

## Borges Beyond Interpretations Changeability and Form in "La secta del Fénix"

---

**F**ocusing primarily on the *meaning* of the fictions, research on Borges' prose production has traditionally been hermeneutically oriented. The fictions have generally been considered allegorical or symbolic: they have thus been assumed to *stand for* something else, however unorthodoxically, and if only for a concealed theory<sup>1</sup>.

This situation makes Sylvia Molloy state that Borges is "one more example of an author whose potential for disquiet, or better still, whose intellectual provocation, has been weakened by a tradition of reductive readings" (2). The elusive, disquieting moment, which is so characteristic for Borges, has been smoothed out and neutralized by the critics, Molloy argues: the unfamiliar has been made familiar, the fragmentary whole, the fleeting monumentalized. Her remark is pertinent –without doubt there *is* something "unsettling, or uncanny, in Borges" (2)– but even these kinds of descriptions easily get reductive. There is a risk that every reading reaches the same mysterious moment of 'indescribability', to which it has to yield. So what is it concretely, in Borges' fictions, that is so disquieting or uncanny? Is it possible to study that element without neutralizing it?

My primary focus in this article is "La secta del Fénix" (OC 1). In spite of –or maybe just because of– its brevity, it is one of the least studied of the fictions that form *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*. Although the fiction has the character of a dry, academic article, one is immediately struck by to what a degree it invites interpretation. Besides the fact that "Fénix" is an ancient symbol, open to a wide range of significations, the whole tale circulates around a number of occurrences –a sect, a Secret, a rite– that all are left so vague and undefined that it is hard to avoid inter-

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example Rodríguez-Luis 33-34; Echavarría 15, 217; Alazraki 16-17, 116, 152.

preting them. That the fiction has been read allegorically throughout by scholars is thus not surprising, but nevertheless problematic. For even if "La secta del Fénix" virtually cries out for explication, every interpretation is, in my opinion, paradoxically doomed to overlook something essential to the fiction. My aim with this study is, on one hand, to show why this is so, and on the other to demonstrate an alternative way to read the fiction, with the help of the formalistic views of Theodor W. Adorno and Gilles Deleuze.

"La secta del Fénix" tells us the story of a sect, but confusingly enough the information we get renders the existence of the sect more and more elusive. The tale starts with – or rather in the middle of – a rather complicated polemic on the historical origin of the Sect of the Phoenix, but what appears, after a number of references to various sources and commentators, is that the sectarians seem to lack distinguishing qualities. Paradoxically enough, anonymity appears to be their only characteristic. Actually the sectarians are united only by a 'Secret', which in its turn is constituted by a trivial rite. The information given about this rite is meagre: some insignificant materials are enumerated, as well as a few very commonplace sites that are said to be suitable for the execution of the rite. Through such insignificant specifications, and through certain inconsistencies, the sect, the Secret, the rite and all else, gradually become increasingly unreal. At length only 'the Secret' remains, but in the last sentence a possibility is hinted that the Secret over time has become instinctive. That raises the question of what really remains: is a secret of which one isn't conscious even conceivable? In the end it seems like 'the sect' doesn't refer to anything at all.

It is no exaggeration to state that there is almost a complete unanimity regarding how "La secta del Fénix" is to be interpreted. Almost all that comment on it share Edna Aizenberg's opinion that "the whole tale serves as an extended metaphor of the sexual act" (83). The fiction is thus read as an allegory, a parable or "a sophisticated literary puzzle" (Bell-Villada 103), where 'the Secret' stands for the sexual act. In light of the widespread idea of a fundamental ambiguity to Borges' fictions, this is quite a remarkable situation. The fact is that even the slightest doubt about the meaning of "La secta del Fénix" is hard to find among commentators; *that* 'the Secret' stands for sexual intercourse is apparently considered so obvious that arguments are superfluous. Dubiously enough, this certainty seems, to a great extent, to be founded on two statements Borges himself made –in a foreword and in an interview– on the fiction at hand. The consensus about the fiction's meaning

is in other words *biographically* founded (OC 1: 483, Christ 190)<sup>2</sup>. Naturally this gives rise to questions of a methodological kind: is the author (still) in possession of the answer to his own stories? Should the scholar rest content with the opinion of the author? Borges' view on the meaning of the text can, of course, be interesting, but it can hardly be taken as a justification of the validity of an interpretation. How strong then, is the interpretation of which there is consensus, per se, biographical statements left aside?

To find an answer to this question, one may fruitfully begin by noting *what*, in "La secta del Fénix", the various commentators build their interpretations on. Daniel Balderston<sup>3</sup> cites the part of the text that describes the Secret, the rite, the initiation into the mystery, the ridiculousness of the Secret and the difficulty to talk about it. Much of this undeniably sustains the interpretation at hand, but Balderston makes some significant cuts in his citation: he omits the part on the forgotten legend of the sect, their God and the consultation of travellers, patriarchs and theologians, and also the three sentences in which the materials and the suitable sites for the execution of the rite are enumerated (37-38). It is obvious that the latter passage in particular does not harmonize with Balderston's idea that the sect of the Phoenix is constituted by "'male bonding,' anal penetration" (38). How would cork, wax, gum arabic or silt fit into that interpretation? And why would theologians and patriarchs have more to say on this matter than anyone else? Balderston neither raises, nor answers these questions.

John T. Irwin in turn gives "La secta del Fénix" a page of commentary in connection with a longer, biographically oriented discussion on dreams and oedipal father-son-relations. He cites part of the same passage as Balderston however, and like him he omits, among other things, the enumerations of materials and sites. Beyond this, he doesn't hesitate in letting Borges' answer in Ronald J. Christ's interview serve as the answer to the riddle (288-289).

---

<sup>2</sup> That situation can be illustrated by the parenthetical comment made by Bell-Villada: "(In case there are doubts [about the identity of the 'Secret'], Borges once told Ronald Christ, 'the act is what Whitman says 'the divine husband knows, from the work of fatherhood,'" adding that as a child he was shocked upon realizing that his own parents had done it.)" (103).

<sup>3</sup> Since he resolutely states that the text is about *homoerotic* sexuality, Balderston's interpretation differs slightly from the others, but this variation is rather insignificant from my perspective (38).

Emir Rodríguez Monegal also lays big stress on Christ's interview, but unlike Balderston and Irwin he doesn't omit the enumerations of sites and materials. Strangely, however, they only raise the laconic reflection that "goma arábica" also occurs in a tale by E.A. Poe, on which Borges writes on one occasion (77-78; *OC* 1:230). Apparently the interpretation sanctioned by the author is so self-evident to Rodríguez Monegal that he doesn't see any contradiction between his very concrete interpretation and the concreteness of the enumerated materials.

