

BORGES AS ANTIPHILOSOPHER

Bruno Bosteels
Cornell University

Unequivocal rejection of all philosophy is an attitude that always deserves respect, for it contains more of philosophy than it itself knows. Mere toying with philosophical thoughts, which keeps to the periphery right from the start because of various sorts of reservations, all mere play for purposes of intellectual entertainment or refreshment, is despicable: it does not know what is at stake on a thinker's path of thought.
Heidegger, *Nietzsche*

We know that he was the philosophers' enemy; to have appropriated one of their weapons so as to turn it against them must have caused in him a bellicose pleasure.
Borges, "History of Eternity"

Over the last decade or so, whenever I presented parts of my ongoing work on Jorge Luis Borges and philosophy to the wider public in the form of lectures or seminars, somebody usually sitting in the front row would almost always stand up afterwards and, with the triumphant smile of an ironist, remark that the Argentine should not be taken so seriously since, after all, he is not a philosopher but a literary writer, that is, someone who merely toys with philosophical ideas for the sake of entertainment and aesthetic pleasure, without implying any systematic philosophy of his own. We know of course that Borges was fond of describing himself as "simply a man of letters" or as "an Argentine adrift in the sea of metaphysics," while just as often he would express his disdain for grand system-building. "Because they want to make me into a philosopher and a thinker. But it is certain that I repudiate all systematic thinking because it always tends to mislead," he thus affirmed in one of his numerous interviews, speaking with Jean de Milleret: "A system necessarily leads into a trap" (Milleret 148; all translations, unless indicated otherwise, are my own). What Borges and our front-row ironist prefer to leave unacknowledged, though, is the extent to which such a rejection of systematic thinking is in itself astonishingly systematic—so systematic, in fact, that it ceases to be astonishing at all. Indeed, the objection that Borges's own delightful sense of irony defeats any and all attempts to offer a systematic account of his thinking falls squarely in line with a longstanding argument according to which all philosophers, in their millenarian love of truth, sooner or later become prey to an arrogant illusion of mastery, and that the sheer thrill of happiness, of enjoyment, or of pleasure, though perhaps no less inaccessible to us mere mortals, nonetheless is a worthier object of pursuit than the ever-elusive line of

demarcation between opinion and truth that completely seems to absorb the philosopher since at least Plato.

The reaction against philosophy as system not only forms a systematic tradition in its own right, but this tradition moreover hides a prestigious genealogy that as a minimum would have to include the likes of Saint Paul, Pascal, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and the early Wittgenstein. It belongs to Jacques Lacan to have coined (or recast) the term “antiphilosophy” for this peculiar critical stance, somehow occupying a position both inside and outside, with regard to the claims to truth that have defined the discourse of philosophy since its inception in ancient Greece. In recent years, furthermore, the question of what constitutes antiphilosophy has also been taken up by Alain Badiou in an attempt to recapture the project of philosophy from the hands of its antiphilosophical rivals. Borges, I will argue in the following pages, can be situated profitably in the context of this debate: his work will then turn out to have been in large part the work of an antiphilosopher, one who is indeed ironically opposed to the universality claims of truth but one who is also forever in search of a radical gesture that would be able, if not fully to replace, then at least continuously to compete with the prestige of truth in philosophy.

Following Badiou’s accounts, particularly in his essay on the early Wittgenstein, we can distinguish a few general clues that serve to detect an antiphilosophical approach to thinking: first, the assumption that the limits of language coincide with the limits of the world; second, the reduction of truth to being nothing more than a linguistic or rhetorical effect, the outcome of historically and culturally specific language games; third, an appeal to what lies just beyond language, or at the upper limit of the sayable, as a domain of meaning irreducible to truth; and, finally, in order to gain access to this domain, the search for a radical act, such as the religious leap of faith or the revolutionary break, the intense thrill of which would disqualify in advance any systematic theoretical or conceptual elaboration.

