

Rhetoric and the Question of Knowing

"La rhétorique [c'est] un système de questions possibles."

Michel Charles, *Rhétorique de la lecture*, Paris, 1977

"La pregunta es retórica: sé demasiado bien la respuesta."

Jorge Luis Borges, *La cifra*, 1981

Borges slides quite naturally from personal ontology to personal anthology. What keeps that naturalness from turning into a still life, a "*naturaleza muerta*" of the *florileggio* is the combinatorial conjugation of sundry elements that links the anthology to ontology in a manner that escapes stasis and reification, monism and monody. Self-awareness and understanding as combinatorial possibilities find their conjunction in Borges' epistemic constructs and in the linguistic turns of epistemological processes. There, language and the critical awareness of the possibilities of language, which is to say rhetoric, are joined with a self-awareness of the knowing subject. This is the juncture where the question of rhetoric and the rhetorical question cross with what, in Borges, is also a chiasmus, that of the *anthos* and the *ontos*, the anthological compilation and the ontological self-recompilation. This juncture in Borges, as I shall endeavor to show, is the crossing point where one's own possible ontology and the anthology constituted from the appropriation of sundry elements from others interrogate each other, seek to know each other, in protracted dialogue and conversative questioning.

All knowledge is questionable. One could also say that this is a questionable statement. Statements are symptomatic of a state of knowledge. Knowledge is the conspicuous symptom of the question or questions that elicit it. Questions are licit by virtue of a system, whether it be

called rhetoric, as Michel Charles would have it in our epigraph, or metaphysics. We question through determinate enablements, whether these be lessons of belief we call doxology or critical endeavors we refer to as epistemology. In either case, these procedures and their constitutive elements are determined and determinative. Hence, the predictable congruity of the shape of knowledge to the nature of the questions which engender it. The inevitable fate of construal and congruence between the mechanism of knowing, namely, a system of questioning, and the ensuing knowledge authenticates the lessons of pursuit of knowledge. In etymological terms, conceptual *orthogenesis* and the pragmatics of *doxa* join into *orthodoxa*, and no knowledge is more certain, none as self-convinced of its own certainty, than orthodoxy.

Though itself an inalienable part of these processes of knowledge, the twentieth century may well be remembered for its elaborate critique of the system of knowing I have just sketched here. The ironic conjugation of *orthodoxa* and *paradoxia* was eloquently suggested by Lisa Block de Behar more than a decade ago.

It has its antecedents in an earlier era than our century, however, most memorably in one of the founders of our modern "science of philology." I am referring to Friedrich Schlegel and the fifty-third of his "Atheneum Fragments" (1798): "Es ist gleich tödlich für den Geist, ein System zu haben, und keins zu haben. Er wird sich also wohl entschließen müssen, beides zu verbinden." ["It is equally lethal for the mind to have a system and to have none. It may very well have to decide to combine the two."] (2:109, cited in Hernardi 4)

In the twentieth century, this *ars combinatoria* and its prestidigitations have become the trademark of a literary, philosophical, and scientific epistemology with which Jorge Luis Borges is particularly identified. The affiliation has been traced most notably by Floyd Merrell in his thoughtful and thought-provoking book *Unthinking Thinking: Jorge Luis Borges, Mathematics, and the New Physics*. In characteristically forthright fashion, "[o]ne might say," Merrell declares at the outset, "that Borges' only personal metaphysics is *paradox*" (xiii).

A "personal metaphysics" qua personal is an inevitable form of paradox, but the hypallage serves to remind us of how thoroughly Borges has imbued his literary métier with the obliquity of an epistemology that blends the metaphysician's *noesis* into the ironist's *poesis* with felicitous élan. Since critical attention to Borges' ludic cogitations has been focused principally on his prose, I shall focus on his poetry on this particular occasion. And, within the poetry, I shall examine those ellip-

tical junctures of interrogation, the site of the rhetorical question, and the nature of knowledge that issues from that epistemic moment.

