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The Oldest Trick in the Book: Borges and the "Rhetoric of Immediacy"

James Winchell
Stanford University

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Abstract

In his most "philosophical" texts, Jorge Luis Borges paradoxically posits the act of reading as the scene of affectively "immediate" experience: his reader reads a reader reading (*ad infinitum*). This sort of hyper-meditated, specular imitation actually comes to mirror the substantive preoccupation of the "philosophical" text itself. Borges thereby breaks down what Theodor Adorno calls "concept fetishism" by making *mimesis* his textual *concept*. Given Italo Calvino's claim for the novelty of "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" in relation to modern genres, I propose a two-fold thesis: first, that this typically Borgesian narrative juxtaposes *concept* and *mimesis* (a traditional philosophical antinomy) and then subverts the difference between them as a *mediation of immediacy itself*. He creates thereby a second-level "rhetoric of immediacy." Borges thus arrives at a re-inscription of the kind of narrative technique upon which traditional texts, even texts that form a part of a sacred canon, operate. The drama and rhetoric of immediacy exploited by Borges—and what is allegory, if not a "rhetorical drama"?—far from amounting to the last innovation of modem forms, as Calvino claims, might more accurately be called the oldest trick of presence in the book of absence.

Keywords

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Borges and the "Rhetoric of Immediacy"

by James Winchell
Stanford University

Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment *[Verhexung]* of our intelligence by means of language.
Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

De là, peut-être, un moyen d'évaluer les oeuvres de la modernité: leur valeur viendrait de leur duplicité.
Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*

What does it mean to be a Buddhist? To be a Buddhist is—not to understand, because that can be accomplished in a few minutes—but to *feel* the four noble truths and the eightfold path.
Jorge Luis Borges, ''Buddhism'' in *Seven Nights*

In his most ''philosophical'' texts, Jorge Luis Borges posits the act of reading as the scene of experience: his reader reads a reader reading (*ad infinitum*). Characteristically, this highly mediated imitation of the act of critical attention comes to mirror the substantive preoccupation of the ''philosophical'' text itself, according to the epigraph above from Wittgenstein: both the *bewitchment* and the battle *against* the bewitchment of our intelligence by language.

Borges thereby creates ''duplicitous'' works of high modernity, in the sense suggested in the epigraph above from Barthes, by imitating the double game of modern philosophy: he pretends to speak the language of the Master of presence while laying a fatally mimetic trap for him (Descombes 1980, 138-139). He therefore breaks down the ''concept fetishism'' of philosophy by making *mimesis* his textual *concept* (Adorno 1973, 12).[1]

Italo Calvino has pointed out the originary moment in Borges' career when this strategy emerged, its ''mechanism'' and the place this innovation assumes in literary history:

The last great invention of a new literary genre in our time was achieved by . . . Jorge Luis Borges. . . . The idea . . . was to pretend that the book he wanted to write had already been written by someone else, some unknown hypothetical author--an author in a

different language, of a different culture—and that his task was to describe and review this invented book. Part of the Borges legend is the anecdote that when the first extraordinary story written according to this formula, "El acercamiento a Almotásim" 'The Approach to Al'Mutásim,' appeared in the magazine *Sur* in 1940, it was in fact believed to be a review of a book by an Indian author. In the same way, critics of Borges feel bound to observe that each of his texts doubles or multiplies its own space through the medium of other books belonging to a real or imaginary library, whether they be classical, erudite or merely invented. (50)

Given Calvino's claim for the novelty of "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" in relation to modern genres, I propose a closer look at its formal and rhetorical procedures. My thesis is two-fold: first, that this typically Borgesian narrative juxtaposes *concept* ("philosophy") and *mimesis* ("bewitchment") and then subverts the difference between them as a *mediation of immediacy itself*. He creates thereby a second-degree "rhetoric of immediacy."[2]

Consequently, the self-referentiality he exploits in this process poses the problem of significance and meaning on two levels: first, in the sphere of the intertext (of texts real or imaginary, written or written about); and second, in the desire and *askesis* (renunciation of desire for desire's sake) of the reader confronted by this text of texts (Girard 1965, 153-75).

The new genre implied by this modern "duplicity" is first elaborated in "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" on at least two narrative levels: as recounted by Borges' narrator in his description of Mir Bahadur Ali's novel of the same title, and as "experienced" by the non-existent novel's protagonist himself in his search for the eponymous Other. Borges' "invention," then, might be stated as the paradox of the "successful" critical hoax: like the tale of forensic mysticism recounted in the story itself, "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" is an "authentic" forgery, a "genuine" imitation, a "real" fake.

Borges' original desire to write the full-dress novel called *The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim*, complete with "round characters," direct speech and descriptions, becomes therefore a "trans-formed" desire in the story as written: the secondary text to the originally *un-writeable* (*non-scriptible*) primary one. According to Derridean logic, this move "can only seem to be a metaphysical reappropriation of truth. [Such] Reflexive literature, in wishing to be seen as a total discourse, self-sufficient, *per causa sui*, is a disguised theology" (Dupuy 1989, 503). But the question remains: disguised as what? And informed by what rhetorical strategies?

The answer lies in the double nature of self-referentiality, which in Borges, as in all "consciously self-referential literature," refers not once but twice: "first, to itself; and second, to . . . self-reference itself, *understood here as a property of the world and in particular of human desire*" (Dupuy 1989, 492; emphasis mine).

The drama in "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" emerges therefore in the narrator's passage from the assertion of critical mastery in the intertext toward its gradual, unspoken renunciation in the world (of Borges' text *and* of its reader). In the final two paragraphs of the story, his "anxieties of influence" emerge as the overwhelming problem of his critical practice, a problem ever-more-mediated by the nature of Al-Mu'tasim himself.

The narrator's demonstration in the story—that the seeker is identical, ultimately, with the one sought—itself imitates the substantive claim made not only in the Indian novel under review, but also in two other, more traditional genres of revelation: the mystical text of initiation through deconstructed immediacy, and the heuristic allegory. Both often exploit the forensic hermeneutics of the mirror, the Word and the "threshold gesture" of presence as ways to expose the thoroughly mediated quality of all desire.

Borges thus arrives at a modernist re-inscription of the kind of narrative technique upon which traditional texts, even texts that form a part of a sacred canon, operate. Zen Buddhism, for example, poses its threshold narratives and riddles, the *koans*, precisely in terms of the mystique of presence and the persistence of absence. The drama and rhetoric of immediacy exploited by Borges—and what is allegory, if not a "rhetorical drama"?—far from amounting to the last innovation of modern forms, as Calvino claims, might more accurately be called the oldest trick of presence in the book of absence.