These four features of thought tend to push the antiphilosopher, respectively, in the directions of nominalism, sophistics, mysticism, and various forms of (political, religious, artistic, or even scientific) radicalism. In fact, the tension between the first two of these features and the last two produces a characteristic vacillation that can range from a purely constructivist viewpoint, which reduces truth to what can be discerned in the existing language systems, all the way to the yearning for a mystical beyond, pointing toward the ineffable other side of language. Incidentally, this vacillation also helps explain the deeply narrative potential involved in the “essential scepticism” that we have come to identify, perhaps somewhat lazily following the author’s own statements, with the case of Borges. By this I mean to refer not only to the fluctuations between nominalism and realism, or between scepticism and mysticism, that can be found from one text to another, but also to the narrativity involved in the comings and goings of certain positions within one and the same story or essay. Following this line of reasoning, we might even be able to come up with a better definition of what really constitutes the logic of a “fiction” or an “inquisition” in Borges’s sense.

Antiphilosophers, particularly those modern ones who try to think in the wake of the so-called linguistic turn after Wittgenstein, Mauthner, or Saussure, first of all tend to reduce the limits of our world

to the limits of our language. Let us call this their constructivist or nominalist side. The world, upon this view, conventionally and nowadays perhaps somewhat trivially can be seen as some sort of book—or, alternatively, as a library, a finite or transfinite collection of books. As Borges writes in his essay “On the Cult of Books” from *Other Inquisitions*: “According to Mallarmé, the world exists for a book; according to Bloy, we are the versicles or words or letters of a magic book, and that incessant book is the only thing in the world; or, rather, it is the world” (120). For Borges, nominalism consists precisely in the view according to which all descriptions of the world, far from being truthful or even verisimilar propositions that correspond to an objective state of things, turn out to be purely linguistic classifications that are as arbitrary and conjectural as they are inevitable. As he concludes in “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” also from *Other Inquisitions*, “obviously there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural. The reason is very simple: we do not know what the universe is”; what is more, this first, strictly epistemological reasoning quickly expands into a much vaster, properly ontological argument: “We must even go further; we must suspect that there is no universe in the organic, unifying sense inherent in that ambitious word” (104). What appears to be a shortcoming of our intellect, in other words, constitutes an essential lack in the order of being as such.

We also know, and Jaime Rest’s classical study amply documents, that for Borges nominalism names the untranscendable horizon of our time. This means that we cannot even imagine anymore what it means to be a realist; we live and breathe the air of nominalism even without knowing it, as Borges writes in “A History of Eternity”: “Now, like the spontaneous and bewildered prose-speaker of comedy, we all do nominalism *sans le savoir*, as if it were a general premise of our thought, an acquired axiom. Useless, therefore, to comment on it” (135). Or, in the later words of “From Allegories to Novels” in *Other Inquisitions*: “Nominalism, which was formerly the novelty of a few, encompasses everyone today; its victory is so vast and fundamental that its name is unnecessary. No one says that he is a nominalist, because nobody is anything else” (157). In fact, aside perhaps from Charles S. Peirce and his pragmatist followers in New England, few modern-day thinkers have made the debate between nominalism and realism into such a central tenet of their worldview as Borges.

Nominalism, despite its proclaimed ubiquity, which would have to make it into a matter of common acceptance rather than a topic of open disputes, is above all a source of critical leverage for Borges. It is that which gives his writing the necessary impetus to go against what he calls the great “continuities” of Western thought: time, the self, the universe, or God. Once these notions are submitted to the razor-sharp edge of a nominalist critique, they turn out to be little more than linguistic constructs, the effects of a grammatical slippage or a rhetorical turn of phrase. The notion of a stable person, to give but one of the more famous examples, is reduced to these terms in his early inquisition “The Nothingness of Personality”: “There is no whole self,” Borges repeats as if in a mantra, while turning to his reader: “Are you, as you ponder these disquietudes, anything more than an indifference gliding over the argumentation that I make, or an appraisal of the opinions that I expound?” (3). From

this type of assertion and rhetorical question, we can easily see why there exists such a deep-seated friendship, or at the least an unmistakable family resemblance, between the nominalist and the sophist.

