

BORGÈS AS MEGISTUS:

HERMETIC SHADOWS IN AN ENLIGHTENED MIRROR

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52 The Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borgès occupies a unique position in the world of letters, as much as that very idea would be an anathema to him. He belongs in some ways to the generation of the Latin American “boom” writers, whose fiction is often described as that of “magical realism,” but his work diverges from theirs in its theoretical implications. For a long time he was considered quintessentially “modernist,” but is now also cited as a “postmodernist.” Borgès’ work exhibits characteristics of all of these, but in fact, Borgès resists our attempts to classify him and has proved to be a writer of multiple times and spaces. Borgès’ writing in fact revives a complex literary and cultural heritage, and even as it may suggest other arts, such as the weaving of a vast tapestry, or the creation of an elaborate musical score, or even the techtonics of avant-garde architecture, his writing may find its best analogies in modern physics.

Borgès is praised for his erudition and his irony, admired for his arcane storytelling, his irony and playfulness, but he is considered a bizarre writer who lived in his own world, a solipsistic, hermetic world of signs and symbols, removed from history and modern realities. Of course Borgès assisted in the creation of his various *personas*, donning masks which allowed him to live many lives at once, a strategy which ironically attracted more attention to the act of authorship than he claimed to seek. But perhaps we as readers have been presumptuous in our desire to establish firm reference points from which to understand his literary enterprise: as his fables have told us so often, there are no stable beginnings or endings, and all limits are also windows upon other worlds. Indeed, perhaps the very undecidability of meaning, so prevalent in Borgès’ texts, the spirit of endless transcoding, akin to “infinite semiosis” in which meaning remains in constant suspension or deferral, can make us feel less guilty, less heretical, in reading Borgès in ways that he may not have himself intended.

For if Borgès is revered, he is not an author one thinks immediately of consulting for an understanding of modern culture, however vast his own knowledge of modern literature. We may even call him anachronistic in his fascination with detective plots and adventure stories that evoke in us a certain nostalgia for the escapist pleasures of reading. Nonetheless, it may be argued that the conundrums and fantastic voyages in Borgès' writing contain serious ethical and philosophical lessons for understanding the extremism and violence of contemporary culture, if we can decipher them. To discover these, we must look to the traces of archaic, pre-modern traditions within his work that are grounded in other systems of writing which in turn carry other forms of knowledge and belief.

It has often been suggested that Borgès' universe is one in which God is either absent or perverse. Indeed, Borgès seems to view all religions with a clinical eye, as artificial constructions created for the delusion of a desperate humanity. His interest in them seems to be that of a scientist who appreciates their articulation but who is cold to their affective appeal, and infinitely cynical of their efficacy. But if Borgès is indifferent to the call of faith, he is highly sensitive to the experiences that subtend most doctrinal religions. His tales are permeated with extra-rational experiences, they open onto worlds inhabited by spirits and are governed by the logic of dreams. In them, temporal experience is transformed into spatial labyrinths. His world is, in effect, an inverted universe, one that makes fiction a vehicle of truth and accords reality to the products of the imagination. But he is not a madman.

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In Borgès' texts, apparently "irrational" phenomena are treated rationally, even "naturally," but we must remember that for Borgès the world was first introduced to him by the mediation of books and writing long before he enjoyed extensive direct experience of the world. He grew up in his family's vast library, whose volumes were his mentors, his teachers, his friends, his family, his lovers. His vision of life, therefore, was imaginary, or rather literary, by which I mean that his first reality was language and his apprehension of the material world came to him linguistically formulated. This idea of course has been theorized by both linguists and sociologists, and is not unique to Borgès, but in his case it was extreme to the point that his intelligence evolved through the prism of fables, symbols and metaphors, and the forms of the tale and parable structured his experience of the natural world.

By his own account, Borgès' apprenticeship of the world evolved differently than many other writers of his time, despite his formal education abroad and his several voyages. We may imagine Borgès learning from a series of great masters, according to a model that the Sufis term the wisdom of an *oweisi* who studies from mentors that are not in direct contact with their disciples, but for whom learning involves intimate exchange. The student, in turn, transmits this occult knowledge to others, perhaps distant in both time and space, according to specific formulas.¹

From the inversion implied by his early development between the world and language, Borgès became sensitive to other "ways of being in the world" than that conditioned by rational metaphysics which has prevailed in the industrialized world

since the Renaissance, and especially since the Enlightenment. Borgès inherited these traditions from an accident of history, for they came into the New World with the Spaniards in the 15th century. Spain had been occupied for some 800 years by the Arabs and Jews as well, who transmitted traditions originating in the East into Europe, and because of the Conquista, they came also into the New World. These Eastern traditions also entered Europe through Italy (the Arabs also occupied Sicily and Southern Italy for some 400 years), and with the translation by Marsilio Ficino of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a text containing the wisdom of Ancient Egyptians that was discovered much later, around 300 A.D. This text was believed to encode the wisdom of the Egyptian God Thoth, or Hermes Trismegistus, as he was called by the Greeks. Thoth was the God of writing and prevailed over time and destiny, assisting Osiris in the passage to the next world.