Indeed, Borges' genre-bender may well be judged a "sacred" text masquerading as a "profane" one. This paradox—which might be called the paradox of the "authentically profane"—emerges primarily because "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" commands the reader's conversion and must, therefore, be interpreted *mimetically* even as it is read *conceptually*.

These categories participate in hermeneutics, the art of the interpreters of divinatory signs, oracles, or omens, of "words that tell us what we are and what it is our lot to be" (Descombes 1986, 21).[3] Borges imitates this discourse of divination by fashioning a narrator who is a practitioner of hermeneutics, but at the same time skeptically unendowed with the belief system inherent in the text he is "approaching" and interpreting. In this narrator/character, Borges provides the reader with both a model

and an obstacle: the urbane critic is initially a "model" of taste, discernment and culture, disinterested and objective; he also presents a disenchanted stumbling block or screen through which the "primary" material of the novel—the bewitchment of intelligence when faced with the inadequacy of language and the terror of the sacred—must be projected.

Historically, the reader's Borgesian predicament in "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" resembles two well-known cases of hermeneutic (mis)reading: the interpretation of Homer by the Alexandrians and the Protestant reinterpretation of the Bible in the nineteenth century (Descombes 1986, 24). All three feature a text, philologically obscure, culturally different but not grammatically indecipherable, whose prophetic meaning is ambiguous, not inaccessible. The reader of this "foreign" text (in Borges, the narrator) struggles to *approach* "the message it would yield if it were indeed the Text that an entire tradition has suggested (the Poem, the Bible)" (Descombes 1986, 24).

For hermeneutics in the strictest sense, faith is a pre-condition for an approach to any text that posits the possibility, or even the inevitability, of divine revelation. Because the Borgesian narrator manipulates a rhetoric of critical distance and disbelief, however, the reader's "disbelief" is thereby engaged mimetically, sharing "critically" as she does the narrator's bookish or profane skepticism. For Borges this *mimesis*— in which the reader initially grants the narrator credibility *in imitation of his own claims to it*—becomes, as noted above, the *concept* of the text. The confusion experienced in 1940 by the readers of Borges' story when it was published in *Sur* (as described by Calvino, above) proves this phenomenon.[4]

Thus, Borges paradoxically dramatizes the "necessity of interpretation" based on the hermeneutic situation as traditionally defined, in which:

> I receive the sign of a power that reveals itself to me through the very sign it has sent. Interpretation is permissible whenever it is necessary, but such necessity is valid only for signs confined to the area of revelation, the *templum*: outside the temple, there are no hermeneutics. Beyond the temple lies the delirium of interpretation. The condition of interpreting signs given within the temple is that outside it, in profanity, there are different procedures for understanding. (Descombes 1986, 25)

Borges' narrator therefore straddles the demarcation between sacred and profane, between hermeneutic legitimacy and extramural delirium.

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Nevertheless, the novel of detection and ratiocination, clearly situated on the "horizon of expectations" he brings to his reading of Mir Bahadur Ali's novel, represents for him a "sacred" textual tradition whose literary conventions form a part of his own "comparativeness."

On the other hand, he is also an outsider faced with the Unknowable at the center of the book under review. For this "heathen" reader of an obscure intercultural text, the confines of the hermeneutic temple explode in the volatile, "analytic" antinomy of mimesis and logical skepticism: "What *can* be shown," writes Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, "*cannot* be said" (26). The shards will be pieced together at the conclusion, in the narrator's intertextual shrine (Chesterton, Spenser, Joyce, Homer, Kipling, Eliot, Farid ud-din Attar) that will enact, by a performative sort of rhetorical bootstrapping, a substitution of itself for the sacred site or Text of the faithful.

The Borgesian *templum* is constructed in the interstices of intertexts whose concepts are produced, again, mimetically: the urbane narrator/character/interpreter in "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" imitates a critic more than he writes "critically." For starters, he cites two other critics to demonstrate that he belongs in the field of argumentation, then deftly places both of them in the same sack by repeating their common agreement that the novel is a "hybridization" that "may cause us to imagine some likeness with Chesterton; we will soon see," he concludes authoritatively, "that there is no such thing" (Borges 37).[5] Chesterton is therefore inimitable; Mir Bahadur Ali, the Bombay lawyer and author of the novel *The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim,* it is implied, is equally so.

This denial of "imitability," logically enough, propounds the narrator's first paradox regarding his own method: metaphysical desire is insufficiently provoked by mere mimesis of the first degree (i.e., in the form of intertextual "borrowing"); rather, the requisite model for "immediate" imitation must be *inimitable*. His conclusion, as I shall show, explicitly criticizes those critics who manifest their "harebrained admiration" of the "derivations" detected in current works from ancient ones. Instead, he will discuss these "influences" in terms of metempsychosis, or "*Ibbür,* "for this, too, is a necessarily "unmediated" term for mimesis.

The critical concept of "hybridization" is pronounced *not* to be applicable to the Bombay lawyer's novel, but the evocation of the "hybrid" signals an initial self-referential moment of Borges' tale along with the title it uncannily shares with the novel ostensibly under review. The narrator's sovereign rejection of his predecessors' critical evaluation ("hybridization") serves as the first grounding for his superior mastery of *the text of the text*. In this he shares an understanding with the Russian

Formalists, who held that it is neither the works nor the genres that change; rather, "they [works and genres] are the *products* of transformations, trans-forms" (Ducrot & Todorov, 189; my translation). Borges' story therefore becomes not only an imitation of criticism, a simulacrum of concept-driven discourse, but also an allegory of literary history, genre theory and the sensory moment of reading itself: not the hybrid, but the product of the hybrid of the hybrids, the *trans-form*. This explains Calvino's enthusiasm for Borges' text as "the last great invention of a literary genre in our time."

Its "plot" (or significance over time) unfolds therefore in the gaps between the reader, hermeneutic "legitimacy" and the narrator's critical expertise. The *form* of the frame narrative in which the narrator exists (inasmuch as he *writes)*, consequently, manifests as much signifying content as the *framed* tale paraphrased, "conceptualized" and criticized *by* the narrator *from outside*. Both recount the renunciation of appetitive desire in the name of metaphysical desire (I will address the Girardian dimension of this issue below). The generative source of these narrative concepts, therefore, is located "affectively," in a narrative simulation of a critico-sensory presence, performatively self-manifesting in its own scene of writing.

