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THE OTHER WRITING

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in Latin America's Writing Culture*

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A SHORT PARABLE

Borges's Admonition to the Self-seeking Reader

Within the economy of certain literary institutions, the politics of interpretation could be a deadly game. Borges's literary corpus emanates from a world context where the interpretation of politics often entails equally dire consequences. It should not surprise us, then, that this most notorious of Latin American writers should be dramatizing this predicament with the full force of its most foreboding and fatal consequences. Borges has often allegorized the ambivalent fate of reading and writing as an enterprise whose random contingencies could just as easily spell a saving grace—however deluded and illusionary—as a fatal blow, however indifferent and casual, but no less deadly for its matter-of-factness.

As author, Borges demures on proprietary authority, often transferring that "privilege" to the reader, or allaying the dread of that awesome responsibility by allying his authorial activity with the interpretive acts of the reader, whose burden of responsibility traditionally has been taken as "less consequential," though, as the Borges plot often proves, no less ominous. If the author bequeaths, Borges appears to imply, the reader is the hermetic executor, the hermeneutical executioner, of the bequest. Borges's author, more often than not, warily wishes to forego proprietary

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responsibility and its attendant consequences by re-leasing what he does not claim to have ever owned unto the desultoriness of the happenstance, unto inheritors of anonymity's randomness, that is, the unknown readers. The hermeneutical appropriator who would lay claim, that is, who would fool-heartily own up to an exclusive and impropriety appropriation, who would, in other words, reduce that bequest to a re-presentation in/of his/her own reflection, is surely exposing him/herself to consequences equally or perhaps more dire than those the wary author saw fit to avoid in his disclaiming bequest to unnamed "beneficiaries." The dramatic space where Borges has most often thematized this predicament lies, as he has mapped it, between the book and writing. The action of this drama consists in the suspenseful oscillation between the two, where the book translates as natural totality, as metaphysical absolute, as transcendental completion, as inappellable inscription and implacable law, on the one hand, and, on the other, writing as tentative and differential/deferential performance with provisional claims that abstain from the attempt to contain exhaustively writing's bequest within their own reflection.

Clearly, I am summarily rehearsing two alternate modes of interpretive activity that most vividly contend in the literary and philosophical institutions today, i.e., the veridic-univocal and the ludic-polysemic, the logocentric and the grammatological, the metaphysical and the differential. While Borges is often invoked as precursor in whom the debates of the contemporary critical institution have a franchise, the critical and exegetic work done is frequently not commensurate to the sweep of these often tendentious claims for/on Borges.

I should like to essay, on a minimal and modest scale, such a parsing with no intent at any proprietary or exhaustive representational claims. By way of such a tentative reading I hope to show how Borges's ludic casualness amounts to a critical reversal whose masterful persiflage spells an understated dramatization of the death sentence awaiting hermeneutical hubris when it would venture the attempt to contain writing within its interpretive and specular reflection. It is a Faustian plot with a Borgesian turn that juxtaposes, at the level of reading, as I have said, the paradigm of the book to the periphrastic pursuits of writing and reading as contingent activities. As in the best of Latin American writing, the pragmatic and political entailments are deftly sublimated in Borges. And one need not be a

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Michel Foucault to realize that in a context such as Latin America the extratextual realities, the torsions of “real-world” determinations, have traditionally been so pervasively deadly that a more subtle tact of textual formalization may well be the indispensable mask or ironic grimace that redeems literary/critical discourse from the heavy-handedness of apocalyptic overpoliticization. In this sense, we may yet learn to read Borges’s cavalierly reactionary political assertions in the light and shadow of this necessarily misdirected and oblique narrative. Where the thrust of the Borgesian discourse may lie, in other words, may well be—as in the better part of Latin America’s texts—in the implicit otherness of its understatement, in the tropical other writing in the writing. Latin America is not unique in this regard. As in most contexts where censorship, unbending normative imperatives, or institutional intolerance reign, forms of misdirection, ironic or otherwise, as well as textual circumspection have been the necessary recourse. Borges’s lessons in reading, I venture to say, could well teach us to read accordingly.

