

***Radical Propensities and Juxtapositions: Defamiliarization and
Difficulty in Borges and Beckett***

Though I hope it can be inferred from what I write below, Borges and Beckett seem to me to be what I should call 'necessary writers' for the age in which we find ourselves. My own increasing involvement with their work is driven by a desire to show how necessary their work in fact is. In an age in which, as George Steiner so eloquently put it, a 'mandarin madness of secondary discourse infects thought and sensibility',¹ the juxtaposition of Borges and Beckett may be an apposite one. Is there an arbitrariness in the juxtaposition of Borges and Beckett, two contemporaneous writers who, it seems, did not know the other's work? An immediate point of congruence was the propensity to minimalism. Borges was committed throughout his life. Beckett was a later convert. We have only to think of the short dramatic pieces of Beckett's later years, as well as the elliptical prose texts culminating in *Stirrings Still*. Though Borges's admiration for novels such as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Joyce's *Ulysses* was often expressed, he just as often made it clear that the short story in its synthetic and telescoped intensity could achieve in a few pages what most novels achieved languorously in two or three hundred pages.

I cannot help feeling that at the back of Borges and Beckett there is an awareness of too much speech, too many words being spent to no avail, or without sufficient

¹George Steiner 'A Secondary City' in *Real Presences* (London: Faber and Faber,1989), p.26

justification. In their different ways, I see Borges and Beckett asymptotically approach silence without, of course, ever reaching that sublime *desideratum*. But each was too much in love with language ever to want to turn his back on it. The eccentric twists and turns of syntax, the lexical oddities, the seemingly redundant cycles of repetition that bespeak excess and superfluity, and, of course, the penchant for etymological rootedness make us attend to the rigours of form, and attend rigorously.

Another feature that strangely brings Beckett and Borges together is the way that both writers at different times have been charged with being elitist, and being unnecessarily difficult; an insinuation too that they somehow put themselves beyond the body politic, beyond the pale of anything that might be reasonably termed common discourse. The implicit and often explicit, charge of political reaction that was levelled at Borges (particularly during the Malvinas/Falklands War in the early 80s), and also at Beckett (the strictures of Georg Lukacs are particularly telling)² for his seemingly quietistic, nihilistic, and utterly 'static' dramas on the stage and on the page has brought both writers willy-nilly into the political arena. And this, notwithstanding Beckett's famous response to the questionnaire directed to artists and intellectuals during the Spanish Civil War - 'Up the Republic'. If I have an argument that I want to develop in and about these two writers and their work it is that, precisely in the recalcitrance, obtuseness and difficulty of their writing there reside, unbeknownst to them perhaps, a radical vision (and I use the word 'radical' with its full etymological force) of cultural

forms, and a timely regeneration of the language itself, Spanish in one case, English in the other. I rule out French in the case of Beckett, because as Christopher Ricks has demonstrated, the French versions of Beckett's texts, whether the originals or translations, are comparatively impoverished when one looks at the detail.³

In his book *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Herbert Marcuse writes in a way that has relevance for an understanding of Borges and Beckett : "The "flight into inwardness" and the insistence on a private sphere may well serve as bulwarks against a society which administers all dimensions of human existence'.⁴ The seemingly solipistic, inward-turning movements of the work of Borges and Beckett constitute for me in artistic form that very concept of 'negative thinking' that the Frankfurt School in many respects made their own in the collaborative, as well as individually, written works which critiqued the nefarious influence of mass culture.

Marcuse's comment that:

The authentic 'oeuvres' of our time, far from playing down alienation, enlarge it, and harden their incompatibility with the given reality...they fulfill in this way the cognitive function of Art which is...to name the Unnameable... The authentic avant-garde do not recoil from the exigencies of form.⁵

² See Georg Lukács, 'The Ideology of Modernism' in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1972).

³ Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1979), p.38.