How does Borges pull this off technically? First, the Bombay lawyer's book is evoked as an object, in terms of its *hors texte*. The paper used for the *editio princeps*, the narrator tells us, "was almost the quality of newsprint." The cover of this edition "proclaimed to the buyer that the book was the first detective novel written by a native of Bombay City." The second, illustrated edition "has just been reproduced and issued in London by Victor Gollancz, with a prologue by Dorothy L. Sayers, and the omission—perhaps merciful—of the illustrations." The narrator's credible presence is everywhere accentuated in this passage, from the use of familiar names of flesh-and-blood historical personages (Gollancz and Sayers) to the discerning judgment concerning illustrations ("—perhaps merciful—"). The details of this second edition all prepare the story's first climax of presence or rhetorical immediacy regarding the book of the book: "I have it in front of me," the narrator states in a deceptively simple, matter-of-fact way. Derrida's well-known dictum is apt here: for Borges, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (1972, *passim*).

The original edition, the one absent from the narrator's consideration except for sparse "traces" of its existence, approaches the status of sacred text precisely because it is unavailable to the "infidel" narrator. The source for the clues upon which he bases his editorial judgment— that the first is of a far superior to the second edition—is an appendix

"which summarizes the fundamental difference between the primitive version of 1932 and the 1934 edition." The only further detail we have concerning this index is not what it contains, but rather that it somehow legitimates this critical opinion itself: "I am authorized in this last judgment by an appendix. . . ."

The far more telling information available to us regarding the superiority of the first edition is contained in the change of title in the second: *The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim* (1932) has been changed in 1934 to *The Conversation with the Man Called Al-Mu'tasim* "and handsomely subtitled," the narrator tells us admiringly, "*A Game with Shifting Mirrors.*" This "superiority" is intimated by a metaphysical devaluation revealed in the changed title: where the second promises a "Conversation" with the "Man" called Al-Mu'tasim, indicating presence, the first promises only "the approach" to his *suspected* or intuited presence, implying a passage through a series of stages marked rather by his absence. The subtitle, similarly, adds a new layer of specular reflexivity, even of baroque sensibility (a frivolous "game" of mobile mirrors) that may work to undermine or multiply the presence of Al-Mu'tasim implied by the phonocentric promise of a "conversation" with him.

But as we have learned, along with the readers of *Sur* in 1940, not to reduce the flesh-and-blood Borges to his narrator (who may bear no resemblance even to the "Other Borges"), hints are dropped (without comment) that imply in Mir Bahadur Ali's protagonist significant parallels with Mir Bahadur Ali himself. For the "visible protagonist" of the novel is also in law (a student, implying autobiographical precedence and authenticity) and also from Bombay.

This information comes in the first sentence of a long paragraph of detailed vicissitudes, paraphrased by the narrator as if in rapid cinematic montage. The opening scene of holy war ("a civil tumult between Moslems and Hindus") catches the disbelieving protagonist (who has "blasphemously" rejected the "Islamic faith of his fathers") in its midst. This "free-thinking [law] student," "aghast" at the violence unleashed by the battle of "God the Indivisible against the Gods," joins in and "With desperate hands he kills (or thinks he kills) a Hindu." This crime, whether willed or accidental--for it is a member of the "other side" he kills—or is it, since he is a "free thinker" and not allied with either faction?—in any case, whether fatal or not ("or thinks he killed"), this desperate act precipitates his flight.

His next encounter, with a "despoiler of cadavers" who hides in a circular tower, provides the reader with a wealth of allegorical information that the narrator, once again, neither explicates nor renders explicit. The protagonist, despite the judgments he passes upon his corpse-

robbing companion (he is "squalid," "minutely vile"--or is this the narrator's choice of adjectives?), actually comes to share symbolic as well as physical space with him. The "vile" thief, who "mentions that fourteen nights have passed since he last purified himself with buffalo dung," expresses hatred for "certain horse thieves in Guzerat, 'eaters of dogs and lizards, men as unclean as the two of us.'" This instance of direct discourse by a character in the novel under review, when reported directly by the narrator, assumes a special significance. The revelation that the law student is on an equal footing with a man he views so far beneath him is sufficiently startling, sufficiently sublime, that it merits direct citation by the frame narrator.

A great chain of mediation is thus established: the reader (of Borges' story) has her reading of the novel mediated by the narrator, who himself cannot gain access to the "authentic" 1932 edition; the protagonist, who at the time of his encounter with the despoiler of corpses is not yet aware of his fate as an "approach" to anything, has his status (social and religious) mediated by the "untouchable." This "squalid man," "squatting by the light of the moon and urinating noisily," is merely the first in an "ascending progression" of "interlocutors" whose mediations mark the approach, in a text "burdened . . . [with] mathematical technicality," to Al-Mu'tasim himself. The conversation with the corpse robber--the only one cited directly by the narrator--implies that Al-Mu'tasim may be found at the beginning rather than the end of the chain. Narrative, like time, loses thereby its linearity; commenting on intertextual influences, the narrator will confirm, in the last line of the last note in the story, the possibility that "Al-Mu'tasim is the 'Hindu' whom the student believes he has killed" in the book's opening incident.[6] The religious nature of this violence is not negligible; again, I will address Girard's theory on these issues below.

The protagonist's commission of this murder in a holy war is compounded, thereafter, by a precipitate tumble in social and moral ("unclean") status. Upon awakening he undergoes two further falls. First, he realizes he has been robbed by the corpse-robbing thief, his former equal, which now puts the law student closer to the land of the dead than the land of the living. Secondly, "He meditates on how he has shown himself capable of killing an idolater, but not of knowing for certain whether a Moslem is more justified in his beliefs than a Hindu." This second truth, like the first, displaces him in both social and sacred realms: he now knows himself comparable to the unclean, capable of irrational, murderous violence, and equally incapable of rational distinctions in theology. He departs in search of a "*malka-sansi* (a woman of the robber caste) of Palanpur," about whom the thief had spoken vituperatively. As

Carter Wheelock states it, "The student reasons that vilification by such a man is tantamount to praise, and he resolves to go in search of the woman. So the search for Almotásim [sic] really begins here as a reaction against that which is not Almotásim" (Wheelock 151). More important than the mere fact of this "reaction against that which is not Almotásim" is the effectively *negative mediation* by his corpse-robbing opposite-and-equal, which event ". . . concludes the second chapter of the work." During a thoroughly undifferentiated sacrificial crisis, Borges' logic tells us, the rhetoric of vilification serves just as well as the rhetoric of praise to propel the student toward the absent sacred.

