Magic causality
The Function of Metaphor and Language in the Earlier Verse, Essays and Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges, read as Constitutive of a Theory of Generic Incorporation

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I declare this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

Borges saw narrative as the bearer of universally re-combinable elements. Although these elements seem sequential, their essential formal integrity guarantees their rearrangement to generate new narratives. The ficción lives beyond its author. However, Borges’ ontological anxieties also have a life of their own that undermines the ficción’s assimilative potential.

By developing poetic and linguistic insights Borges creates immortal text through the construction of a symbolic repertoire. Each element of the repertoire has its genesis in the author’s personal development. This history is archaeologised in the early poetry and mediated through a theory of metaphor and the reader’s interaction with the text. Borges sees no need for a Freudian reading theory. Instead he develops an anti-psychological poetics. He enlists the reader as a willing participant in the text by a dual strategy of symbolic incorporation. Firstly, readers identify with characters through vicarious emotional prediction. Secondly, he refreshes the reader’s participation by presenting emblematic devices serving as sub-text to enhance symbolic participation. Together these strategies constitute a ‘magic causality’ of negotiated textual interpretation continually operating in his narratives. But the discipline of magic causality also conceals a rhetoric of presence establishing counter-motivational effects to disturb symbolic incorporation at the level of genre.

The dissertation extracts key features for scrutiny from Borges’ early literary theory and criticism, elaborating them into a general aesthetic programme. It examines biographical influences in shaping his critical and creative work. It problematises his texts from the point of view of his ideas about linguistics, their identity as contributions to the genre of the ficción, and the centrality of metaphor and analogy as interpretative strategies. I use a number of approaches for this enterprise, including biographical criticism (ontological preoccupations), substitutional analysis (temporal subjectivity), linguistic interpretation (theory of metaphor), literary criticism (readerly reception), structuralism (readerly incorporation), and
deconstruction (rhetoric of suppression). The dissertation pragmatically investigates, and contests, Borges’ assimilative poetics of textual presence.
Glossary

(Many of the terms which appear here may be familiar from linguistic philosophy and structuralist theory. However, because of the need to develop a specialised terminology for Borges’ ideas many terms which appear in this glossary may be unfamiliar. Also Borges’ own use of these terms often requires some clarification. Where an analogue can be found in the work of well-known structuralist and narratological theorists I have attempted a comparison. Where this is not possible I have done my best to provide helpful explanations.)

**aesthetics, anti-psychological** - narrative relying on a strictly causal reduction, and where the constantly recurring images of a story are structurally constitutive. In a discussion of Poe’s ‘The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym’ Borges isolates the main motivational plank as the feature of ‘whiteness’: all the action is directed to either avoiding, or resisting its fascination.¹ See 1.4.1 Anthropomorphism and Pantheism: Revealing the Life of Objects

**anti-psychologism** - material and causal motivation in narrative as opposed to inchoate motivation based on ‘interior’ motivations not apparent to the reader. See 1.4 Formal Motivation

**atomicity, of words** - In Russellian philosophy sentences in ordinary language may be analysed into their constituent semantic parts, these parts corresponding to objects in the world. By paying attention to the nature of the parts the sentence may be recomposed to reveal its true sense, and referent, if any. For Borges’ criticisms, see 3.1.5 Verbal Relations as Weakly Psychological

**attitude, propositional** - An attitudinal proposition is a sequence of words containing a subject, an object and any verb of affective or cognitive meaning. Thus ‘Beth drives Tom to distraction’ is a proposition that indicates Tom’s attitude to Beth. Whereas ‘Beth drives Tom to the airport’ merely describes a physical act. For Borges’
understanding of word-relations as the bearers of psychological relations see 3.1.5 Verbal Relations as Weakly Psychological Relations.

causality, magic - a related collection of ideas in Borges that centres on the concept of recurrent and serial association as the sub-stratum of plot development. In Borges it's not only the obvious elements of plot in narrative that determine the outcome, but their interplay with a main image (say “whiteness”) that “surfaces” at regular intervals to form a series of secondary associations “under the plot” as it were. The outcome of the narrative is that point where the main image is revealed as the principal causative agent of the plot. Magic causality shouldn't be mistaken for Todorov’s “imaginary causality” where a helper figure functions as the incarnation of luck or chance, since his ‘generalised determinism’, is so diffuse that it's useless as a description for Borges’ idea. Nor should it be taken for a contestable feature of sequential assimilation, as in Iser, since my elimination of ‘collateral resources’ from the reader’s symbolic interpretation requires greater attention to the fantastic over the realist elements of a text. If magic causality is any kind of theory for narrative causation at all, it must be seen as a superficial reading of the German Motiv und Wort school, especially as formulated by Fritz Mauthner, Leo Spitzer and Josef Körner. See 4.1 Magic causality.

