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IN THE CARDS: PROPHECY AND THE GAMBLE OF LANGUAGE
IN BORGES'S "EL TRUCO"*

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The initiated reader approaches any Borges essay, story, or poem en garde, an almost paranoid suspicion toward the intricacies she senses must be at play within the most seemingly banal details. His poem "El truco" justifies this suspicion, as Borges transforms a card game into a metapoetic discourse and, more surprisingly, a radical approach to historical narration. Borges's revisions of the poem¹ from 1923 to 1977 help demonstrate how the poet turns prophecy backwards, in a familiar blending of space and time that yields a poetics committed to infusing the present with the ghosts and echoes of the past. However, Borges goes beyond this metaphysical haunting, as his early *criollo* poetics reworks cultural codes and forsakes the pursuit of lost origins, applying the truco player's heightened presence of mind to past events at large. Ludic and poetic attention in this case become investigative modes, the unceasing reordering and constellating of past events. Rather than a reactionary and insular art, Borges's poetry practices a radical conservatism

* For their responses to earlier versions of this essay, I am grateful to Daniel Balderston, Francine Masiello, and Rob Kaufman.

¹ "El truco" is also the title of a prose piece in *Evaristo Carriego*.

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that sustains attention to the past's possibility, constantly reshuffling the deck.

In hindsight, the game of truco seems an obvious choice for the poetic program Borges began in *Fervor en Buenos Aires* (1923) and altered with subsequent editions of the book. As Beatriz Sarlo has explained, the young Borges sought to create his own *criollo* poetry. (107) In truco, he found a "juego criollo" (Lefere 72), an archive of traditional song, *gauchesca* literature, political and cultural history, and uniquely *criollo* verbal codes. Ana C. Cara's "The Poetics of Creole Talk: Toward an Aesthetic of Argentine Verbal Art" furthers this claim as she elaborates on truco's cultural role via Borges's poem and his essay on truco published in *Evaristo Carriego* (1930). For Cara, truco is

emblematic of creole dynamics, is indeed about *viveza criolla*, about cleverness, wit and cunning, but it is also about *viveza's* counterpart: a creole intelligence that 'gets' what's simultaneously going on at two or more cultural registers...It is the player who by telling us the truth makes us disbelievers, or the player who by 'lying' reveals a truth, that practices a creole art (Cara 42).

Criollo talk, embodied in truco, is a deceptive communication code intended to destabilize single-minded signification. As with Borges's poetry, the card game proceeds from the belief that nothing can be taken at face value.² *Criollo* poetics, then, not only describes a certain cultural tradition within Argentine society, but also a polyvalent discourse that intentionally upsets standard communication.

The poem draws on truco's specific codes to emphasize poetic deception, the sign's refusal to pledge semantic allegiance. Multiplying meaning, an innocent adjective becomes an inside joke in a phrase like "floridas travesuras" (6).³ Ostentatious sleights of hand like this actually describe the poet's method, as

² In the prose version of "El truco" Borges writes, "La habitualidad del truco es mentir" (Borges, *Ficcionario* 327).

³ Unless otherwise mentioned, all citations from the poem refer to Jorge Luis Borges *Obra poética*, 1.

"travesuras" (tricks) recall truco (trick), the poem and game. At the same time, "florida" does double duty, modifying the trick and referencing a specific truco hand, "flor," the name for three-of-a-kind. As truco games operate by this same method, often concealing the call for "flor" or "envido" (another betting term that arises in the poem) in a player's song, the poem establishes itself as a possible truco verse.⁴ Thus, the poem argues for its authentic *criollo* status and raises the stakes on a reader's presence of mind, insisting on attentiveness to the subtleties and subterfuges of poetic discourse.

The poem thus couples aesthetic attention with sensitivity to cultural codes. For a poet like Borges, invested in kabalistic alphabets, numerology, and philosophical puzzles, one might assume that truco's word games function solely as an ideal combination of popular culture, esoteric knowledge, and metafictional fun. However, it is worth rethinking the image of Borges the literary riddler and schemester as more than an elitist entertainer. An interest in the codes of marginalized cultures (*compadrito* duels, Jewish kabalistic studies) and literatures (pulp detective fiction) permeate his work. In fact, "El truco" consciously establishes a poetics committed to the unique perspectives art and culture on the margins makes available.