The narrator then avows the impossibility of retelling the nineteen chapters that remain, and resorts once again to cinematographically mounted details, generalizations ("a biography which seems to exhaust the movements of the human spirit"), paraphrases and place names that trace a geographical, narratological and spiritual circle. The conclusion of the montage of time and place effaces the protagonist from its purview, as "the story" becomes the grammatical subject of a miraculously "bewitched" sentence:

> The story which begins in Bombay continues in the lowlands of Palanpur, lingers an afternoon and a night at the stone gates of Bikaner, narrates the death of a blind astrologer in a Benares sewer, conspires in the multiform palace of Katmandu, prays and forni- cates—amid the pestilential stench of Calcutta—in the Machua Bazaar, watches the days be born in the sea from a balcony in the state of Travancore, hesitates and kills at Indapur and closes its orbit of leagues and years in Bombay itself, a few paces away from the garden of the mooncolored hounds.[7]

The succession of verbs predicating the subject "story" marks a progress toward absence: it "begins" and "continues" as most stories do, then it "lingers," "narrates" and "conspires." But when "the story" "prays and fornicates--amid the pestilential stench of Calcutta," the protagonist's mystique of presence is both subverted and enhanced by means of his simultaneous displacement or multiplication (in several predicates) and effacement (as the subject of these verbs).[8]

Undifferentiation therefore is the *mode* (formal range) and the *code* (index of content) of this text. Singularity is multiplicity; the One shows itself as the Many. Even the ontological dichotomy (Being/Non-Being) is triangulated by the rhetoric of immediacy, which discursively pro- vokes a dynamic tension within the "infinite" chain of mediations that constitutes the *mise en abyme* reaching from Borges to his narrator to his

reader/protagonist to an untold series of mediators to Al-Mu'tasim himself, who may or may not "be" identical to any of the preceding list. Merely writing the preceding sentence, which aspires to clarity, challenges the writer's syntactical powers and, no doubt, the reader's patience.

The undifferentiated series comprising the Borgesian narrative chain is rendered explicit, however, in order to pose the issue of the difference of difference. As I mentioned above, the "squalid man" is merely an early link in this chain. In the paragraph that begins "The plot is as follows: . . . ," we learn that the protagonist perceives "all at once," with "the miraculous consternation of Robinson Crusoe faced with the human footprint in the sand . . . a tenderness, an exaltation, a silence in one of the abhorrent men" with whom he has fallen "in a kind of contest of infamy."

The narrator then cites Mir Bahadur Ali's prose directly: "'It was as if a more complex interlocutor had joined the dialogue.'" Suddenly the mode of undifferentiation is itself modulated by a newly revealed dialogic-ontological difference. The "more complex interlocutor," whose presence is sensed, intuited affectively by the protagonist but impossible to locate in his own *presence,* compels the infamous law student "to dedicate his life to finding him."

This broken link in the chain of undifferentiation, then, implies an interlocutor of interlocutors, an author of authors, a narrator of narrators, and so on. Even the reader is implicated or caught in this inevitable succession: faced with the Borgesian text, we are the readers of readers, the "more complex" readers implied by the simultaneous presence and absence of the "more complex interlocutor." Undifferentiation challenges the status of linguistic signs because language, as we have known since Saussure, consists only of differences. In the "social dramas" of myth, ritual and representation, however, difference vibrates with undifferentiation, and *vice versa.*

This break corresponds precisely to the moment in the narrator's critique when his anti-allegorical bias comes full circle to bite him, *ourouboros*-style, as the snake of discernment tastes its own tail. After recounting what he calls "the general argument" of the novel, which is allegorically "burdened" with the weight of its immeasurability, he judges the work on literary grounds and opts in turn for what can only be called, from this reader's perspective, the allegory of mimesis and infinity, or the multi-fold parable of "infinite mimesis." The narrator pronounces the author a success in "the various invention of prophetic traits," but modestly allows himself incapable of passing judgment on

Mir Bahadur Ali's success at "seeing to it that the hero prefigured by these traits [Al-Mu'tasim] be no mere convention or phantom."

"In other words:" he writes, "the extraordinary and unseen Al-Mu'tasim should give us the impression of a real character, not that of a jumble of insipid superlatives." The absence of such "supernatural notes" in the 1932 edition is cited as "literary good conduct," while the 1934 edition "sinks into allegory" with its abundance of "grievous details. . . all meant to insinuate a unitary God who accomodates Himself to human diversities. To my mind," he concludes, "the idea is not very stimulating."

This critical judgment constitutes the second crisis or climax of mediated immediacy in Borges' story: the narrator pronounces his preference, over the allegory of a unitary, accomodating God, for "the conjecture that the Almighty is also in search of Someone, and that Someone in search of some superior Someone (or merely indispensable or equal Someone), and thus on to the end—or better, the endlessness— of Time, or on and on in some cyclical form."

Borges' characteristic undifferentiation of categories poses a range of difficult issues for philosophy. As Jaime Alazraki puts it, "The common denominator of all his fiction can be defined as a relativity which governs all things and which by being the result of a confrontation of opposites, takes on the appearance of a paradox and, at times of an oxymoron" (45). Would a philosophical grammar exclude such a mix? One tenet shared by analytic and deconstructionist philosophers is that such a prohibition represents a move to *expand* non-meaning, *not* restrict it: "a curious response," concludes Vincent Descombes, "to the demand for meaning" (1986, 19).

On the other hand, the literature of mimesis, whether sacred or profane, has traditionally authorized and performed this mix on its own authority. Historically, Borges participates in and even generates the textual desires of an entire (post)modernist tradition of "self-engulfing" literary artefacts.[9] Whether this proliferation constitutes a misprision of the Borgesian sacred is a question, however, outside the scope of this paper.

It is clear that any definitive distinction between "philosophy" and "literature" in Borges' case no longer holds. Recent criticism in the cognitive sciences has shown that the claims for textual autonomy by the *nouveau roman* (and the *nouveau nouveau roman*), post-structuralism and deconstructionism differ radically on this issue, yet also share several procedural assumptions. First, they share commonly held ideas: for example, that the "infinite regress" of mirrors mirroring mirrors can push an ontology of literature all the way to absolute autonomy. This

mechanism, so prevalent in the literature of the *mise en abyme,* would hold that "The only way to escape from mimesis would be to multiply it to infinity. Mimesis could then only be deceived by itself" (Dupuy 1989, 501). This is on the surface similar to the notion implied by Derridean *différance,* which would undermine the ontology of the sign based on "the Heideggerian strategy of the 'destruction' of the concept of truth as determined by *homoiosis* or *adaequatio,* a strategy shared by Derrida, the Derridians, the Lacanians, and the theoreticians of reflexivity in literature such as Ricardou and Robbe-Grillet" (Dupuy 1989, 502).

