

The Villain at the Center: Infrapolitical Borges

Alberto Moreiras  
*Duke University*

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**Abstract:** In "The Villain at the Center: Infrapolitical Borges," Alberto Moreiras revisits the Argentinian ideology of "emancipation of the fatherland" on the basis of a re-reading of Jorge Luis Borges's short-story "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero." Moreiras begins by referring to Paul de Man's comment that Borges's essays were like *PMLA* essays. Moreiras suggests that, concerning essays, the more deceptive the more honest and less devious they are; and, therefore, the less devious the more devious. He then considers this notion as he surveys recent work on "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" by Josefina Ludmer, Enrique Pezzoni, and Raúl Antelo. Moreiras proposes an alternative political reading of Borges as a writer of the infrapolitical, that is, a writer of poetic finitude against ideology where a reading of "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" shows us the excess of the popular, a movement towards historical truth that coincides with the movement of the poetic drive towards its furthest limit, towards the truth of the social in its overwhelming immanence. Thus, Borges's literature, in its apathetic practice, is an infrapolitical literature against the biopolitical rapture of politics.

**Alberto MOREIRAS****The Villain at the Center: Infrapolitical Borges**

"Life is but a walking shadow; a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more" (Macbeth act V, scene 5).

Paul de Man said that Borges's essays were just like PMLA essays, except that they were "a great deal more succinct and devious" (124). As proof of succinctness and deviousness de Man quoted the comment Borges made on Enno Littmann's German translation of *Arabian Nights*: "Incapable, like George Washington, of telling a lie, his work reveals nothing but German candor [probidad]" (qtd. in de Man 124). A literal and honest translation ends up yielding a literal and unimaginative world. Borges would have liked to learn of his extreme like-mindedness in these matters with Sherlock Holmes, for whom "there is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact" (Conan Doyle 72). The somewhat alarming conclusion this juxtaposition permits is that PMLA essays, or their cousins, are the more deceptive the more honest and less devious they are; and, therefore, the less devious the more devious. Let us take PMLA-style essays on Borges: the critical effort of the last fifty years and more would depend one devious or deceptive way or another on "the ordering presence of a villain at the center" (de Man 124). But villains, when their villainy becomes explicit, end up revealing their fundamental candor. Is it not notorious candor to say "for Borges the literary exercise was a revealer of our possibilities. His literature speaks to us of what we are and cannot be, of failure, tragedies, uselessness. A literature that unconceals fragility, loss, fatigue" (Scarfó 83; my translation)? Or to say: "Borges defines the centrality of memory in the search for the crystal of memory and of his uncertain meaning, his dubious refractions" (Pimentel 164; my translation)? Nothing is more deceptive than the obvious. Thus, nothing more treacherous.

"The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" comes to be written when "the date of the first centenary ... was approaching" (Borges 143). It is true that the narrator means Fergus Kilpatrick's death, not Borges's birth, but the association is hardly avoidable today. The story narrates Ryan's story, who tells Kilpatrick's story and imagines or reveals in it a rare mimetic conspiracy: Kilpatrick signs a traitor's death sentence. His comrade James Alexander Nolan suggests "a way to turn the traitor's execution into an instrument for the emancipation of the country [patria; this is a bad mistranslation in this context]" (145). "Thus the teeming drama played itself out in time, until that August 6, 1824, in a box ... draped with funereal curtains, when a yearned-for bullet pierced the traitor-hero's breast. Between two spurts of sudden blood, Kilpatrick could hardly pronounce the few words given him to speak" (145-46). The identity of the traitor and the hero becomes undecidable, but Ryan must decide. "After long and stubborn deliberation, he decided to silence the discovery. He published a book dedicated to the hero's glory" (146). The villain is at the center of this story by Borges, but he is also at the margins, since Ryan becomes a villain through his probity (and upright in his villainy). Ryan learns the truth and persists in falsity, in the name of a higher truth. Or conversely: Ryan learns a falsehood and persists in the truth. Nothing more deceptive. But Ryan is placed at the site of the critic, at the site of the PMLA contributor or of his Argentine cognate. Near the date of the first centenary, how can we avoid a meditation on the enigmatic relation between Borges and criticism that is prefigured in "Theme" as a step into, or a passage towards, undecidability? To advance into undecidability is however always a decision. And every decision is a cut into truth.

Paul de Man's essay was published in 1964, at the very beginning of the internationalization of Borges's writing. It is important to remember the central aspects of de Man's exegesis, also to the extent to which it has rarely been surpassed: "the artist has to wear the mask of the villain in order to create a style" (124); "whatever Borges' existential anxieties may be ... they are the consistent expansion of a purely poetic consciousness to its furthest limits" (124); "the world [of his short stories] is the representation, not of an actual experience, but of an intellectual proposition" (125); "poetic intervention begins in duplicity, but it does not stop there. For the writer's particular duplicity ... stems from the fact that he presents the invented form as if it possessed the attributes of reality, thus allowing it to be mimetically reproduced, in its turn, in another mirror image that