Julio Woscoboinik's psychoanalytic interpretation of "La secta del Fénix" is peculiarly biographic: without hesitation he identifies the fictive narrator with the real Jorge Luis Borges. Like Rodríguez Monegal he cuts out the passage on the reports of the travellers and the sectarian's lack of a religious practice from his citation of the fiction (155-156). Interestingly enough, however, he doesn't yield to the materials, but tries to make cork, wax, gum arabic and silt to fit in to his interpretation:

Todo recuerda al semen y sustancias que, una vez secas, se endurecen, incluso fijan, como la goma arábica, o dejan sus huellas en las sábanas, como las poluciones. (157)

Even if one disregards the fact that this description doesn't really accord with reality –especially "el corcho" remains a mystery– the question remains what point there is in trying to find similarities between the materials for the *execution* of an act in the fiction, and the *product* (sperm) of 'the same' act in reality. Woscoboinik's explanation of the role of the materials is consequently not very convincing.

A commentator that covers most aspects of the text is Gene Bell-Villada. Like Woscoboinik, he tries to explain "the curious mention of 'cork, wax or gum arabic' as required materials", but his explanation is likewise not very convincing (104). There is no support to be found in the Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy that "corcho" can signify "'a mat or small mattress'" as Bell-Villada maintains, and "goma arábica" remains an unsolved riddle to him as well (104). That "cera" is to be understood as vaseline or something like it, may be accepted with some reservation, but Bell-Villada's conclusion that the 'mud' used in the rite is the human body seems too far-fetched. His concluding remark on the striking final sentence of "La secta del Fénix" – "Alguien no ha vacilado en afirmar que ya es instintivo." – can be taken as a symptom of the squareness of the prevalent interpretation: from Bell-Villada's perspective, the ending is nothing but "a bit of wry and outrageous understatement since everyone knows that sex is by nature instinctive" (107). The strange, but at the same time logical, dissolution

of the Secret, quite simply doesn't harmonize with such a concrete and precise interpretation. From Bell-Villada's view the ending is thus an odd understatement, a lapse that doesn't fit with the rest of the text.

Arguably, the established interpretation of "La secta del Fénix" is consequently forced to omit too much of the fiction to be convincing. Above all the concrete details never get a satisfactory explanation. It seems like Borges's own statements on "La secta del Fénix" have resulted in defective readings. (Another possible explanation is, of course, that the interpreter's views on the fiction are coloured by their psychoanalytical theses.) The only critic that has questioned the common interpretation is paradoxically enough Ronald J. Christ himself, who, by way of his interview, has indirectly legitimated the same interpretation. Christ means that the answer to the question the fiction makes, not necessarily has to be that concrete:

I think Borges has a rather more typically metaphysical answer in mind. The rite which is celebrated by the sect of the Phoenix is the last rite, that of death. (155-156)

His scepticism towards the established interpretation depends partly on the difficulties to make the enumerated materials fit in to it, but his principal argument is comparative. According to Christ "La secta del Fénix" is inspired by Thomas De Quincey's essay "Secret Societies," which should point towards a more metaphysical interpretation. But even if he is correct in this, and in spite of his interpretation being more open and therefore easier to defend than the prevalent one, it still shares the latter's most severe weaknesses. The fundamental problem with both interpretations is that they reduce the fiction and close it in the way that Molloy has criticized. The fiction is reduced to a trivial riddle –an allegory or a psychoanalytical symptom– to which the existence of a correct answer –coitus or death– is taken for granted. Christ too comprehends the fiction as a unity of meaning, made to be interpreted; the fiction and the interpretation are presupposed to stand in a symbiotic relationship to each other. The problem with this stand is that the fiction's tendency to undermine its own meaning is thereby completely disregarded. As we have seen, the unity of meaning constructed in the reading, appears to destroy itself –the sect, that is ascribed such a long history, finally shrinks to nothing.

But even though there is consensus as to how –or at least *that*– precisely "La secta del Fénix" ought to be interpreted, there is still a large group of scholars, beside the hermeneutically inclined Borges critics, that focus the difficulties in interpreting the fictions of Borges in gen-

eral. Unlike the first group, they see an essential obstacle to interpretation in the fictions. A soft variant of this view can be found in J.B. Hall's attempt to demonstrate an essential ambivalence, impeding the possibility of *one* sole correct interpretation of "Emma Zunz". That observation doesn't, however, refrain her from trying to interpret the fiction, rather the reverse – according to Hall the ambivalence is symbolic:

"Emma Zunz" no more admits of a single 'correct' interpretation than does life itself, and may thus be taken as a convenient symbol of the ambiguous nature of reality. (259)<sup>4</sup>

Thus she too lets the fiction stand for 'something else', in spite of its apparent ambiguity.

In attempting to show that silence or absent description receives a signification in Borges, Gabriela Massuh follows a similar line of reasoning:

El espacio mudo que se abre al final de los relatos de Borges no es una estructura vacía, sino justamente lo opuesto: trascender la palabra escrita no es anularla, sino contenerla. Así concebido, el silencio que articula Borges logra ser 'palabra' en un sentido más amplio y más profundo. En ningún momento Borges deja traslucir una renuncia al significado. (236)

Massuh tries, so to speak, to save Borges' silence from silence. In the obstacles to immediate signification, she sees a deeper and more extensive possibility of meaning. What could be seen as a resistance to meaning is thus turned into an increased possibility of interpretation.

A more extreme form of problematizing of the possibility of interpreting Borges is proposed by Herman Rapaport. Characterizing Borges' fictions as "a literature against itself", he reasons that a fiction such as "La escritura del Dios" deals with the difficulty the story itself has in taking place: "Borges's fiction (...) tells the story of its own deconstructive unreadability" (141). According to Rapaport, the inner ambivalence, or rather inconsistency, is so strong that the readability of the fictions becomes precarious. That is a correct observation in my opinion, but the problem with "Borges, De Man, and the Deconstruction of Reading" is that it has more to say about de Man and deconstruction than about

---

<sup>4</sup> A concordant view is found in Cynthia Stephen's discussion of the relation between construction and destruction, everything and nothing, in Borges. In the meta-fictional variant launched by Stephens, it isn't the world that is symbolized, however, but literature: "Construction and destruction entail each other in Borges's work, and they also, as do everything and nothing, symbolize the nature of literature" (55).

Borges. Furthermore it is aggravating, but interesting, that Rapaport himself cannot refrain from interpretation to reach his conclusion.

In this sense Pierre Macheray's statement that if Borges forces the reader to think, it is by depriving him or her anything to think *of*, is more consistent, especially as applied to "La secta del Fénix". Macheray turns against the recurrent attempts to save a meaning out of the contradictoriness of Borges' fictions. That doesn't mean, however, that the fictions lack meaning: "Le récit a bien un sens, mais ce sens n'est pas celui qu'on croit" (1312). The meaning, he writes, is not situated in any of a multitude of possible interpretations, but in the *difficulty* the texts have in becoming what they are at all. To Macheray, the meaning of "La secta del Fénix" would consequently neither be death nor the sexual act, but precisely the text's tendency to empty itself of its own fictive referent, and thereby of a possible meaning as well.

In writing that Borges "wisely eschews meaning in the ordinary sense", Floyd Merrell apparently approaches Macheray's conclusion (242). Like him, Merrell believes that the very notion of interpretation, as well as all theory of meaning, has to be abandoned in the presence of Borges' oeuvre. Instead, attention should be directed to the "sentences qua sentences, on the ongoing flow of the signifying process", since there is nothing to interpret 'under' the sentences (242). In Borges, the meaning resides somewhere else, or appears in another shape than we are used to, Merrell and Macheray seems to imply.