The important difference between deconstruction and theories of literary *mise en abyme,* however, emerges in Derrida's objection to the literary claims for the "productivity" of infinite regress, presented as "the present [of mimesis] unveiling the present: monstration, manifestation, production, *alètheia. . . ,*" especially as praised and promoted by theorists of the *nouveau roman.*[10] Derrida objects that the "production" of infinite mirroring "reflects no reality; it produces mere 'reality effects'," and therefore amounts not to production itself, but to the simulacrum of production (1981, 206). "In this speculum with no reality," he states:

> . . . in this mirror of a mirror, a difference or dyad does exist, since there are mimes and phantoms. But it is a difference without reference, or rather a reference without a referent, without any first or last unit, a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh, wandering about without a past, without any death, birth or presence. (1981, 206, qtd in slightly different form in Dupuy 1989, 502)

It would be difficult to locate a passage more diametrically opposed to René Girard's claims for mimesis and for literature as the "science of desire," yet a comparison between these antithetical positions regarding the referent, especially in light of Borges' tale, may help us to understand the most crucial issues at stake here.

The critical site for the referent in the nascent Borgesian sub-genre is *askesis*: discipline, or the renunciation of desire for desire's sake. The figuration of the infinite, so central to Borges' aesthetics, provides therefore a sort of contagious threshold deferral for the desiring reader or critic, the would-be *subject* of criticism whose part in "a game of shifting mirrors" makes her the *object* of her reader's interpretation.

The "bewitched" rhetoric of immediacy exploited by the Borgesian *genre* thereby fulfills pleasure even as it would discipline or displace it. It provokes (meta)textual eroticism by its intertextual assertion, then denial, of immediated privacy, which renunciation passes out the other

side of the decentered "doughnut of representation" in the form of deferred *eros*. "Text, in this [Michael Riffaterre's] view," writes Ross Chambers, "is 'shaped like a doughnut,' the hole being the absent and unexpressed verbal referent, or 'hypogram' " (95).

Borgesian *askesis*, then, involves this sort of self-referential framing—and Borges' catalogue of automorphic tropes (library, labyrinth, lottery of Babylon) is well known—of the precise moment of *askesis*, or desire deferred for the sake of desire. The textual act of displacement, therefore, is itself effectively displaced.

His writing, however, may not represent the innovation Calvino claims it is, although this in no way diminishes its value. For like many nineteenth-century novels, the Borgesian deferral of textual authority simultaneously transmogrifies the character's and the reader's affective energies: the drama of the story (*fabula*, "the sum-total of events to be related in the work of fiction") gradually shifts away from the tale toward the frame, eventually taking place precisely in the compound communication of this transference between sender (author), mediator (narrator/ character) and receiver (reader) (Erlich 240). "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" demonstrates that the parenthetical identities in this hermeneutic circuit—author, narrator/character, and reader—are interchangeable, just as Al-Mu'tasim may "be" the murdered Hindu, the despoiler of corpses or the "theologically indeterminate" homicidal protagonist himself.

At the same time, the Borgesian narrative persona most often posits its own grounds of (self-)referential legitimacy *performatively*, by pronouncing critical judgments on books, or worlds, or Alephs that *ought* to exist. The second-level plot—its *sjuzet*, or the organization of its significance—even as it passes *toward* the frame of the intrigue, unfolds as it mediates the reader's desire to understand by deferring comprehension itself (Erlich 240). Is the Borgesian structure of narrative *askesis*, in its maddeningly complex provocation and renunciation of metaphysical desire, so very different, therefore, from Nerval's or Flaubert's, or from Chesterton's for that matter? Perceptive readers of *Madame Bovary* today are not likely to be more compelled by Emma's story—which might be paraphrased in a sentence or two—than they are by their understanding of Flaubert's multi-fold *sjuzet*, the novel's organizational allegory.[11]

Borges' narrator slyly and frankly undoes his seeming insistence on Bahadur's literary shortcomings in the last paragraph before the row of stars that separates the body of the text from the ending. For here he expresses uncertainty regarding his own criticism: "After rereading, I am apprehensive lest I have not sufficiently underlined the book's

virtues.'' The ''civilized expression'' he cites as a counter-example to his expressed reservations reveals its own secret intertext: ''. . . for example, a certain argument in the nineteenth chapter in which one feels a presentiment that one of the antagonists is a friend of Al-Mu'tasim when he will not refute the sophisms of his opponent 'so as not to be right in a triumphal fashion.' ''

The narrator's appreciation here echoes the highest political wisdom regarding restraint in the *Tao Teh Ching* (third century B.C.), which states: ''Conduct your triumph as a funeral'' (Lao Tzu 45). His initial reservations and demurrers regarding his fellow critics (or, in Girard's term, his ''internal mediators'') are thereby economically undone because he finds the refusal of ''triumphant'' critical rectitude a higher value *in the very text he is criticizing*. The text becomes, thereby, the critic's ''external mediator.'' The narrator also undermines his own expressed disdain for allegory (a distaste explicated on historical grounds, and therefore explained away, by Borges in his essay ''From Allegories to Novels'') by taking issue with the censurious nineteenth-century critic of Spenser, agreeing instead with Eliot's approving judgment regarding Gloriana's absence from the seventy cantos of *The Fairie Queene*. Again, the drama of this shift on the narrator's part loses something in my paraphrase; the attentive reader cannot help but ponder, nonetheless, its elaboration as mediated by the context of Bahadur's novel.

A well-known Zen parable illustrates the rhetoric of immediacy in relation to the very problems explored by Borges' text. Case 14 of the *Gateless Gate* (*Mumonkan,* 13th century) tells the following story:

> Once the monks of the eastern and western Zen halls were quarrel-ling about a cat. Nansen held up the cat and said, ''You monks! If one of you can say a word, I will spare the cat. If you can't say anything, I will put it to the sword.'' No one could answer, so Nansen finally slew it. In the evening when Joshu returned, Nansen told him what had happened. Joshu, thereupon, took off his sandals, put them on his head and walked off. Nansen said, ''If you had been there, I could have spared the cat.'' (Hui-k'ai 223)

Between two ''sovereigns'' of wisdom, or Masters, the challenge to linguistic competence issued initially by Nansen to the group of quarrel-ling monks is transformed: from an impossible task—to speak the unspeakable—to a possible one, to *show* it. Hence, Joshu's gesture of (non)response would have effectively saved the life of the cat, *had Joshu been present to make it*. The ''immediacy'' of his feline-saving gesture—itself absurdly unrelated to the issue in its content—would suffice to

arrest the violent act, which replicates sacrificial violence, especially in the group dynamics of dispute and judicial arbitration by Nansen. The rhetoric of immediacy, then, may be found in the representation and re-telling of this anecdote as an heuristic device. Zen favors the act of ''immediate'' presence over the ''enchantment'' of a language that would presume to speak the Unspeakable, but it must resort to the mythic-heuristic representation of the *act* in order to pose the *problem* itself. The rhetoric of immediacy, in such cases, both promotes and undermines mediation.

