

Borges and the Ontology of Tropes

Dios mueve al jugador, y éste, la pieza
¿Qué dios detrás de Dios la trama empieza
De polvo y tiempo y sueño y agonías?¹

Such is the closing tercet of the double sonnet “El Ajedrez”, by J. L. Borges. And this question represents, perhaps, the quintessence of what can be called “Borges’ rhetorical ontology”².

Rhetoric is, no doubt, one of the central points in the Borgesian *Weltanschauung*. Not only rhetoric as subject, but also rhetoric considered as an intellectual or, moreover, an ontological position, and even, like in this sonnet, as a way to deal with the problem of God.

For the occidental tradition, the idea of God is intimately related to the idea of causality. That means that for any chain of facts it is reasonable to postulate an absolute beginning, which can be called “God”. Nevertheless, if instead of explaining the universe through the principle of causality we decide to refer to the pure idea of a “form” -as one can speak of “rhetorical (or mathematical) forms”-, the chain ceases to be factual and becomes structural and iterative, like a grammar, and there is no longer any way to avoid the possibility of denying a “real” beginning. The entities in the world become figures in a diagram, the ontological “history” becomes a rhetorical “texture” (*trama*), and God (written with upper initial) may always “be moved” by some other “god”

¹ God moves the player, who moves the pawn. / And behind God, which god opens the run / of dust and time and dream and agonies? (*El Hacedor*, OC 2: 191).

² The present essay is a re-elaboration of some themes dealt about in the Permanent Seminar of the “J. L. Borges Centre for Studies & Documentation”, in 1994 and 1995, as well as in the Ph.D. Seminar of the Faculty of Arts, University of Aarhus during the Fall Semester 1995. We owe many of the following ideas to the participants in the Permanent Seminar.

(with lower initial), and so on, following a never ending texture “of dust, and time, and dream and agonies”.

The purpose of the following pages is to illustrate this Borges intellectual position with some of his most relevant texts. Considering the ontological option of Borges’ rhetoric (or the rhetoric option of his ontology, which, in this case, is the same) can also help us to discover the amazing degree with which the boundaries of rhetoric have been changing steadily throughout the centuries.

The Nature of Rhetoric

According to Juri Lotman, the ancient and medieval conception of rhetoric can be presented following three types of oppositions: a) as opposed to **poetics**, rhetoric is taken as the art of *prose* discourse; b) as opposed to **ordinary language**, it is considered as the art of *ornamented* discourse; c) as opposed to **hermeneutics**, it can be considered as the art of *generating* texts, instead of interpreting them.

Today, still following Lotman’s definition, in the scientific area determined by poetics and semiotics, rhetoric acquires three new distinctive features: a) as a part of **linguistics**, it is the set of discourse-constitutive rules at the transphrastic level, i.e. beyond the boundaries of a simple sentence, as, for instance, the narrative structures; b) as a discipline studying the **poetical semantics**, it becomes a theory of tropes, its *proprium* being constituted by the displacements of meaning; and c) as **text theory**, rhetoric is the part of poetics which studies the inter-textual relationships as well as the social functioning of texts as unitary semiotic organisations.

As far as we are concerned, the evolution of rhetoric can be divided into seven different periods including as many trends: 1) the ornamental trend, 2) the argumentative trend, 3) the poetical trend, 4) the linguistic trend, 5) the semiotic trend, 6) the cognitive trend, and 7) the ontological trend. We must anyway bear in mind that the evolution in this case was not linear and that the notion of ‘periods’ should perhaps be considered as a fictive presentation of sometimes synchronic phenomena.

The ornamental trend

Rhetoric was born as the art of oratory or public speaking, probably in the early sophistic milieu. Its normal intellectual area was neither poetics nor philosophy *stricto sensu*, but politics, in general; this term in-

volution here the deliberative activities before the laws, the forensic discourses before the courts, and the epideictic speeches before occasional assemblies.

Aristotle was the first who systematically tried to turn rhetoric from a simple strategy of persuasion into a real theoretical endeavour to elucidate the conditions of persuasion. And thus, he placed rhetoric in some tense relationship with dialectic, which, as for it, only aims to 'expose', without any perlocutionary intention. Even if Aristotle attempted to make rhetoric meet somewhere the question of truth, mainly by including the syllogism as a figure of speech, he and his disciples continued to consider it as a purely pragmatic discipline. Gradually rhetoric received its standard division into *inventio* (subjects, arguments, commonplaces), *dispositio* (arrangement of large units of discourse, such as narration, peroration, etc.), and *elocutio* (management of terms and phrases). To this last component belongs the well-known division into *tropes* and *figures*. In this long first period, they are considered mostly as ornamental means belonging to the complex art of persuasion. Quintilian described the **tropes** as "the artificial alteration of a word or phrase from its proper meaning to another", and the **figures** as "a change in meaning or language from the ordinary and simple form".

