

Silvia G. Dapía

***Die Rezeption der Sprachkritik Fritz Mauthners im Werk von Jorge Luis Borges.*
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Silvia G. Dapía on Borges and Mauthner

Silvia Dapía's importance in demonstrating the depth and breadth of the influence of Nineteenth-century German poet, novelist, literary critic, and philosopher, Fritz Mauthner, on the fictional and essayistic work of Argentine Jorge Luis Borges is unquestionable. She has studied the subject in depth and has written about it at length in various articles, but it is in *Die Rezeption der Sprachkritik Fritz Mauthners im Werk von Jorge Luis Borges* that Dapía consolidates her contribution.

Mauthner (1849-1923) was arguably the first modern philosopher to assert that philosophical problems are essentially linguistic problems. His major contribution is that he discovered and developed a hidden tradition of using the criticism of language (*Sprachkritik*), as a tool for philosophical analysis. However, posterity has largely forgotten Mauthner, and the recently-published studies that look at the philosophical underpinnings of Borges's work have studied the influences of Schopenhauer (Roberto Paoli and Juan Nuño, for example), Wittgenstein (Sierra Mejías) or the Platonic component. Dapía, though she addresses and digests all these studies, chooses to map instead the uncharted territory of Mauthner's influence, and a fascinating area it is indeed. To begin, Dapía carefully documents Borges's explicit admiration for and fascination with Mauthner. In 1940, for example, Borges remarked that Mauthner's *Wörterbuch der Philosophie* was one of the five books most covered with notes that he owned. A year later, in a review of Gerald Heard's *Pain, Sex and Time*, Borges refers again to Mauthner's dictionary, calling it "admirable". In 1944, in the prologue to *Artificios*, Borges mentions Mauthner as one of the seven authors that he says he continually rereads. Borges also explicitly states elsewhere that he used the *Wörterbuch* in the preparation of essays such as "La doctrina de los ciclos" (1936) and "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins" (1952).

In order to bring the reader to an understanding of German literature on her Argentine subject, Dapía starts with a reconstruction of Borges's "lecturas alemanas." It should be made very clear that the purpose of this is not at all to flatter or appeal to the German reader of her book, or to demonstrate the well-proven fact that Borges was a well-read intellectual, familiar with German letters. Much more significantly, Dapía uses this chapter to describe the fertile ground into which the seeds of Mauthner's ideas were planted. First she looks at Borges's relationship with lyric poetry (principally Heine), and next at narrative (especially Meyrink and Kafka), before arriving at philosophy in German, with a special focus on the influence of Schopenhauer.

In Chapter Three, so that the reader of her study will have a clear idea of the thesis and fundamental ideas of Mauthner's critique of language, Dapía explores eight important studies on the philosopher (by Gustav Landauer, Walter Eisen, Elisabeth Leinfellner, Gershon Weiler, Allan Janik, Joachim Kühn, Walter Eschenbacher, and Lars

Gustafsson). This interpretive mosaic enables us to fully enjoy and appreciate Dapía's tracing of Mauthner's influence in Borges's short fiction, and is also recommended reading for anyone interested in Dapía's other published studies on Mauthner and Borges.

Once all this is established, the real fun of Dapía's book begins, namely that of demonstrating the influence through a close and careful analysis of eight Borgesian short stories. The first story analyzed is "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*" (1939), a piece that Hans Robert Jauss (*The Theory of Reception*) insisted anticipated the shift from classical aesthetic production to modern aesthetic reception. Pierre Menard, the title character of the tale, conceives the goal of writing Cervantes's *Quijote*, word for word, by converting himself into the one-armed survivor of Lepanto. He proposes to learn Spanish, convert to Catholicism, fight the Moors or Turks, and forget all European history that transpired since the *Quijote* was published. Ultimately, however, he rejects the process, stating: "Ser, de alguna manera, Cervantes y llegar al *Quijote* le pareció menos arduo -por consiguiente, menos interesante- que seguir siendo Pierre Menard y llegar al *Quijote* a través de las experiencias de Pierre Menard."

Dapía asserts that through Menard's project, Borges manages to contrast two types of interpretation of literary texts, attempting to pursue the author's intention, or concerning oneself with the reader. Says Dapía, according to the first method, Menard intended to arrive at the *Quijote* by identifying with Cervantes; according to the second, Menard would continue being Pierre Menard and arrive at the *Quijote* through his own experiences. Dapía deftly demonstrates then that the story lays out for us different temporal interpretations of phrases and intentions. One example she gives regards Cervantes's use of the phrase, "la verdad, cuya madre es la historia." The narrator of the story attempts to account for what both Cervantes and Menard mean when they use the phrase. According to the narrator, it is an empty rhetorical phrase for Cervantes, while for Menard, writing in the twentieth century and being a contemporary of William James, the meaning is totally different. Another example comes from the famous proclamation of Chapter 38 of the *Quijote* when the Knight of Mournful Countenance declares himself against letters and in favor of arms. The narrator gives several possible explanations, namely that Menard might have subordinated himself to the psychology of his "idol," that he was merely intending to transcribe the *Quijote*, that he was under the influence of Nietzsche, or even that he had the "resigned or ironic habit of propounding ideas that were the strict reverse of those he preferred." By showing that Borges was well aware, in 1939, when he wrote "Pierre Menard," that there was no single, fixed meaning to be discovered in a text, but rather that our reading covers a text with a multitude of discourses that vary according to time, place and individual reader, Dapía greatly enhances Borges's figure as a literary and philosophical pioneer. Surely this is a facet of Borges that many critics have intuited to some degree, but none has explained so well as Dapía. And certainly no one else has traced the path that Borges followed to arrive at these insights, a path well-marked by Mauthner, as Dapía has done.

