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# VISAGES OF THE OTHER: ON A PHANTASMATIC RECURRENCE IN BORGES' 'EL SUR'

PATRICK DOVE

In his study of the mythic basis of Argentine nation-building (*The Invention of Argentina*), Nicholas Shumway offers a standard and seemingly irrefutable assessment: as a post-nationalist writer, Jorge Luis Borges conceives of Argentine modernity as taking shape through the eventual depoliticization of literature. The fact that any number of Borges' own self-critical comments could be used to substantiate this claim would seem to place him well within a Western thought of politics that derives its impetus from Plato's meditations on the organization of the *polis*. According to this tradition, history could be described as a movement toward the completion or elimination of the political (of the strife, conflict and disorder which accompany political struggle) and the realization of a state of permanent accord. Perhaps even more profoundly than the post-ideological epoch of bureaucratic navigation imagined by Fukuyama and others in the so-called "end of history," this dream of permanence could be seen to take root in the idea of a space of absolute autonomy. For many modern discourses, this space belongs to art. Such a utopian conception of art, envisioned as an ideal evacuation of discord and unfulfilled desire, finds in Borges' work a strong resonance with the tumultuous history of Argentine politics (and notably following the September 1930 military *coup d'etat* and leading up to Borges' adversarial experience with the populist-authoritarian regime of Juan Perón). In the absence of any foreseeable end to ideological conflict in Peronist Argentina, literature (or so this argument goes) represents the utopian space of a post-political, post-nationalist existence.

In what follows, I am interested in examining Borges' engagement of the two discourses competing for dominance during the course of Argentine modernization—Liberal identifications with Western European and North American traditions on the one hand, Nationalist attempts to identify or produce the essence of Argentine existence through autochthony on the

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other—and in following what I take to be a moment in Borges that eludes or exceeds the myriad efforts to organize the Argentine nation into a coherent and self-identical totality. In this respect, the logic of Shumway's reading must be confronted with one of the crucial lessons provided by Borges' text (even and especially if this logic eludes Borges himself at times): what announces itself as the end of ideology is *nothing but* an ideological fantasy. And thus, rather than assuming with Shumway that *the political* names an already defined and consolidated field, I will consider the possibility that Borges' text poses a question—one that may well move against the author's own attempts to govern over or organize the interpretation of his oeuvre—concerning the *absence* of a clear definition of the political, and thus of a politicality at work in the processes of inheritance, interpretation and definition itself.

A distinction frequently employed in Borges criticism asserts the presumed difference between what might be termed the "early Borges" and the "later Borges." The latter period, during which the majority of Borges' translated works were written, is generally agreed to commence with the 1939 publication of "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote* in the journal *Sur*." It is at this point that Borges begins to consider himself a writer of *ficciones*, of short stories and parables, whereas prior to 1939 his published work consisted almost exclusively of poetry (three volumes) and essays (seven collections). Although a critical understanding of this turn to "fictions" has yet to be developed, it is easy to discern a shift in tone and address between the "early" and "later" texts.[1]

As Beatriz Sarlo has shown in her important study of the topical function of Buenos Aires in the work of Borges (*Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*), one of the concerns defining the "early" work lies in taking stock of the contradictory process of modernization in the port city, and with locating or perhaps even inventing a possible meeting ground between the antagonistic forces shaping Argentina, both from abroad and from within. In contradistinction to the "universal" focus of the later *ficciones*, the texts from this period share with the *gauchesque* and nationalist traditions a certain array of poetic figures, which could be partially (yet not entirely) subsumed under the heading of local color.[2] A significant number of Borges' poems and early essays are in fact eulogizations of the heroic, *gauchesque* ethos; this apotheosis of the recent past and its forms resonates to a certain degree with Lugones' project of identifying a spiritual ground of Argentine cultural production, albeit with a crucial difference: whereas Lugones seeks to identify—and identify with—the unalterable essence of this past, Borges is always careful to remark the difference that accompanies this inheritance. Sarlo declares the guiding *topos* of this period in Borges' writing as *las orillas*, the suburban or intermediate zone in which the urban and the pastoral, and the cosmopolitan and the autochthonous, encounter

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one another on uncertain ground. Rather than a simple conglomeration of differences, this space emerges in Borges' writing as a third term: as a strategic invention marking the limit of each opposing element (the logic of *las orillas* is thus radically democratic: neither cosmopolitanism nor autochthony can legitimately claim to represent *all* of Argentina), while also embodying the possibility of exchange between the two.

The "transition" from the local and particular concerns of the early work to the sweeping and at times atopical scope of the later fictions is marked by tension that has not yet been sufficiently examined by Borges criticism. This antagonism is manifested in some of Borges' efforts, beginning in the early 1960's when his fame outside of Argentina was rapidly increasing, to revise or even conceal the existence of a number of his earlier works. Many of the poetic works composed in the 1920's, when Borges had been associated with the Spanish and Argentine avant-garde (that is, the work of his provincial years), are at this later point derided as merely "experimental" or outright disowned by the author, who began in 1939 to fashion himself as a writer of fiction. While one might speculate at length regarding possible motivations behind these shifts and subsequent "revisionist" efforts, a discussion of this turn is not feasible here.[3] Instead, the line of inquiry I would like to pursue concerns the possibility that this literary turn in Borges has been somewhat overstated, and that what criticism finds in the "later" texts under the sign of universal themes and ideas precisely *is* the concern of the "early" Borges. Or, in other words, that the issue of particularity, including the array of Argentine or *porteño* problems which occupy the critical focus of the poetry and essays of the 1920's, can be seen to recur—albeit by way of an unmistakable displacement which is itself part and parcel of what is at stake here—in the presumed universalist orientation of the later "fictions."

But—and here we have come full circle—if it can be said that the central concern of Borges' text never departs from the real issues that were central to those early texts, it must also be noted that the socio-political climate in Argentina has undergone a number of catastrophic transformations and crises during this same period. Borges' understanding of the relation between the nation and the West in general finds itself the subject of a profound crisis during the decade of the 1930's, following which it is perhaps no longer possible to imagine a creative synthesis between historical epochs, and between literature and nation-building.[4]

In an early essay entitled "El tamaño de mi esperanza" (1926), we find Borges lamenting the retreat of tradition in the face of modernization. A sense of this withdrawal is palpable in his poetic accounts of Buenos Aires: a place that springs up suddenly as a cosmopolitan port-city in the midst of late nineteenth-century waves of immigration and industrial modernization, and which also precisely embodies the invisible retreat of tradition. At the

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same time, this essay also advocates in a strange way the need to *create* the tradition one would presume to have been placed at risk in the process of modernization. As the young Borges proclaims dramatically, "No se ha engendrado en estas tierras ni un místico ni un metafísico, (ni un sentido de la vida! (...) No hay leyendas en esta tierra *y ni un solo fantasma camina por nuestras calles*. Ese es nuestro baldón (emphasis added)." The rhetorical gesture punctuating this passage, in which Borges inserts the figure of a ghost, is worth pausing over for a moment. What exactly would it mean to lack a phantasm? And what, on the other hand, would it look like—supposing that we read this dirge as a kind of manifesto, a call to arms—to engender one? The multiple rhetorical functions of this phantasm produce a kind of trembling within the logical structure of the plaintive: as a sign upon which Borges hangs his portrait-like assessment of the state of Argentine literature, the specter (or absence thereof) is an indicator of a cultural lack, an insufficient share of heritage. It provides a figure for the disparity that exists between the Argentine tradition and others, or for the sense in which the Argentine tradition experiences a dissymmetrical relation to the general figure of the Western tradition. The phantasm—if there were one—would then constitute the seal of a hallowed tradition, of perhaps unfathomable depths. But here the problem named through this rhetoric figuration tends to multiply: Can a ghost actually be "present"? And could it for that matter be "absent"? What, again, would it mean to lack a phantasm when, in the tradition to which we have recourse, such a figure is the index par excellence of a score that remains unsettled, a time that is out of joint?