The creole talk exhibited in truco foregrounds one example of the social critique called for in the poem's work on the margins. Here the double discourse defines discursive limits and cultural distinctions, approaching the edges of representation. According to Cara, the game's codes signify how a marginal class carries on subversive dialogue in the face of its oppressor (42). Elliptical phrases, calembour concealment, these semiotic tricks obfuscate meaning for the uninitiated, they protect "disempowered 'insiders,' while acceptably performing externally . . . for a separate,

⁴ A truco "song" is a poetic verse or song players incorporate into a game to distract their opponent and/or pass information about their cards on to their teammate. Astigueta, for instance, mentions, "Un constante discursar matizado con versillos y dichos populares marcan el tono del juego" (381). Cara comments on "the constant dialogue among players trying to divert and trick each other into playing a card by what they say (or don't say) in the course of a game, and by reciting 'truco verses' with great flourish" (Cara 40). And Borges himself mentions that in truco "you announce that you have a *flower* in verse" (233).

dominant audience of 'outsiders'" (42). Sociological readings like this have their value, and while I am not committed to reading Borges's poetry as a social allegory, Cara's study helpfully points to the thematic interest for *las orillas* developed in *Fervor en Buenos Aires* generally and "El truco" specifically.

Indeed, inherent in Borges's search for a *criollo* poetry is an engagement with the culture on the edge of city and pampa. On this margin, Sarlo (4) writes, Borges founded his imaginary landscape, part of the "mitología casera" (7) he identifies in "El truco". Throughout his early stories and poetry he discovers and creates this space in which he works "with all the meanings of the term *orillas* (edge, shore, margin, limit)" (Sarlo 20). Consonant with Cara's insider/outsider dynamic, Borges writes that truco occurs "en los lindes de la mesa" (8) where "la vida de los otros se detiene" (9). A ghostland, a limbo space, "un extraño país" (10), within this borderland Borges situates the card game. Of course, readers looking between the lines of the poem's title or familiar with the 1972 text's closing lines (to which I will return later), recognize the card game as the poem's representative. With artful casualness, Borges calls attention to his work's marginal mode, literally locating his poetics on the table's borders.

How Borges negotiates those edges continues the poem's *criollo* deception, the refusal to speak from only one side of the mouth. For "los lindes de la mesa" border on several semantic frontiers. The table's limits at once represent a space where aesthetic play and the historical converge. On one hand, these edges mark out an alternate cultural sphere, separating the players' lives from "los otros," those excluded from the game. In Cara's reading such exclusivity reads as the oppressed's secret voice spoken aloud before the oppressor. On the other hand, frames within frames, borders within a poem that encircle a game that is the poem, are motifs that quickly conjure up the metafictional play of Borges's multiple mirrors or the infinite regression implied in stories such as "Las ruinas circulares." Here the poem moves outside and inside, addressing a national political and economic crisis while insulating itself with self-referential art. As with Derrida's parergon, Borges reminds his readers to study the

two sides to every edge: he insists on an aesthetic and historical convergence that reveals the aesthetic as historical.

Such intentional multiplicity, in which the politically radical can be read as cultural elitism, characterizes the poem's slipperiness. The poem's deception allows these overlaps, denying critics intent on separating the aesthetic from the historical. As with Theodor Adorno's essays about Paul Valéry,⁵ Borges's poem observes so-called autonomous art's entanglement with political and social radicalism via highly crafted literary ambiguity. It is this mystery that keeps meaning circulating in the poem, opening and sustaining a dialogue with readers called on to continue guessing, returning to question and reread the text.

These multiple meanings also help the poet picture the various temporalities in this work on the edges. For not only do linguistic and cultural codes change within the table's strange country, but time too assumes a different character. In this other space, "una lentitud cimarrona / va demorando las palabras" (15-16). The chosen adjective reemphasizes the poem's border dispute, as *cimarrona* walks the limits of Sarmiento's distinction between civilization and barbarism. Dense with semantic possibilities regarding domestication and savagery, cultivation and natural growth, slavery and freedom *cimarrona* modifies the temporal shift, reminding readers to go slow with the poem's words, to acknowledge potential histories indirectly referenced by such linguistic fence-posting. Alongside this ingenious interweaving of aesthetic attention's necessarily slower time and the line's description of a more sluggish temporality, *cimarrona's* link to rural discourses, especially *gauchesca* literature, announces a distinct cultural sphere. The strange country now reads as a marker for a national discourse about property rights, industrialization, and the influx of populations to the cities, the very movement that creates the somewhat fluid difference between city and pampa, the discourse of the *orillas* within which Borges writes.⁶

⁵ See Adorno 1: 98-110; 137-173.

