

~~Jan~~ This came out in RCEH a while ago. Can't remember if I sent it to you. All best wishes,
Peter

Borges and the Limits of Language

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A glance at the comments of leading Spanish American writers who followed Borges confirms that though they may have disliked his conservatism, his European leanings or his intellectualism, they all respected his style and his influence on literary expression in Latin America. García Márquez, in his dialogue with Vargas Llosa, is typical: "Es uno de los autores que yo más leo y que más he leído y tal vez es el que menos me gusta. A Borges lo leo por su extraordinaria capacidad de artificio verbal; es un hombre que enseña a escribir, es decir, que enseña a afinar el instrumento para decir las cosas" (41).¹

That Borges was preoccupied with language must rank as one of the greatest commonplaces of criticism. In 1961 he wrote that of the two things that really interested him one was language, its poetic uses, its problems, its etymologies and the similarities and disparities between languages.²

The other, more interesting side to his exploration of language, is evident even in his essays of the twenties, though it reaches its fullest fictional realisation in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (see "Palabrería para versos" in *El tamaño de mi esperanza*). Borges saw language as the major instrument by which mankind sought to impose some structure on the chaos that was the universe, set some limits to its infiniteness; yet he also recognised that the attempt to achieve this was futile from the outset: "Notoriamente no hay clasificación del universo que no sea arbitraria y conjetural" (*Obras completas* 708).

Locke had described the problem in the following terms: "...Words, which were by Nature so well adapted to that purpose, came to be made use of by Men, as the Signs of their Ideas; not by any natural connexion, that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain Ideas, for then there would be but one Language amongst all Men; but by a voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an Idea" (III, 2, 405).

Professional linguists never tire of reminding us that language is "arbitrary," an adjective which they most often relate to the particular selection and ordering of sounds that are characteristic of a given tongue. But Borges saw this arbitrariness as more semantic and more seminal, involving the very perception of reality. If we use the word *árbol* (which is, to be sure, an arbitrary concatenation of sounds) we

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- . *El prodigio de Etiopia*. Madrid, 1964.
- . *La juventud de san Isidro*. Madrid, 1965.
- . *San Isidro labrador de Madrid*. Madrid, 1965.
- VORAGINE, JACQUES DE. *La Légende Dorée*. I et II. Paris, 1967.

rely for mutual understanding on an arbitrary convention regarding what is referred to. In doing so we also abstract, ignore peculiarities such as those of time, space and perspective, resolving all trees into an ideal one: "To put a name to something is to identify it with all the other actual and possible instances of that name, to identify the particular with the universal" (Sturrock 65).

It seems to me that it is this linguistic problem, as much as the issue of memory, that is at the heart of "Funes el memorioso." To think, as Borges tells us there, is "olvidar diferencias, es generalizar, abstraer" (*Ficciones, Obras completas* 480). Borges omits to add at that point that language is the medium of thought. As Ana María Barrenechea notes, however, thought is condemned to the mediations of language; and languages can only be oversimplifications of reality (80). "There's no escaping from this prison [of language]," wrote Mauthner. "Knowledge of the world through language is impossible" (XI, 175).

The logic of Funes' prodigious powers implies (rather as Locke would have argued) one linguistic item per perception. Locke argued that we can frame general ideas but these are based on their applicability to a number of particular things, that names used by people to classify things "whereby men sort them, are made by men," and thus that the individual perception may lead to the generalisation (III, 3 and 4). But this last is what Funes cannot do. Hence the dog at 3:14 p.m. in profile merits a different term from the same dog (if, for the sake of argument, you will tolerate sameness as a tenable concept!) at 3:15 p.m. seen full-face. And why should one not say *Máximo Pérez* instead of 500, if the only linguistic system is a one-to-one correspondence of signifier to signified? It is thus a perfectly coherent strategy of Funes' to learn Pliny word by word.