takes the preceding pseudoreality for its starting point" (126); "by carrying this process to its limits, the poet can achieve ultimate success -- an ordered picture of reality that contains the totality of all things, subtly transformed and enriched by the imaginative process that engendered them" (127); "all these points or domains of total vision symbolize the entirely successful and deceiving outcome of the poet's irrepressible urge for order" (127); "the success of these poetic worlds is expressed by their all-inclusive and ordered wholeness. Their deceitful nature is harder to define, but essential to an understanding of Borges" (127); "our 'real' universe is like space: stable but chaotic. If, by an act of the mind comparable to Borges' will to style, we order this chaos, we may well succeed in achieving an order of sorts, but we dissolve the binding, spatial substance that held our chaotic universe together" (128); "style in Borges becomes the ordering but dissolving act that transforms the unity of experience into the enumeration of its discontinuous parts" (128); "hence ... his definition of his own style as baroque, the style that deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) all its possibilities" (128); "the poetic impulse in all its perverse duplicity belongs to man alone, marks him as essentially human. But God appears on the scene as the power of reality itself, in the form of a death that demonstrates the failure of poetry ... God is on the side of chaotic reality and style is powerless to conquer him. His appearance is like the hideous face of Hakim when he loses the shining mask he has been wearing and reveals a face worn away by leprosy. The proliferation of mirrors is all the more terrifying because each new image brings us a step closer to this face" (128-29); "although the last reflection may be the face of God himself, with his appearance the life of poetry comes to an end. The situation is very similar to that of Kierkegaard's aesthetic man, with the difference that Borges refuses to give up his poetic predicament for a leap into faith" (129).

With devious and duplicitous candor I take de Man's ordered vision of Borgesian reality as my point of departure. I oppose to it a contrary vision, which I admit can only be subjected, at least initially, to the treacherous mimesis of that which it denies: Enrique Pezzoni's, as it is given to us in some of the lectures recently transcribed by Annick Louis. And to the latter I will oppose a wicked, if succinct, essay by Raúl Antelo, "La zoología imaginaria como deslectura de las radiografías y los retratos de la nación en crisis." If at the end of this process we end up looking at Hakim the Dyer's face we will know it is not God's, but only Hakim the Dyer's -- although nothing can be more deceptive than the obvious fact. Between the lines, to be completely honest and hide nothing, we may also fleetingly glimpse the image of another villain at my center, the later Heidegger.

Perhaps in despair at similar, if more abundant, verbosity Josefina Ludmer writes: "From where could one read Borges in order to leave him? From what reading position? I confess this is my recurring question since I arrived at Buenos Aires, in May, and I found the Centenary" (289; for this and all quotes from Ludmer all my translation). I suspect Ludmer carefully disassembles some of her tedium in order to not reveal the fundamental impatience she feels about the fact that Borges's centenary came and went, and with it sixty years of academic criticism on Borges, and we are still in Borges's presence like poor Borges himself was when he would come to visit at the house that sheltered the Aleph, and with it Beatriz Viterbo's atrocious revelation, and the world's: perplexed, jealous, bored, and with a Santafé alfajor hanging from a ribbon.

The proofs of our critical candor are innumerable, and we only have to check, say, the MLA Bibliography and other repertories for their precise enumeration. With few exceptions, like de Man's (and, partially, Ludmer's and, I will suggest, Antelo's), our relation to Borges mimetizes Carlos Argentino Daneri's relation to the universe: literal, if somewhat imaginative. We are lacking, grievously after so many years, a theoretical articulation of Borges's poetics; fundamentally, we are lacking a conceptual procedure that will allow us finally to move beyond the weariness that endlessly repeated clichés and truisms can only inspire. "These magical texts where a thousand luminous moments crackle" (Saer 31; my translation) (talking about the king of Rome) seem to have brought along little more than blindness, camouflaged in empty chatter about mirrors, memories, traditions, loss, and labyrinths. There is an aesthetic reading of Borges, perhaps the dominant one, that is precisely anti-aesthetic because it is only aesthetic pretension: in relation to Borges, we have never touched the aesthetic. Not having reached the aesthetic, not having conceived the

possibility of conceptual labor, how can we think of exiting from Borges? Before leaving one must at least have arrived.

Enrique Pezzoni was a greatly reputed master of Borgesian literature, and a mentor for many. Those of us who only knew of him by fame would perhaps have expected a higher illumination than the one provided by the book that has been carefully edited by Louis, and that contains a number of class lectures given by Pezzoni at the University of Buenos Aires. I will focus on the class notes where Pezzoni concerns himself with "Theme." As I will show, Pezzoni hands us a snub, purely nihilistic, falsely subversive, metaphysical, and trivial Borges (with all my respects to the master I did not meet, but others met).

The distance between Ryan before his discovery and Ryan who makes the decision to write a panegyric is similar to the infinite distance between Miguel de Cervantes and Pierre Menard -- it does not matter that, in the case of both successors, the text to be written would have been identical to the precursor's text. The deciding Ryan is not in symmetry with the initial Ryan, since the deciding Ryan is as fallen into the "theme of the traitor and the hero" as his protagonist. But the deciding Ryan repeats the critical position that Ludmer recommends on the basis of a brief commentary on Pezzoni. Here is Ludmer: "Enrique Pezzoni writes in *Sur* in 1952 that after the first critical reviews and praise there occurs a fundamental revision of the opinion on Borges: 'what started to be discovered in him was his position regarding reality and culture, the latter conceived as a new reality at the same level as the former, and just as vast, as urgent.' I will retake this ... because I believe it is crucial for us today, or at least for me: culture and reality, two realities with the same weight. I believe that without this premise I would be unable to read Borges" (Ludmer 292).