Perhaps this figure, as it is strangely positioned in Borges' text, should be heard to attest to something resonating beyond the homogenizing forces of modernity; perhaps it evokes, in the face of relentless commodification, the need to *re-mark* a haunting or uncanny repetition, to produce a disruption within the cultural text that is the Argentine tradition. The phantasm, which Borges quite literally seeks to summon into existence, will have attested to a lacuna within the mechanics and the systematicity of modernization; it will hold the place of a something—perhaps nameless, and thus always to be named anew—which remains unsettled in the otherwise seamless face of modernity. And thus, for Borges, tradition will from this point forward bear an enigmatic association with what would seem to be its antithesis: alteration and displacement, difference and withdrawal. Not only does repetition mobilize two distinct possibilities of the work—as a continuation of a certain tradition and as composed of potential differences (see, for instance, the reproduction of the *Quixote* in "Pierre Menard")—but it likewise brings forth the difference of the work from itself: repetition both passes over and marks anew the point at which the totality of the work shows itself to be finite; it engenders within the work its remainder and its limit, or the knowledge that, as totality, tradition is structured as a not-all which cannot

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account for its own limits (despite the fact that we may well be unable to say anything about what lies beyond it). I would suggest that this moment in Borges' thought, attending to a certain outstanding balance both *in* and *of* the Argentine tradition, in fact functions as a cipher not only for the early works but for a number of the later *ficciones* as well. In this manner, while the thematic content of Borges' texts may well undergo a marked shift at a certain point in his career, the expression of a sense in which the Argentine remains strangely in need and out of joint is never far from the central concerns of this writing.

In what follows, I examine the short story "El Sur" (1953), in which I find a register that resonates in important ways with those concerns brought forth in the works of the 1920's, and which perhaps gives further evidence of a chiasmatic link between the two periods, "early" and "late." While the parodic treatment of *criollo* nationalism in this text serves as a measure of Borges' eventual efforts to dissociate himself from the mythopoetic production of national identity in early twentieth century Argentina, the text is nonetheless crossed by an array of concerns that do not entirely fit into the critical paradigm of a "later Borges" who has successfully effaced the *topos* of Argentine particularity from his work. And thus, even as the narrative offers a brilliant deconstructive reading of the Nationalist discourse and its invention of an Argentine essence, it also marks a failure within the project of modernization in its attempts to efface and forget the barbaric traces of the past. Thus a critique of Liberalism is at least implicit here.

A thought of the past as shared inheritance—or what Borges elsewhere refers to in terms of a collective dream—also traces the limit of national identity as conceived by either Eurocentrism or Nationalism. This past is received and borne, like a mark or a scar, as what can neither be revived, outstripped nor fully comprehended. In this respect, "El Sur" is structured by a formal dynamic which at certain points closely mirrors the staging of classical tragedy. At its most fundamental level, the tragic dimension of Borges' text explores a connection between death and self-knowledge, and gives form to a paradoxical sense in which death and finitude function as both the limit of self-consciousness and as the condition in which relations are born. In establishing a correspondence with classical tragedy, the text engenders two related effects: first, it places a limit on the monumental epic tradition celebrated in Lugones' reading of *Martín Fierro*; and, at the same time, it announces an exigency—or what I will describe as a thought of a radical and excessive responsibility—which issues in the nation's reflection on its past.

The tragic index is overdetermined by multiple and potentially conflicting registers; and while tragedy acts to place the gauchesque ethos decisively in the past, it also signals the hope for a new articulation of Argentine experience, and for a new way of making historical meaning from

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out of the catastrophic events of the recent past. My reading of this short story attends to two "moments," the first of which re-enacts the logos of nationalism's quest romance. The second produces or delivers what was only latent in this tradition: the truth of the subject as *lost cause*.

The story of "El Sur" is set in 1939, in the half-century following the modernization of the littoral provinces. The protagonist, Juan Dahlmann, is described as a *porteño* bureaucrat who posits his true identity in the pampas of the South, a place he invests with the mythic value of a surviving remainder, uncontaminated by the artifice of modernity. By way of this simple sketch, Borges demonstrates an unavowed moment in the nationalist project, in what amounts to a literary syllogism: 1) modernity constitutes an experience of limits and finitude for Dahlmann; 2) the *topos* of finite existence that marks his name (*Da*: the inter-linguistic association gains credibility if we consider his German ancestry) in turn gives shape to a supposition of its other: the transcendent order as what survives finitude; 3) and therefore Dahlmann sustains this Other through a structure of belief, via an imaginary relation which will then have guaranteed *his own* identity as an essence held in reserve: "Verano tras verano se contentaba con la idea abstracta de posesión y con la certidumbre de que su casa estaba esperándolo, en un sitio preciso de la llanura" (196).[5]

We must follow what has begun here as parody of the myth of *argentinidad* in more than one direction. To begin with, the text offers a warning, concerning not only what could be described as the inauthenticity of authenticity, but moreover of a danger that lies in the attempt to realize or institutionalize such a nexus of imaginary identifications. The underlying concern is thus not limited to Argentine Nationalism; it is also of a general Western phenomenon, appearing in the wake of modernization and its crises. At the same time, parody also opens up a space in which the *literary* basis of this imaginary is able to emerge, as a manifestation of the limit (of these identifications) *as such*. The literary here provides a figure for the non-ground and the indeterminate possibility upon which Borges will attempt to think identity and meaning; this index anticipates an enigmatic link between the national imaginary and the paradoxical constitution of its borders—as marks of delineation that are at once utterly contingent and absolutely necessary. I will continue to trace this narrative bifurcation by indicating key points in the unfolding of this "literary" dimension of the text (or what we might refer to as the text's *own* specular relation), after which I move to underscore some of the critical and political implications of this reading. Finally, we will address the possibility of a relation between these diverging paths.

The description of Dahlmann's ancestry (his paternal grandfather was a German minister and his maternal grandfather a Creole soldier) closely mirrors the author's own genealogical identifications, and delivers in

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condensed form Borges' understanding of Argentine culture as a space informed by a nexus of traditions and genealogies. Nation, for Borges, is not a simple unity but the subject of an originary division. The text casts an ironic light on Dahlmann's idealization of his creole lineage, which he imagines to hold in store the timeless abundance of a heroic life; the truth of this identification is revealed as the substitution of a romanticized, memorable death for an impersonal, anonymous death: "...en la discordia de sus dos linajes, Juan Dahlmann (tal vez a impulsos de la sangre germánica) eligió el de ese antepasado romántico, o de muerte romántica" (195). If, on one hand, Borges ridicules the piety and naïvete of creole nationalism by attributing its impetus to the catachrestic figure of "Germanic blood," this mock-fatalism in turn calls attention to the metonymic movement of a mutual contamination of lineages, or what the text terms "discordia": an index of relationality which, Borges suggests, in fact precedes the determination of purity while persisting as unacknowledged cause of this projection of pure *argentinidad*.[6] This play of *estirpes*, of stocks and types, destabilizes not only the particular claim nationalism places upon the nation's destiny—in terms of purity of *sangre*, *raza* and Spirit—but also the very concept of lineage.

The heroic "ideal ego" through which Dahlmann affirms his proper being is further satirized, first in an incident which brings the protagonist to the brink of death, and again during his subsequent endeavor to recover the authentic promise of the South. In the banal circumstances of the protagonist's limit-experience, the defiant pathos proper to the epic hero is supplanted by the pathos of the bumbling intellectual. Inattentively climbing a staircase while immersed in a book, Dahlmann receives a cut on his forehead; but it is not until he arrives at his destination and is struck by the horrified look of a woman who opens the door to him, that it begins to dawn on the protagonist that something catastrophic has happened. The following day, he awakes with a fever. He is transported to the hospital (which the narrative perhaps significantly terms "sanatorio"[7]), where he borders on death for an unspecified period of time. We are told that Dahlmann eventually begins to recover his *sanitas*. Upon his release, the protagonist opts to complete his convalescence at the ancestral home of his maternal grandfather in the South. In what follows, we are given an account of the train ride through the Pampa: of Dahlmann's reflections as he passes from modern, littoral setting into the archaic space of the South, and as he vacillates between reading from *The Thousand and One Nights* (the same book which participated in his catastrophic accident) and reflecting on the transformations on the other side of the window. This journey by train returns to the discourse of nationalism its own message—its critique of modernity—in inverted form.[8]

> A los lados del tren, la ciudad se desgarraba en suburbios;
> esta visión y luego la de jardines y quintas demoraron el

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> principio de la lectura. La verdad es que Dahlmann leyó poco; la montaña de piedra imán y el genio que ha jurado matar a su bienhechor eran, quién lo niega, maravillosas, pero no mucho más que la mañana y que el hecho de ser. La felicidad lo distraía de Shahrazad y de sus milagros superfluos; Dahlmann cerraba el libro y se dejaba simplemente vivir (199).

