

THE BURIED BAROQUE: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION
OF BORGES'S "CLASSICAL" STYLE

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*Fue novador, pero no a semejanza de los que
siguen el asombro y el sacar del quicio al leyente;
fue clásico, pero sin mimetismo apasionado
ni rigideces de ritual.*

*He was innovative, but not in the likeness of those
who seek to amaze readers and drive them mad; he
was classical, but without impassioned mimicry
or the rigidities of ritual.*

Jorge Luis Borges,
"Sir Thomas Browne" (1925)

Almost as a matter of course, critics and commentators have conspired to call the style of Borges's unforgettable fictions "classical," and certainly one can agree with that estimation if what it means is that every word in this remarkable style carries its own weight, all the excess has been pared away. In addi-

tion, the construction of many of Borges's sentences clearly follows the rules of classical rhetoric; he uses chiasmus, parallelism, repetition-with-variation, occasionally an ablative absolute, clear marks of that tradition. And then of course this elegant and unmistakable prose style might be called classical in a less purely descriptive and more metaphorical way, too, because it was such a polished and finished part of the Borges voice (in both senses of the word "finished") that it remained the same for fifty years, from the first book of fictions that he published in 1935, *A Universal History of Iniquity*, right through the last pieces he published in the early eighties.

One group of people who have been especially perceptive in commenting on Borges's style is writers, for in many ways Borges is a "writer's writer" and writers have tended to look at his style not to marvel, as many lay commentators have done, but to learn. One of those who have commented at some length on Borges's style is Mario Vargas Llosa,¹ who has described it as having "great directness and restraint"; he speaks of the "elegance and straightforwardness of the prose" (p. 3), notes that Borges's "precision and concision are absolutes" (p. 8), and is emphatic about the radical change that Borges's style, its concision and purity, marked in the writing of Spanish. The influence of Borges's writing, Vargas Llosa says, has been inestimable.²

But save for one or two moments in Vargas Llosa's essay, his description (or praise) remains at that relatively high level of ab-

¹ "Borges's prose is an anomaly, for in opting for the strictest frugality he deeply disobeys the Spanish language's natural tendency toward excess. . . . [In] Borges there is always a logical, conceptual level to which all else is subservient. His is a world of clear, pure, and at the same time unusual ideas that, while never relegated to a lower plane, are expressed in words of great directness and restraint. . . . In forging a style of this kind. . . . Borges made a radical innovation in the stylistic tradition of Spanish. By purifying it, by intellectualizing and coloring it in such a personal way, he showed that the language... was potentially much richer and more flexible than tradition seemed to indicate" (Vargas Llosa 10).

² "I am quite aware of how ephemeral literary assessments may prove, but in Borges's case I do not consider it rash to acclaim him as the most important thing to happen to imaginative writing in the Spanish language in modern times. . . . I also believe that the debt we who write in Spanish owe to Borges is enormous" (Vargas Llosa 3).

stractionCwith almost no examples, no description of the *details* of the style, no definition of its "classicism." (Vargas Llosa seems to lack that gift for perfect quotation that Borges so fully possessed.) In fact, in the two or three places in his essay when Vargas Llosa points to a specific trait in the style, the trait is actually rather unusual, one might even say un-"classical": once, it is those verbs *conjeturar* and *fatigar*, "used transitively" and therefore oddly, "innovatively"; and at another point, in a remarkable aperçu, it is Borges's "strikingly original use of adjectives and adverbs." Otherwise, we are pretty much left with "classical" and its semi-synonyms *restrained, elegant, concise, precise, direct, straightforward*.

Indeed, I would contend that precisely *because* the style of Borges's fictions is at once so classical, so constant, yet, according to Vargas Llosa's and others' testimony, so new in Spanish-language letters, and therefore so challenging and unconventional (especially to Spanish-language readers), it has sometimes been difficult for commentators to see the traces of another, quite different and perhaps "older" style in it, a "baroque" that marked a period of Borges's prose writing which for many years he did everything he could to prevent us from seeing: Not only did he forbid any reprinting or reissuing of the books he had employed it in but he even bought up copies of the out-of-print volumes when he ran across them in bookshops. But another reason that this baroque has been so particularly difficult to see, I believe, is because we have been brainwashed by Borges not to see it. That Vargas Llosa saw traces of it (that "strikingly original use of adjectives and adverbs"), even without explicitly recognizing it for what it is, is a tribute to his perspicacity as a reader/writer, because over and over, in the forewords and afterwords that Borges wrote for his volumes of poetry and fiction, in interviews, and in the "Autobiographical Essay" written especially for a volume of English translations called *The Aleph and Other Stories*, Borges told us, tried to convince us, that he had overcome the baroque, purged it. We might take as the primary example of his several renunciations this declaration from the introduction to *Brodie's Report*, in 1970: "I have renounced the shocks of a baroque style as well as those afforded by unforeseen or unexpected endings. ... For many years I believed that it would be my fortune to achieve literature through variations and novel-

ties [a generally-cited characteristic of the baroque]; now that I am seventy years old I think I have found my own voice. ... Each language is a tradition, each word a shared symbol; the changes that an innovator may make are triflingC we should remember the dazzling but often unreadable work of a Mallarmé or a Joyce" (*Collected Fictions* 346; *OC* 2: 400).