Likewise, Case 44 in the *Gateless Gate* reads as follows: ''Master Basho said to his disciples, 'If you have a shujo, I will give it to you. If you have no shujo, I will take it away from you''' (223). When the disciples in Matthew 13:10 ask Jesus why he speaks to people in parables, he responds with another parable: ''To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away'' (1187).

Like these traditional or sacred parables, the mechanism by which Borges' ''modernist'' text operates is both immanent in its form (the semantic doubling and persistence of absence in language) and produc-tively transcendent in the doubly-bound tension it establishes between desire and *askesis*. Why ''doubly bound''? Because the ontological plenitude of Al-Mu'tasim simultaneously *compels* imitation (in identity) and *defeats* it (in difference). Self-reflexively, the text's renunciation of the desire for closure (in the name of metaphysical desire) mirrors the narrator/critic's eventual renunciation of any split between concept and mimesis.

These developments themselves work to renounce or counteract the very immanence initially *produced* by its form (as a review of a detective story). This is discussed by Adorno in terms of ''sensuous immediacy,'' a quality of spirit in the art work which ''is not an aberration of art but a useful corrective to it'' (1984, 133). Accordingly, it is neither the inherent presence nor absence of spirit in the work that accedes to the appearance of immediacy, but rather ''the negation of that appearance, being at one with the phenomenon and yet opposed to it'' (1984, 131).

Indeed, Adorno's analysis of modern art works accounts in one way for the dynamic ''movement'' of Borges' story, which generates the communicability of issues posed in terms of totalizing (or theological) mediation and the drama of renunciation on the part of the critic:

> The strict immanence of spirit in works of art is contradicted by a
> counter-trend which is no less immanent and which is the tendency

of art works to try to escape the hermetic quality of their own structures, to make deliberate incisions, and to abrogate the totality of appearance. Since the spirit of a work of art is not co-extensive with that work, it breaks the objective form which is constitutive of art. This break is the instant of apparition. (1984, 131)

This "instant of apparition" in "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" is doubled within the structure of the story, yet the protagonist's encounter in the framed tale with the Unknowable is, in my view, less crucial than the narrator/critic's similar encounter in the last line of the body of the text. Writers who treat this story discuss the theme of the "eternal return" and the student/protagonist's "endless journey of postponements" before citing the scene where he asks, through "a cheap and copiously beaded mat curtain," for Al-Mu'tasim. "A man's voice—the incredible voice of Al-Mu'tasim—urges him to come in. The student draws back the curtain and steps forward. The novel ends."[12]

This is, in my opinion, only the first (and lesser) of the two apparitions in the story. The second, more crucial and revealing, occurs in the narrator's final criticism when, after complaining bitterly about the "derivations" detected in Bahadur's novel by "harebrained" critics in London, Allahabad and Calcutta, he champions an opinion by Eliot regarding the absence of the heroine from all seventy cantos of "the incomplete allegory *The Faërie Queen* [sic]." This opinion, he states, was "previously pointed out in a censure by Richard William Church (*Spenser*, 1879)." How can one account for this "critical" shift on the narrator's part, *away* from the fishing expeditions for predecessors stupidly played out by his "harebrained" fellow critics *toward* the positively promoted virtue, in an allegory no less—a genre for which he expresses scorn in the context of the novel—of the total and utterly mysterious absence of the main character from a literary work?

The answer to this question lies in the "conversion" of the critic. This information is so subtly delivered, however,—in a parable, without insistence—that the story itself becomes an allegory of *reading as mimesis*, of mediation as the only way of access to the unmediated. In the last two sentences of the body of the text (there is a note appended to this ending, about which I will speak below) the narrator speaks "frankly" instead of "critically," revealing as he does his own mediation by the material he would ostensibly master:

With all humility, I wish to mention a distant, and possible, predecessor: the Jerusalem cabalist Isaac Luria, who in the sixteenth century proclaimed that the soul of an ancestor or that of a master

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might enter the soul of an unfortunate to comfort or instruct him. *Ibbür* is the name for this type of metempsychosis. *

Literally, the critic/narrator musters here the claim for metaphysical, even mystical, influence by forces absented or distant in time, space, and even ontology as an explanation for how Bahadur came to write his novel. Uncannily, he has been drawn into the "great chain" of mediation posited by the text under his consideration and "with all humility" claims that the "soul of a master" has entered the soul of the author. He helpfully identifies the term for "this type of metempsychosis," in the conceptual or critical mode, in what seems an anti-climactic last line; mimetically, however, the fact that he would claim such an explanation and support it with the "original" (or culture-specific) terminology means that he himself vouches for this "source" in Bahadur. The spirit of Al-Mu'tasim, in the final drama of this "essay," passes through the spirit and the letter of the framed author (Mir Bahadur Ali) into the spirit and the letter of the frame narrator.

The further information regarding his collapse into the mystique of presence at the center of the fiction comes near the end of the final note, marked with an asterisk at the end of the body of the story. Still addressing the issue of "precursors" of Bahadur's text (in this case, Attar's *Colloquy of the Birds)*, the narrator states that the analogies he discerns "may merely signify the identification of the searcher with the sought; they also might mean that the latter influences the former." Explicitly, the absent one (the sought) influences the seeker, even to the point of identification.

The Girardian analysis of these claims would raise two important issues, in my opinion. First, the mediator he describes as "internal" (sharing the same ontology) or "external" (separated ontologically) is here combined and undifferentiated to a volatile and all the more "contagious" or "communicable" degree:

Obviously it is not physical space that measures the gap between mediator and the desiring subject. Although geographical separation might be one factor, the distance between mediator and subject is primarily *spiritual*. . . . The closer the mediator comes, the greater his role becomes. . . . (1965, 45)

Second, the root cause of the "approach" to the mediator on the part of the protagonist/student is an irrationally provoked, contagiously crowd-mediated act of religious violence. The specter of sacrificial murder, in Girard's thesis, haunts all religions. The confluence in the novel's opening crowd scenes of Islam and Hinduism, faced with the

"free-thinking" atheism of the protagonist, makes the "sacrificial crisis" in progress, with its characteristic melt-down of difference, all the more contagious and the strategies for its representation all the more complex.

