken in an all-too-literal sense: It is the end-as-convention which is shown, not the theme of the enigma. The conclusion of the hermeneutic “sentence” thus appears as deceptively formal, as if the outcome merely commented on the structure of narrative closures

³ George R. McMurray, for instance, who holds that “the story’s meaning (...) lies in its existential implications, namely, that truth lies within the individual. The tale’s mirror structure, then, also conveys its absurdist theme: that rational man’s search for the missing God inevitably takes him back to himself” (119).

rather than presenting a novelistic ending in its own right. Arguably, Barthes' aphoristic assertion that, in the readerly narrative, "ce qui est montré, l'est d'un seul coup et à la fin: c'est la fin qui est montrée" (596), has never been more relevant than on this particular occasion.

"El acercamiento" questions the end in other ways as well. Certain words attributed to Almotásim, the reviewer informs us, have already been spoken by the hero, a fact which he takes as a suggestion of an identity between seeker and sought—between the subject and the object of the pursuit. Such a coincidence also infects the narrative with an infinite erring, since it implies the impossibility of ever fulfilling the quest. A final remark suggests that Almotásim is actually the Hindu supposedly killed by the hero in the first chapter of the novel. Again, the resulting structure is a continual drift towards an illusory end—a conclusion which occurred before the hermeneutic sequence was initiated. Hence the middle part of the text (the temporary "wandering" of the predicate) turns out to be its only "truth." There can no longer be any ultimate metaphor to illuminate the theme of the enigma: The only possible closure of the project is the recognition of its contradictory, frustrated, preposterous nature.

This structure is apparently contagious. In certain ways, the relation between the reviewer and the novel recapitulates the one between the hero and Almotásim, which underlies the novel's incapability to reach its end. The reason for this is that the *editio princeps* of the novel (which is said to be the *first* crime novel written by a native of Bombay) is inaccessible to the reviewer, whose only copy is a second, revised edition. This one, however, is published together with an appendix summarizing the most important differences between the two versions. Suggestively, the reviewer criticizes the revised edition for its extravagant reliance on an allegorical figurality which makes the plot into an easily translatable account of the soul's ascension in mystic experiences and Almotásim into an emblem of God. He therefore laments that he has not "logrado juntarme con la primera, que presiento muy superior" (414). This relation stages an internal reflection of the novel's inconclusiveness, insofar as the review is written as an attempt to grasp the essence of an original ver-

sion (one that is *reflected* in a second, inferior edition) which the reviewer has not yet uncovered, “revealed.”

Such an internal framing of the story foregrounds the most fundamental of our prejudices as readers of texts: the presumption that a text is a readable object which coincides with itself. For the novel does not, quite literally, appear as a self-identical structure. It is marked by a “*diferencia fundamental*,” an internal difference which pluralizes the work and which necessitates an “*apéndice*” (414)—a supplement—in order to reconstitute its unity with the lost or absent origin. Yet this difference is precisely what becomes productive in the reviewer’s discourse. It is a *site* or breach for his critical interventions, an opening through which he actually unravels “*el curso general de la obra*” (414), consisting of nothing but displacements, duplications, deferred conclusions. Instead of reaffirming the origin, i.e., the grounding capacity of the *editio princeps*, the reviewer actually destabilizes the very conception of both beginning and end. The textual space in which these quests take place is therefore marked by a structural indeterminacy which infringes on the frontiers of the individual work—since the uncentered and encroaching sequences do not actually belong to any work at all.

Borges’ fictional quest for narrative structures thus ends up entangled in the very same patterns it set out to reveal. There is no longer any vantage point from which the text could be critically and objectively described. No metalanguage is exempted from the structure of an endlessly frustrated approach to a figure that refuses to reveal its true countenance. Borges makes these points indirectly, by dramatizing a theoretical insight. Yet I believe that his most compelling perspectives are precisely those that, by staging a furtive deconstruction of their own rhetorical apparatus, defy an expository, assertive style. It is here, moreover, that the Borgesian involvement with narrative theory most relentlessly departs from a purely formal investigation of the autonomous status of the literary work of art: We enter a more uncanny realm in which the laws and codes of writing—whose essence is constantly called into question—reach well beyond the frontiers of the text.

III.