I would like to begin at the beginning and remind you of Borges' first volume of poetry, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, published by the author in 1923 when he was twenty-four years old. Specifically, I would like to call your attention to the last poem of this first collection and to the poem's own coda. The poem in question is not only the coda of this primal Borges, but the *incipit* of the inquisitor, the beginnings of the author as the master of a hybrid genre he would re-invent, the *inquisiciones*. The poem is entitled "Líneas que pude haber escrito y perdido hacia 1922." Its final three verses occasion the first time in this book and in Borges' documentable career as writer in which we encounter the poet as *quaestor*: "¿soy yo esas cosas y las otras / o son llaves secretas y arduas álgebras / de lo que no sabremos nunca?" (OC 1: 51)

Beside what I have already alluded to as firsts and lasts in this incipient Borges, the poem has much more that is remarkable about it. In this sense, it is already a replete tautology as much as it is a proleptic synecdoche of the Borges canon. I shall explain.

In terms of epistemic facts that constitute knowledge, poetry is as far from apodictic demonstration as it is from the axiomatic givens that comprise self-evident truths and sanction what is unquestionably known. It is in the perverse nature of poetry to elude obeisance to ontology. Poetry, characteristically, is what it is not, its ontology a paradoxical contradiction, its facticity factitious. A fugitive from immutable certitude and logical necessity, poetry inhabits conceptual warps as exceptionalism, eschewing thesis in favor of hypothesis, shunning factuality in favor of the contrary-to-fact conditional, preferring the contingent to the constant and the conjectural to the congenital. Of course, this too is a form, or diverse forms, of knowledge. And Borges' poem in question serves as demonstration of what kind of knowledge the Argentine author will rehearse through his poetry and, thereafter, throughout his literary career.

Analogously, the rhetorical question is a fraudulent beggar more intent on giving than on receiving the object of its solicitude; at least this is how we are taught to understand a rhetorical question, as coming over-loaded with its own answer rather than the forbearance of its declared need. But there is also another form of rhetorical question, the kind that comes and goes unanswerable. Borges essays both, and both can be one and the same simultaneously in the rhetorical ruses of Borges the inquisitor. In this the first instance of positing the question in

the poetic coda of his primal anthology, Borges' question rehearses both possibilities, just as in our epigraph from Borges' *La cifra* the term *retórica* in "la pregunta es retórica" could well be a noun predicate of the copula as well as an adjective modifying the insomniac question of Borges' dual reflection. ("Dos formas del insomnio", *OC 1*: 301)

In Borges, as is well known, modifiers and equivalents tend to equivocate at non-Euclidean junctures with winking irony.

We shall get to the coda, but first let us look at the beginning, at the very beginning—the poem's title: "Líneas que pude haber escrito y perdido hacia 1922." ["Lines that I Could Have Written and Lost Circa 1922"]. For the nominalist, a name or title is a declaration of identity. For the ironist, an identity is what the phenomenon is not, and Borges' poem declares its own self-contrariety through its title or nominal tag. In one sense, in the sense I have just remarked, the poem's title is a tautological declaration of the poem as a poem, namely, as something that might be what it is not. In this paradox of identity, Borges' poem simultaneously corroborates and undermines its own nominalism. It functions as exemplar of "poem" that embodies its own definition as phenomenon that is contrary to its own declared facticity. At the same time, it subverts its nominalist exemplariness through the realist ostentation of the fact that it is a construct, a product of the imagination and forms of *poesis* of its author. This is the paradoxical simultaneity that at the end of the poem will culminate in the rhetorical question of what/who the poet himself is.

The question of the poem's ambiguous ontology, in other words, will pass deftly into the question of the ontology of the poet, both as rhetorical object and as existential subject. In all cases, the question simultaneously answers itself and deems itself unanswerable and, therefore, perpetually repeatable in the long itinerary of the poet's career, and in the longer history of the readers' encounters with this poem and with the subsequent poems it anticipated. This, in short, is how in this incipient adventure and its many avatars the question of ontology becomes transmuted into a question of epistemology, and the knowledge derived from these epistemic vicissitudes is the question itself as ambiguous and unavoidable, as paradoxical, but a form of doxology, nonetheless, in perpetual dialogue with the possibilities in question.