In the "Autobiographical Essay," Borges rather sheepishly describes the way that he himself had tried to "dazzle" (unreadably) when he was young:

When I wrote these [early] pieces, I was trying to play the sedulous ape to two Spanish baroque seventeenth-century writers, Quevedo and Saavedra Fajardo, who stood in their own stiff, arid, Spanish way for the same kind of writing as Sir Thomas Browne in "Urne-Buriall." I was doing my best to write Latin in Spanish, and the book collapses under the sheer weight of its involutions and sententious judgments. (*The Aleph* 160)

This "confession" implies its own repentance: Borges is clearly saying that he took a wrong turn early on, but that somewhere along the way he got back on track. And because he said this so often and so sincerely, we have taken his (implicit) word that his later style is purified and "classicized" and that the baroque, as he always persisted in calling it, was behind him.

Yet where is this baroque that Borges says he has rid himself of? What did it look like? Where are these early essays on Sir Thomas Browne, on metaphor, that Borges mentions earlier in that paragraph quoted above? Until recently (several years after Borges's death) they were nowhere to be found. Specialists have known that they were in *Inquisiciones*, but for the general reader, or even the reader truly interested in ferreting out these things, they were simply invisible, for *Inquisiciones* existed only in the shadow-world implied by the title of another, this time available book, *Otras Inquisiciones*, where the style was far from baroque. The only style one ever saw, then, was that "classical" style, which was the only style left after Borges, like some Aztec king burying the traces of prior (and now repented?) pyramids under this latest one, had interred the others.

And Borges was painstaking in his burials. Although through the years many of his essays were reworked and reprinted in volumes that he did allow to see the light, many more of his early pieces, scores of them, in fact, originally appearing in magazines and newspaper supplements, were lost to view. Today, however, with the posthumous republication of Borges's first, suppressed volumes of essays (*Inquisiciones* [1925], *El tamaño de mi esperanza* [1926], and *El idioma de los argentinos* [1928]), and the anthologization of newspaper and magazine pieces from his earliest years (*Textos recobrados* 1919-1929), we can finally see for ourselves the style, or *styles*, plural, that Borges was so keen to renounce throughout his later life. In this essay, I will speak of only two of the early styles: the first, found in *Textos recobrados*, which is a style so strange that I dare not attempt to classify it in one or two adjectives; and the second, that baroque that Borges never wanted us to see but was always so ready to publicly disown. And *that* public disinheritance of an offspring almost no one had ever seen gives us a clue, I believe, to one of Borges's clever put-ons which he perpetrated upon us for a good forty years.³

But let us not get ahead of ourselves.

As a translator of Borges, and therefore vitally interested in any comment that might bear on Borges's writings (the writing of them, their style), I began to look for the baroque when it struck me one day that Borges was constantly saying he had abandoned it, and so I thought I would begin my search at the beginning of his career. But I discovered that the baroque was certainly not to be found in those manifestos and other texts that Borges wrote between 1919 and 1925 in order to define Ultraism, posit a new aesthetics, and comment on his contemporaries. There, the prose style is one that I might call bombastic, overwrought, confrontational; and Borges the person comes off, at least in print, as a very aggressive, rowdy-sounding, forward-looking young man, a rebel and an iconoclast. The prose is full of dashes and colons and exclamation points, but the texts are highly emphatic even beyond the punctuation; often they use polemical or didactic, one might almost say *pedantic*-

³ See Coleman, "The Playful Atoms of JLB" and Brackman *The Put-On*.

sounding, lists preceded by emphatic introductory words or phrases:

There exist two aesthetics. . . ("Manifiesto del Ultra," *Textos recobrados* 86)

And, in order to conquer that vision of newness one must throw overboard all things of the past. *All*: the rectilinear architecture of the Classics, Romantic exaltation, Naturalism's microscopes, the blue twilights that were the lyrical banners of Nineties poets. ("Manifiesto del Ultra," *Textos recobrados* 86)

Borges is constantly exclaiming *he aquí*, the Spanish equivalent of *voilà*. The pedantry is sometimes painfully blatant:

Let us go deeper into this assertion.
I shall explain the meaning of that malevolent conjecture. ("Acercas del expresionismo," *Textos recobrados* 177-78)

Unlike the later prose style, and unlike anything we might expect from any generally-accepted definition of the baroque, the style of these early pieces is highly interruptive, staccato, even "punchy"--one might dare call it *modern*, in the Futurist or Vorticist vein; the sentence will begin with a word or two, the subject of the sentence perhaps, or sometimes the barest adverb (*ya*: "already, once"; *ahora*: "now"), and then there will be an interruption set off by a dash, then a resumption, and then an emphatic assertion or a punch line:

And--after that literary display that smells of Baedeker or a movie poster--he writes the following: . . . ("Contra Crítica," *Textos recobrados* 79)

or

Painting--that is, the emotional transmutation of the outside world's visuality generally has two stumbling-blocks to get over: . . . ("El arte de Fernández Peña," *Textos recobrados* 78)

or

Once--having a presentiment of the obsolescence of books as expressive instruments--Ludwig Rubiner proclaimed that the Manifesto would constitute the most vital organ of our intellectual interchanges ("Vertical," *Textos recobrados* 76)

or

Verbal savoring--that is, refreshing one's spirit with language and its changes, its variations, its ebbs and flows, or with the sonority and suggestiveness of isolated words--is not, as is universally believed, a quality found only in those who frequent libraries or profess erudition ("Acotaciones," *Textos recobrados* 174)

or

Thus: with regard to form, the cortical integument of a book, which, although located outside the polemical and sociological radius, we remark that the author is pleased to suppose at the very head of the avant-garde adolescences.