⁶ In the poem's prose version from Borges's book on the Argentine street poet, Evaristo Carriego (1930), the cultural distinction is even more obvious. There he names truco's landscape "otro país" rather than "extraño país" (*Ficcionario* 327).

Tied to rural temporality and its fading place in the face of urbanization, the poem's magical discourse, the apparent philosophical rationale for *truco's* slow motion, requires a metapoetic explication that joins aesthetics and the sociohistorical in the cards' special engagement with the past. Within the poem the sacred resides on the surface of the profane, as painted pieces of cheap cardboard become infused with magic, operating as "talismanes." Where the poem's 1969 version departs from the original is not so much in this image ("talismanes" has replaced the more or less synonymous "amuletos"),⁷ as in the cards' function. In the poem's 1923 text, the cards offer a desire for origin conveyed through the Bible's lapsarian vocabulary, as the painted amulets summon a "realidad primordial / de goce y sufrimiento carnales / y una risueña génesis" (4-6). Contrary on some semantic levels, the 1972 text redirects the magical power from the past to the future, the cards now "nos hacen olvidar nuestros destinos" (3). With the future liberated from determination, however, the present, the threshold between past and future, swells with possibility.⁸

This distended present derives from the cards, the secular residue of a belief in magic, specifically the magic of prophecy. A mystical mode of seeing most widely known in the Western canon through the Delphic means of illuminating destiny, prophecy throws light onto the inevitable path of the future. And for Borges, magic's prophetic character is linked to narrative, as he explains in his essay "El arte narrativo y la magia" (1932).

"Otro" helps emphasize the "criollization" the essay explicitly identifies with *truco*. Although "extraño" seems appropriate to describe the defamiliarization experienced by players suddenly "acriollados" and estranged from their habitual selves (ibid 326), "extraño" helps move the poem away from the confused nationalism and local color so present in the essay and the 1923 text (these aspects of the poem were most drastically altered in the 1969 text, the first publication of the poem to arrive after his lecture "El escritor argentino y la tradición" (1951)).

⁷ For this and all other records of textual variation in "El truco's" four publications, see Scarano.

⁸ As Edelweis Serra writes, "La identidad de momentos eterniza el juego, símbolo de un presente permanente que se afirma contra el devenir" (Serra 118).

Borrowing from Frazer's *Golden Bough*, Borges's essay provides examples of "magia contagiosa" and "magia imitativa" to conclude that "la magia es la coronación o pesadilla de lo causal, no su contradicción" (*Ficcionario* 54). In several examples drawn from multiple cultural traditions he demonstrates that belief in magic embraces rather than opposes causality, assigning too many causes for a given event (Pastormelo 38). A superstitious person, for instance, not only draws the logical causal link between a corpse and a nearby gun, but the corpse and "una maltratada efigie de cera o la rotura profética de un espejo o la sal que se vuelca o trece comensales terribles" (*Ficcionario* 54). In literary terms these magic moments are reader oriented. The reading subject supplies the various causes rather than encountering them as already given in the object-text. Destiny seems determinate because the object is overdetermined.

Without acknowledging this subject-object distinction, Borges claims that causal superabundance is true not just in magic, but in literary narrative as well: "Todo episodio, en un cuidadoso relato, es de proyección ulterior" (*Ficcionario* 54).⁹ To restate my essay's opening lines and to paraphrase Borges's essay, the author's own intricate poetics are magical—they are preordained. In other words, the text's meticulous ordering creates an atmosphere in which every new interpretation appears foreseen by the author. Textual magic, however, is a trick, a *trampa*, a *truco*. Semiotic proliferation of the kind Borges elaborates around the corpse is not equivalent to the intricately layered narratives he singles out in his essay. In the first instance (the superstitious corpse encounter), a subject provides multiple causal links between one object and several others. In the second (Joyce's *Ulysses* is Borges's example), the text itself anticipates the reader's possible interpretations and, however subtly, provides the links along the way. What the essay elides, the logical link it perhaps intentionally and performatively forgets is the encounter between the reader and the narrative. Here is the site of real textual

⁹ Borges uses a similar phrase to describe Cheserton's detective fiction. In a 1936 essay entitled "Modos de G.K. Chesterton," he writes that the author's "episodios más fugaces y breves tienen proyección ulterior" (*Ficcionario* 119; emphasis added).

magic, the still mysterious trick wherein multiple readers derive endless semantic possibilities in their exchange with a text.