This remarkable passage comprises an allegory of ideology. That is, it precisely demonstrates the ideological nature of the escape from ideology. The vacillation between literature and Nature which marks the passage to the South culminates in a gesture that would seem to signal the renunciation of artifice (cosmopolitan life, imported literature) and thus inaugurate a realm of permanent truth. Argentine nature functions in this opposition as the locus of a secure and constant autochthonous knowledge, uncontaminated by—and no doubt promising the rectification of—the foreign knowledge and confusion of the littoral *polis*.[9] This is at least the story Dahlmann tells himself. However, the act of closing the book on artifice also constitutes the literary gesture par excellence. It will have been necessary to go through fiction in order to emerge from contingency: the renunciation of cosmopolitan falsity is an act Dahlmann could carry out only by reiterating what is already inscribed as a profoundly literary and nostalgic knowledge of the South.

Let us suspend momentarily this discussion of narrative structure in order to attend to a movement of repetition emerging here. The logic of this movement concerns a renunciation which re-enacts on the basis of a misrecognition precisely what it refuses on the level of recognition; this pattern of displacement is announced by what the narrative over and again describes as Dahlmann's "distraction." The protagonist's disjunctive relation to his surroundings—in his desire to truly *be* he is never quite *there*—is part and parcel of a general disturbance within the diegetic economy of the text, one which undermines our ability as readers to refer to a meta-narrative, to a textual level at which the difference between truth and fiction would finally become legible and secure. In retrospect, Dahlmann's "distraction" will have provided one of the first indications that the journey to the South is *perhaps* nothing more than a story he tells himself within the clinic. But traditional complicity between reader and omniscient narrator is thereby shattered: it is as if what began as an account of *criollo* ideology and its blind spots ran aground and were transformed into an allegory of the impossibility of fully accounting for ideology. An even earlier reference allows us, in light of these later developments, to situate this trope ("distraction") as bordering and opening onto two modes of inquiry in the Western philosophical tradition: aesthetics and ethics. Immediately preceding the protagonist's traumatic experience in the stairwell, the narrative issues a more or less

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apocryphal warning: "Ciego a culpas, el destino puede ser despiadado con las mínimas distracciones" (198). In the course of the narrative development, this introjection acquires both the value and the opacity of an oracular sentence: what does it mean to speak of destiny as an essential "blindness," or in terms of an errancy? For the moment we are only able to situate what is evoked by this "distraction" within the text's articulation of a literary motif. "Distraction" here names a radically dissymmetrical relation which constitutes a liminal moment for consciousness; it is sustained, if we follow Dahlmann's lead, by a kind of fascination, by an allure that precedes the subjective representation of an object. The origin of the subject as "distraction" bears witness to—albeit precisely as the failure to completely register—a limit-relation, a relation that is not yet a possible aesthetic experience. As we have seen, Dahlmann's investment in the South began as an imaginative overvaluation of a *topos* he had known only through his exposure to gauchesque literature. The liminal space circumscribed by "distraction" is fixed by something the subject could not possibly recognize, and which Dahlmann remains unable to integrate into a dyadic system of understanding. I will return when the occasion presents itself to these aphoristic allusions to "distraction," and will attempt to indicate how these references open a space in which tragedy becomes an interpretive key and a strategic point of reference for Borges.

Dahlmann's eventual arrival at his ancestral home is deferred by an encounter which can alternately be read as the realization or the interruption of the phantasmatic narrative we have been following. In the story's final scene we find a textual knot, the precise nature of which will require some time to develop. Nearing the end of his journey, Dahlmann stops at an *almacén* (the meeting place *par excellence* in gauchesque narrative). He finds himself harassed by a group of *peones*, who impress the protagonist as anachronistically resembling gauchos from a prior era. His effort to ignore their insults is inadvertently short-circuited by the owner, who (inexplicably) addresses Dahlmann by name. And thus, whereas the confrontation with these "others" was initially carried out at an anonymous level and thus had no bearing on the protagonist's *being*, as soon as there is an address—once Dahlmann knows himself to be seen, or sees that it is *he* who is addressed—the protagonist is unable to remove himself from the fray, and thus feels himself obligated to reply. On the basis of Dahlmann's response (any response at all would have sufficed), one of the *peones* proposes a duel by knife. A final step is necessary, however, for a tragic-heroic conclusion to be won: Dahlmann, unarmed, can accept the proposition only after an intervention on the order of a *deus ex machina* (or perhaps we should say, of the protagonist's own desire). It is the unforseen intervention of the figure described as a *gaucho extático*—not one of his antagonists, but a third party which inserts itself into this confrontation of the imaginary—that enables

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Dahlmann to fully enter into the *polemos* that has already opened here: "Desde un rincón, el viejo gaucho extático, en el que Dahlmann vio una cifra del Sur (del Sur que era suyo), le tiró una daga desnuda que vino a caer a sus pies. Era como si el Sur hubiera resuelto que Dahlmann aceptara el duelo" (203). This knife, a weapon which the narrative tells us he "perhaps" would not know how to use ("que acaso no sabrá manejar," 204), is a synecdoche for the gauchesque itself, for the character and the system of ethics through which Lugones had sought to identify an Argentine essence.

The strangeness of this imminent duel, which the text announces but does not narrate (the narrative instead concludes with Dahlmann and the other man exiting onto the plain), is that it lacks precisely the element of uncertainty which would distinguish it as a juridical mode. The efficacy of the duel as a mediating function—i.e. of a place-holder, introducing the possibility of justice—is sustained only insofar as the outcome is not a foregone conclusion, only to the degree that it leaves open a space, however minute, of indetermination. Dahlmann, however, bears no relation to the outcome as such; or rather, his relation is one of disinterest. On the contrary to the origin, to the call through which he believes himself to have been summoned, that Dahlmann remains attentive: "Era como el Sur hubiera resuelto que Dahlmann aceptara el duelo." The obscurity of this scene is reinforced by what may well be a moment of undecidability inherent to the decision itself. It is no doubt possible to understand the instant in which Dahlmann grasps the knife—and whereby he signals his assent to a process whose outcome will inevitably (or so it seems) be his death—as the very realization of the *criollo* fantasy that has oriented the narrative from the outset. In such a scenario, Dahlmann's essential identity would be constituted (or recovered) insofar as he is able to situate himself as addressee, as the true destination of an appeal from the Other. This reciprocal recognition would present itself as an antidote to the anonymous and meaningless death that was imminent during his stay in the clinic. In an act which superimposes itself over the real impossibility of witnessing or choosing one's own death, the protagonist transforms what was previously the nothingness of the limit into a Work. What the Althusserian critique of ideology would term the "interpellation" of the national subject is constituted here as a disavowal of the decision as such (or in its groundless quality), and responsibility for the act is instead deferred to the Other. What is disowned in this way is the imprint of the subject's own desire in this sublimation of mortality. The meaning of that archaic pact into which Dahlmann inserts himself when he accepts the knife is re-inscribed by the desire to agree with the (prior) agreement of others. I will suggest, however, that things are not quite so simple here; and that this preliminary account must be confronted with a structure of errancy from which it cannot entirely remove itself.