collateral resources - narrative furniture, all non-symbolic objects in a text besides the actions of its characters. What makes the text recognisable in the first place. Texts have different levels of collateral resources. A realist novel is collaterally rich in that every mention of a thing (weather, clothes, cars) contributes to the reader’s ability to locate it within a recognisable environment. Conversely, fantastic narrative is collaterally poor in that most objects have a symbolic value which is privileged over their value as narrative furniture. See 4.2.3 A Return to Transhistorical Subjects.

complex, symbolic - any collection of emblems functioning not as a textual object, but as the embodiment of abstract qualities. Thus the anti-hero in a text may enact morally negative decisions, yet still give an impression of positive moral qualities. This impression is not an en bloc phenomenon, but occurs as the product of a number of symbolic associations, having their own history in the text, which agglomerate in, and are borne by, the character of a major character. This does not
imply that the ‘personality’ of the character is the product of psychological features, but functions as the bearer of a symbolic complex through which the reader identifies the defining features of the text. Thus Borges avoids both the necessity of psychological portrayal, and the detail of realistic description. Characters reveal their fictive integrity not only through expressive acts (speech, thought, reflection) but also through the location of these acts within the text. Because the complex is located by the reading consciousness within the *person* in the text, it occupies a much more localised and individual character than Husserl’s idea of passive synthesis can express. See 1.3.1 *Propositional Complexes in Borges*

**contingency**, *existential* - character-action dependent only on the external plot conditions that have been established by the particular narrative in which he or she appears, and which allow the character to persist. In narratives of psychological motivation action on the part of the character is determined by an internal dialogue of the subject with manifold forces and symbols, rather than by external circumstances alone. See 1.3.5 *Willing the Displacement*

**defamiliarisation** - in a phenomenological sense, the privileging of any image or idea that allows it to stand out for inspection beyond the bounds of normal experience. Not a reference to the Russian Formalists’ idea of *ostranenie*, or ‘making strange’. For Borges it constitutes a violation of expectations at the level of language use in daily life. See 3.1.4 *The Secret Life of Words*

**economy** - the exchange-relations of a system. Any set of relations that can be categorised in terms of transfer, duplication, substitution, exchange, etc. A number of recent examples that can be appropriated as models of literary economics come to mind, Louis Althusser’s *Reading Marx*, Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, François Lyotard’s *The Differend*, among others. See Chapter 5 passim.

**emblem** - an identifying feature of any object described in text, but not the whole object itself. Thus in fiction old age may be indicated by any feature commonly associated with it: i.e. creaking furniture, dry and dusty interiors, etc. The ‘life of emblems’ is the continuous use of certain emblems in varying combinations by which the reader is able
to recognise the text as both an individual author’s work and the continuity of its symbolic repertoire. See 2.1.2 The Life of Emblems

**fallacies**, *ontological; historical* - Two types of poetic object management. In the first an archetype (i.e. ‘woman’) is transferred beyond any carnal consideration by romantic idealisation. In the second the poet assumes a transcendent point of view beyond historical processes, thus becoming immune to material contingency. See 2.3.2 Woman/God as Parallel Abstractions in Borges

**functionalism**, *verbal; semantic* - not to be confused with functionalism as a theory of cognitive linguistics. The doctrine merely indicates that words may be characterised by their grammatical function. Naming something as a verb, for example, obviously limits its interchangeability with other parts of speech. The challenge for the semanticist is to determine the conditions under which verbal interchangeability is lawful or unlawful within a language system, from this deducing a series of law-like conditions for substitution within a larger semiotic context. See 3.1 A Functionalist Theory of Verbal Relations.