In arguing that the cards "nos hacen olvidar nuestros destinos," therefore, Borges inverts expectations, and announces his poem's magical status for the reader. Paradoxically, prophecy in this poem means looking backward. Having replaced the homogeneous time of Greek myth with "una mitología casera," the poem slows time via the reader's struggle to account for all potential causes (i.e. meanings) in the poem. Each moment is overly fraught with possibility from both future and past, such that a new temporality emerges to make space for the compacted chances.¹⁰ Like an unsettled truco player or the superstitious subjects in Borges's essay, the attentive reader sifts through the possible meanings concealed in the poem's phrases, lines and letters. And because the text is, as Borges would have it, magical, the reader uncovers numerous allusions and suddenly visible semantic pathways.¹¹ The magic of narrative, by means of intertextual allusion, allows the poem to perform like a truco player—inserting songs, stories, and jokes that transform a card game into a twelve hour event or a twenty four line poem into a fifteen page commentary. Within Borges's poetics, then, linguist-

¹⁰ That is, Borges repeats motifs in his individual poems, stories and essays, such that each particular textual moment links with another. In this process, each word operates like a mirror, reflecting the light of the reader's gaze onto other surfaces, other words and stories, themselves mirrors which continue to bounce the light in a seemingly endless system. That Borges's collected works function as a hall of mirrors should surprise no one. Within this hall, the poem becomes infinite because of its expanding allusions and the unique attention and experience brought to the work by each new reader.

¹¹ Robin Lefere and Francine Masiello remind us of the difficulty of exhausting Borges's texts. For these critics, the reader's face shatters realism's mirror into polysemic fragments: "En su encuentro con los escritores artísticos, el ego unificado del lector se quiebra gracias a los textos que estudia; a la inversa, una pluralidad de textos expandirán la naturaleza singular del yo" (Masiello 100). To look back into the text is to create new meaning, to acknowledge the inexhaustible reservoir of textual possibility. Repetition is always accompanied by variation, as each careful reading resets the poem's signs.

This semiotic flexibility is also associated with Borges's project with the *orillas*. As Missana notes, "Las orillas constituyen una vaga fronteriza, sin espesor; más que un lugar de anclaje, son un espacio móvil, inestable, de tránsito, construido desde una mirada que también se desplaza" (34).

tic indeterminacy coupled with intertextual allusion formally enacts the multiple temporalities addressed in the poem's cultural references and metaphysical allusions.

This composition and reading practice is reinforced by the temporal philosophy alluded to in the poem's reference to don Juan Manuel. An allusion to Borges' own source material and extensive *oeuvre*, don Juan Manuel is the medieval Spanish author from whom Borges borrowed the plot for his later story, "El brujo postergado" (1935).¹² That story also condenses experience and restructures time, as a magician tests the devotion of his would-be apprentice through the latter's experience of a lifetime of travel in the course of a few hours.¹³ Time, in this world, seems to move toward its dissolution, as more and more space, an abundance of experience, easily fits within a single moment.¹⁴ While the formal use of allusion expands the frame of experience the poem constructs, the allusion's referential content reinforces, doubles, or better squares the formal assertion.

One could close the argument here, agreeing with critics like Bernal Herrera and Sergio Missana who read Borges's work as a domestication project, an attempt to universalize national history into a metaphysical realm where difference vanishes.¹⁵ However, Cara's comments on creole talk remind us to investigate the poem's duplicity, to look back again. For don Juan Manuel is not only a Spanish theologian, but the *criollo* dictator,

¹² See Diz 281-97 and Montgomery 464-66.

¹³ The plot resonates with the poem's gambling focus as well. Consider the following quote from Anatole France, as cited in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*: "Well, what is gambling, I should like to know, but the art of producing in a second the changes that Destiny ordinarily effects only in the course of many hours or even many years, the art of collecting into a single instant the emotions dispersed throughout the slow-moving existence of ordinary men, *the secret of living a whole lifetime in a few minutes*" (498; emphasis added).

