

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

5th Year of Open Access

Vol. 5, Issue-6 December 2014

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‘Language as the Divine Guarantee of Humanity’: Jorge Luis Borges’s Linguistic Virtuosity in *Other Inquisitions*

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Abstract:

Jorge Luis Borges’s seminal *Other Inquisitions* (*Otras Inquisiciones*) explores his complex and multifarious responses to the use of language in his fictional *oeuvre*. His fiction foregrounds the inauguration and development of a new literature responsive to the radical discontinuities of human experience, marked by disjunctions in narrative points of view, space, time and language. The variety of new literary forms thus produced testify to the emergence of new subjectivities and new modes of writing. Language, with its poetic uses, its problems, its etymologies and its similarities and disparities across cultures interested him greatly. For Borges, language is the divine guarantee of humanity. His erudite fetishization of literature entails a constant reinvention of his fictional self. His interest in language as self-conscious dreaming and his dalliance with linguistic wordplay lends credence to his *oeuvre*.

Keywords: Language, *Other Inquisitions*, linguistic wordplay, fetishization, Jorge Luis Borges.

Jorge Francisco Isidore Luis Borges (24th August 1899-14th June 1986)’s *Other Inquisitions* (1964) [originally published as *Otras Inquisiciones* in 1952] forms a necessary complement to the fictional entities of *Fictions* (originally published as *Ficciones* in 1944) and *The Aleph* (published as *El Aleph* in 1949) which made him a towering personality in Latin American avant-garde literature. Poet, essayist, critic, translator- Borges is truly a virtuoso. His fiction, a vortex for seemingly the entire universe, deploys the search for meaning, archaeological reconstruction and narrativity in all its forms as epistemological paradigms. Borges’s fiction mimes other kinds of writings- narrative, literary criticism, encyclopaedic learning, learned disputation, philosophy, religious exegesis. His writing reveals how the discordant and disparate fragments of culture, linguistic rules and narrative strategies combine to suggest the illusion of an order and a direction. We glean from his essays the play of his mind, his obliqueness, his speculative ironies, the often wilful and surprising connections he makes. Through his poems, we come to appreciate his essential metaphors, his dalliance with words and sounds. The enormous pleasure his prose gives can be savoured, word by word, like a delicacy. His prose is so recognisable that often in someone else’s work a single sentence or even a simple verb becomes a dead give-away of Borges’s influence. His fictions opportunely have become exemplary texts.

The essays and stories of Borges must be placed in an intermediate zone between the critical and the imaginative, the intellectual and the poetic, the real and the invented. Through fictional retelling, Borges is able to create a world where words have a ceremonial and ritualistic function. His penchant for words becomes a structural principle of his fiction. The Borges fiction is a context-free paradigm where his theme of the transforming power of fiction-making necessarily incorporates his disjunctive use of metaphors and a language which powers up the narrative. Though his fictions can be claimed as examples of religious, metaphysical or sceptical demonstrations, his narrative patterns incorporate complex

inveterate tools of paradoxes and direct references. Borges himself opines, “. . . [I] have always worked at my language within an essentially poetic framework, savouring the multiple meaning of words, their etymological echoes and endless resonances. My own characters are often no more than excuses to play with words, to enter the fictional world of language” (Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 74). Borges’s fictional removal from the inveterate heat and chaos of human relationships and attachments entail a dismissal of his characters as mere ‘ciphers’; his dalliance with language lends credence to his fictional *oeuvre*. Even when Borges’s fiction is grounded in mundane settings far removed from his hyperliterary universe, his linguistic virtuosity never fails him.

The fundamental aspect of Borges’s writing tendency has always been to question philosophical and scientific constructions of reality. He believed that reality and fiction are betrothed to each other, that all our ideas are literally creative fictions. His stories keep reminding us that they are verbal constructs. To mistake them for reality is to be deceived, for the gap between language and reality is insurmountable. He was convinced that the worlds of fiction and reality continually intertwine. A state of unreality was deemed by Borges to be a pre-requisite of art. But even though language is the tool through which he wields his philosophical sleight of hand and narrative wizardry, Borges has always been sceptical of the powers of language to convey reality. His use of varied linguistic devices constructs bizarre, typical and compelling situations whereby foregrounding and relativizing the difference between fiction and reality is underscored. Borges negates the reality of personal self/selves in a literary endeavour; it is this intuition that the self doesn’t exist as a permanent entity, reality that constitutes the initiation of Borges’s fictional *oeuvre*.