Whereas “El acercamiento a Almotásim” dramatizes quite explicitly a critique of narrative conventions, “La lotería en Babilonia” might necessitate an extra dose of allegorization in order to perform the same task. Yet granted such an operation, the story appears as a most interesting comment on the basic delimitations of narrative according to structuralist poetics. Structuralism, as is well known, conjures up a *system* of functions whose internal laws and limits govern and circumscribe the domain of fiction. As a codified, lawful institution, this system is radically cut off from the realm of chance. “Il n’y a pas de hasard dans l’art, non plus qu’en mécanique,” wrote Baudelaire (107); Roland Barthes is even more relentless on this point when he claims that “il y a un abîme entre l’aléatoire le plus complexe et la combinatoire la plus simple, et nul ne peut combiner (produire) un récit sans se référer à un système implicite d’unités et de règles” (II 75). Thus the expulsion of chance can be regarded as the original sacrifice from which an ordered narrative universe emerges.

The narrator of “La lotería en Babilonia” — himself an exiled citizen of Babylon — seems at first to be engaged in a structural analysis of sorts: He seeks to grasp the fundamental constitution of his own existence through an exposition of the laws, customs, institutions, and beliefs of his people. However, the institution which sustains the cultural and juridical system of the Babylonians is that of the lottery, and the narrative strain of Borges’ story relates the stages by which it has supposedly evolved. This evolution amounts to a gradual withdrawal from broad daylight into absolute secrecy. At an early stage — the narrator has been told by his father — the lottery was a plebeian activity whose only motivation was the participants’ (and the merchants’) hope to enrich themselves. Yet in a first reform “unas pocas suertes adversas” were introduced “en el censo de números favorables” (457), the holders of which would have to pay a determined amount of money. The improvement was an immediate success — the Babylonians “se entregaron al juego” (457) — and from then on the institution in charge of the lottery (which has come to be known only as the Company) expands progressively until it satu-

rates the totality of the Babylonian civilization. The economic aspect of gambling disappears altogether. The mercenary sale is abolished; lucky and unlucky numbers alike are required according to other standards; and soon all, rich and poor alike, participate equally in the lottery. "Las consecuencias," the narrator assures us, "eran incalculables" (458). Two other modifications are also required for the institution to reach a state of perfection. First, the Company must see to it that the outcome of the lottery remains unknown to the participants (this stage would amount to a "naturalization" of the code). Secondly, not only the major events, but also their circumstances must be subjected to the rules of the Company. It is illogical, the Babylonians contend, that the lottery should determine the death of a person without interfering in the contingencies of the execution. A final amelioration should be added, via that of the "sorteos impersonales, de propósito indefinido" (459), in which the stakes concern animals or even lifeless things: to release a bird from a tower, to move a grain of sand, etc. Thus completed, the lottery has become indiscernible. It would be impossible to decide whether or not a given event actually owes its occurrence to the Company's drawings.

An interpretive quandary is produced by the existence of different codes which give rise to identical events. However, after the totalization of the lottery, yet another "code" must also be taken into consideration, namely the "laws" of nature, which engender occurrences indistinguishable from those of the drawings. Whereas the first of these codes have to do with the institution of law and justice, that is with the enforcement of official laws or decrees, the last one concerns the regularity of physical laws, which also embraces what might be called the institution of chance. The impossibility of controlling the small-scale circumstances of the drawings introduces the element of unpredictability, randomness, risk—these terms being implied by the Spanish word "azar," the Arab etymon of which designates a dice or lot. Accordingly, the lottery is determined both by the arbitrary institution of "the rules of the game," comparable to the legal code, *and* by the physical "codes" which preside over each single drawing.

The problem of deciding the meaning of any particular event, or series of events, is related not only to the uncertainty as to which elements correspond to which code but also to the question concerning the status and implications of these relations. Most important, however, is the fact that this questioning cannot disregard the possibility of a "pure" event, indifferent to the regulations of any norm or grammar whatsoever – and hence irrecoverable, unanswerable to the Babylonian codex. Accordingly, the institution of the lottery remains precarious, singular, as it were exterior to itself. It is never wholly "instituted," since the grammar according to which the drawings are executed and their results enforced is hazarded each time it is applied. It "occurs" alongside the events it prescribes. Incessantly rehearsing the arbitrariness of its own foundation, the lottery's legitimacy is called into question at each singular drawing, which thus becomes a momentous *cardinal function* in the existence of the system. As a consequence, the totalizing, integrational force of the institution (the code or system of the lottery) on which its legitimacy depends, is endlessly deferred. *The code is itself narrativized, subjected to its own principles, which thereby cease to exist as such.*