Two realities with the same weight: culture and reality. Between them, in some enigmatic manner, we must imagine literature: neither simply culture nor simply reality, but something else, perhaps the otherness that marks the possibility of that absolute separation or initial difference between culture and reality, but an otherness that becomes one only as it conquers, impossibly, absolute autonomy: "[Borges] defined in Argentina a purely literary, modern literature, independent from other spheres, without spheres above it. He turned literature independent, or rather; he completed the process of autonomization that was open in 1880 with the establishment of the national State and the independence from the political sphere [sic]. He reduced everything to literature and wrote that philosophy was a branch of fantastic literature" (Ludmer 292-93). Borges reduces everything to literature precisely through the same movement that allows him to create two radically heterogeneous orders of the real: reality, culture. In other words, upon discerning or absolutely deciding between reality and culture through his particular invention of literature, Borges paradoxically posits literature as an apparatus for the reduction of all difference between reality and culture. Such a trip is a parallel to the apotheosis of the modern State, which is constituted by the very autonomization of the political, and hence by the reduction of everything to the political (except, in a strong sense, the State itself): but with and through this reduction the State, like literature, also simultaneously, and aporetically, establishes an essential if enigmatic difference between the order of reality and the order of culture. "That is the fiction of the time of literature's autonomy and Borges' fiction, which is a machine that generates enigmas, that turns around the verbal decomposition of the legitimate truth and of perpetual ambivalence, of the undecipherable text, of the form itself of the secret in literature" (Ludmer 293-94).

What is this secret that Borges's fiction conceals and that the responsible critic, sincere and devious, must also conceal, like Ryan, into the perpetual ambivalence traitor/hero? This is Ludmer's second comment on Pezzoni: "Borges may appear as a revolutionary writer in Argentina from the 1960s to the 1980s because textual ideology (the textual subject) can be opposite to the explicit ideology of the writer. And thus he appears, nihilistic and anarchistic, in Enrique Pezzoni's classes in the 1980s ... Pezzoni reads Borges's procedure of the technical invention of series that deny each other successively, even as they absorb all kinds of other discourses. And he finds a textual subject that surpasses the division between pure literature and social literature" (294). For Ludmer's textual economy, as I understand it, such a conception is precisely what must be abandoned. Pezzoni's "textual subject" -- a subject that surpasses the distinction between pure litera-

ture and social literature, or the division between reality and culture -- is a confused subject: in the first place because his supposed nihilism and anarchism absolutely coincide with the position of the State as subject, as State-Subject. The textual subject that becomes autonomous in literature is in the same place as the state subject that becomes autonomous through the political, and both of them make a system, as Ludmer herself suggests when she says that Borges carries to "a fusion and a critical point" the history of the Argentine national-popular state after 1880 and the "history of literary autonomy (and with it the history of the idea of author, of work, of self-reference, and of fiction)" (292). Hence to abandon the state-national Borges is also to abandon the monumentalized and literary-autonomous Borges, and vice versa: "Because, for me, to leave Borges, to take the name and the authority away from Borges does not mean not to name him, but rather to dissolve the organic unity of his work, to take away its stability and its monumentality. It would be to dissolve an autonomized organic unity and also to break the unity of his texts in order to build with his literature, with some fragments from his literature, another field that would no longer be a field ruled over by his name" (297).

It would appear that Ludmer is getting ready to mimitize the other Ryan, the Ryan of the alternative decision to deconstruct Fergus Kilpatrick against the foretold chronicle of the "emancipation of the fatherland." Borges, like life itself in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (one of the recurring texts in the mimetic conspiracy Nolan orchestrates), would have come to be, in the future anterior of a new emancipation, the very possibility of an emancipation from Borges himself, now understood, somewhat resentfully, as "a walking shadow; a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more." But such post-state or counter-imperial revelation remains merely imminent and never comes to fruition in Ludmer's text. Ludmer withdraws, against the real, towards the cultural, and proposes a field that is still a field ruled over by Borges's name, which is now the name of a suspect hero, a fallen hero who therefore needs the stage and the representation that Ryan, as a new Nolan, puts forth, or Pezzoni as a new Ryan, or Ludmer herself, since her critique of Pezzoni never radicalizes its own principle and thus never reaches its truth -- or perhaps it does reach its truth, but in too succinct and devious a manner, and thus a manner that remains undecided regarding a necessary betrayal. Ludmer concludes: "I would retain a Borgesian reading position regarding the use and critique of Borges. And I would transform Borges into a tradition. This irreverent tradition regarding Borges would be a critical tradition regarding national traditions and histories. Upon reading Borges as tradition, I would leave Borges from within, given his critical position regarding cultural traditions, which would make of this position a national tradition" (299). Ludmer ends, against her own argumentation, by restoring the trap of a national Borges that Pezzoni's conception of the textual subject as a mediator between the heterogeneous series of reality and culture opens: in Ludmer the nation reemerges as the mediator between those two equal weights. But, after all, reality and culture do not have the same weight, just like a traitor and a hero do not weigh the same, and they are not the same thing. To posit their balance, which is what de Man or Borges never do, is a surreptitious wager on the superiority of culture, which will always have revealed its cards as a communitarian wager for cultural communion, in this and in so many other cases national communion, against the counter-communitarian rights that destabilize the real, and follow a different fidelity.