In the canonical *The Aleph* Borges attempts to portray Aleph as a metaphor of literature, whose purpose is to subvert objective reality effectively and represent its own objective, self-contained world. But Borges fails to depict Aleph linguistically, thereby realizing the limitations of language as an artistic medium. Aleph represents a Borgesian symbol of fiction- a hallucinatory world that vanishes once the reader finishes the story. The fictional Borges in the story says (and Borges the author agrees with him), “All language is a set of symbols whose use among its speakers assumes a shared past. How, then, can I translate into words the infinite Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? . . . What my eyes beheld was simultaneous, but what I shall write down will be successive, because language is successive” (*Fictions* 26). Borges’s contention here is man’s attempt to reduce chaotic reality to more manageable proportions. Here, Borges tries to come to grips with the esthetic problem of synthesizing a simultaneous vision of the world via a linear, successive medium of language. For Borges, language is that indispensable medium through which the edifice of his fiction is erected and consolidated.

The themes of *Other Inquisitions* matter less than their state of awareness and scope can induce; a utopian world of pure mental content, the sacred order of the universe, the notion of immortality- all point to an atemporal realm of complete and enduring stability, all through the medium of language. Borges’s fictional language carries the implications of these themes to the point of reversal and final dissolution which has the effect of surprise endings in many the essays. This is aided and abetted by unusually musical sentences and declarations that strive towards the condition of poetry. He appears to have always woven the reader into the very fiction he has created. Repetition, leitmotif and symmetry are accommodated into Borges’s vision of the universe. Borges relishes similitude and metonymy. In fact, he metonymizes human existence.

His rare form of writing takes one to “the very limits of language” (Reid 27) and makes us peer over the edge, so that after reading his stories, some ordinary commonplace event deigns to assume an ominous significance. This sense of awe, for Borges, is what lies at the heart of great literature, through which we truly contemplate the whole mystery of existence. The elegance and straightforwardness of Borges’s prose, the refinement of his stories and perfection of his craftsmanship reigns supreme. The brilliant insinuation in the essay “A Comment on August 23, 1944”, “the *physical* happiness I experienced when they told me that Paris had been liberated” (Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 134) is a chosen means of expression for Borges. Borges considers all language to be of a metaphorical nature. He further opines that the mode of communication between the poet, the text and the reader continues to be the metaphor. The possibilities of elaborating new metaphors from the very few ‘true’ metaphors is infinite, Borges believes. “Pascal’s Sphere” opens with the line “Perhaps universal history is the history of a few metaphors” and is rounded off with the line “Perhaps universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors” (14). The essential metaphors for existence recur. Here he examines an image which is not only paradoxical in itself- our universe as an infinite, eternal sphere, a measureless, boundless form perfectly circumscribed but which also serves to express diametrically opposed emotions: Bruno’s elation and Pascal’s anguish.

In the essay “The First Wells”, he exults in H.G. Wells’s ‘vast and diversified library’, stating that “he [Wells] chronicled the past, chronicled the future, recorded real and imaginary lives” (Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 88). This metaphor suggests that Borges identifies ‘this vast and diversified library’ of fantastic books in which Wells plausibly traces the absurd consequences of an idea, with the ‘library of limitless English books’ in which Borges himself has sought a model of the universe. “From Allegoristic Novels” has the ellipses and transferred epithets based on the substitution of part for the whole, where possibilities for the animation of the abstract and the impersonal explains why Borges terms the typical example of ‘allegorical’. At the beginning of the essay Nathaniel Hawthorne, Borges briefly traces the history of a metaphor and goes on to say that true metaphors cannot be invented, since they have always existed on their own. Borges shared with Hawthorne the acute feeling of their respective fictional selves being more than one man; his predilection for Hawthorne’s Wakefield cycle of stories reveals certain spiritual and technical affinities with him. In “Poetry”, Borges opines that “Language is an aesthetic creation” and goes on to say that “The aesthetic event is something as evident, as immediate, as indefinable as love, the taste of fruit, of water. We feel poetry as we feel the closeness of a woman, or as we feel a mountain or a bay. If we feel it immediately, why dilute it with other words, which no doubt will be weaker than our feelings?” (81).