¹⁴ A similar idea presents itself in "El milagro secreto," where Jaromir Hladik's prayer stops a bullet in midair, allowing him an entire year to finish composing his play before the external world is reanimated and the bullet resumes its inevitable course.

¹⁵ See Herrera 87 and Missana 35. For further commentaries on circularity in "El truco" and Borges's work in general, see also Yurkievich and Blanco Amores de Pagella.

don Juan Manuel Rosas. The other side of the same card, Rosas supplies a local, historical and political valence, a balance for the metaphysical and metafictional games described above.

Yet Rosas's historical importance partially conceals itself within the multiple roles his name plays in "El truco." To begin, the reference reinforces the poem's *criollismo* and its truco disguise. Invoking the dictator's name, "idolátrico amor en el gauchaje" (Borges, *Obra poética*, "Rosas" 18),¹⁶ resonates with the poem's other *gauchesca* allusions—it once again marks out the poem's fluctuating territory. Second, a popular citation in the Argentine oral tradition that includes truco songs,¹⁷ Rosas, or rather the empty space that refers to this name operates as a masked code. After all, *rosas* (roses) are flowers and thus serve as a veiled reference to "flor" (flower), truco's most powerful combination, the three-of-a-kind hand. Finally, Rosas links "El truco" to two other poems in *Fervor en Buenos Aires*: "La rosa" and "Rosas." Rather than enter the referential labyrinth elicited by these allusions, I want to examine how Borges employs "Rosas" to intentionally disrupt what until now in the poem would seem to have been his semiotic system, explicitly inviting history into his game and thereby expanding his poem's aesthetic range and uncovering new access routes to different imaginings of history and politics.

Beyond such poetic flourishes, Borges invites Rosas into the poem in order to upset the tidy interplay of citation and reference traced above. An historical and political reference rather than a literary allusion, the ghostly name signals another glance backwards, one that applies literature's lessons to history's work, and vice versa. I will begin with the second assertion first, with the claim that "Rosas" helps Borges rethink aesthetic autonomy.

If one understands the name as a sign within the poetic system, "Rosas" comments on that system by alerting readers to poetry's difference from the political, the distinction between the

¹⁶ Borges *Obra poética*, 1.

¹⁷ Rosas' over thirty appearances make him the second most cited figure after Justo José de Urquiza in Olga Fernández Latour de Botas' *Cantares Históricos Argentinos*.

aesthetic and the rhetorical. Tucked within that distinction remains the reminder that a poet's formal tricks are often also a political tyrant's means to power, if only via a renunciation of the artwork's "semblance character," the artwork's insistence on aesthetic illusion and its necessary distance from the empirical world.¹⁸ Without this difference, the double talk Cara associates with truco's *criollo* voice can as easily marginalize a people as it can protect a marginal culture. "Rosas" therefore indicates a counter discourse implicating poetry's formal ties to political violence—not through the usual claims of a formalist escapism that denies political turmoil, but rather via a semiotic history wherein the tropes, images, and syntax from poetry have been employed to persuade mass movements to wreak havoc against whatever enemy the empowered choose to put in place.

Robin Lefere acknowledges Rosas as a ghostly presence in the poem, one that ups the political ante of the cards' role. For Lefere, the allusion invites into the poem "la tradición autoritaria y violenta de la política argentina" (72). Like the anthropologist Fernando Diego Astigueta's interpretation of truco as a storehouse for Argentina's most dangerous political tendencies,¹⁹ Lefere's reading of the poem argues that the game makes politics "una dramatización lúdica y atractiva" (72). He arrives at this reading because he takes the poem's opening line ("Cuarenta naipes han desplazado la vida") at face value. The resulting displacement, psychological for Astigueta, textual for Lefere, positions the game as a ludic representation of political violence.²⁰ Here

¹⁸ My understanding of "semblance character" derives mainly from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. For a commentary on Adorno and Benjamin's notions of semblance see Hansen 3-46 and Kaufman, "Lyric's Constellation" 209-34.

¹⁹ See Astigueta (371-90). Borges makes a similar contention in the poem's prose version. There he writes that truco is a "fantasma de política de parroquia y de picardías" (*Ficcionario* 327).

