

THE DANGERS OF ABSTRACTION IN BORGES'S
"THE IMMORTAL"



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In Borges's "The Immortal," the narrator's chronological origin and spiritual symbiosis with Homer affect the written discourse by giving it features proper to oral communication. The narrator, by virtue of his immortality, exhibits the linguistic characteristics and the viewpoint endemic to the Homeric bard. His diachronic existence allows him to incorporate into the narrative a number of features that reflect the historic transition from the oral into the literate mind. The metaphoricity and turns of speech present in "The Immortal" are largely a product of the linguistic perspectives of oral discourse. The plasticity, fluidity and transience of the language respond to philosophical rather than aesthetic exigencies. What we would call today figurative speech and myth were in ancient times essential to humanity as it saw itself in relation to the world. The capacity to conceptualize unity and permanence that emerged simultaneously with the written letter denied the transience of time and the fleetingness of orality. Borges seems to despair at the evanescence of images that dissolve in his mind after years of blindness, and to hold on to the audible quality of a language that he can no longer read, but which carries within the sound of voices.

In contrast to the mortal world, Borges's bleak immortal world contains only abstractions, fixed notions and permanent truths. Static creatures, dead to the pleasures of sensual perception, vegetate in the darkness. For those dedicated to contemplation, the physical world holds no claim and deserves no attention; body and mind are shrines to the intellect. The danger of losing the self within the boundless realm of the mind resonates throughout; Borges seems to send through his tale a cry for balance and a eulogy to mortality, transience and orality. The narrator revives through imagery and Homeric similes the nimbleness that the author himself had long lost. The agility of his landscape is reminiscent of the whims of the gods and heroes of the ancient past. The fragmentation of his visions seems akin to the telescopic view of the ancient eye. Action was, in antiquity, paragon to excellence, and will was the privilege of the gods. The struggle between both systems of values is biased, the balance favoring the more attractive insufficiencies of the mortal, which is identified with all that is precarious, transient and, therefore, precious. Permanence is repetitive, multiplied to satiety, stagnant. One possible reading of "The Immortal" urges us not to surrender to the panic of dissolution in the infinite reflection of mirrors. Eternity is only an illusion, a reprinted mirage; the written word is a deadly, ever repeating trap.

Borges's stylistic adaptability to the circumstances of his protagonist is responsible for the quality of the figurative language of his story. The original oral context of the narrator is reinforced by his mysterious symbiosis with Homer, for whom language was solely recitative. As a result, Borges's narrative transpires the worldview of the Homeric man with the notions of a pre-literate civilization. The philosophical and linguistic implications of this chronological setting are varied and by no means unproblematic, given both the medium through which the story reaches us—a book—and the reader's ontological presuppositions—that we are individuals, that we have a will, that there is a world, that things are. It is essential that we keep in mind the conditions inherent to the oral discourse if we are to unravel the strange and timeless beauty of the language of the story. In the ancient way, we are to attribute to its linguistic characteristics epistemological, instead of aesthetic value. The preliterate

bard had difficulty discerning the subject as a unified entity, the idea without the sensory perception, the action without the stimuli. For Homer the notion of permanence was implicitly related to the gods, just as the concept of will was. The absence of a conceptualized subject was directly connected to the belief that human fate depended on the gods. Bruno Snell describes this phenomenon in his study of classical epistemology *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*. In Homer, he says, human deeds are made possible through divine grace instead of through personal talent or effort, "there are personal fates, but not personal achievements" (61).