⁵ See Herbert Marcuse, 'Art as Form of Reality', in *New Left Review*, No.74, July-August 1972, pp.51-58

It seems to me that the constructs of artifice that are the fictions of Borges, or the peripatetic monologues of Beckett, become, through their very sense of 'otherness' and distance from *that which is*, artistic renditions of our time that are unparalleled, and are far from being escapist sorties into privatized realms of the individual imagination. We should perhaps take stock of George Steiner's advocacy of difficulty in a consumerist age where ease is the *summum bonum*. Steiner himself juxtaposed Borges and Beckett some time ago in his book *Extraterritorial*, commenting that they:

have demonstrated that the liberating function of art lies in its singular capacity to "dream against the world", to structure worlds that are *otherwise*.⁶

The critic Geoffrey Hartman, more recently, and in similar vein, talked of:

Auscultations that have the capacity of putting us on the alert towards the silence in us: the wrongly silenced words as well as the noisy words that get in their way and prevent thoughtfulness. The words of a text, in their silence, are but divining rods to disclose other words, perhaps words of the other.⁷

I am interested in processes of defamiliarization at work in Borges and Beckett. If we look at Borges's major collections of stories, say *Ficciones* and *El aleph*, we discover that the stories are not by any means homogeneous. But each story engages in

⁶ George Steiner, 'Tigers in the Mirror' in *Extraterritorial* (London: Peregrine Books, 1972), p.44.

procedures whereby the terrain of the 'real' is unsettled and problematized. The concept of 'ostraneniye' or 'making strange' - 'defamiliarization' as it has become known in its English embodiment has its coining as many will know, in Russian Formalism, and specifically, in Viktor Shklovsky's 1917 essay 'Art as Technique'. Shklovsky held that common perception was 'familiar' perception, a way of looking that was inevitably unconscious and automatic. Art, however, he argued, has built-in capacities for impeding easy internalization of the matter to be perceived: 'The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception.'⁸

When we apply this observation to Beckett's *Worstward Ho*, or *Stirrings Still*, or to the extraordinary taxonomies in Borges's stories, such as those we find in the story 'El aleph', we find ourselves as readers engaged in an agonistic encounter that is exacting. The unexpected juxtapositions in Borges's taxonomies illuminate in ways that make the Surrealists' advocacy of juxtaposing unlike items in unusual contexts look tame by comparison. Roland Barthes makes an observation that throws light on the recurring patterns of Borgesian construction. He writes that:

⁷ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Saving the Text* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p.142.

⁸ Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* ed. by Lemon and Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p.12.

Notions of discontinuity and combinativity remain alive and important. I constantly find myself on the side of thought that grapples with what is discontinuous and combinatory. Today I was reading a text by Brecht on Chinese painting in which he says Chinese painting puts things next to each other. That's what I want to feel, the juxtaposition of things, the 'next to'.⁹

Borges's propensity for radical juxtapositions of unlike terms, his relishing of anachronisms, his quite positive delight in etymologies mark his work out as singular and troubling. Michel Foucault ascribes his writing of *The Order of Things* to Borges's giving word to the seemingly impossible task of gathering into a taxonomy the most disparate of items. Referring to a passage he encountered in Borges's work which quotes from a 'certain Chinese encyclopedia' in which it is written that 'animals are divided into: a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) sucking pigs, e) sirens, f) fabulous, g) stray dogs, h) included in the present classification', Foucault comments:

In the wonderment of the taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark

⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962 - 1989* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p.132.

impossibility of thinking that. What is impossible is not the propinquity of the things listed. It is the very site on which their propinquity would be possible. Where else could they be juxtaposed except in the non-place of language ('le non-lieu du langage')?¹⁰

What Foucault implies here is not so much that Borges manifests an indeterminacy of meaning, but that he causes us to feel in thrall to some 'mad' universe where definitions are increasingly difficult to come by. David Cooper, writing on madness and language, comments:

We find that metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche are in fact a radical denormalization of language, or "demystification" of the normal language. Speech is 'defaced' but in a particular way.'