First, however, another brief digression is in order. The aestheticization

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of death (that is, the production of a subject-object relation that would begin with the elevation of death to the level of Work) might well lay the groundwork for a preliminary reading of tragedy in Borges, and could help to define his text's engagement of classical tragedy and its synthetic potential. The conversion of death into work gives shape to a particular way of understanding tragedy through aesthetic theory: tragedy conceived as an attempt to make meaning—through representation, identification and taking pleasure in the beautiful—out of what is otherwise irreducible to understanding; and, likewise, tragedy as a mode of representation in which reality remains ideally legible and available to be mastered. For instance, fate or sheer contingency is, via the tragic representation of a destiny, conceived as necessity *and* as the avatar of a kind of freedom. One could extend this analysis in terms of what Schelling attempts to think of as tragedy's presentation of a rational identity between freedom and necessity (see the tenth *Letter on Dogmatism and Criticism*). And, at the same time, it would be possible to read the concluding scene of "El Sur" as a commentary on the antagonistic history of Argentine development, signaling a certain violence that is both shared and effaced between the disparate philosophical traditions vying to provide foundational support for the nation-building project. Such a correspondence could be identified, for instance, between the rational, systematizing tendency found in the discourse of Enlightenment thought and a discourse which might be described as fascist, authoritarian or barbaric. Or, in the case of Argentine nation-building, between the utopian character of Argentine political projects and the dystopic events which likewise mark the history of Argentine modernization. In this sense, Borges' text issues a warning regarding the danger of attempting to bring the transcendental postulates of a particular line of thinking into the world.[10]

## Fate, Desire, Chance: The Borgesian Subject as Ethical Problem

How does the "fate" of narrative in "El Sur," its myriad developments, its unfolding and its casualties, help us to think the nexus of identity, sovereignty and responsibility—in short, all of that by way of which the Western tradition conceives the subject—as it takes shape in Borges' work? And how do the myriad allusions to classical tragedy in this short text enable us to glimpse a thought of the subject as an ethical problem—that is, not only as a problem to be submitted to a formal system of ethical inquiry, but as likewise posing a problem *for* this very philosophical tradition of thinking? These questions, which will guide this part of my reading of "El Sur," can serve as a link between regionalist and universalist concerns in Borges. But first we must situate them within the denouement in order for their force to become fully apparent. As I have already suggested with regard to possible

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interpretations of the final scene, the text does not bring itself to a close by supplanting an ambiguous message with a transparent one. On the contrary, what is demonstrated in the process of unveiling the fantasy structure of nationalist identity is *the failure of narrative itself.* By remaining in close proximity to the language of the text, we will see that any attempt to resolve its hermeneutic knot in favor of a particular position (interpretive or ideological) misses a more fundamental point, demonstrating the impossibility of providing a total and adequate account of the event as such. We can see how this is the case by turning once again to the decision for the duel, and moreover by attending to the very letter of the text's concluding statement, in which we find inscribed a certain resolve—what might be termed a tragic defiance—in relation to the appearance of what is ineluctable. The suggestion that Dahlmann "might not" know how to handle the weapon he grasps is of course yet another indicator of the literary basis of his knowledge. But the crucial interpretive instance here in the final passage, I would like to suggest, in fact hinges on the *irreducibility* of this "perhaps" (*acaso*)—as a placeholder which, in a certain sense, utters the protagonist's death sentence, while, in another sense, is all that remains *between* Dahlmann and his death.

Several critics have commented on this clause (see, for instance, Alazraki and Rodríguez Luis). By and large, these commentaries have attributed a literal basis to this "perhaps," finding in its conditional term a residue of ambiguity which continues to complicate the fable's conclusion. It would be easy in this light to allow our understanding of this final "perhaps" to remain within the terms already advanced, i.e. as a refusal of narrative closure. And it would be well within the spirit of the Borgesian *oeuvre* to assert that, rather than providing the semblance of a total, universal representation, the text demonstrates the ways in which narrative in fact reproduces the very uncertainty it seeks to resolve, while insisting on the possibility that things *might not* proceed according to expectations, etc. In its essential incompleteness, the text acts to destabilize the natural association of narrative and the invisible hand of teleology. Insofar as these alternatives present an undecidable moment for reading, the text casts serious and perhaps irremediable doubt on the critical supposition of a single, underlying narrative temporality, of a unified time to which we could refer as the text's "reality." Likewise, it presents a compelling critique of the desire for hermeneutic mastery at work in various attempts to provide a total account of national history and destiny.

But while our diligence toward this hermeneutic limit underscores an important insight into a general Borgesian conception of literature, it cannot avoid missing an even more fundamental point. Despite everything we have learned from reading Borges, I am suggesting that the conclusion must be read against the grain so to speak, as an effort to think *absolute certainty as*

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*such*. It is as if the only means of conveying the precise ineluctability of the limit that emerges here were by way of yet another negation, or specifically via a partial negation that would repeat the protagonist's own refusal of finitude. However, the thought of certitude I am proposing does not diminish the undecidable character of the conclusion. On the contrary, it only acts to reinforce the aporetic character of the decision, by displacing what had initially seemed to be a fixed locus of ambiguity (i.e. a question posed concerning textual reality: does he or does he not die?). Apropos of what is often called the "unreliability" of literary narrative (though with Borges it is perhaps more to the point to state that the issue of reliability is simply not a literary one), the hermeneutic problem arising here concerns the possibility or impossibility of giving shape to reality as necessity. The interpretive question posed in the conclusion does not concern the text's reality "in and of itself." Rather, the problem announced *through* this "perhaps" is that of signification itself, of how to give shape to or symbolize an encounter with the real—in this case, not only with death but with the problem of necessity as such—which, significantly, falls out of Borges' own re-reading of the Argentine tradition. In other words, Borges' text is confronted with the problem of giving form to a (necessary) thought of necessity in the midst of a sustained narrative labor of drawing out the contingent ground of every representational or ideological construct.

In his "Autobiographical Essay" (*The Aleph*, 1972), while describing an early interest in the figures and idiom of *las orillas* and with literary representations of "local color," Borges confesses a fascination with the notion of a destiny such as Dahlmann's: "One such experiment, of dubious value, was 'Hombres pelearon,' my first venture into the mythology of the old Northside of Buenos Aires. In it, I was trying to tell a purely Argentine story in an Argentine way. This story is one I have been retelling, with small variations, ever since. It is the tale of the motiveless, or disinterested, duel—of courage for its own sake" (*The Aleph*, 231-2). In this final clarification, Borges would like to distance himself from the nationalist memorialization of the duel as heroic (and "interested") act. By locating the decisive or captivating aspect of the duel in its disinterested character—which might be construed as displacing the political implications of the event and substituting an aesthetic value in their place (see Kant's definition of the beautiful in the third *Critique*)—he implicates the *criollo* interest in this motif as a pathological one (once again in the Kantian sense): the ethical weight attributed by Argentine nationalism to this fatal moment masks a particular desire operating under the sign of the unconditioned (and one can imagine any number of demonstrations of this correspondence: for instance the duel represents for creole nationalists the space of an unmediated and transparent human act, purified of or even prior to modern artifice). Borges' rewriting of the myth of *argentinidad*—wherein is re-marked a certain unrelinquished

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attraction, an interest in disinterest—begins to take shape here via a displacement within the ethical relation itself. Contrary to a popular misconception, it is not that Borges holds the philosopheme of the subject to be a mere pseudo-problem. Rather, it is a matter of pursuing the subject at that point where it goes beyond the economy of the Same—or, similarly, where it exceeds all determination of value on the basis of the misrecognition of desire. At this point, as Borges' comments suggest, the subject can only be approached in relation to a *lost cause*.

Here certain aspects of the formal dynamics of classical tragedy can help elaborate what might be at stake in Borges' self-described fascination with the disinterested duel.[11] But the relation between "El Sur" and tragedy is in fact one of mutual implication: not only does the tragic form bring a certain weight to bear upon the scene described here (and to account for this gravity we must also take into consideration the history of critical and philosophical commentary on tragedy as a mode of sublimation), but Borges' text at the same time unfolds as an intervention and a displacement within this very history of reflection on tragedy. The exemplary value assigned to classical tragedy by the Western tradition can at least in part be attributed to the ethical dimension opened up with this artistic mode; and, at the same time, this valuation is linked to a function attributed to tragedy itself: namely, as an exemplary mode of production (of cultural value) and of transformation (of the finite into the transcendent). Thus it is not accidental that, in Lacan's *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, the discussion of "sublimation" in relation to cultural production in general is followed by a reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Lacan's juxtaposition of aesthetics and ethics in his discussion of Greek tragedy also portends a sense in which one field functions at once as the condition of possibility and the limit—or the "condition of impossibility"—of the other. Thus, if *Antigone* on the one hand invites a conventional reading in which representation of the Good provides the *telos* for artistic representation, it also traces the limit of this universalization of the particular, insofar as Antigone is seen to occupy a site "beyond the law" of the pleasure principle, or in that she finds herself at that turning point (*At'*) where desire of the Same opens onto *jouissance*. This limit is found in the recognition that the Good (or what Lacan calls the "unique value" of Polynice's existence) is signifiable only from the point of its impossibility.