The common denominator for this latter group of commentators, is that they, in focusing the *problem* of meaning in Borges, find another –and in some cases deeper– kind of meaning in that very problem. In this sense they still try to save a meaning, a possibility of interpretation, from the aporia they have perceived –the non-signification, one could say, is thus instrumentalized. The risk with such a procedure is that it may result in a very stereotyped way of understanding literature. Following Massuh, one could find a more profound and extensive meaning in just about every blank and silence in literature. And like Rapaport one could demonstrate the unreadability of not only Borges's fictions, but well-nigh every conceivable text, with the help of De Man. Thus the efforts to do full justice to the problem of meaning in Borges tend to result in the same kind of reductions and fixations – if only on a more abstract level– as the traditional interpretations do. To make the essential ambiguity of a fiction a symbol of the ambiguity of existence or literature, is to make the ambiguity univocal. The literary insolubility is dissolved through a *translation* into another insolubility. In this

sense the problem I'm trying to illuminate is situated in the inclination to let Borges's fictions stand for something else, to ascribe to them 'another meaning.' For no matter how abstract the ascription is, the result is a binary block. Hence the element that breaks down the totality of the fictions, their symbolic structure and every possibility of interpretation –as Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari put it in their book on Kafka– is disregarded (14). This circumstance is apparent in the Borges discourse as well: the problem with the commentators discussed so far –with the exception possibly of Macheray and Merrell– is that they fail to do justice to the dynamics of "La secta del Fénix". All of them take it, as Gary Saul Morson writes on account of the processuality in *The Idiot*, that "the work at some point can be taken as an atemporal whole signifying something at that moment" ("Sideshadowing" 621). According to Morson, literary criticism has missed a lot of what's essential in Dostoevsky's novel, owing to the inability to see it as a process, rather than product. Indeed, this critique could be directed to a large portion of Borges research as well.

"En la alegoría del Fénix me impuse el problema de sugerir un hecho común –el Secreto– de una manera vacilante y gradual que resultara, al fin, inequívoca", Borges himself writes about "La secta del Fénix" (OC 1: 483). Those who have referred to that statement have all called more attention to the 'unambiguity' of the result, than to the 'tottering, gradual' way of getting there, but in my opinion it is precisely the changeability that is the most interesting thing about the fiction at hand. Of "El Aleph" it has been noted that the conditions of the story seem to change during the reading –this is true of our example as well (Mortensen 185, 196). It is exactly this circumstance that makes "La secta del Fénix" aporetic, from a hermeneutic viewpoint. As a matter of fact, this situation is not unique to Borges. If we are to believe Adorno, every single work of art is aporetic, inasmuch as it has the character of an insoluble enigma. It's an "enigmaticalness" (Rätselcharakter) that can't be done away with through interpretation; instead it's a question of bringing forth the dynamics of which the enigmaticalness is constituted:

If the process immanent to artworks constitutes the enigma, that is, what surpasses the meaning of all its particular elements, this process at the same time attenuates the enigma as soon as the artwork is no longer perceived as fixed and thereupon vainly interpreted but instead once again produced in its objective constitution (*Aesthetic* 125).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> "Konstituiert der den Kunstwerken immanente Prozeß, ein den Sinn aller Einzelmomente Übersteigendes, das Rätsel, so mildert er es zugleich, sobald das



The process Adorno speaks of here is not the "signifying process" Merrell, Morson and others refer to. Adorno suggests something that differs radically from the traditionally hermeneutic or narratological model: since literature is aporetic from a meaning-directed perspective, we have to focus another dimension in the literary work. In other words, mimetic qualities are not the most important aspects of the work of art to Adorno, but rather its becoming of form. From his approach we can therefore handle the enigmaticalness of the work only by bringing forth the immanent process that constitutes the same enigmaticalness, and this without making the process into something fixed.

Surprisingly many of these thoughts are in accordance with the view on meaning, form and dynamics found in Deleuze. Deleuze's understanding of form is non-typological (see Tygstrup 186). This means that he doesn't start out from any generalized, ready-made concept of form, but constantly seeks the specific form established by the particular work. (As a result, there is no applicable method to be found in Deleuze –certainly neither in Adorno–, hardly even a coherent theory.) Consequently, there is no form ready from the outset, to Deleuze; instead, form is articulated gradually, and it is exactly this process of articulation which interests him. What he tries to capture, with his awkward apparatus of concepts, isn't any meaning or mimetic aspects of literature, but rather a becoming of form which is something opposite of meaning. As Stefan Hesper puts it, Deleuze's is an attempt to make analysis sensitive to the chaos of writing (17).

If we are to transcend the drawbacks of the efforts already made to interpret "La secta del Fénix", I believe we have to concentrate on the immanent dynamics of the fiction. By bringing forth changeability *in itself* –that is, without reducing it to 'the changeability of the modern world' or the like– we might possibly get another understanding of the fiction. Accordingly, the question arises as to how the changeability is achieved. *Where* is it situated? On what level? How can it be explained? How should one proceed to bring it forth in its own objective constitution, as Adorno puts it? These are questions to be discussed, and possibly answered, below.

The most conspicuous aspect of "La secta del Fénix" is probably it's display of a negative progress from an initial certainty and 'saturation'

---

Kunstwerk nicht als fixiertes wahrgenommen und dann vergebens gedeutet sondern in seiner eigenen objektiven Konstitution noch einmal hervorbebracht wird" (*Ästhetische* 190).

of meaning to an uncertain 'emptiness' of meaning. While a story is obviously created in the act of reading – a meaning is actualized, a text realized, as Iser puts it (18-19)– the same act inevitably leads to an emptying of the content of the story. The fiction describes a movement from 'The sect of the Phoenix *is*' to 'The sect of the Phoenix *is not*'. The efficiency of that course is to a high degree a fruit of its own elusiveness. A rather manifest aspect of the negative progress, however, is the pervading degradation of the sect. The narrator commences by relating to Herodotus and Tacitus, but when he approaches the Secret, it is a slave, a leper, a beggar or a child that's in its centre. A similar line can be drawn from the gravity and elevation of "los conventículos de Ferrara", to the furtive execution of the rite and the indecency that adheres to it; or from the solidity, grandeur and downright eternity connoted by "Heliópolis" and "los monumentos egipcios", to the fleeting formlessness and extreme banality of the clay that obtains a central role towards the end. Also deserving attention is the progress from the specific to the general and unspecified: from "Tacitus" to just any 'child;' from "Ferrara" and "Ginebra" to "en tres continentes"; from "Juan Francisco Amaro" to the "alguien" of the last sentence. A quick look at the text suffices for one to discover how much more frequent the proper nouns are in the first half than in the second. After the name-dropping polemics of the beginning, the fiction gradually slips into a more diffuse anonymity. The characteristics of the sect are thus gradually made more indistinct.

