

OF SIGNS AND SPIRIT



David E. Johnson



*Semiotica* vol. 140, 1/4 (2002), Special Issue: Jorge Luis Borges: *The Praise of Signs*<sup>1</sup>

---

**S**emiotica's 2002 special issue devoted to Jorge Luis Borges and subtitled "The Praise of Signs," which is guest edited by Lisa Block de Behar, one of our most important and provocative readers of Borges, is at once a necessary intervention in Borges scholarship and a complicated but persistent attempt to limit the effects of Borges' *obra* to a certain Peircean program. No doubt this is to be expected inasmuch as *Semiotica's* project is largely analytical and eponymously semiotic. Thus the dedication to Peirce. Yet, despite the commitment of the contributors to read Borges next to and within Peirce's vocabulary, Block de Behar notes from the beginning that "it is not appropriate to consider Borges a semiotician" (1), anymore than it is to consider him a philosopher, epistemologist, logician, poetologist, or historian. Block de Behar notes that "Borges was probably aware of the fact that the reflective quality of his writing and the aesthetic alternatives of this thought are akin to notions elaborated in the fields of philosophy, epistemology, logic, poetics, history and, as well, by semiotics—academic institutions of which

---

<sup>1</sup> I thank Martin Hägglund and Margarita Vargas for their insightful comments on this text.

he knew how to do without" (1). Nevertheless, the insistence that Borges was not a semiotician only goes so far in that "many of those who devote themselves to the doctrine of signs talk about Borges and establish comparisons between his findings and the enlightened intuitions of Charles Sanders Peirce" (2). Despite her claim that Borges was no semiotician, in her preface Block de Behar also makes clear that the "deep coincidences" between Borges and Peirce "cannot be ascribed to chance, logic, or the conventional fixations of chronology" (2). Rather, according to Block de Behar, what accounts for the relation between them is a "*Zeitgeist* or signs of the times that leads to simultaneity" (2). *Zeitgeist* is more aptly translated as "spirit of the age," but the rendering of it as "signs of the times" is compelling—given the question of semiotics and the context of *Semiotica*—but also problematic, for "signs" are necessarily and irreducibly temporal. As temporal, signs never come together; in every case, they differ and defer the possibility of coming at the same time, a possibility rigorously impossible in that such coming together would amount to the obliteration of time in the immediacy of an absolute self-presence. Indeed, were signs circumscribable within the horizon of simultaneity, all signs thus taking place at the same time, signs would be immediate to one another, hence, absolute. The simultaneity of signs would be another name for God, for infinity, for eternity. All recourse to *Zeitgeist*, in fact, points in this direction, for the notion of *Geist* in this formulation effectively limits the effects of *Zeit* or time, which, in its most rigorous conception is ungovernable in the extreme. Hence, the equivocal translation of *Zeitgeist*, to which in any case only Block de Behar refers as explanatory of the "relation" between Borges and Peirce, fittingly characterizes the volume's larger project to situate Borges next to, if not explicitly within, Peirce's semiotic enterprise. For example, Iván Almeida explains that in his consideration of "Peirce's explicit and Borges's implicit theory of conjecture," he is not concerned with "weaving artificial links between the two authors," but rather only with the desire "to share a surprising discovery of some family likenesses" (13). The idea of "family likenesses" undoubtedly derives from Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblance" in the *Philosophical Investigations* and the earlier, preparatory *Blue Book*. The introduction of the idea of the

family, however, without any attempt to situate the concept, has the effect of naturalizing the likenesses or resemblances ascribed to the various parties. Not only, in other words, do they resemble one another, but they do so within the horizon of a regulatory principle: the family. According to the logic of the family, Borges and Peirce share the same patronym, the same lineage. The same *Geist* (spirit) figures their relation. Within the horizon of the *Zeitgeist* and the family everything appears in the name of the father, under his auspices.

In his contribution, "Borges's Realities and Peirce's Semiosis: Our World as FactFableFiction," Floyd Merrell disagrees with the suggestion that a *Geist* or familial patriarch governs the referentiality—the likenesses, say—of signs at the same time that he makes this suggestion unassailable. In his attempt to bring Borges and Peirce into proximity he explains that "According to Peirce, the meaning of signs . . . is found in their interrelations with and dependency upon other signs" (118). He continues: "The succession of signs along the *semiosis* stream becomes a network of glosses, or commentaries, of signs on the signs preceding them. Or perhaps better put, signs are *translations* of their immediately antecedent signs. The process of signs *translated into* others signs is endless. For, everything is incessantly becoming something *other than* what it is" (118). This is a remarkably precise understanding of the temporality of signs; indeed, but for two problems Merrell's rendering of Peirce would appear to be one place in which Peirce—and perhaps analytical philosophy more generally—approaches one of the central tenets of deconstruction.

*First*, there is no attempt in Merrell's essay to analyze that which makes possible—indeed, necessary—the sign's incessant becoming other to what it is; that is, the irreducibility of temporality. In short, Merrell fails to account for that which is *not* a sign, but which nonetheless necessitates the sign's becoming other to itself. In Derrida this is the trace or, by any other name, difference. The trace, that is, temporalization, is forgotten in Merrell's account, however, insofar as he understands the translation of or movement from sign to sign to depend on the production of meaning: "An *interpretant* gives purpose, direction, meaning, to a sign. But this *interpretant*, upon be-

coming an *interpretant* charged with meaning, becomes in the process another sign (*representamen*)—the sign of meaning” (118). In Merrell’s elaboration of the perpetuity of the movement from sign to sign, meaning effectively accounts for the translation or transition, as if meaning were not in fact an effect of translation. Yet Merrell fails to explain how a sign becomes “charged with meaning.” (This will have been left to Iván Almeida who takes a page out of Hume’s *A Treatise on Human Nature* and writes, “Our knowledge is, in fact, made up of habits, and these habits . . . determine what is expected” (15). Almeida, however, does not consider the synthesizing operation of belief in Hume and its subjectification of time in anticipation.<sup>2</sup>) In short, whatever is meaningful is always already only a sign, the sign of a sign, in other words, *ad infinitum*. The sign does not, could not, become other to itself only at the moment of becoming meaningful, at the moment of such consolidation. On the contrary, were such consolidation possible there would in fact be no necessary translation. In Derrida, the trace is not meaningful; it is neither word, nor concept, nor sign; it is, rather, the temporal synthesis that makes possible the possibility of any word, concept, or sign, and that which makes every word, concept, and sign necessarily unstable, perishable, finite. That is, translatable. Always already.