The Borges text I shall try to track here is an incipient and factitious miscellany entitled “The Mirror of Ink” (“El espejo de tinta”). It first appeared in the periodical *Crítica* of Buenos Aires on 30 September 1933, and two years later it was strategically placed in an appendage aptly called “Etcetera” of that desultory congeries *Historia universal de la infamia* by the wily Borges.¹ The tale’s anecdote is simple. Its allegory much less so: The implacably cruel ruler of the Sudan, Yaqub the Ailing, has plundered the country to satisfy the Egyptian tax-collectors. Yaqub dies “on the fourteenth day of the moon of Barmahat, in the year 1842.” There are those who claim that the wizard Abd-er-Rahman al-Masmudi, either by poison or dagger, perpetrated that death. Our narrator has doubts about that claim. Since Yaqub was called the Ailing, “a natural death is more likely.” We are told that Captain Richard F. Burton spoke to the wizard in 1853 and that our narrator quotes what was recounted to Burton: that the wizard’s brother masterminded an unsuccessful conspiracy; that, as a result, his brother fell victim to the sword of the ruler’s justice and the wizard suffered captivity; that the wizard is spared on promising to show Yaqub “shapes and appearances still more wonderful than those of the magic lantern”; that this display in a mirror of ink culminates in Yaqub’s self-contemplation; that, finally, in that self-apperception, Yaqub witnesses his own execution by the

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hand of Abu Kir, the Court executioner who had dispatched the wizard's brother. In the spectral presence of his own countenance and of his execution, Yaqub tumbles to the floor dead.

Now "etcetera," as we have all been taught in our earlier school days, is a desideratum deployed to convince ourselves, if not others, that we know or command more than we actually do, and the ironic Borges turns that strategic datum, how consciously it is hard to determine, back on itself. He accomplishes that turn or deflection, deliberately or not, through an errancy that de-authorizes the pseudoknowledge immanent in the self-convinced insecurity of an *etceterum*; and, in doing so, he gives free play to the indeterminacy of "etcetera" as a rhetorical figure. The deferential depletion of self-certainty or conviction that ensues from the self-reassuring insecurity of this turn allows the author to err with a clean conscience, or, at least, with the more serviceable error that ensues from self-effacement as opposed to self-privileging conviction. And err he does, cunningly or naively. The ruse implicit in this sort of enabling power play has come to be one of the identifying marks of the Borgesian enterprise. One could venture the observation that Borges's project has consisted over the years in converting its own enterprise—writing—into the differential and cunningly diffident alterity or excrescence of a desultory *etceterum*. Through that ploy, allegorically dramatized—as we shall see presently—in "The Mirror of Ink," Borges has managed to attain the spectral other, the mirrored reversal, of an ironic depletion or de-authorization of the written sign and of authorial self-effacement. He has managed, that is, to convert, to divert, the furtive gesture of diffidence and its litotes into a posture (really an imposture) of authorial power, obtained as a dividend through an investment in the multivalent practices of reading.

The duality, the duplicity, the *di-vertissement* of this tactic comprises the identifying signature of "The Mirror of Ink." A title with a semantic overload, for if we associate "Ink" with the di-ersionary and ambiguous enterprise of writing, "Mirror," the genitive alterity in the title, is already a surfeit term given to engendering multiple and supernumerary excess. In short, and at the very least, the title of this early Borges tale figures a pleonasm. Borges's avowed abhorrence of mirrors may well reside in his early precognition that his own activity as writer entails a mercurial, that is hermetic and hermeneutical, wizardry, a *spectral* self-presence with its

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attendant sleight of hand, its furtive gesture, fraudulent propriety, and incontinent kleptomania of abysmal citation. The measure of error in Borges's *etceterum*, therefore, is a measure of the writer's mercurial errancy, the furtive adventure of the thieving Mercury/Hermes, herald of gods and souls, of medicine and writing.