Joseph Cartaphilus, Borges's immortal protagonist and narrator, seems to attribute most of his ancient deeds, retrospectively, to an unconscious urge to act. He bitterly complains about not being allowed to fight, and about "scarcely [managing] a glimpse of Mars's countenance"

This privation pained me and perhaps caused me precipitously to undertake the discovery, through fearful and diffuse deserts, of the secret City of the Immortals...I do not know if I ever believed in [it]: I think that then the task of finding it was sufficient. ("The Immortal" 106-7)¹

Action is a principle that pervades ancient discourse for diverse reasons: as a mnemonic strategy inherent to the oral transmission of the texts, as a sign of excellence, and as an intrinsic value for identity. Eric Havelock, in his study titled "The Linguistic Task of the Presocratics," lists two requisites for the oral conservation of a message: the language must be rhythmic and "it must tell stories rather than relate facts. It must prefer mythos to logos" (13). This requirement implies a natural avoidance of abstract speech and a deeply ingrained tendency to anthropomorphize nature.

¹ "Esa privación me dolió y fue tal vez la causa de que yo me arrojara a descubrir, por temerosos y difusos desiertos, la secreta Ciudad de los Inmortales. (...) Ignoro si creí alguna vez en la Ciudad de los Inmortales: pienso que entonces me bastó la tarea de buscarla" (OC 1: 533-534).

In “The Immortal,” natural phenomena and elements from the landscape are endowed with will and agency. We find that “fever and magic consumed many men” (106)², that the river Egypt is “fed by the rains” (107)³, that the stream is “hindered by the dunes”⁴ (109), and that the invariable walls did not “consent to a single door” (109)⁵. The nature of these analogies responds to a human effort to understand both the inanimate world and animate behavior by comparing the familiar to the unfamiliar. According to Snell, this linguistic strategy is built into ancient patterns of speech:

This peculiar situation, namely that human behavior is made clear only through reference to something else which is in turn explained by analogy with human behavior pertains to all Homeric Similes. More than that, it pertains to all genuine metamorphism and in fact to every single case of human comprehension...man must listen to an echo of himself before he may hear or know himself. (200)

The inevitability of metaphor seems to be intimately linked to action and to the immediacy and transience of sense perception. Action is, to the ancient mind and to some modern ones, the emblem of excellence. Dynamism is classically perceived as inherent to all existence and as a constituent of the aim of all being. According to Nietzsche, “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; the ‘doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything” (qtd. in de Man 126).

Notwithstanding the “fictitiousness” inherent in the agent linked to the action, the definition of dynamism as ornamental – whether in relation to the animate or the inanimate – seems, in this context, ludicrous. Action, in the eyes of the early Greeks, describes all beings. The nature of this association remains ontological to them and, as Paul Ricoeur concludes in his study of the Aristotelian metaphor, ultimately essential to the classical worldview:

² “la fiebre y la magia consumieron a muchos hombres” (OC 1: 533).

³ “que alimentan las lluvias” (OC 1: 534).

⁴ “entorpecido por escombros y arena” (OC 1: 535).

⁵ “los muros invariables no parecían consentir una sola puerta” (OC 1: 536)

To present men '*as acting*' and all things '*as in act*' — such could be the *ontological* function of metaphorical discourse, in which every dormant potentiality of existence appears *as* blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action *as* actualized. *Lively* expression is that which expresses existence *as alive*. (43)

In antiquity, warfare is the activity endowed with the highest degree of excellence, accordingly, bellicose analogies and similes are constructed as validations of the task under consideration. In Borges's narrative the "barbarous regions, where the earth is mother of monsters"⁶ can still "shelter" cities (107), silence is hostile and the traveler must "usurp the hours of the night" (107)⁷. In the same vein, Cartaphilus feels that the sudden unexpected obstacles of the road are external assaults, "an unforeseen wall halted me; a remote light fell upon me" (110)⁸. Moreover, motion is occasionally caused by a primitive sense of military duty: "We continued our march for it would have been dishonor to turn back" (107)⁹. The hostility of the world Cartaphilus encounters is analogized with that of his enemies. As a result, he encounters his surroundings in a spirit of combat and sets off to fulfill his dream as if it were the task commended to him by the gods, to whom his success would be both owed and dedicated; his individuality is not yet at stake.