These are the possibilities of an irresolvable dialectic that inhabit the etymons of questioning as *interrogation*, particularly when considered in the context of Borges' poetry. *Inter-rogare* is both a pleading and an inquiry between possibilities, among phenomena, amidst epistemes.

And in the enumerative series of this primal poem Borges arrays for us a display of certain lapidary elements that may well comprise the conjectural edifice of a formative identity and personal ontology:

Silenciosas batallas del ocaso
 en arrabales últimos,
 siempre antiguas derrotas de una guerra en el cielo,
 albas ruinosas que nos llegan
 desde el fondo desierto del espacio
 como desde el fondo del tiempo,
 negros jardines de la lluvia, una esfinge de un libro
 que yo tenía miedo de abrir
 y cuya imagen vuelve en los sueños,
 la corrupción y el eco que seremos,
 la luna sobre el mármol,
 árboles que se elevan y perduran
 como divinidades tranquilas,
 la mutua noche y la esperada tarde,
 Walt Whitman, cuyo nombre es el universo,
 la espada valerosa de un rey
 en el silencioso lecho de un río,
 los sajones, los árabes y los godos
 que, sin saberlo, me engendraron,
 ¿soy yo esas cosas y las otras

And, at the same time, with the second part of the climactic question, “o son llaves secretas y arduas álgebras / de lo que no sabremos nunca?”, these touchstones may well be the conjectural keys to the decipherment of an epistemic construct that could be the poet’s own self-knowledge. Nevertheless, the question remains just that, a conjectural *inter-rogatio* whose noetic value persists as rhetorical question rather than as resolute apodictic episteme.

The epistemological freight of Borges’ questions remains stranded in the elliptical divide that simultaneously separates and bridges the elements of knowing which have been thrown together (which have been literally *con-jec-tured*, that is) and that remain pleading to and querying each other across the inter-rogatory ellipses of being possibly this or that, or of possibly being or not being. It is thus that Borges transmutes his own Hamlet from ontological prosopopeia into epistemic cipher. Our passage from the hamletizing of Shakespeare to the hamletizing of Borges, then, entwines the duality of either/or around the optative caduceus of the rhetorical and rogatory wish of desiring to reach an object of knowledge one suspects he already knows and, at the same time, he senses he can never know. This predicament itself is a form of knowledge, albeit a paradoxical one, and this, I suspect, may well be what led Borges’ friend and assiduous reader L. Block de Behar to wed

orthodoxa to *paradoxa*. It may well be also what F. Merrell points to when he notes, "that Borges' only personal metaphysics is *paradox*."

I call this an elliptical form of knowing not in the sense of being defective or lacking, but because this type of knowing figures a convergence, as in non-Euclidean geometry where lines converge. And in this vein I would like to return momentarily to that locus of ciphers I have referred to as a site of hamletizing where Borges conjugates in counterpoint the questioning rhetoric of ontology with the rhetorical question of epistemology. This is the site of the long and somewhat dreaded vigil where the poet would decipher for us the enigma of knowing oneself as product of a dual form of vigilance: insomnia and longevity.

And having opened this parenthesis with the incipient Borges of *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, I shall close it by focusing on the late Borges of the final decade of his life. More than an opening and a closing of parentheses, "Líneas que pude haber escrito y perdido hacia 1922" and "Dos formas del insomnio" are spectral way stations of a poetic itinerary that often passed through the mirror of its own reflections for more than six decades in the course of this century.

If "Líneas que pude haber escrito" comprise a pursuit of knowledge through a contrary-to-fact strategy, "Dos formas del insomnio" marks an exacerbation of such "negative capability," to use Keats' 1818 phrase. In the process, the acute vigilance that limned self-consciousness in the early poem, allowing in the process the half-knowledge of a rhetorical question and its ambiguities to blend ontological interrogation and epistemological algebra, now becomes a different sort of wakeful arithmetic in the poet's final decade. Here, at the end of the day, the rhetorical question, which is simultaneously declared to be rhetorical and tantamount to rhetoric, no longer serves as equivocal instrument of assuaging enigma. Rather, it is used as screen on/through which knowledge is projected as self-conscious knowing that would rather lose the vigilant self in the enabling oblivion of that negative capability.

