

BORGES AND NARRATIVE ECONOMY
CONSERVATIVE FORMALISM OR SUBVERSION OF SIGNIFICATION?



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The genre of the short story constitutes, as it were, the laboratory of Borgesian writing. Borges privileges the genre mainly for three reasons: for its affinities with storytelling, its orality, and its narrative economy. First, the short story is one of the oldest literary forms since the act of storytelling is inherent in human nature; by elaborating the genre, Borges places storytelling back to the heart of modern literature, providing his texts with the delights of traditional fiction: that is, storytelling. Specifically, as the memorable phrase of Jean Paul Sartre confirms, “l’homme est un conteur d’histoires” (Grojnowski xi). For more than three thousand years, people have kept on telling stories. These can be short works of fiction such as tales, sketches, fables, myths, legends, parables, fairy tales, and other sorts of brief narratives. As Walter Benjamin affirms in his essay “The Storyteller”, “the first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales” (101). Essentially, the short story, as a modern brief narrative, lies indisputably at the heart of fiction; it is the kernel of literature and as such it can be found everywhere in any form. In his interview with Cesar Fernández Moreno, Borges argues that

la novela es un género que puede pasar, es indudable que pasará; el cuento no creo que pase. Es mucho más antiguo. Y además los cuentos aunque dejen de escribirse, seguirán contándose. Y no creo que las novelas puedan seguir contándose. (Rodríguez Monegal 317)

Secondly, the short story can be orally communicated precisely because of its brevity. The alluded orality of the modern short story points to the multiple versions that it can take each time it is recounted. This is due to the suggestive orality of the genre, which provides the text with a sense of lightness as a counterbalance to the rigidity of written language. In fact, it makes the reader conceive it as a passing version in a series of infinite possible variations. As Benjamin argues, “storytelling is always the art of repeating stories” (90). In his book, *Lire la nouvelle*, Daniel Grojnowski refers to Marguerite Duras and Borges as two of the most celebrated writers who look for the convention of orality in literature (7). Similarly, in an interview in 1977, Borges speaks of the spontaneity of the short story in contrast to the artificiality of the novel. The spontaneity of the genre could be ascribed to the fact that, in contrast to the novel, it depends less on the written language:

Le roman a quelque chose d’irréel pour moi. C’est parce qu’il s’agit d’une succession. [...] Je le vois comme un *genre artificiel*. Tandis que le conte est un *genre*, disons, *spontané*. On raconte une histoire, alors c’est bien plus simple. J’ai passé toute ma vie à lire des textes brefs. (“Le goût” 68; my emphasis)

The stories “Hombre de la esquina rosada” and “Historia de Rosendo Juárez” constitute illuminating examples of the Borgesian concept of orality in literature and the notion of writing as rereading. “Historia de Rosendo Juárez”, published in *El informe de Brodie* (1970), is a second (slightly different) version of Borges’ famous story “Hombre de la esquina rosada” which is first published in *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935). Thirty-five years after writing this early text, Borges goes back to the original story, changing its moral dimension: the protagonist, Rosendo Juárez, confesses that the reason he ran away from his rival “cuchillero”, Francisco Real, was not fear (as we assume in the earlier version of the story) but shame; the foolish actions of Francisco Real reminded Juárez of himself when, years before, he had killed a young boy

called Garmendia in an unexpected fight (*OC* 2: 411-2). He says: “Sucedió entonces lo que nadie quiere entender. En ese botarate provocador me vi como en un espejo y me dio vergüenza. No sentí miedo; acaso de haberlo sentido, salgo a pelear” (414). The oral dimension of “Historia de Rosendo Juárez”—as well as of many other Borgesian texts—is also enhanced by the fact (?) that this story has been orally recounted to Borges (the narrator) who, in turn, repeats it in writing. Ultimately, the latter emerges as an archetypal storyteller since, I repeat Benjamin’s words, “storytelling is always the art of repeating stories” (90). The cases of “Hombre de la esquina rosada” and “Historia de Rosendo Juárez” make it clear that Borges’ short stories are passing versions in a series of infinite possible variations. Moreover, Borges’ interest in orality in fiction is manifested not only by his selection of the short story as his chief form of literary expression but also by his interest in *gauchesque* poetry (epitomised by José Hernández’ epic, *Martín Fierro*) and its affinities with oral traditions in Argentina (notably, with the *payadas*).