It is important that this particular limitation of Merrell’s reading be clear. Translation happens, according to Merrell, only once the sign becomes meaningful: “A given translation of a sign calls up another sign *upon its being endowed with meaning*” (118, emphasis added). Merrell therefore suggests that the incessant “becoming something other than what it is” of the sign only occurs to the sign insofar as it is endowed with meaning, which means that prior to such endowment the sign is not temporal, or, put another way, without meaning the sign rests in itself. In Merrell’s analysis the sign is not ecstatic to any itself of the sign. Prior to its being endowed with meaning, then, the sign is what it is and nothing else. Consequently, *in itself* the sign is eternal and timeless, but also, of course, not a sign at all because signs always and only indicate,

---

<sup>2</sup> For Hume, see *A Treatise* (94-106); see also Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity* (92-3).

point out and away from themselves toward other signs—even if the other sign is the “same” sign. In other words, the effect of the temporality must be thought to infect and disturb even the most apparently immediate self-referentiality. Nevertheless, according to Merrell, prior to the sign’s being endowed with meaning, there is no need for translation, no movement, no incessant “becoming something other than what it is”; therefore, there is no need and no possibility of or for signification. Yet, signs are nothing but *translations*, which means that the originary sign, of which there could be no example, no instance, would necessarily have to be (at least) two. There could never be a unique sign. No sign could be in itself and still be a sign. As translation, the “itself” of the sign is deferred and displaced. Any given sign is only the translation of other signs, which means that signs are necessarily provisional. The identity of a sign—that this or that appear as a sign—is always only the effect of reduction. The “itself” of the sign is, in fact, always only the sign of the sign. Merrell’s argument, however, makes clear that he thinks the sign and meaning are two independent entities, whereas meaning is only possible as an effect of the logic of the sign, but the sign is never static or in itself, but rather irreducibly ecstatic.

Merrell’s failure to think through the possibility of meaning as an effect of the structural opening of the sign may be attributed to Peirce’s own inability to think temporality outside the horizon of the present. Peirce’s ultimate determination of temporality as the present contradicts his understanding of time as what makes inevitable the incessant becoming other of all that is. This requires explanation.

In “The Law of Mind” Peirce noted that it was “Necessary to hold that consciousness essentially occupies time; and what is present to the mind of any ordinary instant, is what is present during a moment in which that instant occurs” (*Essential Peirce* 1.322). On the basis of this assertion Peirce concludes that “The present is half past and half to come” (1.322); according to this logic, the present is divided within and against itself. In short, Peirce appears to agree with Hegel who explained in the *Philosophy of Nature* that inasmuch as time is thought on the basis of the present, “It is that being which, inasmuch as it *is*, is *not*, and inasmuch as it is *not*, *is*” (§258, 34). The present is always already past and yet to come, which means, sim-

ply, that the present is not *in itself*. Up to this point Peirce thinks time radically (and correctly) as incessant change. The question becomes, if time is change and thus the present is not, how is temporality synthesized such that thought becomes possible? Peirce answers this question in the same way as metaphysics has historically, by positing a now point that, despite serving as the synthesis of temporality, is not temporal. The now or *nunc-stans* becomes visible in Peirce's determination that his understanding of time as ceaseless becoming other to any possible itself affords a solution to Zeno's paradox of the arrow insofar as "the velocity of a particle at any instant of time is its mean velocity during an infinitesimal instant in which that time is contained" (1.322). Incessant change is here reduced to "an infinitesimal instant" that affords the ruse of calculating time from a point of stasis outside time. The upshot, then, is that in order to think time as infinite change Peirce has recourse to that which does not change, the instant.

More than once Borges recurs to Zeno's paradox of the arrow in order to refute time. Borges understands, certainly better than Peirce, the impossibility of thinking temporality as incessant change or infinite corruption on the basis of the present or the now, for the present, the now, is necessarily atemporal. Peirce's attempt to configure the present as always already no longer and not yet repeats a move at least as old as Hegel; nevertheless, the evaluation of the velocity of a particle "at any instant of time" as "the mean velocity during an infinitesimal instant in which that time is contained" (1.322) repeats the metaphysical solution to the problem of *thinking* time, a solution that is also as old as Hegel, and older.<sup>3</sup> For the instant—no matter how infinitesimal—in order to be an instant at all must be conceived as identical to itself or as self-same. Peirce's distinction between the moment and the instant—in which "moment" means "infinitesimal duration" and "instant" means a "point of time" (1.315)—comes close to Heidegger's later distinction in *Being and Time* between the present (*nunc-stans*) and the *Augenblick*, which has been translated as "moment of vision" (Macquarrie and Robin-

---

<sup>3</sup> On the problem of thinking time on the basis of the present, see Jacques Derrida, "Ousia and Grammē."

son 376) and as “Moment” (Stambaugh 302), but which cannot not refer to the stasis of temporality.<sup>4</sup> This is in spite of Heidegger’s remarkable definition of time “as the *ekstatikon par excellence*. *Temporality is the primordial ‘outside of itself,’*” although even here Heidegger goes too far and, consequently, stills time by bringing it back to an “*in and for itself*” that temporality could never sustain (*Being and Time* H 329, here Stambaugh 302). In the instant, in other words, time is not ecstatic but, rather, in itself; therefore, time is not. According to Peirce, moreover, the atemporal condition of possibility for *thinking* time is necessary: “consciousness must ostensibly cover an interval of time; for if it did not, we could gain no knowledge of time, and not merely no veracious cognition of it, but no conception what ever. We are, therefore, forced to say that we are immediately conscious through an aforementioned interval of time” (*Essential Peirce* 1.315). How is such immediate consciousness possible if one thinks temporality as ecstatic? The answer, of course, is that such immediate consciousness is not possible, for time, which is neither more nor less than the incessant becoming other to any possible itself, forecloses the possibility of the in itself of immediacy. For Peirce, therefore, time must be denied, that is, it must be grounded upon an infinitesimal interval, a self-identical point of time, a *nunc-stans*.