In “The Wall and the Books” Borges suggests elaborate, tentative and contradictory explanations of the metaphoric significance of ‘the two vast undertakings’ of emperor Shih Huang Ti, that is, “the building of the almost infinite Chinese wall’ and ‘the burning of all the books that had been written before his time’ (Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 3). The emperor may have begun the monstrous projects at the same time, the walling in of space and the incinerating of the past might have been ‘the magic barriers to halt death’. Perhaps the two acts ‘were not simultaneous’, in which case possibly (since the one is destructive and the other creative), “Perhaps the burning of the libraries and the building of the wall are operations that secretly nullify each other” (5). Borges’s tone of caustic irony and thinly veiled mockery cannot be missed here.

Borges indulges a baroque fascination with paradoxes, metaphysical games and infinite progressions and regresses in the narrative. The purpose of paradox is to produce an

intellectual and emotive unbalance; it weakens one's feeling of intellectual security. He titles one essay "A History of Eternity" and another "New Refutation of Time"; he quips, "This refutation of time is present in all my books in one way or the other" (Borges, *Other Inquisitions*, 172). Images and constructs of infinite regress are favoured by the Borgesian imagination; this is evidenced in the essay where mental conundrums like the tortoise and the hare have been wittily forced into the reading of psychological time. Provoked by his own penchant for paradoxes and metaphysical games, he waxes eloquent in an essay "Partial Enchantments of the *Quixote*" (which has infinite repetitions in its narrative structure):

Why does it make us uneasy to know that the map is within the map and the thousand and one nights are within the book of *A Thousand and One Nights*? Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is the reader of the *Quixote*, and Hamlet is a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious. In 1833 Carlyle observed that that universal history is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they too are written. (46)

Or, as he elaborates in the essay "New Refutation of Time":

Our destiny (unlike the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not horrible because of its unreality; it is horrible because it is irreversible and ironbound. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river that carries me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am Borges. (187).

In this essay, he posits that in the fictive world, bulwarks like time and memory have no reality or grounding. A literary minimalist, his style is capable of containing infinitely resounding paradoxes in the compass of a brief paragraph. Borges's use of paradoxical language in the essay "Forms of a Legend" confronts the reader with a paradoxical vision of the unreal universe which we must accept, or else, reject the basis of the universe we call 'real.'

Borges's fiction-making irradiates its ambiguities and playfulness throughout the volume. Most of the essays in *Other Inquisitions*, with a few exceptions, have been the investigation, discussion or elaboration of a disturbing fact, usually in form of a contradiction or paradox. Such is the case with "Pascal's Sphere" in which a metaphor in the form of a paradox serves, first, to express God's greatness, declaring that "God is an intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere" (Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 7) and ends by expressing the terror of man lost in infinite time and space, positing that the universe is "A frightful sphere, the centre of which is everywhere, and the circumference nowhere" (9). The idea of a man who has been to the past or to the future and returns to the present with a concrete proof of having been there is the theme of "The Flower of Coleridge".

In his essays, Borges studies a subject by applying theories that he has previously condemned as fallible and fallacious. Oxymoron is an attempt to overcome the inherent narrowness that reason has imposed on language. Like any other literary trope it represents an effort to correct through language the deficiencies of language itself. This stylistic technique best represents Borges's fictional *oeuvre*. In a number of essays, through an oxymoronic use of language, Borges reduces philosophical and theological ideas to mere creations of the imagination that differ little from any other mythical form. Essays like "Pascal's Sphere",

“The Flower of Coleridge” and “The Dream of Coleridge” attest to this. In “Time and J. W. Dunne” and “The Creation and P. H. Gosse” small poetic incisions serve to accentuate the mystical effect created by the explication of the concept of eternity and the first day of Creation. A quote from the Talmudic anthology by Raphael Cansino- Assens serve Borges splendidly to express this fact, “It was only the first night but a series of centuries had preceeded it” (Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 21). His love of repetitions is evidenced in “Two Books”, “God sees all of history, what unfolds as history, in a single, splendid, dizzying instant” (29).