Having suggested a possible juxtaposition between a psychoanalytic reading of classical tragedy and "El Sur," we can now return to some of the hermeneutic difficulties that arose in reading Borges' text, which we should be able to confront in a different light (and, in the process, we should also begin to see how Borges' text might engaged in a *reading* of a number of theories of tragedy). Returning to the interpretive problems presented by Borges' text, we noted that critical receptions of this text have typically

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remained focused on the prospect that its conclusion supports two mutually exclusive interpretations: either the second half of the story takes place on the same level of reality as the first half, or it in fact comprises a fiction within a fiction, the narration of an alternative to or disavowal of a limit-experience set forth in the first half. It should now be possible to make clear the limit of this either/or paradigm, which I would suggest has only been accepted—and not yet fully questioned—by Borges criticism. Critical attention to narrative ambiguity is itself the function of a certain presupposition regarding the nature of literature, and specifically concerning a natural teleological design, of which a reversion into "ambiguity" is one possible derivation. Meanwhile, the majority of commentators, in the process of emphasizing the logical contradictions encountered in this hermeneutic split, tend to lose sight of another possibility: that this interpretive impasse is in fact a condition of the text's legibility, and that the slippage between "denotative" and "connotative" registers is also the opening of a space in which meaning can take place (and that it is thus not the end of reading but the beginning). This opening is akin to the singular dimension that Lacan, in reference to Antigone's relation to the corpse of Polynices, characterizes as *between two deaths*. Thus the textual redoubling of "death"—which is only confusedly termed an "ambiguity" in what is supposed to be an otherwise univocal narrative—is reincorporated into the text, which could be said to aspire to nothing other than a meditation on this impossible space between two.

What exactly does it mean to speak of a space between two deaths in conjunction with Borges' text? We can situate this phrase by returning to what can now be designated as the first of two deaths, or that point at which the issue of Dahlmann's mortality first comes to the fore. At stake here is an experience of the limit, and of human existence as a relation to mortality. I am suggesting that Borges is attempting to think a fundamental link between existence and death, as a limit-experience which would likewise enters into the arena of cultural production, of praxis and its relation to a world. (Or, to put it in other terms, Borges' text manifests two conflicting forces, one of which is a poetic power of creation and world-building, and the other a caustic movement of annihilation and dissolution.) Before broaching the issue of this "limit-experience," we should momentarily note the profound ambivalence with which the text approaches this edge. It will be helpful to pause over this site of ambiguity that is the decision, and to attempt to hear the conflicting imperatives which set Borges' text in motion.

To state simply that Borges is interested in transgression and with encountering the theoretical and ethical reality that lurks behind the symbolic masks encountered in "El Sur"—and to stop at that—would be to fail to do justice to the bind in which the text finds itself. For while the issue of impossibility haunting the scene of the disinterested duel is of fundamental importance—it perhaps constitutes Borges' most original engagement of a

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Latin American *topos*—one would be equally justified in maintaining that the diegetic presentation is aligned with, or at least to a certain degree sympathetic, to the Dahlmann of those earlier scenes, and that the conclusion in fact helps to sustain, via a further series of displacements, the elaborate concealment of a truth which nevertheless speaks from behind it. To affirm this latter reading would also be to suggest that the text seeks to resolve the impasse that is Dahlmann, to expel the mummified remnant of the ancestral *domus* and to thereby release itself from the hold of imminent catastrophe in Argentine modernity. These two possibilities, which issue from a conflicting array of demands (from a juxtaposition that comprises the dissymmetrical origin of the text), coincide with a pattern which, as one reader of Borges has shown, recurs in a number of the "ficciones," and through which the Borgesian text is seen to have been marked by a double imperative: for Borges, writing is at once a labor which brings us to the very edge of what Lacan calls "the real," in all of its immediacy, while at the same time (and this paradox sets the ambivalence of Borgesian tone) also seeking to preserve us from this domain and its catastrophic effects. I owe the basis of this reading to Alberto Moreiras' "*Circulus Vitiosus Deus*: Borges y el Fin de la Memoria". The Borgesian text is structured by conflicting affective registers: by an insistent yearning and anxiety for a world that has been—or borders on being—lost for all time; and by a concurrent effort to register this loss and delimit its scope. This dyadic, potentially conflictive movement of circumscription defines the course of writing as an approach through withdrawal, and as safeguarding through proximity: by definition, "the real" (just like "the South") is never experienced immediately; however, in the process of mediation or representation through which we seek to grasp it, the real ceases to be what it is. And thus, as Borges' text demonstrates, the only possible relation to or experience of the real is of its impossibility and its indictment, its having been lost twice-over (or, in Wittgenstein's words, "that of which we cannot speak we must remain silent": Borges' writing is a ceaseless interrogation of this *must* in the wake of its *cannot*). Remaining at the site of this recognition of prohibition, writing also seeks to break away from nostalgic reflection upon the archaic loss it yearned to recover. Or rather, writing undergoes a fissure and a bifurcation at the site of its primal reflection; and now its return to the site of the real also initiates a mourning of that loss and an attempt to purge itself of the archaic, petrified remainder. It is through the retracing of these potentially conflicting steps that a world of mediation is constituted for Borges. The process of mourning, in distinction from nostalgic remembrance, places a limit upon the dream of recovery through which writing formerly sought access to the archaic real. This attempt can be described by another paradox: writing seeks to allow the real to take (its) place, so as to prevent it from happening.

How then does this vacillation, between a "melancholic" fascination

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with the Thing and what would amount to an interminable work of expelling it through the repetitive travail of mourning, relate to the space in which Borges' text plays itself out, that zone between two deaths? This question poses, in its condensed form, the reciprocal connection between "El Sur" and classical tragedy. The issue of the protagonist's relation to his own death has been implicit in every facet of our discussion. As is clear from early in the narrative, this relation is troubled by the specter of its own impossibility: death, as another name for the limit of the subject, is precisely what resists all efforts of recognition; it is that which cannot be made one's own—not only because death is "silent" or "invisible," but because, as Master, it is that from which nothing returns: death reflects nothing. Nonetheless, to state the impossibility of recognition is by no means the end. On the contrary, what resists recognition is also what returns yet again in the mode of the specter. Thus, according to the double imperative that informs and constrains Borges' text, it is absolutely necessary that death be given a place within the symbolic life of the subject. The "second death" is a way of naming this necessity and seeking to initiate its accomplishment. Death *must* be circumscribed—if not by traditional markers such as recognition and appropriation, then by recourse to a new term and a different order of relation—*in order for it to take place*. Within the Western tradition, in which the Argentine writer encounters the limit and freedom of marginal being, this circumscription is carried out through a reading of tragic form.

Borges' text also concerns itself with what might be described—albeit with some caveats—as a human difference. The difference at issue here (the difference that "is" existence, in Heidegger's terms) emerges from the finite relation(s) which the human, from the moment of its birth into language, assumes toward death. In a scene immediately prior to the protagonist's journey to the South, we find allusion to a radical separation between human experience and that of other beings. This gap, which not only separates the human from other beings but also separates the human *from itself*, is framed as a confrontation between temporality and infinitude. Dahlmann, while awaiting the train that will convey him to his destiny in the South, recalls a nearby café in which resides a memorable cat (he describes the animal to himself as both "enormous" and as a "disdainful divinity"). A problem of temporality is paramount for this allegory of *anamnesis*: memory is not only a nexus linking identity and difference, but is also found to be structured by its limit: negation and forgetting. In the lure of its massive presence, the cat represents a moment in Dahlmann's search for Same; but the realization of this quest produces something other than what was intended and expected, and the unmediated presence Dahlmann had sought vanishes in the shattering of an imaginary equivalence: "pensó...que aquel contacto era ilusorio y que estaban como separados por un cristal, porque el hombre vive en el tiempo, en la sucesión, y el mágico animal, en la actualidad, en la eternidad

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del instante" (198-9). But it is in fact the restitutive value of memory, initiated with a thought of the cat's sublimity—through recollection he sought to make present the exalting effects of the colossus in its divine indifference—which is thoroughly unsettled here, in the absolute dissolution of the imaginary relation that had sustained memory. In his attempt to grasp absolute self-identity, the protagonist is struck by the absolute alterity of the Other: the cat brings forth an exposure to the unthinkable, revealing that the Same is in fact another name for death. The ethical ramification of this scene is to have indicated the essentially finite or fallen nature of human existence, for which self-identity is constituted as always already under prohibition or out of reach.