Indeed, if there is no escape from the prison-house of language, then truth can only be a linguistic or rhetorical effect—the felicitous or infelicitous outcome of certain language games. No doubt more familiar to readers of the early Nietzsche, particularly as seen through the lens of Paul de Man, this reduction of logic to rhetoric is the side of antiphilosophers that makes them nearly indistinguishable from ancient or modern sophists. Admittedly, Borges never went as far in this direction as Nietzsche did in his early texts from the so-called *Philosopher's Book*. But in his “Note on Walt Whitman,” after attributing to Nietzsche the thesis that “the important consideration is the change an idea can cause in us, not the mere formulation of it,” Borges nonetheless offers one of the more striking summaries of the sophistic premise, echoes of which can still be heard in the rumble provoked by deconstruction many decades later. Thus, in a footnote to the idea attributed to Nietzsche, Borges writes:

Reason and conviction differ so much that the gravest objections to any philosophical doctrine usually pre-exist in the work that declares it. In the *Parmenides* Plato anticipates the argument of the third man which Aristotle will use to oppose him; Berkeley (*Dialogues*, 3) anticipates the refutations of Hume. (71)

For sure, logic and rhetoric are not equated in this footnote; on the contrary, their radical difference is affirmed. However, one of the consequences of this affirmation is a certain devaluation of pure logic, or reason, in favor of the persuasive force of conviction of an argument. In fact, so much weight is given to the effects of language and the change it can produce that the principle of non-contradiction, cornerstone of classical logic if there ever was one, no longer applies even in the most canonical of philosophical works. When taken to an extreme, this privileging of rhetoric over logic can easily lend the argument a mystical overtone. Indeed, if what really matters is the change an idea can produce in us, and if this effect is beyond the scope of mere logical formulation, then it is hard to resist the temptation to find alternative modes of access to this domain of meaningfulness.

As Jaime Rest and Gabriela Massuh, among others, were quick to point out, no sooner do we posit the identity of the limits of our world and the limits of our language than the question arises of knowing what lies beyond these limits. This is the question that paradoxically opens a path from constructivism toward mysticism. Paradoxically, because at first this path seems to contradict the principle according to which reality is a verbal, linguistic, or discursive construct. Thus, speaking of one Quevedo's most famous sonnets, the one written in his Torre de Juan Abad, Borges asserts in *Other Inquisitions*: “I shall not say that it is a transcription of reality, for reality is not verbal, but I can say that the words are less important than the scene they evoke or the virile accent that seems to inform them” (40); or as he writes in his essay on Leopoldo Lugones, “reality is not verbal and it can be incommunicable and atrocious” (62). There seems to be, then, a dimension of reality, or perhaps it would be better to say a dimension of the real—whether cruel or not—that forever remains beyond the scope of language.

Some of Borges's most canonical fictions of course revolve around this gap between language and its incommunicable, atrocious, or simply eternal beyond. Perhaps even more concise than "The Aleph" in this regard is "A Yellow Rose," a short prose from *Dreamtigers* (*El hacedor*) that tells of the revelation that befalls Giambattista Marino on the eve of his death, in an illumination that Homer and Dante may have achieved as well:

Then the revelation occurred: Marino *saw* the rose as Adam might have seen it in Paradise, and he thought that the rose was to be found in its own eternity and not in his words; and that we may mention or allude to a thing, but not express it; and that the tall, proud volumes casting a golden shadow in a corner were not—as his vanity had dreamed—a mirror of the world, but rather one thing more added to the world. (38)

This fragment not only relies on a conventional split between the worldly and the otherworldly realms but it also and more importantly names the basic operations or representational strategies that are involved in dealing with them. First and foremost among these, the fragment distinguishes between expression and allusion, between transcribing and mentioning, or between saying and showing. In the final instance, however, what is at stake in this revelation is not a process but rather an instantaneous or atemporal act.

This last notion is, without a doubt, the most important element in the characterization of an antiphilosopher, namely, the reliance on a radical gesture that alone has the force of destituting and occasionally overtaking the philosophical category of truth. Beyond the horizon of language, antiphilosophers indeed typically posit the possibility of some radical act such as Kierkegaard's "leap of faith," Nietzsche's "breaking in two of history," or Borges's own "aesthetic fact," *el hecho estético*, better translated as "act" than as "fact," in the sense that *hecho* should retain the echoes of an active *hacer*, as in *hacedor*, or *poet*, from *poiein*. This "act" or "fact" does not produce a new truth but what matters is rather its effect on the subject, the "thrill," which in principle disqualifies any systematic theoretical or conceptual purpose.