Further, this instant, which for Peirce makes it possible to comprehend time as incessant change and, therefore, as what does not endure in itself, also makes no difference. Peirce writes: “If  $A$  is a finite quantity and  $i$  an infinitesimal, then in a certain sense we may write  $A + i = A$ ” (1.322). If, as Peirce notes, time is “the universal form of change” (1.323), here the addition of an infinitesimal, that is, time in its minimality, nevertheless makes no difference in Peirce’s calculation of identity. Nothing happens in the instant; in the addition of the instant time stands still, rests or comes to a halt in such a way that  $A = A$ . How are we to take seriously a thought of temporality that effectively allows for time to make no difference?

*Second*, Merrell’s contention that “for Peirce there is no ultimate meaning” (*Semiotica* 118) is untenable on the basis of the preceding

---

<sup>4</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H 328.

argument: insofar as the instant is self-contained, non-ecstatic or in itself, it is necessarily absolute, hence, it is not temporal. Therefore, every instant is the last instant. As atemporal or absolute, the instant, which would also be the condition of possibility of meaning, would be without relation to any other instant. But this argument against Merrell, although correct, is unnecessary, because Merrell confesses, parenthetically, that "Peirce does in fact write of a 'final' or 'ultimate *interpretant*'" (118), with the proviso, Merrell explains, that this last meaning "is inaccessible *for us as finite, fallible semiotic agents*" (118). Merrell discounts this parenthetical assertion and writes as if for Peirce the consciousness of finitude—incessant change, irreducible divisibility—were not always already limited by the thought of an ultimate meaning. But it is clear that for Peirce our finitude is only tolerable insofar as the infinite or ultimate meaning remains a human *instinct*.

In "What is a Sign?" Peirce remarked that "no combination of words . . . can ever convey the slightest information" (*Essential Peirce* 2.7). This is the case because words lack the necessary relation to experience that would secure meaning: "To identify an object we generally state its place at a stated time; and in every case must show how an experience of it can be connected with the previous experience of the hearer. To state a time, we must reckon from a known epoch,—either the present moment, or the assumed birth of Christ, or something of that sort. When we say the epoch must be known, we mean it must be connected with the hearer's experience. We also have to reckon in units of time; and there is no way of making known what unit we propose to use except by appealing to the hearer's experience" (2.7-8). What Peirce is after here is the definition of an index: "Anything that startles us is an indication, in so far as it marks the junction between two portions of experience" (2.8). An indexical sign is a sign that points toward some other experience; it is a sign that points toward something else: "Thus a tremendous thunderbolt indicates that *something* considerable happened, though we may not know precisely what the event was. But it may be expected to connect itself with some other experience" (2.8). Peirce's point is that words mean nothing in themselves; on the contrary, they indicate always something other than what they are.



Words point away from themselves. Merrell reads this deferral of meaning as infinite, but Peirce makes clear that it is not. At the very moment he claims that no combination of words conveys even the slightest information he parenthetically notes, "excluding proper names" (2.7). In "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God," which was composed only five years before his death, Peirce began, "The word 'God,' so capitalized (as we Americans say), is *the* definable proper name, signifying *Ens necessarium*" (2.434). Proper nouns, then, are excluded from the condition of other words, namely, that words fail *in themselves* to convey information. Proper nouns apparently mean whatever they mean without recourse to other words. The proper noun *par excellence* is God, which Peirce calls "*the* definable proper name." The name of God is not simply the last name in a series of names, nor is it the first in that series; on the contrary, the name of God, according to Peirce, is not marked by seriality in any way. More broadly, it is not differential, neither from other names nor from itself. As the name *par excellence*, the name that means what it says, it is without relation to any other name or to itself as other. Insofar as it is not temporal (there is no difference between what it says and what it means, it never points away from itself toward any other thing or word, hence, past, present, and future are all one in the name of God), the name of God is not a sign; therefore, the name of God is not translatable. It is neither the effect of nor affected by translation.

The question becomes, if the name of God is untranslatable, and if translation is the constitutive possibility of signification and, more generally, of language, what is the relation between God and the human being? If language, from the possibility of its first word, is always already marked by translation, then there are two possibilities for God. One, that He is not, that He is nothing more and nothing less than fantasmatic; two, that God is, but is without any relation whatsoever to the human. Language is either infinitely finite or it is a gift from God that can never be returned to God. In other words, if experience is, as Derrida claims, translation,<sup>5</sup> and if "God" is untranslatable and thus atemporal, what is the possibility of any

---

<sup>5</sup> In "Des Tours de Babel," Derrida writes: "L'expérience est traduction" (246).

human relation to God? Of course, there is none. This Merrell fails to note inasmuch as he prefers simply to ignore what, in Peirce, makes possible and appears to regulate the temporality of thought in the first place, what here might be called the instant and the insistence of God.