This negative moment prepares the way for the final scene in the *almacén*. Specifically, it allows this scene to direct what the text will nominate an "ecstatic" character, to human existence as such. The gap between the initial catastrophic scene in the stairwell and these later moments has been delineated as a space between two deaths. As Lacan makes clear in his remarks on both Sade and Sophocles, psychoanalysis attempts to think this "between" as an ethical space: as a confrontation with the "real" cause of our actions and desires. The hypothesis of "two deaths" affirms that, in addition to the biological death that humans share with all other beings, the human has also to do with a second, symbolic "death," which typically follows biological death (e.g. burial and funeral rites, and likewise the recounting of family histories or destinies), and through which others endeavor to make both life and death meaningful. From time to time, however, this "second," symbolic or narrated death actually precedes biological death (this is the case for Antigone, and for Dahlmann insofar as he comes to the awareness of having been marked for death). But the structure of this supplemental death, inscribed within the symbolic ordering of life, is anything but a metaphor for the real thing. It is precisely a trace of that cut, that share of solitude constituting a radical separation from immanence, on the basis of which humans have access to the language of metaphor—yet, at the same time, this mark is itself irreducible to substitution. The mark of death thus necessarily precedes death in the sense that it prepares one for it as a possibility, as a strictly unrecognizable material that makes space for recognition and thereby allows meaning to take place. In other words, it will be necessary to have suffered a second or symbolic death in order to assume a relation toward the reality of death itself.

In our discussion of the concluding scene of "El Sur," we discussed the protagonist's attempt to identify with his "destiny" as a kind of misrecognition. The notion that it was "the South" which would desire that he opt for the duel seemed to entail a retroactive effacement that would initiate the work of ideology. It was precisely from the real cause of desire—from the subject as relation to an originary withdrawal, which leaves Dahlmann a marked

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man—that this interpellating maneuver turns. However, we have since begun to see that things are somewhat more complicated than this critique of ideology would imply. The protagonist's act also destabilizes one of the principal axioms of the moral and ethical system in which the gauchesque mode is traditionally situated in Argentine letters: that is, it marks the limit of the literary attempt to constitute the duel as the sacrificial ground upon which the modern nation is constituted. And thus the decision by which the protagonist risks everything begins to stand out in the simultaneity of divergent indications; that is, it assumes a kind of hetero-anachronicity.[12] The sense in which the act is carried out over an "abyss," as an attempt to come to terms with the absolute (i.e. non-substitutable) negativity on its horizon, must not obscure the equally crucial sense in which it constitutes a response to a certain urgency (perhaps unidentified as yet), and to a demand that cannot readily be relinquished or accommodated. The manner in which the decision finds itself responsible, and is itself a testimony to this responsibility, cannot be accounted for by a critique of the concept of ground. This "responsibility" attests to the *earliness* of the demand that situates the act: urgency arrives via an anachronic temporality, in which it is difficult to determine the destination or end of responsibility prior to the decision itself.

An index on the finite character of responsibility, as determined by a relation to the other that cannot be exchanged or negated, can be found in the earlier incident on the staircase which precipitates Dahlmann's illness. The kind of relation which will have defined the stakes of obligation in Borges' text is not a relation in the usual sense of the name (of one subject to another). Instead, relation names the inscription and delineation of a liminal space of contact, whose emergence is strictly prior to the reflexive exchange of subject and object. (In marking this space as "inscribed" space, relationality is for Borges a necessarily finite event.) In the encounter on the staircase, death and finitude are not remarked on at all—and this failure to register is itself an important aspect of the limit-experience which Borges is attempting to make manifest.[13] The encounter with the other which frames this scene will thus reappear under the sign of a missed encounter. An indication of the stakes of the staircase scene is provided by a brief reference in the narrative to the face of the other. It is in the gaze and the expression of the woman who opens the door to him that the protagonist is struck by the fact that, to put it simply, he cannot see; or that *he is seen* from a place where he does not see himself, and that this locus of in-visibility opens onto a dimension of his being that is neither proper nor to be renounced. This "fact" no doubt fails to become one for the protagonist himself: it is not to be negated here; it can only be repeated. This spectacular scene recalls us to some of the exemplary episodes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, through which Hegel gives body to the dialectical structure of self-consciousness. However, it also affords an

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important clarification for the dialectical conception of *Geist*: Borges, evoking the manner in which self-consciousness seeks out the other in order to find itself or reaffirm itself (as having already found that which it seeks; and as having negated the otherness in itself by way of the other), also traces the limit of this recuperative process of self-identification. Prior to its serving as a metaphor for something else, Dahlmann's encounter with the other is inscribed by a structure of metaphor and metonymy that gives shape to the experience as one of surprise. The face of the other presents itself via a logic of displacement. It gives shape to the paradoxical constitution of self-consciousness, which can approach its own features and its own limits only by way of the other, and via this latter's non-relation to its own death (relation of non-relations). Through the flashing of repetition in this scene, we find condensed an entire thesis regarding the traumatic kernel of self-consciousness. At the same time, the countenance of the other is the site of a condensation: as a corporeal surface, the face reflects and puts into play a broader, less determinate condition in which we find self-consciousness inscribed by a structure of openness and exposure. As that which looks onto and engages a world for the subject, self-consciousness must initially expose itself, beyond what it can know, to the irreducibly other.[14] This metaphoricity also rediscovers a geopolitical current in Borges' text, in which the issue of borders might be raised as a dual question of contingency and necessity. The discourse of Nationalism can be understood as a particular attempt to control and regulate the liminal space of borders: as condition of possibility for any national space, yet as neither part of nor outside the space it inaugurates (and, moreover, as strictly contingent), the border embodies a dual and invisible threat. What the anti-immigration rhetoric that emerges in the first decades of the twentieth century makes evident is that borders localize the risk of infection from the outside; and, as Scalabrini Ortiz's commentary on the British-built railway system indicates, borders also give substance to the danger of defection from within. Dahlmann's own reflection on borders is an attempt to mask the traumatic contingency of these marks, and to bestow an air of essentiality upon them: "Nadie ignora que el Sur empieza del otro lado de Rivadavia. Dahlmann solía repetir que ello no es una convención y que quien *atraviesa* esa calle entra en un mundo más antiguo y más firme" (198). In other words, convention or repetition, on the basis of which meaning is created within a social sphere, here conveys the process of its own effacement in national consciousness. The haphazard contingency of borders, underscored by the reference to a mere street as a natural or epochal delineation, will have been interdicted within the space of legibility which this geometry opens up.

A thought of the material character of the limit can also be extended to the "gaucho extático" of the final scene: as instantiation of a certain impossibility within the text, or as evincing a condensation of tradition and

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ritual along with an irreducible alterity. The archaic gaucho is described as a cipher for which "los muchos años lo habían reducido y pulido como las aguas o una piedra o las generaciones de los hombres a una sentencia." This phrase would have to be meticulously analyzed in terms of the relation between repetition, generation (in two senses), historicity and the dual function of speech act (performative/poietic and constative/juridical: *sentencia* as aphorism and as juridical decision or judgment). Very briefly, I am suggesting that this *cifra del Sur* embodies a particular instance of the real, a strictly ahistorical kernel which persists through, and continues to motivate and traumatize, the history of the gauchesque narrative. At this point, the archaic gaucho is perhaps the only thing distinguishing the narrative from a "realistic" account, and it thus serves as a reminder of the always *partial* relation which reading assumes to the whole (tradition, work, etc.). Its uneasy presence in the text advances both a parody and a renewal of Argentine *mythopoiesis*.