This negative progress on the level of the story corresponds to a hollowing out of the sect and the Secret through the narrating<sup>6</sup>. All through the fiction, the narrator speaks mostly about what the sect is *not*. This becomes most evident in the discussion, in the second paragraph, of the anonymous character of the sectarians:

He dicho que la historia de la secta no registra persecuciones. Ello es verdad, pero como no hay grupo humano en que no figuren partidarios del Fénix, también es cierto que no hay persecución o rigor que estos no hayan sufrido y ejecutado. (521-522)

There are no less than five negations in these two sentences. The interesting thing is that the double negations not only neutralize each other, but also deprive the referents of some of their substance; the history,

---

<sup>6</sup> With 'narrating' and 'story' I here, and henceforth, aim at what Gérard Genette calls "narration" and "histoire", which are accessible only through the "récit", i.e. 'the narrative' (71-76).

the persecutions, the human groups and the suffering mentioned all become a little less substantial and a little more unreal because of all the negations. Since the few affirmative descriptions that, after all, can be found in the fiction, are so indistinct – “los sectarios suelen ejercer felizmente las profesiones liberales”, “todas las palabras lo nombran [el Secreto]” – that they border on meaninglessness, the generality of the sect gradually slips into nothingness. To say that all words refer to the Secret verges on saying that no words refer to it. The substance of the story is thus undermined by the narrating.

In this way the fiction incorporates a movement from self-evidence, grandeur, facticity and accuracy, towards uncertainty, banality, unreality and vagueness. This tendency is in fact so strong that it would be correct to describe the fiction as an emptying of its own content. Interestingly enough, however, there is a lot that speaks against such a description. The fact is that the fiction seems to hide an emptiness from the reader already at the outset. If ‘the sect’ stands in the centre in the beginning, attention is gradually moved to its uniting ‘Secret,’ whose only manifestation is a ‘rite’, which in its turn consists of an ‘act’ that doesn’t deserve description. In that way the fiction displays an onion-like composition; it consists of a number of peels without a tangible centre. For once we have reached the ‘act’ an interesting displacement occurs: the ‘act’ becomes a ‘cult,’ then a ‘practice,’ a ‘rite’ again and finally a ‘Custom.’ The coveted kernel is thus evaded through a horizontal slip. If we initially approached an answer to the riddle of the fiction (“secta” → “Secreto” → “rito” → “acto”), we are finally just moved to the side (“acto” → “culto” → “ejercicio” → “rito” → “Costumbre”); in other words, continually to yet another synonym that doesn’t get us closer to an answer than the previous term. Accordingly, the fiction is constructed as one long postponement of the fact that it has nothing to say.

Such a postponement can be observed also in particular sentences. The following sentence, for example, is something of a *mise en abyme* for the entire fiction:

En las literaturas germánicas hay poemas escritos por sectarios, cuyo sujeto nominal es el mar o el crepúsculo de la noche; son, de algún modo, símbolos del Secreto, oigo repetir. (522)

It begins *proportionately* precise and *seemingly* illuminating; it discusses Germanic poems written by sectarians, but once the whole thing is specified, it is, typically enough, done with the help of two motifs – “el mar” and “el crepúsculo de la noche” – whose specifying function is in turn undermined both by the general character of the motifs, and by

the endlessness and vagueness they respectively express. The more the reader gets to know, the less certain it thus becomes *what* he or she knows. And as if this wasn't enough, precision is reduced even further in the subordinate clause: "el mar" and "el crepúsculo de la noche" are said to symbolize the Secret, not 'period' but "de algún modo". Those three words are important. They increase the distance which is implied already by the symbolizing as such; the relation is mystified yet a little more. Thereafter the final "oigo repetir" contributes still further to an undermining of what has been said. The *repetition*, time after time, that the sea and the dusk in some way symbolize the Secret, does arguably not point to the self-evidence of that fact, but on the contrary to its lack of evidence –it would naturally not have been worth mentioning, had it been obvious. What happens in the cited sentence is thus that the tangibility the Secret received in the anterior sentence –“(...) sintieron que yo había *tocado el secreto*” (italics added)– is removed with small means, reminding of the paradox of Zeno to which Borges constantly returns: like Achilles in his hunt for the tortoise, we approach the Secret, but the closer we get, the more apparent it becomes that we will never reach our goal, and at length the conclusion that there is no goal to reach is hard to overlook.

The question thus appears if there is any progress at all. Isn't the same emptiness –"The sect of the Phoenix is *not*"– prevailing already from the outset, even though the narrating tries to hide the fact? Something one should notice is that the obvious historical reality that distinguishes the sect initially is established indirectly through a focusing of disagreements –about the denominations, about the validity of different sources, etc.– between different commentators. That the fiction begins by arguing against "Quienes escriben que la secta del Fénix tuvo su origen en Heliópolis" paradoxically enough causes an illusion of consensus about the existence of the sect: there is unanimity about the fact that the sect of the Phoenix *does* have an origin, the only questions are when and where. This suggesting effect is reinforced by the complexity and length of the initial clauses. It is thus not accidental that the first sentence is by far the longest of the whole text, and the second sentence one of the longest; in that way the reader is brought well into the text without a chance of breathing and reflection, and when she finally reaches the first full stop, the sect of the Phoenix has already become something self-evident to her as well. In passing, the narrator leads her into a concord which is later to be hollowed out, step by step.

That the discussion of the first paragraph deals solely with linguistic phenomena –writing, inscriptions, denomination, orality, denomination– also contributes to the suggesting effect: by focusing the name, the linguistic sign, a denotation is *presupposed*, a reality denominated by the name, something that gives it a content. In this sense the initial certainty is a semblance, suggested by the narrator.

If our first observations bore witness to a negative progress on the level of the story, these later ones show that the fiction lacks progress completely. Instead, the narrative seems to *proceed* from a nothingness; the emptiness of the story appears to have been there all the time, even though it is only revealed little by little. From this perspective the progress of the fiction becomes somewhat illusory; the only real progress is the transition from hiding to showing on the level of the narrating.

At the end of “La lotería en Babilonia” –a fiction with extensive similarities to “La secta del Fénix”, not the least regarding its changeability– the narrator gives an account of some of the theories about the Company that runs the lottery which, in course of time, has come to structure the whole existence described in the fiction:

Alguna abominablemente insinúa que hace ya siglos que no existe la Compañía y que el sacro desorden de nuestras vidas es puramente hereditario, tradicional (...) Otra [declara], por boca de heresiarcas enmascarados, *que no ha existido nunca y no existirá.* (OC 1: 460)

These two approaches illustrate the two possible ways, sketched out above, to look at “La secta del Fénix”. Naturally there is no ground to decide which one of the two theories about the Company is correct. The point is of course that they, in practice, amount to the same thing, but that at least the latter theory undermines the entire story we just have been told. It’s the same thing with the possibilities of seeing an emptying or a static emptiness in “La secta del Fénix”: both options are there, and we can’t ignore either. ‘The sect of the Phoenix is’ and ‘The sect of the Phoenix is not’ *at the same time*, already from the outset. It is neither a case of an enriching complementarity, nor a situation of ‘either or,’ but an ambiguity or an uncertainty we cannot really cope with. Rather than an isolated phenomenon, this is a central aspect of the borgesian aesthetic. Another example can be found in “El Sur”, at the end of which the reader realizes that the story *may* have passed from vigil to dream, from life to death, without he or she noticing it. In other words, the protagonist may have been dead long before this is disclosed by the narrating (OC 1: 525-530; see Hall 259-260). Neither in

this case is there any possibility to rule out any of the alternatives; consequently we can't really determine when the protagonist actually died.