The feeling of cosmic insignificance seems to weigh heavily on Borges. Metaphysical despair appears to inform his view of the human illusion of time. The infinity of time is forbidden to us only as a result of our own weakness and limitations, in his words: "everything is given to us successively because we cannot bear the intolerable burden of the universe" [author's translation]¹⁰. The passive construction indicates the possibility of an agency behind the

⁶ "esas regiones bárbaras, donde la tierra es madre de monstruos" (OC 1: 534).

⁷ "usurpar las horas de la noche" (OC 1: 534).

⁸ "un no previsto muro me cerró el paso, una remota luz cayó sobre mí" (OC 1: 537).

⁹ "Proseguimos la marcha, pues hubiera sido una afrenta retroceder" (OC 1: 534).

¹⁰ "Todo eso nos es dado sucesivamente, porque no podemos aguantar esa intolerable carga, esa intolerable carga de todo el ser del universo" ("El Tiempo" OC 4: 200).

chronological configuration. The inescapable sequentiality of time reminds us of our inability to cope with the abstraction of totality.

Notions of subjection to a superior will that permeate Borges's essays are also present in his fiction. In "The Immortal," Cartaphilus is driven by a sense of inexplicable fatality and is detained by "a kind of sacred horror" (109)¹¹. However, his motivations, though obscure, are attributable mainly to passion—which originates in the self rather than in an external force. Human consciousness thus begins its detachment from the divine. The stages the protagonist goes through seem tainted by a sense of emergent, if still primitive, individuality, which evolves along with his immersion into the world of abstraction and the literary era. Cartaphilus mentions that "a dark elemental reason obliged [him]" (117)¹². This confession marks the transition period in which the cause that moves him to action springs from within, and yet is personified, as if the idea of external agency was still needed in order to conceptualize it. Snell explains this process as follows: "Homeric man has not yet awakened to the fact that he possesses in his own soul the source of his powers, but neither does he attach the forces to his person by means of magical practices; he receives them as a natural and fitting donation from the gods" (21).

Action pervades even within the self, where no unity is clearly perceived. The body is to the early Greeks an "aggregate" of limbs and members (Snell 6). Thus, unsettling feelings are best resolved as conflicts between parts and best explained through bellicose similes: "All that night I was unable to sleep, for something was combating within my heart" ("Immortal" 106)¹³. The conception of the body as a compound with no necessary correlation among its parts relates to a mentality which dealt only with the concrete and immediate and which had difficulty with the notions of unity and abstract relations. Hence, the numerous cases of synecdoche that relate the narrator's feelings to concrete parts of his body are in fact, when understood in

¹¹ "Me detuvo una especie de horror sagrado" (OC 1: 536).

¹² "Una oscura razón elemental me obligó a registrarlos" (OC 1: 543)

¹³ "Toda esa noche no dormí, pues algo estaba combatiendo en mi corazón" (OC 1: 534).

Homeric historical perspective, examples of his perception of himself. The following examples illustrate the fragmentary conception that the narrator has of his own body and individuality: "my hands almost touched it, my eyes could see it but ... I knew I would die before reaching it" ("Immortal" 107)¹⁴. "I felt a painful throbbing in my chest ... I threw myself headlong down the slope my eyes closed, my hands behind my back. I sank my bloody face into the dark water" ("Immortal" 108).¹⁵

According to Snell's study of early Greek thought, the awareness of the body as a unity took place gradually, and not totally until an adequate concept to designate the whole comprising the parts was formed. He maintains that the precise relevance of the functional correlation of the limbs escapes the subject. The objective existence of this connection is not apparent or perceived as the logical consequence of the presence of the individual, corporeal limbs themselves: "again and again Homer speaks of fleet legs, of knees in speedy motion, of sinewy arms; it is in these limbs, immediately evident as they are to his eyes, that he locates the secret of life" (7-8). The perception not only of the world, but of our own body as a unity, Snell explains, is not integral to man until it is designated by words and becomes an object of thought.