²⁰ In this context, "las alternativas del juego" that "se repiten y se repiten" become indicators of "el carácter repetitivo o permanente de la vida política" (Lefere 72). Although Lefere does not mention trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, the imbrication of political violence and endless repetition would reposition the poem's backward glance as less a nostalgic longing for return than a horrific need to remember and memorialize. Rosas' absence (the poem cites only

the political allusion deepens the poem's entanglement in a political discourse alien to the aesthetic, as Lefere positions Borges's poem on the edge of aestheticization.

For Lefere and others the game is an obvious allegory for Borges's poetry;²¹ yet his interpretation fails to attend to how the political figure might function within the poem other than by supplying another discourse so that the poem becomes, in his view, "una metáfora completa de la vida" (72). If *truco* is a ludic representation of political violence as well as a metaphor for Borges's poetry, then is that same poetry also, as Lefere writes, an seductive and ludic dramatization of politics?

As Francine Masiello and Beatriz Sarlo have explained, Borges's early avant-garde poetics, the period in which "El truco" was first composed, consist of a paradoxical utopian desire for political power and artistic autonomy.²² Sarlo identifies the literary journals *Martín Fierro* and *Proa* as political forces in Buenos Aires, part of an avant-garde that reorganized "the system of intellectual hierarchies," helped define debates about nationalism, and "considered that it embodied new values that it could define and carry out" (117-18). Borges's involvement in such an aesthetic-political movement contextualizes the thematic overlap found in "El truco." Perhaps Borges was drawn to Rosas in the same way authors in the United States have been drawn to terrorists as novelistic protagonists since the 1960s—as figures whose own rhetoric of the spectacle wields enough power to directly intervene in history.²³ Indeed, as Masiello notes in her explanation of Argentine vanguard ideology, Borges and his fellow vanguard authors' writing was characterized by

"don Juan Manuel") might then be read in accordance with these theorists' idea of the wound in signification, the unnameable horror. See Caruth.

²¹ "Hemos visto ya que el poema convierte de forma evidente el juego del truco en metáfora del 'juego' literario, y no resulta difícil mostrar que casi todos los componentes del texto se dejan interpretar con esta clave (referencia metafórica)" (Lefere 70).

²² For further studies on Borges's politics, see Eduardo González, Gómez Lo-pez Quiñones, Rodríguez Monegal, and Mario Santí and Alonso.

²³ See Kunkel.

el implacable deseo de control del artista, en su paródico discurso político, en la voluntad de poder que investirá su actitud en cuanto escritor. ...el discurso literario de este tipo establece un código para la percepción del artista, exaltando al yo literario por sobre todos los acontecimientos de los tiempos modernos (Masiello 105-06).

Rosas remains in the poem as a specter of the tyrannical longing in this literary discourse, of the avant-garde's desire to affect political change through aesthetic means. The name, therefore, appears to represent not just a look back, but a gaze fixed outside literature; less an attempt to domesticate an extra-literary code than the effort to pattern poetry on a political figure.²⁴ Untamed, this *criollo* counter discourse insists on an historical recognition that upsets claims for the poem's status as an ahistorical object.

There is, of course, another side to this story. Once again rupturing oversimplified divisions of the particular and the universal, the aesthetic and the political, "Rosas" helps Borges stage a confrontation between the political and the aesthetic, an encounter that illuminates how the aesthetic operates politically. True, "Rosas" pushes the poem to recognize poetry's own associations with a violent past, to narratives of national consolidation, odes glorifying war and inspiring bloodshed, literary canon's that silently silence other voices and stories, and the aestheticization of politics carried out in avant-garde manifestos like that of Marinetti's futurists. In contrast to this history, however, Borges's poem distinguishes itself via its particular aesthetic response to the historico-political. Against Lefere's claim, Borges does not merely represent politics as playtime. Rather, the historical allusion allows the Argentine poet to construct an aesthetic system whose non-linear intertextuality provides a unique and specifically literary model for acknowledging the past's intervention in the present. Aestheticization, in either the sense of attempting to conceal the horrors of violence through beautification or the act of actually following a political mode in artistic creation, and thus collapsing the categories of the aesthetic and

²⁴ For a similar argument concerning Borges's work in general, see Balderston 57.

the political into an artwork one refers to as an already completed political action, is rejected by Borges in favor of the aesthetic.²⁵ In this case, the poem operates as both a universal and a particular text, one whose formal achievements make available historical content that transcends the poet's contemporary moment.²⁶

The two-faced signification of "don Juan Manuel," its combination of metaphysical and historical allusion observes how the text's aesthetic autonomy achieves historical significance. This coupling calls on the reader to apply the intertextual poetics to historical narrative—to sift through past events and texts, the runes and ruins of history, recognizing multiple causes in a constellating process Borges might call historical narrative's prophetic magic. As I will show in concluding this paper, the poem most clearly announces this "magical" recasting of history-telling in the 1969 and 1972 texts' closing lines, the poetic structure and the poem's publication history.