Now I--for one--have no idea what that last sentence, if it is a sentence, says, but I assure the reader that Borges wrote it in 1925, and one can imagine why he might feel obliged to repudiate a period in his life that was marked by a style such as this--even if it was a style that I think no one would claim to be baroque.

Nor was the aesthetics that he was prescribing for Ultraist poetry baroque. *Ultraísmo* was an approach to writing, even more than a style, that the manifestos repeatedly tell us was defined by four major characteristics, or at least ambitions:

- (1) the *reduction* of poetry to its primary element, the metaphor;
- (2) the *elimination* of connective phrases and useless adjectives, any "filler" as we might call it;
- (3) the *abolition* of ornament, autobiographical confession, circumstantiation, preaching, and *recherché* fogginess; and

(4) the *synthesis* of two or more images into one, thereby increasing the single trope's suggestiveness.⁴

This program sounds more like a manifesto to *clean up* poetry than to make it baroque, and in fact numbers 2 and 3, especially, might well be thought to apply wonderfully to Borges's fully-realized late style.

Of course in the early work there are also prose-poems that one might call if not baroque at least "impassioned and turgid," such as a prose-ode to Russia that was merely the transcription in long lines of a poem he had written ("Rusia," *Textos recobrados* 56, 57) or a piece called "The Flame" ("La llama," *Textos recobrados* 36), but these are very few and the truth is, they are offset by other prose pieces such as two "parables" that are written in a very restrained and controlled prose that almost reminds one of the "late" style:

Había una vez un hombre prisionero de una muy larga cadena. Cien sometidos compañeros, como cien sometidos eslabones, estaban fusionados con él; bajo el yugo del día trituraban las piedras, mientras los maldecía el sol, que mordía como un lobo sus espaldas, o la tormenta, cuyas disciplinas flagelaban sus hombros, o la nevada, blanca como la lepra. Siete soldados armados de maldad y de alabardas los custodiaban. De noche, yacían sobre la tierra hostil. Cuando se incorporaba el alba lívida se despeñaban en la amarga faena con sus almas opacas de sopor por la penumbra tambaleante.

El cautivo pensaba, y al cabo de siete años, se dijo: --Será tan justo este orden de cosas? ... Tal vez mis heredades sean la vida y todas las victorias de la vida. Tal vez mis heredades sean los violines de los vientos, y los jardines de los campos, y los caminos errabundos y la locura de los arroyos libres...

Y tuvo miedo ante esta idea, que pecaba de blasfematoria e impía. Mas paulatinamente fue iluminando su alma y la acariciaba como un vedado deliquio. Y en las miserias cotidianas que le oprimían,

⁴ These characteristics freely translated from "Ultraísmo," *Textos recobrados* 128, although the general thrust of these traits are suggested in a number of essays from the same period; see *Textos recobrados*, "Ultraísmo" (108-11), "Ultraísmo" (83), "Manifiesto del Ultra" (86-87), "Anatomía de mi Ultra" (95); "La metáfora" (114-20); "[Manifiesto]," (150,) et passim.

érale un bálsamo sentir que él no era igual a sus hermanos que nunca habían pensado.

Al cabo de siete años dolientes, llegó a la paz de una resolución. Reconoció que su derecho era la vida y todo el esplendor de la vida. Y decidió la fuga.

Arribado que hubo a esta cúspide, vio que era imposible libertarse. ("Liberación," in "Parábolas," *Textos recobrados* 32-33)⁵

Although this piece is self-consciously "poetic" and somewhat archaic-sounding, it is also "clean" and restrained. So again we might ask: where *was* this baroque? And again, the answer must be that it was buried. Not uncollected and unreprinted like these pieces just quoted, but well and truly buried.

The biographies tell us that in 1925 Borges published his first collection of essays, a volume titled *Inquisiciones*. Before that, his essays, reviews, and those Ultraist manifestos now collected in *Textos recobrados* had been published in literary magazines in France, Spain, and Buenos Aires, and there had been poetry published both

⁵See also "Lucha," *Textos recobrados* 32. A relatively literal English translation of "Liberación" might be:

Once upon a time there was a man imprisoned for a very long sentence. One hundred yoked comrades, like one hundred yoked links in a chain, were joined to him; under the lash of the day they crushed rocks, all the while cursed by the sun, which chewed at their backs like a wolf, or the rain, whose scourgings flagellated their shoulders, or the snow, as white as leprosy. Seven soldiers armed with evil and with halberds stood guard over them. At night, they lay upon the hostile earth. When the livid dawn awoke, they would labor at their bitter task, their darksouls in a stupor from the stumbling half-light.

The captive thought, and after seven years he said to himself, "Can this order of things be so just? . . . Perhaps my estate is life and all the victories of life. Perhaps my estate is the violins of the wind and the gardens of the countryside and the wandering paths and the madness of free streambeds . . ."

And at that idea he grew afraid, for the idea bespoke the sin of blasphemy and impiety. Yet slowly his soul came to be illuminated, and he caressed the idea like a forbidden rapture. And in the daily hardships that oppressed him, it was like unto a balm to him to feel that he was not like his brothers, who had never thought.

After seven painful years, he reached the peace of a resolve. He recognized that he possessed a right to life and all the splendor of life. And he resolved to flee.