Borges's two extant definitions of the aesthetic act are well-known but it might be worth quoting them in detail. The first concludes the opening essay in *Other Inquisitions*, "The Wall and the Books," when Borges seeks to understand the meaning behind Shi Huang Ti's simultaneous destruction of the library and the construction of the Chinese wall:

Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces molded by time, certain twilights and certain places—all these are trying to tell us something, or have told us something we should not have missed, or are about to tell us something; that imminence of a revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic act. (5, translation modified in order to render *el hecho estético*)

The second is part of Borges's attempt, in the prologue to his 1964 *Obra poética*, to define what he calls "the aesthetics of Berkeley:"

The taste of the apple (states Berkeley) lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself; analogously (I would say) poetry lies in the commerce of the poem with the reader, not in the series of symbols registered on the pages of a book. The essential aspect is the aesthetic act, the *thrill*, the physical modification provoked by each reading. Perhaps this is nothing new, but at my age novelties matter less than truth. (*Obra poética* 11)

In fact, in this last sentence we can begin to see how the antiphilosophical search for a radical act—in this case an aesthetic one—allows us to redefine truth itself, rather than to jettison it altogether. It is, then, a question of intensity. What matters is the experiential content or effect caused in the subject, particularly as speaking subject.

This decisive role of the speaking subject, finally, constitutes a fifth and final feature that is typical of antiphilosophy. Indeed, the experience of the beyond through a radical “act,” can be transmitted only in a near-autobiographical style that is inseparable from the subject of the enunciation. This is the experimental, writerly side of antiphilosophers, present in Nietzsche’s aphorisms, Kierkegaard’s diaries, Lacan’s esoteric seminars, or Saint Paul’s epistles. Borges’s early fragment called “Feeling in Death” (“Sentirse en muerte”) repeated in *The Language of Argentineans* and in *History of Eternity* is exemplary of this highly personalized style, which otherwise contradicts the critique of personality provided in his more theoretical essays, but even “New Refutation of Time” in *Other Inquisitions* ends on a similar (or the same) autobiographical note.

I, on the other hand, want to end with what is perhaps the quintessential phrase in the stylebook of the antiphilosopher, a quote which Borges by way of James Boswell attributes to William Henry Hudson, in his essay “About *The Purple Land*,” also from *Other Inquisitions*: “Improving the perfection of a phrase divulged by Boswell, Hudson says that many times in his life he undertook the study of metaphysics, but happiness always interrupted him” (144). Some of Boswell’s original assertions, for sure, could be used to prove the contrary, for example, when the author of *The Life of Samuel Johnson* writes: “A peasant and a philosopher may be equally *satisfied*, but not equally *happy*. Happiness consists in the multiplicity of agreeable consciousness. A peasant has not the capacity for having equal happiness with a philosopher” (229). Happiness, as distinct from mere satisfaction, according to these lines would always seem to require, and not interrupt, the active study and agreeable consciousness of the philosopher. But perhaps this is precisely the part of Boswell’s phrase that was improved to the point of perfection by Hudson. For, in the eyes of Borges, between philosophy and happiness there can be no reconciliation—at least not at first sight. Borges, like most antiphilosophers, thus typically discredits philosophy’s claims by appealing to the intensity of a subjective experience, the thrill of which alone is capable of producing actual happiness.

And yet, as early as in his youthful essay “Happiness in Writing” (“La felicidad escrita”) from *El idioma de los argentinos*, Borges reveals his doubts as to the capacity of literature to come any closer than philosophy or metaphysics would to express happiness in the present, as opposed to the mere promise

of happiness to come or the elegiacal remembrance of happy times past. “It seems disheartening to affirm that happiness is no less fleeting in books than in real life, but my experience confirms this,” Borges begins by observing (41), only to conclude with the following words in the end:

We usually suppose that literature already has stated the essential words of our lives and that innovation comes only in grammaticalities and metaphors. I dare to assert the opposite: there is an overabundance of minute belaborings but a lack of valid presentations of the eternal: of happiness, of death, of friendship. (47)

Literature, in this sense, is found equally lacking as philosophy when faced with the task of presenting actual happiness.