Finally, the brevity of the genre serves Borges’ Aristotelian quest for *narrative economy*. In fact, as John Sturrock notes in his book *Paper Tigers*, “Borges [...] is [...] absolutely a Classicist in literature [...], his view of narrative is that of Aristotle” (3). In effect, Borges primarily embraces the Aristotelian concept of the *ἀναγκαῖον* (“necessary”), according to which there must be nothing in the literary text that is not necessary for the development of the narrative. Referring to the unity of the plot, Aristotle argues that

the incidents ought to be so constructed that, when some part is transposed or removed, the whole is disrupted and disturbed. Something which, whether it is present or not present, explains nothing [else], is not part of the whole. [...] The poet ought always to seek what is [...] *necessary* or probable, so that it is either necessary or probable that a person of such-and-such a sort say or do things of the same sort, and it is either necessary or probable that this [incident] happens after that one. ¹ (My emphasis)

¹ “Χρῆ οὖν [...] καὶ τὰ μέρη συνεστάναι τῶν πραγμάτων οὕτως ὥστε μετατιθεμένου τινός μέρους ἢ ἀφαιρουμένου διαφέρεσθαι καὶ κινεῖσθαι τὸ ὅλον· ὃ γὰρ προσὸν ἢ μὴ

In fact, for Borges, the principle of narrative economy is not merely essential to the genre of the short story but to literature in general. For example, in his preface to Adolfo Bioy Casares' novel, *La invención de Morel* (1968), Borges attributes the Aristotelian principle of the "ἀναγκαῖον" to the genre of the "detective story": "La novela de aventuras [...] no se propone como una transcripción de la realidad: es un objeto artificial que no sufre ninguna parte injustificada" (OC 4: 25). Commenting on Borges' words, Sturrock argues that "this old-fashioned belief in the power and unreality of narrative explains Borges' prejudice against whatever he feels to be formless" (1997: 4). Because of its brevity, the short story is the genre that demands frugality of means in expression more than any other genre. Accordingly, in doing so, it becomes a construction condensed to the absolute essential that maintains heterogeneity by revealing less than it conceals. In an interview with Roberto Alifano, Borges says referring to Kipling's short stories: "Empezó escribiendo cuentos de *apariencia sencilla pero tremendamente complejos*; tan complejos como la misma realidad" (my emphasis; 1984: 64). In order to amplify the hermeneutic scope of the genre, Borges employs a number of writing strategies such as resonance, ellipsis, and allusions which all belong to what he calls "reinado del silencio" (realm of silence). In his essay, "La postulación de la realidad", Borges explains this concept by commenting on Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* xxxv:

El autor nos propone un juego de símbolos, organizados rigurosamente sin duda, pero cuya *animación eventual* queda a cargo nuestro. No es realmente expresivo: se limita a registrar una realidad, no a representarla. Los ricos hechos a cuya póstuma *alusión* nos convida, importaron cargadas experiencias, percepciones, reacciones; estas pueden *inferirse* de su relato, pero no están en él. Dicho con mejor precisión: no escribe los primeros contactos de la

προσόν μηδὲν ποιεῖ ἐπίδηλον, οὐδὲν μόριον τοῦ ὄλου ἐστίν. [...] Χρῆ δὲ [...] ἀεὶ ζητεῖν ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον ἢ τὸ εἰκός, ὥστε τὸν τοιοῦτον τὰ τοιαῦτα λέγειν ἢ πράττειν ἢ ἀναγκαῖον ἢ εἰκός καὶ τοῦτο μετὰ τοῦτο γίνεσθαι ἢ ἀναγκαῖον ἢ εἰκός" (1451a30-5, 1454a33-5). I have extensively referred to the notion of the *probable* in Aristotle and Borges in my article "Aristotle, Borges, and Kalokyris".

realidad, sino su elaboración final en concepto. Es el método clásico. (OC 1: 217-8; my emphasis)

According to Borges, the classic as the realm of silence does not represent but registers reality. It employs the method of allusions and hints, which enables the reader to infer multiple interpretations. In other words, the allusive and ambiguous nature of the text makes its eventual creation the work of the reader (“cargó nuestro”). As Grojnowski argues, referring to Borges’ short story “El informe de Brodie” (1970), “l’allusion consiste à faire sentir le rapport d’une chose qu’on dit avec une autre qu’on ne dit pas, et dont ce rapport même réveille l’idée” (151). Hints, allusions, and silence all belong to the realm of irony because irony is the method of the hidden and the ambiguous, of what lies beyond the external semantics of the text which is unable to constitute itself fully. Irony is the space of ambiguity where meaning is simultaneously dangling between both its own affirmation and negation. Hence, situated on the *edge* of opposing poles, Borgesian irony is the *agent of deferral*. In other words, it affirms the negation of a final, fixed meaning within a text which always exceeds itself. Moreover, ellipsis is a constitutive element of Borges’ “reinado del silencio” where reality is registered yet not represented. Grojnowski says about ellipsis:

L’ellipse l’oblige [au lecteur] à suppléer aux carences du récit. Tout en mentionnant un épisode, le narrateur invite le lecteur à l’imaginer, à le composer par hypothèse: manière d’aménager un certain flou, une indétermination suggestive. (154)

In the end, ellipsis belongs to the realm of irony where meaning is left dangling, sustaining its final suspension. Ironic language is the coronation and nightmare of reason, not its elimination. Irony keeps reason in order to challenge it; it needs meaning in order to oscillate between its two poles. These strategies plausibly serve the quest for rereading and transgressing the (by definition) confined textual limits of the short story. They ultimately place the reader before a condensed kaleidoscopic text that omits and/or suggests more than it says.

In general, Borges argues that brevity prevents fiction from being caught up in divergence of plot and unnecessary details that would be reductive concerning its focus and effectiveness. However, one

could quite plausibly raise the following questions: is Borges' quest for narrative economy after all a manifestation of his conservative formalism? Does his (I dare to say) fixation with Aristotelian necessity show a traditional practitioner of the genre? The answer is definitely negative. This is due to the fact that the "ἀναγκάσιον" fundamentally belongs to the "reinado del silencio", it is always absent or it is always present through allusions, silences, and deferrals. In other words, the "necessary" is absent and it is absent precisely because it is necessary—necessary for the opening up of meanings and interpretations, which, of course, is in accordance with Borges' concepts of writing as rewriting, reading as rereading and the infinite variations of a given text.

Effectively, beyond Borges' apparent conservative formalism lies a ground-breaking elaboration of the genre which subverts signification by silencing, alluding, and deferring the *necessary* which is not *there*; instead, it is always *elsewhere*: ultimately, it is a *deferred necessary*. An exemplary case of this deferred necessary in Borges' short stories is the *topos* of the total Word, the word of the absolute (and absolutely necessary) truth. However, there is no single text of Borges where the Word is actually pronounced. Even when the characters supposedly utter or hear it, they are condemned to die and the reader is left, as it were, with the absolute absence of the Word. For instance, in "La escritura del dios", the narrator says: "Por eso no pronuncio la formula, por eso dejo que me olviden los días, acostado en la oscuridad" (OC 1: 599). Similarly, in "El espejo y la máscara" (OC 3: 45-7), where the poet supposedly utters the Word (the single-line poem), this absolute necessary (the essence) is the great absent. That is to say, in contrast to the King in the story, the reader is never told the divine single-line poem which Borges silences and defers. This is because the absolute necessary, the Word that would encompass every single (deferring) meaning or reality is by definition *impossible*. Instead, what is possible is the opening up of the story to infinite interpretations and variations. Borges' Word becomes, in Roland Barthes' terms, encyclopaedic, precisely because it is a *deferred word*.

Moreover, Borges' deferred necessary is closely related to what Sylvia Molloy, in her book *Las letras de Borges*, calls the "resto

diferencial” (differential trace). Specifically, in “La postulación de la realidad”, Borges acknowledges three methods of representation in literature:

El de trato más fácil consiste en una notificación general de los hechos que importan. [...]. El segundo consiste en imaginar *una realidad más compleja que la declarada al lector* y referir sus derivaciones y efectos. [...] El tercer método, el más difícil y eficiente de todos, ejerce la invención circunstancial. [...] Es método admirable y difícil, pero su aplicabilidad general lo hace menos estrictamente literario que los dos anteriores, y en particular que el segundo. (OC 1: 219-220; my emphasis)

Borges does not seem to be interested in the first method, which he simply cites without further comment. This is the method postulated by the aesthetics of realism that systematise information excluding what reason classifies as “not important”. Apparently, Borges rejects this first method because it does not reveal the artificiality of fiction since it conceals, in Sturrock’s words, “the essential mediacy of language, of literary protocol” (81). Subsequently, “circumstantiality” is the third method to which Borges refers. It is the encounter of trivial details within the literary text, which do not actually serve the textual economy. The circumstantial is precisely what is excluded in the process of perception and representation. It is the Derridean *différance*—crudely, what is different and deferred from the conventional meaning of a term (1-29). It is what is considered to be trivial or different to what is included in the process of signification in order for the meaning to be produced. In his early essay, *Evaristo Carriego* (1930), Borges claims that the circumstantial is “patético” (OC 1: 107) for it is excluded from the production of meaning—it stands without signification. Correspondingly, Molloy remarks on Borges’ concept of the “passiveness” of the circumstantial:

[Es] una imagen más [...]: la que se retiene, sin embargo, como mero placer [...]. Una imagen más que no abre un nuevo relato, que se retiene como *resto diferencial* puro: que es, solo, una imagen más. (120; my emphasis)

Any system of signification is selective and so is literature. In “Funes el memorioso, Borges affirms that “*pensar es olvidar*

diferencias, es generalizar, abstraer" (OC 1: 490). This is why this third method, which Borges considers to be "less strictly literary", as Molloy notes, "aparece en su obra más como añoranza que como realización" (119). In fact, the "resto diferencial" is what prevails in Borgesian heterotopias where there is a gathering of incommensurable elements, yet its disruptive nature is under the control of the metafictional discourse.