Yet when he had arrived at this pinnacle, he saw that it was impossible to free himself.

in magazines and in a volume titled *Fervor de Buenos Aires*. But *Inquisiciones* marked the first time that Borges set out to produce something in criticism and in the essay form that would be more lasting and substantial than periodical pieces. And then he suppressed it. In fact, he suppressed his first three volumes of essays--*Inquisiciones*, *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, and *El idioma de los argentinos*--and it was not until after his death that they appeared in Spanish. They have never appeared in English.

It is there, in *Inquisiciones*, that one finds the baroque that Borges buried, and it is there that one also finds a clear definition of those traces or persistences of the baroque that--to anticipate my argument a bit--I see in his later classical style. Let me quote just a sentence or two from Borges's appreciative essay on Sir Thomas Browne, first in Spanish and then in an "imitative" translation.

...Laudar en firmes y bien trabadas palabras ese alto río de follaje que la primavera suelta en los viales o ese río de brisa que por los patios de septiembre discurre, es reconocer una dádiva y retribuir con devoción un cariño. Lamentadora gratitud [C] son los trenos y esperanzada el madrigal, el salmo y la oda. [sentences A] Hasta la historia lo es, en su primordial acepción de romancero de proezas magnánimas. [D]⁶ ... Yo he sentido regalo de belleza en la labor de Browne y quiero desquitarme, voceando glorias de su pluma. ("Sir Thomas Browne," *Inquisiciones* 33)

To praise in firm and well-sculpted words that high river of foliage which the spring frees from its bounds, to flaunt its green among the lanes, or that river of breeze which across September lawns doth waft, is to recognize a gift and repay with devotion an act of paternal affection. Sorrowing gratitude [C] is the threnody, and hopeful gratitude the madrigal, the psalm, the ode. [sentences A] Even history may be so, in its primordial sense of composer of romances filled with magnanimous deeds [D]18.... I have felt a gift of beauty in the labors of Browne, and I would acquit myself to him by singing hosannas to his pen. (my translation)

⁶ These references will be used in my argument below.

Now I have used quite a few Latinisms and archaisms here, such as *doth waft*, because later in that essay Borges translates Browne into Spanish, and this is the English that he translates:

I cannot start at the presence of a Serpent, Scorpion, Lizard, or Salamander; at the sight of a Toad, or Viper, I feel in me no desire to take up a stone to destroy them. [*sentence B*]... If there be any among those common objects of hatred I doe contemne and laugh at, it is that great enemy of reason, vertue and religion, the Multitude, that numerous piece of monstrosity, which taken asunder seeme men, and the reasonable creatures of God; but confused together, make but one great beast, & a monstrosity more prodigious than Hydra. ... Neither in the name of multitude doe I onely include the base and minor sort of people; there is a rabble even amongst the Gentry, a sort of Plebeian heads, whose fancy moves with the same wheele as these; men in the same Levell with Mechanickes, though their fortunes doe somewhat guild their infirmities, and their purses compound for their follies. (Browne 67)

Borges's Spanish translation is as follows:

No me sobresalta la presencia de un escorpión, de una salamandra, de una sierpe. En viendo un sapo o una víbora, no encuentro en mí deseo alguno de recoger una piedra para destruirlos. [*sentence B*]... Si entre los comunes objetos de odio, hay tal vez uno que condeno y desprecio, es aquel adversario de la razón, la religión y la virtud, el Vulgo: numerosa pieza de monstruosidad que, separados, parecen hombre y las criaturas razonables de Dios, y confundidos, forman una sola y gran bestia un una monstruosidad más prodiosa que la Hidra. Bajo el nombre de vulgo no sólo incluyo gente ruin y pequeña; entre los caballeros hay canalla y cabezas mecánicas, aunque sus caudales doren sus tachas y sus talegas intervengan en pro de sus locuras. (*Inquisiciones* 37)

It seems clear enough that the Spanish of this translation is very much like the Spanish written "originally" by Borges; in fact, Borges seems to have been imitating Browne. The sentences of both writers are filled with doublings and triplings of not only nouns and adjectives but also entire phrases (*ese alto río de follaje que la primavera suelta en los viales o ese río de brisa que por los patios de septiembre discurre* in Borges's own words; "their fortunes doe some-

what guild their infirmities, and their purses compound for their follies" in the Browne). The "high" language is common to both authors, as is the complex and convoluted syntax.

This, then, was the missing or invisible baroque that I was looking for. It may be even more visible, or audible, in the essay on Quevedo which immediately follows the essay on Sir Thomas Browne in *Inquisiciones*. And it is in the Quevedo essay, too, that one finds the sort of definition of the baroque that Borges was working from and that was so important to him:

... [Casi] todos los libros son cotidianos en el plan, pero sobresalientes en los verbalismos de hechura. ... Fue perfecto en las metáforas, en las antítesis, en la adjectivación; es decir, en aquellas disciplinas de la literatura cuya felicidad o malandanza es discernible por la inteligencia. ("Menoscabo y grandez de Quevedo," *Inquisiciones* 44, 46)

Once again, I translate:

Almost all the books [written by Quevedo] are quotidian in plan, but remarkable in the verbalisms of their making. ... He was perfect in metaphors, in antitheses, in adjectivation; that is, in those disciplines of literature whose aptness or calamity is discernible by the intellect.