It is significant that as Borges matured as a writer, he became increasingly preoccupied with eliminating the rhetorical or stylistic flourishes that had characterized his earliest literary endeavours; in his early essays he developed a new concept of style, moving from traditional ornamentation and artistry to functionality and invisibility (Reid 74). He took great pains to refine his style, divesting it of showy mannerisms or idiosyncrasies. His concerted effort to pare down his style was a part of his emerging literary vision, according to which an author should strive for a certain degree of anonymity, leaving his or her texts unnecessarily encumbered by stylistic flourishes. The literary significance of Borges’s attempt to render himself stylistic invisible is not to be under-estimated.

Borges’s web of literary references and canonical reinforcements in this volume is as impressive as it is ambiguous. References to Virgil, Dante, Cervantes, Franz Kafka, Walt Whitman, Paul Valery, H. G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Thomas De Quincey, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Schopenhauer, Henri Bergson can be found strewn throughout the volume. Literary references to Quevedo, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Book of the Thousand and One Nights*, *Don Quixote*, *Kubla Khan*, the *Wakefield* cycle of stories, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* are encountered aplenty. Waxing eloquent on Chesterton, Borges elaborates in a very personal essayistic manner, “In Argentina, Catholics exalt Chesterton, freethinkers reject him. Like every writer who professes a creed, Chesterton is judged by it is condemned or acclaimed because of it. His case is not unlike that of Kipling, who is always judged with reference to the English empire” (Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 83). This shows his linguistic acumen which is premised in brevity and abnegation of needless stylistic flourishes.

In the seminal essay “Kafka and His Precursors”, Borges posits his notion of literary predecessors in a curiously impersonal and a slightly ironic tone, “The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future” (Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 108). He goes on to say “The word ‘precursor’ is indispensable in the vocabulary of criticism, but one should try to purify it from every connotation of polemic or rivalry” (109). His vision of literary tradition is astute. By the inveterate tool of allusion, Borges’s stories examine the possibility that the literary question of one’s relationship to one’s successors runs parallel to the philosophical question of one’s personal identity. To Borges, not only one’s writing but one’s own identity is contingent upon the revisionary perspectives provided by the future generations. Borges deems Oscar Wilde (in the essay “About Oscar Wilde”) to have that rare ability to mix humour and frivolity with intense intellectual depth. Through him, Borges came to believe in comic truth, the truth of fiction which is able to tolerate cyclical and contradictory representations of reality.

Borges’s analytical style of prose is a vexing one. “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” is a perfect example of this style. Elaborating on the quintessential metaphysical theme of order and chaos, the analytical style of Wilkins is an expression of the yearning for an order that is unattainable to human comprehension and intelligence. Borges’s mastery of

narrative simplicity has to be placed within this complexity. Inherent in the notion of fictions is the fundamental mistrust of language, an irony. This paradox is at the heart of all of Borges's work. The worlds created through language are, albeit illusions, glorious illusions. This playing off of one form against another is the gist of Borges's multiplicities, where languages, cultures and aesthetic traditions are thrown against each other. In Borges's sentences habits of Latin rhetoric permit the attribution of human feelings to objects. In "The Divine Comedy" Borges declares "buon tetragono a I colpe di fortuna", man is a good tetragon, a cube. Latin references such as these abound throughout the volume. Borges's use of external (and extensive) allusions to multi-national literary works is mind-numbingly vast. His allusions to Dante, Heraclitus, Zeno, Pythagoras, Scotus Erigena, Croce, Groussac, Gershom Scholem, Schopenhauer, Gustav Spiller and the list is endless.

Borges's fiction promotes the paradox that multinational literary consciousness must be forged from the vernacular and lived experiences which produced them. His cosmopolitanism and his eagerness to be a master of so far-ranging a cultural sphere is a hallmark of his fiction. His construction of a past upon a foundation both national and foreign was his way of being profoundly Argentine. The basic hypothesis of Borges's literary endeavours is paradoxical. John Barth refers to this tendency as being akin to the 'Literature of Exhaustion' to which belongs nearly all of Borges's works. This type of self-regarding literature, as Borges indulges in, is underscored by the fact that his universe is fictive, not real. (Barth 78). Fiction and fact, imagination and critique are aspects of the same continuum throughout Borges's work. This erasure of boundaries is encountered in the essays "The Meeting in A Dream" as well as "From Somebody to Nobody".