It might be awarding to relate the destructuring operations of Borges' text to the different levels of the structural hierarchy of narrative.⁴ On the basic level of functions, which concerns the smallest units of the story of the Babylonian world, the disintegrational gesture is carried out in a surprisingly literal manner. The narrator offers the following account of the structure which determines the articulation of his vernacular reality:

Imaginemos un primer sorteo, que dicta la muerte de un hombre. Para su cumplimiento se procede a un otro sorteo, que propone (digamos) nueve ejecutores posibles. De esos ejecutores, cuatro pueden iniciar un tercer sorteo que dirá el nombre del verdugo, dos pueden reemplazar la orden adversa por una orden feliz (...), otro exacerbará la muerte (...), otros pueden negarse a cumplirla... Tal es el esquema simbólico. En la realidad *el número de sorteos es infinito*. Ninguna decisión es final, todas se ramifican en otras. (459)

⁴Cf. for instance Barthes' influential survey article of structuralist narratology, "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits" (II 74-103).

Borges' fiction proffers us the design of a narrative machine which operates according to a simple yet lavish principle which seems to endorse the structurality of narrative—and which nevertheless contradicts the cohesive manoeuvres of the canonical system of narrative on at least two decisive points. First, every “nucleus” is radically contingent. The series of drawings might either annul the sequence or engender inconclusive deviations. This means that the moment of “risk” (*azar*) which adheres to each cardinal function in Barthes' system, is allowed to enforce its principles. Secondly, the narrative produced by the Company actualizes the system's drive towards infinite catalyzation. It subjects the circumstances (catalyses) to the same bifurcating scheme that governs the principal actions, which is why the continuous drawings constitute a refractory ground for the Babylonian world.

The gesture prescribed by the Barthesian system of narrative to countermand these tendencies would be to move to a superior level where the functions might be reintegrated and thereby recuperate their narrative meaning. Yet the radical uncertainty of the lottery also forecloses any appeal to intentional structures:

¿quién podrá jactarse de ser un mero impostor? El ebrio que improvisa un mandato absurdo, el soñador que se despierta de golpe y ahoga con sus manos a la mujer que duerme a su lado ¿no ejecutan, acaso, una secreta decisión de la Compañía? (460)

Such notions as action, intention, and character are inadmissible constructs: mere projections or presuppositions countermanded by the functioning of the narrative machine; feeble hypotheses whose essence dissipates in the lottery's aleatory unfolding. Accordingly, the very foundation of the hierarchical system, the notions of demarcation and of levels, withers away, and the narrative (sequence) appears as a purely differential and limitless pattern.

At the level of narration, the structural effects of the lottery are equally disturbing. Although there are only a few explicit marks of enunciation in the text, the general condition of writing among the Babylonians is exposed quite meticulously. Scribes, historians, and editors, the narrator asserts, conscientiously indulge in errors, discrepancies, falsifications. Moreover, the history (even in the sense of

the *past*) of the Company is relentlessly subjected to the lottery's haphazard revisionism. A method to correct chance has been invented but its operations "no se divulgan sin alguna dosis de engaño" (460). In a retrospective comment the narrator includes his own exposition in this economy of deception: "yo mismo, en esta apresurada declaración, he falseado algún esplendor, alguna misteriosa monotonía" (460). This remark may seem an ominous one for the narrative *situation* of the story; but in a sense it only corroborates the predicament which defines the Babylonian's discourse in the first place. No one could rightly claim to have dodged the all-pervasive influence of the lottery. Thus one cannot simply dismiss the possibility that the narration which is to account for the nature of the lottery in Babylon is the result of an infinite series of drawings. This means, in a quite accurate sense, that the figural span between story and discourse is suspended. There is no longer any significant distance between the narrated events and the act of narration. The two levels have become continuous, unidimensional — like a Möbius strip.