Similarly, from “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*,” we learn that obsolescence and uselessness are structural elements built into the history of philosophy: “There is no intellectual exercise which is not ultimately useless. A philosophical doctrine is in the beginning a seemingly true description of the universe; as the years pass it becomes a mere chapter—if not a paragraph or a noun—in the history of philosophy” (53). But then we should also not forget the extent to which such decay is no less fatal in the case of literature than in the history of philosophy: “In literature, this ultimate decay is even more notorious” (53). Borges thus seems to posit happiness as an experience which lies beyond language and which, for this very reason, escapes the conventions of art and literature no less than the classified perplexities he calls philosophy. “... all art is conventional,” he writes in his essay on “Gauchesque Poetry” (“La poesía gauchesca”) in *Discusión*: “The circumstances pass, the facts pass, the erudition passes... ; what does not pass, what is perhaps inexhaustible, is the pleasure bestowed by the contemplation of happiness and of friendship” (21). For Borges, though, this pleasure is no less rare in writing than in the world of our bodily destinies.

Happiness, in particular through friendship if not on a par with friendship, would be the proper name of the domain that lies just slightly beyond language. However, even this typically antiphilosophical disjunction between happiness and metaphysics, or between happiness and writing, does not constitute the final word in Borges. In a subtle rephrasing of the myth of Ariadne, the poem “The Fable’s Thread” (“El hilo de la fábula”) from his last book, *Los conjurados*, actually suggests the possibility of a reconciliation in the final instance:

The guiding thread is lost; the labyrinth is lost as well. Now we do not even know if what surrounds us is a labyrinth, a secret cosmos, or a haphazard chaos. Our beautiful duty is to imagine that there is a labyrinth and a guiding thread. We will never come upon the guiding thread; perhaps we find it and we lose it in an act of faith, in a rhythm, in dreams, in the words that are called philosophy or in pure and simple happiness. (61)

May this final encounter serve by way of a tentative reply to the tiresome and inevitable objection coming from the front row. At the end of this short journey through the purple land of

antiphilosophers, there is in fact a form of happiness to be found even in the study of Borges and philosophy. I, for one, like to think that this constitutes one of his more provocative lessons for the twenty-first century.

Works Cited

- Badiou, Alain. "Silence, solipsisme, sainteté. L'antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein," *¡Barca! Poésie, Politique, Psychanalyse* 3 (1994): n.p.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "La felicidad escrita." *El idioma de los argentinos*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1994. 41-47.
- . "Sentirse en muerte." *El idioma de los argentinos*. 123-126.
- . "A History of Eternity." *Selected Non-Fictions*. Ed. Eliot Weinberger. New York: Penguin, 2000. 123-139.
- . "The Nothingness of Personality." *Selected Non-Fictions*. 3-9.
- . "La poesía gauchesca." *Discusión*. Madrid: Alianza, 1976. 11-33.
- . "Leopoldo Lugones." *Obras completas en colaboración*. 2 vols. Madrid: Alianza, 1983. 2. 9-62.
- . "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote." *Ficciones*. Ed. Anthony Kerrigan. New York: Grove Press, 1962. 45-56.
- . "Quevedo." *Other Inquisitions*. Trans. Ruth L. C. Simms. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964. 36-42.
- . "The Wall and the Books." *Other Inquisitions*. 3-5.
- . "Note on Walt Whitman." *Other Inquisitions*. 66-72.
- . "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins." *Other Inquisitions*. 101-105.
- . "On the Cult of Books." *Other Inquisitions*. 116-120.
- . "About *The Purple Land*." *Other Inquisitions*. 141-145.
- . "From Allegories to Novels." *Other Inquisitions*. 154-157.
- . "A Yellow Rose." *Dreamtigers*. Trans. Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964. 38.
- . "El hilo de la fábula." *Los conjurados*. Madrid: Alianza, 1985. 61.
- . *Obra poética 1923-1964*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1964.
- Boswell, James. *Dr. Johnson's Table-Talk: Containing Aphorisms on Literature, Life, and Manners; with Anecdotes of Distinguished Persons; Selected and Arranged from Mr. Boswell's Life of Johnson*. London: C. Dilly, 1798. Available on the Web at Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed 03/01/06.
- De Man, Paul. "Rhetoric of Persuasion (Nietzsche)." *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. 119-131.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Nietzsche*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. 2 vols. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982.
- Massuh, Gabriela. *Borges: una estética del silencio*. Buenos Aires: Belgrano, 1980.
- Milleret, Jean de. *Entretiens avec Jorge Luis Borges*. Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1967.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Philosophy and Truth. Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*. Ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1979.

Rest, Jaime. *El laberinto del universo: Borges y el pensamiento nominalista*. Buenos Aires: Fausto, 1976.