As Peirce explains in the “Neglected Argument,” the argument for God is neither deductive nor inductive but retroductive,<sup>6</sup> that is, the process of arguing from consequent to antecedent, which is itself the effect of a *habit* of the mind. The idea of God, Peirce argues, is an instinct: we recur to God habitually, naturally; God occurs to us outside or before logic, that is, *logos*. The argument for God can only be made retroductively, therefore, not because God is before reason or irrational, but because God is the instinctual thought that opens toward the retroduction that grounds reason, whether deductive or inductive: “Finally, comes the bottom question of logical Critic, what sort of validity can be attributed to the First Stage of inquiry? Observe that neither Deduction nor Induction contributes the smallest positive term to the final conclusion of the inquiry. They render the indefinite definite: Deduction Explicates; Induction evaluates: that is all. Over the chasm that yawns between the ultimate goal of science and such ideas of Man’s environment as, coming over him during his primeval wanderings in the forest, while yet his notion of error was at the vaguest, he managed to communicate to some fellow, we are building a cantilever bridge of induction, held together by scientific struts and ties. Yet every plank of its advance is first laid by Retroduction alone, that is to say, by the spontaneous conjectures of instinctive reason; and neither Deduction nor Induction contributes a single new concept to the structure” (2.443). In sum, God comes to mind, instinctually, habitually. God is perhaps the constitutive habit of mind, the first habit of thought that makes all logic—*logos*—possible. As such, it seems shortsighted of Merrell simply to

---

<sup>6</sup> “Retroduction” is another name for what Peirce earlier called “abduction.” See Iván Almeida’s contribution to *Semiotica* (13-31) for a discussion of abduction. He writes, “Abduction is the inferential activity that, once an aberrant phenomenon is found, tries to discover or construct a norm according to which this aberration can be interpreted as a normal case” (14).

dismiss the importance of the “ultimate *interpretant*” as “inaccessible for us as finite, fallible semiotic agents” (*Semiotica* 118). Quite to the contrary, for Peirce, it seems the idea of the “ultimate *interpretant*” is the condition of possibility of the idea of our finitude. If translation is another name for experience, that is, another name for finitude, then in Peirce the untranslatable (God) regulates the possibility of translation; the infinite governs the finite; our experience is conditioned by the inexperiencible.

The problem in Peirce—and in Merrell’s reading of Peirce—lies in the impossible conclusion that God is a universal without relation to any particular. The idea of an “ultimate *interpretant*” amounts to the idea of a last word—a final meaning—that is also the first word. For Peirce this can only be God, the possibility of *Ens necessarium*, that, as Merrell sees it, necessarily is beyond the reach of finite, fallible semiotic agents like us. God therefore would be the absolute universal, absolutely and uniquely unconditioned by time, and thus by circumstance. But as such, the human could have no idea of God. Yet, according to Peirce, we do. Instinctively. If the human were the infinite concatenation of circumstances, of affectivity, were he, then, absolutely particular; and were God absolute universality; there could be no possible thought of the human for God and no thought of God for the human. This would be the condition of possibility of Merrell’s claim that the “ultimate *interpretant*” is beyond the grasp of finite beings. The human could not think of God for, as particularity, it could not abstract the universal; God could not think of the human for, as universal, He could not particularize Himself. We know the Christian/Hegelian solution to this problem, but this position ultimately abdicates human finitude in favor of divine “salvation”—“absolution” in and as death. Indeed, Peirce’s contention that the human instinctively posits God as the ground of its own logic suggests that for Peirce the human—from the moment of primeval wanderings in the forest—desires death, seeks to overcome finitude through death in the name of God. This is the dream of becoming one (with God), of attaining the absolute singularity of the universal, the untranslatability of the absolutely singular—hence absolutely universal—original.

In this context it is worthwhile to take up—as Merrell does—Borges’ “La Escritura del Dios” in terms of the relation of particular to universal and the impossibility of any absolute, that is, atemporal, synthesis of temporality. In “La Escritura del Dios,” neither the human nor God—if the human, as Borges says, “es, a la larga, sus circunstancias” (OC 1: 598) and if God is “el universo”—finally can have any contact with or any thought of the other. This is clear in the story’s conclusion: “Pero yo sé que nunca diré esas palabras, porque ya no me acuerdo de Tzinacán” (598). Inasmuch as he has “glimpsed [*entrevisto*] the burning designs of the universe” (*Collected Fictions* 253), Tzinacán “can have no thought for a man, for a man’s trivial joys or calamities, though he himself be that man” (253-4). That is, at the moment Tzinacán interviews (*entrevistar*) the universe, the universal and absolute, he forgets—can no longer think of—that which makes him human, his joys, calamities, those trivialities constitutive of the human *qua* circumstance or affectivity. The human is only circumstance, affectivity, particularity; but as divine, there is only universality. Yet, as absolutes—for absolute singularity is no less absolute than absolute universality—these two positions are the same. “Funes el Memorioso” works the same territory, demonstrating that an absolutely particular (or private) language and an absolutely universal (divine) language would be the same although neither would in fact be language. This becomes clear in Borges’ elaboration of divine language, which is “but a single word, and in that word there must be *absolute plenitude*” (252). “The ambitions and poverty of human words—*all, world, universe*—are but shadows or simulacra of that Word which is the equivalent of a language and all that can be comprehended within a language” (252). More than once in his *obra* Borges remarks that any repetition amounts to a disturbance, a doubling, and, thus, cessation of the incessant seriality of time. One example, perhaps the best known, from “Nueva Refutación del Tiempo”: “¿no basta *un solo término repetido* para desbaratar y confundir la serie del tiempo?” (OC 2: 141). But it is also the case that Borges concludes his rigorous discussion of time and the limitations of any nontemporal synthesis of time (the necessary upshot of which would be the refutation of time) by claiming, “El tiempo es la sustancia de que estoy hecho. El tiempo es un río que me arrebatá,

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: 148-9). These lines leave no doubt that Borges understands that time cannot be thought on the basis of a positive infinity or eternity: time corrupts, destroys, changes; but we are temporal. Any attempt to posit a nontemporal ground of the human (that is, of time) necessarily does away with the possibility of the human. The desire for eternity is the desire for death; the dream of overcoming our being-toward-death or the finitude constitutive of the human is only the desire for the death that would be the end of the human.