Cooper comments that what he calls 'the poetic discipline' 'defines itself specifically by the breaking in a specific way of certain specific rules that would normalize language'.¹¹

It is as though Borges's work transposes our normal systems of intelligibility based mainly on binary apperceptions (if not this, then that) on to quite another plane, radically heterogeneous and free. Throughout his work a limited number of concerns can be detected again and again: firstly, the notion of 'unoriginality'; in other words the idea that, logically and ultimately, everything can be reduced to one thing and

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Taavistock Publications Ltd., 1970), pp.xvi-xvii.

everybody to a single person. This notion is to be found preeminently in the story 'Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'. We read in a footnote that 'todos los hombres en el vertiginoso instante del coito, son el mismo hombre. Todos los hombres que repiten una línea de Shakespeare, son William Shakespeare'. The same notion looms large in 'El acercamiento a Almotásim', 'La forma de la espada' and in 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote'; secondly, the notion that knowledge is somehow coincident with death. In 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan' the killing of Stephen Albert provides the crucial name of the

city to be attacked. In 'La muerte y la brújula', the fourth death completes the Hebrew name for Jehovah. In 'El milagro secreto', Hladik's play is completed just as the command for his execution is given. In 'El sur' Dahlmann appears to come truly to know himself by indulging in a combat to the death, and thereby becoming one with his paternal grandfather.

The features I have just mentioned appear to suggest an aspiration in the direction of unifying impulse, a desire for oneness, totality, harmony of a kind. And yet, Borges is nothing if not paradoxical. The defining properties of his work are finally those of brokenness, unfinishedness, fragmentation, juxtaposition, 'the finite naming of a potentially infinite number of combined elements' (as the Italian novelist Italo Calvino puts it in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*). His work constitutes a valuable critique of origins and teleologies. The sense of beginnings and endings is deeply inscribed in the

¹¹ David Cooper, *The Language of Madness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), p.27.

prevailing culture of Western societies. That sense is proprietorial, monologic and dogmatic. And Borges will have none of it. I would argue that the work of Borges, as indeed the work of Beckett, stands against the tyranny of monology and dogmatism. How many stories in Borges begin with a character referring to the absence of a crucial piece of knowledge, the missing page of a manuscript, for example? How many texts of Beckett fizzle out in a babble of indeterminacy like the voice in the wonderful monologue *Not I*, so magnificently rendered many years ago by Beckett's favourite actress, Billie Whitelaw, on stage and in film, and, alas, so poorly performed in Neil Jordan's recent film? If we examine loose ends and stammered incompletions in Borges and Beckett, we shall conclude that the works of these writers radically eschew closure, that they abhor the finished statement, and that they offer themselves to the reader as texts of incompleteness in a world that privileges the finished product.

But it is in what Barthes calls the 'direct phenomenological contact with the tutor text', the engagement with linguistic form itself, that one can make the case for Borges and Beckett as the radical word-forgers that they are. By engaging with the words, both discretely and in the constellated frame of the phrase, we are engaging (by processes of negation) with the debased discourses of politics, media-speak and administered 'one-dimensionality' that pervade the space we daily inhabit. Beckett and Borges, far from being out of touch and divorced from reality, enable us to keep a firm hold on that reality which is the touchstone of culture and political freedom.

This process of looking at, rather than through, the language of the text was so marvellously articulated in the extraordinarily proleptic essay of the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, 'La deshumanización del arte' written in 1925. Ortega, more than any other writer of his time foresaw developments in music, art and literature in the late twentieth-century. When he writes 'la mayoría de la gente es incapaz de acomodar su atención al vidrio y transparencia que es la obra del arte (the majority of people are incapable of attending to the transparent pane of glass that is the work of art)', he is making a radical case for the attention to the form of the work that we shall ignore at our peril. Ortega's remarks call to mind a publishing moment of some importance thirty years ago. A book called *Labyrinths* was published; it was a selection of Borges's early fictions. Those critics who lambasted the competence of the translation of that book would have done well to attend to Ortega's remarks on language and form as articulated in 'La deshumanización'. There was a mighty hullabaloo in the pages of *The Times Literary Supplement* with critics and reviewers ridiculing the translation. The translators, it seemed, could not write English. One of Borges's most anthologized stories 'Las ruinas circulares' (The Circular ruins') begins with the words, 'Nadie lo vio desembarcar en la unánime noche'. The translators unimaginatively, it was argued, translated thus: 'No-one saw him disembark in the unanimous night'. What in goodness name was a 'unanimous night'? It struck me at the time, as it strikes me now, that a sense of etymology, of radical propensities, was dead and buried in the minds of those commentators. I began to consider that what a writer like Borges was doing in the