Not so unexpectedly for a reader of Borges (or for deconstruction, itself an inheritor of Sophocles the detective-story writer), we can find in some words of Sherlock Holmes the secret of the dissymmetry between reality and culture that Borgesian criticism seems to have taken upon itself to keep and never to reveal. Says Holmes of the "ideal reasoner": "[he] would, when he has once been shown a single fact in all its bearings, deduce from it not only all the chain of events which led up to it but also all the results which would follow from it. As Cuvier could correctly describe a whole animal by the contemplation of a single bone, so the observer who has thoroughly understood one link in a series of incidents, should be able accurately to state all the other ones, both before and after. We have not yet grasped the results which the reason alone can attain to. Problems may be solved in the study which have baffled all those who have sought a solution by the aid of their senses. To carry the art, however, to its highest pitch, it is necessary that the reasoner should be able to utilize all the facts which have come to his knowledge, and this in itself implies

... a possession of all knowledge, which, even in these days of free education and encyclopedias, is a somewhat rare accomplishment" (Conan Doyle 105).

Given infinite knowledge, map and territory, reality and culture would infinitely coincide. It is the failure of knowledge, not the failure of reality, what unleashes the need for a figural or poetic consciousness, whose character in Borges is classically mimetic, but becomes baroque through its impossibility of stasis. Borges's poetic consciousness, as de Man notes, seeks to carry its expression to the limit, to exhaust its possibilities (which are then never exhausted). Borges's will to style is baroque tension inasmuch as it thematizes the fissure between reality and culture, territory and map. Far from positing a substitutive or compensatory possibility for the poetic artifact, far from thinking that the poetic series can bring the mimesis of the real to a point of closure (this is precisely what is most remote from Borges, what Borges never does, although his critics will not cease to betray him by attributing nothing else to him), Borges shows over and over again how the possibility of total vision is simply an illusion, an ideologeme that displaces and defers the real, the impact of the real, or the real as impact. De Man's ordering of chaos or Holmes's total knowledge are symptomatic formations and mere inversions of the Borgesian impossibility of closure for the real. Such an impossibility is the very name of the possibility of poetry -- the very mode in which the poetic abandons truth as representation and enters an alternative theory of truth. In Borgesian aletheology the deceptive is the mark of a truth deeper than the obvious: hence the need for "the ordering presence of a villain at the center." In a context where truth as representation is revealed as a deceptive version of truth, deceitful representation -- representation as deceit -- points to a higher truth, a truth beyond representation. Every ordering act is a dissolving act. Only the villain can dissolve and (dis)order without threatening the substance of the mystery, since the villain understands the mystery from his finitude, and does not aspire to infinite knowledge. With the villain, with the traitor, the goal of the poetic as finite is announced: poetry is finitude, and infinitude is pure cultural farce, pure (cultural) pretension of equivalence with the real. If there is a god in Borges it is the god of finitude, on the side of the real, and thus of the poetic, against every form of culture (including, most certainly, national culture).

Pezzoni's theory yields a nihilistic Borges because Pezzoni's Borges is a culturalist, so he is, nihilistically, against the real, which is (supposed to be) just another name for nothingness. The obvious inconsistency of this position does not keep Pezzoni from embracing it. In order to show this I will limit myself to Pezzoni's reading of "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" in the first part of Enrique Pezzoni, *lector de Borges*. Louis calls that first part "El sujeto Borges o la exhibición desafortada." It contains notes from classes 13 to 17, held between May and June 1988. Pezzoni's point of departure is summed up in the last class: "'Theme of the Traitor and the Hero' could be a kind of epitome of all Borgesian narrativity; and the game of the treason of opposites permanently under-lays Borgesian literature" (118). From this perspective, what Pezzoni determines in his lectures is good as a general statement on Borges's poetics, and should not be restricted to commentary on a single short story: the particular stands for the universal. First I transcribe some passages that I will then intersperse with paraphrase.

"['Theme'] questions the mechanisms commonly used to convey a real or fictitious fact, and how those procedures decisively and ideologically influence the vision of the conveyed real or fictitious fact" (30; my translation for this and subsequent quotes); "the Borges textual subject ... is ... a subject essentially subversive of institutionalized forms" (31); "a counterposition of two practices: the allegedly submissive practice of the documenter and the radically active, discursive practice of the one who proposes, invents documents -- the core of ['Theme']" (37); "against the world, the best possibility is to propose alternative forms of ordering and schematizing the world" (40); "one could compose different biographies of a character, or a man, reordering the series of events in such a way that the re-reading of such a multiplicity of biographies would eventually show that all of them are the biography of the same subject" (41). Pezzoni imagines the existence of an "institutionalized form" that is a correlate of that which the "práctica sumisa del documentador" seeks. "Submissive practice" and "institutionalized form" sustain each other and constitute each other. Against that "submissive practice" he then imagines an alternative practice, "essentially subversive," another form of ordering of the world, but, curiously, an ordering whose

referent is still "the same subject." We have a subject, and two different "procedures" "against the world." The subject makes an ideological choice between them. Borges would seem to opt, in every case, for the subversive practice, revealing in the process not only that whatever is institutionalized is ideology, but also that any subversive practice is also itself ideological.