The human need to reach outward to assist self-explanation is seen by some as a natural step in the process of human development, a stage that was transcended with modern reflection. The objectification process is explored by Giambattista Vico, who contends, in *The New Science*, that human intellectual evolvment is due, not to our ability to transcend allegorical language, but to our capacity to recognize that the value of such a language is indeed not referential: "Primitive man is presumed to have been able at first to speak only figuratively and to think in allegories, and to have taken these figures and allegories as literal truths, or denotative representations, of

¹⁴ "mis manos casi lo tocaban, mis ojos lo veían, pero tan intrincadas y perplejas eran las curvas que yo sabía que iba a morir antes de alcanzarlo" (OC 1: 535).

¹⁵ "Sentí en el pecho un doloroso latido, (...) me tiré, cerrados los ojos, atadas a la espalda las manos, montaña abajo. Hundí la cara ensangrentada en el agua oscura" (OC 1: 535).

the world external to himself" (White 207). Borges, in the good company of philosophers such as Derrida, is, at least ideologically, not so optimistic about man's epistemological powers and would deny the possibility of a purely referential language and defend the inescapability of metaphor.

The absence of the notion of "being" in Homer's time is reflected in the lack of the copula. The copulative use of the verb "to be," as we know it and use it, was unknown to the Homeric Greeks and only felt amiss after the need to express permanent relations arose. The presumption that early Greek thinkers had access to this kind of vocabulary is belied by linguistic evidence. It would have been impossible for them to formulate or, therefore, conceptualize the following: "the angles are equal to two right angles. They *are* not born that way or become or are made so" (Havelock 14).

"The Immortal" exhibits a diction that illustrates the transition period in which the permanence of the simple present "to be" is gradually being assimilated into the discourse. This verbal lack is initially overcome by making the subject possess, instead of be defined by, the quality, and by making both attribute and subject inseparable. Thus, the moon "possesses" the color of the sand (109)¹⁶, and the troglodytes "lack the commerce of words" (110)¹⁷ – both examples of dynamic attributes which are the alternative to the description through copula plus quality, which in these cases would correspond to the moon *being* golden and troglodytes *being* ignorant, respectively.

In Borges's tale, the inanimate, aside from potentiality to act, is inscribed with sense and emotion: deserts can be "exhausted" (107)¹⁸ and "the fervor of day is intolerable" (107)¹⁹; holes are "miserable" (108)²⁰ and silence is "hostile" (109)²¹. All this imagery, as we would call it, resists the label of aesthetic purpose; its function is purely, or

¹⁶ "la luna tenía el mismo color de la infinita arena" (OC 1: 534).

¹⁷ "carecen del comercio de la palabra" (OC 1: 534).

¹⁸ "Fatigamos otros desiertos" (OC 1: 534).

¹⁹ "el fervor del día es intolerable" (OC 1: 534).

²⁰ "esos mezquinos agujeros" (OC 1: 535).

²¹ "El silencio era hostil" (OC 1: 536).

at the very least mainly, epistemological. The apprehension of unfamiliar phenomena through familiar qualities and human attitudes functions in a conciliatory way and sets the precedents for myth creation.

Nonetheless, a newly discovered power of digression soon allows the narrator to dwell in innumerable hypotheses aimed to assist his understanding:

From that imagination I went on to others, even more extravagant. I thought that Argos and I participated in different universes; I thought that our perceptions were the same, but that he combined them in another way and made other objects of them...I thought of a world without memory, without time; I considered the possibility of a language without nouns. (112)²²

The playfulness with which Cartaphilus poses imagination as epistemological source is reminiscent of the Nietzschean irony in *The Will to Power*, where the philosopher exposes human fear and resistance to admit the indifferent nature of our contribution to the world. De Man's brilliant treatment of Nietzsche's work in "Rhetoric of Tropes" reflects a tone analogous to that of Borges in "The Immortal". De Man postulates that in Nietzsche's text

the idea of individuation, of the human subject as a privileged viewpoint, is a mere metaphor by means of which man protects himself from his insignificance by forcing his own interpretation of the world upon the entire universe, substituting a human-centered set of meanings that is reassuring to his vanity for a set of meanings that reduces him to being a mere transitory accident in the cosmic order. (111)