While it may very well be that our finitude is nothing to celebrate—thus, Borges' "El mundo, desgraciadamente, es real; yo, desgraciadamente, soy Borges" (OC 2: 149)—it is clear that for Borges there is no other possibility for being human, or for being at all, least of all the possibility of an eternal oneness with or of God. If anything, Borges incessantly reinscribes God within temporality. He does so in a twofold way: on the one hand, through the necessary possibility of repetition, specifically, the iterability necessary to the possible decipherment of the Word of God; and, on the other hand, through the possibility of forgetting Tzinacán. The condition of possibility of becoming "*todopoderoso*"—the effect of saying the Word of God—is, in fact, *forgetting* the human, even the human being that one happens to be. That God should—must—forget in order to be God is troubling, not to say, for God as such, impossible. Thus, God would be all powerful, omniscient, omnipresent, yet necessarily forgetful. But inasmuch as God cannot remember the human, God is not God, not eternal, but rather temporally determined, because forgetting is an effect of time. Augustine's *Confessions* makes this clear.<sup>7</sup>

Merrell, however, reads the conclusion of "La Escritura del Dios" in terms of the absolutivity that Borges problematizes: "Each word, when used, becomes so overbearingly bloated with generality that instead of saying something in particular it said something in general. It said it all. Which is to say that as far as we helpless finite souls are concerned, it said virtually nothing at all. It was at the same time all-intelligible and un-intelligible" (*Semiotica* 136). This is

---

<sup>7</sup> See Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk X.

no less the case for human discourse. Borges writes that Tzinacán “came to be tormented less by the concrete enigma which occupied [his] mind than by the generic enigma of a message written by a god” (*Collected Fictions* 252). “What sort of sentence, I asked myself, would be constructed by an absolute mind? I reflected that even in the language of humans there is no proposition that does not imply the entire universe” (252). Granted, according to Tzinacán’s musings, the difference between human and divine language depends on the temporality of human language, which is figured as a certain latency of the absolute; namely, that the universe it necessarily evokes in every utterance is only *implicit*, whereas divine language in every word *explicitly* and instantaneously speaks “that infinite concatenation of events” (252). Nevertheless, both human and divine languages are marked by a universality that appears to override the possibility of saying anything in particular.

The problem of the relation of the particular to the universal in language is, as is well known, the point of departure of Hegel’s philosophy. In the first part of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, the *Logic*, Hegel explained: “Now language is the work of thought: and hence all that is expressed in language must be universal. What I only mean or suppose is mine: it belongs to me—this particular individual. But language expresses nothing but universality; and so I cannot say what I merely *mean*. And the unutterable—feeling or sensation—far from being the highest truth, is the most unimportant and untrue. If I say ‘the individual’, ‘this individual’, ‘here’, ‘now’, all these are universal terms. Everything and anything is an individual, a ‘this’, and if it be sensible, is here and now. Similarly when I say ‘I’, I *mean* my single self to the exclusion of all others; but what I *say*, viz. ‘I’, is just every ‘I’, which in like manner excludes all others from itself. ... All other men have it in common with me to be ‘I’; just as it is common to all my sensations and conceptions to be mine. But ‘I’, in the abstract, as such, is the mere act of self-concentration or self-relation, in which we make abstraction from all conception and feeling, from every state of mind and every peculiarity of nature, talent, and experience. To this extent, ‘I’ is the existence of a wholly abstract universality, a principle of abstract freedom. Hence thought, viewed as a subject, is what is expressed

by the word 'I'; and since I am at the same time in all my sensations, conceptions, and states of consciousness, thought is everywhere present, and is a category that runs through all these modifications" (*Logic* 31). Comparable passages can be found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as well as in the *Science of Logic*, and the second two parts of the *Encyclopedia*, the *Philosophy of Nature* and the *Philosophy of Mind*. In the *Phenomenology* Hegel solves this problem only in the absolute presence of the Absolute, in the moment in which the temporality of language is always already contained in the timelessness of the infinite. But this is not only the conclusion of the *Phenomenology*; in many ways it marks the point of departure of the *Encyclopedia* inasmuch as the *Philosophy of Nature* begins with the question of space and time, where time must be thought on the basis of the timelessness of the present.

In Merrell's analysis, Borges comes close to this Hegelian solution: the insightful understanding of how language works circumscribed by the dream of an absolute presence, but Borges in fact thinks otherwise, always situating the absolute within temporality. In the prologue to *La cifra* Borges wrote, "No hay una sola hermosa palabra, con la excepción dudosa de *testigo*, que no sea una abstracción" (*OC* 3: 290). In *Borges: La pasión de una cita sin fin*, Lisa Block de Behar situates this sentence in the context of a remarkable reading of Borges' response to the Holocaust, but she understands Borges' claim as an enduring "lament" (160), specifically, that Borges laments that there is only one word—and perhaps not even that doubtful exception—that is not always already an abstraction. Block de Behar goes on to locate *testigo* in relation to *mártir*, from the Greek *martur* meaning witness (*testigo*), and asks about the relation between the witness and the victim, effectively asking whether all *testimony* is not always already a *testamento*, a last will and testament; whether the *testigo* cannot not always only make a final testament. It is not clear, however, that this is a lamentation and not least for the auspicious determination of *testigo* as the one word—nonetheless doubtfully so—that is not an abstraction. *Testigo* names human finitude. The human witnesses; indeed, the human cannot not witness, testify; yet, the articulation of this condition of possibility of being human necessarily exports the human from any possible immediate being-in-itself,

from any possibility of an absolute singularity of one's own experience, as if experience were not, from the start, *ex-periri*, hence, ecstatic, always already outside any possible *in itself* and thus temporal.<sup>8</sup> Because we are constitutively temporal, we bear witness, testify, to the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular in the *ex-citation* of "our" place of testimony and testifying. This *ex-citedness* is the testament of the human.