Interestingly enough, Borges does comment at this stage on the fact that, in Swift's Lilliput, the governor is held to have the power to perceive every moment of time. In "El informe de Brodie," which is another piece of Swiftian inspiration, Borges seems to approach the problem of language from the other end, as it were. While Funes' perceptions are extraordinarily fragmented and endlessly discrete, the ironically barbarous yahoos, who stoop so low as to throw dung at their royals, (think and) speak at an extraordinarily abstract level. For them, perceptions are conflated to a high degree, discreteness is lost, so that an army on the run is designated by the same term as a pattern in the sky or the spots on a leopard's skin. Elsewhere, in the same vein, and carrying the same line of argument further, Borges asks: "Por qué no crear una palabra, una sola, para la percepción conjunta de los cencerros insistiendo en la tarde y la puesta del sol en la lejanía?" (*El tamaño de mi esperanza* 48).

In "Tlön ..." more or less the same thing crops up: the bells become the cry of a bird and the sunset becomes sunrise. Locke, once more, speaks of "distinct complex ideas with distinct names annexed to them" (IV, 3). Then again, in the world of Tlön Borges invents objects evoked by terms that combine visual and auditory characteristics, and he imagines poems each consisting of one long composite word. The languages of the two hemispheres, it will be remembered, lack nouns (one is verb-based, the other adjective-based); the absence of nouns, of substantives, undermines the Aristotelian idea of "substance" but also that of the "universal," carries us towards Locke's idea that all things are particular. At other points, Borges entertains the idea of a language in which each word would convey all characteristics of its referent, present, past and future. Hence his fascination with the likes of Bishop John Wilkins' *An Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*, published in 1668. Wilkins divides the universe into classes which are then subdivided and further subdivided, to produce a tree structure. To each distinctive feature of the referent there is ascribed a consonant or a vowel, and thus the related features of different referents are perceivable through the complex (in the technical sense) descriptive linguistic items that result. In phrasing these last comments, I have deliberately called upon the descriptive terminology of modern linguistics; Wilkins, except in his prescriptivism, was clearly ahead of his time! ("El idioma analítico de John Wilkins," *Obras completas* 906–9).

Language, then, is a hopelessly inadequate yet fascinating and inescapable instrument of mankind, not least of the writer. On the matter of the adequacy of language to the task, Borges may have been an out and out sceptic, but he was nonetheless resigned to the constraint of using it; it was "la díscola forzosidad de todo escritor" (*Otras inquisiciones* 67).

I believe that these two sides of it – the philosophical and practical – come together in "El Aleph." Here, the limits and the fatuousness of it all are at their most evident. Carlos Argentino Daneri is writing nothing less than a poetic account of the globe, and making a terrible job of it. Borges pokes fun at his attempt at comprehensiveness, with a ridiculous rag-bag enumeration of things so far covered – a gasworks near Vera Cruz, the main shops in a particular suburb, a private residence in Belgrano, and some Turkish baths not far from Brighton. But his scorn extends also to the manner of representation, the pretentious *afrancesado* style. Behind the humour of the grandiloquence, of the appalling rhymes and the self-consciousness of Carlos Argentino's poem, lies Borges' concern with the ineluctable practical challenge of using language, and perhaps an allusion to his

own experiments with it, to his own attempts at finding a personal style. Given the gulf that separates Borges from Carlos Argentino Daneri, despite their common heritage, given the manifest failure of the latter to portray the world adequately through language, how is Borges to tackle the task of conveying the inexpressible, limitless Aleph?

Arribo, ahora, al *inefable* centro de mi relato; empieza, aquí, mi desesperación de escritor. Todo lenguaje es un alfabeto de símbolos cuyo ejercicio presupone un pasado que los interlocutores comparten: ¿cómo transmitir a los otros el infinito Aleph, que mi temerosa memoria apenas abarca? (my emphasis)

The problem is insoluble, as Borges goes on to tell us, not only because of the paradoxical challenge of attempting an “enumeración, siquiera parcial, de un conjunto infinito,” but also because most astoundingly his perceptions were both multiple and simultaneous, “[todos en] el mismo punto, sin superposición ni transparencia,” whereas language is by nature serial (*El Aleph, Obras completas* 625). And how much greater is the impossibility if the interlocutor is from a different culture, a different time, or has a different language to translate to, as he showed us in “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”? Time changes meaning. Repetition is a perplexing notion in itself. And if we are to believe Sapir, people are not led by their experience to the same picture of the universe unless their language backgrounds are the same; according to Whorf, language moulds our perceptions, so that speakers of different languages are incapable of communicating the same world (Sapir and Whorf *passim*).³ As to Mauthner, his view was that language assumed a sharing of what is fundamentally unsharable: sense-experiences.