Borrowing from the detective genre he exploits elsewhere, Borges closes his poem by turning readers back. At the poem's

²⁵ In terms more familiar to theory's history, one could say that the distinction I recognize Borges making in this interplay with Rosas's name is that between the avant-garde and modernism as the categories appear in Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant Garde*. Commenting on that text, Robert Kaufman writes, "Bürger and others have shown why it makes sense to differentiate between, on one hand (and these will be usages derived from Bürger) *avant-gardist* attempts to enact a collapse of art into life—a certain artistic radicalism's effort...to destroy art's institutional, 'distanced' status in hopes of marshalling art's energies for the quotidian and political; and on the other hand *modernist* attempts to preserve aesthetic autonomy and a rigorous separation of art from life, on the view that art's power is fundamentally negational" ("Negatively Capable" 368). Following this rubric, I would argue that Borges modifies "El truco" from an avant-gardist text, in its 1923 and 1943 versions, to a modernist text in the 1969 and 1972 revisions.

²⁶ Kate Jenckes' makes a similar claim in her excellent "Allegory, Ideology, Infamy: Borges and the Allegorical Writing of History." There she observes, "Borges's writings present us with an entirely different conception of what history actually is: not a continuous outer world that can contain a self-enclosed 'hecho literario,' but something that must be understood internally, through the complexity of 'literary' forms of representation...Borges is writing about history in such a way that forces us to question the opposition between literature and history" ("Allegory" 49).

end, the game's repetitive tricks "resucita un poco, muy poco, / a las generaciones de los mayores / que legaron al tiempo de Buenos Aires / los mismos versos y las mismas diabluras" (21-24). I do not want to repeat what has already been said about the relationship drawn here between poetry and truco. I do, however, want to return, with a variation, to the theme of repetition. For like the detective stories of Poe, Conan Doyle, or Chesterton that Borges mentions in his essays, the poet retains his revelation until the end. The effect induces readers to read again, deciphering lines describing truco as verses also concealing comments about poetry. The closing moment, like the content it contains, enforces an encounter between the dead and the living, an intervention of the past in the present.

This meeting should not be confused with nonproductive repetition—the endless and inescapable return of the same. Contrary to Lefere, who reads the text as denying time and immortalizing, and thus, solidifying the past, the poem's internal games parody rather than enact utopian circularity (Lefere 66, 68). Indeed, formal markers ironically undermine readings that fail to acknowledge variation's importance. "El truco," the trick, reappears in the poem as "travesuras," "bazas," and "diabluras." Each a variation on the poem's theme, the words attract attention to their difference from the others, as each signals how the verbal archive develops and fluctuates. The poem's trap (truco) is to read these signs without critical attention, to believe in repetition's hold. The poem's trick (truco) is to acknowledge multiple meanings, to read attentively, and to keep signification open. Repetition, as practiced here, creates new words, new orders, new meaning. The past is not immortalized, it is brought back to life.²⁷

The philosophical implications of this structural trick are illuminated by Borges's essay, "Kafka and His Precursors" (1951).

²⁷ Jenckes also explores how the past returns to engage the present in *Fervor en Buenos Aires*. Commenting on Borges's early poetry, Jenckes writes, "his poetic project can be understood as an attempt to open the tombs of the past in order to introduce its strangeness ('ajenidad') into a present that would prefer to either ignore it or which believes...that it is securely named and contained" ("Against" 39).

That essay describes how Kafka's work posits a new thematic constellation, creating unique similarities between several writers from literature's past: "El hecho es que cada escritor *crea* a sus precursores. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción del pasado, como ha de modificar el futuro" (*Ficcionario* 309). Thus, a later moment in history discovers and creates a new way to read and connect previously isolated events. With its historical focus, its work around and through "Rosas," "El truco" suggests applying the Kafka constellation beyond literary history. In this case, practicing "the alternatives of the game" identifies a narrative mode and approach to reading and writing history wherein one employs the presence of mind and minute attention of the aesthetic to even the past's most banal details. "El truco"'s approach engages in aesthetic play with what has come before, ceaselessly returning to configure new combinations, new interpretations, new compositions.