Spanish language, as I later came to feel that Beckett, even more than Joyce, was doing in the English language, was engaging in an exceptional act of restitution. The mad eccentricities, lexical irregularities, syntactical upheavals, punctuational hesitations were revivifying language itself in an age of linguistic debasement.

In writing about 'three figures of probable genius in contemporary fiction - Nabokov, Borges and Beckett', George Steiner refers to:

the *a priori* strangeness of the idea of writers somehow linguistically 'unhoused', not thoroughly at home in the language of their production, but displaced or hesitant at the frontier.¹²

'Linguistic unhousedness' is, of course, a feature of universal colonial legacy. This may seem somewhat far-fetched with regard to Latin Americans and their relationship with Spanish or Portuguese. After all, the colonial dominance by Spain and Portugal seems to have been well and truly replaced by the neo-colonialism of the colossus of the United States to the north. It is my contention, however, that there is a considerable ground of similarity that unites the Irish writer writing in English and the Latin American writer writing in Spanish. The inventive playfulness and eccentricities of writing parade themselves more obviously and self-consciously in the countries that have been colonised than in the imperial centres. Novels like Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela*, just as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, could not have originated in an imperial centre. They are

fragmented, disjointed and multi-voiced. Cortázar and Borges have described how Latin Americans are somehow out of joint with the Spanish language, not quite at home in it, because sediments of linguistic anteriority are always threatening to emerge, and even take over. Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist* knew only too well how the English tongue had never quite grafted in Ireland. We have only to listen to Seamus Heaney abjure his Derry 'a' vowel sound as in 'late', 'gate', 'fate', to know that self-conscious insecurity in, and inferiority with regard to, the dominant imperial conventions are colonial legacies that may never be erased. But as Heaney and others have realized, colonial disadvantage can be turned to advantage. If 'abrogation' and 'appropriation', much used terms now in post-colonial theory, are affirmatively embraced in Dublin, Derry and Buenos Aires, then writers can make, and do make, a virtue out of 'unhousedness', and refuse to be smitten by disabling complexes of inferiority.

It may now be appropriate to paraticularize more with regard to Borges and Beckett, all the time keeping in mind the more general outline already given. Borges's work is, as I have suggested, often perceived to be cold, aloof, detached. Structures of artifice are preferred to structures of verisimilitude. His characters and plots fulfil strictly logical designs. His worlds have a smooth, rectilinear efficacy. Rectangles, rhombuses, labyrinths bespeak geometric codes. The subordination of history's necessity to literature's uselessness is emphasized again and again, though as I have hinted, Borges's historicity may well be greater than even he imagined. In 'Tema del traidor y

¹² George Steiner, op.cit., p.14.

del héroe' (Theme of the Traitor and the Hero') one of several stories set in Ireland, historical event is seen to mimic and recuperate what has been laid down in literature, in this case Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. This interface between art and history is fundamental. Another is the significance of the dominant quest motif - peripatetic souls in search of a destiny, in search of an identity. We have only to think of Nils Runeberg, Funes el memorioso, Recabarren, insomniac all, like the 'lost ones' in Beckett's text of the same name, or the anguished blind citizens in what surely must be considered as one of the finest novels of the last twenty years, *Blindness* by the Portuguese Nobel prize winner José Saramago. These are clearly texts of, and for, our time. A pictorial analogy might be M.C. Escher's graphics. In one graphic, 'Ascending and Descending', Escher has his figures symmetrically arranged, tramping up and down steps in some hectic *danse macabre*. In similar fashion, in 'La biblioteca de Babel', ('The Library of Babel') Borges has his souls incessantly searching through the library's hexagonal world for the Book of Books that has the minutest chance of existing. Escher's cubic space division with its frightening scaffolding of forms, or his 'House of Stairs' with its grotesque creatures mounting and descending staircases can only be the consummate pictorial equivalence of the Library of Babel', or indeed the 'lost souls' in Beckett's text *The Lost Ones* - and both surely in some sense allegorically image the frenetic universe of simulacrum and vacuousness that hovers so imperiously in our daily universes.