I do not know that we can characterize this as a metamorphosis of the *quaestor* into a quietist. The poet's question/rhetoric is all too acutely conscious of the impossibility of such quiescence of self and its noetic pursuit; and its insomnolent calculus much too implacable to permit benign forgetfulness or the blessings of oblivion. Thus, whereas in the ruse of the contrary-to-fact 1922 poem the poet left the answer suspended in all its open-endedness in the elliptical inter-rogation of the rhetorical question, in the *Cifra* poem of sixty years later he yearns for

the ellipses of derogation. His plea is not that he might find what he does not know, but to find surcease, instead, from what he knows he can not ignore:

¿Qué es el insomnio?
 La pregunta es retórica: sé demasiado bien la respuesta.
 (...) es querer hundirse en el sueño y no poder hundirse en el sueño,
 es el horror de ser y de seguir siendo, es el alba dudosa.
 ¿Qué es la longevidad? (...)
 es un insomnio que se mide por décadas y no con agujas de acero (...)
 es no ignorar que estoy condenado a (...) ser y seguir siendo. (301)

This negative metaphysics of self that would diligently labor toward a “continual extinction of personality,” carries an unmistakable reminder of T. S. Eliot, whose own project of constant self-attenuation is ultimately traceable to Keats’s “negative capability.” But Borges’ plea for an ellipsis of personal ontology, unlike Eliot’s doxa, never abandons a verve of epistemic irony. And one need not go far from “Dos formas del insomnio” in this same collection, *La cifra*, to find Borges in pursuit, once again, of a *noesis* and furtive glimpse into a possible *ontos* of self in the paradoxical ciphers of a personal metaphysics that flow, yet again, in the elliptical current of the rhetorical question. I refer you specifically to the poem entitled “Correr o ser,” (OC 3: 324) where Plato’s archetypal *ontos* and William of Occam’s nominalist epistemology are set in counterpoint as dialogic mirror to the poet’s own spectral interrogation and conjectural self:

Correr o ser

¿Fluye en el cielo el Rhin? ¿Hay una forma
 universal del Rhin, un arquetipo,
 que invulnerable a ese otro Rhin, el tiempo,
 dura y perdura en un eterno Ahora
 y es raíz de aquel Rhin, que en Alemania
 sigue su curso mientras dicto el verso?
 Así lo conjeturan los platónicos;
 así no lo aprobó Guillermo de Occam.
 Dijo que Rhin (cuya etimología
 es rinan o correr) no es otra cosa
 que un arbitrario apodo que los hombres
 dan a la fuga secular del agua
 desde los hielos a la arena última.
 Bien puede ser. Que lo decidan otros.
 ¿Seré apenas, repito, aquella serie
 de blancos días y de negras noches
 que amaron, que cantaron, que leyeron
 y padecieron miedo y esperanza
 o también habrá otro, el yo secreto

cuya ilusoria imagen, hoy borrada
 he interrogado en el ansioso espejo?
 Quizá del otro lado de la muerte
 sabré si he sido una palabra o alguien. (324)

Sixty years after the rhetorical questions of the incipient *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, Borges still prefers to demure to others on resolving the conundrums of being and knowing, of self-ontology and of epistemic self. And though he abjures on decidability, enjoining others to decide (“que lo decidan otros”), he never abandons the inquest of what might be plausible by virtue of being within the purview of the questionable (and between the etymological current of the parenthetical, as the parenthetical verse of the poem just cited suggests).

The curious rhetoric of language (the nominal “*palabra*”) and the nagging persistence of self, either as “*yo secreto*” of illusory image, or as the conjectural subject “*alguien*,” are Borges’ legacy that perpetually presents itself to us as heuristic mirror in the form of the rhetorical question. There, through the reflected images of self and language, we countenance the epistemic possibilities of the Borges palimpsests.

Who are we to decide the fate of that mirror’s ciphers and decipher the enigmas of its inquest? My question is obviously rhetorical, and by no means intended to impugn the laudable efforts of the many who continue to read Borges with critical élan.

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