Given the Kafka essay's conclusions, it is perhaps unsurprising that Kafka's work brings together two of his greatest readers, Borges and Walter Benjamin, around the theoretical concept of the "constellation." As Robert Kaufman describes the concept in "Lyric's Constellation, Poetry's Radical Privilege," constellation is "the process of forming configurations of thought that did not allow us critically to move towards grasping or conceiving what otherwise would remain unapprehended in the sociopolitical or historical" (209). Similarly, in the Kafka essay previously invisible or unthought associations between authors in literary history become apparent via reading them through Kafka's work. Likewise, "El truco" develops an intertextual poetics responsible for creating new ways of imagining history, assuring that the past's absence remains acknowledged and accessible to intervene in the present. Thus, "El truco"'s practice and its emphasis on process observes how the aesthetic, Borges's apparently politically disengaged formalism, radically engages the political and socio-historical via a poetics committed to constellation.²⁸

²⁸ The poem's prose version reinforces truco's specific applicability to such a history telling model. That text emphasizes the game's numerological aspect: "Así, desde el principio, el central misterio del juego se ve adornado con un otro misterio, el de que hayas números" (*Ficcionario* 326). Borges counts the numbers

The text's palimpsest publication most strongly testifies to the philosophical idea of constellation—the belief in reshuffling the past. In tune with this dynamics, Borges the poet and reader worried the final line for more than forty five years and three separate publications before deciding on the three line conclusion printed in the 1969 and final 1972 editions of *Fervor en Buenos Aires*. The same year Borges revised the poem's biblical language he transformed a mute conclusion into a call to turn back.²⁹ These revisions radically altered the poem's semantic field, transforming a poem about national origins into a complex meditation on the poetic mode's role in telling history. Rewriting the project to create a single, national past, the poem presents alternate temporalities and multiple fictional worlds. Its aesthetic play with historical reference allows Borges to forge a Borgesian poetics in which seemingly insulated semiotic codes intentionally disturb readers into critical thought. The poetic engagement with everything from cheap cardboard to political dictators foregrounds a practice demanding a return as much committed to changing the empirical world as altering a fictional universe.

A truco verse itself, "El truco" slyly tucks the game's vocabulary into its own poetic statement. More unexpectedly, the poem

in order to reveal his poem's mystery: "Cuarenta es el número de los naipes y 1 por 2 por 3 por 4...por 40, el de maneras que pueden salir" (326). In other words, the numbers' secret depends on their order, their count, or the very act of counting. "Contar" (the verb means to count, to value, to tell) contains truco's aesthetic-historical magic. Different means of counting (i.e. altering a progressive order from 1, 2, 3, 4 to 1, 7, 3, 8, 5, 7, 9...) means different value systems. And truco's rules more radically depart from mathematic values. Within the game, for instance, three sevens are more powerful than three tens. Applying this general lesson to history, telling (contar) this counting (contar), one can perhaps make better sense of the constellation, wherein historical events are revalued via new combinations, new narratives. Such a historical mode allows long silent voices to resound, echoing off previously unavailable or unthought historical angles. In this way, what was thought lost, a date fixed in the past, may newly correspond with a passing moment in the present, suddenly illuminating both past and present, and therefore altering the future.

²⁹ 1923: "a los compañeros que hoy callan." 1943: "a los compañeros muertos que callan." 1969/1972: "a las generaciones de los mayores / que legaron al tiempo de Buenos Aires / los mismos versos y las mismas diabluras." See Scarno 74.

employs a card game's code to illuminate history's role in poetry and its possible application to history. Of course, Borges's poem is a truco duel, or a duel with truco itself. Through poetry, as well as essays, stories and interviews, Borges vied with the Argentine cultural tradition that surrounded him. In "El truco" the metaphysician sits down at the gambler's table, where he disguises himself as a player and his poem as a song; he challenges popular tradition with his own mythology. That Borges is one of the most well known Argentine exports suggests his gambit paid off. Whether his work stands as a hurdle or a distraction, it seems the country's authors and critics, its tourist officers and museum curators must confront the author at some point in constructing their own narratives at home and abroad. He has succeeded, it seems, in inserting his own cards into the deck. His role in Argentina's history will depend on how he is read.

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