As I noted above, Borges' narrative of his reader's "essay" on Bahadur's novel is told in the mode and by the code of undifferentiation: the protagonist, killing the Hindu, takes a step closer to Al-Mu'tasim; we learn later (by authorial insinuation) that the victim himself was, just possibly, "always already" Al-Mu'tasim. The frame narrator reveals compelling evidence, by his change of critical tone and his concluding remarks, that he can bear personal witness to "this type of metempsychosis," and I feel it would not be an unjust extrapolation from the spirit and the letter of the text to propose that the narrator, too, is Al-Mu'tasim.

I also stated above that Borges' story is a sacred text ("disguised theology") masquerading as something else, and I think it is on the grounds of undifferentiation and the representation of a "secular ritual" of criticism (in the narrator's reading of Bahadur) that the full hermeneutic import of this story may be grasped. For structuralist anthropology, undifferentiation (corresponding to ritual) and differentiation (corresponding to myth) are principles that may be radically separated and distinguished on the grounds of language and its determinate role in differentiating objects. For René Girard, however, it is impossible to drive a wedge between myth and ritual because both function together in any given anthropology:

> In order to achieve undifferentiation, myths, as well as rituals, resort to make-believe. . . . In myth as well as in ritual, this undifferentiated can only be a *representation*. (1978, 156-57)

Objecting to Lévi-Strauss's privileging of myth (associated with language) over ritual (associated with non-verbal religion), Girard argues here that, on the contrary, the two work together in a "parallelism" that combines *both* forces in social processes that tend toward the "regeneration of differences" (1978, 156). The important point, he concludes, is not to privilege one over the other, but rather to see that their relationship "remains indeterminate, behind an appearance of determination" (1978, 171).

This structural, thematic and even anthropological truth lies at the center of Borges' story. Behind the "appearance of determination" at the conclusion of the text (the narrator's claim for "metempsychosis") lies the larger, more subtle and complex indeterminacy of the claim itself: its

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relation to his criticism of the novel and the insufficiency signalled by the desperate proliferation of asterisks, footnotes, and lists of mediating predecessors. Along with the second-level significance of the story, these features signal an opening-out of critical perspectives, a breaking-open of the writer's conceptual sphere, which the reader might normally expect at the beginning of a critical essay, rather than at the end. This gesture, far from marking any triumphant conclusion or closure, works in the opposite direction.

Borges' text illuminates an issue central to current philosophy, hermeneutics and literary criticism: the problem of "centrality" itself and of language's access to it. The narrative's exploitation of *mise en abyme* and its aggressively textual insistence on its own procedures mark it as a work of modernity, yet its themes, incidents and deployment of the rhetoric of immediacy reveal it as a traditional, "sacred" text in the hermeneutic sense described above. Its self-referentiality, its "disguised theology" veils nothing else than the masks assumed by the sacred, or the Unspeakable, the Unknowable, or "all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them" (Girard 1977, 31).

The social crisis of undifferentiation, reflected in the opening chapter of Bahadur's novel, results in an uncannily "motivated" yet nonetheless "irrational" violence that spreads contagiously like ripples on a pond; so, too, spreads the totalizing omni-identity of Al-Mu'tasim, "the more complex interlocutor," who alternately conceals and displays the vicissitudes of difference in language and experience.

The last issue raised by Vincent Descombes in the introduction to his "philosophical grammar" concerns the questions contemporary philosophy must pose for itself: not in terms of method—which he pronounces "after all, a peripheral matter"—but rather in terms of "the nature of philosophical questions . . . in other words, what philosophy is *capable of*" (1986, 14).

The critique of affective reason I detect in Borges' text is the same one toward which critical disciplines may be tending in the "post-theoretical" era. Theories of self-reference and applied epistemologies break down long-standing disciplinary differences in the name of new knowledge. One final thought-experiment here will show that Borges' parable also shares features with model paradoxes used by logicians to demonstrate criteria of belief and induction.

Paul Berent's parable of the 99-foot man poses the following situation:

Say you subscribe to the reasonable belief: "All human beings are less than 100 feet tall." Everyone you've ever seen is a confirming instance of this hypothesis. Then one day you go to the circus and see a 99-foot tall man. Surely you leave the circus far *less* confident that all people are less than 100 feet tall. Why? The 99-foot man is yet another confirming instance. (Poundstone 39)

There are two reasons for the confusion regarding the operative hypothesis, despite the fact that the 99-foot tall man does not contravene it: first, language has imperfectly expressed the intent of the hypothesis, "bewitching" it instead with an outsized scale of proportions. Its "hypothetical intent" is easily transgressed by examples that approach the limit of applicability (100 feet) without surpassing it. Consequently, an effective disconfirmation of the 100-foot hypothesis is achieved by "non-essential information"—i.e., that in *one* instance *one* man *approaches* (like Al-Mu'tasim and his seeker) the limit of hypothetical truth. If our data were limited to a binary read-out of criteria yes/no, marked 100-feet/less-than-100-feet, our judgment would not be affected in the least by the 99-foot man. He would be just another "no" on our yes/no list. His height—or the variable heights of any beings—would constitute non-essential information.

Borges has provided a parable of what philosopher Rudolf Carnap has called "the requirement of total evidence," which in inductive reasoning decrees the use of all available information (Poundstone 40). As William Poundstone states it:

The requirement of total evidence has occasioned much soul-searching in the scientific community because it addresses much of the research arena of biochemistry, astronomy, physics, and other fields. ... *If we are ignorant of other factors ["total evidence"], and necessarily so, then we can generalize only from the information that is available.* (41, emphases added)

In "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim," Borges has acceded to a sacred hermeneutics previously unavailable to or methodologically excluded by both scientific induction and current philosophy. He has delivered this information to a disenchanted modernity by disguising it as "criticism," textually distanced from the reader's experience by the very concept of critical discernment and judgment.[13]

Borges has thereby provided contemporary theory and the human sciences with not one, but a "mathematically burdened" series of 99-foot men who will contribute to the total evidence currently

acknowledged as essential, if inaccessible, to the hard sciences. A Borgesian syllogism is thus established: No being is all beings (No human is more than 100 feet tall); Some beings, however, are many beings (Some humans are 99 feet). In writing, for Borges, there is no "non-essential" information.