Traditions such as those of Mesopotamia (*the Gilgamesh*), India (*the Vedas* and *Upanishads*) and China (*the Tao Te Ching* and *I Ching*) also circulated in the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean during the period of High Greek culture and later at Alexandria under Ptolemy where Persian culture (Zoastrianism) was introduced as well. All of these traditions share, in varying degrees, a belief in the processes of metamorphosis and reincarnation, and envision the universe as an orchestrated cosmos of shifting oppositions, of harmonies and dissonances, but a cosmos that is ultimately unified, despite its myriad, diverse manifestations. Pythagoras spoke of numerical elements that organize the universe. He and Plato, and Plotinus as well, spent years studying with Egyptian priests. The aspects of their work that are inconsistent with the ideals of the Renaissance became excluded from their legacy, or were conceived as pure metaphors.

Out of the rich encounters and the transmutation of diverse traditions between East and West, evolved what are collectively called the Hermetic or Esoteric Sciences, including Alchemy, Astronomy, Astrology, Numerology, Gnosology, Geometry and Physics, among others. With the rise of Islam in the 7th century, these traditions became incorporated into the mystic tradition of Sufism, and the Sufi brotherhoods carried them into the Maghreb and Africa where they effected a wedding of both elite and popular culture. Often considered heretical with respect to doctrinal Islam (Al Hallaj and As-Suyuti and others were killed for their beliefs), Sufism in fact served to preserve the spirit of Islam during times of strife and conflict.

When the Arabs moved from the Near East across North Africa in the late 7th and 8th centuries, their traditions mingled with those of the Berbers and with those of peoples of subsaharan Africa, where many Arabs travelled and some became scribes at the courts of African kings.² The contact with animist religions in Africa (just as in the case of early Christian gnosticism and Judaism in the Near East) often provoked conflict, because doctrinal monotheisms perceived the natural religions to be heretical and idolatrous. In fact, however, we know now that all monotheisms contain vestiges of these beliefs, however they may be transformed.

Espoused by early Christians as well as Hebrews (in the Kabbala) as well as Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, Plotinus and Plato, the Hermetic or Esoteric sciences would evolve into the movement called Neo-Platonism that thrived in Europe during the Renaissance. The Esoteric sciences influenced most of the great men of science as well as art during this period, but they were suppressed by the Church and the Monarchies because they advocated the possibility of an individual, intimate path to enlightenment or to God, which was threatening to the political ambitions of the institutions of the Church and State. Alchemy, which is above all a spiritual discipline, was marked as sorcery and black magic; Giordano Bruno and many others were burned for their beliefs. Modernity has inherited this mistrust of the esoteric traditions: because of the spirit of positivism and its disdain for superstition and fear of the irrational, modern “enlightened” culture has ignored the implications of the epistemology and ethics carried by such traditions. These sciences (the very distinction between science and art or religion is absent) espouse a vision of the world which inverts the modern emphasis upon the visible as an arbiter or guarantor of truth. They treat empirical reality as illusion, and reconfigure the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity in a manner very different from that of empirical science. The subject is not a distant observer of objects: he or she is part of the thing observed. These traditions, therefore, do not present merely “alternative” ideas about how to view reality; they recast our entire metaphysics.

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Many of Borgès’ tales are redolent with esoteric beliefs: In *The Aleph*, a man with encyclopedic ambitions introduces the narrator to a small disk containing the history of time and space condensed into a luminous sphere, where all history is present in all its manifold materiality simultaneously, but at the end we are led to believe it to be false. Is it because this vision should be reserved for the eyes of initiates, or is it simply a fantasy of a lonely man? The tale is at least partially a comment on the arrogance of our will to knowledge and power, and our tendency to confuse the two. In *The Circular Ruins* a man discovers that he may be the character in another man’s dream, and in *El Sur*, the narrator goes on a train trip after an operation and wakes up as a sacrificial victim in a primitive ritual.

Esoteric symbols abound throughout Borgès’ work, but each has an epistemological function. Mirrors and doubles interrogate the narrow parameters of our modern individual identity; labyrinths translate the idea of our search for truth into an inward quest for our own unacknowledged alterity, sometimes monstrous, sometimes beatific. Roses remind us of passion, suffering and mortality, but are also organic mandalas reflecting our destiny. In all the texts, symbols operate paradoxically to suggest contradictory values, much like the two-sided coin of *The Zahir*.

But if we may recognize some affinities between these traditions and the world of Borgès’ fictions, there is an even more basic connection that can be understood by recognizing that the Hermetic Sciences are rooted in a wholly different conception of writing from that based in the rational semiotics that prevails in modern European culture, except perhaps, in the work of certain poets and artists (Mallarmé,

the Surrealists, for example). The Esoteric traditions are anchored in sign-systems that differ dramatically from our own in that they are hybrid, involving more than one type of signification. The Hieroglyphs, like Sumerian Cuneiform and Chinese ideograms, are composed of iconic, symbolic and phonetic elements, which means that meaning is often suspended or ambiguous, irreducible or undecidable without further information. Furthermore, in the case of the Hieroglyphs, a sign may change its function within the same utterance, so that at one moment it operates as a symbol or logogram, at another it functions phonetically (as the sound of the first letter of the object it signifies) or it serves as a picture of what it designates, or even as a determinant, indicating a class of objects or even a type of punctuation. Furthermore, where rational semiotics takes the word as the basic unit of meaning, in hieroglyphic script, words may be broken up and their parts may function according to different principles. (No wonder Champollion had frequent headaches!)