The argumentative trend

In fact, the elocutionary conception of rhetoric, even if overtaken by other tendencies and more or less striped of its ornamental function, has until now never been totally dismissed. On the contrary, the most recent studies about argumentation emphasize the virtues of the figurative discourse, which, being addressed to a more complete range of human faculties than the simple inferential demonstration, develops its own strategy of rules, independently of the dialectical or logical rules, and even including them. Renaissance rhetoricians called these conversational attitudes: "metaphorical arguments" or "*concetti napoletani*" (Tesauro 88, 99) because, having developed in the Spanish earliest "conceptist" environment, they reached the Italian intellectual circles via the Naples harbor. Even if from the logical point of view these "metaphorical arguments" can be ranked among the paralogsms, because their medium term is often constituted by a metaphor³, their euristic force is, nevertheless, undeniable.

³ Tesauro (25-26) said that while theologians search to confirm their theses by the means of literal arguments, God, through the Inspired Writers, often has recourse to the "*concetti predicabili*" based on metaphors.

From the 16th-century French Philosopher Pierre de la Ramée (who ranged figures into serving as arguments and serving as extrinsic ornamentation) until today's "New Rhetoric" (Cf. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca), the permanence of the argumentative trend is constant in the history of rhetoric. For New Rhetoricians rhetoric is related to a "theory of argumentation", as opposed to "demonstration", and represents the epistemological field where the 'non-empirico-deductive' statements, like those of the ethics, can find their logical justification.

The poetical trend

The notion of "displacement" included in the etymology of the word 'trope' makes the field of rhetoric gradually lose some emotive ingredients and attain a new aesthetic and poetic dimension. Because they were dealing with the problem of the nature of symbolic expressions and their relationship to the notions of truth and of proper meaning, the major contribution to this change of perspective was most likely offered by the sacramental and exegetic theology in the early Christendom.

The poetry or literary art, rather than the communicative strategy, becomes the natural area of rhetoric. The number of tropes began a transformation of reduction: from more than 350 (Peacham) to ten (cf. Lausberg), to four -metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony- (Fraunce), to three -metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy-, or to two -metaphor and metonymy- and, finally, even to one: for some theoreticians the metaphor is the general mechanism producing all displacements of meaning, for others (cf. Groupe μ) synecdoche is the universal matrix of every trope, producing *in praesentia* the metonymy and *in absentia*, the metaphor.

The linguistic trend

The major representative of this point of view was, no doubt, Roman Jakobson, with his famous article "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbance". For Jakobson, metaphor and metonymy become two constant aspects of any language. Any verbal organisation orients itself toward one or another of those tropes, displaying an axis of *selection* (the "paradigmatic" axis, oriented to *metaphoric function*) and an axis of combination (the "syntagmatic" axis, oriented to *metonymic function*). This linguistic "metaphorisation of metaphor", though open to criticism, gradually became a real standard for all semiotic analysis situated in the linguistic-saussurian tradition.

The semiotic trend

The semiotic point of view, mostly represented by the position of Juri Lotman, criticises the notion of 'substitution', that seems presupposed by the traditional theory of tropes. For Lotman, the scope of metaphor and metonymy

is not to enunciate, by the means of some semantic substitution, somewhat that can be enunciated even without it, but to express a content or convey an information that can not be transmitted otherwise. (1053. Our translation)

The notion of 'substitution' generally entails that a trope is 'another' way to say something, founded in the presence of some common 'seme' in both elements -the substituted and the substitute. Lotman retorts that

the effect of the trope is determined not by the presence of some common 'seme' (...), but by the incorporation in some incompatible semantic areas and by the degree of semantic distance between non-coincident semes. (...) The borders between the substitute and the substituted are so incomparable that any attempt to establish the correspondence becomes irrational. (1052)

The consequence of this position is, so to say, a 'substitution of the theory of substitution': the real trope is a displacement of the relevance level of a semiotic unit. An artistic text, for instance, doesn't necessary contain any phrastic or lexical trope, but is a whole trope in itself. The fact that, in addition, it is structured by many non linguistic (spatial, musical, social) patterns gives it a second kind of modelisation (Lotman's 'secondary modelisation'), which produces a 'gap effect' between the continuous and the discontinuous way of interpreting it. That is why, for Lotman, the actual state of rhetoric coincides with the "text poetics". He says:

The rhetoric structure doesn't result automatically from the linguistic one, but constitutes a clear reinterpretation of it. (...) The rhetoric structure comes into the verbal text from outside as a complementary systematization. Such are, for instance, the various ways of introducing in the text, at their different levels, the laws of symmetry which constitute the base of spatial semiotics and don't belong to the structure of natural languages. (...) It can even be said that the rhetoric structure not only introduces into the text some external organization principles that are intrinsically unfamiliar to it, but is also subjectively perceived as irrelevant to the structural principles of the text. (1060)

The cognitive trend

One further step on the way to generalisation of tropes can be perceived in the attitude that considers them no longer as only universal linguistic functions but even as universal cognitive patterns.