The mirrored or spectral mendacity of Borges here resides in the first, the predicative paragraph of this tale of infamy. As an early ruse, it establishes a precedent for what will have become in Borges an irrepressible constant: the apocryphal pre-text (or graphic pretext). Borges's attribution of this Egyptian tale of the wizard Abd-er-Rahman al-Masmudi and of the infamous Yaqub the Ailing to Richard Burton's *The Lake Regions of Central [Equatorial] Africa* has been detected as a false attribution by the tale's English translator, Norman Thomas di Giovanni.² Di Giovanni identifies the tale's origins, the elided pretext, in Edward William Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. He tells us that "'The Mirror of Ink' has nothing whatever to do with Burton. It is pure, original Borges and gives the lie to the statement in the Preface to the first edition [of *Universal History of Infamy*] that 'As for the examples of magic that close this volume, I have no other rights to them than those of translator and reader.'" We must remember, however, that di Giovanni is himself a translator, in this instance the translator of a purported translator. And if these *tradittori* manage to dupe each other into compounded entanglement, surely we must guard against an extended entrapment that might ensnare us within the web of the scheme. How much more believable than Borges is di Giovanni here when he assures us of the authenticity of a "pure, original Borges"? At a more basic and problematic level, we might inquire, "Who, after all, is the referent of the preceding question?" before we seek to establish a "pure and original" specimen. I suppose we should be thankful that translators as such are neither critical readers nor logicians (they are at once less and hazardously more than that) and read them, as we must our own exegetical intervention, with the grain of salt that is their due.

Duped by Borges's seemingly optative stratagem, di Giovanni opts for the ready-made and, on the face of it, credible decoy and he settles with stripping the first veil. "The mirror of ink itself comes from Edward William Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, one of Borges's favorite books. What is seen in that pool of ink is of Borges's own

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invention, however, not Lane's." Di Giovanni's statement here reveals more than he himself might suspect. For Borges's *invention* is Borges's *invenio*, that is to say, what Borges *literally* comes upon. And while what he comes upon may not be in Lane, the possibility of its preexistence is not precluded, as di Giovanni would have us believe. What one translator may impute to another as a lie may well be the most assured "truth," like a positive magnetic field that ensues from two negative poles, or from a compounded fiction. Thus, when di Giovanni notes that Borges's statement in the preface to the first edition ("As for the examples of magic that close the volume, I have no other rights to them than those of translator and reader") belies itself, we can take di Giovanni's incredulity as we would an image that is righted by virtue of its reflection in redoubled mirrors—one of writerly ink and one of hermeneutical mercury.

But di Giovanni's putative addendum as corrective is tautologically excessive to the spectacle, for Borges's invention already comprises a pleonastic surfeit and, by dint of his spectral title's double "lie," Borges's declared role as translator and reader of the thaumaturgies that trail as miscellaneous "Etcetera" in his book masks a veiled truth. In the obliquity of that deflected "truth," Borges is, in fact, the translator, reader, and executor, albeit not solely of a misappropriation from Burton, nor exclusively of a datum from Lane. There is yet another Egyptian tale that Borges is interweaving, and hermetically delivering: an Egyptian *abecedarium scripturae* found in Plato, specifically in the *Phaedrus*, in the *Theaetetus*, and alluded to, as well, in other Platonic dialogues. Borges's citational *invenio* simultaneously educes and elides the graphic trace that lies embedded in Plato citationally, anagrammatically (in mirrored refraction) as the differential *pharmakos*. Insofar as Borges's tale is figured as a quote or as a citation—either through a ruse or a naiveté, with its self-differential falsities, half truths, and veiled potentialities—that tale figures as tautology, as abyssal citation of that which it cites. Tautological figuration, however, is ultimately self-presence, even if it be spectral, and the imminent danger in such plenitude or totalization is an unbounded hubris with all the marks of a fatal gesture. That violent eventuality, too, is emplotted into Borges's dramatic rendering of a Platonic citation. In this particular tale, the paroxysm devolves upon the sword of an executioner. Elsewhere in the Borges codex, it eventuates in ironic self-mockery and playful derision, as in the tautological plenitude of "El Aleph," for instance.