This is as far as a traditionally narratological study will take us: to an inevitable uncertainty about what's actually happening in the fiction. We may argue for the existence of an emptying movement on the level of the *story*, but on equally good grounds we may state that the only movement in the fiction is situated in the act of *narrating*, in its gradual disclosing of the static emptiness of the story. We can't escape that ambiguity. Certainly we can relate to this uncertainty in different ways: we may agree with the deconstructive stance of Rapaport and state that the fiction is permeated by ambiguity to such a degree that it virtually becomes unreadable, or we may argue, like Hall, that the uncertainty as such receives a meaning. Basically that difference isn't very significant, however; it is rather a case of two variants – one positive and one negative – of the same basic hermeneutic view. If we want to reach further, we have to find another approach.

Perhaps Svend Østergaard's discussion of a similar uncertainty in "La otra muerte" may lead us on track. The interesting thing about that fiction is that it contains two competing truths about the protagonist, Pedro Damián. As Østergaard writes, there are, quite simply, two Damiáns, one real and one symbolic, "but not at any moment is it possible to determine which of the two one encounters." The reason is that the fiction "constantly *alternates*" (italics added) between the two versions (188). What I would like to seize upon in the comment of Østergaard, is his observation of a fluctuation or movement in the uncertainty. In my opinion, the same kind of movement is to be found in the uncertainty of "La secta del Fénix". It's a matter of a dynamics with no direction; a constant alternation between the being and simultaneous non-being of 'the sect of the Phoenix'. With Deleuze we may understand this as a *zone of proximity or indiscernibility*, caused by the processuality, the *becoming*, that all literature incorporates. This becoming – "devenir" – is an important concept in Deleuze's attempt to catch the literary articulation of form. That doesn't mean that the becoming is to be understood as a progress from formlessness to form; on the contrary it is a matter of a constantly incomplete, diminishing movement from the dominant towards the indiscernible; from the formed and distinct, towards uncertainty and formlessness (Deleuze 11)<sup>7</sup>. Through this

---

<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon is also discussed, under various names, elsewhere in the works of Deleuze. See for example Deleuze & Guattari 38.

processuality literature, according to Deleuze, has the possibility to *de-territorialize* a fact, i.e. deprive something, virtually anything, of its formal characteristics. And this is where the zone of proximity comes in:

Devenir n'est pas atteindre à une forme (identification, imitation, Mimésis), mais trouver la zone de voisinage, d'indiscernabilité ou d'indifférenciation (...). On peut instaurer une zone de voisinage avec n'importe quoi, à condition d'en créer les moyens littéraires. (11)<sup>8</sup>

The zone of proximity –or indiscernibility– could thus be understood as a consequence of the movement towards formlessness, uncertainty and indiscernibility; a boundless border country in the middle of order, a region that can neither be defined nor fixed. In his essay on Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener" Deleuze demonstrates how the repeated answer of the protagonist –"I would prefer not to"– opens such a zone. In short, he maintains that the somewhat contradictory formulation incorporates a fluctuation that cancels all reference and prevents the fixation of a meaning (92; see also Tygstrup 189). With his "I would prefer not to" Bartleby constantly postpones the answers he is prodded to utter, and thereby he obtains a means of survival in a hovering uncertainty between the wish and the refusal of the formulation. The same phenomenon arises, to my mind, in the space between the being and the non-being of the sect in "La secta del Fénix". The entire fiction becomes a zone of indiscernibility, in which the sect hovers, without really being or not being. At no point can the reader disregard the 'opposite' status of the sect. That situation gives rise to a fluctuation without end.

In this connection, Deleuze may help illuminating a dynamics that isn't primarily situated in the act of reading, but in the work, in the form. The becoming and the zone are *formal* categories. That implies that they give us an opportunity to explain how the fiction coheres without being a unity of meaning, how it may resist interpretation without losing all relevance. To bring Deleuze's outlook into relief, one may compare it with Gerardo Mario Goloboff's discussion of the much discussed 'fantastic' in Borges. According to Goloboff the 'fantastic' arises out of a zone of uncertainty (where the silent becomes speaking), rather like

---

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze's non-typological approach makes his ideas very hard to give an account of. All one really can do is to observe how he proceeds in his readings. This also implies that his apparatus of concepts is all but rigid: the concepts glide into each other, and the reader is constantly confronted by new names of (seemingly) well-known phenomena. By the same token, the causality in the relation between 'becoming' and 'zone of indiscernibility' should not be overemphasized.

the one we have found in "La secta del Fénix" (62). Since he connects the uncertainty with a processuality, it is close at hand to see an affinity with Deleuze in his discussion. Goloboff concludes that the bourgeois literature shouldn't be regarded as a finished result, but as "un proceso donde, más que ofrecerse significados, se indagan los mecanismos por los que la significación literaria se produce" (64). As can be seen, he is talking about a meaning-generating process that, to all appearances, is situated in the act of reading. Thus he ends up close to Lser's view on processuality and meaning, but very far from Deleuze's. The processuality investigated by Deleuze is not productive of meaning; quite to the contrary, the becoming here punctures coherence and dissolves meaning (see Deleuze & Guattari 38). If one would like to make a picture of this abstract discussion, one might see the becoming as a vertical line or movement through a horizontal meaning.

The hovering of the sect between being and non-being is not the only zone of indiscernibility in "La secta del Fénix". Another example can be found in the enumeration of suitable cult sites. The mentioning of these sites is preceded by the reminder that there are no "templos dedicados especialmente a la celebración de este culto". The places that 'are considered suitable' ("una ruina, un sótano o un zaguán") are consequently suitable in place of the absent temple – the suitable is already from the outset a substitute for the official and ideal. It is also worth noting that if the enumerated sites have something in common, it is a certain negativity or lack of substance: "una ruina" is *no longer* a building, "un sótano" is nothing but a space *beneath* a house, "un zaguán" is hardly a *real* room, but only a kind of preliminary space. The suitable site is in other words a place that not quite 'is': it is a substitution, a formless gap, a former place. Here too, the information of the narrator causes an uncertain hovering, now between the suitability of the site and its simultaneous character of absence. A zone of proximity of the site arises.

Yet another example is to be found in the successive revelation of 'the Secret.' As with most things in the fiction, there is less left to be known about the Secret, the more information we receive. The Secret is constituted by a rite. It is sacred, but at the same time a little ridiculous. It is generally known among the sectarians, but it still appears fantastic that it hasn't been lost. There is something indecent about it, and one can't avoid alluding to it since all words do – still the narrator makes the effort to mention the symbolizing of the Secret in certain 'Germanic poems'. And if it *isn't* still, at least it *was*, "baladí, penoso, vulgar y (...) increíble." Maybe, it is finally hinted, it has now become instinctive. All this the Se-



cret is. Finally it is so much, that what distinguishes a Secret –to have a content and not to be known by everyone– disappears out of sight. Generality prevails over secrecy, and the content becomes so extensive that everything –and consequently nothing– is a part of the Secret. All that is left is an empty word. The odd thing about the Secret, however, is that it, after having played a minor role in the beginning of the fiction, gradually becomes more important, and finally it is all that remains. In this way an increasing gap opens between its essential importance and its total nullity. The consequence is that the reader finds himself chasing an increasingly important answer to a more and more meaningless riddle –an increasingly intense fluctuation between importance and insignificance is generated. Once again a vertical movement deterritorializing the coherence of its own context can be discerned.