One of the forerunners of this tendency can be found in the aesthetic orientations of Baroque. The notion of “acuteness” in Baltasar Gracián, but principally in the writings of his Italian contemporary Emanuele Tesauro (1592-1675), is that of a divine property, shared not only by the humans but also by nature itself, and consists in the art of bringing together what is normally incompatible and unifying what is in opposition. The rhetoric figures constitute the appropriate mechanism of acuteness, but among the figures, the most “acute” is the metaphor, since “while the others clothe the concepts in words, it (metaphor) clothes the words themselves in concepts.”⁴

A modern actualisation of the cognitive trend is the theory of Georges Lakoff who, somewhat abusively, calls “metaphor” the normal schematism structuring the possibilities of knowledge.

But perhaps the higher representative of this tendency is the French anthropologist Dan Sperber, particularly in his article “*Rudiments de rhétorique cognitive*”. Sperber’s starting point is the traditional notion of rhetoric ‘gap’ or ‘displacement’. This notion seems to require some kind of ‘zero level’ in relation to which a discourse can be considered as a transgression. But Sperber explains that this ‘figureless’ level of discourse doesn’t exist, and that even the most regular and grammatical sentence can be interpreted in some figurative sense. He concludes:

I have pretended to show that if we can admit some gap, it is not between many types of discourses but between many levels of conceptual representation. The figure is not in the text, and it is not a function of the sole text. It is in the conceptual representation of the text; it is a function both of the text and of the shared knowledge. Rhetoricians debate in order to know whether beside the phonological, syntactical and semantic figures there are also figures of thought. I wanted to suggest that there is nothing but figures of thought, in relation to which some phonological, syntactical or semantic features could play the role of supplementary focal points, being never necessary nor sufficient to release the mechanism of figurative interpretation. (414-415. Our translation)

The ontological trend

This kind of epistemological “success story” of the theory of tropes, that started at the ornamental level and kept developing as poetic, linguistic, semiotic and cognitive phenomenon, finally arrived, via Borges and others, at the level of a genuine ontological question.

⁴ “...e dove quelle vestono i concetti di parole, questa veste le parole medesime di concetti”. (67)

For the French philosopher Paul Ricœur, the metaphorical efficacy overflows the limits of the language, the text or the cognition, and gets to the point of affecting the realm of the reference. His theory of referential bearing of metaphoric statements, first developed in *La métaphore vive* was later resumed by Ricœur himself in these terms:

Just as metaphorical meaning results from the production of a new semantic relevance on the ruins of literal semantic relevance, so metaphorical reference would proceed from the collapse of the literal reference. In order to mark the ontological bearing of this thesis clearly, I proposed to compare the 'seeing-as' of the metaphorical statement to a 'being as' in the extralinguistic order revealed by poetic language." (28)

Nevertheless, if we consider the role of the tropes in the vision of reality offered by the texts of Borges, we must recognise that the ontological bearing of rhetoric can go farther beyond the consideration of a referential 'being as'. For Borges, the tropes, as forms, are the real matrix of historical events as well as of the structure of reality. And this is what we would like to illustrate in the second part of this essay.

The Ontology of Tropes

Somehow Borges comes back to a view that recognises the diversity of multiple tropes as "forms". But what is new in his own position is that these forms contribute to structure not only discourses, but also facts and things. It is therefore in harmony with his style of thinking, to introduce a paper as follows: "I shall begin the history of American letters by the history of a metaphor"⁵... or "Perhaps the universal history is the history of a few metaphors."⁶ Let us start our journey through some of Borges' most relevant texts, with his analysis of a historical event.

"The Wall and the Books"

This is one of those typical Borges' texts⁷ which are presented as having no fictional character. It is just a "note" that displays Borges' reflections

⁵ "Empezaré la historia de las letras americanas con la historia de una metáfora" ("Nathaniel Hawthorne". *Otras Inquisiciones*. OC 2: 48).

⁶ "Quizá la historia universal es la historia de unas cuantas metáforas." ("La Esfera de Pascal". *Otras Inquisiciones*. OC 2: 14)

⁷ When not explicitly mentioned, all the quotations of Borges' writings in English are extracted from the American anthology *Labyrinths*.

on a historical deed: the fact that the Chinese emperor Shih Huang Ti was the one who paradoxically ordered both the construction of the wall of China and the destruction of all books in his empire. What disturbs Borges in his analysis is that both actions, construction and destruction in such an enormous scale, have their origins in the same person. He considers a few of the many possible conjectures -historical, ethical, magical, etc.- that could help to interpret this paradox, but since none of them alone provides a satisfactory interpretation, each is ultimately discarded.