Borges entertains the idea of a language in which each word would convey all characteristics of its referent, present, past and future. His strikingly original use of adverbs, adjectives, nouns and external allusions is remarkable. In "Poetry", he adumbrates, "Beauty waits in ambush for us. If we are sensitive, we will feel it in the poetry of all languages" (Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 188). His delightful coinage of words, typically Borgesian in its essence, enhances the flavour of his fiction. Adjectives such as *asombro* (denoting amazement or awe) or *vertiginoso* (implying vertiginous or vertigo-inducing) abound in his work. In "Avatars of the Tortoise", Borges declares, "Stories within stories create a strange effect, almost infinite, a sort of vertigo" (77). Words are like magic playthings for him to toy with. His multi-national apprenticeship enables him to play with words as beautiful toys to enter 'the great game of language'. In some of the essays, he traces the etymological origins of words such 'orient', 'nightmare', 'dream' with a certain precision and conciseness which is final, absolute and binding. His veritable romanticisation of the Orient reveals his imaginative fervour.

Borges was meticulous in his writing but he was ever conscious of the restrictiveness and arbitrariness of his linguistic medium; his unobtrusive use of style and disciplined use of words exemplify this. In the essay "The Divine Comedy", Borges quips "Paul Claudel has written- in a page unworthy of Paul Claudel- that the spectacles awaiting us after death will no doubt little resemble those that Dante showed us in the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*" (Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 74).

Alastair Reid elaborates on Borges's style as "crisp understatements, rigorous compressions, disciplined attention to expressive nuance and strict avoidance of facile bluster" (Reid 175). In forging a literary style of this kind, which so genuinely reflected his taste and background, Borges made a radical innovation in the stylistic tradition of the Spanish language. In "Poetry" Borges opines, "Rhetoric must be a bridge, a road; too often it

is a wall, an obstacle. We see it in writers as diverse as Seneca, Quevedo and Milton. In all of them, the words come between them and us” (Borges, *Other Inquisitions* 175). Or, in “Two Books”, “Dreams are the genus; nightmare the species” (186). A Borges tale is a search. It leaps from time to the timeless, from the earthly to the eternal. Humour is not altogether absent from Borges’s fiction. In the essay “The Modesty of History” Borges recalls a dream documented by William Wordsworth and elaborates upon it, “He is in the middle of a desert- in the desert one is always in the middle- and he is horrified at the thought of trying to escape” (27). In the essay “Note on Walt Whitman” we see the Borgesian trick of inverse persuasion, his trademark logical ju-jit-su move, invested with raucous humour.

Borges’s erudition is a key element in his fictional strategy; its aim is to imbue his stories with a certain colourfulness, to endow them with an atmosphere all their own. His uncommonly abstruse and erudite subject matter couple with the wild and imaginative originality of linguistic devices he employs entails an impeccable fictional essence in which every effect is studied and deliberate. “I’m rotten with literature”, Borges once confessed in an interview. So is his fictional world. Borges always knows what he is saying. His is an art of contrasts, of extremes, of unbalance beneath the apparent surface of calmness and order.

James E. Irby has paid a befitting tribute to Borges. Elaborating on his stylistic virtuositities he elucidates “Borges’s curious erudition, plausible paradoxes and restless scrutinies serve those functions [of perceptibility], as does his very readable style. Taut and effortless, transparent and mannered, deeply true to the genius of the Spanish language yet heterodox, his rhetoric is also a silent parody and an extension of itself. For even certain excesses, the abruptness of certain transitions, the dubiousness of certain obviously sentimental attachments, seem a wilful demonstration of the limits of his writing and thought, as if to invite the reader, once he is sufficiently initiated” (Irby 74). Everything connects. But it is Borges alone who can make these connections, across cultures, across literatures, across languages, across time. Only a Borges can practise such an art of fiction.

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