Thus Borges' engagement of this tradition offers itself as but one reading among others: a brilliant reading perhaps, but not the reading to end all readings. And, likewise, it confesses to its own blind spot, its umbilical point of relation to its outside—a stain which is perhaps invariably (mis)recognized. As a *cifra*, the gaucho is the inscription of a pure *potens* of literary language: strictly illegible or incomprehensible in thematic terms, it emerges as an internal distortion which makes the narrative possible. Borges' text tells the story of meaning constituted by way of supplementation. The anachronistic "gaucho extático" remarks a lack that cannot be filled within the narration of history: it recalls and stands in for the absence of an essential signifier that could conceivably close the circuit (of the gauchesque in particular, and of Argentine *historias* in general). With this figure, the erosion of meaning within modernity is momentarily brought to a halt; and, at the site of this hesitation, the text is able to function *as if* it were the account of a completed circuit, by way of a supplementary index which precisely attests to the impossibility of having the final word. The lack or absence embodied by this figure is neither secondary nor exogenous to the signifying system in which it is located; rather, as an endogenous limit it calls attention to the signifier (gaucho, Argentina) in its inability to signify itself, as what must always summon yet another signifier in the process of an interminable appeal.

"En el suelo, apoyando en el mostrador, se acurrucaba, inmóvil como una cosa, un hombre muy viejo. Los muchos años lo habían reducido y pulido como las aguas a una piedra o las generaciones de los hombres a una sentencia. Era oscuro, chico y reseco, y estaba como fuera del tiempo, en una eternidad" (201-2). This portrait, which initially gives appearance to a decrepit and loathsome figure, in fact contains the ledger in which we must read what the narrative later nominates "a cipher of the South." Or rather, it

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is through a movement back and forth, between portrait of decrepitude and conceptual index of the cipher, the South finally appears as an object of the protagonist's desire: as that which can only be ascertained as hieroglyph or as empty set, strictly impenetrable. We are told parenthetically that this gaucho pertains to *Dahlmann's* South, and not to something on the order of the South itself: "Desde un rincón, el viejo gaucho extático, en el que Dahlmann vio una cifra del Sur (del Sur que era suyo)...." We might hear in this repetition a warning that the protagonist's relation to this motif has undergone a certain shift in the course of his journey, and that the material difference at the heart of the traumatic encounter on the staircase—the excess and opacity, as what always remains to be deciphered in the look of the other—is in some sense *re-marked* here as a possible opening toward the other. Could the disparity that appears between discrete enunciations of *el Sur*—between *el Sur* and *el Sur que era suyo*—allude to the possibility of this opening? In other words, might the phrase *el Sur que era suyo*, rather than describing a property or a subjective impression, instead name a primordial debt of the subject, a temporality (of obligatedness) into which the subject is thrust, prior to knowing to whom or to what the decision is owed, but which still must be assumed? This thought of an incommensurable debt could render a different inflection of the classical motif of destiny, thereby turning toward the past in effort to signify its difference anew (this return would lend the text its tragic tone) and at the same time acting to delimit the permanence of tradition. This notion of destiny no longer envisions history or inheritance as the ground of self-identity. Rather, it underlines a need to act that remains both irreducible to calculation and irremediably caught up in the violence of existence; it addresses an exigency which issues precisely *within* and not despite the opacity of tradition (the thought of a profound errancy in Borges' reflection on inheritance). This imperative, as a call to arms, is furthermore a summons to language which, in placing a limit upon what is possible, also gives shape to possibility—that is, the possibility of engaging the other. As Jacques Derrida writes in relation to another thinker of the human face as site of radical relationality, "Speech is doubtless the first defeat of violence, but paradoxically, violence did not exist before the possibility of speech. The philosopher (man) *must* speak and write within this war of light, a war in which he always already knows himself to be engaged; a war which he knows is inescapable, except by denying discourse, that is, by risking the worst violence" ("Violence and Metaphysics" 117). The act of decision, introducing itself as a signifier into the world it delimits, gives itself over to a labor of death. At the same time, insofar as it gives place to the limit, it is also the advent of life.

*SUNY-BINGHAMTON*

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## NOTES

[1] In his "Autobiographical Essay" (which, according to Rodríguez Monegal, contains a composite sketch taken from various interviews, prologues, etc., and edited by Norman Thomas di Giovanni [see *Ficcionario*, 421]; the "essay" was first published in the *New Yorker* [1970] and then republished as part of the third edition [1970] of the English-language translation of *El Aleph*; this text has not been translated into Spanish), Borges attributes the turn to writing fictions more or less directly to an accident suffered on Christmas Eve of 1938. While on the way to pick up a family friend, he received a cut on his forehead. The wound became infected and Borges contracted septicemia; as he describes it, he then wavered between life and death for weeks, unable to speak. As he began to recover, his concern for what he calls his "mental integrity" prompted Borges to undertake a new mode of writing: "I had previously written quite a few poems and dozens of short reviews. I thought that if I tried to write a review now and failed, I'd be all through intellectually but that if I tried something I had never really done before and failed at that it wouldn't be so bad and might even prepare me for the final revelation" (*The Aleph*, 243). What interests me in this self-assessment is the tension it makes manifest within the terms of writing: between a kind of deferral—it is as if Borges conceives of fiction-writing as a way of avoiding confrontation with the horrific (the possibilities of aphasia, mortality and madness)—and what he names, without any further clarification, a (messianic?) "final revelation." Writing, then—or at least the conception which appears to have taken shape around this traumatic experience—is at one and the same time (but does it not also signal the death of the homogeneity and continuity of time?) a turning from and a grappling with the limits of language and understanding. Writing is marked simultaneously by a desire not to know and by the hope of an absolute knowledge to come.

[2] The gauchesque narrative is affirmed as a critical category through a series of famous lectures given by Argentine poet laureate and critic Leopoldo Lugones (later consolidated and published under the title *El Payador*). Through a reading of Hernández's epic poem *Martín Fierro*, Lugones attempts to identify an authentically Argentine, heroic tradition, which could be sustained as a counternarrative and antidote to the influx of "foreign" and "artificial" influences in the midst of a tremendous surge in immigration, which began in the late nineteenth century and continued through the first decade of the twentieth.

[3] Suffice it to indicate the dramatic transformations which took hold of

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national discourse in the years leading up to WWII, and coinciding initially with Argentina's relative proximity to Germany and Italy. In the early 1930's, Lugones and others associated with Nationalism—and, at least in Lugones' case, interested primarily in developing a discourse of autochthony—became increasingly sympathetic to fascist and anti-semitic ideologies, which Borges on the other hand vehemently rejected. Then, in the early 1940's, the Nationalist movement was effectively co-opted by the populist and pseudo-authoritarian regime of Juan Perón—with which Borges was equally antagonistic. Thus, to speculate: perhaps a relatively "innocent" interest on Borges' part, concerning a transcendent national *mythos* which informed the Nationalist project prior to 1930 and which may well have offered an interesting site of engagement for the early Borges, is retroactively and decisively discredited as the avatar of national and indeed global disaster. It seems possible that something akin to the general experience of horror with which the West has since regarded the events leading up to WWII—and I mean specifically the thought of a profound and terrible complicity between the Enlightenment project and its fascist or racist other—might be discerned in Borges' attempts to distance himself from the thought and work of the 1920's. This is not to suggest that Borges at some point felt any kind of sympathy toward the fascist turn in Argentine cultural politics, but rather that such a paradoxical and traumatic complicity (the logic of which is itself never far from the surface in Borgesian irony) is perhaps a good deal more "personal" than might otherwise have been suspected.