Our contemporary "philosophy in decline," as Vincent Descombes has written, can no longer afford to indulge "the tendency to regard those issues that puzzle all genuine philosophy as minor" (1986, 20-21). These issues include the mimetic character of desire, the uncanny relation between violence and the social bond, death and *askesis*. "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim" exemplifies Borges' "science" of reading as experience: his critique of affective reason. This, too, is a necessary metempsychosis, a revealing mirror of *Ibbūr*.

Notes

1. Adorno writes: "The substance of concepts is . . . both immanent, as far as the mind is concerned, and transcendent as far as being is concerned. To be aware of this is to be able to get rid of concept fetishism. Philosophical reflection makes sure of the nonconceptual in the concept. It would be empty otherwise, according to Kant's dictum; in the end, having ceased to be a concept of anything at all, it would be nothing."

2. I am grateful to Bernard Faure for introducing me to this term.

3. For a slightly different description of this issue, cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 95 ff.: "If we define the task of hermeneutics as the bridging of the personal or historical distance between minds, then the experience of art would seem to fall entirely outside its province. For of all the things that confront us in nature and history, it is the work of art that speaks to us most directly. It possesses a mysterious intimacy that grips our entire being, as if there were no distance at all and every encounter with it were an encounter with ourselves."

4. These readers, some of whom attempted to order copies of Bahadur Ali's novel after reading Borges' "review," seemingly privileged the rhetoric of the narrator's critical authority over the nascent, innovative and "Borgesian" play of sublimated mirrors. Short of possessing expert knowledge of contemporary popular Indian detective fiction—and thereby the capacity to reject the "bewitchment" effected by the narrator's mixing of historical and fictional authors—how could they do otherwise? Incidentally, Calvino's

version of this story omits the fact that this story, written as early as 1935, originally appeared in *Historia de la eternidad* in 1936; cf. Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas*, Vol I (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974).

5. All citations from this very short story refer to this translation and edition and will not be further noted.

6. Eugene Webb informs me that Borges' choice of ''the tenth of Muharram'' as the day of the riot is extremely significant because it commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein, Muhammad's grandson and a candidate for succession to Muhammad's leadership role; his abandonment by the Shi'i led to his death, for which the Shi'i flagellate themselves in procession on this day in self-punishment for their predecessors' failure to come to Hussein's aid. The symbolism of his status as a sinless victim, Webb goes on to say, implies that his death is a kind of redemptive sacrifice and that it therefore shows an influence derived from Christian imagery.

7. I should note here an important difference in the more recent translation of this story by Norman Thomas di Giovanni ''in collaboration with the author'' in *The Aleph and Other Stories* (New York: Dutton, 1979). Precisely at this juncture (immediately before the verb ''conspires''), di Giovanni adds a semi-colon and a new subject (''the hero'') for the verbs ''prays and fornicates.'' Even though this subject is not present in the original Spanish, we can only assume he added it with the author's approval. In effect, this addition unduly ''simplifies'' the text.

8. This phrase (''The story . . . prays and fornicates'') is reminiscent of a sentence in another story by Borges, ''Tlön Ugbar, Orbis Tertius,'' to the effect that ''mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they both multiply the numbers of men.'' Jean-Pierre Dupuy (1989, 502) concludes that this warning parallels ''Derrida's message—that one can escape mimesis only through mimesis.'' He goes on to demonstrate, however, the complication of this idea in deconstruction as expressed in the ''Derridean motto,'' ''Neither *re*-production *nor* production.'' The shift from the first claim to second marks the very site of the split between literary theorists of self-reflexive texts (who see Derridean ''différance'' as support for their claim for inherent ''productions'' of *mise en abyme*) and Derrida himself, who rejects ''production' on grounds of the absence of any possible origin.

9. For an excellent philosophical analysis of this issue, cf. Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley with Emma Hughes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989). Orig. Publ. as *Le Récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Seuil, 1977).

10. Cf. Derrida (1981, 206), as qtd in Dupuy (1989, 502).

11. Dominick la Capra, in Madame Bovary *On Trial*, makes the fascinating point that Second-Empire prosecutors of Flaubert's novel actually emerged as the more fluent and incisive readers or interpreters of the "demoralizing" allegory expressed by the novel's *sjuzet*. The author's defense attorney, on the other hand, manifests a complacent, even superficial reliance on the "poetic justice" of the novel's story, an interpretive strategy that is itself intellectually ambiguous and highly problematic, not to mention legally ineffective. A recent work that provides insight along these lines in Joel Kovel's "On Reading *Madame Bovary* Psychoanalytically," in *The Radical Spirit: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Society* (London: Free Association Books, 1988) 33-52. For current problems in this area, cf. my contribution to *Approaches to Teaching* Madame Bovary (Laurence M. Porter and Eugene F. Gray, eds.; New York: MLA, 1993), "Reading (in) *Madame Bovary*."

12. For a sympathetic but, in my opinion, too "magical" reading of Borges, cf. Ana María Barrenechea, *Borges the Labyrinth Maker*, ed. & trans. Robert Lima (New York: New York University Press, 1965) *passim*.

13. In *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), Emir Rodriguez Monegal cites this remark made by Borges (in a 1966 interview with Ronald Christ), in which he describes the sales of *The History of Eternity*: "I remember I published a book . . . and at the end of the year I found out that no less than thirty-seven copies had been sold! . . . At first I wanted to find every single one of the buyers to apologize because of the book and also to thank them for what they had done. There is an explanation for that. If you think of thirty-seven people—those people are real, I mean, every one of them has a face of his own, a family, he lives in his own particular street. Why, if you sell, say two thousand copies, it is the same thing as if you sold nothing at all, because two thousand is too vast— I mean, for the imagination to grasp. While thirty-seven people—perhaps thirty-seven are too many, perhaps seventeen would have been better or even seven—but still thirty-seven are still within the scope of one's imagination."

On the issue of disguised theology and sacred texts, Borges' primary mediator may be Franz Kafka, about whom Borges wrote what must surely constitute the most incisive formulation of critical anxiety and influence: "The fact is that each writer *creates* his precursors." It is no accident that this truth—a truth that much of modern criticism has labored mightily to unpack—should emerge in a critical appreciation of Kafka. For Gershom Scholem, the issue of revelation is treated in Kafka's "linguistic world" as a representation of "the prosaic in its most canonical form" (cf. his letter to Walter Benjamin of August 1, 1931, cited in Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin and Scholem* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991] 106).

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