The most immediate interpretation is also the most trivial: "Burning books and erecting fortifications is a common task of princes" (221)⁸. But doing that in such a scale should not be a simple question of degree:

Walling in an orchard or a garden is ordinary, but not walling in an empire. Nor is it banal to pretend that the most traditional of races renounce the memory of its past, mythical or real. (221)⁹

A possible historical interpretation is that by burning the books, the emperor attempted to eradicate the memory of the whole past in order to abolish one single memory: that his own mother had to be banished for being a libertine. "The conjecture is worthy of attention, but tell us nothing about the wall" (222)¹⁰.

Borges also briefly offers a magical interpretation without further elaboration: maybe "the wall in space and the fire in time were magic barriers designed to halt death"(222)¹¹.

There are also two possible psychological interpretations: a) "a king who began by destroying and then resigned himself to preserving"¹², and b) "a disillusioned king who destroyed what he had previously defended"¹³. The problem here is that these interpretations presuppose that both acts were separated by an amount of time adequate to foster a radical change in emotional state, but history tells that they were al-

⁸ "Quemar libros y erigir fortificaciones es tarea común de los príncipes" (*Otras inquisiciones*. OC 2: 11).

⁹ "Cercar un huerto o un jardín es común; no, cercar un imperio. Tampoco es baladí pretender que la más tradicional de las razas renuncie a la memoria de su pasado, mítico o verdadero." (11)

¹⁰ "Esta conjetura es atendible, pero nada nos dice de la muralla" (11).

¹¹ "La muralla en el espacio y el incendio en el tiempo fueron barreras mágicas destinadas a detener la muerte." (12)

¹² "(...) un rey que empezó por destruir y luego se resignó a conservar" (12).

¹³ "(...) un rey desengañado que destruyó lo que antes defendía." (12)

most simultaneous, because those who hid books to preserve them from the flames were sentenced to work on the construction of the wall.

Finally, Borges arrives to his own rhetorical hypothesis: "Perhaps the wall was just a metaphor..."¹⁴ This astonishing conjecture means that this historical fact may be interpreted as an aesthetic phenomenon in which, as it happens with several rhetorical tropes, two contradictory elements, stated together, arrive to create some unstable situation in which they neutralize each other. In this case the burning of books became an act of veneration and the act of walling in the empire an act of trivialisation :

Perhaps Shih Huang Ti walled in his empire because he knew that it was perishable and destroyed the books because he understood that they were sacred books, in other words, books that teach what the entire universe or the mind of every man teaches. Perhaps the burning of the libraries and the erection of the wall are operations which in some secret way cancel each other. (223)¹⁵

Such a hypothesis, in which the plausible interpretation lies in the historical 'performativity' of the forms as forms, independently of their content, has the virtue of allowing the integration of all other interpretations. Borges concludes:

Generalizing from the preceding case, we could infer that *all* forms have their virtue in themselves and not in any conjectural "content". This would concord with the thesis of Benedetto Croce; already Pater in 1877 had affirmed that all arts aspire to the state of music, which is pure form. (223)¹⁶

This text plays a capital role in the construction of Borges' rhetorical vision of ontology. For the moment, we can retain three aspects of it:

First, the tropes are pure forms, without any exigency of some semantic implication. The real function of tropes can be derived from the notion of 'musical' forms as pure combinatory occurrences. Secondly, so interpreted, the tropes do not only overflow the limits of the discursive

¹⁴ "Acaso la muralla fue una metáfora" (12).

¹⁵ "Acaso Shih Huang Ti amuralló el imperio porque sabía que éste era deleznable y destruyó los libros por entender que eran libros sagrados, o sea libros que enseñan lo que enseña el universo entero o la conciencia de cada hombre. Acaso el incendio de las bibliotecas y la edificación de la muralla son operaciones que de un modo secreto se anulan." (12)

¹⁶ "Generalizando el caso anterior, podríamos inferir que *todas* las formas tienen su virtud en sí mismas y no en un "contenido" conjetural. Esto concordaría con la tesis de Benedetto Croce; ya Pater, en 1877, afirmó que todas las artes aspiran a la condición de la música, que no es otra cosa que forma." (13)

phenomena, but go also beyond the pure artistic domain, so that they become the secret formal root (as the ontological reason) of historical events. Finally, it seems that for Borges the rhetorical-formal interpretation of this fact somehow depends on the circumstance that the two events were, if not simultaneous, at least occurred close together in time. We will see that the rhetorical interpretation of the universe implies its fundamental untemporality. Narrative structures seem to be the human way of approaching the timeless ontological structure, constituted by rhetorical forms.