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In Plato's *Phaedrus*, writing is itself the object of tracing, clearly a redoubled and spectral undertaking. The invention of writing, traced to the Egyptian Theuth, is dubbed a *pharmakon*. Now, in our poststructuralist era, the term *pharmakon* as used to designate writing is untranslatable. In other words, it is immune to the mendacity or betrayal of univocal translation by virtue of the fact that it already "betrays" itself in its equivocations. That is, the chain of significations loosed by the term entail their own mutual reversibility, their mirrored inversion, and their virtual self-contradiction *without* interdicting or canceling each other. This is what we mean when we say that a term is "citational"; that the term becomes capable of quotation which "cites" other senses of itself in simultaneity. The exclusive rendering of such a term as only one of its significations becomes tantamount to the violence of catachresis, of misplacement, or to the mortal delusion entailed by the flat monody of a univocal reduction.

In "The Mirror of Ink" Borges simultaneously avoids these traps and dramatizes the foreboding dangers for those who would succumb to such temptation of normatively and righteously privileging *one* face of the *vultus mercurialis*. In my own reading of Borges here, you no doubt have noticed that I do not reduce Borges to interpreter or fabulist of Plato exclusively (as di Giovanni does with Lane). Both Burton and Lane persist, even as spectral "negatives," as mirror reflections, as differential alterities, as abysmal citations, even if they resonate in the guise of errancy, as ploy, or as naively wrought *découpage*. Reading, as Borges demonstrates through his obliquity, is no exclusionary exercise; because even what we might opt to exclude, in the mere rehearsal of that option, the "excluded" exerts a "determinacy," leaves a trace of otherness, a differential inscription, a graft, on the "included." Thus, what we do not care to recall or sanction haunts in our reticence, and, in this sense, what is left out persists.

The deferent, citational spirit of this mutuality is precisely the necessary and irreducible virtue (the *virtuality*, as we would say in philosophy) of Plato's *pharmakos*. The Platonic dialogues conjugate the multifarious term *pharmakon* variously as charm, remedy, poison, recipe, drug, antidote, artificial tint. When, in the *Phaedrus*, Theuth, the divinity-inventor of writing, offers his invention to the Egyptian king Thamus as "Here, O King, . . . is a discipline that will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories: both memory and instruction have found their recipe [*pharmakon*]" (274c–e, 275a–b), in his famous response King

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Thamus inverts the utility of the “recipe,” thus imbuing the *pharmakon* with its contrary signification—poison rather than remedy. Subsequently, the spectral *pharmakos* entails in its multifarious etymology the echoic significations of magician, wizard, poisoner, the propitiatory sacrifice expelled from the city for the community’s purification, i.e., the scapegoat, that part of itself which the city turns out.

This complex chain of irreducible denotation becomes conflated into the intricate mesh of Borges’s text. For the critical reader, for the student of writing, “The Mirror of Ink” becomes a recognition scene, a spectacular scene of writing. From the declarative title to the appellative coda, the reader, the executor-trustee of writing, is faced with the prismatic dispersal of the graphic looking glass. The mirror of the title is itself a *pharmakon*, since *tinta*, “ink,” that artificial tincture, vital fluid of writing (or, as Borges puts it, that “specular water mirroring / the other blue within its bottomless sky” [“Los espejos,” *La Nación*, 30 Aug. 1959]), is etymologically rooted in *pharmakon*.