According to this perspective, human ego-centrism and, implicitly, linguistic anthropomorphism are but defenses against the ver-

²² "De esa imaginación pasé a otras, aun más extravagantes. Pensé que Argos y yo participábamos de universos distintos; pensé que nuestras percepciones eran iguales, pero que Argos las combinaba de otra manera y construía con ellas otros objetos; (...) Pensé en un mundo sin memoria, sin tiempo; consideré la posibilidad de un lenguaje que ignorara los sustantivos" (OC 1: 539).

tigo of existence, illusions that allow us to believe in the possibility of controlling our surroundings. With the introduction of abstract language the human potential extends itself to the formulation of absolute truths. The desirability of attaining a permanent knowledge of higher truth drives man from the transient, mutable and physical world to the contemplation of conceptual truths; passive is now preferred to active, intensive to extensive, permanent to immediate.

In "The Immortal," the inactivity of the immortals is made hyperbolic, considered an indulgence and is attributed to the will:

Let no one reduce us to the status of ascetics. There is no pleasure more complex than that of thought and we surrendered ourselves to it ... I remember one whom I never saw stand up: a bird had nested on his breast. (115)²³

Argos, the troglodyte who turns out to be Homer himself, tries to convince Cartaphilus of the triviality of immortal existence and of the pointlessness of action within the immortal world: "Seen in this manner, all our acts are just, but they are also indifferent. There are no moral or intellectual merits" (113)²⁴. Only from the point of view of infinity does man recognize the delusion involved in the hope of intellectual achievement and the benefits it supposedly reports. A rudimentary sense of the subconscious seems present in this explanation, a resource not yet explored, but which nonetheless springs from the individual.

The objectification of language through writing aided in the process of self-individuation. Once speech was severed from the physical presence of the speaker, the world under examination became similarly disengaged from the describer's consciousness. Thus, from reversal and mutual validation arises our awareness of subjectivity. The "oral mind's" awareness of a world exterior to itself does not

²³ "Que nadie quiera rebajarnos a ascetas. No hay placer más complejo que el pensamiento y a él nos entregábamos. (...) recuerdo alguno a quien jamás he visto de pie: un pájaro anidaba en su pecho" (OC 1: 541).

²⁴ "Encarados así, todos nuestros actos son justos, pero también son indiferentes. No hay méritos morales o intelectuales" (OC 1: 541).

presuppose the objectification of this world as an environment: "the Presocratics not only had to invent a terminology suitable to describe an external world; they had initially to realize that such a 'world' or a cosmos existed to be described" (Havelock 15).

With the integration of the new terminology emerges the urge to encompass the ever changing, and previously always anthropomorphized, landscape within a unified perspective. Abstraction originates as the natural consequence of the objectification of reality through speech.

In the last stages of his immortality, Borges's protagonist, already immersed in the literary tradition, digresses about death and eternity. He compares the lines of *El Cid* with those of Heraclitus—equating history with fiction—and endows the mind with creative powers. His new capacity of abstraction enables him to separate body and mind, parts of which he did not have awareness in his primeval stage and, as a result, allows him to classify the body as inferior. Ironically, he acknowledges that intellectual superiority does not guarantee, in fact often obliterates, moral superiority: "The concept of the world as a system of precise compensations ...made [the immortals] invulnerable to pity" (115).²⁵

Furthermore, total submersion to abstract thought can result, as he seems to conclude, in paradoxical absurdity: "I am god, I am hero, I am philosopher, I am demon and I am world, which is a tedious way of saying that I do not exist" (115)²⁶. Cartaphilus's disillusion in the excellences of eternal existence relates to the impossibility of uniqueness and the tedium of repetition. The lack of visible beginning or end leads to the abstract notion of infinity in which all entities, including the individual, dissolve. All contact with the finite and immediate, in short with sensory perception, is by comparison insignificant and therefore obsolete.