“The Zahir”, a pragmatic oximoron

The second text we are to consider has less relevance for our purpose in its main structure, but presents a passage in which a personal event is explicitly described by Borges as a pragmatic trope.

One evening in Buenos Aires, the narrator, after leaving the funeral of his friend Teodelina Villar, enters a bar and among the coins in his change he gets the Zahir (an object, in this case a coin, which has the property of being maddeningly unforgettable). The coin triggers a disturbing series of brooding meditations, and after a restless night, he decides to rid himself of the coin. After wandering in Buenos Aires randomly, so he can not rediscover his location, he enters a bar and purchases a brandy with the Zahir. Unfortunately this does not end his obsession, but rather intensifies it: even though he no longer owns the coin, he cannot exorcise its growing presence from his mind. Obtaining the proper old books, he studies his condition and learns that to see the Zahir is to be driven irrevocably mad. Nothing can save him, and the presence of the Zahir will gradually replace reality, ultimately becoming his only reality.

For our present purposes, there is a passage in the story that deserves our attention: the narrator’s impressions of the night when he got the Zahir:

In the figure of speech called oxymoron a word is modified by an epithet which seems to contradict it: thus, the Gnostics spoke of dark light, and the alchemists of a black sun. For me it was a kind of oxymoron to go straight from my last visit with Clementina [sic] Villar to buy a drink at a bar; I was intrigued by the coarseness of the act, by its ease. (The contrast was heightened by the circumstance that there was a card game in progress). (191)¹⁷

¹⁷ “En la figura que se llama *oximoron*, se aplica a una palabra un epíteto que parece contradecirla; así los gnósticos hablaron de luz oscura; los alquimistas, de un sol

The immediate consecution of two ethically incompatible actions is thus interpreted by Borges as a pragmatic oximoron.

Gradually Borges will lead us to the idea that the contradictions only exist in the temporal vision of the world, which provides only one thing at a time at the same place. Behind this appearance, there is the timeless vision, which denies time and gives the synoptic vision of a pure abstract combination of forms.

Borges constantly plays with what remains of the notion of truth once time has supposedly vanished. Let us notice, for example, how the short story "Emma Zunz" concludes, after the protagonist has confessed to the police the murder of her employer, putting forward as a reason of it a sexual abuse:

Actually, the story was incredible, but it impressed everyone because substantially it was true. True was Emma Zunz's tone, true was her shame, true was her hate. True also was the outrage she had suffered: only the circumstances were false, the time and one or two proper names. (169)¹⁸

"The theologians": God's Ars Rhetorica

The next question is about the inner system of Borges' ontological theory of tropes. Practising, as usual, a constant epistemological transgression, Borges will expose his theoretical position through the plot of a theological story: "The Theologians", included in *The Aleph*.

The events are situated in the high Middle Age, and the frame leans on the rivalry of two great theologians in their controversy against two heresies. It is important to stress that both heresies deal with different conceptions of time. What follows summarises the narrative stakes of the text:

Two theologians, Aurelian and John of Pannonia, are engaged in fighting against the heresy of a sect called the Monotones, who affirm that "the history is a circle and that there is nothing which has been and will

negro. Salir de mi última visita a Teodelina Villar y tomar una caña en un almacén era una especie de oximoron; su grosería y su facilidad me tentaron. (La circunstancia de que se jugara a los naipes aumentaba el contraste.)" (*El Aleph*. OC 1: 590)

¹⁸ "La historia era increíble, en efecto, pero se impuso a todos, porque sustancialmente era cierta. Verdadero era el tono de Emma Zunz, verdadero el pudor, verdadero el odio. Verdadero también era el ultraje que había padecido; sólo eran falsas las circunstancias, la hora y uno o dos nombres propios." (*El Aleph*. OC 1: 568)

not be" (150)¹⁹. Simultaneously, driven by an old rivalry and rancour, Aurelian secretly conducts a personal battle against John. Wishing to surpass John of Pannonia in order "to be rid of the resentment he inspired in him" (151)²⁰, he prepares his own refutation of the heresy. The Council of Pergamum considers both of their refutations, finally deciding that John's treatise is the best to condemn the Monotone leader Euphorbus to death. Time elapses, the heresy is banished, but Aurelian continues his covert battle against John of Pannonia. Although both share the same faith and the same enemy, all what Aurelian writes is secretly destined to surpass John. Some years later, there appears a new heretical sect, the Histriones. They found their main doctrine in a perversion of the idea that the higher world is a reflection of the lower, and they develop many and divergent and heretical doctrines. In Aquilea, Aurelian's diocese, the Histriones affirm that time does not tolerate repetitions. Aurelian decides to send to Rome a presentation of Histriones' heresy but cannot find the words to resume the thesis in question. Suddenly he finds the right sentence and writes it down. Afterwards he remembers that many years before he had read literally the same sentence in John's refutation of the Monotones. He decides to include this quotation in his report, aware that this could imply an accusation of heresy against John. Actually, following Aurelian's refutation of the Histriones based in John's arguments against the Monotones, John is accused of heretical opinions and sentenced to die at the stake. Aurelian does not cry over John's death but spends the subsequent years trying to justify the death sentence and his own tortuous denunciation. One night, by a strange coincidence, Aurelian himself dies, "just as John had", in the flames of a burning forest.