Specifically, the *escritura* of Borges creates, in Michel Foucault's terms, *heterotopias*, which are capable of containing heteroclitic elements as if there were no tensions between them. The elements of this *heterotopic* world—like the "*hrönir*" of the fantastic planet of Tlön—are, in Borges' terms, "objetos ideales" (OC 1: 435), or, in Jean François Lyotard's terms, "jeux de langage", which can be transformed and modified into anything at any time. In this universe, where human reason is constantly being transgressed and violated, objects uncontrollably increase and decrease like the stones in Borges' late story "Los tigres azules" (1983). Here, the narrator, who is a "profesor de lógica occidental y oriental y consagr[a] [sus] domingos a un seminario sobre la obra de Spinoza" (OC 3: 379), is confronted with "las piedras que engendran" (383), which "destruyen la ciencia matemática" (385); that is, the scientific reasoning for which he himself stands. He confesses:

Si me dijeran que hay unicornios en la luna, yo aprobaría o rechazaría ese informe o suspendería mi juicio, pero podría imaginarlos. En cambio, si me dijeran que en la luna seis o siete unicornios pueden ser tres, yo afirmaré de antemano que el hecho era imposible. Quien ha entendido que tres y uno son cuatro no hace la prueba de monedas, con dados, con piezas de ajedrez o con lápices. Lo entiende y basta. No puede concebir otra cifra. Hay matemáticos que afirman que tres y uno es una tautología de cuatro...A mí, Alexander Craigie, me había tocado en suerte descubrir, entre todos los hombres de la tierra, los únicos objetos que contradicen esa ley esencial de la mente humana. (383-4)

Literature (the word) appears as a microcosm, which reflects the heterotopic macrocosm of reality (the world). It sustains elements that are ready to contradict and undermine Reason: "Ahí estaban las piedras en el cajón, listas a transformarse" (OC 3: 384). As I have

already mentioned, Borges' heterotopic literature recalls Foucault's concept of *heterotopia* as defined in the latter's essay "Of Other Spaces". According to Foucault, *heterotopia* is "an impossible space" which houses a "large number of impossible worlds". Heterotopias are "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality [...]. These places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about" (24). In his famous essay "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins" (OC 2: 84-7), Borges speaks of a Chinese Encyclopaedia which categorises "animals" following the most heteroclitic taxonomy—animals who belong to the emperor, frenzied animals, innumerable animals, animals that are drawn with a very fine camelhair brush and so forth. In his *Order of Things*, Foucault refers to Borges' Chinese Encyclopaedia as a paradigmatic example of heterotopia, which is related to "aphasia" (ἄφατος = speechless)—the loss of the ability to understand or express speech. According to Foucault, Borges, like the aphasiac,

continues to infinity creating groups, then dispersing them again, heaping up diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, frenziedly beginning all over again, becoming more and more disturbed, and teetering finally on the brink of anxiety. (xviii)

The Chinese Encyclopaedia and Borges' textual heterotopias in general (like Tlön) chart, according to Foucault, "the interstitial blanks *separating* all these [heteroclitic] entities from one another" (*Order*: xvi). Effectively, Borgesian writing composes texts that are situated within the Foucauldian *interstitial* space of language where polysemia and contradictions preside over monosemia and harmony. According to Foucault, Borges' stories, like the Chinese Encyclopaedia, suggest that

there is a worse kind of disorder than that of the incongruous, the linking together of things that are inappropriate; [...] the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without geometry, of the heteroclitic. (*Order* xvii)

In fact, by the time one finishes reading Borges' perfectly formed pieces of fiction, the heteroclitite elements of these texts are set loose in a virus-like way and the tensions and contradictions between them prevail in the consciousness of the reader.

To conclude, Borges' selection of the short story lies much beyond his apparent conservative formalism. The Borgesian short story is a kaleidoscopic text, which subverts signification sometimes by accommodating heterotopic spaces, other times by sustaining the differential trace, and most of the times by deferring the Aristotelian necessary within the realm of silence—the realm of irony *par excellence*.

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