Surely this is, in a general way, what Borges later in life defined as "the baroque": literature more highly elaborated verbally than the ordinariness of the subject calls for; extremely self-conscious or intellectual at the level of the language; and filled with "wit" in the seventeenth-century meaning of the word. And there can be no doubt that Borges the fiction-writer does in large measure forgo the highly elaborate style that he both defines and employs here; in the later works his sentences become shorter, less grand or swaggering, more restrained. Yet it is my contention that there are three elements here that not only prefigure elements in Borges's much-praised later style but that actually continue in it absolutely unchanged. Those elements are first, Latin sentence construction of a particular kind; second, what Borges calls "adjectivation," of which I want to mention three sub-types; and third, "wit."

To begin with classical sentence structure, I would refer the reader to the first sentence of the Sir Thomas Browne passage, marked "sentence B." There we can see an example of chiasmus (the sidewise "X" structure of a sentence, in then out: ABC-CBA) which Borges used throughout the classical or late style. In the first two sentences of the Borges extract, marked "sentences A," can be seen the exaggerated use of parallelism that also is a characteristic of the late style: "To praise in firm and well carved words that high river of foliation which the spring frees from its bounds, so that it may flaunt its green among the lanes, or that river of breeze which across September lawns doth waft, is to recognize a gift and to repay with devotion an act of paternal affection." And of course, throughout the excerpts from both writers one can see the variations-with-repetitions that are everywhere in late Borges.

With respect to the "adjectivation" that Borges refers to, I call the reader's attention to two examples in the Borges excerpt [C and D]. The first is "sorrowing gratitude" and the second is "magnanimous deeds." In "sorrowing gratitude" one sees an example of the sort of "startling" rhetorical device that Borges talked about in one of the Ultraist manifestos that he wrote, this one in 1921 and titled simply "Ultraísmo" (*Textos recobrados* 109). Borges remarks there on such oxymoronic images as "arrogant humility," "universally alone," and "looking on darkness which the blind do see," from Shakespeare (*Textos recobrados* 118). There, then, is the principle for that phrase "sorrowing gratitude" that we have seen Borges himself coin--the principle of "mismatching" if not strict oxymoron, and a bit of John Donne-like wit thrown in.

And since oxymorons are by definition "startling," "shocking" (at least to the intellect), he expands his discussion of adjectivation strategies to further "shocks," specifically synaesthesia. Quevedo, he says, using simply the Spanish of his time, also renewed that language, and Borges quotes the following lines as demonstration:

Flor con voz,	Flower with voice,
Silbo alado, voz pintada,	Winged whistle, painted voice,
Lira de pluma animada,	Living feathered lyre,
Y ramillete cantor. . .	And singing bouquet. . .

In these lines Borges singles out the phrase *voz pintada* as “audacious” (*Textos recobrados* 116). The use of a startlingly new adjective, Borges says, and one must allow Borges his small exaggeration here, redeems the apostrophe to the somewhat clichéd bird, the nightingale. In another 1921 essay titled simply “Metaphor,” Borges gives another example from Quevedo of the use of a synaesthetic adjective: “negras voces,” black voices (“La metáfora,” *Textos recobrados* 116). While the Spanish of that time, it seems, did not customarily employ this sort of “mismatched” adjective, neither these examples nor the trope itself seems in any way shocking or innovative to us today, of course, because today poetry has fully adopted--even overused--the strategy. It is Rimbaudian *avant* Rimbaud, as we know--and as Borges with his wide reading knew (“Ultraísmo,” *Textos recobrados* 108-09), but he also knew that, as he quipped, “the Spanish language was his fate,” and so I believe--he implicitly says as much in “Ultraísmo”--that he was trying to find something in his own language heritage, in Spanish literature, that was as innovative and redemptive of poetry as the Symbolist or Imagist or Vorticist movements, all of which he was acquainted with, were in other languages and cultures.

It seems very revealing in this regard that when Borges talks about Sir Thomas Browne, he makes much of the fact that Browne used Castillian words such as *dorado*, *armada*, *noctámbulos*, *crucero*, and the phrase *beso las manos* (though misspelled). Thus, for his own ideological purposes Borges implicitly claims Browne, one of Borges’s most admired writers and a model for his prose style, for Spanish literature! In Ultraism, Borges and his colleagues were attempting to renew Spanish-language poetry (and later, the poetry of Argentina), but this renovation had to be done in the Spanish poetic tradition; Borges had no interest in redoing French or English experiments. And so he sought Spanish writers who had invigorated the poetry of *their* time, hoping to find in them strategies for the reinvigoration that he was now attempting. If he had to “naturalize” Sir Thomas Browne or even Shakespeare--most uncharacteristically, in the essay cited he quotes Shakespeare in Spanish translation--or if they could be made to be seen not as “national,” English writers but rather as “universal,” then certainly

it was easy enough, for the cause, to make them honorary Argentinians.

What about “magnanimous deeds”? Here, we must go back for a second to the Sir Thomas Browne essay and read what Borges says there about Browne’s prose style:

He “latinized” to perfection, and in that regard his activity, contemporary with that of Milton, is comparable to that carried out in Spain by Diego de Saavedra. ...

... Browne latinized with exceptional efficacy and yet that approximation to Latin was common to many of the writers of his time.