One could go on pointing out similar movement and zones, for example in the discrepancy between the depreciation of Miklosich's comparison of the sectarians of the Phoenix and gypsies, and the considerable attention his comparison still gets; between the admiration of the sectarians for those who *deliberately* renounce the rite, and the contempt for those who renounce it *out of fear*, etc. In these cases too, gaps arise in the system, in the meaningfulness which the fiction assumes and in itself forms. The logic of the fiction, the sense of the story and the functioning of the narrating is punctured, and the menacing chaos hiding underneath gleams in a number of zones of indiscernibility. From Rapaport's perspective these observations could be used as a justification for the deconstructive unreadability of the fiction. Following Deleuze – and, as we shall see, Adorno as well – we can instead see all this as elements of *form*, and thus gain an affirmative possibility of reading beyond interpretation and narratology. The zones certainly imply that the coherence of the story is dissolved; everything fluctuates, nothing seems stable anymore, but at the same time, however, we may perceive, in that very changeability, a form we haven't been aware of before. The consistent unity of meaning is dissolved, but a 'vertical' dynamic form comes in sight.

The disintegrating tendencies become still more obvious if we focus the remarkable exactitude of a number of very peripheral details: the narrator has got acquainted with sectarians "en tres continentes", Juan Francisco Amaro comes from "Paysandú", etc. It is hard not to regard this information as unimportant. Otherwise, a common opinion in the Borges research is that everything in the borgesian fictions has a meaning. In a trivial sense that is, of course, true –Paysandú is a city in Uru-

guay, the word signifies something- but what is implied is that Borges' fictions are a kind of ingeniously constructed clockworks, where every little sign is irreplaceable since it in some way contributes to the effect of the totality. Massuh, for example, states that "Nada es azar en la prosa de Borges" (238), and in the same spirit Shaw writes that "Every good Borges story is a mechanism: each part of it is functional" (7; see also Alazraki 142-143). All certainly with some reason -hopefully the present paper has also given a hint as to the density and complexity of Borges's writing- but I still consider this a simplified and untenable characterization. It is founded on an Aristotelian conception of the work as a stable unity, in which every ingredient is *of necessity*; everything in a work has a reason and fills a function. That is a conception that turns out to be -or rather to have become- problematic, even in confrontation with Borges' fictions. It is true that one could argue that the *three* continents and "Paysandú" are necessary and functional in that they give an illusion of credibility to the story -they bear the reality-effect Roland Barthes speaks of (479-484)- but it still is difficult to do away with their obvious *contingency*. "Juan Francisco Amaro" could just as well have come from Salto, the narrator could have met sectarians on *four* continents - the reality-effect would have been the same. In that sense the words are interchangeable <sup>9</sup>.

It is this interchangeability which makes the homogeneity of the fiction problematic, for it is as if the contingency of these details infects the rest of the information of the story. If a leper can serve as a mystagogue, why not a crippled? Couldn't an *attic* be just as suitable for the execution of the rite as a basement? Why was it exactly *artisans* in Geneva that didn't know the term "Fénix"? And why aren't the sectarians compared with all *men*, for example, instead of with the gipsies, when they don't have much in common anyway? In this way an uncertainty about the necessity of the story told spreads also to the (supposedly) more fundamental features of the fiction. Why is "Fénix" the name of the sect, if even the sectarians themselves don't know that name? Why is the Secret so important, if it is instinctive -if not forgotten- nowadays? Following this thread, one quickly ends up in a morass, where it ultimately is hard to see any reason for the text looking as it does; its form seems to lack all necessity. "La secta del Fénix" could, as Stefan Hesper notices regarding "La lotería en Babilonia", at

---

<sup>9</sup> This aspect is even more distinct in others of Borges' fictions. In "La biblioteca de Babel", "Funes el memorioso" and above all "La lotería en Babilonia" the contingency is more openly thematized.

any single moment turn into a completely different road, choose a completely different world (37). In this sense the contingent details de-territorialize the necessity of the fiction; it is as if the fiction acquires a shadow: a number of just as possible yet not realized texts become visible underneath the available one<sup>10</sup>. The interchangeability of singularities thus implies a changeability similar to the one we observed above: the experience of contingency means that the gaze of the reader starts moving between the realized text and the virtual ones. Macherey expresses something similar when he states that Borges is preoccupied with the question of how, at all, to write the most simple of stories, when the chosen variant in itself implies an exclusion of all other, equally imaginable possibilities (1313). He could have added 'how to read,' for the question is how one could read and interpret a story if its form is fortuitous. How do we avoid that the fortuitousness incorporated in the story colours our interpretation as well?<sup>11</sup> Or as Morson puts it: "if events are contingent, how can they be the subject of knowledge at all" ("Contingency" 676)?

There are probably two possible ways to relate to this problem. We can try to eliminate contingency by stubbornly continuing on the track pointed out by Massuh and Shaw: i.e. to stress that it is "Ginebra" and not "Zürich" since Borges had lived in Geneva; that 'four continents' wouldn't fill the same function as 'three' since the number three is more symbolically loaded, etc. Such efforts are misdirected, not primarily because they are doomed to fail –there will always remain a certain amount of chance that can't be explained away–, but because they

---

<sup>10</sup> Morson finds a similar 'field' of non-realized possibilities in Dostoevsky. "Dostoevsky's novels are thick with events that might have happened," he states, and if we want to understand the novel, we can't disregard these possibilities. "What is important is the field of possibilities, not the one actualized. By depriving any version of undeniable actuality, Dostoevsky reveals the field itself" ("Sideshadowing" 604-605).

<sup>11</sup> According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, only that is understandable which makes a complete unity of meaning. Such a unity is achieved through a circular movement: out of our preunderstanding we construct a meaningful totality, which then is constantly modified – and thus becomes more and more complete – through the confrontation with the parts we successively meet. What appears in "La secta del Fénix" however, is that this constructive course incorporates a disintegrating tendency. While we certainly understand more and more, *what* we understand seems to be dissolved completely through the very act of understanding itself. If the singularities of the fiction are focused one at a time, it is as if their belonging to the totality that "La secta del Fénix" claims to be, goes up in smoke. Thus, "Paysandú" not only contributes to the shaping of the whole, but to its dissolution as well. See Gadamer 57-65.

imply that one approaches the fiction as a crossword puzzle rather than as an aesthetic object, and so one has missed the whole point. We may also defuse contingency by giving it a function. That is essentially what Macheray does when he states that Borges assents to inevitable contingency and makes it an element in his aesthetic. Macheray argues that of all possible forms Borges chooses the one that, through its very instability, its inner inconsistencies and apparent artificiality, keeps the question posed above ('why choose exactly *this* variant of the story?') as open as possible (1313). Paradoxically enough, Macheray thus tends to see the contingency, the non-necessity of form, as a chosen *method* – so he too does away with it. Therefore both these explanations can be ranged within the rational tradition that, according to Morson, since the enlightenment has tried to do away with contingency:

The tradition of 'rationalism,' theoretism, and social science seeks to deny, ignore, or, so far as possible, eliminate contingency. (...) For the theorist, the less contingency, the better the explanation. ("Contingency" 675)

The other alternative is to try leaving this tradition and, as Morson writes, do justice to contingency. He himself connects its presence in literary works to the processuality of literature. The efforts to do away with contingency are therefore related to "our habitual inclination to think away processes in favour of synchronic designs" (677). That is probably a correct observation, but since Morson's primary example (Dostoevsky) is so different from ours, his approach isn't immediately valid to "La secta del Fénix". (Morson demonstrates how the processuality of Dostoevsky's novels leads to an unavoidable contingency. In Borges the situation is actually the opposite: the contingency of the details results in a vertical changeability.) His fundamental thesis – that we have to make analysis sensitive to the immanent contingency of literature – is, however, highly relevant in this regard as well. In other words, the need for another approach, an approach that can do justice to the changeability and the contingency of Borges' fiction, once again becomes urgent.

From Adorno's angle of approach contingency cannot be explained away. It is a token of the immanent *non-identity* – history, society, in short 'the heteronomous' – that constantly threatens to dissolve the work from within, while it is also one of the poles in the tension that constitutes the work (*Ästhetische* 326-330). Contingency is thus a constitutive part of the work, according to Adorno. That makes his stand more radical than Morson's, which held that there certainly *are* 'masterpieces' free of contingency ("Sideshadowing" 260). To Adorno con-

tendency has nothing to do with quality. Not even a formally perfect poem or fiction can obtain the identity between the identical and the non-identical as it yet *has* to obtain: a work consisting of a contingent gathering of contingent singularities is inconceivable. This aporetic situation, Adorno states, implies that the identity of the work can only be processual; the work has to be conceived as a *becoming*:

Artworks synthesize ununifiable, nonidentical elements that grind away at each other; they truly seek the identity of the identical and the nonidentical processually because even their unity is only an element and not the magical formula of the whole. (*Aesthetic* 176)<sup>12</sup>

Consequently the unity of the artwork is situated in the *processuality* between the identical and the non-identical. It is in that process or tension –between form and contingency, between disintegration and the demand for unity– that the form of the work is articulated, he writes a few lines further down:

The resistance to them of otherness, on which they are nevertheless dependent, compels them to articulate their own formal language, to leave not the smallest unformed particle as remnant. This reciprocity constitutes art's dynamic; it is an irresolvable antithesis that is never brought to rest in the state of being. Artworks are such only *in actu* because their tension does not terminate in pure identity with either extreme. (176)<sup>13</sup>

With the negative dialectics of Adorno, the contingency of "La secta del Fénix" thus becomes logical: it gives rise to the processuality that makes the form-becoming of the fiction. Such a statement may appear to fall into the same trap as Macheray's explanation of contingency, but there is an important difference: while Macheray understands it as a planned part of Borges's aesthetics, Adorno would see it as exactly that which *isn't* planned. Accordingly, he gives contingency an explanation, but he doesn't explain it away.

<sup>12</sup> "Kunstwerke synthesieren unvereinbare, unidentische, aneinander sich reibende Momente; sie wahrhaft suchen die Identität des Identischen und des Nichtidentischen prozessual, weil noch ihre Einheit Moment ist, und nicht die Zauberformel fürs Ganze" (*Ästhetische* 263).

<sup>13</sup> "Der Widerstand der Andersheit gegen sie, auf welche sie doch angewiesen sind, veranlaßt sie dazu, die eigene Formsprache zu artikulieren, kein ungeformtes Fleckchen übrig zu lassen. Diese Reziprozität macht ihre Dynamik aus; das Unschlichtbare der Antithetik, daß jene in keinem Sein sich stillt. Kunstwerke sind es nur in actu, weil ihre Spannung nicht in der Resultante reiner Identität mit diesem oder jenem Pol terminiert" (*Ästhetische* 263).

From this perspective it is not the story's semblance of unity that keeps "La secta del Fénix" together, but the contingent detail's dissolution of that unity; not the 'horizontal' movement implied in the act of reading, but the 'vertical' processuality between the singularities and the totality. Thus the proximity to Deleuze, and his pursuit of the work's articulation of a form, becomes increasingly obvious: just like him, Adorno sees a form-becoming in the disintegrating tendencies of the work. The zones of indiscernibility focused by Deleuze, could, with Adorno, be understood as marks of "das Unschlichtbare der Antithetik" –the antithetic tension of which the form is loaded. Form *is* these becomings. According to Adorno, form is the synthesis of the scattered and contingent, while it preserves the divergency and the contradictions within itself. In this sense form always suspends itself, or as he also puts it: form is that within the work of art, through which it displays itself as self-critical (*Ästhetische* 216).

Such a formal self-criticism can be sensed also in the stream of the narrating in "La secta del Fénix"; in the style itself. After the elegance of the initial paragraph, the narrating becomes more and more uncomfortable. In the second paragraph clauses with similar structure are piled up: "Los gitanos son (...); los sectarios suelen (...) Los gitanos configuran (...); los sectarios se confunden (...); Los gitanos son"; "Urmann era un hombre sensible; Urmann era judío; Urmann frecuentó a los sectarios en la judería de Praga". The narrator enumerates arguments, and it is as if the very form itself – the traditional narrating – stands in the way of what he has to say. This tendency is strongest in the fourth paragraph, in the vicinity of the information that "El rito constituye el Secreto." Besides being, by far, the shortest sentence of the fiction, it stands out by its relative distinctness: for once something is said about 'the Secret' without reservations. In that sense, this is the point where we get closest to 'the Secret,' which is an explanation as to why the narrating is at its most staccato-like right here. The sentences in this section are abrupt and factual, and the hypotactic narrating tends to change into paratactical enumerations: "un castigo, (...) un pacto o (...) un privilegio", "Un esclavo, un leproso o un pordiosero", "el corcho, la cera o la goma arábiga (...) légamo", "una ruina, un sótano o un zaguán" This tendency can be illuminated by the observation, made by Per Aage Brandt, of a conflict between two realities in Borges: while one is temporal, approximate and characterized by traditional narrating, the other is exact, non-temporal and objective, which implies that it can only be caught in cataloguish, paratactical enumerations (1-3). This gives rise to a certain homelessness in the language of the fiction,

Brandt argues; the narrator is condemned to hover between "dos errores, el de lo cotidiano falso, trivial y aproximativo, y el de la nitidez verdadera insoportable" (3). Even though it is doubtful whether Brandt's thesis about two modes of narrating is applicable to our example, the hovering he illustrates can be sensed in "La secta del Fénix" as well: here the narrator tries to tell his story, but the closer he gets to his subject, the more troublesome the very act of narrating seems. Apparently, something in the fiction resists being narrated. Or rather: the exact nothingness of 'the Secret' refuses incorporation into the approximateness of the narrating. Therefore the fiction is weighed down by a constant threat of interruption and silence.