"The Borgesian series, the series Borges makes up in his stories, like St. Thomas' series, also may never have existed. The difference is that, for St. Thomas, there is a first, non-contingent cause in the universe: God. The universe may never have existed, but it does. And its existence is explained through that non-contingent, non-aleatory, non-chance cause that is the divine. The Borgesian series is a series where somebody takes on the role of an absolutely contingent divinity -- an aleatory and contingent divinity -- invents an absolutely contingent divinity that initiates a series that, in effect, can never exist and that is absolutely contingent [sic]" (44); "Borges's ordering principle is absolutely contingent. So Borges's text and the series of events it presents is always unjustified ... The text always constitutes its own causality ... The text justifies with its proposed orderings the ordering itself. The world is like it is because the text suggests it is" (46-47); "they are ideological texts that conceive ideology not as content but as special forms, dynamiting forms, subversive forms, etc. In this sense, Borges is a kind of strange presence" (48); "[Borges's] idea of the non-definitive text [is] an idea about the constant production of sense. Sense as production and not as search of something previous, reified, that already exists" (49). Contingency is then apparently subversive, but subversive of what? It can only be subversive of necessity, which somehow begs the principle. Borges is then a conventional atheist, that is to say, he is an atheist regarding the Western ontotheological convention according to which God is nothing but first unfounded cause and principle of sufficient reason. From that atheist or allegedly anti-metaphysical, anti-ontotheological position Borges derives a simple parodic procedure: the text is placed in the ontotheological site, as a substitute for divinity. But since the text is written by Borges, Borges knows very well that there is no necessity, only contingency in his textual procedures. So Borges emerges as a villain god or false god, a demon or "extraña presencia" that subverts the ontotheological version of becoming, based upon the presupposition of a world-dominating, extratextual principle of sufficient reason. But how, precisely, does he subvert it? Whimsically, through the arbitrary, unjustified positing of ordering principles that yield disorder. For Pezzoni, this would allow us to understand that every act of creation is a proposal of meaning, and that there is no meaning except for the whimsical meaning given by any arbitrary form of ordering. I, Borges, upon assuming the creation of sense that had been supposedly a prerogative of divinity, realize that we can all make sense, so divinity is as ridiculous and false as I myself am. My sense is nonsense, unless it has the sense of showing that there is no sense, that there is nonsense.

"There is a kind of nihilistic and tremendously anarchistic ethics which prohibits falling into the temptation ... of a transcending and founding cause, but at the same time [there is] the nostalgia for a transcending and founding cause" (50); "the absolute refusal to allow ultimate meanings that can impose themselves as true ... the absolute questioning of any construction of sense as a sense that may transcend the very subjects that work with it" (53); "Borges exhibits procedure as form, as ideological form, that is to say, he shows ideology as form, as a form that proposes certain sense conceptions that destroy alternative conceptions" (61-62); "his ideological gesture consists of correcting history, of creating the possibility that universal history can be made anew, but at the same time, through a new nihilistic and anarchistic ideological gesture, he immediately devalues the new rigorous construction: that construction is false, it is not true. Truth is disseminated nowhere" (86); "history and literature continuously exchange their roles and devalue each other; the Borgesian ideological gesture is to destroy paradigms of knowledge. Epistemological paradigms are made to be destroyed, transformed, altered, ceaselessly replaced. There is no ultimate or final sense" (90); "his didacticism ... would consist of showing literature as procedure, but at the same time of showing procedure as a way into ideological systems. That exaltation of procedure is also a degradation of procedure. In other words, it would correspond analogically to showing epistemological paradigms in order to discard them immediately through the emergence of new epistemological paradigms that are in turn discarded and of which only words remain" (96). And, of course, if my sense is nonsense, then nothing is true or false, and everything is relative,



and so forth. I then declare myself a nihilist, since only nothingness exists, and an anarchist, because I do not even believe that my own capacity for ordering can give the world a principle of order. My procedure, which is not even a truth procedure any more, only a procedure of untruth, can only from now on take pleasure in the nihilist-anarchist hypostasis: I dismantle, I dynamite, and I make the word degenerate by showing that there is no more than word, that everything is (nothing but) word, and thus that even the word itself is nothing. Except perhaps for that vague "nostalgia" Pezzoni admits, and that he couples with the prohibition of the higher nostalgia for a transcendent, founding cause. Both of them, nostalgia and its prohibition, in their very dehiscence, insinuate a problem that can be shown to be the true "extraña presencia" in Pezzoni's interpretation, the villain at its center.