It is my conjecture that the frequent Latinism of the age was no mere high-sounding gratification, no mere stratagem for swelling the page, *but rather an eagerness to achieve universality and clarity.* There are two acceptations for the words of Romance languages: one, that given the word by general use, by regional caprice, by the vicissitudes of the century; the other, the etymological, the absolute, the acceptance which is consonant with its original in Latin or Greek. (And let it be noted that English, with respect to its intellectual repertoire, is Romance.) The Latinists of the seventeenth century held to this second and primary acceptance. (*Textos recobrados* 35, 40, emphasis added)⁷

What Borges is pointing out here in 1925 is a method that he employed all the rest of his life, especially in his fictions: the etymologized adjective, as I have called it. One of the most famous

⁷ *Op.cit.*, pp. 35, 40. The original reads as follows:

... Latinizó con perfección y en ese sentido su actividad coetánea de Milton es comparable a la ejercida en España por Diego de Saavedra. ... (35)

... Browne alcanzó a latinizar con excepcional eficacia, pero el arrimarse al latín fue voluntad común de los escritores de su época.

Es conjetura mía que la frecuente latinidad de su tiempo no fue un mero halago sonoro ni una artimaña para ampliar el discurso, sino un ahínco de universalidad y claridad. Dos acepciones hay en la palabras de las lenguas romances: una, la consentida por el uso, por los caprichos regionales, por los vaivenes del siglo; otra, la etimológica, la absoluta, la que se acuerda con su original latino o helénico. (Conste que el inglés, en cuanto a repertorio intelectual, es romance.) Los latinistas del siglo XVII se atuvieron a esta segunda y primordial acepción. (40)

opening lines in Spanish literature is this: *Nadie lo vio desembarcar en la unánime noche*: "No one saw him slip from the boat in the unanimous night." What an odd adjective, *unánime*. But it clearly responds to Borges's intention, expressed explicitly not only here in the 1925 essay on Sir Thomas Browne but also in the 1949 story called "The Immortal," to let the Latin or Greek root govern the Spanish usage. In "The Dead Man" there is a "splendid" woman: her red hair glows. Indeed, in Borges, *espléndido/a* always has either the etymological sense of *glowing* or the sense only slightly metaphorized from that, of *glorious*. Somewhere else there are "concave" hands: cupped, of course. And there are many more examples, including the word that started it all, "magnanimous," for in "The Immortal" we read of soldiers who "magnanimously covet the steel blade": with greatness of spirit, of course, "nobly." "Generosity," the acceptance of general use and regional caprice for "magnanimous," has nothing to do with it.

I want to emphasize that while Borges attributes this innovative usage of language to writers we might call baroque, he insists that the technique be seen as stemming from "an eagerness to achieve universality and clarity." Indeed, one of the characteristics that Vargas Llosa signalled as most particularly "Borgesian"—the use of the verb *fatigar* transitively—was first used in Spanish not by Borges, Borges tells us, but by Góngora, who was literally translating Vergil: *peinar el viento, fatigar la selva/ Venatu invigilant pueri, sylvasque fatigant* ("Gongorismo," *Textos recobrados* 328). Thus, this most idiosyncratic, idiolectic word represents Borges's attempt to achieve universality, becomes an element in universal literature, by adopting a usage whose genealogy claimed some of the most distinguished writers in world history.

If we look at the writers that Borges speaks about most often in these early years—Browne, Quevedo, Góngora, Shakespeare—and look at his pronouncements on the elements of their writing, we discover that more often than not Borges seems to be talking about himself, his practices, his ambitions. When he talks about Browne, for example, he describes him as the very "type" of the literary person, in whom, as Borges describes it, "one can see all the signs of the class: an occupation with the glory of language, a reverence and concern for it, a spinning-out of prolix theories that would legiti-

mize his labor, the sense of himself as a man of his age, the study of other languages, and even the leadership of a salon, the organization of literary bands" (*Inquisiciones* 35). I believe that what we see here, as in many other places, is the young man Borges, seeing himself reflected in his models. We know that in fictions such as "The Maker" there is some confusion between Homer and Borges, both blind poets, both proud and at the same time feeling a bit unworthy, both eager to meet and get the better of the world yet fearful of it. And likewise with blind Milton, whom Borges so often mentions. Thus, it seems that Borges--like the young poets T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound at the beginning of their careers, reintroducing Anglo-American culture to figures of the past whose aesthetics or poetics would allow the young poets themselves to be better appreciated--seems to be, as he phrased it in an appreciation of Kafka, "inventing his precursors." For Borges, that meant his *Spanish* precursors.

There is one further "adjectivation" strategy that must be mentioned here, though it is related to the English poet John Milton, not a "Spanish" poet such as Quevedo or Sir Thomas Browne. That is the technique of hypallage. This is from the preface to the volume *El hacedor*, *The Maker*: "To left and right, absorbed in their waking dream, rows of readers' momentary profiles in the light of the 'scholarly lamps,' as a Miltonian displacement of adjectives would have it. I recall having recalled that trope here in the Library once before, and then that other adjective of setting--the *Lunario's* 'arid camel,' and then that hexameter from the *Aeneid* that employs, and surpasses, the same artifice: *Ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram*" (*Collected Fictions* 291, OC 2: 157). This displacement of the adjective, or hypallage--*arid camel*, *scholarly lamps*--is in fact everywhere in the later Borges, for it both opens and closes the fictional corpus. In the first sentence of the first "biography" in *A Universal History of Iniquity* (1935) we read this: "In 1517, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, feeling great pity for the Indians who grew worn and lean in the drudging infernos (*laboriosos infiernos*) of the Antillean gold mines. . . ." And at the end of his career, in one of the last fictions that he wrote, "The Rose of Paracelsus," in the volume *Shakespeare's Memory*, Borges uses this trope twice: *fatigado sillón*/ "weary chair," and *mano sacrilega*/ "sacrilegious hand." Thus we are presented with a