I believe that it is possible, in this way, to track a becoming or a self-criticism in the very style of the fiction as well: we can observe how the narrating fights against its own superfluosity, how its own literary elegance is put in question. In his essay on Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, Adorno shows how language becomes a tool for its own absurdity ("Versuch" 306; see also 282, and *Aesthetic* 230). In this sense "La secta del Fénix" is very different, but neither in Borges is language an unproblematic, transparent instrument. Just as Beckett thematizes the breakdown of dramatic forms and raises the question how to dramatize anything when meaning is lost, "La secta del Fénix" can be said to pose a similar set of problems *via its form*: how is it possible to narrate something when there is nothing to tell?

What makes a hermeneutic or a narratological approach to "La secta del Fénix" problematic is its immanent processuality and contingency. The more complete a unity of meaning we manage to create out of a text, the better the interpretation; the more of the contingent details of the story we manage to give a function in the narrating, the better the analysis. So how could we, with such an approach, allow the contingency of "La secta del Fénix" to stay contingent? Likewise, it is hard to let the becomings that can be found in the fiction remain becomings; the temptation to let *something* become –usually a meaning– is considerable. Thus one could say that "La secta del Fénix" defends itself against every attempt at interpretation and analysis through its formal constitution. Put differently, there is a dimension in the fiction that we cannot reach if we approach it as a unity of meaning or as a narrative in Genette's sense. In this study, I have tried to visualize this dimension: the fiction as a force-field, whose unity or form is situated in its vertical changeability.

The fact that "La secta del Fénix" already at the outset seems so curiously pointless speaks for the reality of that dimension. As soon as one has perceived its immanent processuality, it certainly becomes more puzzling in one sense –it becomes obvious that no interpretation can ever do justice to it– but at the same time another inner logic, that gives it a completely different justification, is revealed<sup>14</sup>. It is that change which is described by the Adorno-citation quoted above:

If the process immanent to artworks constitutes the enigma, that is, what surpasses the meaning of all its particular elements, this process at the same time attenuates the enigma as soon as the artwork is no longer perceived as fixed and thereupon vainly interpreted but instead once again produced in its objective constitution. (*Aesthetic* 125)

Anders Johansson  
University of Gothenburg

### Works cited.

- Adorno, Theodor W. "Versuch, das Endspiel zu Verstehen." *Noten zur Literatur. Gesammelte Schriften*. Bd. 11. Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1974.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *Ästhetische Theorie. Gesammelte Schriften*. Bd. 7. Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1970.
- Aizenberg, Edna. *The Aleph Weaver: Biblical, Kabbalistic and Judaic Elements in Borges*. Potomac: Scripta Humanistica, 1984.
- Alazraki, Jaime. *La prosa narrativa de Jorge Luis Borges*. Madrid: Gredos, 1968.
- Balderston, Daniel. "The 'Fecal Dialectic': Homosexual Panic and the Origin of Writing in Borges." *¿Entiendes? Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*. Ed. Emilie L. Bergmann & Paul Julian Smith. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Barthes, Roland. "L'effet de réel." (1968) *Œuvres complètes*. Bd. 2. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994.
- Bell-Villada, Gene H. *Borges and his Fiction: A Guide to his Mind and Art*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Obras Completas*. Bd. 1. Barcelona: Emecé, 1989.
- Brandt, Per Aage. "El doble realismo de Borges: Una síntesis." Unprinted. Borges Center, Aarhus University.

---

<sup>14</sup> Bell-Villada also describes this change: "'The Sect of the Phoenix' can puzzle first-time readers; after one has guessed the rather banal identity of the 'Secret,' however, *the story comes to life* as one of Borges's most accessible, refreshing, and even amusing works" (italics added, 103). The statement strikes something essential in the fiction, but it is hard to see why it should 'come to life' to the reader, as a consequence of the discovery of 'the solution' to its riddle. In my opinion the change is, on the contrary, a result of the awareness of the *irrelevance* of every 'solution' to the 'life of the fiction'.



- Christ, Ronald. *The Narrow Act: Borges' Art of Allusion*. New York: New York University Press, 1969.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Critique et clinique*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1993.
- Echavarría, Arturo. *Lengua y literatura de Borges*. Barcelona: Ariel, 1983.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. "Vom Zirkel des Verstehens." (1959) *Gesammelte Werke*. Bd 2. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1986.
- Genette, Gérard. "Discours du récit: essai de méthode." *Figures III*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972.
- Goloboff, Gerardo Mario. "Ideas sobre lo fantástico borgeano." *Río de la Plata Culturas* 1 (1985).
- Hall, J. B. "Deception or Self-Deception? The Essential Ambiguity of Borges' 'Emma Zunz'." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*. (July 1982).
- Hesper, Stefan. *Schreiben ohne Text: Die Prozessuale Ästhetik von Gilles Deleuze und Félix Guattari*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994.
- Irwin, John T. *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story*. Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins U.P., 1994.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- Machery, Pierre. "Borges et le récit fictif." *Les Temps Modernes* 236 (January 1966).
- Massuh, Gabriela. *Borges: Una estética del silencio*. Buenos Aires: Ed. de Belgrano, 1980.
- Merrell, Floyd. *Unthinking Thinking: Jorge Luis Borges, Mathematics and the New Physics*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1991.
- Molloy, Sylvia. *Signs of Borges*. Trans. Oscar Montero & the author. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1994.
- Morson, Gary Saul. "Contingency and Freedom, Prosaics and Process." *New Literary History*. Vol. 29, n<sup>o</sup>. 4 (1998).
- Morson, Gary Saul. "Sideshow and Tempics." *New Literary History*. Vol. 29, n<sup>o</sup>. 4 (1988).
- Mortensen, Anders. "Den moderna tidens slut: Om Jorge Luis Borges' 'El Aleph'." *Moderna klassiker: 16 föreläsningar om vår tid*. Ed. Birthe Sjöberg. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Lund: Absalon, 1996.
- Østergaard, Svend. *The Mathematics of Meaning*. Århus: Aarhus UP, 1997.
- Rapaport, Herman. "Borges, De Man, and the Deconstruction of Reading." *Borges and His Successors: The Borgesian Impact on Literature and the Arts*. Ed. Edna Aizenberg. Columbia/London: U. of Missouri Press, 1990.
- Rodríguez Monegal, Emir. *Borges: Hacia una lectura poética*. Madrid: Guadarrama, 1976.
- Rodríguez-Luis, Julio *The Contemporary Praxis of the Fantastic*. New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1991.
- Shaw, Donald L. *Borges' Narrative Strategy*. Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1992.
- Stephens, Cynthia. "Allusion in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges." *Hispanófila* 111 (May 1994).
- Tygstrup, Frederik. "Prosaens plan: Gilles Deleuzes formforståelse og litteraturanalysen." *Deleuze og det æstetiske*. Ed Niels Lehmann & Carsten Madsen. Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1995.
- Woscoboinik, Julio. *El secreto de Borges: Indagación psicoanalítica de su obra*. Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Latinoamericano, 1991.