Borges cannot relate the surprising end of the story without a sort of meta-narrative reflection: "The end of this story can only be related in metaphors since it takes place in the kingdom of heaven, where there is no time." (157-158)²¹

And the conclusion takes, once more, the form of a conjecture:

Perhaps it would be correct to say that Aurelian spoke with God and that He was so little interested in religious differences that He took him for John of Pannonia. This, however, would imply a confusion in

¹⁹ "(...) la historia es un círculo y que nada es que no haya sido y que no será." (OC 1: 550)

²⁰ "(...) para curarse del rencor que éste le infundía" (551).

²¹ "El final de la historia sólo es referible en metáforas, ya que pasa en el reino de los cielos, donde no hay tiempo." (556)

the divine mind. It is more correct to say that in Paradise, Aurelian learned that, for the unfathomable divinity, he and John of Panonnia (the orthodox believer and the heretic, the abhorrer and the abhorred, the accuser and the accused) formed one single person. (158)²²

This story is quite long and its complexity discourages us from any analytical proposal. Nevertheless, as far as we are concerned, what has just been summarised should be enough to pick up some main rhetorical patterns in the narrative plot.

One first evidence is the 'oximoronic' structure determined by the end of the story: two opposite figures become one -a 'heretic orthodox-believer' has the same structure as a 'black sun'.

A further step into some lateral frames allow us to detect other rhetorical features. Let's consider, for instance, the two main oppositions established by the text: the first one is determined by the axis of the 'enmity' (between an inside and an outside concerning orthodoxy) and establishes the poles 'orthodox' *vs* 'heretic'. The second opposition, internal to the orthodox field, is determined by the axis of 'rivalry' and establishes the poles 'reverent' *vs* 'irreverent'. What happens is that after the first victory of the 'inside' against the 'outside', the outside categories invade the inside field, and as a result the categories of enmity coincide with those of rivalry. Moreover, if we dispose in rows and columns these oppositions, it is easy to perceive that in each axis there is a positive value ('orthodox', 'reverent') and a negative value ('heretic', 'irreverent'). And then, the surprise comes from the fact that the new attribution of categories crosses and inverts the standard values, so that the one who becomes 'heretic' is not the 'irreverent' but the 'reverent', the 'irreverent' becoming, in consequence, 'orthodox'. This structure corresponds to the rhetorical figure of hypallage (from Greek "exchange"), that mainly consists of an attribute that affects an object different from the one it is logically or semantically supposed to affect. In Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* we find a quite extreme example of this procedure: "I see a voice. Now will I to the chink, to spy and I can hear my Thisby's face" (5.1.189-90). But the most common example is the one Borges himself often mentions, the virgil-

²² "Tal vez cabría decir que Aureliano conversó con Dios y que Éste se interesa tan poco en diferencias religiosas que lo tomó por Juan de Panonia. Ello, sin embargo, insinuaría una confusión de la mente divina. Más correcto es decir que en el paraíso, Aureliano supo que para la insondable divinidad, él y Juan de Panonia (el ortodoxo y el hereje, el aborrecido y el aborrecido, el acusador y la víctima) formaban una sola persona." (556)

ian hexameter: "*Ibant oscuri sola sub nocte per umbras*", in which the human solitude and the nocturne shadows exchange their attributes.

Anyway, the consequence of such inversion is, in this case, not so drastic. Its only effect is a total doubt installed about the relevance of any kind of distinction: if the 'reverent heretic', condemned, "dies at the stake", the 'irreverent orthodox', "died just as John had". By the way, let us remark that, after all, both theologians meet in Paradise...