In the final analysis, then, everything in the Babylonian society is reinvented by the institution of chance. Even the most insignificant occurrence in nature (the cry of a bird, say) has been reduplicated and superimposed on the "ontic" world; even the encoded procedures of the lottery have become absorbed by the random modifications of the drawings. Thus a full-size simulacrum of reality has been contrived. In this sense Borges' narrative outlines a procedure of structuration, yet one that is rigorously opposed to the aims of "l'activité structuraliste." Whereas the latter, in Barthes' words, constructs an intelligible, ordered simulacrum of its object in a "combat contre le hasard" (I 1331), the lottery in Babylon produces a quasi-unreadable object through the interpolation of chance in the ordered structure of the world. While a structuralist analysis would seek to render explicit the code which engenders the object, the Company withholds the code *as well as its realizations*. (Perhaps neither of them exists.) The structuralist *activity* has thus been subjected to a casual reconstruction, through which unpredictable occurrences have replaced the regularity of its operations. The aleatory production of random events: this would be the exact reverse of structuralism's law-seeking interrogation of encoded objects.

IV.

The scenarios presented on the previous pages can be characterized as a narrative *re-marking* on the canonical system of fiction. In an unmistakably readable narrative idiom, Borges questions the laws and limits which circumscribe and control the genre in which he somehow dwells. His texts radicalize the inherent deviations, the risks or hazards, which inhere in the systematicity of narrative discourse. Thus they also reveal a way of approaching the question of *how these frontiers can be transgressed* which does not coincide with a post-structuralist *praxis* privileging the act of inscription or locution. Borges' writings operate within the frames of narrativity (readability) but they demand a reading which cannot but suspend the reliance on the criteria and delimitations by which the texts become readable in the first place. To put it schematically, the operations and prescriptions which are subjected to a narrative *critique* are the same which enable such a critique to formulate its premises and to stage their dissipation. Since they are cautious not to present a solution (which would glorify the author's performance), these narratives raise cardinal problems which are handed over to the reader. They do not *conclude*. Borges *questions*, and his questioning embraces the essential issues concerning the range, the status, the possibility or impossibility of narrative. This is perhaps one of the most distinctive features of Borges' involvement with theory.

In its purest form, this question is formulated as a question about the law. "El acercamiento a Almotásim" strives to establish narrative laws which incessantly withdraw from the reviewer's inquisitive gaze. Similarly, in "La lotería en Babilonia," the intangibility of the code which determines the fate of the Babylonians allows for an array of seemingly incompatible conjectures:

Alguna abominablemente insinúa que hace ya varios siglos que no existe la Compañía y que el sacro desorden de nuestras vidas es puramente hereditario, tradicional; otra la juzga eterna y enseña que perdurará hasta la última noche, cuando el último dios anonade el mundo. Otra declara que la Compañía es omnipotente, pero que sólo influye en cosas minúsculas: en el grito de un pájaro, en los matices de la herrumbre y del polvo, en los entresueños del alba. Otra, por

boca de heresiarcas enmascarados, que no ha existido nunca y no existirá. Otra, no menos vil, razona que es indiferente afirmar o negar la realidad de la tenebrosa corporación, porque Babilonia no es otra cosa que un infinito juego de azares. (460)

Perhaps the very disparity of these hypotheses indicates the fundamental attribute of the institution and its laws: their inaccessibility. In a sense, it is irrelevant to raise the question about the “essence” of the law, since its manifestation is but a sophisticated concealment. The affirmation that the Company is eternal and omnipotent is not radically opposed to the negation of its existence. What matters is the *effect* of its laws, their *application*, which should be understood as events from which the law itself is withdrawn. Thus, as long as the force of its legislation remains intact, the Company might just as well have ceased to exist, or never existed at all. This seems to be the insight of the last doctrine, according to which the very acts of affirmation and negation are themselves implicated in the game of chance, in the hazardous play which the lottery has come to represent. The origin of the system (the law, the code) is therefore irrecoverable. It has never been written in a readable script. Thus its reconstruction is but a legal fiction, a narrative of the law, which becomes the ground for Borges’ fictionalized theory of narrative.⁵