Precisely such Borgesian reinscription of the absolute within the ecstatic movement of temporality eludes Merrell, who insists on the absolute as a possibility: "for the whole, the absolute whole . . . lies eternally beyond its capacity regarding surveyability, specifiability, and articulability" (*Semiotica* 137). It is, then, the tension between a necessary translatability as constitutive of the possibility of saying anything at all, on the one hand; and, on the other, the eternal beyondness of the absolute whole that spells the limit of Merrell's reading. In Borges there is only *ex-citation*, the being-outside (*ex-*) of citation, the citation that is, therefore, ecstatic, temporal. Translation is necessarily excited; moreover, according to Borges, "Ningún problema tan consustancial con las letras y con su modesto misterio como el que propone una traducción" (*OC* 1: 239). This means that translation happens not simply at the same time, but in the same place, consubstantially, with letters. Translation is inscribed in the very graphic—material—possibility of letters. There are no letters without, before, translation, that is, without or before the problem (the border, the limit) of translation.

In "Text Metempsychosis and the Racing Tortoise: Borges and Translation," Susan Petrilli avers that "Borges insistently returns to the question of translation, which he considers of great importance on the level of experience. Direct writing does not enable us to perceive that mystery of the text which, on the contrary, is indistinctly revealed by translation" (*Semiotica* 153). This is the flipside of—but not finally different from—Heidegger's assertion in the *Der Spiegel* interview that "As soon as one makes a literal translation everything

---

<sup>8</sup> On experience as *experiri*, see Lacoue-Labarthe, *La poésie comme expérience* (30 n 6); on testimony and experience, see Derrida, *Demeure, passim*, in Blanchot and Derrida, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure*.



is changed" (*Heidegger Controversy* 113). Although apparently opposed to one another, these claims in fact indicate the same fundamental understanding. Petrilli, no less than Heidegger, assumes that translation is somehow *not* direct writing, where "direct writing" must be read as akin to the original articulation of one's (the author's, the writer's) thought. At the same time that Heidegger is one of the twentieth century's most profound thinkers of translation, he also consistently derides a distortion that must also be construed as an effect of translation. In the "Dialogue on Language," for example, Heidegger dismisses transcriptions of his work as "muddy sources" (6) and in *Being and Time* there is an intense effort, *passim*, to mark out the distortion of the they in opposition to the immediate and undistorted experience of the call of conscience.<sup>9</sup> Despite Petrilli's understanding that Borges valorizes translation—she concludes that "A kind of praise of translation runs through the whole corpus of Borges's writings" (*Semiotica* 165)—, in her account translation works to save the original insofar as translation reveals the mystery that nonetheless remains inherent to the original. The relation of translation to an original that remains intact and primordial is further spelled out in sentences like "The literary text itself, and not only its translation . . ." (164); and, for that matter, in the distinction she draws between the "reading text" and the "translation text" and the fact, as she puts it, that "the text withdraws from both ... because it is unreachable" (159). Here the "text" is something beyond the operation of translation, untouchable. Nowhere is the distinction between original and translation clearer, however, than in Petrilli's observation that "A translation is *obviously not identical* to the original (not even Menard's *Quijote* with respect to Cervantes's *Quijote*..." (162, emphasis added). As did Merrell, Petrilli grounds her interest in what she calls the "paradox" of translation in Peirce: "As clearly demonstrated by Charles S. Peirce, meaning is not in the sign but in the relation among signs. Reference is not only to the signs of a defined and closed system ... but also to signs as they are encountered in the interpretive process that knows no boundaries or impediments in moving across ~~different sign types and different sign systems~~" (162). Petrilli

<sup>9</sup> See Heidegger, *Being and Time* (H 272-4).

systems" (162). Petrilli extends this insight—such as it is—to the question of the subject: "the self, the subject, is also a sign and therefore it is continuously displaced, rendered other, in a process of deferrals from one interpretant to another, without ever being able to coincide with itself" (163). The language of this statement she attributes to Peirce. As has already been noted, according both to Merrell's parenthetical observation, which has the force of a confession, and Peirce's own text, this infinite finitude of the sign's referentiality cannot be sustained in Peirce. The problem here, however, is different; it concerns a finally troubling elaboration of translation that fails to account for the furthest implications of Borges' thought. Neither Merrell nor Petrilli, nor for that matter Augusto Ponzio in his "Reading and Translation in Borges's *Autobiographical Essay*" (*Semiotica* 169-79), takes seriously the maximal effect of Borges' understanding of the consubstantiality of translation and letters.

Petrilli focuses on the key text, "Pierre Menard, Autor del *Quijote*"; however, despite noting that "time plays its part as well," she does not consider the temporalization necessary to the problem of the "identical" nonself-same. In her determination of the relation between Menard's *Quijote* and Cervantes' she insists that the translation "is obviously not identical to the original" (156), but also and somewhat problematically that Menard's translation "is only *verbally* identical to Cervantes's *Quijote*" (158). The obviousness of the nonidenticality of Menard's translation and Cervantes' original,<sup>10</sup> which is in any case undermined by Petrilli's concession of a verbal identity, hinges on the reader's accession to the narrator's understanding of how to interpret the difference between the two texts. The narrator's reading suggests the possibility of contextual determinations of verbal or textual events, as if context were not also open to the same translation effects. What secures the limits of context such that it makes possible the historical determination of ver-

---

<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that in "Pierre Menard" Menard's *Quijote* is never granted the status of a translation of Cervantes' "original" *Quijote*. Indeed, the story pushes the notion that Menard's text is no less original. Block de Behar, for one, argues against the identification of Pierre Menard as a translator of the *Quijote*. See Block de Behar, *Al margen de Borges* (117).