Dapía's *tour de force* continues with the analysis of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1947), in which she takes as a point of departure the hallowed interpretations constructed by Jaime Alazraki and Arturo Echavarría, but going more deeply into the role that language plays in the narration. Eventually, Dapía arrives at the conclusion that the story can be interpreted as a fruitful illustration of Borges's incorporation of Mauthner's *Sprachkritik*,

which supposes a divergence between language and reality, and the deforming projection of the former on the latter. Particularly fascinating is the discussion of the encyclopedia. Dapía shows us that Mauthner's *Wörterbuch* had already demonstrated to Borges that there can be no objective system of knowledge, but that rather our systems exist in an instantaneous state, replacing one another with each succeeding scientific discovery and generation. Without this insight, it is hard to imagine Borges ever arriving at the notion of "Uqbar." In the light of Mauthner's *Sprachkritik*, we can understand much better the recurring theme of the encyclopedias in the story, and also the conception of noun, adjective, and adverb.

In her discussion of "Emma Zunz", Dapía turns to another fascinating Mauthnerian concept: the notion of *Wortaberglaube*, or "Word Superstition." Mauthner affirms that humans have an ineluctable inability to distinguish between the various ways in which a word can refer to an exterior reality that the word itself generates, so that by means of words, primitive humans asked themselves, "what does this earthquake mean, or this deformed child, or this comet?" Moderns are more inclined to get hung up on questions of the meaning of words like "soul" or "matter." Says Mauthner, "Most humans suffer from this mental weakness of believing that because a word exists, this word must refer to something; they think that because a word exists, a real object must correspond to it." (*Beiträge I*) Without discounting the possibility of a psychoanalytic reading of "Emma Zunz," or other well-known interpretations, Dapía skillfully helps us read Emma as embodying the dangers of "Word Superstition." Emma manages to construct a story that has no reference outside of language itself, but that, at the same time, takes charge of itself and is not an object of question by others.

"Tema del traidor y del héroe" (1944, a story about which Dapía has also written eloquently in *Romance Languages Annual* in 1992), is also analyzed in a chapter informed by Mauthner's notion of *Wortaberglaube*, or "Word Superstition," and his warnings about the terrible power that language has to create "ghosts" that may not correspond to the exterior world. Borges himself admitted that he wrote the story under the dual influence of G. K. Chesterton ("presenta el misterio, propone una aclaración sobrenatural y la reemplaza luego, sin pérdida, con otra de este mundo") and Leibniz ("que inventó la armonía preestablecida"). Dapía shows that in effect, the narrator of "Traidor" presents us with a "mystery": the enigmatic death of the conspirator Fergus Kilpatrick, then proposes a "supernatural explanation," and finally substitutes this explanation for an "earthly" one, namely that the "secreto y glorioso capitán de conspiradores" is really the traitor of the insurrection. The narrator creates the "hero-ghost" of Kilpatrick for his own ends -for the emancipation of the Fatherland. Thus, in this story, reality becomes a fable of languages through the fiction created by Nolan. Dapía concludes by relating Mauthner's thesis on *Wortaberglaube*, to that of one of his precursors, Francis Bacon.

In studying the 1977 story, "Tigres azules," Dapía shows that it appears to exemplify another Mauthnerian thesis, one that shows that mathematics are a human invention, rather than an unchangeable natural discovery. The failure of logic in attempting to decipher natural relationships leads us to Mauthner as well, as Dapía points out.

"El otro" (1975), examines an "ultraísta" search for surprising and new metaphors, not unlike that carried out by Borges himself. Borges's thesis about the metaphorical nature

of language (especially in articles he published in the 20s) is surprisingly similar to the theories of Mauthner, as Dapía shows us.

In analyzing "El inmortal" (1950), Dapía rejects previous interpretations, and reads the story as essentially a study of the inexorability of the social power of languages on an individual's thought processes. This thesis is to be found in Mauthner, explains as no other previous one has, the relationship between the text and its epigraph, and the interpolated quotes from Pliny, Thomas de Quincey, Descartes, and George Bernard Shaw, as well as the allusions to the theory of reincarnation.

The last of the stories considered, "El congreso," again is explained by one of the central ideas of Mauthner's *Sprachkritik*, namely the arbitrariness of all systems of classification. One is sad to come to the end of these fascinating analyses. The good news is that Dapía continues to write and publish about the relationship between Mauthner and Borges elsewhere, and has studied additional stories and essays in other articles in print or in press. (See especially: *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 42, 1995, 189-206).

In the fifth and last chapter, Dapía sums up the insights into Borges that have been gained by analyzing these eight stories in the light of Mauthner. The five major themes are: the impossibility of the search for the "catalogue of catalogues" (and, by extension, a condemnation of systems); a head-on confrontation with *Wortaberglaube*; the notion that language consists of the "words of others"; and the theme of silence. At the same time, Dapía convincingly shows us how Mauthnerian *Sprachkritik*, in the form of these five themes, can be found throughout Borges's work from the 20s up until his last works. The Epilogue compares Borges's productive reception of *Sprachkritik* to the most recent developments in U.S. criticism and philosophy embodied in Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty.

Dapía leaves no room for doubt that without Mauthner, Borges would not have been the same author we revere and reread today. And without Dapía, we would not know this. The book is a fine and valuable contribution to our knowledge of Borges, a thread that when followed leads us right to the heart of several of his most important labyrinths.

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