Beyond its tautologies, there is great probity in Pezzoni's interpretive proposal (I do not know whether it is Argentine probity in the same sense in which Littmann's was German). But it is in any case a treacherous probity: under the pretext of translating Borges's system literally, it betrays it by reducing it to nihilist triviality. Pezzoni would have in effect no reason to be surprised or bewildered by the fact that this Borges, his Borges, can end up serving as justification for the worst in the order of the political: "Borges's work, eternally subversive, ideologically subversive regarding customary orders, with its great problem of the superimposition of the empirical subject and the textual subject ... this tremendously subversive work, unfortunately, has served as support for conservative governments; in any case Borges's work has not shaken the order of military governments" (123). The reasoning is simple: if there is (nothing but) nihilism, then order becomes the only possibility, that is, the absolute possibility of warranting a principle of immanence or stability for the social. Any order is preferable to disorder when disorder has no higher value than being a mere and vacuous alternative to order. The secret of anarchism, when anarchism is effectively nihilistic, is that it is essentially open to the worst forms of authoritarian totalitarianism: given that there is no order, let it all become an order. The great value of Josefina Ludmer's essay consists precisely in its reaction -- a reaction that remains secret or unmanifested in the essay itself, but that constitutes its true possibility -- against the intimate alliance between the system that proposes the total autonomy of the literary and the system that proposes the absolute autonomy of the state form. We can now begin to understand the complicity between the twentieth-century avant-gardes and state totalitarianism, on which any possible conception of a communitarian nation ultimately depends. And we can now unleash the suspicion that the problem with Borges was not that he was a reactionary. The problem was the unintentional -- but never innocent -- reactionary-ism of Borgesian criticism, and not only on its Argentine side: we have created a national Borges, an anarchist-subversive and nihilist national Borges, whose dark shadow was necessarily the absolute apotheosis of the ontotheologism that underlies dictatorship as necessary state contingency and (final) principle of immanence of the social. In other words, Borgesian literature, in the nihilist-anarchist interpretation, created, or contributed to create, the ideological justification for the exceptional decision -- the decision to rule on the exception -- that is the very name of state sovereignty as the final principle of order-in-disorder.

We should remember the already-quoted words by Paul de Man: "if ... we order this chaos, we may well succeed in achieving an order of sorts, but we dissolve the binding spatial substance that holds our chaotic universe together." One needs doves' feet not to fall into the ontotheological abyss, as Nietzsche, himself quite blind in key moments of his work to the complicity between metaphysics and nihilism, used to say. Pezzoni manages to create an "order of sorts" in the complex and subtle universe of Borges's work, but only at the price of dissolving its properly poetic substance, which is never of course merely functionalist and cannot therefore consist of the mere de-familiarizing astonishment regarding what is established, or institutionalized, or sanctified by a tradition radically compromised in any case by its complicities with state power and therefore with the history of political domination. De Man said "God is on the side of chaotic reality and style is powerless to conquer him ... with his appearance the life of poetry comes to an end. The situation is very similar to that of Kierkegaard's aesthetic man, with the difference that Borges refuses to give up his poetic predicament for a leap into faith." If the poetic is fundamental awareness of finitude, because it depends absolutely upon its relation with the non-poetic, with which it estab-

lishes a relationless relation to the extent that the non-poetic absolutely resists the relation, then any leap into faith, whether ontotheological or anarchist-nihilist faith, is the end of the poetic and the betrayal, heroic or not, of the poetic as such. This is the treason that "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" betrays absolutely by refusing all compromise in the infinite denunciation of the story's final words. Those words are: "In Nolan's play, the passages taken from Shakespeare are the least dramatic ones; Ryan suspected that the author interpolated them so that someone, in the future, would be able to stumble upon the truth. Ryan realized that he, too, was part of Nolan's plot ... After long and stubborn deliberation, he decided to silence the discovery. He published a book dedicated to the hero's glory; that too, perhaps, had been foreseen" (146). Conspiracy would seem exhaustively to coincide with the universe. Nolan occupies the site of the ontotheological god, lord and master of the disjunctive syllogism that will have foreseen and predisposed every possible variation in the historical plot ("either this, or this, or this") in such a way that any action by Ryan will end up proving his presence at the beginning of the ordering series as its non-contingent divinity or absolute lord of textual necessity.

By implication, then, also the writing of "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" was foreseen. And this reading. But there is a crucial difference, repeatedly exposed in Borges's texts (let me just refer to the end of "The Lottery in Babylon," for instance), between what can be derived from understanding the possibility of conspiracy and understanding that understanding the possibility of conspiracy is a fundamental act of poetic freedom that presupposes -- necessarily -- the possibility of non-conspiracy, of the finitude of conspiracy. In other words, if understanding conspiracy and accepting its possibility is already to have fallen into the trap of the ontotheological reading of the world, to understand the possibility of such a trap is already to be open to an alternative history, to a non-ontotheological relation to the world and to the real. Borges's text, in its baroque search for its limit-possibility, gives us over and over again, through its very acceptance of finitude, the open possibility of the mystery of the real, regarding which it is no longer a matter of positing the invention of sense, the proliferation of sense, the contingent construction of all sense, but the opposite: to understand the absolute limit of sense, to understand the radical insufficiency of any sense construction, and thus to receive the world and the real, as if by the first time, as an infinite gift and the total opening of sense. Regarding this alternative, which is, I insist, always literal in Borges, the positing of the textual subject as the dynamiter of sense in the theft of the ontotheological site of divinity is only the hypostasis of the textual subject, the author, and with them the entirety of the literary system, to a poor substitutive place that regards technical mastery as the only possible truth of art in modernity. But then art is the same thing as technology and state power.