bal/textual events? The difference between the original and the translation is not verbal, for they are verbally identical; rather, it is the assumption (which here passes for fact) that we know what it means for a text to be written in Spain in the early seventeenth century and how this differs from the production of a verbally identical text in France—by a symbolist poet, no less—in the twentieth century. Yet, the conclusion of “Pierre Menard” makes such determinative attribution suspect: “Menard... ha enriquecido mediante una técnica nueva el arte detenido y rudimentario de lectura: la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas. Esa técnica de aplicación infinita nos insta a recorrer la *Odisea* como si fuera posterior a la *Eneida* y el libro *Le jardin du Centaure* de Madame Henri Bachelier como si fuera de Madame Henri Bachelier” (OC 1:450). The upshot of the technique of deliberate anachronistic attribution is that the text is always already out of context, out of its time, precisely because the text is constitutively temporal. This is the implication of the possibility of attributing Madame Henri Bachelier’s book to Madame Henri Bachelier. Attribution is always already anachronistic and the condition of possibility of such anachronism is translation, what Rodolphe Gasché called “the operator of differance” (qtd in Derrida, *Ear of the Other* 114), even and necessarily in the attribution of one’s “own” text to “oneself.” Accordingly, there is never any proper, never any immediate relation to any text, not even the text I call my own. In short, the condition of possibility for a text to be one’s own—say, for the *Quijote* to be Cervantes’ or Menard’s for that matter—is precisely the possibility (hence the necessity) that it not be one’s own, that it always be attributable to another. The very structure of attribution in general is governed by the law of the other, namely, that the text is always another’s; the other is always before me. The text is always open to the authority of another. In sum, I am always already in an anachronistic relation to what is properly my own. My authority comes to me, is attributed to me, always already anachronistically and from another, even at the moment I claim it exclusively.

Moreover, this is not only the case for the attribution of authorship; it necessarily holds for the attribution of identity as well. So, for example, Luz Rodríguez Carranza’s claim that Borges’ “thumb-

nail biographies," which he wrote for *El Hogar* during the 1930s, were intended "to stymie all attempts at reductive identification" (*Semiotica* 193) is thoroughly misguided, for were there not reductive identification, there would be absolute identification.<sup>11</sup> But were there absolute identification, then Rodríguez Carranza's conclusion that "racial and national determinisms do not exist, that the passions they arouse are delusional, and, above all, that identity is something so ineffable and kaleidoscopic that it can never be used as a concept without running the risk of fundamentalism: it can only bear enumeration ... or metaphor" (193) would be exactly the opposite of what would have to be the case. For such conclusions can be drawn only if identity is grounded upon an atemporal essence, which would mean that the very condition of the human finitude has been forgotten. But things are exactly the opposite: racial and national determinisms do exist, they are always possible, and they are because of the temporality of identity, but identity is always only identification: provisional, contingent, necessarily reductive, all-too-often toward absurdity. Identity is not absolute, but reductive, which is another way of saying that identity is always only attributed.

Attribution, then, is an effect of translation understood as the operator of differing and deferral; it is another name for temporalization. It is as translation, as differance, that time plays its part, as Perilli affirmed, but here temporalization does not simply contextualize the text thereby relegating it to a certain propriety. Here temporalization, the always already being-temporal of all textuality, of all that exists, is the minimal condition of existence in general. So, the possibility of anything having a context—being assigned a context—depends on temporality; yet, because *all that is* is temporal, *all that is* is both no longer and not yet, which means that any attribution of or to a context is necessarily insecure. The question is, how is such temporality legible in "Pierre Menard" as the very condition of possibility of the appearance of the self-same? In other words, in what appears to be itself, unique, how does the trace or translation operate such that the propriety of the "same"—the self-same or the *in*

---

<sup>11</sup> I thank Martin Hägglund for this formulation of the problem of "reductive identification."

*itself*—is always already anachronistic or different from itself? How is the same ecstatic and thus not self-same, but rather constitutively out of joint?

Remarkably, given the attention paid both to the question of translation and “Pierre Menard,” which Block de Behar has called Borges’ “most cited story” (*Borges: La pasión* 175), no one in this special issue of *Semiotica* reads the footnote appended to the list of Menard’s *visible* work.<sup>12</sup> The note reads: “Madame Henri Bachelier enumera asimismo una versión literal de la versión literal que hizo Quevedo de la *Introduction à la vie dévote* de San Francisco de Sales. En la biblioteca de Pierre Menard no hay rastros de tal obra. Debe tratarse de una broma de nuestro amigo, mal escuchado” (*OC* 1: 446). The narrator here registers, inadvertently no doubt, his inability to think the effects of Menard’s *invisible* work to its furthest conclusion, for what makes possible the narrator’s discovery and recognition of Menard’s *invisible* work as *visible* necessarily operates as well in the irreducible interval between and within the literal translation of the literal translation of San Francisco de Sales’ *Introduction à la vie dévote*. Heidegger’s claim that “As soon as one makes a literal translation everything is changed” must be doubled: if everything is changed in the appearance of the literal translation, then the literal translation (into French) of the literal translation (into Spanish) *returns*—but with a difference, namely, the difference of the possibility of the same, that is, time—to and in the *original*. Borges’ note, therefore, remarks on the necessary but unheard-of and unseen operation of translation that makes possible the monstration of the original. It is the incessant operation of translation that troubles Block de Behar’s claim that “el texto no se altera pero es principio de alteridad” (*Al margen* 122), for insofar as this claim situates the text beyond alteration, it makes of the “text” something atemporal, eternal, the in itself that would be the beginning and the rule of alterity. Were such the case, “text” would be another name for God. In “Pierre Menard,” however, there is no text beyond temporalization. Quite to the contrary, the original is always already marked by the