[4] On this note, see Ricardo Piglia's essay ("Sarmiento the Writer") in *Sarmiento: Author of a Nation*. As Piglia describes it, the task of the Argentine writer is defined in the lore surrounding the production of Sarmiento's famous treatise *Facundo*, and consists of a "double movement" and a straddling of a double border which joins and separates, twice over, literature and its other: on the one hand, between literature and politics; and, on the other, between (national, autochthonous) literature and (foreign, imported) literature. His assessment of Sarmiento's experience in the previous century ("To speak of Sarmiento the writer is to speak of the impossibility of being a writer in nineteenth-century Argentina") might also pertain to Borges' relation to Argentine politics in an inverted form. But if, for Borges, literature represents the hoped-for end of a politics that first and foremost means the impossibility of literature (understood as a space of formal autonomy), I am also interested in pursuing a line of thinking in Borges' work that could be described as ethical and political. And, what is more, it is this line, which I will attempt to develop in terms of a relation to the other as an experience of alterity, which provides one of the key points of departure for one of Borges' more distinctive gestures: his assault upon the Platonic conception of *mimesis* as emulation of an *eidos*.

[5] The supposition of an ideal reciprocity between a modern, urban space and a primordial *habitus* also recalls Güiraldes' *Don Segundo Sombra*, one of the works most revered by twentieth century nationalism.

[6] The fantasy structure of Dahlmann's identification with the archaic South is reiterated in the later descriptions of his arrival at his ancestral home: "También

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creyó reconocer árboles y sembrados que no hubiera podido nombrar, porque su directo conocimiento de la campaña era harto inferior a su conocimiento nostálgico y literario" (200).

[7] Although the use of "sanatorio" rather than "hospital" is not out of the ordinary in this context (it could denote "clinic" as opposed to "hospital"), its appearance nonetheless underscores a metaphorical chain in which the key elements surrounding the accident sustain a connection with the typography of Nationalism. For example, the multiple functions of blood (first shed and later poisoned) resonate with the *criollo* mythologeme of a pure "argentineness" that is first accomplished in the nineteenth century wars (both of independence and of the conquest of the South), and later threatened with contamination from immigrants. The term *sanatorio* itself produces echoes with the racialist dimension of the Nationalist discourse (*sanitas*: "health," or by extention "purity"). For a detailed account, see David Rock's *Authoritarian Argentina*. However, one begins to suspect that the parodic nature of this correspondence between blood and nationalism becomes more complex at a certain point. For instance, the excessive reticence and opacity that mark the account of Dahlmann's treatment at the sanitarium give rise to an ambiguity concerning the precise nature and etiology of his "septicemia." The opacity and the violence which together give shape to this sketch of the sanitorio could be interpreted as indicators of a kind of empathetic resonance between narrative and protagonist: alienation within urban modernity is repeated by the anonymity and opacity of the narrative account. Likewise, it is certainly possible that this empathetic resonance has also "exposed" the text to what we can suppose to be the protagonist's imminent psychic collapse. This textual solidarity, then, is also an experience of the unlocatability and indetermination of causes, which accompanies the destabilization of a reality or a world.

[8] Scalabrini Ortiz's reference to the Argentine railroad as a metaphor of imperialism thus receives an entirely different inflection. Following Borges' text, we might say that the nationalist complaint constitutes *in and of itself* the reciprocal direction that Scalabrini's remarks alleged to be missing. In other words, Borges remarks on a littoral-to-rural movement which begins with *porteño* nationalism's projection of a South that never in fact existed. What this projection masks, we might add, is nationalist resentment regarding a theft of *jouissance*: the British imperialist presence deprives the creole community of its own "right," of its capacity to exploit the pampa and exterminate the region's indigenous populations. It is likewise conceivable that this passage from Buenos Aires to the South signals a reading (in the strong sense, of remarking on a repression at work in the constitution of a system of meaning) of the scenario envisioned by Sarmiento in *Facundo*. (In brief, Sarmiento suggests that Argentine modernization is plagued by an inversion of the proper order. Whereas Culture ought to be transmitted from cosmopolitan center to periphery and from port city to the country, the phenomenon of Facundo signals the precise opposite: a product of the barbaric Pampa encroaches upon the city.)

[9] The ontological distinction between *polis* and the rural is already established in Plato's *Gorgias*: the contingent space of the city—as political space and as port

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of entry, and thus doubly subject to disorder and contamination from outside—must be grounded in the essential values (the highest of which is permanence as such) of the country side. For a discussion of this relation between philosophy and politics see Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*.

[10] Further elaboration goes beyond the limitations of this project. But the question of an identity or connection between Enlightenment thought and fascism or totalitarianism can be found at a number of points in Borges: for instance, in relation to the treatment of the civilization vs. barbarism debate, an important motif for a number of texts. And although I am thinking specifically of "Deutsches Requiem" and "La lotería en Babilonia" as presenting thematic treatments of a possible intersection between Enlightenment and totalitarianism, a number of stories could be seen to present similar identities between, for instance, the utopian logic of Argentine nation-building and periodic dystopic and disastrous effects.

[11] I have addressed this connection between Borges' text and tragic form at greater length in a longer version of this paper. I am alluding here not only to the exemplary value which classical tragedy continues to embody for the West (and, in this regard, what better way to produce Argentine phantasms than by writing a distinctively Argentine tragedy?), but likewise to the specificity of a certain way of reading tragedy that was perhaps perfected by German Idealism. For Hegel, the tragic form gives rise to the production of a synthesis (the State) from out of the mutually-annihilating clash of opposites (family and civil society). For Borges, however, it would be a matter of showing how this synthesis is itself a pretext for the disaster of dictatorship.

[12] There is a tendency in "El Sur" for action or *pragma* to inscribe itself within multiple and antagonistic historical epochs: for instance, Dahlmann's act becomes legible simultaneously within the nineteenth century horizon of nationalism and a twentieth century horizon in which globalization is increasingly at issue. A similar structure of overdetermination is observed by J.P. Vernant in his analyses of Greek tragedy (see in particular "Greek Tragedy: Problems of Interpretation"). For Vernant, tragedy needs to be understood historically, that is, as a transitional mode of artistic production which attempts to mediate between a receding ("epic" and heroic) world and an emerging world (which is increasingly dominated by political maneuvering and, notably, Athenian democracy). The cutting edge of Vernant's theory of tragedy, however, is found in the fact that tragic *mimesis*, as a term of mediation, is also precisely what resists historicization: tragic action, carried out between two worlds (each of which it helps to found), becomes intelligible simultaneously within each of these mutually-exclusive symbolic domains, and is thus reducible to neither. The tragic act thus functions as a signifier in the most precise sense, bearing all of the ambivalence which Freud describes in his notion of "overdetermination." We could also refer Vernant's insight to the discussion of tragic *Schein* in German philosophy: the true being of Oedipus is not the self-identical subject who would be either a master or a criminal but never both, never neither. Rather, it is the very movement or passage of anamorphic reversal through which we encounter the patricide in (or superimposed upon) the master, and through which appearance and being come together and are divided.

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[13] The two-fold issue of death and dissolution is palpable during Dahlmann's stay in the sanitarium; but it is perhaps already too clearly stated there, too literal to be of assistance in illuminating the fundamental problem of signification with which we are concerned. What does, come to the fore in an important way in the sanitarium scene is a strange sense in which the body begins to function as a metaphor for pain: that is, for a frozen signifier which short-circuits the possibility of self-reflexive knowledge at the limit: "En esos días, Dahlmann minuciosamente se odió; odió su identidad, sus necesidades corporales, su humillación, la barba que le erizaba la cara. Sufrió con estoicismo las curaciones, que eran muy dolorosas, pero cuando el cirujano le dijo que había estado a punto de morir de un septicemia, Dahlmann se echó a llorar, condolido de su destino. Las miserias físicas y la incesante previsión de las malas noches no le habían dejado pensar en algo tan abstracto como la muerte."

[14] Both the transitive and intransitive senses of the verb "expose" would be appropriate here. What is at issue, then, is both the sense in which the limit of any particular (whether a face, body, border, etc.) is also a point at which another begins (and hence the latter infringes upon, contaminates or infects the former: the limit both defines the proper and initiates the other), and the sense in which this limit could be described as a pure opening. It is not only as a site that is shared by multiple particulars, but as a point at which the particular as such is constituted on the basis of its opening to the unknown, the indeterminate, the Other. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* and Brett Levinson, "Trans(re)lations."

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