stylistic trait, a fingerprint, that identifies Borges throughout his career. Other clear examples of this technique are *una cicatriz rencorosa*/ "a vengeful scar," *alcohol pendenciero*/ "belligerent alcohol," *biblioteca ilegible*/ "illegible library," and *dentelladas blancas y bruscas*/ "brusque, white bites." Clearly, as he tells us, he borrowed the technique from Milton (but also, to ensure its Spanish heritage, from Leopoldo Lugones), and in both the Browne and Quevedo essays in 1925, he has mentioned Milton as another of the world-class "adjectivalists."

I believe that these three examples of adjective use--the Latinized adjective, the more-or-less oxymoron, and the displaced adjective--all used, despite anything Borges might say to the contrary, to "shock" (both dazzle and delight) the attentive intellect, can give us some idea of the way that Borges might be witty, in the seventeenth-century, John-Donne sense of the word. Here, we might recall *conceptismo*, which, Borges says (*Inquisiciones* 47, 48) is the solution that Quevedo found to the problem of the registers of the language in poetry, that problem about whether to use "high" and illustrious words or "low" plebeian ones. (Borges talking about himself again, no doubt.) *Conceptismo* is, according to one literary dictionary, "a stylistic form that seeks to express clever and penetrating ideas by means of verbal devices such as puns, antitheses, and epigrams." In English, as I have noted, this style might be thought of as parallel to "wit" as we know it in Donne and the metaphysicals. What Borges says is that *Quevedo* employed it to restore to ideas the boldness and brusqueness that made them so wondrous and so startling when the intellect first apprehended them. What better description could there be of what Borges's clear intellect does for us in the stories?

But this "linkage of two registers," this verbal playfulness bordering on acrobatics, this "wit," if I may call it that, is quite different from the sort of writing done by another of Spain's great stylists, Luis de Góngora. Borges criticizes "Gongorism" for being an attempt to "distort the Castilian phrase into Latin disorder," while he praises "Quevedism" for being an attempt to "restore to ideas the rough, brusque character that made them astounding when first presented to the spirit" (*Inquisiciones* 48). For Borges, then, style as syntax is nothing, or, worse than nothing, "deforma-

tion"; true style lies in strategies of adjectivation and metaphorization which restore the world and its ideas to "newness."

When I first began looking into the problem of the invisible or buried baroque, I believed--Borges led me to believe--that I would find a *reaction* to a style, a reaction to or rebellion against the youthful and rather bombastic style that he had employed in his dealings with the Ultraist group of poets that he was part of in Spain in the years from 1918 to 1921 and also in his early writings when he returned to Buenos Aires, and of course a reaction to the "baroque." Yet I find that what must be talked about is the way those years and those styles never left him, the way he carried the distinctive impress of those important years, those important readings, those important models with him to the end of his life, though transformed by craft. He abandoned the "disorderliness" of Latinate syntax, the confusions and convolutions of his "mentor" Sir Thomas Browne (and the unadmitted Góngora), and yet he maintained the "baroque shocks" of Browne's and Quevedo's and Góngora's adjective strategies, the "foreignness" (read *universality*) of certain verbs used in a non-traditional (read *Latin, Vergilian*) way. And so, within a syntax purified and purged of all unnecessary complications--its interruptions either suppressed or moved to the beginning of the sentence, so that the subject and verb are no longer violently torn apart; its double and triple adjectives, adverbs, phrases, and clauses trimmed to one single telling choice--and punctuated with nothing more violent than commas and semi-colons, Borges nonetheless *preserves* the baroque. He never abandoned it at all, or got beyond it--instead, he appropriated it and made it his own.

My sense of how this synthesis and appropriation *happened* is actually rather simple, because I don't believe it happened at all; I believe that with Borges, it simply is. I believe that all of those polar dualities that commentators try to apply when we talk about Borges's stories or even the man himself--public versus private, classical versus modern or classical versus baroque, prose versus poetry, timid versus self-assertive, rebel versus conformist, etc.--and all those other not necessarily opposite but still *apparently* clear or well-bounded categories such as genre-definitions, do *not* work for Borges the man or for his work, and in fact Borges himself seems to have been determined to ensure that they not work. In

this way of looking at Borges, he is not just the usual intriguing writer and person; he is in fact a man who thrived on and cultivated paradox, both literary and biographical, a man who insisted that all safe boundaries sooner or later blur. Oxymoron is defined as the violent linking of opposites; Borges seems to embody the *gentle* linking of opposites, and yet the oxymoron is no less real. As we know from stories such as "The Garden of Forking Paths," "An Examination of the Works of Herbert Quain," "Death and the Compass," "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," "The South," and others, and as we know from such witty sayings as "I am not sure which of us it is that's writing this page" or "Death is life lived, life is death which is coming," Borges was intrigued by the paradox of existing and not existing at the same time, or existing in two "different" modes at once, the idea that rather than having to decide between two or three or more apparently divergent or mutually exclusive courses, one might somehow be able, or cursed, to follow both or all.