Let me name that positing of the textual subject, which is endlessly repeated in the history of Borgesian criticism, "pathetic," using "Theme": when Kilpatrick enters Dublin on his way towards the theater where he will be assassinated (but already Dublin is the stage where the larger representation takes place), Borges says, "the condemned man entered Dublin, argued, worked, prayed, reprehended, spoke words of pathos [palabras patéticas] -- and each of those acts destined to shine forth in glory had been choreographed by Nolan" (145). The textual subject, the critical subject are pathetic when they follow the ontotheological script and partake in conspiracy, that is, partake in the ideology of the infinite construction of sense as artifact or technique of conduct (or conduct of conduct, as it is precisely the Foucaultian notion of governmentality that is at stake here). Incidentally, this is the reason why Borges warns us that the quotations from Shakespeare that will be interspersed in those actions by Kilpatrick are the "least dramatic" passages in the events. Because those quotations, once recognized as such, are precisely what will allow us to understand the conspiracy as conspiracy: their function is essentially non-pathetic, as they make it possible to develop a non-conspiratorial vision of history. In other words, seeing the conspiracy for what it is is already to enter the possibility of an alternative understanding -- as with paranoia. With this, and crucially, Borges comes close to a theoretical proposal, that is, to a conceptual procedure that will allow us to confront the pathetic critical subject with a principle of "a-pathy" that constitutes the very center of the essay by Raúl Antelo I now comment upon.

The "apathetic" series defines in Antelo the possibility of a difference regarding "the dominant productions of sense that take life as their basis" (113; my translation, also in subsequent quotes). Departing from Giorgio Agamben's analysis in *Means Without Ends* according to which "the dominant biopolitical fracture in modern society" (113) is the difference between the popular and what remains outside it ("the popular is that which cannot be totally incorporated to the whole of which it is an inalienable part at the same time it cannot really belong to the whole to which, in spite of everything, it attaches itself" [113]), Antelo defines, from Borges, "pathetism" as precisely a discourse obsessed with the representation of the popular as a totality without division ("there is much of the pathetic manner of Spengler, Keyserling and even Frank, in Martínez Estrada's work" [Borges qtd. in Antelo 114]). The formulation of the possibility of an "apathetic version of experience" is of course identical to de Man's precision that the world of Borges's stories does not refer to "an actual experience, but ... [to] an intellectual proposition." We should also recall here the early Walter Benjamin's notion, expressed in "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," about the need to reform Kantian philosophy in favor of a more generous and less pedestrian conception of experience, where what is at stake is a critique of enlightened empiricism. The fundamental biopolitical fracture of modernity, between the popular and its remainder, between *bíos* and *zoé*, can also be represented as the fracture or the division between reality and culture. Both in de Man and Benjamin the revision of the Kantian notion of experience is crucial for a critique of the cultural as the site par excellence of the machination of modernity: in the split of the real between reality and culture experience is always on the side of culture, hypostatized into life, and metonymically into national or communitarian life. Within this division an appropriation of the real takes place whose categories suffer from a historical genealogy that is radically contaminated by the ontotheological modality of thought. "Life" becomes, for modernity, the sum of techno-economic machination and culture, where "culture" gathers the space of supposedly autonomous experience that techno-economic machination throws off as a mere residue. This is also the Heideggerian account in *Contributions to Philosophy*. If the apathetic series defines in Antelo something other than "the dominant productions of sense that take life as their basis," then the apathetic series is radically a-culturalist and a-constructivist, counter-communitarian, and counter-axiological, whereas the pathetic series, in Martínez Estrada's version, but also in Nolan's version, both motivated by the deluded teleology of "emancipation of the fatherland," like so many critical versions of Borges's work, seeks the establishment of a principle of experience disciplined or tamed into the production of a particular kind of sense: a sense always already contained within the parameters of the split reality/culture, always already relativized and hence destroyed by the unexamined weight of the cultural-communitarian instance. In other words, the pathetic series is the absolute beginning of a sentimentalization of life on the basis of the national-popular regime of rule and all its derivatives, including, by the way, the neoliberal regime of social control whose own brand of communitarianism goes under the name of multiculturalism.

The pathetic series is therefore the site of anarchism and of nihilism, where both of them figure as no more than the inversion of ontotheological sovereignty, thus totally dependent upon the latter: they are nothing but that sovereignty disguised as a villain, disguised as a traitor. Once ontotheological logic is accepted, once the pathetic principle of the real as division between non-contingent divinity and contingent series of events, between reality and culture, is absorbed, the mere negation of the first part of the division is also ipso facto negation of the second. And both negations, which are mutually supplementary and never counterposed, formulate the anarcho-nihilism whose very terribility is hardly dissociable from the conservative and apparently amiable benevolence that reveals metaphysical violence. Antelo's essay blows up such tediously false polarity in a way that has rarely been accomplished in Borgesian criticism, and thus manages "exiting Borges with Borges," upon dismantling, among other things, the arbitrary and ill-advised split between textual subject and empirical subject, the apparent contradiction between textual subversion and reactionary politics that the Borgesian critical machine has done nothing but infinitely rehearse. In other words, Antelo's essay opens the possibility of a critical rupture by proposing the apathetic as a concept capable of turning Borges' literary practice into a theory of reading: a theo-

ry that will refuse national-popular pathetism, and thus every identitarian, subjectivizing, moving, sentimental, and statal formulation of the poetic apparatus. What is, then, the apathetic?