The role of flames is capital in this story. They constitute the element of neutralisation of all varieties of distinction. Four different stakes structure the transition between opposite values. The first one is the burning by the Huns of the sacred books in a monastery. The second one is the punishment of the Monotones' leader Euphorbus. The third one is the punishment of John of Pannonia, and the last the forest "stake" that burned Aurelian. The result of the first fire determines the way of all subsequent transitions: the fire consumes a part of Saint Augustin's *Civitas Dei*, that refutes the platonic theory of eternal repetition, but the burned piece concerned only the augustinian refutation, leaving intact the stated platonic quotation as if it were a part of augustinian doctrine:

The text pardoned by the flames enjoyed special veneration and those who read and reread it in that remote province came to forget that the author had only stated this doctrine in order better to refute it. (150)²³

Thus the first and the constant effect of the flames is to pervert any system of doctrinal distinction: fire is blind, as Borges was. It can be said that each character in the story is constructed following this first schema of 'released quotations'. Each character literally encloses, as a refutation does, the opposite character into his own 'script', and then, due to some literal or metaphorical fire, the negation and quotation marks disappear and the contraries become a single, perverted, entity. Yet, perverting doesn't mean inducing in some chaotic confusion. What time distinguishes, 'flames' integrate -but following different figures that correspond to rhetorical forms. Such is the God's '*ars rhetorica*' Borges introduces in the *coda* of his story.

The final scene cannot be described but metaphorically, not -as we would expect it- because it is impossible to describe the transcendence, but because in the kingdom of heaven, "there is no time." Thus the metaphor is the timeless counterpart of narrative oppositions in a tem-

²³ "El texto que las llamas perdonaron gozó de una veneración especial y quienes lo leyeron y rleyeron en esa remota provincia dieron en olvidar que el autor sólo declaró esa doctrina para poder mejor confutarla." (550)

porally affected situation. The human vision considers the universe and the history as constituted *partes extra partes*, but for the eternal present of God, the oppositions are simultaneous elements of a complex figure. What there is struggle, here is oximoron. The history is only a temporal degradation of the eternal timeless rhetoric.

In fact, Borges doesn't believe in the reality of time. Not in the sense Kant does not, but rather he professes the temporally disconnection of things and events. He has published an essay paradoxically titled "A New Refutation of Time" (*Other Inquisitions*), in which he says:

I deny the existence of one single time, in which all things are linked as in a chain. The denial of coexistence is no less arduous than the denial of succession.

I deny, in an elevated number of instances, the successive; I deny, in an elevated number of instances, the contemporary as well. The lover who thinks *While I was so happy, thinking of the fidelity of my love, she was deceiving me* deceives himself: if every state we experience is absolute, such happiness was not contemporary to betrayal; the discovery of that betrayal is another state, which cannot modify the "previous" ones, though it can modify their recollection. The misfortune of today is no more real than the happiness of the past. (257)²⁴

Finally, we can observe that the rhetorical 'spatialisation' of temporal oppositions leads Borges not to a new kind of platonic dogmatism, as if there were some rhetorical archetypes to which this reality should be conformed, but to a sort of aesthetic scepticism. The aesthetic view of reality allows the gratuitous treatment of the oppositions as if they were as many figures we can contemplate, without any necessity of deciding about their truth-possibilities.

In this connection we can remember that each time Borges himself has to evaluate the different interpretations of a historical or fictional event, he prefers to savour each of them. This is the meaning of his frequent 'perhaps' we have found in "The Theologians", but also in "The Wall and the Books". In front of the impressive array of possible interpretations that can be provided to the paradoxical action of Shih Huang Ti, the rhetorical position of Borges does not produce a new interpretation,

²⁴ "(...) yo [niego], la de un solo tiempo, en el que se eslabonan todos los hechos. Negar la coexistencia no es menos arduo que negar la sucesión. / Niego, en un número elevado de casos, lo sucesivo; niego, en un número elevado de casos, lo contemporáneo también. El amante que piensa *Mientras yo estaba tan feliz, pensando en la fidelidad de mi amor, ella me engañaba*, se engaña: si cada estado que vivimos es absoluto, esa felicidad no fue contemporánea de esa traición; el descubrimiento de esa traición es un estado más, inapto para modificar a los "anteriores", aunque no a su recuerdo. La desventura de hoy no es más real que la dicha pretérita." (OC 2: 140)

but the equanimous contemplation of all the conjectures in their configuration:

The tenacious wall which at this moment, and at all moments, casts its system of shadows over lands I shall never see, is the shadow of a Caesar who ordered the most reverent of nations to burn its past; it is plausible that this idea moves us in itself, aside from the conjectures it allows. (Its virtue may lie in the opposition of constructing and destroying on an enormous scale.) (223)²⁵

That is why, even when Borges professes his refutation of time, he only denies it "in an elevated number of instances"...

"Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)": Art as Reference

The last short story we would like to mention illustrates one of the main consequences of Borges rhetorical ontology: what formal figures first produce is literature (or aesthetic worlds, in general), in relation to which the empirical reality functions as a problematic reduction.