Early on, Borges in fact tells us very explicitly that the worlds he created and the style he used to create them would be governed not by the iron rule of "either/or," but rather by the infinitely more generous, provocative, and creative rule of "both/and," not by exclusion and the falling-away of possibilities but by inclusion, even inclusion of opposites. I quote again from that 1921 essay "Metaphor": "In algebra, the plus sign and the minus sign are mutually exclusive; in literature, contraries join in brotherhood and impress upon the consciousness a sensation which is mixed, yet no less true than those others (*Textos recobrados* 118)."⁸ And as I came to take this view of Borges I was constantly reminded of something that my friend and colleague the eminent Hispanicist Luce López-Baralt reports Borges once, in the early eighties, delightedly saying about Arabic: In Arabic, Borges marveled, every word is simultaneously itself, its opposite--and a kind of camel. Rephrasing that, we might say that in Borges, for virtually every statement, every affirmation, that can be made about his work and his style--and probably, I

⁸ The original reads as follows: "En álgebra, el signo más y el signo menos se excluyen; en literatura, los contrarios se hermanan e imponen a la conciencia una sensación mixta; pero no menos verdadera que las demás."

would add, about the man himself--the opposite is also simultaneously true, and then there is the uncapturable thing itself. (By the way, by 1921 Borges was already beginning to hone that witticism about Arabic, because in "Metaphor" he notes how in Arabic there are words that may translate into two opposite things, as in English the verbs *cleave* and *ravel* [*Inquisiciones* 118-19]).

On the other hand, I believe it must be recognized that there *is* a progression of sorts in the style from the earliest years to the "mature" style that we all are familiar with. So what I would argue is that while deep down he was absorbing everything and either saving it up or putting it to some immediate use, on another, more discernible level Borges was constantly reacting or rebelling: first, as a very young man he reacted or rebelled against the poetic status quo, against what a young man would understandably perceive as the smothering weight of the past. This is a reaction that took place *in* Spain and *against* Spain, *within* the tradition of Spanish poetry and *against* that tradition, as though the young man, still living at home but increasingly exposed to the wider world outside, should quite naturally be reacting against the attitudes, values, and even aesthetics that his parents, or in this case the *madre patria*, embodied. In Spain he joined a group of young poets and created a poetics, Ultraism, that broke with the past and called for a clean modernity. But then he realized that Ultraísmo was somewhat "of the moment," more than a little "trendy," and possibly as Frenchified as its critics accused it of being, and that his own talent raised him above virtually all the members of the group both in Spain and in Buenos Aires, and so again he reacted, this time against his own group's poetics, trying to find a way to express his own particular vision of the way *his* work was going to be. What he found were some of the classic writers of Spanish literature who were at the same time themselves innovators: Quevedo and Góngora, with a little hybridization from Sir Thomas Browne. But although Borges made the understandable young man's mistake of imitating their style, he finally did not take these writers as his models because of their baroque; quite the contrary, it was for their timelessness, he says, their connection to the very springs of thought and poetry. Although as he himself says, he wound up "playing the sedulous ape" to them, doing his best to write "disorderly" Latin in Spanish, it

was the compression and underlying orderliness of Latin itself that actually attracted him. How deliciously ironic, that Borges reacted against the past by becoming relentlessly avant-garde, and then against the avant-garde by becoming relentlessly antiquarian. But soon another reaction occurred. He began to write in "Argentine," to differentiate and distance himself from the Spaniards, from the weight of the past. So this time, now eschewing at once the past, the European present, and timelessness itself, he chose the Argentine present and local color. (Because this phase was so ephemeral, and left such faint traces,⁹ I have chosen not to talk about it here.)

And then we come to his last reaction or rebellion. In the "Autobiographical Essay," Borges tells us that it was Adolfo Bioy Casares that brought this reaction about. And there, as Borges himself recognizes, we find another irony: the younger man, Bioy, becomes the teacher of Borges, the older man. "Opposing my taste for the pathetic, the sententious, and the baroque," Borges says, "Bioy made me feel that quietness and restraint are more desirable. If I may be allowed a sweeping statement, Bioy led me gradually toward classicism" (*The Aleph* 173). But like so many things in Borges, this is both true and not-so-true. Clearly, although Bioy may have been a catalyst for this move, Borges had in some sense been seeking classicism since his earliest attempts at poetry, his earliest attempts even at prose. The pendulum-swings that his style went through never seem to have obscured the line of development, which was toward a self-expression that was intellectual yet humorous, quiet yet startling, new yet timeless yet old: rather than discard effects or stylistic traits, Borges incorporated them.

Borges's writing, we know, often incorporates a conspiratorial wink at the initiated reader. How many chuckles Borges must have gotten from having convinced us all that he had "abandoned the shocks of the baroque," when indeed, like Poe's purloined letter, those shocks were lying about in plain view. Borges's "classical" style--what he even dared, late in life, to call his "plain style,"

⁹ Though there is that wonderful word "memorioso," a "country" word, an "Argentine" word.

and that must have inspired a quiet laugh—holds within itself its entire history, then, from the earliest days of his serious theorizing about literature (the centrality of metaphor, the elimination of connective phrases and useless adjectives, the abolition of ornament, and the synthesis of two or more images into one) through stylistic experimentations with Latin syntax and dazzling or shocking adjective and adverb strategies, to the quiet, clean syntax of the later years. The archaeologist digging to find the lower strata of Borges's style does not have to dig too deep, after all; there are outcroppings of the past everywhere, on every line. One simply needs the eye to see it—and what better guide than Borges himself?

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