Liddell-Scott's Greek-English lexicon gives the following definitions of the word *pathos*: "anything that befalls one, an incident, accident ... what one has suffered, one's experience ... a passion, emotion ... any passive state, a condition, state ... in pl. the incidents or changes to which things are liable." The more limited Spanish Royal Academy *Diccionario de la lengua española* says under "*patético*": "what is capable of moving or agitating the mind by giving it vehement affections, particularly pain, sadness, or melancholy" (my translation). And under "*apatía*" "impassibility of mind ... 2. Laxity, indolence, lack of vigor or energy." Antelo's essay, upon defining the apathetic's "line of flight" as the "fortuitous encounter that posits a new conception of experience that owes nothing to lived-experience [*vivencia*]" (115), moves in the sense of a modification of Liddell-Scott's first rendering: for Antelo the apathetic defines a modality of reception of the event not subsumable by lived-experience, or *vivencia*. *Vivencia* was a word invented by José Ortega y Gasset in order to translate the German *Erlebnis* in opposition to *experiencia* for *Erfahrung*. It is not necessary for us to go into deep philological labor, which would have to cross in any case the Benjaminian account of the difference between the two German words. It is enough to say that *Erlebnis* is on the side of biopolitical interiority and is therefore consubstantial with the difference reality/culture -- *vivencia* marks what is pathetic in every literary appropriation. *Erfahrung*, by contrast, marks the apathetic series as an opening to the trace of the real. The apathetic is a radical opening to the sense of the real against the pathetic production of sense. In Antelo's words, "it marks ... the in-between (a-synthetic and non-dialectizable) of sense, a sense where the value world circulates" (115). The world circulates through the apathetic sense, whereas the pathetic circulates intra-worldly. Apathy, which Antelo calls "acephalic" and "Minotaurid," "retrospectively rebuilds the ontological consistency both of individual *bíos* and of mass *zoé*, but it forces us, in exchange, to reassemble a labyrinthine world where the simultaneity of absolutely incompatible presents and the dissemination of not necessarily true pasts coexist side by side, giving a striated character to truth. It is therefore not a matter of evaluating reconstruction as restoration of the lived, but rather as a challenge for the creation of new ethical links through the potentialization of the false. In that series, whose virtue is the result of acting forces, truth, always differed and virtual, resides in the inactuality of all experience, in its unrepresentable void" (117). Apathy is, in other words, the opening to "truth present through its concealment, the truth of a narration that shows no truth but is ruled by it, to such an extent that its visibility duplicates the very fictional opacity that attempts to grasp it" (113).

If anarcho-nihilism is a response to a prohibition of nostalgia, then anarcho-nihilism is a form of self-repressing voluntarism and is therefore anything but anarcho-nihilism: the inconsistency of the difference between a Borgesian textual subject and an empirical subject starts there. If nostalgia, measured by its very prohibition, was in Pezzoni the anarcho-nihilistic ordering principle of Borges's text, and thus its uncanny guest and the axis of destruction of the ontological consistency in Pezzoni's critical proposal, Antelo's proposal for an apathetic critical practice enables the establishment of ontological consistency in the very displacement of ontotheology. Apathetic ontotheology seeks "the truth present through its concealment," that is, it seeks the infamous and villainous duplicity of a truth that is not exhaustible by representation, never subsumable in the production or machination of sense. That truth, the truth or non-truth of the mystery of the real, accounts for reality/culture at the same time that it displaces the horizon of interpretation beyond the biopolitical polarity towards an encounter with the face of divinity or the end of poetry and beyond the "*emancipación de la patria*," which is in any case always the entry of the fatherland into full domination, of the father, and of the name of the father, in the perpetual exclusion of that which the popular, pathetic name for the national totality of knowledge, can not account for. That is what "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" gives us: the excess of the popular, a movement towards historical truth that coincides with the movement of the poetic drive towards its furthest limit, towards the truth of the social in its overwhelming immanence, which is the immanence or the infra-immanence of everything that ontotheology, including patriotic ontotheology,

subalternizes. Borges's literature, in its apathetic practice, is an infrapolitical literature against the biopolitical rapture of politics.

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Author's Profile: Alberto Moreiras teaches Romance studies and literatures at Duke University. A prolific scholar, his many publications include *Interpretación y diferencia* (1991), *Tercer espacio: Literatura y duelo en América Latina* (1999), *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies* (2001), and, as co-editor with Nelly Richard, *Retrazos de la transición* (2001). Moreiras is co-editor of the *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*. E-mail: <[moreiras@duke.edu](mailto:moreiras@duke.edu)>.