The story in question -"Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829-1874)" - tells about an Argentine man, a gaucho, whose life resembles many others: born in the pampas, he grew up and lived in a 'barbarian' world. As many other gauchos, he accepted no other justice than his own, so that to punish an offense, he once killed a man. Since then, he became a 'matrero', a man always hiding himself from the police. One day he is captured and sent to a fort, to defend the frontier against the Indians. Later, redeemed through this experience, he turns to civilization and becomes a 'good citizen' and even a policeman. In 1870 he got the order to capture a bandit who was a deserter and had killed two men. The night of 12 July 1870 Tadeo Isidoro Cruz and five of his men discovered the fugitive; surrounded by the police, the criminal left his hiding place to fight alone and disarmed against the five men around him. Watching this brave man fighting alone, Cruz understood that his destiny was not to catch the fugitive. He threw his cap on the soil, he cried that he would not consent the crime of killing a courageous man, and taking his place beside the deserter, he started fighting against his own soldiers.

²⁵ "La muralla tenaz que en este momento, y en todos, proyecta sobre tierras que no veré, su sistema de sombras, es la sombra de un César que ordenó que la más reverente de las naciones quemara su pasado; es verosímil que la idea nos toque de por sí, fuera de las conjeturas que permite. (Su virtud puede estar en la oposición de construir y destruir, en enorme escala.) (OC 2: 12-13)

Borges' story ends: "beside the deserter Martín Fierro" and this name is a disclosure to the reader: just now the reader notices that what he has read was not a 'real' biography but the trans-fictional reconstruction of a fictional person: Cruz, the friend of Fierro, the main character in *El gaucho Martín Fierro*, a long poem written by José Hernández in 1869.

One element of surprise in this text is that Cruz, an illiterate man, as he is living his real life, guesses that, in a certain way, he has already lived all those present events. And only the aware lector discovers that Cruz's life is, so to say, a pragmatic 'quotation' of a character in an existent literary book. But then, the decisions the man takes moved by this special 'memory' determine a 'real' evolution of his character inside the plot of the book in question. The effect here is similar to the situation created by Woody Allen in *The purple rose of Cairo*. The hypothesis that lies under those artistic works is that there is no priority of real life over fiction.

Another surprising element is that in Borges' rewriting of the classical poem, Cruz not only rejoins his official adversary Fierro (that is the case in Hernández's poem), but also 'becomes' Fierro: fighting with him is a temporal way of showing his untemporal identification with him. This is the way in which Borges describes the last encounter:

A notorious reason prevents me from telling the struggle. Be it enough for me to recall that the deserter wounded or killed several Cruz's soldiers. As Cruz was fighting in the dark (as his body was fighting in the dark), he began to understand. He understood that no destiny is better than another, but that each man must fulfil the destiny he carries inside. He understood that the shoulder-knot and the uniform began to tease him. He understood his deep destiny of wolf, not of gregarious dog; he understood that the other was him. (OC 1: 563, our translation)²⁶

In the original poem, Cruz just decides to rejoin the camp of his enemy. For Borges, he really turns into his enemy, or better, he discovers they are the same person, as the two theologians in Paradise. Borges stresses this effect describing some scenes of Cruz's life in the same way Hernández describes Fierro's.

²⁶ "Un motivo notorio me veda referir la pelea. Básteme recordar que el desertor malherido o mató a varios de los hombres de Cruz. Éste, mientras combatía en la oscuridad (mientras su cuerpo combatía en la oscuridad), empezó a comprender. Comprendió que un destino no es mejor que otro, pero que todo hombre debe acatar el que lleva adentro. Comprendió que las jinetas y el uniforme ya lo estorbaban. Comprendió su íntimo destino de lobo, no de perro gregario; comprendió que el otro era él."

But for our purpose, this text presents a huge novelty in the strange parenthetical sentence by which Borges corrects the description of the conversion: "As Cruz was fighting in the dark (as his body was fighting in the dark)". This correction is not a sign of hesitation but a warning. That means that a human being, for the author, is composed by two separate substances: the body, that is the superficial component, and the Other. Normally we are supposed to fill in this Other with the soul. In this case, however, the other, the deep component is the literary identity of the person. The narration, conceived as the temporal way of understanding the eternal rhetorical grounds of reality, is thus telling the imaginary moment in which the real person who fights, is a void carcass, since his true literary entity has already left the contradictions of the real illusion, to precede the body in the realm of the figures...

Now we can understand why, as a conclusion of his conjectures about the wall and the books, about political, historical and ethical things, Borges offers one of the best definitions of... the aesthetic fact:

Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belaboured by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should never had missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon. ("The Wall and the Books" 223)²⁷

He seems to say: "All real things are shadows: the rest is literature".

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²⁷ "La música, los estados de felicidad, la mitología, las caras trabajadas por el tiempo, ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares, quieren decirnos algo, o algo dijeron que no hubiéramos debido perder, o están por decir algo; esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es, quizá, el hecho estético." (OC 2: 13)

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