Subtending Borges's texts there is a continuous meditation on reading and writing. For Borges the work is a palimpsest, forever carrying the traces of anteriority.

'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote' ('Pierre Menard, the Author of the Quixote'), shows how it is possible for a twentieth-century Frenchman Pierre Menard to write the Quijote word for word from the vantage point of Menard. The title is shocking. The authority of Cervantes has at a stroke been eliminated. What Borges in this story does is to mount a structure of contrastive symmetries. In a typically brazen-faced manner, we are presented with some lines from Cervantes's *Quixote*, followed by some lines from Menard's *Quixote*. See Appendix. 'la verdad cuya madre en la historia'. 'Truth, whose mother is history. The lines are identical in all particulars. This we discover after painstakingly scouring the words for the slightest trace of difference. Yet, we are told, the import of the words is radically distinct. Menard's Spain cannot be, and is not, Cervantes's Spain. Cervantes's Spain is 'la pobre realidad provinciana' ('a tawdry provincial reality'); Menard's Spain is 'la tierra de Carmen' ('the land of Carmen'). Menard's style of writing cannot be, and is not, Cervantes's. Menard's style is 'un estilo arcaizante' an 'archaic-sounding style'; Cervantes writes 'en el español corriente de su época' (in the current Spanish of his time'). Borges's story is a wonderful parable of how every reading is a dynamic re-writing. As an aside, it seems to me that the repetition of text in Pierre Menard has its almost certain origin in Borges's passion for the short celebrated poem by Robert Frost 'Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening'. The recent 'discovery' in the depths of Harvard University Library of the long lost recording of the 1967 Charles Eliot Norton lectures delivered by Borges, and his lengthy and passionate discussion in one of those lectures of the last two lines of Frost's poem, 'And miles to

go before I sleep',/ and miles to go before I sleep' and of the way the two lines differ from each other, might suggest that Robert Frost, and not Cervantes, caused the writing of the Pierre Menard story.

But the enduring richness of Borges and Beckett is in the sheer linguistic inventiveness of their works, the unassimilable 'thingness' of that language. As readers, we are blocked at every turn. The figural richness invites caress and exploration. We have only to examine Borges's strong, anthropomorphizing verbs: 'el espejo inquietaba el fondo de un corredor' ('the mirror was making the end of the corridor anxious'; 'fatigamos atlas' ('we tired our atlases'). In Tlon's Ursprache there are no nouns - we are told: 'no hay palabra que corresponda a la palabra luna, pero hay un verbo que sería en español lunecer o lunar. Surgió la luna sobre el río se dice hlor u fang axaxaxas mlo, o sea 'hacia arriba detrás duradero fluir luneció'. All of this translates as follows: '(There is no word corresponding to the word 'moon', but there is a verb which in English would be to 'moon' or to 'moonate'. The moon rose above the river' is u fang axaxaxaxas mlo, or literally, 'upward behind the moonstreaming it mooned'). Then, there is Borges's omnipresent use of oxymoron: the 'grave felicidad (the serious/heavy happiness)' of one character, the 'graciosa torpeza (the gracious sluggishness)', of another, eyes that are 'dormidos y enérgicos (asleep and energetic)'; and then there is his use of hypallage - the memorable 'cicatriz rencorosa' (the 'spiteful scar') of John Vincent Moon in the 'Irish story', 'La forma de la espada'; there is the deliberate cultivation of anachronistic usage; and the tight synthetic couplings of adjective and noun, couplings that repeat from story

to story. It is difficult to think of any other writer who can compress into two words a complex description that in English would require a full sentence of explication. In the stories of hoodlum life in the outlying 'barrios' of Buenos Aires we find on more than one occasion the term 'alcohol pependenciero' (literally 'quarrelsome alcohol') being used. It describes the wild and dangerous carousing of a Saturday night in a saloon bar. The power of juxtaposition (here, adjective and noun) is efficacious, synthetic and exhilarating.