56 These archaic sign-systems operate according to the principle of a rebus, which is akin to the language of dreams in which abstract notions may acquire weight and measure, and in which temporal and spatial parameters become fluid. Objects may fly about, ideas may converse, and qualities may be transposed, substituted and displaced from one thing to another, or those of a given entity dispersed to other contexts. An element that functions narratively at one moment, may function as decor at another, or become a meta-figure at another. The signifiers of these languages circulate more freely than in modern European languages, and resist anchorage in any stable signifiers. Finally, these scripts may be read from right to left, left to right, or vertically. Meaning, therefore, is dynamic and shifting, requiring a circular rather than purely linear reading and requiring that the reader take more than one point of view.

Within both the Tao and Sufism, we find a relation to language that engenders an apprehension of reality that is dynamic and, I might add, deeply paradoxical. In the *Chuang Tze*, written long before Christ during the Chou dynasty, the narrator speaks of things being similar in their difference, or of things changing their identity if looked at from near or far, and speaks of language as if it were necessarily oxymoronic. We also find the narrator dreaming of a butterfly then suddenly having the vertiginous sensation that he is not the observer but the object of the butterfly's dream. For those of you who know Borgès' dream tales, this oscillation between the status of subject and object, dreamer or dream, is quite familiar. In the Tao as well, we find the opposition of Yin and Yang which are not exclusive, hierarchical binaries, but intimately linked complementary forces that are in a dynamic relation to one another.

In both Sufism and the Kabbala, the quest for knowledge of reality must involve an understanding of the meanings encoded in numbers and letters. The Sufi concepts of *az-Zahir* and *al-Bâtin*, referring to the appearance of the world and to its hidden, inner truth, translate an opposition that, like that of the Tao, is not exclusive but represents two faces of the same reality. Borgès uses the notion explicitly in the tale

entitled *The Zahir*, but he also uses the concept in several other texts, where as readers we oscillate between two apparently contradictory interpretations of events, or two dimensions of reality, which we discover are inextricably interwoven.

The inversion I have been discussing between our modern conception of language as that which designates or describes the real and that in which language both engenders and constitutes reality itself is present in the writings of the great 12th century Andalusian Sufi, Ibn 'Arabi, whose theorization of Sufism goes hand in hand with a use of language that is both rational and visionary at the same time. In his *Futuhât al-Makkiyya* (Illuminations of Mecca), we find a conviction that mankind's very being is linguistic in nature and the theory that God created the world out of words and letters whose combinations are infinite, and from names (the 99 names of God) whose consonantal roots encode all aspects of human existence. It is difficult for us to imagine that these are not simply metaphors: for the Sufis, the consonantal root system in Arabic encodes the essences of human reality in its multiple declinations. Ibn 'Arabi conceived of the universe as a vast linguistic cosmology, a universal grammar that governs the entire natural and spiritual world. Ibn 'Arabi was criticized, both by some disciples and particularly by Ibn Tammiyya, for the heterodoxy of his ideas, but we must understand that what posed the greatest problem to orthodoxy was the inclusiveness of his vision which included implicitly other forms of belief, and because his language was considered potentially misleading for being polysemic. But the ambiguity of Ibn 'Arabi's writing is consistent with the principles of esoteric science, in which truths will be understood differently according to the degree of one's advancement on the spiritual path.³

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The ethical lessons of these archaic traditions are present in Borgès' postmodern writing as epistemological metaphors. They ask us to decentre our subjectivity, to inhabit other possible realities and modes of knowing. Just as for the Sufi, the apprentice is directly implicated in the reality of the object of his quest (Al Hallaj was killed because he announced *Anâ al-Haqq!* I am the Truth! He meant that his ego had evaporated to allow the truth to enter him fully) Borgès' readers are invited to thread themselves into his tales, whose deciphering demands a process akin to solving enigmas for the ancients: the answer is hidden both within us (in the way we apprehend it) and it transcends our rational comprehension by reminding us of our relation to universal mysteries.

Borgès' genius is perhaps that he manages to make such profound lessons so infinitely amusing. But what if ... we were to take them more seriously?

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 Sufism is the mystic branch of Islam, and involves intuitive modes of knowing God that lead the subject through a series of stages of detachment from the world leading to enlightenment.
 - 2 The most famous is Leo Africanus, a Maghrebi voyager who visited the ancient kingdom of Mali and became a geographer under Pope Leo X.
 - 3 For a very clear description of Ibn 'Arabi's theory, see Pierre Lory's *La Science des lettres en Islam*, 115-36.