---

<sup>12</sup> For a similar discussion of this footnote, but in a very different context, see Johnson.

movement of translation, of differing and deferring “itself” as self-same in order to appear “as such” in the “first” place. Perhaps it is precisely this possibility that makes inevitable Borges’ reading of the “original” *Quijote* as if it were a bad translation: “Todos los libros que acabo de mencionar los leí en inglés. Cuando más tarde leí *Don Quijote* en versión original, me pareció una mala traducción” (*Autobiografía* 26). Moreover, the same operation no doubt explains the possibility—the inevitability, then—that the “Autobiographical Essay,” which Borges dictated in English to Norman Thomas di Giovanni, would be assumed to be a translation.<sup>13</sup> The original is never uniquely or simply where it is; rather, it has the structure of the event in that the original is always yet to come and always already no longer. It never rests *in itself*. The original is ecstatic, divided against itself, always already outside any possible itself as the condition of possibility of appearing as itself. That the narrator finds no traces of the literal translation of the literal translation in Menard’s library makes sense, of course, for the traces, the *rastros*, of such translation, of such differance are always already erased in the appearance and institutionalization of the original; such differance, which is the inscription of the time that plays its part, is marked out in the monstration that *is* the original.

*Semiotica*’s “Jorge Luis Borges: The Praise of Signs” is an important, even necessary, achievement, but it is also an achievement determined to misrepresent Borges to the extent that—in the main—the contributors insist on a contextualization—the relation to Peirce and semiotics—that Borges’ text challenges on nearly every page, in nearly every sentence, word, letter. Block de Behar’s warning that “it is not appropriate to consider Borges a semiotician” perhaps should have been more rigorously heeded, but it is enough to note that Borges understood what Peirce apparently did not: namely, that the name of God is only another name. Block de Behar makes this insight clear and, therefore, lays to rest any attempted coordination of Borges’ and Peirce’s respective understanding of signs. In-

---

<sup>13</sup> The page proofs of the “Autobiographical Essay”—which are partially reproduced, with corrections—in Jorge Luis Borges, *Autobiografía*—indicate that initially *The New Yorker* assumed that di Giovanni had translated the “Essay” (*Autobiografía* 95).

asmuch as Peirce posited a God beyond the incessant corruption of temporality he effectively sides with a certain interpretation of Augustine, according to which, Block de Behar writes, “Dios es la cosa, pura y simplemente, es aquella que está más allá no de las apariencias sino de los signos” (*Al margen* 188). No doubt Borges understood God in more Joycean terms: “God was God’s name” (qtd in Block de Behar, *Al margen* 188; from Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist*). Now, the power to name is human. Only the human names and names himself. Although God creates, He does not name: “So he took some soil from the ground and formed all the animals and all the birds. Then he brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and that is how they all got their names” (*Genesis* 2:19-20). That God is called, even at the moment he calls Himself, inscribes God under the authority of the human, that is, under what Block de Behar calls the *autodesautorización* of language (*Al margen* 109): “I am that I am” (“Yo soy el que soy”), God’s proper name, necessarily repeated, literally so (“I am . . . I am”), always already in and as the effect of translation, displacement, ex-citation, dislocation. Borges, too, understood this; Block de Behar draws attention to the last paragraph of “El espejo de los enigmas,” where Borges wrote, “Ningún nombre sabe quién es” (*OC* [1974]: 722).<sup>14</sup> God is God’s name and no name knows who (it) is. At stake, then, is not the praise of signs, which are neither to be praised nor condemned nor lamented; rather, at stake in Borges is the thought of translation that makes possible the opening toward signification even as it necessarily makes impossible any return to the father. And this is not only the case for the son who would return to his father’s right hand, but also of the father himself who does not know who he is, who, incapable of knowing his own name, can only repeat himself, cite himself, *sin fin*.

David E. Johnson  
State University of New York at Buffalo

---

<sup>14</sup> We might call it a miracle—the work of human hands—that in the 1996 edition of Borges’ *Obras completas* this sentence has become “Ningún hombre sabe quién es” (*OC* 2: 100, emphasis added). See Block de Behar, *Borges: La pasión*, 180, for a reading of this sentence.

## WORKS CITED

- Augustine, *Confessions*. Henry Chadwick, translator. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Blanchot, Maurice and Jacques Derrida. *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2000.
- Block de Behar, Lisa. *Al margen de Borges*. Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1987.
- Block de Behar, Lisa. *Borges: La pasión de una cita sin fin*. Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1999.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Autobiografía*. Trans. Marcial Souto and Norman Thomas de Giovanni. Buenos Aires: El Ateneo, 1999.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin, 1998.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas*. Four Volumes. Buenos Aires: Émecé, 1996.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas*. Two Volumes. Buenos Aires: Émecé, 1974.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*. Trans. Constantin V. Boundas. New York: Columbia UP, 1991.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Des Tours de Babel." *Difference in Translation*. Ed. Joseph F. Graham. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Ousia and Grammē: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*." *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Allan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*. Trans. Christie V. MacDonald. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Schocken Books, 1985.
- Hegel, Georg W. F. *Philosophy of Nature*. Trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970.
- Hegel, Georg W. F. *Logic*. Trans. W. Wallace. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975.
- Heidegger, Martin. "A Dialogue on Language." *On the Way to Language*. Trans. Peter D. Hertz. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.
- Heidegger, Martin. "'Only a God Can Save Us': *Der Spiegel's* Interview with Martin Heidegger." Trans. Maria P. Alter and John D. Caputo. *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Richard Wolin. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise on Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978.
- Johnson, David E. "The Time of Translation: The Border of American Literature." *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*. Ed. Scott Michaelsen and David E. Johnson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *La poésie comme expérience*. Paris: Bourgois, 1986.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. *The Essential Peirce*. Two Volumes. Ed. Nathan Houser. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992-98.