**grammatical time** - the use of the word ‘time’ as a marker for any period of duration which may be substituted for it without destroying the grammatical sense of the sentence in which it occurs. Thus, in the sentence: ‘I haven’t seen you for a long time’ a long time may be exchanged for any other phrase that also expresses a sufficiently long period, like *three years*, or *five months*, depending on the emotional attitude of the addressee. While interesting in itself, this classification is meant to give a rule by which we may discount grammatical word-use when considering particular words in poetical utterance. See 1.2.2 Time as a Word & 1.2.3 The Grammatical Use of Time

**idiomatic** (or *grammatical*) - use-features of particular words. Idiomatic use can be described as the conditions under which a word is used in a phrase, where replacing that word with an analytic instance would render the phrase lexically opaque. For example, as in the English phrases: ‘I haven’t seen you for a long time’ and ‘I heard a song of that time’, the word ‘time’ in both cases is not replaceable by a specific periodic term, say ‘four years and three months’ and ‘1956’. Grammatical use can be described as the substitution of a term within
its class without this resulting in lexical opacity. In the Shakespearian sonnet this applies where love is described as not being ‘time’s fool. Replacing ‘time’ with any term of the same class, say ‘the ages’ or ‘eternity’ (‘Love’s not the Ages’ fool,’ or ‘Love’s not Eternity’s fool’) may supply the same grammatical sense, although neither the scansion, nor the beauty, of the original. See Chapter 1.

**lexical opacity** - the experience of not understanding a word, either due to our own ignorance or its non-legal use. See above.

**magic** - see causality, magic.

**Metaphor** (and kenning, kenningar [pl.]) - In Aristotle ‘what may happen when of four things the second stands in the same relationship to the first as the fourth to the third; for then one may speak of the fourth instead of the second, and the second instead of the fourth.’ Any substitution of one term in term-pair for the term in another. See 4.2.6 The Kenning as a (Borgesian) Exploration of Metaphor

**Object** - (and Super-Object) - a distinction between the personal and general character of phenomena, as evidenced in Borges’ references to a ‘time’ that can be read as either a specific phenomenon of duration (Objective Time), or as a means for projecting his subject-position beyond the immediate frame of reference in order to participate in a quasi-universal phenomenon (Super-Objective Time). Thus the word ‘time’ for Borges assumes the status of an Object and a Super-Object on different occasions. See 1.2 A Theory of Syntactic Substitution for Grammatical, Objective, and Super-Objective Time in Fervor de Buenos Aires.

**Object-in-the-text** - Not to be confused with the foregoing or the following, an Object-in-the-text is a discursive convenience, which can be thought of as the identification by the reading intelligence of the physical characteristics usually appended to the thing named in the outside world to its counterpart in the text. A Super-Object (see above) on the other hand, is the idea of a thing outside the particularity of the text. This is, I feel, an advance on previous phenomenological accounts that posit an ‘image’ as liminal to consciousness. Because the ‘Object’ is physical and ‘in-the-text’ it may be readily distinguished from any extraphysical components it
may have in the reader’s imagination. Its extraphysical components, including any undisclosed psychological affects which the reader brings to his or her reading, constitute its Super-Objectivity. In Borges’ case we may speculate he constructs the Super-Objective use of ‘time’ in order to explore a quasi-historical distanciation between himself and his work, stepping outside the poem for a moment to carry on a dialogue with God. See Chapter 2.

**object, textual** - the combination of emblems that constitutes any particularity in the text. In phenomenological accounts a ‘passive synthesis’, since not all of its constituents are actively cognised. See 3.2.1 The Management of Conceptual objects in the Text

**ontology (and unease)** - one’s idea of the nature of existence, both generally and individually, but always predicated on the idea of persistent identity through time. Existence may be spoken of as continuous, or discontinuous, universal or particular, teleologically informed or teleologically neutral, relative or absolute. In a more general sense, and certainly in the sense in which I employ the term throughout the dissertation, one’s individual sense of ontology may be dependent on apparent guarantors of persistent identity, either singly or in various admixtures: memory, a body of literature, science and technology, the social transmission of mores, religious prejudice, racial doctrine, emotion, responsibility. Unease about ontology would therefore be the result of doubt concerning any aspect of persistent identity. See especially Chapter 1.

**repertoire, symbolic** - the collection of whole objects-in-the-text that make up all instances of figurative substitution. Thus Borges’ symbolic repertoire is composed of coins, mazes, mirrors, books, etc. since all these things are never simply themselves (i.e. in the capacity of collateral resources) but always stand as objects via which another relation is described. See 1.1.3 Archaeology of the Source

**substitutional analysis** - a technique for determining absolute semantic values against their poetic, or literary, backgrounds. As its name implies, a key word is selected and analysed in terms of the ways that its paraphrases may logically substitute for it. The differences in semantic value discovered are used to theorise the relationship that the writer has to his or her subjectivity *qua* author. In
the dissertation only two terms have been selected for study: time and
space. Their choice was not arbitrary, but based on their importance
in Borges’ work as structural principles. Actually, any term may be
selected for substitutional analysis, providing it is general enough to
furnish adequate ambiguities of sense that may then be investigated.
See Chapters 1 & 2.
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