The shimmering fragments sketched here from the *fata Borgiana* glimmer as citational prescription, as a grammatic spectacle, as a reading lesson in writing. The tale’s wizard, Abd-er-Rahman al-Masmudi, “whose name may be translated as the ‘Servant of the All-Merciful,’” is the steadfast (“al-Masmudi”) servant of Theuth as much as, if not more than, of the God of the Arab Prophet, whom the citational allusion to Burton and the skewed elision of Lane overtly suggest. In this sense, al-Masmudi, the steadfast, the part of the wizard’s name that goes unglossed in the tale, exhibits a more enduring loyalty to the ancient pharmacy that resonates in the epithet by which he is characterized: the wizard, *el hechicero*, the *pharmakos*—servant and avatar of Theuth, god of the *sentence*, written and executed, life-giving and life-taking. As in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, he pleads before the king, offering the multiple *pharmakon* to the ailing Yaqub, promising “shapes and appearances more wonderful than those of the magic lantern.” Cunningly, allusively, Borges’s narrator beckons us *beyond* Burton, Lane, and the ruse of the *Arabian Nights* and its magic lantern, of which this tale too might be misread as an apocryphal *etceterum*, as a desultory and belated addendum. We are enjoined to witness the wonderful shapes and appearances conjured by the pharmacy of this *pharmakeus*, by its grafting *calamus*, incisive and ambivalent scissors, Venetian paper, the pharmaceu-

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tical inkhorn, the chafing dish with some live coals, coriander seeds, and an ounce of benzoin, in short, the perennial alchemy for smoke and mirrors.

In this necessarily minimal commentary I can only suggest, synoptically, the turns by which this alchemy figures an enabling fiction become a mirror to itself and a citation of writing's pharmacy. Within this trope of *pharmakos* as multifarious figure of writing, we recognize immediately in Borges's tale the fertile conjunction of inseminating calamus—the writing reed—and of the copulative/apocopeic scissors: instruments both in which the mirrored functions of life and death (remedy and poison) recoup each other as supplemental alterities. The written invocation, the epigrammatic or proleptic inscription within this tale's writing—the Koranic *sententia* “And we have removed from thee thy veil; and thy sight today is piercing”—becomes hauntingly meaningful. Our reader's discernment in this recognition scene of writing starkly obviates for us that crossing point, the threshold mediacy of these mirroring and mutually supplementing processes as acts of self-perception. Borges's cautionary advertence is clear: Interpretive speculations may well end up as self-reflective acts of overreaching for immediate and privileged self-presence as, for example, in the case of Yaqub the Ailing, whose very name and its Hebrew etymology (*Ya'aqôbh*, “he who takes by the heel or overreaches”) point to overtaking and the dire consequences of such hubris.

Allegorically significant in this caveat is the mirror we hold up to writing: Reading and the crucial role of the reader as executor of writing's pharmaceutical alchemy, a role made critically acute in this Borges tale by way of an onomastic trope, through an ominous prosopopoeia. I am referring to Abu Kir, the Court *executioner* in the tale, in whose name and offices resonate the all-significant life-giving and life-taking powers of generation (*abu*, “father”) and of readership, with *Kir* having, as it does, its root etymon in the Arabic *k'raa*, meaning “to read.”

Through this nominal allegory, Borges convokes us to a reading lesson. The lesson becomes unmistakably urgent in the antithetical and supplementary juxtaposition of the story's two hermeneutical executors: the fated Yaqub the Ailing, whose reflection reaches after a mastered and mastering identity, an identical representation with his speculation—an auto-scopy that reduces writing and its otherness, i.e., the mirror of ink, to the tantamount totality of/in his own hermeneutic likeness and spectral

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reflection—and Abu Kir, the enigmatic Court executioner, whose dual name doubles back on his courtly function. As “father reader/of reading,” he *carries on* writing’s generic sentence, even as his offices require that he *carry out* (that he “throw the book” of) the Court’s sententious law or nomos.

Borges’s allegory of the reader, in short, would appear to anticipate by nearly half a century a kind of “reader-reception” theory whose hermeneutical enterprise would not enslave the text to the reader’s willful strategy or ideological preferments, but, more accurately, function as a poetic theory that calls for a deferential criticism with the full array of its generative otherness and generosity of differentiation. In short, Borges points toward a “courtly reader” whose potency resides in hermeneutical “serving,” as receptive host, rather than in a hermeneutic of interpretive mastery, of proprietary representation that levels otherness and its dialogic alterities. We cannot be unmindful, as no one could afford to be, of Borges’s chastening admonition in our own acts of reading. I suggest we proceed accordingly through the pages that follow.