Where then can we locate the propinquity of Borges and Beckett? Perhaps the site is that of death or 'common mortality', as Borges has described it in his Harvard lectures. The Borges stories that end in an apocalyptic or epiphanic death seem infinite in number. Mortality inscribes itself at every turn. In Beckett too, from Malone's prediction that he will be 'quite dead at last in spite of all' to Krapp's midnight silence and the woman's final 'close of a long day' in *Rockaby*, Beckett's characters parade their mortality. Borges and Beckett are thanatographers, and the nature of that thanatography is worth exploring.

Take for example, and finally, the opening of Beckett's novella, *First Love* written in 1945, but not published until 1970 when, Beckett tells his biographer Deirdre Bair, 'the lady in question was dead'. See Appendix. We are confronted, as in Borges, from the very first sentence with a thickened language, vertically resonant with layers of suggestiveness (on matters of strict morality, social ordering, biological and temporal

inevitability) and horizontally disruptive (the syntagmatic ordering of elements is inimical to good grammar):

I associate, rightly or wrongly, my marriage with the death of my father, in time.

The commas, as always, are halting devices, but here the respiratory pauses they force on us split the 'I' activity by an adverbial interpolation of some ambiguity, and then cause the word 'time' to scintillate in a lonely void at the end of the sentence. By postponing 'in time' until time has almost run out for it, time insists with some urgency, there just before the full stop. 'Rightly or wrongly', an adverbial tag, introduces morality or does it? If what 'I' does is either right or wrong, then moral ambivalence is such as to suggest the nugatoriness of morality.

As in Borges's writings, the figure hyperbaton is dominant. By holding back the main clause 'that other links exist, on other levels' etc. we must stay the course of the sentence as far as the double negative. The four clauses, somewhat symmetrically constructed link up easily one with the other, mirroring the linkage of 'the two affairs'. That marriage and death should be termed 'affairs' is 'defamiliarizing', no doubt, until we probe the etymology of the word. 'A faire'; that which is to be done, busied about. In the one case. (marriage), a matter of choosing; in the other ('death'), a matter of being chosen. In any case, matters to be busied about!

The triple 'I effect' in the third and last sentence of the opening paragraph, far from stamping the subject's authority on the articulation does the opposite. 'I have', 'I think', 'I know', in another context, affirmative and assertive; here insecure and doubtful by virtue of their linkages and collocation.' I have enough trouble'; I think I know', undermining, by being juxtaposed, both the possibility of knowledge and the respectability of thought.

So, finally then, what is the worth of critically juxtaposing Borges and Beckett? I think because the work of these great writers constitutes itself as a kind of unassimilable obelisk, standing there as an obstacle to any attempt to domesticate it. Both writers refuse the commodification of language. In an age where the 'grands récits' no longer hold sway, and where instant technology and the internet are apotheosized even, it seems for school children, the work of Borges and Beckett stands as a grand negation of the culture of conformity and ease. Beckett and Borges are labour intensive. Their texts demand the interrogative response. Harold Bloom's memorable phrase 'the achieved dearth of meaning' comes to mind when one thinks of Borges and Beckett. Their worth is not measurable in quantifiable terms. If we may re-work slightly the paradoxical statement by Theodor Adorno which would best summarise for me the redemptive 'quality' of the work of Borges and Beckett, it would be as follows, that 'the inhumanity of their art triumphs over the inhumanity of the world for the sake of the humane'.¹³

¹³ See Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London:Routledge, 1986), p.24.