One might argue that where things become ineffable, Borges reacts with silence. Gabriela Massuh (211) has noted that the silence of Tzinacán at the end of “La escritura del dios” comes at a point when his experience calls for verbalisation. Similarly, we might say that “El acercamiento a Almotásim” cuts off just as the key dialogue is due to begin.⁴

References in Borges to the “fraudes de la palabra” are legion, but there are also many comments about how language might be used, constructive suggestions for new strategies in writing.⁵ According to Cortázar, it was the common quest to find an authentic Argentine style, one which would enhance creativity, rather than stifling it under an overlay of rhetoric, which united him and Borges.⁶ At a high level

of generality, conciseness and rigour are surely the two characteristics most often associated with the style of the mature Borges, the Borges of *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*, and few people would take exception to Bell-Villada's description of it: "Crisp understatement, rigorous compression, disciplined attention to expressive nuance, and strict avoidance of facile bluster" (36).

Later prose is generally held to become less dense and more simple. The road of this evolution of style was a long and uneven one; it included Borges' *affaire* with the *ultraístas*, a phase of self-conscious experimentation, and another in which, by his own admission, Borges wrote with such local Argentine linguistic colour that he could barely understand himself.⁷ The stylistic goals Borges finally set himself were maximum efficiency and minimum visibility. It is noticeable that when reviewing *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935), often seen by critics as a keywork in the evolution of Borges' style, Amado Alonso praised just that: the disciplined use of words and his progression beyond the "violencia algo contorsionista de antes" (114). It was the achievement of what Pedro Henríquez Ureña had advocated ten years previously, when he wrote: "Estilo perfecto es el que ... oculta las inquisiciones previas; es de esperar que Borges aprenda a quitar sus andamios y alcance el equilibrio y la soltura" (79).

Whether the mature Borges in fact used an unobtrusive style is a moot point; but that he did not waste words in idle rhetoric is beyond doubt. All this, however, does not necessarily make for easy reading, and one must wonder whether Borges didn't have his tongue in his cheek when he told Richard Burgin in 1968 that: "I don't like to have a sense of effort while I'm reading ... I don't see why a writer of stories or of novels should give any trouble" (103).

"Trouble" of a very fundamental sort is immanent in any use of natural language, whose forms can never be more than compromises, approximations to the communicative task in hand. If reading Borges is not easy it is not because of the visible complications of his style so much as the functional load he places on it, or on the silences between, because language cannot rise to the task before him. Borges, the *grammaticus*, was meticulous in his writing but ever conscious of the restrictiveness and arbitrariness of his linguistic medium; and his scepticism is at its most radical in those stories that thematise the problem of defining perceptions and conveying them through the slippery medium of language.

NOTES

- 1 The conversation took place in September 1967.
- 2 In *Ficción* 33–34. Quoted by Luis Mario Schneider in “La place de Borges ...” 142.
- 3 To my knowledge neither linguist gets a mention in Borges, and this seems to be confirmed by Balderston’s *The Literary Universe ...*
- 4 Borges’ scepticism about language is less exceptional than it might at first seem; one must bear in mind that a preoccupation with language is found in many writers around this time (Mallarmé and Eliot, to name but two) and that with Wittgenstein comes the recognition that most problems of knowledge are really problems of language.
- 5 For example, in *El tamaño de mi esperanza*, 39, he advocates deriving new parts of speech from nouns, experimenting with prefixes, the transitivisation of intransitive verbs, and the revelation of etymologies.
- 6 In interview with Luis Mario Schneider: “Julio Cortázar,” 24–25.
- 7 This evolution is well documented in Ana María Barrenechea, “Borges y el lenguaje,” in Jaime Alazraki, *Jorge Luis Borges*, 215–36 and in Alazraki’s *Borges and the Kabbalah*, 77–89. Borges’ own comment on his “Argentine” style is to be found in Guibert, 100.

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