⁵ “La lotería en Babilonia” also addresses the question of the law in a more oblique way. The concealment of the code is stressed in a passage which describes the outlandish way in which the Babylonians communicate with the Company: “Había ciertos leones de piedra, había una letrina sagrada llamada Qaphqa, había unas grietas en un polvoriento acueducto que, según opinión general, daban a la Compañía; las personas malignas o benévolas depositaban delaciones en estos sitios. Un archivo alfabético recogía esas noticias de variable veracidad” (458). What matters here is the indirect evocation—hidden behind a quasi-Arabic spelling—of a corpus of writing obstinately preoccupied with the question of the law: Franz Kafka’s. Borges’ purpose with this allusion is probably not to invoke a distinguished precursor of his own writing but to stress the importance of the legal code to the question of literature and narrative. As is well known, Kafka’s *Der Prozeß* (and its interpolated parable “Vor dem Gesetze”) center on the seemingly infinite deferral of man’s appearance before the law. A more peripheral text, “Zur Frage der Gesetze,” reveals an even stronger reciprocity with Borges’ approach. Here an unnamed narrator relates the customs of his people; these are distinguished by the inscrutable character of the laws, whose custody is privy of the nobility. Although the majority of the people spend their lives trying to figure out the prin-

Allow me to end with what is probably an oversimplified conclusion. I have throughout the pages of this essay been claiming that Borges operates within the presumed jurisdiction of narrative laws in order to question their legitimacy and their limits. In this sense, Borges' fictional narratives *represent* or *project* the structural possibility of textual transgression without wholly practicing it. Although Borges remains faithful to the logic of the classical, readable narrative, he also indicates, through a narrative critique, where and how the systematicity of this construct is most vulnerable or precarious. Borges exerts, to put it somewhat bluntly, a narrative—and readerly—critique of the readerly narrative. At the same time, his writings obviously pursue the literary effect of the envisioned transgres-

ciple of the secret laws, "so ist das alles unsicher und vielleicht nur ein Spiel des Verstandes, denn vielleicht bestehen diese Gesetze, die wir hier zu erraten suchen, überhaupt nicht" (366). Significantly, Jacques Derrida's reading of Kafka in "Before the Law" takes as its point of departure the assumption that the law shares "its conditions of possibility with the literary object" (191). The law is not simply a prohibition, it is also prohibited (interdit): "One must enter into relation only with the law's representatives, its examples, its guardians. And these are interrupters as well as messengers" (203-204). The essence of the law is thus to withdraw from any contact with those whom it nonetheless addresses as answerable to its decrees: "Like truth, the law would be the guarding itself (Wahrheit), only the guarding" (206). The fact that Derrida derives most of his insights from Kafka's writing leads him to raise the following issue: "If Kafka's text says all this about literature, the powerful ellipsis it gives us does not entirely belong to literature. The place from which it tells us about the laws of literature, the law without which no literary specificity would take shape or substance, this place cannot be simply interior to literature." (214) Yet there is, in my view, a difference between a general excess of literary texts and the more obstinate inquiry which is at work in Borges' narratives. On the other hand, although Derrida's reading of Kafka is no doubt a pertinent and perspicacious deconstructive operation, I'm not so sure that Kafka's text "says all this about literature." Comparing "Vor dem Gesetz" or "Zur Frage der Gesetze" with "El acercamiento a Almotásim" or "La lotería en Babilonia," it would seem that Borges criticizes more radically the narrative laws and conventions than does Kafka. Even if we enlarge the field of inquiry to include the entire jurisdiction of literature, Borges' stories address the problem in a far more systematic manner. In a sense, therefore, Borges does not "need" a deconstructive reading. His texts have already accomplished the intricate operations that qualify such an approach, which is why it befalls the reader to examine the results of the narrative re-markings of the codes and laws of fiction—a procedure which has as an important moment the reconstruction of the system which the text has frustrated, dismantled. Needless to say, such a manoeuvre does not imply a return to an earlier state of affairs where the systematicity of narrative discourse remained intact and unquestioned.

sions rather than any supposedly liberating or revolutionary potential. Yet precisely by *not* abandoning the discourse of the readerly but pushing the codes and figures of narrative to their limits, Borges creates a space—a universe—of narrative where one would normally situate its “others”: commentary, description, theory, criticism, philosophy, textuality, etc. And it is in this impure realm of readability that Borges stages the scenes of writing in which the *nomoi*, the *doxa*, and the metaphysical assumptions of narrative are inscribed in a series of quasi-transgressive and paradoxical subversions of its generic constraints. This is a context which also deserves to be taken into account when the figure and the work of Jorge Luis Borges are discussed—even if it does not properly belong to any particular national or cultural scene.

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