Cartaphilus's resistance to this scheme leads him back to the search for mortality. His quest requires a return to action—implicit

²⁵ "El concepto del mundo como sistema de precisas compensaciones (...) los hizo invulnerables a la piedad" (OC 1: 541).

²⁶ "soy dios, soy héroe, soy filósofo, soy demonio y soy mundo, lo cual es una fatigosa manera de decir que no soy" (OC 1: 541).

in the discovery of the new river. His report of the events shows a novel disregard for names and languages and a new appreciation for images and sensory perception: "I transcribed with measured calligraphy, in a language I have forgotten, in an alphabet I do not know" (116)²⁷. It is interesting to notice the contrast with the events that Cartaphilus does remember – in a line almost identical to one in the first paragraph of the story: "I recalled other very ancient mornings, also facing the red sea, when I was a tribune of Rome and fever and magic *and inaction* consumed the soldiers" (116)²⁸. Two aspects of this remark are deserving of attention: the fact that he recollects his days as a soldier on duty, and the fact that he attributes his men's ailments to idleness – my emphasis indicates the only two words that differ from his previous mention of the facts in Chapter I of the narration. In subsequent lines, the pain caused by a piercing thorn confirms the narrator's recovery of his longed-for mortality and, consequently, his return to the senses – which validates anew both the immediate and the finite.

Within this context, Cartaphilus's last assertions prove particularly ironic. His blatant negation of concrete circumstantial detail as valid testimony of reality is held by a paradoxical justification: he tells us that the abundance of such detail is "a procedure [he] learnt from the poets and which contaminates everything with falsity, since those details can abound in the realities but not in their recollection" (117)²⁹. The narrator poses as impossibility the accordance between memory, which tends to abstract and unify experience, and reality itself. The oxymoron results in the defense of memory as the most reliable and veritable of the two. This argument is reminiscent in its contrariety to that presented by Hayden White in *Tropics of Discourse*: the availability of facts and concrete detail only exposes

²⁷ "transcribí con pausada caligrafía, en un idioma que he olvidado, en un alfabeto que ignoro" (OC 1: 542).

²⁸ "recordé otras mañanas muy antiguas, también frente al Mar Rojo; cuando yo era tribuno de Roma y la fiebre y la magia y la inacción consumían a los soldados" (OC 1: 542).

²⁹ "procedimiento que aprendí en los poetas y que todo lo contamina de falsedad, ya que esos rasgos pueden abundar en los hechos, pero no en su memoria..." (OC 1: 543).

the fictitious nature of the abstract conclusions. White maintains that "the more we know about the past, the more difficult it is to generalize about it" (89); the difficulty lies in the required willingness to discard and exclude facts for the sake of self-delusion. The "historical continuity" that is sought retrospectively in a series of events can be "secured only by dint of fraudulent outlines" which are in fact the product of abstraction (91).

The false sense of unity and coherence, which is exposed and censored by White, is positively vindicated by Cartaphilus. Borges hides, once again, behind the facade of an unreliable narrator that advocates fervor for conceptual terms that the author himself seems unable to practice. Borges's subtle undertones warn us of a threat he himself was unable to avoid—partly due to his blindness—the endless regress of the world of intellectual contemplation and the vertigo of getting lost "in [the] maze of indefatigable mirrors" that is the mind (116). Borges counsels us through his tale that excessive abstraction is only conducive to self-reflection and, therefore, to the exclusion of the world and others. It is not incidentally that Borges concludes his speech on "The Book" with the following captious remark "and this confidence I make to each one of you, not to all, for that would be an abstraction" [author's translation].³⁰

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³⁰ "una confianza que les realizo a cada uno de ustedes; no a todos, pero sí a cada uno, porque todos es una abstracción" ("El libro". OC 4: 170).

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